

Episode 2.26 Getting Deeply Into Sourdough with Emily Hoven

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Hannah (Host): [Music: "Mesh Shirt" by Mom Jeans] I'm Hannah McGregor and this is Secret Feminist Agenda. I'm back. Did you miss me? I missed you. Though I actually didn't miss making a podcast for two weeks, or being on social media, or being anything other than on vacation with dear friends. Here are some things I did: how to pretend tea party in the ocean, improvised a rock opera about not falling asleep in the car, read a lot of books, ran through a sprinkler, picked a flat of strawberries, ate all of the Covered Bridge brand salt and vinegar chips I could get my hands on, went to a queer coffee shop with our very own Kaarina and had a latte with edible glitter in it, argued about the merits of poetry with dicks in it, had dance parties to Tom Waits, and so many other whimsical and deeply relaxing activities that have me genuinely recharged and so much less burnt out than two weeks ago, including feeling stoked to make the rest of season two of this podcast. So let's go meet Emily. [Music: "Mesh Shirt" by Mom Jeans] Emily Hoven is a PhD student at the University of Alberta, a writer, and a guitar teacher. When she's not researching sourdough or in her kitchen baking a loaf, you'll find her crying to Dar Williams, tweeting about therapy, and fine tuning the vision board for her future pantsuit collection. Emily's sourdough starter is named Eve Breadgwick. Eve loves eating rye flour, going on road trips, and hanging out in cozy kitchen cupboards. [Music: "The Poison I Keep" by Hannah Moroz]

Emily: Can I just begin? I loved in the last episode, one of your guests just like, "this is my name and I'm a Virgo." I'm also Emily and I'm a Virgo.

Hannah (Host): [Laughs]

Emily: Virgo sun, Cancer rising, which I really resonate with. Yeah. And then Aquarius moon, which feels, feels fine. [Laughs]

Hannah (Host): Like do you just cry a lot?

Emily: Oh, all the time.

Hannah (Host): Okay, good. Yeah. [Laughs] Emily and I go back a few years. Yeah, so I taught you first and that as, as I do with so many students, just waited until an appropriate amount of time had passed and became your friend. Early bonding over over Can lit. And then since then, you know, just being on Twitter. But we are here today to talk about sourdough, which I'm very excited about. So I'm going to start just by asking if you can talk a little bit about sort of how and why you started making sourdough bread. I feel like I just came into it in the middle. All of a sudden you were deeply into sourdough. Where did it come from?

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Emily: So I don't actually think you came in, in the middle. I just like go through these phases where I get an obsession and then it's like a deep dive and it's like, it's like zero to 100. So I started the starter in October, and part of it, this is going to sound really pretentious, but I was trying to eliminate plastic from my life entirely. Which I'm like, I'm still trying to eliminate plastic, but I was like, "the only way to get bread, plastic-free is to make sourdough," which is not true. I can go to a bakery down the street and get bread. I was like, "let me do it the most complicated way I can." So I just started a starter and then I got obsessed and then decided to write a paper about it for a class on ecology. And then now I think I'm going to do my dissertation on it, so it's gone real quick. Yeah. Yeah. So that's, that's how that happened. Although part of it, so do you know who Heidi Rose Robbins is? So she's an astrologer who has this lovely podcast called The Radiance Project. And I was listening to an episode where she was talking about, it's just like an intro to the signs, but like she was giving a description with like the textures of the signs that she loves most. She does esoteric astrology, which I don't really know anything about except what she talked about in this particular podcast episode. And so she was talking about how you should use your sun sign in the service of your rising sign. And so she was talking about how like for the rising sign, like Cancer is all about nourishment and feeding people and being close to the mother, which is what you call a sourdough starter. And then like Virgos being so analytical and needing to make sense of things. So I was like, "well that's a sign that I need to write a dissertation analyzing sourdough." So that's, that's how we got here.

Hannah (Host): That's really incredible.

Emily: [Laughs]

Hannah (Host): I really, I really, I mean right off the bat, I really just love the idea of using your sun sign to serve your rising sign. I've never thought of that. I have so much in my mind your rising sign is like a false part of you, but I think that's just my pathological relationship to my rising sign, because I'm Leo rising and I think I give off a very Leo vibe in general that causes people to like, assume a number of things about me and my way of being in the world that, as my astrologer once told me leads me perpetually feeling like people misunderstand me, which is fun. But this is all fun. So I'm going to spend some time meditating on that, which is a very interesting idea, but it also resonates so deeply with the desire to turn hobbies into an object of analysis. Like, I like so much the sort of deep dive into a thing and the pairing of like, engaging sort of physically and emotionally and affectively with an activity while also thinking about it. Like the analytical part of things brings me a great deal of pleasure that like I really liked to, to operate in those two registers simultaneously. And I know for a lot of people that feels like, oh, you ruin it. Like when you think too much about a thing, it ruins it, critique, ruins it, analyzing ruins things. And for me it just always heightens the pleasure of things to sort of have like, a critical vocabulary to talk about something like, makes me like it more.

