

Episode 3.14 Getting Shit Sandwiched with Vivek Shraya

January 18, 2019

Hannah (Host): [00:06](#) [Music: "Mesh Shirt" by Mom Jeans] Hi, I'm Hannah McGregor and this is *Secret Feminist Agenda*. I'm recording this from Edmonton, where I had the pleasure of recording a live *Secret Feminist Agenda* with Chelsea Vowel, a.k.a. âpihtawikosisân, and relaunching *Refuse: CanLit in Ruins* with Julie Rak, and Nikki Reimer, and Chelsea, and CJ Bogle, and Marilyn Dumont. You'll get to hear my conversation with Chelsea down the line as an episode, and if you'd like to experience the brilliance of the launch, you could buy the book. That would be a good way of doing it. Anyway, that's why this episode is a bit late, because I'm in Edmonton and off my usual schedule. Also, there's a little weird audio interference in some of this episode. I did my best to edit it out, but I didn't want to lose too much of the actual content, so I left some janky sounding bits in to preserve some actual brilliant ideas, from the guest obviously, not me. It's not the whole thing, so I hope you'll bear with it for the great conversation to come. And on that note, let's meet Vivek. [Music: "Mesh Shirt" by Mom Jeans] Vivek Shraya is an artist whose body of work across as the boundaries of music, literature, visual art, and film. Her album with Queer Songbook Orchestra, *Part-Time Woman*, was included in CBC's list of Best Canadian Albums of 2017 and her first book of poetry, *Even This Page is White*, won a 2017 Publisher Triangle Award. Her bestselling new book *I'm Afraid of Men*, was heralded by Vanity Fair as "cultural rocket fuel." She is one half of the music duo Too Attached and the founder of the publishing imprint VS Books. A Polaris Music Prize nominee and four-time Lambda Literary Award Finalist, Vivek was a 2016 Pride Toronto Grand Marshal and has received honors from the Writers Trust of Canada and CBC's Canada Reads. She is currently a director on the board of the Tegan and Sara Foundation and an assistant professor of creative writing at the University of Calgary. And yet somehow she found time to talk with me for the podcast. [Music: "I'm Afraid of Men" by Too Attached]

Hannah (Host): [03:00](#) That's great. So, I would really like to hear how the year of touring your new book has been going. The new book is, this will probably be in the bio, but heck, let's say it anyway. The new book is *I'm Afraid of Men* and it has been, from what I've been seeing, appears to be just a massive success.

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- Vivek: [03:26](#) [Laughs].
- Hannah (Host): [03:26](#) So [laughs] maybe this, maybe it's just the bias of my particular social media presence, but it, it looks like it's doing incredibly well. So how's the touring process for this big title?
- Vivek: [03:38](#) Yeah, I mean I was a little bit nervous because...I mean, with any project you're always nervous about what the response is going to be, and you know, for me it's, it's a significant book because it's my first time moving into a relationship with a larger press. And so--
- Hannah (Host): [03:56](#) Yeah.
- Vivek: [03:56](#) --you know, for the past four years I've been working really closely with Arsenal Pulp Press, who are amazing and I continue to have a relationship with them. But you know, once you develop relationship but you sort of get a sense of the flow and it was starting this new relationship with Penguin, it's just sort of like starting all over again. And the stakes felt higher in all kinds of ways because you know, I really wanted to like, do right by them, but simultaneously you don't really have a lot of control. And with a title like *I'm Afraid of Men*, yeah, there was just sort of a lot of uncertainty on my part, in terms of how people would connect, if people would feel immediately alienated. And if anything I feel like the opposite has been true. Bustle just put out an article like last week that said that "I'm afraid of men" like, best describes the mood of 2018, or something like that.
- Hannah (Host): [04:46](#) [Laughs].
- Vivek: [04:46](#) Which is great.
- Hannah (Host): [04:46](#) Yeah.
- Vivek: [04:47](#) And tour wise, again, the response has been really like, lovely and I couldn't have asked for a better experience. This is the first time that I did a lot of like, the major literary festivals in Canada too, which again was a really big deal for me. So it was, it was really interesting to get that experience because suddenly you're in the same room as like, you know, Dionne Brand and Eden Robinson like Buffy Saint-Marie. So it just like, it's, it's a very different experience then, you know, two years ago when I was touring *Even This Page is White* and you know, doing indie bookstores, which are also fantastic, but it's, it was just really interesting to get the other perspective. And, and now and as,

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you know, like I'm obsessed with the industry and like, learning about the business, so for me it's, it was just like an interesting learning process too to see like, what the differences were exactly.

Hannah (Host): [05:39](#) No, I have so many followups I have from that. The first thing, I mean, I obviously am also really interested in the ins and outs of the industry, and it's so interesting to me to sort of observe, I mean, cause I've been reading your work, I've been following your work for years.

Vivek: [05:54](#) Oh, wow. Thank you.

Hannah (Host): [05:54](#) And to really see, I mean it's, thank you. It's amazing work. And to see the, the sort of nature of small press versus multinational press reception, like it feels so concrete in this case. And, and it, it might be, you know, like we can theorize till the cows come home, how the book, would have been received differently if published with a small press, and whether this was just going to be your breakout title, whatever. But that that feeling of like, "oh, Penguin has taken you on and now you are in the room where it happens." Like it, it has looked like that from the outside at least.

Vivek: [06:31](#) Yeah. And I mean, I think you, you've made a good point in that it doesn't always line up that way. Certainly, you know, in having conversations with Penguin, I've heard, you know, of times where you know, the book is great and the author is lovely, and everyone's put their eggs in the basket, and everyone's really invested and it just doesn't land in the same way. So I think that there's lots of things, there's just so many elements at play and I often think a lot about Neil Gaiman who.

Hannah (Host): [06:59](#) [Laughs]

Vivek: [06:59](#) [Laughs] I bet--

Hannah (Host): [06:59](#) Sorry. Just gazing into the distance, thinking about Neil Gaiman.

