

Episode 3.13 Understanding White Supremacy

January 11, 2019

Hannah (Host): [00:07](#) [Music: "Mesh Shirt" by Mom Jeans] Hi, I'm Hannah McGregor and this is *Secret Feminist Agenda*. Happy New Year. I don't do resolutions because they're mostly aligned with a capitalist and white supremacist notion of the self as perfectible, but I do revise based on peer review, which is kind of what I'm doing today. As I believe I have already mentioned in a previous episode, the peer review for season two is now up at Wilfrid Laurier University Press's website. I will make sure will link through to it in the show notes. It's such a great set of documents. The peer reviewers, Anna Poletti and Carla Rice have written incredibly thoughtful engagements with the podcast that were so exciting for me to read, because I felt really profoundly like the work has been seen for what it's trying to do, and that's not always an experience you have in academia. Sometimes you really feel like the work that you're doing is being treated ungenerously. The sort of culture of critique that's so central to what we do in this field can sometimes lead to, I think, a lack of, of generosity with one another's work. But that what's being modeled in these peer reviews is just, I mean the, the most generous and thoughtful kind of engagement I could possibly hope for. They were a huge pleasure for me to read and respond to, and if you're interested in *Secret Feminist Agenda* in so far as it is this academic project that's doing open peer review and thinking about different forms, scholarship can take, go take a look at them and at my own response to them. What I'm going to do in the podcast itself, I'm not going to talk through the peer reviews at great length, but I want to tell you a couple of things that I'm planning on doing moving forward based on the feedback that I've received. So one thing that I've actually talked with, with Siobhan, my editor at Wilfrid Laurier University Press about is using the minisodes to build connections between the interview episodes more explicitly. Maybe to pick up on threads in the interview conversations that we didn't get a chance to pull out fully, or to draw connections between different interview episodes through which interesting themes are emerging. I am also based on the feedback of Anna Poletti, planning on doing an episode that things explicitly about the genre of the anecdote and how that plays a role in the kinds of feminist and informal public knowledge production the podcast is doing. Also based on feedback suggesting that there's space for more conversations that are explicitly about the work of being a public intellectual, I'm planning on doing a sort of cluster of

episodes in the second half of season three that are specifically about, or that talk to other feminist public intellectuals who are using podcasting to do this work. I'm in the process of gathering suggestions for possible guests. I've already reached out to some people. So if you have ideas for podcasters who are, who are using the medium specifically to do this kind of intellectual knowledge translation work, I would really, really love to hear those suggestions. And then finally based on feedback from Carla Rice, that panel conversations would be an interesting way to, sort of, widen the scope of some of the episodes. I'm planning now on concluding season three with a panel discussion about public scholarship, so stay tuned for that. That should also be good. So in order to follow through right from the get go with the kind of work that I said in particular, minisodes are going to be trying to do a little bit more of, I want to pick up on a piece of feedback that I got from the last interview episode, wonderful interview with Tara Robertson. I've been getting lots of great feedback on it. Rightly so, Tara is brilliant and I loved that episode. One listener emailed suggesting that it was inappropriate and unscholarly to call Jordan Peterson a white supremacist. So my first secret feminist agenda for 2019 is understanding white supremacy. [Music: "Mesh Shirt" by Mom Jeans].

Hannah (Host):

[04:35](#)

A heads up as usual. When I do episodes on whiteness, my target audience here is fellow white folks. That's who I consider myself to be talking to, as a white person. I'm always grateful for the ears and feedback of my Black, Indigenous, and person of color listeners, but also you know this violence in a way that I don't and never will and I also really want to empower you to use this opportunity to just skip straight to Kaarina, if that's what you would look to do. So I've actually already done, not a whole episode on this topic, I mean whiteness, white violence, white privilege, white supremacy are obviously themes throughout the podcast. But I've talked specifically about white supremacy and about white people's responsibility to educate ourselves about how white supremacy functions way, way, way back in season one, episode six the episode is called "Taking Up Space and Feeling Safe with Leslie Allin. The interview itself is about self defense and women learning self defense, but back in season one I was sort of smushing the interviews and the minisodes together into single episodes. And so my discussion at the beginning was specifically about white supremacy in the context of the Charlottesville rallies, which had just happened. There's no comparable, sort of recent, striking moment that is prompting me to return to this topic. It really is that, that interview that's been making me think about it. But of course white supremacy is all around us and we're seeing playing out