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Emily: Yeah. Like I find analyzing things really fun. So with anything that I get really into, I feel like I don't get into it unless I like, really start analyzing it and learning everything there is to know about it and having it become my life. Yeah. Yeah.
[Laughs]

Hannah (Host): [Laughs] Okay. So we're going to get into the practicalities of sourdough making because you have been explaining a lot of it to me. I've been taking some short videos of you. We're actually sitting in my dining room right now with a loaf of sourdough in media res. Oh, that's how you talked about bread, like a normal person, right? And so I've been taking some videos as you've been sort of modeling things and explaining how things work and I think I'm just going to sort of splice some of the audio from those videos into the episode if they come out okay at all. But, and I'll also, we'll talk through the like, "here's how the bread making actually works" because I think that was really interesting is just the practicalities of it. But like good academics, let's start with the scholarly side. Can you talk about like, when you say you're going to write your dissertation about sourdough, like what does that mean? What aspects of sourdough, cuz you're a literary and cultural studies scholar. So like how does sourdough come into those topics for you?

Emily: So I don't totally know yet because this is like, a fairly new endeavor and so I'm still kind of trying to figure out what that means. I think a big part of what I'm interested in is like, the, the ways that making sourdough for me has been like, a real practice of, of care and I don't know, like the kind of ethics of care, something that I've started dabbling in. I mean, and I don't even know that much about it either. So like with a lot of this I kind of feel like, oh, I don't know how to talk about. There have been a couple of conferences or research seminars I guess that the Canadian Literature Center at the U of A has done on kind of various aspects of the ethics of care and kind of generally what they've talked about, I guess is just like, what is care? How do we practice care in a relationship? How do we practice good care? And like what are the possibilities of, of, of care. I guess I feel like I'm being repetitive, but that's I think so far that's generally my understanding of what it is. And so I think sourdough is a really interesting way to think about that because it like, on one hand is like this very localized thing where it's like, me in my kitchen, like every morning going down to feed my starter, you're like constantly tending to the dough as you're baking it. And then like this reciprocal thing that happens where like, I bake the bread and I feed it, but then I also consume the bread and there's this like wonder, right? I know. So there's, there's that side of it. But then I think sourdough can also be like so much more expansive because it's like, like it's this one little tiny ecosystem in a jar that actually comes from like the larger ecosystem that's happening in your kitchen and in the waterways that you're feeding it with. So like it, like easily like expands out to like this, like the super huge, huge thing. So I just feel like there's like a lot of room for playing around with it. And that's kind of as far as I've gotten.

Hannah (Host): I love that there's, there's something really interesting in there about, so like the ethics of care. Like ethics for those of you who don't know, sort of as a, as a

subject area tends to be concerned with our relationship to others, or to the other as a sort of philosophical concept. And so there's a lot of different schools of ethics that sort of theorize how it is we can sort of come up with, with abstract or generalizable models for how to behave towards others. Right? And there's, we can think about like, you know, religious ethics that sort of, you know, are guided by sort of theological principles about what our relationship is to God. And then there's the virtue ethics school which comes from classical philosophers who have a particular idea of a sort of universal idea of good premise on particular set of virtues that all humans should practice. And then there's like normative models of ethics that came from enlightenment theorists who were like, we just need rules that everybody has to follow, and those rules should be like universalizable. And so like Kant famously came up with this idea called the categorical imperative. Famously, is that the right word to use? Maybe. And the categorical imperative is the idea that any ethical principle should be like abstractable to a sort of universal law. So when you are making an ethical decision, you should ask yourself, "if this was a rule that everybody had to behave like this all the time, would that result in the destruction of society or not?" So if you're deciding if something is good or not you like asking yourself that question. And so the feminist intervention into ethics as a field has sort of argued that masculine dominated ethics has tended to abstract away from human experience, from our relationship to one another towards these sort of like, law-based and universal ideas and that that sort of universalization of ethics ends up leaving a lot of people out essentially. And so the feminist ethics of care is about sort of making decisions based on care for your community and for the others around you. And you can see how that's like, you know, has a particular feminist resonance. There's also some very interesting work by Black feminists and I'm thinking particularly of Kristina Sharpe here, *In the Wake*. That is her book, which talks about the ethics of care as a particular sort of, she talks about a slave ship called, that I believe I will go back and double check the details of this, but I believe the ship was called *The Care*. And so there's this way that sort of the ethics of care also gets leveraged as a particular form of violence as well. All kinds of interesting topics that come under the ethics of care idea, but I think one of the most interesting things of it, and one of the sort of fundamentally feminist things about it is that it really refuses the idea of like, an individual liberal subject who is autonomous and disconnected from their community. Like it places us back in relation and insists that we're like always in relation and that what it means to be a person is to be irrevocably tied up in these, these care-based relationships with others. And like, yeah, you can refuse to practice those, but that's an ethical decision and it's a particular kind of ethical decision. And there's something about what you were saying about like sourdough starter, which is like, you literally put flour and water in a container together and then the ecosystem of your kitchen turns it into something, and that's like such a reminder that we are in these relationships always already to all of these living ecosystems around us that we can ignore if we want, and we cannot care for if we want, but that's a choice and that's a violent choice. So like, what are other ways of being in relationship to like the many, many things we're sharing space with? And that was my history of ethics. You're all very welcome. Bread, huh?