Vivek: [07:05](#) I always think about Neil Gaiman cuz he gave this really lovely speech where he talked about how making art is like putting a message in a bottle. And how, you know, as an artist all you can do is like sort of hope that it reaches the other side. And I've had a career of putting a loooooooot of messages in a bottle--

Hannah (Host): [07:18](#) [Laughs].

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- Vivek: [07:18](#) --that just sunk. That just like, didn't even make it like, a yard. Is that, I don't know if that's the right measurement for, for, for water distance, but yeah, anyway--
- Hannah (Host): [07:34](#) There's gotta be something more nautical, like a nautical mile.
- Vivek: [07:37](#) --But I think like, for me, I'm always just sort of fascinated with the mystery and the magic of what allows a bottle to reach the other side. And some of it isn't mysterious. Some of it isn't magical. Some of it's just capitalism.
- Hannah (Host): [07:54](#) [Laughs].
- Vivek: [07:54](#) [Laughs] You know? But some of it is really, you know, but like capitalism at the end of the day is like certainly an insurmountable, I want to say "pressure," but maybe that's indelicate. But there's also other forces at work there, and like that to me is sort of what's, what's really interesting. So.
- Hannah (Host): [08:11](#) Yeah, absolutely. I mean that's, that's the thing about publishing, right? Like if there was just a, a simple formula that could be followed, if that made a title a success, then everybody would know exactly how to make a title a success. But it isn't, you can't publish a blank book and make it successful. It's some combination of the, the way that it circulates and the thing itself. And, and there's predictable aspects and then there's just these, these beautifully, chaotically unpredictable aspects. And I think it's really interesting to think, you know, about what's made this, this title have the impact it has to think about that, was it Bustle? The article that says the title best describes the the mood of 2018? and I definitely had a really visceral reaction when I first saw the cover of this book.
- Vivek: [09:03](#) Oh, wow.
- Hannah (Host): [09:03](#) It was a really powerful moment of like, "oh, we're allowed to say that. Oh, wow. I didn't know we were allowed to say that."
- Vivek: [09:11](#) Wow. That's so nice to hear. Yeah. I mean it's been interesting cause I, one of my friends, Farrah Khan said something along the same lines about how the title just, she felt like it was permission to say something and to own something that we're not really allowed to articulate. And so yeah, that feels so lovely to hear. And I think for me, in some ways it's almost, you know, even though even though I've been sitting with this project were for quite a while now, it's still sort of surprises me to think being what a significant deal it is for women and gender

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nonconforming people to articulate fear. Like how, how, yeah, how impossible that still is, you know?

- Hannah (Host): [09:50](#) Yeah. And the, the expectation of bravery as a, sort of, like how are women, and especially racialized, women expected to perform the, the image of having to be constantly just a, a brave little...What are you, a brave little engine, a brave little teapot?
- Vivek: [10:08](#) [Laughs].
- Hannah (Host): [10:08](#) What's brave?
- Vivek: [10:12](#) [Laughs] Water bottle? I don't know.
- Hannah (Host): [10:15](#) A brave little, just some sort of brave little anthropomorphic thing, just just valiantly striving against all, all of the, the opposing forces. Like, like that expectation of bravery, which is profoundly exhausting and disproportionately impacts the people who are most marginalized. That goes hand in hand with that, that unspeakability of fear.
- Vivek: [10:38](#) Totally, totally. And I mean that's one of the things I've been saying this fall was that like, I want to think, for me the title and the book certainly is about imagining if articulating fear in and of itself could be a form of resilience. Like, you know, instead of marginalized bodies having to perform some kind of quote unquote "bravery," Can it be possible for us to say that we're afraid and for it to be recognized, as resilience as opposed to the opposite. You know?
- Hannah (Host): [11:07](#) Yeah, it's, it's a toaster. It's a brave little toaster. That's how I got there. Sorry, I almost yelled "toaster" in the middle of your really thoughtful response.
- Vivek: [11:17](#) Oh, please.
- Hannah (Host): [11:17](#) But then I didn't because I'm a professional. That's not true. No. Your that, that, that is absolutely a piece of the book that has stuck with me, is naming of fear as a form of resilience. Because it's quite a radical reformation of how we think about what it means to be resilient and the expectation of resilience is so fucking exhausting.
- Vivek: [11:41](#) Yes.
- Hannah (Host): [11:41](#) But if part of it is, is being allowed to be vulnerable and afraid, and as part of that maybe kind of of asking to be supported and

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cared for through that vulnerability and fear like that, that's a different kind of resilience.

- Vivek: [11:57](#) Yeah, no, totally. And not just about it being allowed, but like, recognizing that it's real, right? Like, I think permission is almost like the second step. Like, for me it's also just like about acknowledging that fear is a very real part of our lives, and that also to me feels like. Like, I would like to see that acknowledgement as a gesture in resilience as well, as opposed to denying because I think that so many of us are sort of asked to deny the validity of our feelings and in this case fear.
- Hannah (Host): [12:33](#) Yeah. Can I ask this--
- Vivek: [12:34](#) Ask me anything.
- Hannah (Host): [12:34](#) It's only kind of a side question, but your book titles are so good. I'm just thinking about, *I'm Afraid of Men* and *Even This Page is White*, are like, two of my favorite book titles of all time. Like, where does the title arrive for you in the process of, of bringing a book together? Because both of these seem like projects that, that their titles are so central to the way that they move through the world.
- Vivek: [12:58](#) You know, if you could see my face right now I'm just smiling so big because [laughs] I just like I take titles very seriously [laughs].
- Hannah (Host): [13:03](#) They're so important!
- Vivek: [13:03](#) So, yeah, I really appreciate that compliment because it is something I think a lot about. And you know, again to go back to this analogy of message in a bottle, like in my experience a title can be a big factor in that, that sort of like connection. And I think your example of like seeing the book cover and the title, having, you know, the title alone conjuring that kind of response like that to me sort of like speaks to ways that like, and as you've experienced with your book title [laughs].
- Hannah (Host): [13:31](#) [Laughs]
- Vivek: [13:37](#) An entry point or not an entry point.
- Hannah (Host): [13:37](#) You know, we changed the title about halfway through the process. The book was originally gonna be called *Refuse: 150 of CanLit Fuckery*.

