

Episode 2.13 Politicizing Tragedy

April 13, 2018

Hannah (Host): [Music: "Mesh Shirt" by Mom Jeans] I'm Hannah McGregor and this is *Secret Feminist Agenda*. Ya know, I started the season by making a pretty topical episode, but kind of got me into trouble, and for awhile there I promised myself no more topical episodes. They're more trouble than they're worth. Sometimes though, sometimes things are happening right now and I just really want to talk about them. So y'all ready to talk about something sensitive? I want to talk about politicizing tragedy. Content warning right up front for discussions of violence and mass tragedy. I want to say it right now that I'm going to be touching on the recent awful Humboldt Broncos bus crash. I'm also going to talk about the Quebec City mosque shooting, the death of Colton Boushie, mass shootings and school shootings, cancer and suicide. So really just content warnings out the wazoo here. If you're not in the place to think about this stuff right now, including if the Humboldt Broncos crash has impacted you, please, please, please tap out with my blessing. I'm going to talk about grief and politics and how they intersect, but if you're grieving right now, you don't owe me your attention.

I want to ask today what it means to politicize tragedy and what assumptions that phrase reveals about both politics and tragedy. So the phrase "politicizing tragedy" I think is one that I at least have encountered, for the most part, as a sort of conservative critique of the way people talk about gun violence, particularly in the wake of mass shootings. And certainly when I give it a sort of google or a quick Twitter search that's where the phrase comes up for the most part, and that is that in the wake of a mass shooting. Specifically in the US, where they are, you know, massively more common than they are really anywhere else in the world, conversations moves yet again always to conversations about gun control and about the importance of gun control and about how prevalent shootings are in the US because of a lack of gun control. And it is not uncommon for conservative commentators to respond by saying that it is tasteless or tactless to politicize this tragedy. That is, to use people's deaths as a platform for scoring political points. So there's a couple of things to unpack in that claim. That politicizing tragedy is a problem and one, a basic one, is that that tragedy is not always already political. That is that there are forms of loss that happen outside of politics. And if we're defining politics as the way that we organize ourselves as people in order to, you know, build societies and sustain some form of livable situation, which is kind of like at it's most reductive, what politics are, it's just sort of how we as a polaris, as a people are organizing ourselves, then all grief and all loss are political because the nature of them, how we experience them, how we mourn them, how they fit or don't fit into our lives, that all has to do with how society is organized, with what losses are seen as more or less important. With, you know, how we stigmatize or don't stigmatize death and mourning. With what relationships are acknowledged and which ones are, are ignored. These are all things that I'll talk about a bit more,

but that. So, so I would push back against sort of premise the first that politicizing tragedy is a thing you can do rather than there always been a politics to what we perceive as tragic. And also too, they're always being a politics to how we experience grief. But the other thing, the other sort of implicit claim in, "Oh, you're just politicizing tragedy," is one about timing.

That is, that it is inappropriate to talk about gun policy, for example, about, about guns and gun ownership and the second amendment when a shooting has happened recently. That some, some amount of time has to be left between the actual event of the shooting in any kind of commentary on it that drives people towards, you know, a shift in, in policies, for example. And I came across this post by an economist, Viet Vu talking about politicizing mass shootings, and that conversation, that sort of, you know, recurring critique of politicizing a tragedy. And what this article does— and I'm obviously, as per usual, going to link it in the show notes— is say, "okay, so let's start with the premise that it's not okay to talk about gun control immediately following a mass shooting." That's the words of the article. Okay? So the premise is, let's say that you can't talk about a mass shooting on the day that it occurred, or within three days after it has occurred. If you define a mass shooting as four or more people shot or killed, not including the shooter, what days in 2017 would it have been possible to discuss gun control? And when you look at this visualization, what you see is that there are one, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, nine, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15 days in 2017 when gun control could have been discussed. So there's some powerful visual rhetoric happy in that article, but there's also a clear and basic argument, which is that tragedy and violence happen all the time, and in fact they happen more to those who are particularly vulnerable to them for political reasons. And to insist that they can't be, that politics cannot be discussed in the moment of tragedy is, is a particular strategy of silencing the kinds of political revelations that tragedy and grief can lead us to, something that Judith Butler talks about as outrage.