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Emily: What you're just talking about reminded me of. There's this researcher named Rob Dunne, who I think is at, I don't know. I have a terrible memory for names. I'm pretty sure he's at North Carolina State University, not sure. But he was on an episode of Gastropod, which is like a podcast about food, I think. I've only ever listened to this episode that he was on and it was about sourdough, and something that has lab found was they were studying the hands of sourdough bakers and the presence of lactic acid bacteria, which is like one of the main bacteria that make up the, the culture of the sourdough starter. And on the hands of sourdough baker's LAB, lactic acid bacteria, makes up 50% of like the, I dunno, microbiota. Science people can correct my terminology here. I'm an English student. And then on the hands of someone who doesn't make sourdough, it's roughly two to four percent. So like I've been thinking so much about that and how like just in the act of baking the sourdough now I carry it on my hands everywhere all the time, which I just think is so bananas, but interesting because it makes me think about like how that relationship like carries on like constantly because it's, yeah, it's like living on my body. I think it's like, really dope. [Laughs]

Hannah (Host): [Laughs] That's the technical term, "dope." That is amazing. That is really amazing. Okay. I'm going to read you a note that I received a couple of days ago from our mutual friend, Jason Purcell, who writes, "Hi Hannah. I am so excited to hear about your sourdough adventures with Em. I want to send her and her sourdough a bit of fan mail. I don't know if she'd talk about herself and so I want to shout her out for the ways in which her practice of baking sourdough is so in step with the way she attends to her friendships." Guys, this is making me cry too. Shhh! Everybody stop crying. "Not only are there similarities between the care and attention, she shows her sourdough starter and her friends, but the sourdough loaves become these ways that she shows and makes manifest her deep love and care. As you probably remember, I've been struggling with that stomach issue for the past few years and Em is always there to pick me up with a loaf of sourdough, knowing how good it is for my tummy, sharing with me the benefits of her healthy loaves and the love she bakes into them. Basically her sourdough equal acts of love and care and friendship. So even though I thank her profusely in our day to day, I thought I'd send a little note of love and appreciation and thanks, in case your conversation heads this direction."

Emily: Aw!

Hannah (Host): [Laughs] I actually had trouble reading that because, because I have tears in my eyes. Ah, so that is a piece of fan mail, but I think is particularly pertinent to this question of what it means to link the act of baking this bread with acts of care, because it is not just that sort of your relationship to the microbiology of the sourdough itself and, you know, also that sort of premise of like, "why did you start making the bread out of this desire to sort of care better for the world that you are in?" But that also then the practice of making the bread becomes a way of sort of strengthening those of care with other people in your life as well. Right? Like baking for others.

