Bonus Episode: Podcasting, Public Scholarship, and Accountability

November 23, 2017

Hannah (Host): [Music: "Mesh Shirt" by Mom Jeans] Hi, I'm Hannah McGregor and this is *Secret Feminist Agenda*. I have a special non-canonical bonus-ish episode for you today. [Music: "Mesh Shirt" by Mom Jeans]

Hannah (Host): I've got to confess, I have really missed talking to you every week. It is the busiest time of the semester, so it's not like I've had this time when I would have been making the podcast, but I've missed it nonetheless, but that doesn't mean I haven't been thinking about you and about this project and I've also been talking about this project and that's what I'm bringing you today.

A few weeks ago, I was invited to speak at an event in honor of open access week at Simon Fraser University. That's my home institution. The event was called "Open Beyond the Academy" and it was myself and a colleague Dr Ray Siemens talking about how doing digital scholarship can be more inclusive, accessible and accountable to the communities that we're working with. I gave a talk called "Podcasting Public Scholarship and Accountability," in which I thought through a little bit about what podcasting has taught me about doing scholarship differently and since I talk about *Witch, Please* and about *Secret Feminist Agenda* in this talk, I thought some of you might be interested in it. So go ahead and give it a listen if you like and stay tuned for the ending, for another, mmm, little bonus announcement. [Music: "Mesh Shirt" by Mom Jeans]

Hannah (Host): That's not true. We're recording these. This thing here is recording us talking right now. Just me, just recording me talking right now, because we are going to release this as a podcast because you know, we should put our money where our mouths are when it comes to public scholarship, et cetera. Thank you so much. Thank you, Rebecca, for the invitation. I'm really delighted to be speaking with you. I want to echo the acknowledgement that we are gathered on Musqueam, Squamish and Tsleil-Waututh First Nations. I want to remember with everybody else in this room that this is unceded Indigenous land, meaning that this land was never surrendered, relinquished or handed over in any way, and I want to remember that these acknowledgments should never be treated as an end in themselves. They're the beginning of a conversation, the beginning of a way of re-imagining what it means to have an ethical university.

So I'm going to talk today about podcasting, which seems to increasingly accidentally be my scholarly wheelhouse and I'm going to talk in particular about what podcasting has taught me about politicized and public-first scholarly work. I particularly want to think about how open scholarship has to model accountability to the communities about which and to which it speaks. So... So Rebecca sent us some questions to think about before these talks and I want to share those questions with you, in case you don't know them. Probably they're already somewhere in your head or your heart. And those questions are: What motivates communities to engage in

open practices? What tensions can open scholarship address and what tensions does it present? And how to open practices shape the kind of scholarship we are producing? And those are all (just going to adjust how loud I am in this microphone, so fun) and those are all going to be sort of informing questions in the background of my comments today.

But my comments today are also inspired by the work I've been doing over the past two and a half years as a scholar increasingly committed to publishing practices that are not just open access, but inherently public-facing, that are what digital humanities scholar John Bath has called, "public first." So a little context for those who don't already know me, I started my academic career doing pretty typical scholarly work, so publishing articles in journals without much concern for their open access policies and chapters in books that cost well over $100, so nobody's buying them. Um, but in February of 2015, my scholarly trajectory took a bit of a turn when I started making a feminist Harry Potter podcast called, *Witch, Please* with my friend and collaborator, Marcelle Kosman. *Witch, Please* has been a really revelatory experience for both of us because of how it's challenged our understanding of what and who scholarship is for. When we started making it, we didn't really think of it as scholarship at all, because we were having fun and we were laughing and sometimes we were crying and often we were drinking and those all seemed, that sort of affective and fun dimension of it, seemed really at odds with like the seriousness of being a scholar. We sure as heck weren't thinking of it as publishing and we weren't thinking of it as open access, even though podcasting lives on the open web. If pressed, we might have described it as a kind of community building project, but for a community of two. So podcasting together was part of our feminist praxis of prioritizing friendship and collaborative knowledge building, which is to say it's fun to sit around with your friends and talk about books. By valuing first and foremost not the thing we were making but the relationships it was facilitating–so, our friendship with each other, our affective responses to the Harry Potter books, and of course eventually the community of listeners whose presence and participation we began to build into the podcast–we positioned ourselves primarily as feminist community organizers and perhaps more importantly, we've emphasized throughout that being scholars and being feminist community organizers can be one and the same thing, if you're doing it right.