So before I move on to, to Butler too much, let me give another little piece of context for why I've been thinking about this quite a lot lately. So last week on April 6th, there was a bus crash in Saskatchewan. The bus was carrying the Humboldt Broncos, a junior hockey team. The bus collided with a transport truck, and of the 29 people who are on the bus, 15 were killed and the other 14 were injured to varying degrees of severity, some very, very seriously. And there is absolutely no denying that it's a horrific event and the kind of, the kind of loss that is so meaningless that people struggled to articulate it. You know, it's just like an accidental loss of life that is so, so significant. So many people and young people, which is hard for us to grapple with and all kinds of other ways. As some people I, I've seen on Twitter have pointed out, there's also, you know, when losses like this happen in rural communities, they spread through the communities. They can leave an impact on the communities for years. So in the wake of this crash, as has become a fairly standard practice recently, someone started a Go Fund Me crowdfunding campaign to support the families to help with whatever expenses arise. And as of the recording of this episode on April 12th, the Go Fund Me has reached \$10,000,000 Canadian, that puts it at one of

the most successful crowdfunding campaigns that has ever happened in Canada. And as a Global News article pointed out, the money's not just coming in from Canada, it has actually come in now for at least as of the time of this writing from 65 different countries. And again, I'll link to this article, but I want to quote Steven Jordans, a professor of psychology at University of Toronto Scarborough who talked about what in particular about this event has been resonating globally such that the response has been so immediate and so, so significant. He says, you know, in part it's that they're, they're young, which in his words "makes us feel it's more tragic." And then he goes on, "But what is more of a factor is that in some way everyone has or knows someone who has a kid in soccer, hockey, etc. A lot of people around the world can identify with that and can feel what a kick in the stomach it would be." Oh, and he goes on to say, "it may not be in the same geography, but there are similar communities across the world doing the same. So people resonate with the story to the extent we can empathize with it. It makes people think of their kids."

So a point that Jordans is making there and a point that that a number of people have made as people in various positions are thinking through this tragedy publicly, which is a thing we do in the wake of publicly grieved events, is think about relatability and how that's playing out, why this event is striking people. And what so many people have pointed out is that, again, it's the sort of, kids playing hockey and how that ties in very powerfully to narratives of Canadian identity, and how that also becomes a sort of seemingly universally relatable experience for any people who have, you know, a kid that plays a sport. And what these conversations about relatability bring to the forefront are those other forms of tragedy and grief that are not perceived as relatable, that don't fit in to national narratives of what it means to be Canadian, or to particular, you know, maybe class-based narratives about, you know, what a universal experience is and how those other losses are not mourned in the same way. And kind of horrifically fundraising campaigns have become their own kind of litmus test of grievability, that we have numbers to point at to say what tragedies capture people's imaginations and which ones don't. And that's a horrific state of affairs. To reduce loss of life to a number on a fundraising campaign is really gross. And it is also really indicative how empathy is not distributed equitably.

A question that some people have been asking this past week is where this kind of successful fundraising was for victims of the Quebec mosque shooting. So some context for you there, in January Of 2017, there was a mass shooting that occurred at the Islamic Cultural Center of Quebec City. A man named Alexandre Bissonnette went into the mosque and fired on the worshipers there. Six people were killed and 19 were injured. And as is the case with these tragedies again, there were attempts at crowdfunding and those attempts at crowdfunding were significantly less successful. I'm thinking in particular of an attempt to raise money for Aymen Derbali, who took several bullets during the shooting specifically in order to place himself in between the shooter and some other people there, and was paralyzed as a result. And a crowdfunding campaign was set up to raise money to help him in his family to get a house that would be

accessible for him. And the goal of that was \$400,000. That goal was eventually reached with a total of \$416,375. We might also look at the simultaneous Go Fund Me campaigns that were started for both Colton Boushie and Gerald Stanley, the story of which I've spoken about in the podcast before. Again, I'll link to an article about it and you can read up more if you aren't sure what I'm talking about, but that is another example. Again, I can't, I can't state enough that the logics of a crowdfunding campaign take us back to that scarcity thinking. Seems so much to suggest that I and other people are saying, these young people who died don't deserve to be mourned in this way or their families don't deserve to be supported by their communities, which I really don't think anyone is saying. What I think people are asking is how are different lives publicly mourned, publicly grieved differently, and what does that tell us about who we perceive as more and less valuable members of society? This isn't the first time I've had this conversation with people. In fact, I remember very vividly having a conversation with Marcelle years ago when I was still in Edmonton, where on the very same day, a police officer had been killed in the line of duty and the entire downtown of Edmonton had been shut down for a public funeral, and that same day a woman's body was found in an alley in a grocery cart and it didn't even make the front page of the newspaper.