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- Emily: I was, I was reading recently, I forget where, sorry about like the etymology of the word "companion," about how it comes from like--
- Hannah (Host): Oh, bread!
- Emily: Yeah, yeah, like breaking bread with people. And so I've been thinking about that a lot too. Like yeah, it's not just this relationship with like, me and the microbes that hang out in the starter. Like that's part of it, but part of it too is, is like breaking bread with my beloved people. And like the recipe that— I don't even know if you can call it a recipe, I guess— the method that I normally use when I bake sourdough makes two loaves. So every time I bake I like bring it to a different person. And it's, I don't know, it's been good for me because I don't know because of my numerable chronic illnesses I like don't go see people ever. So it's also like a nice, like just having to go give someone a loaf. Then I like spend time with them but it's really lovely, and I feel a little flustered after that lovely message from Jason.
- Hannah (Host): Oh, so your love language is bread. That's great. Yeah, yeah. That is a, I think that because that is one of the ways that I like, really like to receive care is like, being given something somebody has made like, means so much to me, or just like receiving a gift out of the blue is like always so exciting for me. My friend Erin, shout out to Erin past Secret Feminist Agenda Guest, is a very good like, gift giver and like out of the blue gift sender. And that is always such a like, exciting moment for me and yet I really struggle to enact that myself for all kinds of reasons, including like I don't have a particularly good skill that manifests in like, a fit. Like I don't like make bread, or jam, or like a thing that you can send to people. But also I get so fucking in my head about sending my friends gifts. So Erin, not too long ago was in Ottawa, and I knew that she was having a bad week and I thought to myself, "oh I know what hotel she is staying at. I'm going to call that hotel and ask if I can like have a nice bottle of wine sent to her room." Sorry Erin, I didn't do this. So I didn't do it. And I didn't do it, and the reason why I didn't do it is because I got into my head about it and started to be like, "That's weird. That's like a creepy thing with a stalker would do is like find out what hotel somebody is staying in and like, send them a secret gift. Like what a creepy, weird thing to do." So like I end up like, overthinking the point of which is that [timer chimes] that's the bread timer. The point of which is that I so appreciate like having arrived at a way to be like despite all of the anxieties that attend, figuring out how to be in good relation with the people in your life, like to have arrived at a way to be like, "yes, this is it. I know how to do this and it is bread." And bread can communicate through like illness or social anxiety or a combination thereof. It's like, "I've got this thing." Okay. We're gonna, we're gonna pause and check on the bread. [Music: "Mesh Shirt" by Mom Jeans]
- Emily: So basically what we're trying to do right now is just to increase the tension so that it's not like the big mass that came out. So you're trying to spin it around so that the outside gets really taut, but you don't want the outside skin to break.

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- Hannah (Host): How long would you say it took you just like, to learn how to master, cuz this looks hard.
- Emily: Oh, I feel like I like, have not mastered this at all.
- Hannah (Host): Gotcha.
- Emily: See this little bubble there. Yeah, I think that this is probably... [Music: "Mesh Shirt" by Mom Jeans]
- Hannah (Host): Okay. So how about you just like walk us through. Like what are the steps?
- Emily: So the first step is to acquire a starter, which you can either do by like, finding a friend. You can also buy like dehydrated starters, or you can just make your own. So to do that, what I did— this is like controversial amongst sourdough people— there's all kinds of ways you can do it, but my method was you just mix equal parts, flour and water in a jar, set it on your counter uncovered. And then every day you return to it and feed it, and kind of over the course of roughly a week— that's what it was for me, but it probably depends on your particular kitchen and temperature and all of those things— it'll get stronger and stronger and you'll notice more fermentation happening. And so that's how you develop a starter. It's basically just like coming back to it every day and feeding it with flour and water.
- Hannah (Host): Do people with starters, like, do you get like a starter sitter when you travel? Like what do you do if you're leaving your home?
- Emily: So there are, there are a couple things you can do. Currently, my sister Rachel is feeding my starter in Edmonton. Because I brought some with me to Vancouver, but I'm flying home instead of driving and I don't think I can take a jar of starter through security. I think it counts as liquid. So, so she's feeding it for me. But you can also put your starter in the fridge or the freezer. Basically what cold does is it just slows down the process. So a lot of people, if they're just baking once a week, they'll just put their starter in the fridge for the week even if they're not going anywhere, just so that you don't have to be feeding it so often. So you can cut down your feedings to like weekly instead of daily, which saves you a lot of flour. But I know of people who have like put their starter in the freezer for like three months and it just kind of goes dormant, and then you can bring it back. So you can get a sitter or, I was just like really worried about it so I didn't do that. So, so once you have a startup that's active, then you can use it to bake a loaf. And again they're probably all kinds of methods, but this is mine. So I start by making something called a leaven, which is, I take a tablespoon-ish of starter and then I add 100 grams of flour and 100 grams of water. You add the water first and dissolve the starter into it, like just by pinching the starter through your hands, and then once that's dissolved you add the flour. Mix it up, and then, I'm trying to think of the way to streamline this most. So then I either do one of two things if I want to do like, sourdough in a span of like 24 hours—