Even once Marcelle and I began to think of *Witch, Please* as itself a kind of academic work and to receive attention from it, for it, from fellow academics, we were still pretty nervous about what it meant to do this kind of academic work in public, particularly via a platform like the open web where podcasts mostly live that deprived us of the usual kinds of protections that the university gives you, so, the critical distance of academic writing and the institutional protection of a peer reviewed journal. It felt scary and risky and possibly really stupid, especially considering that Marcelle was and continues to be a PhD student and I was an underemployed postdoc at the time. It turns out it wasn't stupid. Uh, it turns out that my shift into podcasting got me a job here, which is great, but I really didn't know that at the time. What I want to emphasize today is what the community response to *Witch, Please* was like, because that's what has been most surprising for us

about this work, is what it's taught us about the large, enthusiastic audience for open and community-engaged scholarship. Maybe it shouldn't have surprised us as much as it did, but it did surprise us. It turns out people want to hear what we're talking about.

So, it's like maybe the one citation in this whole thing, Robert C. MacDougall, media studies professor, he has written about podcasts, not a ton of people have, and he's been a little suspicious of the value of podcasts as a form of media because he says they really encourage media silos. So, essentially we choose podcast that reinforce our predetermined understandings of the world, that sort of give us back our own world view. Um, I don't think he's wrong. I'm sure there are a lot of super conservative podcasts out there that I don't listen to, but this kind of critique assumes that politicized communities lack internalized diversity and that there isn't work to be done within communities that share the same basic principles but are struggling with the language to articulate them or the means to enact them, like feminist communities.

So, a lot of our podcast listeners, a lot of *Witch, Please* listeners, are super devoted Harry Potter fans. As a result, they hold us accountable for the accuracy of our references to Harry Potter. Um, they mostly fact check us. They send us screen caps of book pages and indignant corrections–they are so mad when we get it wrong, but they keep listening, right? Like, they're mad because they're engaged already. We also have a lot of feminists listeners who aren't necessarily Harry Potter fans and they do a different kind of correcting. They call us on instances of ableism, of transphobia and of appropriation. For example, I'm going to give a longer, more detailed example of this kind of being called to account by our community a little later on, but an early example was after we posted episode 7B, "The Goblet is Political." We had talked about identifying as intersectional feminists, uh, and one listener commented on our website and she said, and I quote, "I hate to be this girl"–I wish women would stop apologizing when they're right–"I hate to be this girl, but you can't really be an intersectional feminist. Intersectional feminism as a concept and theory created by a black woman to interpret and analyze oppression. It's something you can attempt to practice as a white woman, but I don't think you can be it," end quote. She's absolutely right. To appropriate intersectional feminism as white women is to elide its origins in Black women's activism and criticism. Thus, the distinction between "I am an intersectional feminist" and "I strive to practice intersectional feminism" is enormous, right? So we responded to her and said, "You're absolutely correct and we are going to catch ourselves next time. I'm going to do better and we're going to be more thoughtful with that language" and that's been an ongoing process of making this podcast.

So, much has been made of Internet call out culture, but appeals for accountability that come from within a community are really a different thing altogether. That kind of critical commentary opens up dialogue and create a new shared vocabularies. It builds instead of tearing down. It's the kind of response we often lack in academia where our students are separated from us by huge gulfs of institutionalized hierarchy and our peers respond to our work through the barrier of blind peer

review. Yes, it can be uncomfortable to be taken to task publicly. Uh, it's also part of what it means to participate in a community and to do our pedagogy and our scholarship in public. So let's think a little bit more bit more about this piece: what it means to do your work accountably.

