

Episode 2.14 Pervert Evangelism with Carly Boyce

April 20, 2018

Hannah (Host): {Music: "Mesh Shirt" by Mom Jeans} Hi, I'm Hannah McGregor and this is *Secret Feminist Agenda*. So a listener reached out to me this week to let me know that I have dropped the ball regarding accountability and accessibility on *Secret Feminist Agenda*. Sometime ago listeners asked me to make the podcast accessible via transcriptions and provided resources on how I could do so. I took note of this need and began to move the process forward behind the scenes. I can tell you right now there's half a dozen starred emails in my inbox on this very topic, but I didn't address the need, my plans, or timetable with listeners. This was a real failure and accountability on my part. People shared time and labor with me that I have not yet reciprocated. I also want to recognize that a key reason I have not been as transparent and accountable on this subject as I should have been is that I am not disabled, nor do I have any loved ones who are deaf. There's no question in my mind that if I did transcriptions of the podcast would have been a top priority. I want to say that I'm so, so grateful for the time and energy and care that listeners demonstrate by reaching out and calling for accountability. I want to recognize how I have failed here to extend the care that I wish I had extended in the first place. As for an actual status update, I'm very fortunate to have some grant money that I can redirect towards prioritizing this in the next few weeks I've asked my research assistant to look into the primary options available to us. It's crowdsourcing versus hiring professionals versus automating the process, and I've asked her to suggest the best option for our needs. The timeline will depend on which option we settle on, but I'll keep you updated as we go. Now let's go meet Carly. [Music: "Mesh Shirt" by Mom Jeans] Carly is a gender queer femme, a white Jewish settler, sex radical, feelings witch, and facilitator. She reads tarot and leads workshops on community mental health, consent, and peer support in Toronto. They like bitter foods and yarn and hate capitalism. [Music: "Fists City" by Loretta Lynn]

Carly: That would be the most important item on the agenda.

Hannah (Host): Yeah, it's very important. We also have to go for shopping and buy matching necklaces.

Carly: [Laughs] You life sounds really funny.

Hannah (Host): It's pretty [Laughs] You know what? It is. Okay. Let's segue into the content of this conversation.

Carly: Yeah, great.

Hannah (Host): So I always assumed that one day I would have you on *Secret Feminist Agenda* and I also assumed that we will probably talk about tarot and then midway through the series that I'm doing on play, I got a message from you, um, sort of,

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sort of pitching a, a different version of a conversation about play that I had absolutely not thought about, but that was very excited to, uh, to hear you suggest. So will you tell our listeners what definition of play you are bringing into the conversation?

Carly: Yeah, totally. I had been listening to those episodes about play and thinking about them a lot, and it kind of occurred to me that one of the places that I have found the idea of play in my life is in sexuality, particularly in the realm of BDSM. Yeah.

Hannah (Host): So, I think I heard the term "play" used around BDSM for the first time last summer at the Vancouver Dyke March, where I was chatting with a friend and a previous Secret Feminist Agenda guest Adèle Barclay about what she had been up to that weekend and she was like, "Oh, you know, I've just been, you know, like it's Pride weekend, so, you know, we've been going to a few parties and we were at a play party last night." And I, having only encountered the phrase "dungeon party" before, did not know what she meant and asked if she was in a play.

Carly: That's incredible.

Hannah (Host): Yeah, I did it. I did it. It was very embarrassing.

Carly: I love that story. And also like, that makes a lot of sense, because play isn't it the idea that we like, primarily associate with, you know, dungeons.

New Speaker: So yeah. So "play" is not the word that I had heard associated with dungeon parties. So can you tell me about the, sort of, the origin of using the term "play"? Like do you know where that language sort of started?

Carly: That's a great question, and I don't know the answer.

Hannah (Host): Is that the term that you prefer?

Carly: Yeah, I mean it's the verb that gets used often when people are kind of like flirting or talking about if they want to do a thing together. That's like, "are you interested in playing with me sometime?" So it's like the party is described as an area of play, but also the activity that you're doing is explicitly referred to as "play."