so this is what I did for the loaf we're baking right now— I would do that the day before I want to bake and leave it just on the counter overnight covered with a towel for 12 hours. If I want to do like, a 48 hour loaf, then I would just do it for around five to six hours. So that's, that's that first step. So once the leaven is ready, you can tell by doing something called a float test. So you take a little spoonful of the leaven and just plop it in a jar of water, and if it floats to the top, it means that it's ready to go. So once it's ready to go, then you move into the stage called bulk fermentation. So my method for doing that is I take 200 grams of the leaven and I mix that with water. Now here you have some options. So with sourdough you can adjust the hydration of the loaf to kind of control the, the kind of loaf that you'll get at the end. So what hydration means is if you have like 1000 grams of flour, that's at 100%. So the hydration is whatever percentage of water you have in comparison to the flour. So like if you were to do 700 grams of water, added to 1000 grams of flour, your hydration would be 70% because flour is 100%. Does that check out? I don't know. Again, English. Math is not my strong suit. So that's the general idea. So usually if I'm doing the 24 hour loaf then I will do a lower hydration, so I'll usually add 700 grams of water, 1000 grams of flour, and 200 grams of the leaven and I'll mix that together. If I'm doing a 48 hour loaf, I will usually bump that up to like around 800 grams of water. So it'll just be like a wetter, looser dough. So then once I've mixed the leaven the flour and the water together, I leave that to just hang out for around 30 minutes. When I was learning how to make sourdough, the sources that I was using to teach myself said that, that's called autolyse. Now that's a controversial thing in the sourdough world. There's lots of controversy. So some people say that if you add the leaven to the flour and water, then it's no longer an autolyse, because basically what the autolyse is doing is it's just hydrating the flour. It's giving a chance for the flour to absorb the water. And so there's debate on whether adding the leavening agent makes it not an autolyse process anymore, but I call it autolyse because that's how I learned. So that's that. So I let that sit for around 30 minutes and then I come back to it and I add 20 grams of salt, and then another 50 grams of water, warm water just to kind of help the salt dissolve, and then you mix that in. And that stage is super cool because it totally changes the texture of the dough. Like before it's like rough and like, I don't know what adding the salt does on like a chemistry level, I have no idea, but it like totally transforms it into this like smooth, velvety dough. It's super cool. So once you do that then you move into the stretch and fold phase, which is part of the bulk fermentation. So basically you're leaving your dough to sit for 30 to 45 minutes and then you're coming back to it and just stretching the dough up and folding it over on itself. So it's like a really slow kneading process basically. And so I'll usually do bulk fermentation for like anywhere from like three to six hours depending on how warm it is, because higher temperatures speed up the process. So you kind of just like, I don't know, I feel like you just learn by, by feel with sourdough. So like, you just kind of get to a phase where like, you know, when it's like at the stage where the bulk fermentation has happened for long enough. Usually you kind of want to look for it to be like really soft and billowy, and you'll see some, some bubbles starting to form on the top. That's usually what I, what I watched for. I'll also like taste it along the way. It usually starts out tasting really salty and as it progresses it's like a sweet

tangy kind of flavor. And because I'm like always using the same flours and because I know like the flavor of my particular starter, I've just kind of like learned what the right taste is. Yeah. So, so I'll do the stretch and folds until, until the bulk fermentation is done. And then we move into what we did at, at your place. So you turn the dough out onto a table and you do preshape. So you're basically just spinning the dough so that it kind of becomes like really taut. And then so once you've shaped it into kind of a tight round ball, you let it sit on your counter for 20 minutes, just covered with a kitchen towel. And if it's held its shape after 20 minutes, then you're ready to do the final shape. If it's flattened into a bit of a pancake, then you want to redo preshape, so you spin it around again until it's in a tight ball and leave it for another 20 minutes and keep doing that until it holds its shape. So once it's held its shape, you sprinkle the top with rice flour, which we use because it has a higher burning point. Then like any wheat flour or whatever. So you sprinkle the top with rice flour, flip it over on its bottom, and then you basically fold it up, like if you're making an envelope. So like you'll fold up the bottom onto itself and then fold the two sides over. So then you just have like a flap on the top and then you take the flap from the top part and like pull it over and under so that the side that was lying on the bottom is now on the top. It's easier to show visually. You can look up YouTube videos of this and you'll know what I'm talking about. So then you take that and you put it into, you can use a bowl or I've used a colander or you can also get Benetton, which are like, special kind of wicker breathable baskets. So you line that with rice flour and flip the shaped boule of dough so that the seam, the part that you folded, is now on the top, and then now you're in the final proofing stage. And so if I'm baking like, a 24 hour loaf, I'll just let that sit on the counter and proof. And usually that takes an hour or two. You'll know it's done when you can kind of poke the top and it springs back, but not right away. If I'm doing a 48 hour loaf then I'll put that in the fridge like, overnight and so that'll slow things down. I do that because if you have like a really wet dough, it's really hard to work with and to like transfer into the Dutch oven and stuff. So cooling, it just helps to keep its shape. So once you're ready to bake, you preheat the oven. I do it to 480 because the knob on the top of my Dutch oven cannot withstand anything more than 483. So lots of people will do 500, but my Dutch oven can't handle that. So we do 480.