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- Vivek: [13:46](#) Oh my God.
- Hannah (Host): [13:48](#) [Laughs] We were calling it the "fuckery project" for like a year. And then the press was like, "our publicity people don't love that."
- Vivek: [13:57](#) I really think that you should do some sort of like, in January or when you're looking to do a second push, maybe like when the book goes into second edition, you should do like, fake alternative covers, or a single alternative cover and be like, "to celebrate the rerelease, this isn't actually the cover, but this is what we originally imagined," because I just think that that would be such a great conversation point and also awesome.
- Hannah (Host): [14:19](#) Oh my god. [Laughs]. That's a great idea.
- Vivek: [14:19](#) So there's an idea for you. Yeah. So I mean, to answer your question, yeah. I think about titles a lot and the importance of titles. And I will say that I tend not to be someone who's like an untitled. I actually let me be very brazen with you and say that like, nothing like, bothers me more than like #untitled or when like, people don't title their work, or untitled columns, or untitled art. I'm like, titling is such a privilege! You've made this work and you had, like, it's a baby. And it's like, it's like choosing not to name your baby, you know, like I just don't understand what's happening here. But that's my own personal two cents about titling and I, I apologize to you and any listeners who might be untitled fans, but that's, that's just how I feel.
- Hannah (Host): [15:07](#) I'm not a fan of untitling but I am so bad at titles.
- Vivek: [15:10](#) I know, I know. This is the thing, like it's not easy. I will say that it's not easy.
- Hannah (Host): [15:14](#) It's hard!
- Vivek: [15:14](#) Like, even coming up with my band name Too Attached, like it took us so long. And having two people and like siblings like trying to like, decide something, it was just like, oh my god. It was so painful. But like then we landed on Too Attached to now I'm just like what a great band name. I feel really good about that. I'm glad we spent the time [laughs]. So I think it's worth the investment, is what I'm saying. But yeah, I tend to be someone that has a title in mind, and to the point that sometimes the title actually informs the project, or becomes a sort of theme for the project. So I mean, *I'm Afraid of Men* certainly the title who is in place before the project had been

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written. *Even This Page is White*, same thing. I was on Twitter and I saw some sort of like award announcement or something, and it was like a collage of three white faces and I was just like, "oh god!" And I wasn't even like up for the award or anything, it was just like a totally different, just like random thing that I saw in my feed. And I ended up texting a friend being like, "you know, I just want to write a book of poetry called *Even This Page is White*." And it was sort of meant as a joke and then it grew into something else. So yeah, I think titles are really important. And that that title, *Even This Page is White* ended up being like, one of the first lines in the first poem that I wrote for that project. There have been times though where like I've waffled on a title or change the title. *She of the Mountains*, my novel was originally called *Body and Body*, and a lot of people, readers really liked the book, the original readers, but a lot of them were like, "meh" about the title. And again, I've learned to really take that response seriously.

- Hannah (Host): [16:38](#) Uh huh.
- Vivek: [16:38](#) I mean, sometimes you have to put your foot down and go with the title regardless, but I do take the response, early response to titles really seriously as well.
- Hannah (Host): [16:47](#) Yeah. And it seems so apparent, I mean, what a, what an incredibly obvious thing. I'm about to say that the title informs a huge amount of how the book circulates through the world. Right? Like, we know, we know this to be absolutely the case. And you said to me, sort of, in passing when we were chatting back in whatever month it was. Was it November? Was it October? Who knows. When we saw each other.
- Vivek: [17:12](#) It was October.
- Hannah (Host): [17:14](#) Great. October. Brilliant, amazing. And I mentioned something about, you know, people being pissed off about my book and you said like, [laughing] "yeah, I toured a book called *Even This Page is White*. I've encountered making people angry with your book."
- Vivek: [17:30](#) [Laughs].
- Hannah (Host): [17:30](#) So, so could we talk a little bit about about that book as well, which is also, you know, like it has become a modern classic of, of Canadian poetry.

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- Vivek: [17:41](#) Can you put that in a blurb or something? And can I just like make a t-shirt or...that's so nice!
- Hannah (Host): [17:45](#) Yeah, yeah, yeah, absolutely. Absolutely. I will, I will blurb you whenever. You are significantly more famous than me, so I'm not sure how effective it will be, but I'm here for you. But that, but that since we're on the topic of like, you know, how books circulate, like in terms of people's actual like,, listening to what you are saying in the books, do you feel like *I'm Afraid of Men* has been listened to more than *Even This Page is White*. Like there are a few years apart, do you feel like people are, are hearing things more, like there's less fall out then there was for *Even This Page is White*. Or are they just not comparable projects?
- Vivek: [18:27](#) Ooh, that's a really interesting question, cuz I feel like what you're asking at the core of that question is, and maybe I'm paraphrasing here and totally not, but like what I hear from that question is "do you feel like we're in a cultural climate where people are more responsive to conversations around misogyny than they were two years ago? About conversations about white supremacy." Maybe that's not at all what you're asking.
- Hannah (Host): [18:47](#) That is what I'm asking, and then also like as I was formulating the question, cause I'm just making these up as I go, I was like, "maybe they're totally incomparable," because the status of the conversation about misogyny in 2018 and the status of the conversation about structural racism in 2015, 2016 is like, like maybe those are just totally non-comparable conversations.
- Vivek: [19:11](#) Yeah. I don't know. I mean I can tell you, well I can tell you a couple of things. I can tell you that *I'm Afraid of Men* has sold more copies since its release in the past, you know, three months, then *Even Page is White* has sold in two years. Again, we've already sort of spoken a bit about why that might be the case, and the other issue around that is also poetry. Poetry versus a small nonfiction essay that you might be able to find in an airport. Right? So it's a very different, there are different structures at work there. I will say that the response to *I'm Afraid of Men*, it wasn't as bad as I thought it was going to be in terms of like, negative response. I mean, I've had my share of negative response and certainly had trolls and whatnot, but like, the response to it hasn't been as negative as I thought, at least in my world. But I mean the book is still young so who knows--
- Hannah (Host): [20:04](#) Yeah.

