

Episode 2.23 #ImmodestWomen

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Hannah (Host): [Music: "Mesh Shirt" by Mom Jeans] I'm Hannah McGregor and this is Secret Feminist Agenda. Welcome back. Hello. How's it going? I'm all right. Thank you for asking. I had a really incredible revelation last night. It is hot and sticky in Vancouver, and I have not slept well the last couple of nights. I wasn't sleeping well first because Pancakes was sick again. Wah-wahhh. That's my comical sound for a thing that was actually deeply distressing, but this is not an episode, but cats. Surprise, the podcast isn't about cats now. No, so I wasn't sleeping well because I was worried and then I wasn't sleeping well because it's really hot. And last night around 3:00 AM, I suddenly remembered: fans. I have like, a beautiful, huge fan, And then I set it up and then I slept so well over the second half of the night. And let me tell you, remember that fans exist. That's my wisdom for the day. Episode over. Secret feminist agenda: use fans. No, that is not actually what my agenda is this week, instead is super topical, and super timely, and gives me a lot of complicated feelings which are the best possible topics. So let's go. [Music: "Mesh Shirt" by Mom Jeans] This week, I want to talk about immodest women, so some context earlier this month, Dr. Fern Riddell, whose name may be pronounced "riddle," but I don't know, so I'm gonna go with Ridell. She's a cultural historian with a really significant public profile in the UK, does media appearances a lot talking about history. So she tweeted, and she was tweeting in response to a Canadian newspaper actually, The Globe and Mail changing its style guide to a new policy where they won't use the title doctor for people with PhDs. They're only gonna use it for medical doctors. Apparently it confuses people because they assume that "Dr." is always applied to a medical doctor. A lot of people have pointed out that historically the title doctor was for people with PhDs and medical doctors only started using that later. That's not actually an argument for us to continue to use it because language changes meaning over time. Anyway, so she wrote the following tweet. She said, "My title is Dr. Fern Riddell, not Ms. or Miss Riddell. I have it because I am an expert, and my life and career consists of being that expert in as many different ways as possible. I worked hard to earn my authority and I will not give it up to anyone." So unsurprisingly, because nothing makes people angrier than a woman confidently stating her authority, the tweet or a lot of negative response, especially from men. Men responded to her, accusing her of being immodest and arrogant. So in response, she started a hashtag #immodestwomen, which spurred women with PhDs all over Twitter to change their handles to include their professional titles. So if you're on twitter and you suddenly saw a lot of women calling themselves "Dr." that's because we all secretly have PhDs. If you didn't see that, it's probably because you don't follow a ton of women with PhDs, which I definitely do. So there's been a lot of coverage of this. Like I said, I've, I've seen a lot of people on my Twitter feed changing their titles and I think, you know, Dr. Ridell herself and her response and then lots of other commentators have been right in connecting the backlash to her original tweet, and then the backlash to, you know, lots of other women,

