

## [Episode 1.13 Laughing Disparagingly at the Google Memo Dude with Aadita Chaudhury](#)

October 13, 2017

Hannah (Host): [Music: "Mesh Shirt" by Mom Jeans] Hi, I'm Hannah McGregor and this is *Secret Feminist Agenda*. I'm back and, gosh, did I miss you. I miss you and I missed a half a dozen things I ended up canceling last week in order to make space for the rest of that my body was so clearly telling me it needed and I have a great conversation for you about, amongst other things, science. But first I want to tell you what my secret feminist agenda is this week. [Music: "Mesh Shirt" by Mom Jeans]

Hannah (Host): Surprise! It's rest. In a lot of ways, this picks up on the conversations that I had with Cynara about laziness, quote unquote "lazy women" and about deciding when something is good enough but I did some really great reading about sickness and rest while I was sick and resting this past week, and I want to just think about that a little bit. So for a little context, this felt for me like the absolute worst possible week to get sick. The day that you are listening to this episode or the day that this episode goes out, I am currently in Las Vegas competing in an international women's barbershop competition. It's a week of singing, a week of competitive singing, so I was terrified of losing my voice. Also just international travel while sick is an absolute nightmare. And after a week in Vegas, I come back home for 36 hours and then turn around for a committee meeting in New York for three days. So, I felt very stressed out at the prospect of not having my health during what is almost two weeks of solid international travel, but at the same time, I had packed this week absolutely full of both professional and social commitments because I'm going away for two weeks and I wanted to see people and do fun things and continue to build my community in Vancouver, and so I'd really, really packed my days. And, um, I woke up on Thursday morning and I said to myself, "I feel like garbage. I'm going to cancel everything," [laughter] and I did. I got in touch with everybody that I had plans with for the next two days and I canceled them all and I stayed in bed for almost two solid days, with the exception of like going out to buy myself soup, and... and I needed it, but it was very, very hard. It was hard for all of these reasons that, that we've already been thinking through, because of the ways in which sort of value and capacity to perform labor are tied together in so many of our minds. It was hard because I'm aware that it is also a luxury to have the kind of job and the kind of life where I can just take two days off, and so that feeling of much needed rest was also laced with guilt for me. It's hard because a staying still and doing nothing is extremely difficult when you are somebody who is used to constantly doing something.

And so, to sort of help with the ways in which it felt hard, I did a little bit of reading and I turned to one piece in particular that I come back to again and again, that has been so, so important to me in a lot of my thinking over the past few years. It's a piece

called "Sick Woman Theory" by Joanna Hedva. Joanna Hedva is a woman who lives with chronic illness and this is the beautiful subtitle for the piece, it says her sick woman theory is "for those who were never meant to survive but did." It is an incredible piece in a lot of ways and there's a lot going on in it and I don't want to talk about all of it. She does echo some of the things that, uh, that Cynara said about how we value only forms of protest that are about putting your body into the street and whose lives are de-politicized as a result of that because they aren't able to sort of protest in public in those ways. She also has an incredible passage for, she thinks through the idea of woman as being a category that speaks to a particular kind of dispossession rather than any kind of biological essentialism, which is also a really, really beautiful passage. But I want to skip right to the end, to part six, where she's talking about anti-capitalist gestures. She says,

"The most anti-capitalist protest is to care for another and to care for yourself. To take on the historically feminized and therefore invisible practice of nursing, nurturing, caring. To take seriously each other's vulnerability and fragility and precarity and to support it, honor it, empower it. To protect each other, to enact and practice community, a radical kinship, an interdependent sociality, a politics of care, because once we are all ill and confined to the bed, sharing our stories of therapies and comforts, forming support groups, bearing witness to each other's tales of trauma, prioritizing the care and love of our sick, pained, expensive, sensitive, fantastic bodies, and there was no one left to go to work, perhaps then, finally, capitalism will screech to its much needed, long overdue and motherfucking glorious halt."