on a daily basis. What, what's happening right now in Canada for example, is the RCMP moving to break up a First Nations blockade of a pipeline moving through unceded Indigenous territory. This is a federal government that has claimed to be dedicated to reconciliation and has claimed to recognize Indigenous peoples' rights to their own lands. And yet the second that a nation attempted to block the building of a pipeline through their lands, the federal government was like, "cool, cool, never mind. We'll just send in a militarized police force to do things like cut off the WiFi and block media" so that minimal information about the violence that they're using can get out. I'm going to put some links to if you would like to learn more about what's going on, and also if you would like to contribute money to the camp to help, to help support the incredibly vital work that they're doing. But the ease with which at any moment I could return to the topic of white supremacy and find something that has happened in the last two fucking days to point to that, that concretizes the kind of violence of this system. Well, it tells us something and the something that it tells us is something that I said way back in episode 1.6, which is that white supremacy is this, this all encompassing and totalizing system. It's a system that we live within. And there was a couple of lines in that episode that I want to return to. One thing I said was, "there is no whiteness outside of violence. Whiteness is only violence." And the other was, "if you aren't pushing back against white supremacy and you're sitting comfortably within it." And these I want to return to because a question like "is it fair or unfair to call X person a white supremacist?" Has within a particular logic which says, that's an outrageous claim. That's an inflammatory claim. That's a libelous claim. That's a claim that demands evidence, and I would argue the contrary. I would in fact argue that that the default of being a white person living within white supremacy is being a white supremacist. I've said it before that, that we want to point to white supremacy as being extreme examples of racial violence so that we can other that kind of behavior. Again, we, I'm talking here about white people, so that we can other that kind of behavior from ourselves. That's an attempt to find a way out of complicity with the violence of this system. I would instead say that the onus is on white people to actively demonstrate your distance from white supremacy on a daily basis. And it, and it worries me to see white people say, "Ooh, is that too much to call that person a white supremacist?" That tells me that you are assuming a sort of neutrality to the way that whiteness operates as opposed to the default being violence. But I also want to touch here briefly on the realities of what it means to point to figures like Jordan Peterson. But certainly not limited to him who are these, sort of, Alt-Right figures whose defendants

often claim that they are not explicitly participating in white supremacy. And again, hinging in that claim is a sense that in order to be a white supremacist you need to participate in a kind of over-the-top, villainous, white racism. Some in that is because of the way that that white supremacy as a system, constantly neutralizes white racially motivated violence is incredibly hard to point to an example that people are actually willing to recognize, is white supremacist violence. Like you need to get a bunch of white men marching with tiki torches giving Nazi salutes, wearing KKK paraphernalia before people are willing to say like, "okay, well that might be racially motivated," but that that can't be how our recognition of white supremacist violence functions. Not if we actually want to understand it as a system and work to abolish it. Our understanding needs to be a lot more nuanced than that and a lot more rigorous than that.

Hannah (Host):

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And so what I want to point to today is a particular form that white supremacist violence has been taking in intellectual circles. And that is the revival of something known as race science. And that is something that, that people like Jordan Peterson have been actively involved in. Race science, for those of you who don't know, is a 19th century pseudoscientific field that is about using science to justify a fundamental difference between people based on race. Probably the best known form of race science is for phrenology, which is now entirely rejected pseudoscientific field that believed that you could study innate characteristics in people based on measuring their skulls. So that you could see if people were predisposed towards violence, for example, or predisposed towards intelligence. It's actually where the terms "highbrow" and "lowbrow" came from. Fun fact, if you are at a cool hipsters house and they have one of those phrenology heads in their home, you maybe you want to let them know that what they have there is a, a terrifying representation of the same racial violence that was used to justify slavery. So it's not fun. Phrenology is not fun and old timey. It is violent and terrifying. As is race science in general. Race as a set of categories used to subdivide the world predates race science, but race science in the 19th century, and it's linked to evolution, and social Darwinism in particular, still powerfully informs how racial politics work in the 21st century. It's an inheritance that we are all absolutely still grappling with. I'm going to link you through to a really interesting interview with Kyla Schuller, who is a scholar who works on the history of race in the US, and who is particularly interested in race science and its inheritance. And she says a number of really interesting things in the interview, but one piece that stood out to me is an idea that came through a, sort of, 19th century idea that came

through via a French naturalist named John Baptiste Lamarck. And that is something to do with plasticity with, with different levels of plasticity. So this is quoting Dr. Schuller. She says, "race and racial difference was understood as the differential capacity to be plastic. Whiteness was fully malleable, fully capable of progress or decline and blackness was at the opposite, barely plastic, except for maybe a few years at the beginning of youth. This is the underlying scientific framework that holds children as key leaders for managing the racial body of the future," end quote. And so the interview goes on to link that kind of understanding of racial plasticity, in terms of the justification of different forms of state racisms, such as the forced removal of indigenous children from their families. And then Dr. Schuller links that to the child detention camps that the Trump administration is running today. But she also goes on to make the point that plasticity is linked to the capacity to feel both emotional and physical pain and that, that, that 19th century understanding of different levels of feeling still plays out today in things like a systemic anti-blackness in the practice of medicine based on an inherited understanding that black people feel less pain. And I'm going to link here to an excerpt from Tressie McMillan Cottom's new book, which I haven't read yet, *Thick*. I'm very excited to read it, but there's an excerpt that was posted about her experience of being ignored when she was talking about what was going on with her body during her pregnancy, and how that's linked to a sort of systemic like medical gas lighting of black women. So some forms of race science, like phrenology, are completely disavowed at this point, but other forms are experiencing a resurgence. And probably the most obvious form that actually is, is coming back in powerful ways, and this being promoted actively by the Alt-Right is the notion of racially differential IQs. The idea essentially, that based on race people have different capacities for intelligence. The reason why that idea is appealing to white supremacists is it suggests that the world is structured naturally. That hierarchies emerge out of nature, rather than out of cultural or political or social forces and that some people are just better suited to be in charge than others. That is the premise of white supremacy, that the white race is supreme and that it is supreme at a biological or genetic basis. And so attempting to prove that race and IQ are linked is an attempt to prove that white people are better suited for rule, are better suited for power, are better suited for social control than black people are. And that that belief in the inherentness of hierarchies is fundamental to the thinking of people like Jordan Peterson. That essentially what he's striving to do is to disavow forms of thought that understand power as being socially structured and to instead, insist that the power and hierarchies