to an established cultural tendency to undermine women's expertise, as well as to mistrust or dislike women who are like, confident and authoritative. You know, the sort of Hillary Clinton effect, confident women are read as cocky, and bitchy, and bossy, and shrill when exhibiting the behaviors that are absolutely perceived as desirable in men. And there's been lots of studies establishing this. I'll link you to one, for example, in the show notes that talks about how this one's about medical doctors— and it talks about how when a female medical doctors introduce their colleagues, they gave men and women their credentials at roughly the same rate, but when male doctors introduced to their colleagues, they give men their credentials around 75% of the time and give women their credentials less than 50% of the time. Yeah. And there's been other studies that talk about the sort of different kinds of language that are attached to women in the letters of recommendation. There's just a really strong tendency to undermine women's expertise and to inflate men's expertise. I also want to note here that I'm using two genders advisedly. I'm talking as though there are only men and women, which is obviously not the case, but these kinds of attitudes about like, naturalized characteristics of genders are super tied to a binaristic view of gender. It's all about naturalizing inherent differences and punishing people for failing to conform to those differences. You know, that whole patriarchy-is-oppressive-for-everyone thing. So there's absolutely like a lot, a really legitimate critique happening in this whole immodest women trend. There's a Guardian article, which I will also link to, wrote, and I quote, "it is easy to dismiss women using doctor as an insignificant issue, but it speaks to a bid to undermine and belittle female expertise and power and to keep gendered social roles. Strangely, women who put wife or mum in their Twitter bio rarely report strangers chastising them for that." Okay, so that all seems pretty legitimate, right? That seems like a pretty straightforward feminist stance to take. It wasn't originally a feminist stance that she was taking. She was actually taking a stance about expertise, but the way that it's been taken up has been very much about the sort of gender dimensions of expertise, because that's the register in which she was chastised. You know, it was, it was very, very clearly a sort of suspicion of a woman being confident. So I've been watching this play out and I have not changed my Twitter handle to "Dr." and that is because I have some pretty mixed feelings about expertise and why it is that we want to link expertise to credentials, and why and in what context we claim expertise. I have absolutely corrected people and have them call me doctor, and I have done that exclusively in contexts where I was being undermined. You know, for example, a context where a male colleague of mine was introduced as "Dr." and I was introduced as "Miss," like I'll stop and be like, "Sorry. No, it's actually doctor, as well." But there is something about the linking of being a doctor to being an expert that. Mmmm. Gives me pause. So Dr. Riddell wrote a longer piece for the New Statesman, sort of in response to this immodest women movement, movement thing, and there's a couple of passages I want to read you because they really summarize my sort of moments of pause. So she writes sort of earlier on the piece about being a public historian, and she says, "I make and contribute to television and radio documentaries, advise on drama series, write books and about history for newspapers and magazines, and I get to do this because I know what I'm talking about, and I know what I'm talking about

because I have a PhD." Okay. So like we can put a pin in that and be like, "Cool. So if you know what you were talking about because you have a PhD, does that mean that people who don't have PhD's don't know what they're talking about? Does it mean that we should blindly trust people with PhDs?" You know, there's, there's some connotations there. The sort of guaranteed expertise of the PhD holder which, as a PhD holder, I have some questions about. So later on in the piece, she goes on to link the expertise of the PhD holder to other forms of expertise, so she writes, "becoming an expert in something is not unusual. We are surrounded by them in our everyday life, pilots, plumbers, beauticians and baker's. Anyone who has to go through training and obtain knowledge that sets them apart from someone else has the right to be acknowledged as a qualified expert," end quote. Again, this raises some questions because I think that it is deeply disingenuous to pretend that the cultural capital of being a doctor or a professor is equivalent to that of been a beautician or a plumber. It's deliberately ignoring the deeply classed connotations of different kinds of jobs and different kinds of credentials and different kinds of expertise, and I think it really undermines the argument to say like, "being a doctor is an expert. Like, like anything else." It's not. The university is a deeply class structured institution. It's a deeply hierarchalized institution. It's an institution that is harder to access for working class people, for people of color, for disabled people. The expertise of the PhD is, is far from a sort of neutral or universalized double expertise. So I have some questions about that. And then things kind of come to a head for me as, so she goes on to talk about sort of, you know, the rise of a culture of suspicion around expertise, you know, that we can link to our contemporary cultural moment. The fake news thing, the whole idea that there's less and less trust for experts, and more and more a tendency for people just to look to others who reinforce the ideas and opinions and perspectives that they already have. You know, and then that's, that that's a dangerous thing. That if we don't trust experts, then how can we have a common ground from which to act? If like whatever 95% of climate scientists say climate change is real and human caused and devastating and we need to do something about it right away. But then people who are in the position to make changes say, "well, I just don't trust you. I just don't believe in your expertise," then like, what the fuck do we do? And that's real. And that's worrying and the rise of a culture of anti-intellectualism and disbelief in the possibility of developing shared knowledge that we can use to make collective decisions is legitimately worrying. Totally agree. However, I'm not confident that the answer is a reinvestment in traditional institutions like universities and in a sort of gatekeeping saturated versions of whose voice counts as expert and whose doesn't. So she writes, she finishes the piece by writing, "we need experts more than ever today to combat the dangerous rise of ignorance and animosity that sits at the center of our governments. We need to know who to trust and just maybe this is a starting point," end quote. Okay, totally agree that we need experts. Totally agree that the expertise of traditionally marginalized people needs to be recognized more readily. That we need to detach expertise from the bodies of white men. Like the degree to which expertise attaches to white men unproblematically is reinforced by, by a simple Google image search, right? Go search "professor" on Google image search and you'll see. So yeah, absolutely. Let's expand expertise,