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- Vivek: [20:04](#) --how, how that will change in the next year or so. You know, truthfully I think it feels about the same. That's what I'll say.
- Hannah (Host): [20:11](#) Okay.
- Vivek: [20:11](#) Same with *Even This Page is White*. Like, I was really worried, there was even conversations with publishers around like with, with Arsenal actually, about like whether or not the title would alienate people. I think touring both books were hard. It was hard work. Both of them were.
- Hannah (Host): [20:25](#) Yeah,.
- Vivek: [20:25](#) Like going into largely often white rooms, right? Like the thing about literary festivals is they're primarily white, they're primarily older, and you get up and you start reading a book called *I'm Afraid of Men*, and it changes the atmosphere.
- Hannah (Host): [20:38](#) Yep.
- Vivek: [20:38](#) And *Even This Page is White*, similar, right. Like, even if you're doing indie bookstores who comes to poetry readings? Who frequents [laughs] who's interested poetry?
- Hannah (Host): [20:46](#) Yep.
- Vivek: [20:46](#) Historically in it's been a lot of white people. So you know, I think the discomfort aspect has been similar. I think that there was a lot of like, polite clapping after. [Laughs].
- Hannah (Host): [20:57](#) [Laughs] Uh huh.
- Vivek: [21:00](#) I will, I probably, there's something about *Even This Page is White* that feels almost a little dated to me just in terms of the conversations I'm interested in having personally as a writer. So like that's what feels different, it's not so much the response of the audience response. But as a writer, I'm not really as invested in having conversations about allyship or, you know, there's a whole section in *Even This Page is White* called, "How to Talk to White People" and like that's not a conversation that I'm that particularly interested in.
- Hannah (Host): [21:32](#) Yeah.
- Vivek: [21:33](#) From an artistic standpoint, like for me, like my mandate is increasingly, "how do I talk to my own people?" yeah. How do I centre my people and my conversation? And it's not that *Even*

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This Page is White doesn't do that, but anyways, I'm going on a tangent.

Hannah (Host): [21:45](#) Yeah. No, no, you're actually, you are, you are picking up, with an incredible sort of, psychic powers the thing I was thinking about asking next, which is that sense of the, the inevitable audience that you'll be facing that literary festivals, at indie bookstores, like who's going to be there? The literary culture in Canada, is just overwhelmingly white, overwhelmingly middle to upper middle class, like you know, overwhelmingly 35+. Like it's a, it's a very particular demographic that publishers are, are very aware of, and knowing that that's who you're facing when you're touring a book, I was gonna ask to what degree it informs when you're writing the book. Like do you still, do you have those future literary festival audiences in your head when you are doing your work, or are you trying to sort of forget them and focus on the audiences that you actually want to reach? Or are you thinking about audience at all? Like is the message in the bottle like, whoever picks this up?

Vivek: [22:45](#) Hmm. That's really interesting. I mean, I do. I've never been a private artist, so I've always, and maybe this is just being a musician, starting out as a musician, I've always written songs of the hope of like, sharing them with an audience.

Hannah (Host): [22:56](#) Yeah.

Vivek: [22:56](#) And you know, on one level, like I think if I said something along the lines of like, "I write my music trying to imagine that I'm on an island where no one can hear," oh, there's so much water in this conversation. Anyways, I'm on an island here and if I still think it's good, if no one can hear it than it actually is good, or something like that. I'm totally paraphrasing. So I mean, on one hand, I think it's really important to stay true to your muse as a writer, and the to stay true to your intentions and your desires around the writing. But simultaneously, once you're making work that you're helping to put out in the world, I think it's almost irresponsible not to consider the audience at some point.

Hannah (Host): [23:32](#) Yeah.

Vivek: [23:32](#) I don't think that that should be the centre or the cornerstone of the creative process, but I think it needs to be there at some point. And so, you know, for me, what that means is having other readers look at the work. You know, if I was solely invested in staying true to my intentions and you know, whatever--

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- Hannah (Host): [23:48](#) [Laughs].
- Vivek: [23:48](#) --I wouldn't be as invested in getting feedback from other writers. A big part of why I get feedback from other artists is because I'm trying to understand if the work is connecting, you know, at sort of like small, intimate level. And I also work through all of my texts orally. So *I'm Afraid of Men*. Like I read that out loud over and over and over again because I feel like, A) I know I'm going to be reading some of it out loud and if I write it with oral in mind, it's just going to like land better live.
- Hannah (Host): [24:19](#) Yeah.
- Vivek: [24:19](#) And then B), I find that if you work through the text orally, it just gives you a better sense of like, changes you might need to make on the page. Yeah. Cause if it works well orally, it tends to work better on the page. So those are some things that I do in terms of thinking about audience, but the one thing I will say is I do feel like as an artist that has the privilege of performing and you know, a potential live audience, that like my job is, is in part to the challenging.
- Hannah (Host): [24:54](#) Yeah.
- Vivek: [24:54](#) So I mean it's funny cause *like I'm Afraid of Men* was really hard to like, I basically read the first 10 pages live and it wasn't easy, but I'm also not an easy artist. You know? Like I my, my job isn't to to go on stage and be like "everyone hold hands and we're great and life is wonderful." Like you can get that from somebody else, but that's not what I do. So to answer your question, I'm thinking about audience and I'm thinking about connecting, but I'm also thinking about what works will also push a conversations forward. What works will make people uncomfortable in ways that I hope will push the conversation forward or will allow people to leave that space with something to think about, as opposed to just choosing the pieces that I think I will feel most comfortable reading and audiences will them feel the most comfortable in that 15 to 20 minutes. I don't know if that makes sense.
- Hannah (Host): [25:56](#) Yeah, it absolutely does. I find myself wondering like, to always be putting yourself in that position like, "here I am, I have access to this public, I have access to this, this platform or this stage of this time and I'm going to use that to push people to challenge people, to try to get people to think differently," seems like, like taking on the hardest version of being, you know, a public intellectual and a public artist. I'm wondering if

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you, if that's always been how you've thought about the work that your art needs to do.

Vivek: [26:31](#) I mean not so much. I mean, I think when I started as a musician it was more like [sings] love songs.