I've been inspired in my thinking about accountability by scholar Moya Bailey's work on digital humanities and feminist ethics. She has this wonderful article that actually read for the first time in the feminist DH course at DHSI. Everybody take it. It was really great. In her article, "#transform(ing)DH Writing and Research," she describes her own research project on trans women of color's online organizing around hashtags and she talks about being really concerned that doing research on these communities that are already inherently vulnerable communities is going to actually heighten their vulnerability by drawing additional attention to them through writing about them. She talks about how the Institutional Review Board, so like internal ethics review, isn't really adequate to deal with the complexity of working on these communities. She says that they don't recognize trans women of color as their own contingent in need of more nuanced ethical study. Further, she points out the IRB tends to adopt what she calls a paternalistic orientation towards research subjects. Right? So, the attitude is like, "You are the subject of my research, you don't get to have anything to do with it." Um, so Bailey's response to these limitations was to essentially create her own personal ethics review board based on her feminist ethics of her research. So what she did was create, first off, she got in touch with Janet Mock, who is the creator of the hashtag she was working on, and established consent with Ms. Mock for doing the work she was going to do, and then she created her own community advisory panel for her research project, which consisted of, in her words, Black women and queer thought leaders within the arenas of Twitter and tumblr, which included a diverse group of activists, artists and academics. So she created this panel to hold her accountable, so she would send them questions. She would send them drafts of her work and they would tell her if the work that she was doing posed risks to this community. But very quickly the advisory board just said, "Oh, what a fantastic list serve you've created of these major people who are doing this work. We're just going to use this for our own purposes now. Thank you." Um, and Bailey talks about what a surprising success this was, the sort of appropriation of the advisory panel for their own activism. In Bailey's words, "We had co-created a three dimensional space with multiple directions of flow." I love that language. The idea of a co-created space with the communities that you're working with and on, through which knowledge sharing is moving in multiple directions simultaneously. It's collaborative, it's community-oriented, and of course it's deeply accountable. It also challenges the often unidirectional flow of scholarly communication. Much of the time scholarly communication, when taking the form of like a paywalled journal article, is barely two dimensional, like it doesn't even get outside of the university. It's just hanging. It's like zero dimensions. Open access gets us, like, those two dimensions, like it can get out, but this, there's something more to be done in creating spaces where the communication can flow in multiple directions simultaneously. We just can't assume that merely making a scholarly journal open access will do this work, which isn't to say anything against open

access itself, because paywalls can die in a fire obviously, but when we think about public and accountable scholarship, we need to re-frame the role that openness plays. I bolded that because I feel like that might be my point. We'll find out.

So, a particularly interesting thing about Bailey's work is that she doesn't talk about openness at all. She talks about ethics and she talks about vulnerability and she talks about collaboration and accountability. These are the values at the heart of the work she's doing and openness as a function of those values, right? I want to work ethically and collaboratively with this community, so obviously as a side effect of that, all of my work will be published openly because it would be a violation of those community ethics otherwise. So this kind of re-framing of openness as a function of ethical research rather than the goal itself has been really in my mind after a series of events unfolding over the past few months, events that have prompted me to ask what norms of scholarly communication should we be resisting and why, and what norms, if any, are beneficial? So the norm I want to think about with you briefly is peer review. If we're re-thinking radically what our scholarship is going to look like, what's the role that peer review is going to play? Because arguably when we start pushing against the limitations of traditional scholarly communication, peer review's one of the first things we need to rethink.

So, for some of you, this is going to be a repetition of familiar details. I apologize if it is. Maybe it will be news for others. In September of 2017, the journal *Third World Quarterly*, a respected, peer reviewed journal published by Taylor and Francis, posted a viewpoint essay entitled "The Case for Colonialism." In it, [laughter] author Bruce Gilley argued that quote, "Countries that embrace their colonial inheritance by and large did better than those that spurned it." end quote, and he calls for countries to reclaim colonialism and even consider being recolonized by–yes, correct facial expression–being recolonized by the original colonizing powers. Um, guess what? People got real mad. In response to the publication of this viewpoint essay–everything about this story insists on calling a viewpoint essay, but it's totally unclear to me what the difference between a viewpoint essay and an article is, because the viewpoint essay was apparently peer reviewed. So, I don't know what that means, but it's a viewpoint essay. In response to its publication, 15 members, that's half of the journal's editorial board, resigned in protest with a statement that claimed that the piece had been rejected in peer review. So it's on the failure of peer review rather than the content of the article that their letter of resignation focuses. I'm going to read you a little piece of that letter. It was very long. They said, "'The Case for Colonialism' must be retracted as it fails to provide reliable findings as demonstrated by its failure in the double blind peer review process. We all subscribe to the principle of freedom of speech and the value of provocation in order to generate critical debate." Not sure if we all agree with that, but "However this cannot be done by means of a piece that fails to meet academic standards of rigor and balance by ignoring all manner of violence, exploitation, and harm perpetrated in the name of colonialism." They go on. So, evident in this letter is the fact that they are equating peer review with scholarly rigor.

