

Episode 2.3 On Being Seen

February 2, 2018

Hannah (Host): [Music: "Mesh Shirt" by Mom Jeans] Hi, I'm Hannah McGregor and this is *Secret Feminist Agenda*. I hope you enjoyed the interview with Kendra and Sylvie last week. I have another fantastic conversation coming up next week. That, spoiler alert, is gonna be great, but this week I'm just here for a little bitty minisode. So tell you about my secret feminist agenda. [Music: "Mesh Shirt" by Mom Jeans]

Oh, let's talk about reading. Don't worry. It's more specific than reading. It's a very specific kind of reading. What I want to talk about is reading things that make you feel seen. So a little context here: before my current job in a publishing studies department, I taught in English departments. My PhD is in literature and the specific thing that I studied about literature was the idea of the ethics of reading. Now this is a particular sort of area of literary study and it's interested in exploring the idea of essentially whether or not reading particular kinds of books in particular kinds of ways might constitute what theorists call an ethical encounter. And the ethical encounter here is defined as an encounter with the other. An encounter with someone or something that is so different from you that it challenges you to accept and value that other, not on terms of recognizability or similarity, but rather out of the sheer responsibility to that other because they exist and are there.

That's sort of the ethical demand. And in that context, literary theorists are really interested in what happens to us when we read things that are really challenging to us. What happens when we read things that are, that are unfamiliar, that push us to think about language in a different way or to see a, a set of experiences that aren't our own, to imagine ourselves into the minds or positions of people who are really, really different from us. And there's a couple of couple of theorists that I, that I really like the way that they talk about this. I'm particularly fond of this quote from a scholar named Doris Sommer, who refers to, these are her words, "the slap of refusal from unyielding books that can slow readers down, detain them at the boundary between contact and conquest" end quote. Oh, it's funny, when I googled that quote, sort of remembering the vague, the phrase "slap of refusal from unyielding books," I googled it and the two Google results for that phrase are both things I have written. So that gives you like a pretty good idea of how much I like that phrase. But that idea of sort of reading something that that makes you stop, that doesn't give you the immediate thrill of recognition or the pleasure of familiarity, and how that can be good for you because it can stop you from assuming that everything should be recognizable to you, that the whole world owes you familiarity or easy comprehension. It's good for us to realize that that that's not a legitimate thing to demand of the world. But I think that there is something really important to be said for the moment when you are reading something and you feel really deeply seen by it. I think there's an important distinction to be made here between the kind of universality that, like, white

dude literary critics have claimed to be the case of stories about other white dudes. So, you know, *Hamlet* is a universal story about human experience when it's like, I'm pretty sure it's about a prince of Denmark story. I do not identify with that at all. The sort of claims of, of what's the universal and the recognizable in literature so often excludes those of us who in whatever ways differ from the norm, the standard, the hegemonic ideal. And it's those particular moments. It's, it's reading something where the part of you that feel seen isn't the part of you that aligns with the status quo. It's the part of you that is so rarely represented. To have that part of you that you don't get to see in books and movies and TV shows, to get, to see that for a moment, to really see it mirrored back to you through art is an incredible gift. And this is why, despite my belief that, you know, reading stories that aren't about us can be really good for us, at the same time, I advocate enthusiastically for greater diversity in publishing because challenging yourself to step outside of comfortable norms, you know, so, so white readers and viewers challenging ourselves to step outside of the false universality of whiteness. That's really, really different from a Black reader or viewer wanting to get to see a wide range of representations of Black characters on the screen and in books, right? Those, those things are. Those things are different, those desires are different because not all identities are represented equally and not everybody gets to see themselves in the same way.

What's represented and what's not represented is deeply political, and to consistently not see yourself can make us feel pretty erased. And so to get to see yourself, I don't know, it, it can be like you come back into focus to yourself even if just for a moment. So I want to share with you three different essays that I've read over the past few years, culminating in one that was published just last week, and that sort of prompted all of this thinking for me. And what all of these essays do that has been really important for me is articulate something about being outside of normative models of romantic and sexual desire, and the ways that that can leave you feeling really unseen by the world because romance and sex are represented as being universal. And when you don't feel yourself fitting into those for whatever reason, it can leave you feeling, I mean like there's something wrong with you. That if this, if this aspect of life is so universal and so shared by everyone, then, then you must be broken somehow.