Hannah (Host): [26:40](#) [Laughs] Okay.

Vivek: [26:40](#) [sings] Yeah, everyone is sad [stops singing]. But I mean, interestingly that's, that wasn't ever the work that could have connected. And it was writing my first book, *God Loves Hair*, where suddenly people were really interested in what I was saying around religion, and sexuality, and gender. And once I understood that that was what was connecting, I was curious if there were other things I wanted to say that music didn't allow me to say like, talking about biphobia, like talking about white supremacy. And so I don't think it was always thinking about that, but thinking about audience comfort and discomfort, but I think the more art I produce and the more I, yeah, I continue to be an artist, the more I'm also thinking about things like the responsibility I feel to my communities, you know, as a trans femme of color that now has been invited into some of these typically insular spaces I have an opportunity to say something that hopefully in some small way could shift someone's perspective around trans people of color or trans people. And so there is this sort of feeling of like, okay, well how am I going to best use this time? I will say, you know, that there are times that I wish that I could just talk about goats, because I'm also very passionate about goats, but yeah.

Hannah (Host): [28:07](#) [Laughs] I'd read, I'd read your book about goats, just saying.

Vivek: [28:10](#) Coming soon. You heard it here.

Hannah (Host): [28:11](#) Great.

Vivek: [28:11](#) But yeah, so I mean it's, it's complicated because there's a lot of, there's a lot of things at work here, and some of it is tied very much to like community accountability and some of it's also about audience accountability. Like as someone who, you know, for half of my career, like only five people would come out to my show is like, I don't take any interest in my work for granted. I wasn't like a young ingenue at 21 who like, had my first, you know, book published by like, a publisher and then had an audience. Like that wasn't my story. And I'm, I'm thrilled that that can be other people's stories, especially if that, if that individual is like, you know, marginalized in some way. But this

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is all to say that like I don't really have a sense of entitlement around connection. So when people are paying or taking the time out to see, to see me, I want them to get a show. Like I want them to get something memorable, or at least like one thing that they feel like that was worth leaving the house for. And because like I hate leaving my house [laughs].

Hannah (Host): [29:08](#)

[Laughs].

Vivek: [29:08](#)

You know, I'd rather not be there. [Laughs] Yeah. So there, yeah, there's a lot of things that work there.

Hannah (Host): [29:13](#)

Yeah. There, there are a lot of things. I mean, and what, what comes through is that sense of like, there is an authorial persona that we have all seen at readings. That is, "I am resentful of you, my audience, and the fact that you have torn me away from my art to stand here before you. And I will make it as clear as possible that I think I'm too good for this." And that attitude, that sort of like, resentful of my own readers is like something that I think pretty obviously is cultivated primarily by white men. But the sort of idea of that generosity to your audience of like, "you have come here. So I am going to put on a show for you." and what that means is that I'm going to make it clear that like, I don't know, I'm glad you're here.

Vivek: [29:58](#)

Well, and I mean think Sanara recently tweeted about this too, but like my partner and I were having this conversation about how unwelcoming it is to go to events where people will go up and just be like, "oh I just wrote this today and you know, like I haven't rehearsed. And like, yeah, like." And so like there's this like culture of self deprecation that happens at times, which can be enduring but sometimes also just feels kind of off putting. It's like, well if you don't really care enough about your work to have like, rehearsed at least and read it a couple times to yourself before, or if you think that the work is terrible, then why am I here and why are all these people here? Right? So I, and again, I employ self deprecation as well, but I think it's like finding that balance. And for me it's like really it's really about honoring the audience because I know what it's like not to have one. [Laughs]

Hannah (Host): [30:47](#)

Yeah, and that certainly comes through in, in, I know you talked about this in the most, your most recent episode of Can't Lit, but that idea of having like a tour uniform. Like an aesthetic sense that you bring with you on tour as well, that like this is a performance and there will be a costume to accompany it.

Vivek: [31:06](#)

[Laughs] Yes.

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- Hannah (Host): [31:08](#) Yeah. Which I associate you so strongly with that very, sort of, powerful aesthetic sense, that I put on lipstick before this interview, even though I knew it was going to be audio only.
- Vivek: [31:19](#) Oh! This is just wonderful. Thank you. I feel very seen and I see you right now, in this moment, even though we can't literally see each other.
- Hannah (Host): [31:27](#) [Laughs] So like I cannot help thinking that there is a no, it's not that I can't help thinking it's that you have articulated very clearly in your work, the flip side to this sense of appreciating your audience, which is also an awareness that when you are writing work that is about you know, misogyny, transmisogyny, racism, homophobia, biphobia, that there is an extractive element to what it seems some audiences want from you, want from this kind of work. And you have a song about this too, "People Want Your Story," and and want to be able to sort of extract particularly, narratives of, of trauma or have pain and that, that sense that that's what like a, like a price you pay for access to, to the literary world or a price that white cis readers feel they have owed to them. It reminds me of a conversation I had a few episodes again on this podcast with my friend Claire, who was talking about, you know, being a trans woman in cis dominated spaces and having a sense that everyone there thinks that they are owed her story, that they have a right to out her story before they accept her into that space. And that that most people would imagine what they are doing to be welcoming because they're like, "oh, tell me all about yourself." But in fact what's happening there is a sort of "pay me in your story before I will let you here."
- Vivek: [32:56](#) Yes. I mean it's tricky because like I'm also, you know, I've been performing since I was 13, and even though you know the songs were about love and heartbreak, there's still a lot of self disclosure there. So in a, in a way I'm so habituated to it. Like I don't really think a lot. I think for me, when I think about entitlement, it's more around expectations like, outside of this stage. So you know, when I get messages from people who asked me to do things, but there's like no, like I don't even get shit sandwiched anymore.
- Hannah (Host): [33:33](#) [Laughs].
- Vivek: [33:33](#) Back in the day it's like, "oh, you know, I really liked this book of yours and Blah, blah blah, blah, blah. You know, you're awesome. I'm looking to publish my own book. Do you have any advice?" Now it's just like I just get messages that are like, "I saw your new book, how did you get published?"