That is to say, it seems impossible that such an article could have been peer reviewed. So, the idea that pure review is an inherent good that will protect us from garbage like this is maintained. It stays in place. Peer review, it seems, doesn't so much ensure as it replaces accountability as a value. As long as the double blind peer review standard is maintained, nothing further is required of scholarly communication. We don't have to think more about the implications of what we do; as long as it's peer reviewed, we're good.

So, when this news first broke, my colleague John Maxwell and I (Hi John) discussed it in terms of the ongoing need for rigorous peer review in the face of an increasingly digital, open and alt metric-driven scholarly ecosystem. The alt metric score on this piece is off the charts. It's like 2000 or something, like it's wild. Given that you can post anything online–you know, that's how the Internet works, right?–peer review becomes a means of keeping journal editors accountable to their scholarly communities rather than posting clickbait to drive up their perceived relevance. But since then, since our first conversations, two things have happened. First, Taylor and Francis released a statement explaining the peer review process that the article went through step-by-step as a means ostensibly of being accountable to the scholars who expressed concern. So this piece did go through peer review. Second, the article has been withdrawn. Not because the author asked for it to be withdrawn, he did and Taylor and Francis refused, and not because of the violence of its content, but because the journal editor has received threats of personal violence, so Taylor and Francis withdrew to protect him. So at no point in the process from peer review to the journals response to its eventual decision to withdraw the article was accountability to the community of peers or readers or a public that includes people personally harmed by colonial violence, ever considered. That was not the reason for the critique of it. It was not the reason for the withdrawal of the piece. In reading the responses to the article though, there's one thing that caught my eye. It's a statement from Vijay Prashad, one of the editorial board members who resigned, and this is what he says, "Across the board, editorial boards have just become window dressing. The use of editorial boards should be to prove intellectual gravity, and in this case, when there was conflictual evidence coming from outside reviewers or when the editor realize there was some conflict, that might have been a good time to consult the editorial board." Those are his words. So, hovering in this statement for me is that question to whom is this work accountable? So, Prashad is proposing the editorial board. That's who the work is accountable to. When one is thinking first and foremost of community accountability, though, one doesn't publish clickbait or devil's advocate pieces that do real harm to vulnerable communities. Prashad speaks of intellectual gravity here, but obviously intellectual gravity is a deeply subjective quality that's determined collaboratively through communities of discourse and interpretation. We decide what counts as intellectual gravity as scholars. So if peer review–oh, so here's my proposition: What if we can think about peer review not as gatekeeping, not as ensuring rigor and the gravity and seriousness. What if we can think of it as building in mechanisms to ensure that scholarship remains accountable to the communities it serves? If that's the case, then as scholars, we need to be thinking first not about whether a platform is

double blind peer reviewed, but about whether the work we're doing models the kinds of accountability that we value. We need to follow Bailey's model and put ethics first and openness becoming a function of those ethics. So let me get back to podcasting (after I have some of this coffee).

So back to podcasting and to open and public first scholarship and to accountability and to different ways of thinking about peer review. I want to tell you another anecdote about *Witch, Please*, and I want to specify that I'm recounting it with Marcelle's permission because, you know, accountability, that thing. So, Marcelle and I recently were recording an episode about Rainbow Rowell's novel *Carry On* in which we were comparing the character Ebb to Rowling's character Hagrid. This is an unimportant detail. Uh, Marcelle made an offhanded remark about genitals and gender, a remark that when I was editing the episode a week later, I didn't think to delete. It was for both of us a revealing mistake, one that exposed unconscious biases about the relationship between gender and bodies. Lucky for us, we not only have trans and nonbinary listeners, but listeners who trust us enough to tell us when we screw up. So, shortly after posting the episode, one such listener tweeted at us that quote, "Knowing anything about a character's genitals will not tell us anything about their gender. In fact, knowing pronouns is a better indicator," end quote. Recognizing the significance of our error, we asked the listener for advice on how best to respond and they suggested that we edit the comment out and then add a note in the episode mentioning that listeners may have heard a different version, explaining the reason for the edit, and apologizing. So I went and made those edits, taking responsibility for my role as the episode editor, but Marcelle decided to go a step further and claiming the implications of her remarks. She recorded the following apology, which we played at the beginning of the next episode and which I want to play for you.