So, as I tweeted last week, I actually don't understand why I haven't just gotten those two paragraphs printed out and framed on every wall that I look at with any regular basis. I want, I want to print it out onto cards and hand them out to people. Those are just the most incredible paragraphs, maybe of anything I have ever read. Every time I read them, they hit me like a wrecking ball, as though for the first time. It is that, that radical act of caring for yourself and caring for others and the image of everyone confined to our beds, witnessing one another and letting the awful machine of capitalism just come to an end. They were certainly the words that I needed in that moment to think about sickness and rest and why I needed rest and what that rest was doing for me.

And one of the challenging things about thinking about rest when you are—are or are not somebody living with chronic illness, really—is the link between rest and productivity. I think we've probably all read a lot of think pieces or come across various, you know, click-bait kind of links saying that, uh, that if you sleep more, you'll actually be more productive. And if you sleep more, you'll lose weight. And if you sleep more, you'll think better. And if you take vacations, you'll be more productive during the time that you're working. And you know, there's this way in which rest is always something that you only earn in so far as it turns into a certain form of increased productivity, that I can justify rest because I come back able to achieve more after that rest. I can justify rest because I have worked myself to the point of illness yet again, which is a thing I keep doing over and over

again. And so at this point I want to turn to a second piece, and this piece was shared with me on Twitter by Zena Sharman, who is a brand new Vancouver friend, as well as being very brilliant queer and trans health advocate and the editor of the recent book, *The Remedy: Queer and Trans Voices on Health and Healthcare*. Probably Zena's a future guest, so we'll talk about that book in the future. But Zena sent me a link to another piece called "The Idea of Rest" by Kendra Marks, and this was a piece that I hadn't come across before, but it so perfectly articulates this sort of anxious relationship to rest that so many of us have. So I'm going to read a little bit of this piece as well. "Think about rest in terms of an amount of time spent resting and an amount of energy resulting from that time. If you rest for x minutes, for example, you have y energy. If I have a 20 minute nap, you might say to yourself on a lazy Sunday afternoon, I'll have the energy to start dinner. Or if I only sleep for five hours, I won't function well tomorrow. For me, there is no longer any relationship between x and y, or if there is, it's inconsistent and unpredictable. I can rest for x hours and still not have the energy or ability to get out of bed. I can spend most of the nights sleepless and sometimes, rarely, still make it to the next day's class. I cannot control this and I cannot count on it and I cannot make a pattern out of it, and so often the idea of rest just sends me into rage and sorrow." So, Marks is also thinking in similar ways to how Hedva was thinking about rest and sickness and productivity and the way all of those ideas are so tied up into a capitalist fantasies of productivity, but also into sort of normative ideas of what a healthy body is and what a healthy body can do, and challenging us, I think, to re-think the role that that rest and sickness has in our lives, as well as the role that rest and sickness have in the sort of larger world of politics and our understanding of what it is to be a valuable human.

People like me, who have deeply internalized this idea that productivity equals value, that kind of deeply ingrained ableism isn't hurting just me. It's not just a violence I turned towards myself. It's also, in so far as it's some belief that's gotten under my skin and laid eggs there. Ugh, gross. It's also something that I bring out into the world and something I unthinkingly project onto my students and onto my colleagues and onto my friends. This idea that doing more is better. It does make me think of what Cynara was saying about how we can only take as good care of others as we can take of ourselves and when it comes to rest and to understanding rest not as something that's justified by productivity, um, but just as something that we need sometimes that may or may not pay off. I think realizing that for myself is a really important part of moving forward in the world in a way that doesn't sort of perpetuate this kind of ableism, and I think that's going to be a really important part of us building a world in which being sick doesn't disqualify you from public life, from political life, from intimate relationships with others. Sickness can make people feel really, really lonely because a lot of people find sickness really, really scary. So this is what I'm proposing to you this week: that we all work as much as we can at getting a little bit better at not treating ourselves like we are productivity machines and see if we can extend that compassion from ourselves out into the rest of the world as well. [Music: "Mesh Shirt" by Mom Jeans]