So the first piece that really gave me a way to start thinking about these ideas is an essay called "On Spinsters" by Briallen Hopper. Now this is, on the surface, a review of a book called *Spinster* by Kate Bolick. But what it really is, is Hopper's own meditation on what the spinster means to her. I want to focus in on an early paragraph where Hopper is trying to think through what she thinks characterizes the spinster. She says, "She is often weird, difficult, dissonant, queer — like an unnerving dream, or a pungent dose of smelling salts. And her social and emotional life is not primarily oriented around the familiar forms of straight romance — dating men, hooking up with men, living with men, getting engaged to men, marrying men, divorcing men, etc.; in other words virtually all the important adult relationships given significant space in Bolick's book. Instead, the spinster may find herself immersed in an ocean-deep existential

solitude that remains impervious to Tinder or brunch. Or she may forge powerful forms of female love, friendship, commitment, and community, like the Boston marriage, the matriarchal family, or the settlement house. These varied modes of life are what make spinsters different from single ladies, debutantes, divorcées, and wives." Hopper goes on to link the identity of the spinster with both queer communities and African American communities. She points out the way that spinsterhood is also linked to communities who are denied the privilege of marriage and who sought ways to thrive outside of that sort of legally sanctioned relationship. And she talks about how communities that have figured out how to thrive outside of marriage present us with options and possibilities other than the sort of normative versions of what life can look like, and thus that we owe these communities a great deal in terms of, under situations of duress, imagining life otherwise. And something that was really significant for me the first time I read this piece was the way that Hopper links spinsterhood and queerness, which was really important for my thinking because part of me has been scared that, that a disinterest in romantic relationships would sort of discredit my queerness, so to speak. You know, you can't be queer if you're not actively doing queer stuff.

That capacity to think about queerness and asexuality or queerness and aromanticism together, and to sort of hold them together at the same time was something that I also really valued in a piece published just this past December by Brandon Taylor called "On Being Queer and Happily Single — Except When I'm Not." And again, I just want to focus in on a particular piece of this where the speaker is talking about what it's like to feel like you might desire the wrong things. He says, "What I want is mostly to be alone. And to not have to contextualize my loneliness in a way that makes other people comfortable with it. So what if I'm alone. So what if I sit in my apartment and read one book after another or watch period pieces. It's not a wasted life. It's not a dead end. It's not one of those sounds that you hear in the middle of the night and go in search of only to find nothing but air. It's not that. But what I really think, in the midst of all of this, is that I'd like to live alone in a cabin in the woods. It's not even about men or what they have to offer. It's not about, Am I attractive to gay men? Or Do gay men find Black men attractive? Or Do gay men find fat Black men attractive? It's not about having parsed the offerings of gay men the world over and having found them lacking. No. It's about, simply, not wanting sex, not desiring it, not needing it, finding it an insufficiently motivating organizing principle of life."

Reading this piece, which, which I'm deliberately not giving a genre because honestly, it's still not clear to me whether it's an essay or a short story and that's fine to me. It doesn't need to be necessarily rooted in another person's experience to still give me that sort of stab of not even necessarily, "oh, that's me, but oh, thank you for saying something I've thought or thank you for saying something I haven't heard before," that that imagines something a little bit differently, in a way that, even though this in particular is not my experience because I am not a gay Black man, still opens up the world for me a little bit. And the most recent piece that sort of did this, did this thing for me that gave

me this stab of, I don't know, gratitude and self recognition. It was published just last week in *GUTS magazine*. It's called "Decrying Desirability, Demanding Care." It's by a really incredible Métis poet living here in Vancouver named Samantha Marie Knock. And again, I'm sort of going to close in on one particular passage which says, "I still live in a society where I'm constantly negotiating my care. Folks who are deemed undesirable—among them, people who are fat, not white, queer, trans, disabled, or exist at any intersection of marginalization—are constantly negotiating their care with the rest of the world, because the world in its current state can't hold us fully. I'm not saying folks who are deemed undesirable by normative standards can't find love, because we can. We can find romantic love. That's not my point. I'm saying that when the world isn't there for you, you learn to create your own world and invite others into it. You rip a hole in the sky and crawl through."