Marcelle: [recorded audio] Hey witches, this is Marcelle. Before we start this week's episode, I wanted to say a few things about what happened with the last episode. Many of you, hopefully most of you, heard the edited version where Hannah explains that a little bit has been edited out of the original episode, but some of you heard that original audio and if you did, you heard me make a really shitty remark implying a causal relationship between genitals and gender. I want to address that remark with you because when we say hurtful things, it's important to take responsibility for them. Last week, Hannah took responsibility for it as the editor and now it's my turn to take responsibility for it as the person who said the shitty thing in the first place. One of our listeners remarked on Twitter that what I said was demonstrative of the way that the attempt to over specify with gender can often result in being trans exclusive. This is totally correct. I would also add that what I said betrays some deeply internalized transphobia that I've been unlearning for years. Trans exclusivity is a vile and violent social norm that weaves its way into supposedly feminist spaces all over the world. It's not something that can be unlearned without work and for some of us that means having a lot of humility. I'm really embarrassed by what I said. With some luck and with some deep breathing, eventually I'll get over myself and my fallibility. Trans people never get a break from transphobia. It's

everywhere. It's all the time and it's everything from micro aggressions to full-fledged hate speech and violence. It's being unable to find a place to go to the bathroom, to being disowned by your family. It's not a small thing. It's astronomical. Listeners have been telling us for years how much *Witch, Please* means to them as a safe and inclusive space and in response, Hannah and I have tried to make it as inclusive as possible. We don't always succeed as you know, but we try and when we screw up, you tell us and then we do better next time. This message is in part to make sure that I do better next time, but there's another reason why I wanted to talk about this. 2017 has been a rougher than usual year, with a lot of people feeling super on edge about politics, about being good enough, about allyship and what it means, and especially how being an ally means being able to hear it when someone calls you out for a shitty thing that you said, no matter how you meant it. This vulnerability is the part that keeps a lot of us silent. We're afraid of making mistakes and we're afraid of not being good enough. Sometimes we're angry because no one gives us credit for all the times that we didn't say something shitty. That's not how being an ally works. I'm here to tell you right now that being an ally means you're going to screw up and it really sucks, but you won't die from shame and if you're never willing to hear how you can do better, you'll never do better. My therapist once told me that there's an important distinction between accepting yourself and being resigned about who you are. Accepting yourself for who you are is so, so important, and it doesn't mean that you can't learn and grow. You can be a good person who is worthy of love and respect and still have shortcomings. Your shortcomings don't define you unless you let them by refusing to move past them. When I saw that I did a thing that made someone feel bad, I wanted to crawl into a hole and die, but I didn't and neither will you. Thank you for listening. Thanks for being great. Here's our season finale.

Hannah (Host):   [live audience clapping] Yeah, I mean great, right? Yeah, it's absolutely incredible. I told her I was re-listening to it yesterday as I was putting–definitely finishing this talk and I texted her and was like, "I'm listening to your apology and I'm literally just weeping at my desk." So, what Marcelle models in this apology is public accountability that is rare in scholarly work because our systems are in fact built to keep us from being personally accountable in these ways. From the uneven flow of power in the classroom to the standards of double blind peer review to the design of ethics review boards, academia seems constructed to externalize and depersonalize accountability. As John suggested in a conversation we had earlier this week, the technologies of academia are standardized to the extent that they're mostly just an interplay of signs at this point. The stamp of peer review, for example, standing in for a more rigorous questioning of our values of scholars.