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- Hannah (Host): All right, are you ready to meet Aadita? Aadita Chaudhury is a PhD student at the Department of Science and Technology Studies at York University. She has a master's in environmental studies from York and a bachelor of applied science from the University of Toronto's Department of Chemical Engineering and Applied Chemistry. It all sounds very intimidating to me. [laughter] Her research focuses on the anthropology and philosophy of biology and the ecological sciences, cartography, postcolonial and feminist science and technology studies and environmental and medical humanities. She's worked in mining consulting for projects in Saskatchewan, Panama and Turkey and interned at the division of technology, industry and economics at the United Nations Environment Program in Paris. She also served as a science writer and the founding editor of technology and engineering for the Canadian Science Communication Platform Science Borealis. In her spare time, she plans off-the-beaten-path and most often solo traveling adventures, learns languages, plays with dogs and collects folk music. [Music: "Train Song" by Vashti Bunyan]
- Hannah (Host): [conversation fades in] ... and that's what I do and that's who a lot of the listenership is, so then that means that like feminist scholars are the people who listen and find stuff and then are like, "Oh, I would love to hear you talk about this topic." And I'm like, "Cool, great, well you're going to do that."
- Aadita (Guest): I have to tell you, like, this is almost kind of a something that I've been wanting to do for a while, just being involved in podcasting.
- Hannah (Host): That's fantastic.
- Aadita (Guest): And I'm about to start a podcast. I don't want to say when and what's it about yet because that's still being planned out and it's not simply about myself, but this is very exciting.
- Hannah (Host): [laughter] Great. Is it going to be about science?
- Aadita (Guest): Yes, yes.
- Hannah (Host): Amazing.
- Aadita (Guest): Yes, but not exactly science, but like social...
- Hannah (Host): [laughter] Science proximate issues. I was really interested in your bio to see you talking about STS; that's science and technology studies, right?
- Aadita (Guest): That's correct. Yeah. So every time when people ask me is like, "Oh, what are you doing your PhD on?" Uh, I have to kind of like pause and give them like a spiel, because most people don't know what STS is. It's one of those things that's like, you found out about it because you went from people to people and like none of those interests would fit you. And it was almost a problematic characterization, but one of my professors said like, "Everybody in my program

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is essentially a refugee from their discipline," which makes it really interesting because there are no, like, there are very few undergraduate programs in STS, so everybody does have to come from somewhere else.

Hannah (Host): So what distinguishes STS from another kind of science program?

Aadita (Guest): So, we're not actually a science program.

Hannah (Host): So what are you? [laughter]

Aadita (Guest): Yeah, so STS is born out of a lot of the work that sociologists and anthropologists of science did in the last century. It has links and associations with history and philosophy of science, but in many ways, it addresses ideas that are much broader than the scope of history and philosophy of science. Our international professional organization is called the Society for Social Studies of Science and I think that's a pretty good characterization of the kind of work that STS scholars do.

Hannah (Host): I met—I had a moment in my life where I got like really deeply into Radio Lab and then fell out of love with Radio Lab, because it was so exciting for me as somebody who finds science and technology really intriguing, it was exciting for me to sort of find a medium that was offering me science in the form of storytelling, which is, like, how I learn. But then at some point I was just like, Robert Krulwich, like, I'm gonna reach through my headphones and murder you. You are the shittiest white dude. Like, I need, I need a Radio Lab made for me by smart critical feminists, very badly.

Aadita (Guest): All right. I will go jot that down in my Rolodex for ideas.

Hannah (Host): [laughter]

Aadita (Guest): It's funny because I also listened to Radio Lab a lot, but I think one of the things that I understood from it, and it was kind of like a gateway for a lot of people I think to get interested in issues that later they come to problematize things like Radio Lab and popular media representations of science in society and gender, sexuality, cultures, race, whatever you're interested in.

Hannah (Host): My impression certainly is that science journalism as a field is dominated by white men. Do you think that impression is accurate?