Hannah (Host): How do you know?

Emily: Came in the manual. I looked it up. Yeah. Yeah. So I preheat the oven with a Dutch oven inside. So it's like a cast iron, kind of deep dish thing. It's like the Le Creuset fancy pants things. I don't have, I have an off brand but that works just fine. So you preheat that in the oven. Once the oven is hot, then you take your loaf and you, you're flipping it again the seam side, the side that's up, of your Benetton will be at the bottom of your Dutch oven. So you put that in the Dutch oven and then you take scissors, or a knife, or you can get like a, like a blade. That works best because its sharpest, but also like you maybe don't want to have those in the house. So then you can just use safety scissors and that totally works too. And you just score the top of the bread and that's just controlling where the bread will split, because there's all of this water evaporating out of

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the bread. And so if you don't score it, it's gonna split somewhere. Scoring it just allows you to be like, "this is where I would like for you to split open instead of on the side." So it's like an aesthetic thing. Yeah. So you score it and then you put the lid of the Dutch oven on, put it into the oven for around 20 minutes. What that will do is it'll steam the loaf. So as the water's evaporating from the loaf, the Dutch oven will catch it and that is what gives you like the nice, like artisanal bread crunchy crust. So you leave the lid on for 20 minutes, then you take it off so that the crust can kind of brown up nicely. And usually I'll leave it in there like anywhere from like 10 to 25 minutes. I just kind of watch the top of the bread and when it looks brown enough I take it out and then you're done. So that was. Yeah, yeah.

Hannah (Host): You've done it!

Emily: Then you've done it. Sorry.

Hannah (Host): Not at all. No, I think that's really great. Like I really appreciate that sort of like, that spelling out of it because a couple of things really come home about that, including like you have to be there, like you have to be there with the bread. Like this is a three hour process during which you fold it every half hour. Like you've got to attend to this thing and you have to plan for like, this is going to be a 48 hour process. And I'm going to attend to it in these ways over this amount of time. And like it's actually really reminding me of like people I know who really love like, gardening and caring for plants. Like there's a similar way in which you, you have to have planned to attend to this living thing, and be responsive to it, and know it well enough to know what it needs at different moments, and learn how to read the signals that sending you, and be patient with how it's going to need different things at different times. Which is also why I kill plants.

Emily: Yeah. It's like it's interesting when you're just starting out because there's not really like a recipe for sourdough. It's just these like, long descriptions of these phases that I've just described. And they try to explain like, what might happen and what might not happen, but like, there's no way to be like, "add this much flour, and then wait exactly this amount of time. And then..." Because it's so dependent on like, your starter and your kitchen and like the weather that day. So it's like even different like for me, like baking a different loaf every day. And it's also like really unpredictable, which is like kind of what I love about it. But like I also had to learn that like, like I got confident really quickly so like a couple months and I was like, "I've figured this out. I know exactly the speed that my starter takes." So one day I was making a loaf and I was in the proofing stage. So like it was almost ready to go in the oven and I had some books that were at the library and I was like, "okay, it'll be an hour trip for me to like get on the bus, take my books to the library and come back." But I was, like "every other time I've baked from this stage it's needed like another two hours. So I'm fine." So I went to the library and I got back and it was like so over proofed and like would not rise in the oven. And like I don't want to anthropomorphize my starter but I was like, "you're mad at me. Message received." So now I've learned that you

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just have to kind of hang out and really attend to it. And just know that it's going to be different every day and you just to be okay with that.

Hannah (Host): Which is all horrifying. It's all really just so, it's so horrifying that like unpredictability, right? That like, that willingness to sort of embrace something. So we were talking sort of before we started recording about the fundamental predictability of like Robin Hood brand All Purpose Flour and Fleischmann's Quick Rise Yeast. And like that is, like when I have made things with yeast in the past, that is what I have made. And they are because they are industrially produced to have a particular, like a deeply predictable reaction time. They, they fall within these logics, these logics that I mean, at risk of being a bit of a broken record, they're deeply capitalists, logics of systematized and predictability and industrialization and mass production that are all about, you know, things that need to be responsive on particular kinds of terms, right? If you're going to mass produce a thing, it needs to be predictable and always work in the same way. And there's, I was about to say there seems to be a pretty anticapitalist logic to sourdough, because it's like not just unpredictable but like, like what's the, I have lost the language that I'm looking for here, like nonproductive in that way. It is inefficient. There you go. That is the thing I was looking for. It is inefficient.