Hannah (Host): Do you think, do you have any sense of why? Like, because when you say that like, "do you want to play with me sometimes?" that also registers to me perhaps as the kind of language that you sort of use, you know, that kind of like, coded language that you use to invite somebody but also to feel out whether they are on the same page as you.

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Carly: I guess so. I mean for me, that's a question that I would only ask in the context of like, a BDSM environment. So we're kind of like already in the, we're like, operating under a certain set of norms.

Hannah (Host): Yeah.

Carly: And a certain understanding of language. But what I, one of the things I really like about that is that it in a lot of ways, it feels less vulnerable than asking somebody if they want to like, date you or have sex with you. And it also can mean so many things.

Hannah (Host): Yeah.

Carly: So like, that's, it's the start of the conversation, not the end of it. So it's like once you've established if you do or do not want to play together, then it's like, "okay, what do we want that to be like?"

Hannah (Host): Yeah. So it's a sort of opening of a conversation. So, so to go back to that, like why is "play" the verb that's being used there, rather than sort of calling on you to like, provide a complete history in etymology of that word— which I don't have a policy against research on this podcast so I can, in fact go, go look that up. But can you speak to me about why— like we'll get into play itself— but can you speak to me about why that particular language appeals to you?

Carly: Yeah, I mean, I think some of it is just, the idea of fun. I think like living in like, heteropatriarchy, the like, realm of sexuality is really fraught. And so like, I think for a lot of people sex feels more like a battleground than a playground. And so the idea of play as a place where adults can kind of like, reclaim adventure and experimentation and fun and connection is like, a really exciting idea to me.

Hannah (Host): Yeah. That's really lovely.

Carly: Yeah. And I think it also, to me, has a lot to do with the idea of boundaries. Like if you think about something like a sandbox. You're like playing together in a certain container. It has rules, it has guidelines, it has expectations, it has a beginning and a middle and an end. And that kind of containment I think can be really exciting and also liberating.

Hannah (Host):: That's wonderful. So let's talk more about that, about the actual sort of sociability of play in this context. So let's start with like, the community settings. Like, you talked about the kind of space you might be in where you are initiating this conversation with somebody in the first place. So what are those spaces like?

Carly: So my experience is mostly in like, queer politicized, dyke oriented, trans inclusive, leather spaces.

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- Hannah (Host): Great. I was like, I don't even care what noun comes at the end of all of these adjectives. These are all the best adjectives.
- Carly: [Laughs] Yeah. And I also like, caveat like, those spaces are also not like, utopia is where like, racism and transphobia don't exist. Like, we're still in the world in the, you know, time that we're in, but I think there is a set of values and expectations on people's behavior that tend to govern those spaces that I really like and make me feel a lot safer. And so the spaces that I tend to be in sometimes are play parties.
- Hannah (Host): Yes.
- Carly: Sometimes are workshops, love a workshop, and sometimes our conferences that involve kind of like a mix of those two things together.
- Hannah (Host): Amazing. So let's break that down a little bit and I would like to start with workshop. Tell me what happens in a workshop.
- Carly: Oh God. I love workshops. Workshops were my entry point into, into BDSM. And that was kind of because I know how to behave in a workshop. It sounds a lot less scary than something that happens in a dungeon, though sometimes they happen in dungeons.
- Hannah (Host): Yeah, I mean same. If somebody said, "would you like to come to a dungeon with me or would you like to attend a workshop?" I would be like, "a workshop. I totally know what a workshop is."
- Carly: Yeah. In a workshop, like probably the lights are on, and probably people are mostly clothed, probably people aren't like actively cruising in a very intense way. It's a sexualized space because the stuff you're talking about like, has sexuality implicit in it, but it's also, yeah, it's like governed by some, some different kinds of social rules that are a little bit easier for me to understand. And easier, I think, for people who are less like acquainted with those community spaces to like, get into.
- Hannah (Host): Yeah. So is the workshop sort of pedagogical orientation, she said in the most obnoxious way. Like, are you learning something? Is that what's happening?
- Carly: Yes, absolutely. So there's like, there's a, I think of workshops is kind of divided into two categories. There are sort of like thinky workshops and more skill-based workshops.
- Hannah (Host): Okay.
- Carly: So like, a thinky workshop might be like, how do you do conflict in a relationship where you have a negotiated power imbalance? So if someone's the dominant and someone's the submissive, how do you have a fight?