Now I sure as heck don't want to propose that we throw all these institutions and standards out overnight, much like the endless bureaucratic red tape surrounding the university hiring process, a lot of these systems and structures were put into place to protect vulnerable members of the academic community, but they have their limitations. Double blind peer review, for example, protects authors from gender and race based by bias, while making it near impossible to write

embodied, personal and autobiographical scholarship or, as Bailey points out, while ethics review boards protect research subjects and participants, they can actually discourage us from becoming personally accountable for the ethics of our own research practices and our relationships with the communities our research impacts. Open and public scholarship gives us an opportunity not to throw out these institutionalized norms, but to fundamentally reconsider the work that they're doing. Rather than externalizing our accountability into disciplinary and institutional structures, we have the chance to ask ourselves some fundamental questions such as, who is the peer in peer review?

So, this is the topic I'm going to end on and I'm going to do it by telling you a bit about my newest project, which is a podcast called *Secret Feminist Agenda*. I started *Secret Feminist Agenda* in July of this year and have since released, as of today, 15 episodes. The title was inspired by a joke about lesbian cats and I'll tell you about it during the Q and A if you ask nicely, um, but it gives you a decent sense of what the podcast is about: Feminism. Um, the project really was motivated for me by a desire to build upon the feminist community work of *Witch, Please*. SFA is explicitly dedicated to feminist relationship-building. So it's structured around, each episode is structured around a conversation with a feminist academic, artist, or activist, and the listenership is really engaged. It's been a priority from the beginning to be in dialogue with the listenership. At the same time as I was making the first dozen or so episodes of *Secret Feminist Agenda*, I was in the midst of developing a collaborative research project with Siobhan McMenemy, who's the managing editor at Wilfrid Laurier University Press. Our project, "Scholarly Podcasting in Canada" proposes to build the infrastructure for podcasting to become viable as a form of scholarly communication; that includes consultation with university administration about recognizing non-traditional publishing in tenure and promotion processes–that's going to be a big one–but we're also working on developing methods for peer reviewing podcasts through a pilot podcast. Public first and serially released and unavoidably non-anonymous, podcasts are really hard to subject to traditional peer review. So, I was chatting with Siobhan about possible topics for our pilot podcast not long ago and she said, "Wait a minute, isn't *Secret Feminist Agenda* or a pilot project?" And I said, "Of course not Siobhan. It isn't scholarly." [laughter] So, what has followed is an extended and ongoing conversation about what qualifies as scholarly work at all and where the principles of *Secret Feminist Agenda*, including its community orientation, public first address, and inherent openness, seem to apply pressure to traditional concepts of the scholarly, including apparently my own. And part of that conversation is of course how we're going to peer review it. As of today, there are 15 episodes, but it's really hard to catch up on peer reviewing something that continues to be produced in real time, and part of that conversation is of course who the peers for this project actually are, because as we push scholarship beyond the borders of the university, as we rebuild our scholarly ecosystem around principles of community engagement and openness, we're going to need to keep asking ourselves, who is our scholarship for, to whom is it accountable, and how radically must have this accountability transform the very shapes of the work we do? That's it. Thank you. [Music: "Mesh Shirt" by Mom Jeans]

Hannah (Host): Hey, you made it all the way to the end. Great job. The bonus announcement is that, while we'll be back sometime in the new year after we've done all of our peer review stuff and thought through how we want to reboot the second season of the show, there is going to be a holiday special coming your way. Now, those of you who are also *Witch, Please* listeners might be expecting something particularly silly. It's not going to be a musical episode, so don't get your hopes too high up. However, I am going to have a couple of really awesome guests. We're going to talk about all kinds of things like self-care over the holidays and the different forms that might take. That will be coming out at some point in early December so you know, don't unsubscribe, unless you have already. [laughter] Now the podcast might be, um, sort of hiatus-ish. I mean, I'm talking to you right now, but you know what I mean, but that doesn't mean that you can't still get in touch. You can find all of the previous episodes and show notes on secretfeministagenda.com. You can always follow me on Twitter @hkpmcgregor and tweet about the podcast using the hashtag #secretfeministagenda. Thanks to all of you who have written super thoughtful and helpful comments on the last episode. If you haven't yet, go and take a look at those and add in your two cents. They're all gonna play a really important role in helping to structure the second season. The podcast theme song is "Mesh Shirt" by Mom Jeans off their album, *Chub Rub*. You can download the entire album on freemusicarchive.org, or follow them on Facebook. And that's it for now. I'll see you in December. This has been *Secret Feminist Agenda*. Pass it on. [Music: "Mesh Shirt" by Mom Jeans]