These three pieces might give you a similar stab of recognition, or they might do that first thing I was talking about. They might be an opportunity for you to see the world in a different way, to sort of step outside things that felt normative and natural and automatic and universal to encounter that kind of otherness or alterity. That door Summer says, can be really good for us. But I, I wish for each and every one of you some piece of art that sees the thing in you that feels unseeable, that reflects it back to you in a way that is more beautiful than you've been able to show it to yourself. I wish for everyone art that makes you feel a little bit more seen. [Music: "Mesh Shirt" by Mom Jeans] Speaking of things that make you feel seen, let's go hang out with Kaarina for awhile. [Music: "I Will" by Mitski]

Kaarina:

Hello and welcome to Kaarina's Cozy Self Care Corner. So today I want to borrow self care or community care idea from a friend. As you may or may not know, I play roller derby. And "play" is a strong word because I've been learning how to play for the last two years, and I'm playing my first game this weekend. And I'm super excited and scared and all those things. A bunch of people from my league are driving to a tournament in another province and we're going to be playing in the rookie bout, which is amazing. And this is a group of about 15 skaters that I have learned with and fallen down with and laughed with. And I'm so excited to be skating with them, but I'm also super nervous. So my lovely, beautiful league mate Daphne posted on our planning page, where we've been posting about, you know, ride shares and hotel room bookings, she posted a poll asking how people want to be treated when they get stressed out or anxious or upset during the tournament. If something's going on and you're getting emotional, she suggested, do you want to be left alone? Do you want someone to sit with you? Do you want a specific person to sit with you? Do you want a hug or do you want something else? And she even put the option, "I don't know, but I will decide in the moment and tell you," and it just warmed my heart because this is gonna to be emotional in ways that we didn't anticipate, and in ways that we do anticipate, and everybody needs comfort in different ways and for different moments. And being able to start a conversation about that, even just to acknowledge that things will be tricky and emotional and scary and hard, that the people around you want to take care of

Secret Feminist Agenda Transcript

you, but they also want to take care of you in the way that you want to be cared for. I'm tearing up just thinking about it because this is the kind of beautiful community that our league is, but also that we've created and contributed to and that maintain every day. And I really hope that you have those kinds of communities and relationships in your life. I'm really looking forward to this weekend, and maybe I'll let you know how it went and how emotional I got and how that manifested itself. Have a great weekend. So it's been a week since I recorded that segment and I'm just checking in to tell you that my first roller derby bout was amazing. The only low point was when I was equal parts hungry and tired, and even in that moment, there were three other people nearby who were equally hungry and tired, and we made an action plan and we followed through and within half hour we were fed and in bed. And that's all we can ever ask for, right? To be fed and in bed when we want to be. So roller derby's the best. Join roller derby. And if you can't or don't want to, then take care of yourself and the people around you. To the best of your abilities. Bye. [Music: "I Will" by Mitski]

Hannah (Host):

As always, you can find show notes and all the episodes of *Secret Feminist Agenda* on secretfeministagenda.com. You can follow me on Twitter @hkpmcgregor. You can follow Kaarina @Kaarinasaurus. And you can tweet about the podcast using the hashtag #secretfeministagenda. And you can rate and review the show like, wherever. Just scream into the void. I'll know. The podcast theme song is "Mesh Shirt" by Mom Jeans off their album *Chub Rub*. You can download to the entire album on [free music archive.org](http://free-music-archive.org), or follow them on Facebook. Kaarina's theme song is "I Will" by Mitski. That's it for this week. This has been *Secret Feminist Agenda*. Pass it on. [Music: "Mesh Shirt" by Mom Jeans]