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- Hannah (Host): [33:46](#) [Laughs]
- Vivek: [33:48](#) And like, you know, I have taken responsiveness very seriously as well, and this is an extension of how I felt about the stage where like, and this is something I have to work on because I actually think boundaries are really important, but there's a part of me that feels like I owe everybody who messages me a response. They care about my work. And again, coming from scarcity around interest in my work, I take it very seriously. And I, and I also feel a lot of pressure as a trans feminine person of color like, we're not allowed to be inaccessible. We're not inaccessible, we're not mysterious we're bitches, you know? And I think that applies to like women at large in a lot of ways, but then you add the other oppressions on and it just gets more intensified. So you know, and like it extends all the way to getting like gig invitations where I still have to say like, "will there be an honorarium?" And like the relief I feel when I get an invitation where the honorarium amount is like, mentioned in the invitation is like that shouldn't be, [laughs] that shouldn't be the exception.
- Hannah (Host): [34:47](#) Why are we so fucking coy about it? I don't get it.
- Vivek: [34:50](#) I will get messages consistently where people will invite me, "you're so amazing, blah blah blah." But like no mention of money. And like again, if you were to treat, if you were to think of an artist as a job, you would like, if I were to hire a plumber, my first question would be like, "what's your availability and what's your fee?" Like, I would be price checking [laughs] essentially. But like it's like there's just in the invitation for you to do your work, there's seldom for me at least personally, but I don't think I'm an anomaly here, there's seldom a mention of--
- Hannah (Host): [35:19](#) No.
- Vivek: [35:19](#) --of money. And so that's the kind of entitlement that I find more difficult than, than people feeling entitled to my story at a show. Because again, I have been disclosing [laughs]--
- Hannah (Host): [35:34](#) [Laughs]
- Vivek: [35:34](#) --for so long that I think I may be immune to it. And again, like offstage and onstage, but if I'm disclosing, if I'm sharing, if I'm going to do this work, like I say in the song that you mentioned, it's like, "pay me." You know? like I'm happy to do this work, and I'm happy, sometimes I'm happy to share my story as well.

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But like I want there, I want there to be a recognition that this is work and that it's not just like, all the glamour.

Hannah (Host): [35:58](#)

Yep.

Hannah (Host): [35:58](#)

And the thing too, about social media is like, now we're just accessible in every platform. So it's like, you know, you can get DM'd on Instagram, or DM'd and on Twitter, or DM'd on Facebook and you're expected to be like, you know, the glory days of publishing where like a publisher would handle all the promotion and PR and the writer just got to be a star, like, those days are over.

Vivek: [36:17](#)

Yeah.

Hannah (Host): [36:17](#)

I had my music agent contact me, and my band is a super visible on Instagram and she's like, "you need to get your Facebook numbers up because promoters are looking at that number to determine whether or not they want to book you." So it's my job to be online, but then you get these messages where people ask you for things to do things with not a lot of consideration for you as a human and that feels crappy.

Hannah (Host): [36:36](#)

Yeah, that makes a lot of sense because that, that expectation of being, at least being perceived to be visible and available all the time, like people read that and, and they conclude from that that you are, in fact, just available all the time.

Vivek: [36:51](#)

Well I'm like, sure but like, at what point do you stop becoming human? You know? Like that's what it's like, really frustrating to me. It's like okay fine, you think someone's available. But like, if I were to contact someone to ask them something, I would at least, bare minimum, shit sandwich them.

Hannah (Host): [37:05](#)

[Laughs]

Vivek: [37:05](#)

I want to be shit sandwiched! Like, shit sandwich is like a beautiful art form. I do not, I'm happy to let go of cassette tapes, but I will not let go of the shit sandwich. You know?

Hannah (Host): [37:16](#)

[Laughs] That is the medium to which I am attaching myself.

Vivek: [37:19](#)

Exactly!

Hannah (Host): [37:19](#)

I mean I think that the lack of shit sandwiching really does go hand in hand with a sense of, you know, trans feminine person of color, like that sense that emotional labor is just your job.

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- Vivek: [37:32](#) Totally.
- Hannah (Host): [37:32](#) That hopefully doing things for other people is just like, like why should somebody apologize for it? Helping other people should just pour endlessly out of you. Like it's, it's undeniably a reflection of, of something that people are thinking about whose time belongs to them and who's doesn't.
- Vivek: [37:51](#) Totally. And like Amber Dawn and I talk about this all the time, but like how, so you know, you get this message, somebody asks you for something, they don't shit sandwich you, you then feel really bad. You're like, you go through this whole process, you texts one of your femme friends. You're like "Oh my god, I've just been asked to do this. Can I? Like, can I say no? Do you think it's okay?" Like anything I say no to like actually I think a lot about because I feel so much like, guilt and I do feel a lot of like, pressure and a lot of like, desire sometimes to to like be able to support someone else.
- Hannah (Host): [38:19](#) Yep.
- Vivek: [38:19](#) But then you do all of that work and then you compose a very nice email saying you can't, and then they don't respond back. They're just like, [dismissive noise]
- Hannah (Host): [38:27](#) It's like, "well you're dead to me now."
- Vivek: [38:28](#) You're dead! You're DTM. Like, why not just be like, "oh, thank you so much," Again, no shit sandwich. Like why not just be like, "You know Vivek, I totally appreciate where you're coming from. I'd love for us to have an opportunity to work together down in the future," like I don't know or just like one sentence. Just like so that I know, because you know the worst part is too, it's not even just about like, formality. It's also like I'm sensitive and now I think this person hates me.
- Hannah (Host): [38:50](#) Yeah. Oh my God. The number of hours I've wasted in my life thinking who hates me. It's just wild.
- Vivek: [38:57](#) Exactly.
- Hannah (Host): [38:57](#) I am trying really hard right now to think about how we respond to other people's no's, particularly as a form of like, modeling boundaries. Because you know, the femmes in my life for teaching me about the importance of boundaries. And so particularly when I have asked a young woman to do something, you know, for example, as a graduate student, if they'll come

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and guest lecture in my class or something like that and they say "no," I make a point of responding, not just "absolutely not a problem," but responding like, "wow, what an amazing job you just did of clearly articulating the boundary. I'm super proud of you. That's really hard to do."