Emily: Yeah. Like if you want to turn out loaves of bread, like sourdough is not the way to do it because it takes so long. Like even just to get to a point where it's like you have a starter to make bread, like that's like a week to two weeks. And like that's, you haven't even gotten to bread then! You've just gotten to like your like quick rise yeast equivalent.

Hannah (Host): Yeah.

Emily: Yeah. It takes a real a real long time.

Hannah (Host): But that's so like, this reminds me in some ways of when Claire and I were talking about video games and like playing games as a kind of like anti-productive hobby. We sort of countered that to the like the new domesticity, the rise of particularly sort of with I think like middle class women, are really embracing this like new— there's a book about it called *The New Domesticity* that I read, that I was actually very disappointed in because it was surprisingly uncritical of like the race and class politics of it, which is a whole thing. But like that idea, that like what we see with a particular demographic of women that's sort of desire to like learn to make jam and needlepoint which is really like, is really interesting because there are these sort of raced and classed dimensions to it. Like what does it mean to sort of take leisure time which is itself a privilege and use that in this way that is productive? And when Claire and I were talking about it, we were talking about sort of you know, resisting productivity. But like there are also like, even when you are making something, there are like different modes of making things. And like sourdough, it's literally productive. Like it literally produces something but not efficiently. Like it's processed based

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and, and unpredictable rather than being sort of oriented towards the end goal of like producing something with the greatest efficiency.

Emily: Yeah.

Hannah (Host): Yeah. Any thoughts on the, on this new domesticity thing? Like is this a thing you have thought about at all, this like sort of re-rise of homesteading culture?

Emily: So I have thought about it and I feel like I maybe haven't, I don't know. I feel like I need to think about it in more critical ways because I find myself so drawn to it. You know, while also recognizing like all of, like the class based in race based politics of it, I still have this strange desire to like move to a farm and have chickens and bake sourdough every day. I was talking to my therapist the other day about how I just want my life to be my Stardew Valley farms. I just feel this pull towards that. And then I'm like, I feel like I need to think more about like, like where is this drive coming from? Like part of it is like a genuine love for doing these kinds of things. Like when I was really young, I lived on this small little organic farm, and like my friends were in my twin and chickens, like those were the people around. Like we have, we have like all of these pictures of us just hanging out with chickens, like on our heads. We would like, walk around, let's just chickens roosting up there just for kicks. Yeah, they're real cute. And like I love, so I love tending to chickens and I love baking bread. Like, I love all of those activities. So that's part of the draw for me. But I think also part of the draw is probably like, I mean it's like the people who like go live off the grid, right? It's like how can we get out of capitalism entirely? I know, we will move to a self sustaining homestead. So I think that's part of the appeal. It's like what if I just quit grad school and went to do that instead?

Hannah (Host): I think the fantasy of escape is really, really interesting. And probably one of the most common conversations I have with other people who are like despondent about being like deeply imbricated in all of these violent systems is like, this fantasy of, "let's go start a commune in the woods somewhere and become self sufficient and like opt out," because it sucks so much to be part of all of these oppressive systems all the time. Like it both sucks internally because it is like wearing us all the fuck down. It also sucks to know that you are contributing to violence against the earth, to violence against other humans, to violence against non human animals. Like all of the stuff. There's something there that is a like, "I want to be able to opt out of this," that is actually— so this is, I don't know, this is all just making me think about my dissertation.

Emily: [Laughs]

Hannah (Host): My dissertation where I like, I hit a like, theoretical wall at some point and have never come back to this work because I couldn't find a way through it. But what I was trying to think through was a relationship between an ethics of care and a kind of fantasy that I noted as being particularly characteristic in the writing of white women. A sort of fantasy of non-complicity, which is like an ethics of care which is tied in with this desire to like not be part of any violent systems, to

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just like, opt out of all of them. And what I was trying to think through was what I called an ethics of complicity, which is like what does it mean to sort of practice and ethics that recognizes that you are just like, irrevocably bound up in these systems of violence and like, too fucking bad. You don't get to opt out of them. Figure out another way. Which isn't like I think you know, going and living on a commune, you can still recognize that you're bound up in these various systems. But yeah. Sorry, I've gotten, like gotten right back to that like, conundrum, that like mental barrier for me. But like, what they all come down to is this question of like, "how do I want to live in relation to the world around me and all parts of the world around me?" And like how do we figure out how to do that well, which is like, I think a question a lot of us are grappling with a lot of the time just on like different registers. Sourdough, man. Deep sourdough thoughts. Should we pause again and put the bread and the oven? [Music: "Mesh Shirt" by Mom Jeans]

Emily: South, and whichever direction this is. I can never remember.