Aadita (Guest): Um, yeah? I would certainly say, in at least in the sort of like global paradigmatic sense, that a lot of the ideas that have been perpetuated by colonial science still reign supreme all across the world. Sometimes it's a bit difficult for me to speak in such terms, mostly because, like, I'm not a first generation academic—that's something that I'm gonna have to say is, like, I'm going to own my privilege that way. My mother is a scientist and she's a professor, not in Canada, but it's the world—I have been exposed to the world and, you know, I'm very familiar with a lot of the social norms and mores and whatever else that helps a person be

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groomed into academic careers. I just wanted to put that out there, that this is a privilege that I do have, that a lot of academic feminist perhaps don't, especially academic feminists of color may not come from families where being an academic is already something that has been achieved.

Hannah (Host): Yeah, it's absolutely incredible. The number of tacit understandings of how academia works, of how being a student works, of how being a professor works, that nobody ever explains them to you and there's the sense that, sort of, if you need to ask, you have already fucked up and already proven that you don't belong there. And like that system's built on tacit knowledge, like, that's how they work to perpetuate exclusions.

Aadita (Guest): Absolutely.

Hannah (Host): Yeah. There's a really great Twitter hashtag going around a couple of years ago, it might still be sort of kicking around there though that was I think started by Amy Morrison. It was #tacitPhD and it was essentially sort of calling on people to share the tacit knowledge that they had gained from grad school to sort of make what is usually not said, said. Just say it; just actually like acknowledge these things.

Aadita (Guest): Absolutely. Like, I mean, there's a lot of tacit knowledge that I had and a lot of tacit knowledge that I lacked entirely just because of differences and experiences from like generations and countries and, you know, education systems. But even when I'm talking about a group of science writers and scientists and science scholars of any kind, uh, anthropologists of science, what seems to really stand out is a lot of the archaic, colonial ideas about things like race and gender are still pretty pervasive in the global praxis of big S Science. By that I mean, you know, science that is done in the university, science that is done in industries. Of course, there are exceptions to this rule. Iceland comes to mind because they believe in the hidden folk and their engineering practice is based on making sure that the place where the hidden folk live is not disrupted by construction.

Hannah (Host): Wow.

Aadita (Guest): So that's an actual thing that happens in Iceland. You might have similarly place-based knowledges where you have the scientific discourse being applied specifically with respect to cultures and beliefs in a certain place. For a large part, I think the ideas about like, oh, you know, biological essentialism plays a huge part in the global practice of science. To a lesser extent, scientific racism used to be a thing; you know, sometimes you see a bit of a resurgence in those kinds of...

Hannah (Host): I saw—it was going around on Twitter recently, this some guy who is like a big name in a new movement in education. He's a real sort of champion for like research-based education policy, but sort of the research base is, like, sort of shitty pseudoscience, and he was circulating this article he had written

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about—not an article, a blog post—he had written about race-based IQ differences and how we need to, like, understand that the reality is that students enter into our classrooms already with different IQs and with different, um, capacities to learn, and that you can't assume that the classroom is actually a space where everybody can learn equally. And I was like, "Oh, sorry, are we fucking kidding here with this?" Like, IQ is not a thing and race isn't a biological category. So what is any—this fucking guy has a fucking PhD. Like how is this real?

Aadita (Guest): Uh, so like a lot of those, I guess, variables like race and intelligence, they're kind of taken for granted and seen as these very stable concepts that you can always get back to in order to make a point. A lot of people, there are certainly people in the sciences who do that, but I think for a lot of people outside of the sciences, lay people using science to make policy decisions or just, I don't know, I'm just, you know, for dinner table conversation, they do a draw upon these notions that these categories and these descriptors are very stable and they're really not. And I think one of the things that I will have to give credit to STS, as well as like feminist STS scholars and Indigenous and decolonial STS scholars, is a lot of people are trying to disrupt the idea that science is done by singular geniuses, right? And that singular genius often happens to be a white heterosexual man. There have obviously been many, many, many exceptions to that, but it is always seen as an individual pursuit and not really dependent on, you know, a host of other factors, like who is helping them out, who's funding them. The fact that science itself is a social process that does not transcend our lived realities is very under appreciated.