- Vivek: [39:34](#) Wow. Wow. That's great. I'm going to, I'm going to keep that in mind. Yeah. Wow.
- Hannah (Host): [39:38](#) Positive reinforcement of boundary dry and like when do we ever get that, right?
- Vivek: [39:43](#) I think like an Amber Dawn also started like, a hashtag called #FemmesSayNothem and I'm just like, yeah, it's, it's really important.
- Hannah (Host): [39:49](#) It's so, it's so important. But yeah, ongoing, honorable tradition of the shit sandwich, which actually sort of the other thing I wanted to, to touch on while we were chatting is I would really love to hear how your first year of teaching went. I'm speaking of of worlds in which a shit sandwich is still very important because literally, how else do you give students feedback on their essays?
- Vivek: [40:13](#) Oh my God. Oh my God. I mean I feel like, really bad. I actually feel really guilty because I feel like I'm just asking for trouble.
- Hannah (Host): [40:22](#) Uh oh.
- Vivek: [40:22](#) But like, I, honestly, I have really loved it. Teaching is just such a natural extension of what I've been doing for the past--
- Hannah (Host): [40:30](#) Oh yeah.
- Vivek: [40:30](#) --however many years because there is something very performative about it. And it, you literally have 70 people, or however many people and you're like, "how am I going to hold your attention for one hour, two hour, three hours?" Right? Like it's a similar sort of equation as being a performer and in thinking about like how to design a class in a way that feels quote unquote "entertaining" in a way.
- Hannah (Host): [40:50](#) Yeah.
- Vivek: [40:50](#) To me it's felt like very natural. It's very challenging and I'm always second guessing myself. I always think I'm the worst teacher. I'm always thinking I'm not doing enough. There's like, I

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think one of the hardest things about being in academia is like, I don't really feel like an academic.

Hannah (Host): [41:06](#)

[Wry laugh].

Vivek: [41:06](#)

So there's this constant feeling of like being an interloper, and you're constantly reminded of that when people, academics always like their first question is, "what's your research in?" And you're just like, "I make crafts."

Hannah (Host): [41:17](#)

[Laughs].

Vivek: [41:17](#)

Like that's how it feels.

Hannah (Host): [41:17](#)

Feelings? I research feelings.

Vivek: [41:21](#)

That's how I feel, right? I'm like, yeah, "I took photos of myself dressed up like my mom." Like, I don't know. You know? So that stuff feels hard. But like again, like the class itself feels really healing and a lot of ways, like the classroom for me has historically been a site of trauma, and to have like 70 students call me "Miss Shraya," use my pronouns, you know, feels like a future that I never really thought I would get to live. So for the most part, I feel really, really grateful. I also really love Calgary. Like, yeah, I dunno. It's just been, it's been lovely. It's hard. Teaching is hard. I spend like hours agonizing over like, evaluation methods, but like overall teaching has just felt like such a gift and I feel like I won the lottery.

Hannah (Host): [42:07](#)

Oh, that's wonderful. I, I love teaching so much. It is my favorite part of my job and I just feel like I don't understand people who don't like it. It's so incredible. Like it's such a, it's such a joy and it's such a privilege to get to just be in that space.

Vivek: [42:23](#)

Do you feel corny saying that? Because that's how I feel. I'm like, it's such a joy and such a privilege, but I feel like as soon as you say that people tune out. Like, I feel like people would rather hear me say, "Oh my god, it was really hard. I hate it. And be like, "I think it's amazing and the students are the future."

Hannah (Host): [42:39](#)

Yeah. I think that you're right. I think that there's a huge culture of negativity. I also think that there's really important work being done around how we talk about teaching in postsecondary education. It's teaching has been historically positioned as the price that you pay for getting to do your research. And the way that, like, you know, teaching has been disproportionately performed by women in the university, the

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same way that service is, and so liking teaching is very gendered. And so having an emotional reaction to teaching is dismissed because it is feminized, as opposed to shaming your students, making fun of how stupid they are, you know, talking about how kids these days, blah, blah, blah, like that as a more valorized position because it is associated with like, you know, the, the masculine position of the professor, for whom teaching is beneath them. So I actually really, I think that it's really important to talk about loving teaching, and loving your students, and feeling privileged to be there because it pushes back against that bullshit culture of like, "yeah, yeah, yeah. I mean, obviously this institution exists exclusively because of them, but like, we can all agree that we're better than them. Right?" Like, that's bullshit.

- Vivek: [43:58](#) [Laughs then groans knowingly] Yeah. How long have you been at the SFU? It's SFU, right?
- Hannah (Host): [44:03](#) It's SFU. I've been here for, this is my third year, so I'm halfway through my third year.
- Vivek: [44:09](#) Oh wow.
- Hannah (Host): [44:09](#) I was at U of A for three years before that.
- Vivek: [44:12](#) Oh wow.
- Hannah (Host): [44:12](#) So I've been teaching, yeah, like, I've been teaching for six or seven years now and I, I just like it more and more all the time. Like the, the uncertainties fades. Like I've always liked it, but have often been in classrooms and been like, "Oh wow, I didn't plan this correctly. Oops."
- Vivek: [44:34](#) [Laughs].
- Hannah (Host): [44:34](#) And so like as it's also something that I feel like I've, I've gained more confidence in my skill set around it and come to understand that it's like, actually a skillset, actually a thing that you can get better at doing. I just like it more and more.
- Vivek: [44:47](#) That's so lovely. That's so lovely. And I mean, I have to say that you've definitely inspired me pedagogically. I think I saw someone tweet, or maybe you tweeted something about how, was it that you passed out every syllab, syllabi?
- Hannah (Host): [44:59](#) So this was, yeah, this was, oh my god, it's so wild. So Emily Hoven, past guest of the podcast and a former student of mine,

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tweeted about the fact that in the class that I taught her at the U of A, I handed out the syllabi to each student as they came in and introduced myself, and then she talked about how, you know, how that made her feel as a student, how it made her feel very seen, and made her feel like the classroom is going to be a community. That had been recommended to me by a teaching mentor, and I did it that semester and it felt, at the moment so silly, that I didn't do it again for years.