And in moments like that, when it's so stark, how differently different lives are valued, it can be really hard not to ask yourself why and I think it is harder not to ask yourself why when you yourself have experienced a loss or grief that is political, that is politicized, where your capacity to grieve publicly is interrupted by politics, let's say. Maybe where your capacity to grieve publicly is directly being undermined by systemic racism, for example, and you're trying to mourn the loss of a youth from your community and shitty racists on Twitter are coming after you and saying, you know they deserve to die. Or maybe when you are trying to mourn the loss of a partner, but because you were gay, that relationship was never legal and so nobody will recognize it as such. This can be the case even for tragedies that are not public, and I have some personal experience of that. My, my mother died when I was 16. She was terminally ill with cancer and she was dying very slowly and very painfully and she was done, and so she killed herself. And she did that, she took her own life secretly at night while her family was sleeping because there was no support for assisted suicide. There were no sanctioned ways in which she could with dignity and control, choose to enter life. Fortunately that's changing, but 17 years ago it wasn't and she didn't want to involve us in something that could potentially have resulted in us getting in legal trouble. And so she killed herself. And for years I felt I couldn't tell anyone any of the realities or detail surrounding that loss because that loss was political, because the circumstances of it and the nature of it were circumscribed by laws reflecting political beliefs about how end of life should and should not happen. And so my grief was politicized from the first instance. My capacity to mourn was inflected and shaped and limited by politics. And so many people have experiences like that, that when, when we hear people say, "don't make this tragedy political," I think for many of us, our response is "tragedy just his political. It just is." Particularly when we're deciding what lives and what deaths we mourn publicly. So let me bring this around to Judith

Butler. As I promised I would. I'm going to start by reading an extract from Butler's work *Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable?*

So she writes, "one way of posing the question of who we are in these times of war is by asking whose lives are considered valuable, whose lives are mourned, and whose lives are considered ungrievable? We might think of war as dividing populations into those who are grievable, and those who are not. An unreasonable life is one that cannot be mourned because it has never lived. That is, it has never counted as a life at all. We can see the division of the globe into grievable and ungrievable lives from the perspective of those who wage war in order to defend the lives of certain communities and to defend them against the lives of others, even if it means taking those latter lives." End quote. So the context that Butler is writing in here is obviously American military presence in the middle east and the framing of the lives of quote-unquote "foreigners" as less grievable, less mournable, less fully lived than the lives of Americans. And the way that that logic of, of whose death is to be grieved and whose death is to be ignored, that that logic becomes a sort of fundamental one for justifying war. But Butler does abstract or, or draw out of this sort of this particular example, a number of situations in which grievability is differentially distributed. Which is to say that not everyone is perceived as equally grievable. So this is. These are her words. Again, I'm going to read one more long Butler quote. She says, "the differential distribution of public grieving is a political issue of enormous significance. It has been since at least the time of Antigone, when she chose openly to mourn the death of one of her brothers, even though it went against the sovereign law to do so. Why is it that governments so often seek to regulate and control who will be publicly grievable and who will not?" And she continues, "what we feel is, in part, conditioned by how we interpret the world around us, how we interpret what we feel actually can and does alter the feeling itself. If we accept that affect is structured by interpretive schemes that we do not fully understand, can this help us understand why it is we might feel horror in the face of certain losses, but indifference or even righteousness in light of others?" End quote.

So some losses horrify us, others leave us in different, others make us feel righteous. It's the differential distribution of public grieving and it's hugely politically significant. So grief, Butler wants to remind us, is in part affective the way it is, because it reminds us of the precariousness of all life. It reminds us that life can be lost. And grief also brings us together because the reminder that life can be lost reminds us that life requires community and systems of organization to be sustained. So again, in that basic sense, grief is political because all grief reminds us that we're social and thus political animals who need each other to survive, and who also in the modern organization of society need political structures in order to survive. That is, we need to be acknowledged by the state as worth keeping alive and all we have to do is to look at the ongoing longterm "boil water" advisories on reservations in Canada to know what it looks like when the state does not want some people to survive. We know that not all lives are valued equally, and we know that not all lives are sustained equally, and thus it is not a surprise that not all lives are grieved