Hannah (Host): That one's east.

Emily: The other one. Thank you.

Hannah (Host): And that one's west.

Emily: Remember the time where I studied maps?

Hannah (Host): Oh! [Laughs] You are a map scholar.

Emily: Lol.

Hannah (Host): Lol.

Emily: So now it's a boulev. And then we take it and we flip it so the seam side will end up on top.

Hannah (Host): Great.

Emily: And then you kind of pinched the seams so that it's...

Hannah (Host): Nice and united?

Emily: Yeah, exactly. And then just sprinkle it with a little bit of rice flour. We're gonna put a cloth on it, and this will rise a bit.

Hannah (Host): Okay.

Emily: The tea towel won't stick to it. [Music: "Mesh Shirt" by Mom Jeans]

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Hannah (Host): Okay. So another direction that we can take this conversation in is sort of a recurring Secret Feminist Agenda theme this season, which is about losing and failing, and the sort of radical potential of embracing failure as a possibility that doesn't like, fill you with terror. Which does seem like sourdough as such a dicey proposition, seems like as lots of opportunities for, for embracing failure.

Emily: Yeah. So the. Okay. So the thing that I've been thinking about a lot lately with sourdough is like, I'm like, really shit at dealing with failure. Like it's so bad. And like for a long time pre-sourdough, like my personal project was to like, figure out how to make failure productive. Make a mistake and learn from it, or whatever. And so I was like trying to make that like the goal for dealing with failure. And I feel like since I've started making sourdough, that's changed for me. Like I'm, I don't know. I think I've decided that I'm not interested in like making failure a productive thing, and with sourdough the thing that's, that's been fun, if I can say that about failure, is that even the loaves that like turn out really terribly are still like really fucking delicious. So it's like there's this pleasure that comes even with failure and I don't know how to like apply that to other areas of my life yet.

Hannah (Host): Interesting.

Emily: But I like, I want to figure out how to like make failure something that you can still like, take deep pleasure in instead of just being like, "let me transform this failure and do something useful." Yeah.

Hannah (Host): Yeah, yeah. Like failure as something that like it teaches you a lesson until eventually, because the outcome of that is eventually I will cease to fail. Like eventually I will perfect this thing I'm failure will no longer be a possibility. And that attitude towards failure, which is like the goal is to eventually eliminate it, again sort of follows, it falls into those logics of like, we're always aspiring towards perfection, as opposed to like, yeah, failure is just always going to be part of it. Like there's, there's just always going to be the unpredictable possibility of something going terribly wrong. And that's a different kind of thing to embrace. Like it's a sort of anti teleological stance. So like it teleology is, is this like way of approaching things that always focuses on an end goal or an outcome that is what you're going for, and if you're fixated on the outcome of something, then if you don't get that outcome, you're going to be dissatisfied with what happened. And if there's only one version of like, this is a successful loaf and this is what it looks like, and if it's anything but this, it goes in the garbage. And then there's no like there's no pleasure to be had in the thing that didn't turn out the way you wanted it to. But if the pleasure is in the process itself rather than the outcome, then there's this other way of thinking about whether something's been a success or a failure.

Emily: I don't know, like there's like real pleasure in the process of making it, but I think like even the outcome that happens from it is like, like that's really pleasurable too, because then you get to eat it. And like, even like I had one left that was so like it was so, so sour, like almost inedible [laughs], but then I made it into really

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sugary cinnamon toast and it was so good. So it's like I'm, I don't know, like I don't know if there's a way, I think there must be like a way to, to translate that into like writing, for example, which is the usual area of my, like real, you know, failure breakdowns.

Hannah (Host): If only you could make delicious cinnamon toast out of writing. Just cover, just take your shitty draft and just cover it in butter, sugar and cinnamon. [Laughs] And hand that in. [Laughs] Okay, that's it. We're done. [Music: "The Poison I Keep" by Hannah Moroz]

Hannah (Host): As per usual, 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 tweet about the podcast using the hashtag #secretfeministagenda. Also, you can and should rate and review the show. The podcast 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. Emily's theme song was "The Poison I Keep" by Hannah Moroz. You can learn more about her at hannahmoroz.bandcamp.com. 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]