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- Hannah (Host): Gotcha.
- Carly: And a more practical workshop, or a skills-based workshop might be like, learning how to use a single tail whip, or a fund with knives, or like learning rope suspension.
- Hannah (Host): So to understand the skills and to know how to do things safely.
- Carly: Exactly.
- Hannah (Host): Every time I talk to people who are part of the kink or BDSM community, the amount of open dialogue about consent and practices really just continues to blow my mind, particularly in conjunction with like, the absolute failure that we have culturally to have anything like a nuanced conversation about sex and consent. We are, you know, centuries behind on the capacity to articulate consent in any nuanced ways. I mean, I'm thinking right now of like, the sort of Aziz Ansari article.
- Carly: Totally.
- Hannah (Host): And the way in which that opened up all of these, yeah, all of these conversations about how bad we are talking about what constitutes consent. And yet there are these communities who are, who seemed to me, and I hate to sort of map this as a like, chronology of advancement, but seem to me to be pretty far ahead.
- Carly: Yeah, I mean I think there— Again, this is like, kind of specific to my experiences in like dyke oriented politicized community, where those standards are really high. Politics around consent and substance use are really different in like, the men's leather scene, but you know, kind of like nerdy academic community of like, dykes interested in doing weird shit with each other, the standards for communication and consent are really high. And that also doesn't mean that like, shit never goes wrong--
- Hannah (Host): Of course.
- Carly: --and that there aren't consent violations in those spaces, but if you can negotiated things really clearly, and particularly if you've been negotiated them in public space, and the things that are happening are in public space, it can be a lot easier to know when boundaries have been crossed and to talk about it.
- Hannah (Host): Oh, that's really interesting. Because it's a public space in the sense that like other members of your community are there.
- Carly: Yeah.
- Hannah (Host): And can sort of hold you accountable to your treatment of people.

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- Carly: Totally. So like, an example in a lot of dungeons, they have a kind of like, agreed upon safe word for the night. And sometimes there are people called "dungeon monitors" who are kind of like, walking around the space, making sure people are like engaging in the activities they're in safely, and that people are generally okay. And that if somebody calls "red," it's not just that the scene has to stop because everybody in that scene knows what that means, but everyone in the room knows what that means.
- Hannah (Host): Yeah. That's remarkable. And so there's, there's something there about the way that sort of sex as private is normalized in sort of patriarchal culture that like, depoliticizes it and removes that, kind of, community accountability from relationships. Right?
- Carly: Totally. Yeah.
- Hannah (Host): Okay. So workshop versus play party.
- Carly: Yep.
- Hannah (Host): The other kind of event. This is, we're starting with a, with a, like a typeology.
- Carly: [Laughs] Yeah. So like, play parties, most of the ones that I've been to aren't kind of at like, established dungeons, and that's because of like, income disparity between dykes and other kinds of folks. So it's really hard to have a dungeon that's like a space that you can afford to rent and equip with dungeon furniture if you're like, a community of women.
- Hannah (Host): This is pretty much exactly what Adele said to me when she was like, "yeah, yeah, yeah, they're not dungeon parties because they're happening in like a church basement."
- Carly: Totally. I think of them as like, popup dungeons. So there's like, the person who has the pickup truck is the one who like, goes around to the house of every person who has one piece of dungeon furniture and picks them all up. And then there was a crew of folks who kind of like, set up the dungeon for the night, and then at the end you'd like, take them all apart. And then there's a community effort to like, return everybody's dungeon furniture.
- Hannah (Host): [Laughs] Is that like, getting people to sign up to like stick around for tear down?
- Carly: Yes, totally. And there's also like, very sweet kind of community norms around like, cleaning up after yourself. Like, if you're going to do piss play, you bring a kiddie pool. If you're going to do stuff with blood, you like bring tarps. There's always sharps containers. There's like, cleaning supplies that are communal that everyone shares. It's like what you would imagine about what a dyke space is.
- Hannah (Host): Yes, absolutely.