equally. Now, Butler wants to imagine a better version of this. That is to say, she wants to imagine the possibility that we arrive at a more equitable kind of grieving by recognizing the shared nature of precarity, that is recognizing that all life is precarious, that all life can be lost. That thus all life is grievable, and all life should be grieved, and that, she points out, is a radical political stance because grief is often linked to outrage and grief and outrage can lead to massive political upheaval. And it often has. I think the link between grief and outrage is not unrelated to the very public anger that has been directed towards people who have commented on the inequality of public grief in Canada. The people who have stated that publicly have been, over the past week, quite sort of violently attacked for that. Because grief can lead to outrage and in part, because I think that that does read to some people as a claim that they're not allowed to feel the grief that they feel. And at the same time, I know that for communities that are absolutely still reeling with grief, grief from the Quebec mosque shooting, grief from the deaths of Colton Boushie and Tina Fontaine, grief from deaths that are so overtly political that a \$10,000,000 Go Fund Me campaign has also led to some feelings of outrage. Outrage at the knowledge that Canada perceives your loved ones and your communities as less grievable than others. And I think to say, you know, "we can't state that right now because it is too soon to the loss of these other lives of these young people's lives," is all kinds of messed up, because, because it's not about proximity. It's not about recentness. It's not as though next week if another police shooting were to happen, all of a sudden that would be the next thing being grieved with this level of intensity. The point is that this level of intensity isn't directed towards every loss. The point is that a lot of losses are happening every day that we're not hearing about, or not thinking about, or not caring about, and that the reasons are not natural and they're not inevitable. They are political. The valuing of some lives over others is political. So here's my final point and one that I tweeted out earlier this week: the only people who think grief isn't political or those who have the luxury of not having their grief politicized. Your grief is politicized when the relationship you're grieving is not legally recognized. When the means through which a loved one died was itself a crime or stigmatized. When your loved one died due to political or governmental neglect. And above all, when your loved one has died as a direct result of political violence, be in a police shooting or racially motivated hate crime. In these cases, you are not politicizing tragedy. Tragedy is always already political. I don't know about you. [Music: "Mesh Shirt" by Mom Jeans]. I need a little self-care right now. [Music: "I Will" by Mitski]

Kaarina:

Hello and welcome to Kaarina's Cozy Self Care Corner. This week I need some help from you. So I was thinking about gaps in my self-care knowledge, which of course there are many. I am by no means an expert. But there are two in particular that I would love your help addressing. So the first one is self-care for caregivers, which is something one of our listeners brought up on Twitter. Many of us have gone through periods of our lives where we are caregiving for others in really time consuming ways, or caregiving for many people and if you're a parent that's going to be most of your life, decades of your life, all of your life. I don't know, I'm not a parent. But I recognize that those situations are very

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different than my own, and that self care for caregivers are so complicated and so individual, but also so much about institutions and structures and resources and the ways we are limited by those. So if you have suggestions or thoughts or feelings about self care for caregivers, I want to hear them. Send me a tweet, send me an email, send me a friendly owl. The other thing I want to talk about is anti-capitalist self care. I was reading this wonderful piece by Nashwa Khan on *GUTS Magazine*. It's called, it's called "Self Care and Justice for All?" question mark. It was published on *GUTS Magazine* on June 29th, 2016. And Khan talks about how self-care discourse and capitalism can go hand in hand, especially when we talk about treating ourselves or when we talk about consumption as a form of self care. And she also talks about who is not served by capitalism. So when we think about treating ourselves, are we perpetuating the exploitation of less privileged, or more marginalized people, especially women of color? Those are some pretty serious things to think about. And I hope that in my previous segments I haven't leaned too much into capitalism in the ways that I talk about self care, but I'm sure that I've made some mistakes, or there's been some gaps in my coverage, or a lack of class analysis and I hope to improve upon that. So I'm going to keep reading and thinking and learning and talking about self-care for caregivers and anti-capitalist self care, but I also want to hear from you. I want your help. You are smart, you are amazing. You bring so much to the podcast every day with your listening and your discussions and your feedback, so I bet you have some great things to say about these two topics. So maybe you want to tell me how you've made self care work for you as a caregiver, or how you imagined self care and anti-capitalist ways, or if you think self care is too deeply entrenched in capitalism. Or maybe you want to talk about the ways that your self care has not succeeded because caregiving is too much, or you lack resources and support, or you don't feel a part of the capitalist discourse of self care, or you can't feasibly financially participate in self care. So I'd love to hear from you. You can respond to me by Twitter @kaarinasaurus or using the hashtag #secretfeministagenda, or you can get at me through email because sometimes Twitter is way too much or sometimes thoughts and feelings are way too much for the limited window of Twitter, or sometimes you just want to do something more privately. So my email is kaarina.mikelson@gmail.com, that's K A A R I N A dot M I K E L S O N@gmail.com. So watch for that Finnish double A. So thanks for thinking with me and thanks for listening to me. I can't wait to hear from you. Have a great weekend. [Music: "I Will" by Mitski]

Hannah (Host): As per usual, you can find show notes and all the episodes of *Secret Feminist Agenda* on secretfeministagenda.com. You can follow me on Twitter @hkpmcgregor. You can follow Kaarina @kaarinasaurus, and you can tweet about the podcast using the hashtag #secretfeministagenda. And hey, when you tweet about this episode, let's all strive to be really respectful of other people's experience of grief and to give people the space to be experiencing grief and loss in the way that they are. 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. 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,

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where I'm grateful to live and work. This has been *Secret Feminist Agenda*. Pass it on. [Music: "Mesh Shirt" by Mom Jeans]