Hannah (Host): Yeah. Yeah, people really want science to be a—what's the word I'm looking for?—Transcendent, right? The sort of pure and perfect truth that we, that is unassailed by the failures or even just the specificities of lived experience, as though we have access to any ideas that are not like deeply embodied and deeply located in like the cultures and contexts that they're emerging from. Like, I mean, we know that, right? [laughter] Like that's sort of a fundamental premise of feminism is that like ideas come out of the people and places that they come out of and are informed by those things. But like people want science to be pure.

Aadita (Guest): Yeah. Absolutely. And, you know, various philosophers of science have talked about this, especially from a specifically feminist perspective. Most notably comes to mind, Donna Haraway talks about situated knowledges and partial perspectives and the limits to objectivity. And I think the idea of there being an objective, sort of, all pervasive and transcendent science is particularly dangerous, especially in the present moment in history where you have a lot of real threats to the scientific establishment from governments. The Harper decade, that was the muzzling of government scientists. And currently now a lot of, I guess, like environmental monitoring programs are being shut down in the States under the Trump administration, and there's this weird idea that science is apolitical

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Hannah (Host): [laughter] When people were so fucking mad at, like, the national parks Twitter for taking a political stance. It was like, "science shouldn't have anything to do with politics." And it was like, "sorry, do you remember all of the guys who were burned at the stake for saying that the earth rotated around the sun?" Like, science has always been political.

Aadita (Guest): Yeah, and it's also really interesting whose knowledge gets categorized as science and whose knowledge doesn't. So for example, Christine Liu, she is a science Twitter person and a PhD student who in response to the Google Bro memo talked about how a lot of the scientific practices that have gone into making computers come from women's crafts, like knitting and cooking with like cooking as being sort of associated with chemistry and knitting is a part of the way that code is organized. Like, those practices can inform these more sort of "masculine" quote unquote practices. The fact remains, and another feminist STS person, Judy Wacjman, (I think that's how you pronounce her name) she also has this thing about like how in the industrial revolution certain kinds of practices became more masculinized and associated with capitalism like metallurgy and all of those things and the rest, like cooking and primary healthcare, that became associated with women and therefore were less science-y, less exact, did not have the same respect. This gendering of scientific pursuits becomes really apparent when you look at the history of science itself.

Hannah (Host): So can we talk about *Hidden Figures*?

Aadita (Guest): Yes! All the time.

Hannah (Host): [laughter] Because I feel like that's really, like, probably the most important cultural object we have that's sort of taking up exactly these histories, right? And saying, what is the myth of NASA that we have, the sort of greatness of heroic white men. What were the actual labor realities that were underpinning the space race and how incredibly central were Black women to the incredibly complex intellectual work and technological work that was making space travel possible, and that has been like quite deliberately written out of that history because it is at odds with how America wants to imagine science works.

Aadita (Guest): It's particularly telling. I keep thinking about the Google memo because it's so ridiculous and annoying—

Hannah (Host): That fucking guy was back on Twitter today with the unbelievably hot take that it's fine for us all to hate the KKK, but we should acknowledge that calling somebody a grand wizard is pretty cool.

Aadita (Guest): Ahhhhhhkay?

Hannah (Host): I was like, I'm sorry, your hot takes are the worst hot takes and you need to have your writing privileges taken away.