but that's actually pretty at odds with the re-restriction of expertise down to people who have PhDs. The idea that we need to know who to trust and that people identifying themselves publicly as doctors is the way that we do that feels kind of conservative to me. Like small c, conservative. You know, feels like a sort of nostalgia for a simpler time when we just assumed that people with particular kinds of institutional credentials were right about things. I will always be hesitant about a response to the destabilization of hierarchies that says the answer is to return to those hierarchies. You know, so, so for example, in scholarly publishing, there's a really strong movement towards open access publishing right now. So the idea that that research, published research should be a free and public good. You know, I'll link you to a really great interview with my friend Alisa who kind of explains this, but, you know, essentially the idea is that those of us who work at taxpayer funded institutions, the research that we produce is a public good, and so that should be shared for free with taxpayers. So suspicious with the language of taxpayers, but that's an issue for another day. In response to the drive for open access publishing, a lot of predatory open access journals have emerged, and predatory journals essentially, you know, aren't real or legitimate journals, aren't properly peer reviewed, and they will often charge academics to publish in them, preying in particular on people who are hungry for publications because the job market is really terrifying. So I have absolutely heard people say that in response to open access and the rise of predatory open access journals, we should return to a sort of traditional closed model of scholarship. And my answer to that is shouldn't we actually get better at teaching people the sort of critical literacies that will allow them to differentiate between a high caliber publishing platform and a predatory one? Like isn't this, in general, the answer to this sort of increasing democratization of information and the increasing spread of forms of expertise, that rather than the answer being to return to gate keeping them to return to a really sort of strictly enforced institutionally sanctioned hierarchy of whose voices expert and whose isn't, that we should instead learn how to critically listen to and evaluate the expertise of people? I mean that's really tricky. It's really tricky because it is, like I said, you know, intersecting with all kinds of things. Like when we make decisions not based on something like a PhD, then instead we're going to make decisions based on other reasons. Like people look like experts to us, i.e. are probably white men, or people sound like experts. So they are, what? I don't know, speaking with a British accent or telling us things we like to hear or...You know, there's always going to be bias structuring who we think counts as an expert and who doesn't, but I feel a lot more excited by the expansion of expertise as a category, by the recognition that there are many, many forms of knowledge and of expertise that don't fit into the university and that aren't recognized or legitimized by this institution and that are still super, super valuable. So to conclude a thing that I have noticed as I have been scrolling through the hashtag #immodestwomen, and this is anecdotal purely, but it sure looks like it's dominated by white women, dominated by not exclusively being practiced by, but that's what it looked like to me. And so I did some super good research and on Twitter, looked up "#immodestwomen" and "Black" to see if anybody had a reflected on sort of anti-Blackness and how it intersects with the idea of immodesty. And what I found was a tweet by a Jackie Wang,