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- Carly: Like a potluck, but just with a lot more nudity.
- Hannah (Host): [Laughs] Like a thing that often strikes me about these spaces that are, that are based so much on, sort of, community understandings of, you know, how things play out and what your responsibilities are as an individual, is that once you are in that community there's a great deal of safety and the clarity of those, those sort of structures, right?
- Carly: Yeah.
- Hannah (Host): The, I mean they're not like, immobile structures but like, they're there to sort of help you understand how to navigate the space. And, at the same time, those communities can be very hard to enter into in the first place.
- Carly: Yes, definitely.
- Hannah (Host): Yeah. Because like from the outside, those understandings of like, this is how things work often don't, often don't translate.
- Carly: Yeah, definitely.
- Hannah (Host): Yeah. Can you, can you speak to sort of what it looks like for people who are new to you know, again, sort of speaking from the perspective of your community experience, like what does it look like when somebody's entering him for the first time?
- Carly: I think it depends a lot on like, where and how they're entering. So like, for me I like, went to a lot of workshops before I went to any parties so that one, I could have a sense of like the community norms, the language and the like, safety parts, and also said that there could be some familiar faces so that when I went to a party I wouldn't just be like sitting in a corner feeling weird. There could be people that I could like, say hello to.
- Hannah (Host): Yeah.
- Carly: And ask questions, and sit with, and that kind of thing. So I often like, I'm a little bit of a pervert evangelist, in that I like bring a lot of people into community with me. And so I think having a buddy is a really important and helpful strategy. So like, yeah, knowing someone who can tell you a little bit about the community norms that you're walking into, yeah, can be a really a really nice way to enter. Because I think it's true that because it's, it's a community also where people are doing things that are vulnerable and risky and sometimes they're like, closeted about those practices, people aren't necessarily just like, totally open and friendly to people they've never seen before.

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- Hannah (Host): Yeah, that makes sense. I mean, like you said, like there's vulnerability involved and forms of intimacy involved that mean like, that you do want to protect that community.
- Carly: Yeah, definitely.
- Hannah (Host): Like that's how you maintain spaces that can be safe like that and that can, that can actually operate according to these kinds like, consent and consensus based rules. Right?
- Carly: Yeah, totally. There's often systems of kind of like, vouching. Like if you're going to a party you've been to before, you can bring someone with you, but you can't just like, share the invite with all your friends.
- Hannah (Host): Just share it on Facebook
- Carly: And that's like, one of the ways that people maintain safety, but it's also one of the ways that communities remain homogenous.
- Hannah (Host): Yeah. Yeah, I've been thinking about like, not in the context of these particular communities, but generally in the context of sort of articulating feminist ethics of accountability and of community accountability, you know, as opposed to these kinds of like, policing models around, specifically around like literature and publishing recently, and instances where people who have written books have been sort of called upon to be accountable for the harm that they're books cause. But that accountability itself involves kinds of community connection that are not equally available to everyone.
- Carly: Yeah. Definitely.
- Hannah (Host): And that's, you know, I don't know. I don't know. Like, are there conversations that are happening within your community about how to sort of work against that homogeneity?
- Carly: Yeah, definitely. I mean for me, also like, the, the kink community as one of the first places that I kind of like, started learning about anti-racist activism because there were people talking about the fact that those spaces are primarily very, very white--
- Hannah (Host): Oh, okay.
- Carly: --and that that isn't just like, politically bad. It's also like, homogeneity is boring. And like, diversity isn't an end that's about like, us looking cool for having lots of different sorts of folks, it's like, actually about enriching what a community looks like.
- Hannah (Host): Yeah.