- Vivek: [45:38](#) Oh, wow.
- Hannah (Host): [45:39](#) Yeah. I was like, it felt like, the whole point is that you are stepping down from that sort of, you know, you know, what you're supposed to do as a professor at the beginning of the class.
- Vivek: [45:48](#) Of course.
- Hannah (Host): [45:48](#) You stand at the front of the room and you shuffle importantly through your papers. And so it felt, I felt so vulnerable and silly doing it. And then it was actually hearing from Emily on Twitter what a striking moment that was for her. I was like, "oh, okay, well I guess I'll go back to doing that."
- Vivek: [46:09](#) That's great. Yeah. I mean, after I read that, I tried to employ something similar but like basically, like I find evaluation, I mean, as I have said, I found evaluation of students so complicated. And like, it really, really hits to the core of a lot of my issues personally, just in terms of like what does it mean to evaluate another human and like, what, what are the like, sort of ethics of doing that and like, the power dynamics. And for me, I really try to blur those lines as much as I can, as someone who works for an administration where evaluation is necessary.
- Hannah (Host): [46:45](#) Yeah.
- Vivek: [46:45](#) In my classroom, and so for both the midterm and the final, and I had 70 students, I like, actually handed every exam. Like, you know how a lot of teachers, it's like, "take one and pass it on." I actually handed each one individually to every student and I actually wished them good luck.
- Hannah (Host): [46:58](#) Aw!
- Vivek: [46:58](#) Basically the same thing to every student. But I like literally like, cheerleadered them.

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- Hannah (Host): [47:03](#) Yep.
- Vivek: [47:03](#) And like that to meet belts. It's so awkward, right? Like it's a very awkward thing to do.
- Hannah (Host): [47:08](#) [Exhales] It's so awkward.
- Vivek: [47:08](#) And they feel weirded out too, or I mean, they don't expect it. Like it's really about like, pulling down that, that wall. But it felt so necessary to me as a teacher to show them that I'm on their side. Like, of course there is a power structure and yes, my job is to mark you and to evaluate you, but I have no desire in riding on this power or being a punitive teacher, as teachers I have experienced to do sort of get off on that, sort of, "I'm going to grade you now and make giant red X's." Like that's not the game I'm playing. And so for me being able to like walk to every student and wish them good luck was about like, affirming them right before they go into that, sort of, place of writing the exam is like, the person who's marking this is on your side because I can be. And that was inspired by you.
- Hannah (Host): [47:58](#) Oh that's really lovely. I think, as you're talking about like, like what a punitive space the classroom can be, I kept thinking about a joke I was making a lot last semester about my teaching philosophy essentially, is a pedagogy of non trauma. Like the university is such a profoundly traumatizing space for so many students that if, if the goal that I set up is just, I'm just gonna do my best to not contribute to the trauma of your university experience in any way. Like there you go. That's going to be my goal. I won't always reach it because we are all situated in this institution, but like, oh, I'm going to try my best not to harm you.
- Vivek: [48:39](#) Yes, yes. Beautiful, beautiful baseline. [Laughs]
- Hannah (Host): [48:44](#) And you know, one of the ways that you avoid harming students: shit sandwich.
- Vivek: [48:52](#) [Laughs] Oh, you know, I don't know what it is about me and shit, but like I just keep thinking about your conversations around like, audience and *Even This Page is White*, and I remember that like, so I usually treat readings as like a set. And this is my set list that I'm doing essentially for every like, day on a tour. And I sort of stick to it because it really helps me get into the zone, kind of like a tour uniforms, as well. And so first of all like, someone reads the bio when they say your, your book title,

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and so like people awkwardly laugh in the audience, "*Even This Page is White!* Hahaha".

- Hannah (Host): [49:27](#) [Laughs].
- Vivek: [49:27](#) And then you'd get up and like, you know, you've already set up a power dynamic when that happens. Right? Like people ostensibly feel something. And then I remember the first poem in my set, which is also the first poem in the book, there was like a line about cum and I said like "if my, my cum was brown, would you still eat it?" And [laughs] I can just remember doing this at the Ottawa Writer's Festival [laughs].
- Hannah (Host): [49:52](#) [Laughs]
- Vivek: [49:52](#) And like one of my gay friends was in the audience and he's like, after the reading he was like, "you know, I just have to give you props for reading that poem in that room." [Laughs]
- Hannah (Host): [50:04](#) [Laughs].
- Vivek: [50:04](#) Again the story and I feel like I'm beating a dead horse, but I just like keep thinking about that particular, I was like, which book was harder to tour? I don't know. Why did I make that choice?
- Hannah (Host): [50:15](#) [Laughs] Why do I read this line in this space? Like, I don't know.
- Vivek: [50:18](#) The thing is, I guess that's, I guess the point that I was trying to make here, right now, is just that I'm never one to like run to the safe choice. If anything it like, "hmm, what's going to make me the most uncomfortable and challenge me the most as a performer?" Because, you know, I hope that I have the privilege of doing this for the rest of my life. And I also hope that I have the privilege of an audience for a lot of that, if not all of that. And you know, I think the only way for me to sustain this practice is by ensuring that I'm always feeling challenged by the work itself and the work that I feel I need to do. [Music: "I'm Afraid of Men" by Too Attached featuring Peaches].
- Hannah (Host): [50:59](#) You'd like to learn more about Vivek, you can find her at vivekshraya.com. That's V I V E K S H R A Y .com. and she's @vivekshraya on Twitter and Instagram. You should definitely be following her on Instagram. You can find show notes as well as all of the episodes of *Secret Feminist Agenda* on secretfeministagenda.com. You can follow me on Twitter @hkpcgregor and you can tweet about the podcast using the hashtag #secretfeministagenda. And you can review the show.

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There are new reviews from, don't know how to say this, Sermayad? Chermayed? And Hips Ahoy. So thanks to both of them for the kind reviews. 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. Vivek's theme song was "I'm Afraid of Men" by Too Attached featuring Peaches. You should listen to and buy all of Too Attached's music. That's an order. It's the law now. *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]