@Loneberrywang who wrote "It turns out Angela Davis formulated a response to a immodest woman in 1994, see her speech "Black Women and The Academy." And then there's a link to the speech which I will share with you, but I just want to read a little bit of it out to you. So here's what Angela Davis says. She says, "While courageous people have organized and fought to make the walls of academia less impenetrable, these very victories have spawned new problems and foreshadowed new struggles. So today we are talking about defending our name within the system of higher education, as students, teachers and workers. Like Janetta Cole did last night, I include workers because it would be a mark of our having reproduced the very elitism which excluded, and continues to exclude, so many of us if we assumed that there's only one group of Black women whose names are worth defending in the academy. Why, in fact, is it considered more important to defend the name of the assistant professor who is refused tenure than the secretary who is kept in a dead end job, or the woman of color, janitor, who is not allowed to unionize? Certainly the academy is an important site for political contestations of racism, sexism, and homophobia. In relation to some issues we choose to address the academy may be a strategic site, but it is not the only site, especially if we commit ourselves to defending the name of Black women," end quote. So yeah, I am onboard with women being more immodest. I am onboard with everybody who's expertise, and voices, and successes are structurally and systematically downplayed. Anybody who is told that they need to, you know, sit down and shut up, I am super on board with you standing up and getting really loud. And at the same time I want to question, you know, what expertise means, and what kinds of expertise we value, and what kinds of expertise we think counts, and maybe make sure that as women our immodesty is, is balanced out with an ongoing critical interrogation of what exactly we think it means to be an expert. [Music: "Mesh Shirt" by Mom Jeans] All right. Speaking of expertise, it's time to go visit our self care expert, Kaarina. {Music: "I Will" by Mitski}

Kaarina:

Hello and welcome to Kaarina's Cozy Self Care Corner. Today I am going to talk about comics and how they are definitely a form of self care in my life. I read a lot of comics. I just taught a course on comics. I'm writing my dissertation on comics. And even with all of that work-based comic reading, I still read a ton of comics in my free time. And I think that comics can be a wonderful medium for relaxation and consumption. So social media consumption can be really stressful, especially lately, which is what we always say. It will always be relevant to say, "especially lately." TV consumption is something I love but sometimes can have a negative impact on your mental health. The consumption of like prose and like word-based literature can be good but also intimidating or acquire the kind of focus that you're not able to give all the time, but comics are this like, fun, easy, quick, engrossing storytelling and they make me really happy. And they can be short like web comics or they can be long like graphic novels, and you can spend as much or as little time with you want with them and they could still be really satisfying and entertaining. The reason I'm thinking about this, this week is because my favorite comics critic Mey Rude of Autostraddle is leaving her position at Autostraddle. She is ending, she has just ended her time there, including her wonderful comics column Drawn to Comics.

Secret Feminist Agenda Transcript

In reading her farewell piece, I realized how influential she was on my own trajectory, trajectory of reading comics. So I first discovered the website Autostraddle, queer women's website, because Kate Beaton, one of my favorite comics artists, linked Mey Rude's review of Kate Beaton Sucks, a really great long form comic about Fort McMurray. And so I started reading Autostraddle and I started reading comics again. And Mey Rude's recommendations really gave me a whole body of comics that helped me, that made me feel comfortable, that represented me and the people I knew, and the people I wanted to see in the world, told me stories that were exciting and challenging and fun and joyful. And now I'm writing my dissertation on Kate Beaton and Emily Carroll and a lot of the wonderful comics artists and cartoonists that Mey Rude brought into my life. And I'm really grateful for that work that she did of finding those comics and those artists, and of writing about them, and just curating this beautiful feminist queer comics column for so many years. So if you're new to comics, or you want to get into comics, or you just need some new comics reading material, Mey Rude's Drawn to Comics is still there on Autostraddle, not updating any more but still there, and there's years and years of wonderful comics recommendations for you. And I'd love to hear what you are reading. So tweet me your comics recommendations and faves @kaarinasaurus hashtag #secretfeministagenda and I'll see you at the comic book store. [Music: "I Will" by Mitski]

Hannah (Host):

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 @hkpmcgregor and you can follow Kaarina @kaarinasaurus, and you can tweet about the podcast using the hashtag #secretfeministagenda. And of course you can rate and review the show, which you should totally do. 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, 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]