emerge through nature. The Alt-Right who believe in race science insist that this is scientifically sound but politically unpopular thought. They often talk about unpopularity or risky thinking or edgy thinking as though this kind of race science is speaking truth to the status quo. A couple of important things to note there. One, it's not scientifically sound. Basically every prominent person in the field of genetics has said that there is no link between race and IQ. That has been entirely undermined, and so if people continue to push forward that thinking there's very clearly an agenda at work and we know what that agenda is. The other thing is that the claim that this kind of thinking is edgy, or risky, or unpopular is just deeply ahistorical. I mean in what world is the belief that has dominated the world for the past 200 years at least, and continues to structure industries like medicine and the prison system, risky or edgy? It's actually the most mundane and banal thinking. It's, it's the most old fashioned thinking. Claims that that's unpopular or risky thought, that things like race science are unpopular or risky thought, is an attempt to strategically leverage white people's anxiety and anger at even the smallest loss of white power. And we can see it working, right? We can see the degree to which that kind of thinking is popular. It's massively popular. It's massively popular and it hinges on claiming its own unpopularity, which is, would be funny if it wasn't profoundly and viscerally horrifying. The big takeaway that I want to come out of this episode is a take away that that I've said before, and will say again because I think it really can't be repeated too much, which is that: it is the responsibility of every white person to be actively educating ourselves about white supremacy and how it functions and to be actively working to disavow it as a system in all of our actions. There's no possibility for living and functioning neutrally within white supremacy. And an attempt to do so are an attempt to claim that you or others are doing so is complicit with the system. It's a maintenance of the status quo. So go click on some of those links. Read up on race science. Give yourself the knowledge that you need to repudiate these claims when you see them or when you hear them from other people. Equip yourself with the tools that knowledge gives you to fight against an incredible form of violence that, that needs to be fought and that needs to be fought by white people. If I believed in New Year's resolutions, I would say that's a resolution that we could all get on board with for 2019. [Music: "Mesh Shirt" by Mom Jeans] All right. Speaking of things I am on board with for 2019 let's hear from Kaarina. [Music: "I Will" by Mitski]

Kaarina:

[20:01](#)

Hello, and welcome to Kaarina's Cozy Self Care Corner. So two things happened this week. One, I realized, I kept sighing

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because I was breathing in and then forgetting to breathe out, and then I would have to sigh in order to reset the cycle of breathing. And two, I was doing a breathing exercise to try to address this and I found myself getting really impatient with the act of breathing, which is ridiculous. I know, but that is where I'm at apparently, physically and mentally. I'm impatient with the act of breathing, and if I'm with that, you can only imagine how I feel about the other parts of life, like riding a crowded bus, or doing the dishes, or writing a dissertation. I don't know, things like that. So, this week I'm just going to remind you to breathe. Mostly I'm going to remind myself to breathe and to remember that everything takes time and that it's okay for everything. To take time. That's what time is there for. Nothing particularly deeper insightful this week. Friends, just keep breathing. That's what I'm trying to do. Have a great weekend. [Music: "I Will" by Mitski]

Hannah (Host):

[21:51](#)

As always, you can find show notes and the rest of the episodes of *Secret Feminist Agenda* on secretfeministagenda.com. You can follow me on Twitter @hkpcgregor. You can follow Kaarina @Kaarinasaurus and you can tweet about the podcast using the hashtag #secretfeministagenda. I've got a message from a listener from Norway saying that I should check the iTunes reviews in Norway, and I did and there are two. So shout out to Inga Langfelt and Mia Marier. I'm probably saying both of those super wrong, but thank you both so kindly for your refuse. The podcast's 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. Kaarina's theme song is "I Will" by Mitski. *Secret Feminist Agenda* is recorded on the traditional and unceded territory of the Musqueam, Squamish, and Tsleil-Waututh first nations where I'm grateful to live and work. This has been *Secret Feminist Agenda*. Pass it on. [Music: "Mesh Shirt" by Mom Jeans]