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- Aadita (Guest): Your Twitter, like he should just not be—
- Hannah (Host): No, banned from Twitter. Banned from Twitter forever. But he's fucking Twitter famous now. Everybody loves his—
- Aadita (Guest): They're saying this is infringing on his free speech. Just saying.
- Hannah (Host): Fringe the fuck out of his free speech.
- Aadita (Guest): Yeah.
- Hannah (Host): Sorry. So, you keep thinking about the—I never read the Google memo.
- Aadita (Guest): I haven't either because like he was talking about like—
- Hannah (Host): Because you already know it, you don't need to, you already know.
- Aadita (Guest): Yeah, I guess there's nothing particularly novel about it. I have seen annotated and sort of bridged versions of the Google memo that's been going around the internet and it's like, uhh, it's the same deal that you have re-hashed again and again when it comes to talk about the participation of women in science. It's like, "Oh, women are biologically different and this is what they do and that's why they're not good at science lalalala." Okay, but here's the thing: Most computer programmers historically, especially during the space age up until the 1960s I believe, at least, the majority of people that were human computers and programmers were women because it was considered kind of like repetitive labor that men were so much above that they didn't want to have to face the indignity of having to do these calculations time and time again. So, these iterative tasks got assigned to, you know, these buildings full of women that were assigned to a cracking codes during World War Two. It's really interesting that like a lot of the actual blood and sweat that went into computer science was done by women and now, after it has reached a critical mass of knowledge and establishment within academia and the world at large that, oh, suddenly women can no longer come in and it's okay if there's not gender parity in these professions because women not created for this work.
- Hannah (Host): Yeah. Naturalizing that as, like, women are biologically not predisposed to the work that like literally women were the first people to do so...
- Aadita (Guest): Yeah. So and it's kind of just like, hang on a minute, right? [Music: "Train Song" by Vashti Bunyan]
- Hannah (Host): For more on Aadita, follow her on Twitter at @thylacinereport. That's T H Y L A C I N E report. Speaking of more of things, it's time for more of Kaarina's Cozy Self-care Corner. [Music: Kaarina's Theme: loon hoots, instrument plays]

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Kaarina: Welcome to Kaarina's Cozy Self-care Corner. So I think that a lot of our anxieties and worries and... general discomfort come from social interactions and specifically your social life. How do you manage it? Are you socializing enough, are you socializing too much, are people always flaking out on you and canceling plans up last minute? How does that make you feel and are you that person? Do you make plans that you can't keep for whatever legitimate reasons? Today, I want to address that, so I want you to think of somebody who includes you in plans, someone who makes sure to invite you to their parties or events, or texts you every once in a while to check in, or tries to hang out with you for coffee, and I want you to send them a little note saying thank you. "Thanks for including me. Thanks for inviting me to that party last week. I'm sorry I couldn't make it" or "Thanks for taking me for coffee last week. I really enjoyed it" or "It was so nice to see you a month ago and I hope that we can hang out again soon" or "Thanks for continuing to invite me to things even though my mental health or my work schedule or my family life is keeping me from coming." Let them know that you appreciate those kinds of gestures and those invitations, and then I want you to think of someone that you love hanging out with. I just want you to think of somebody that you love spending time with and I want you to make a plan with them and maybe you're not going to keep it. Let's face it. We don't often keep our plans [laughter], but I want you right now to think, okay, the weather is beautiful, hopefully, the leaves are out. I want to go for a walk with blank and I want you to try and make it happen. And maybe you're rolling your eyes like, "Come on, this isn't difficult. This is something I do every day. Why do I need this to be a self-care corner?" But I think a lot of us can rely on other people to do that social planning and that can be hard on them and it can be hard on you. So, uh, remember that you are the instigator in your social life, and that you can let people know how much you love them and how much you appreciate them. Even if it doesn't result in actual concrete time spent together, those little messages, those little gestures, always have good luck and enjoy your walk with your dear friend. Bye. [Music: Kaarina's Theme: loon hoots, instrument plays]

Hannah (Host): As always, you can find show notes and all the episodes of *Secret Feminist Agenda* on [secretfeministagenda.com](http://secretfeministagenda.com). You can follow me on Twitter @hkpmcgregor and tweet about the podcast using the hashtag #secretfeministagenda. If you have the time, please consider rating or reviewing or recommending the podcast. When our coven gets large enough, there'll be no stopping us. The podcast theme song is "Mesh Shirt" by Mom Jeans off their album, *Chub Rub*. You can download the entire album on [freemusicarchive.org](http://freemusicarchive.org), or follow them on Facebook. Aadita's theme song is "Train Song" by Vashti Bunyan. That's it for this week, my dears. This has been *Secret Feminist Agenda*. Pass it on. [Music: "Mesh Shirt" by Mom Jeans]