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- Carly: And bringing in different kinds of knowledge and practices and interests that, that like, makes all of our lives better. And so the vouching system and the ways that these things get kind of like, whispered about rather than posted publicly, makes it really hard for folks who don't have access to those social networks to kind of like, enter in. And so I think there's been like, ongoing conversations in my communities about how to change that, and I don't know that I would say we've made a ton of progress, but I think there's interest in thinking and talking more about that.
- Hannah (Host): Yeah. Do you have a sense of how or why these communities sort of have this, kind of, homogenous whiteness to them? Like, how sort of whiteness plays out as an origin for the kink community even if it's not a sort of end point or a goal?
- Carly: Yeah, that's a really interesting question. I don't know that I have like, a real answers, but I have some speculations about it. I think some of it is about like, class and access. That for some there are like, perceptions— and I don't think this is necessarily true— but that to be kind of like, cool in a kink scene, you also have to like, own a lot of leather and fancy toys and those things all cost money. And we live in a society that has like very, very racist wealth distribution.
- Hannah (Host): [Laughs] Sorry. That's my, that's my "ha ha, everything's awful" panic laugh. It shows up in this podcast a lot.
- Carly: Yeah. And so the people have access to enough money to have a party, to host a party, to like know enough people who have the dungeon furniture that could like, not staff, staff with objects. Outfit a party?
- Hannah (Host): Equip?
- Carly: Yeah, exactly. Those like, folks tend to be white. And also there's vulnerability in approaching a venue like a place that usually holds weddings, or sports games, or you know, church functions and being like, "Hey, we want to have filthy sex in your space."
- Hannah (Host): [Laughs] Is that the email?
- Carly: [Laughs] Something like that, right? Like, you can't really lie about what you're going to be doing in a space like that. And so the people who also have enough kind of like, social cache privilege, respectability to be able to pull that off also tend to be white.
- Hannah (Host): Yeah, respectability is key here, right? So you have a couple of times like, you used the word "pervert" before, and like, "filthy sex," like all of this is like, pushing hard against the respectability politics of, you know, what communities do, what adults do when they hang out together. And you know, respectability and resource access go hand in hand.

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- Carly: Totally. I was thinking also about, I just listened to the episode of Secret Feminist Agenda where you talked about roller derby, and I was thinking about the conversation about names, because kink is another realm where people sometimes use pseudonyms.
- Hannah (Host): Okay.
- Carly: And that that's about like, protecting people's vanilla identities. You know, if you have a job where your employment could be at risk if someone found out that you were a sex pervert, you can't run a workshop using your legal name so that your life googleable in that way.
- Hannah (Host): Yeah. So, so where that's sort of taking me is this sort of anonymity and the idea of a sort of necessary closeted-ness, which has sort of laterally led me back to a question that sort of came up at the beginning when you were talking about the particular orientation of your community and the degree to which sort of the Venn Diagrams of kink and queerness do or do not overlap. Because, I have to say, I personally have not encountered straight people who participate in kink, but that may be because I don't encounter a ton of straight people.
- Carly: [Laughs] Yeah. I mean, I too do my best to live in a queer bubble.
- Hannah (Host): Just really love my homonormative life.
- Carly: Yeah, me too. I like, was joking with some friends that I did, I did have a Vipassana retreat last spring, and the best part about it was that I didn't have hear the voice of a man for 10 days.
- Hannah (Host): [Laughs] That's so great.
- Carly: And so yeah, that's just like, my orientation towards the world is really about surrounding myself with people who I share values with. Not to say that, you know, whatever. Hashtag no tall men.
- Hannah (Host): [Laughs] Hashtag no tall men. Also like, share values with, or who will push your challenge you in ways that are productive--
- Carly: Yeah.
- Hannah (Host): --as opposed to just like, fucking derail your life.
- Carly: But to answer your question about like, whether there are kinky straight people like, yes there absolutely are. There are lots of them. And there are, there are scenes, just like there are kind of like scenes of, of queer can keep people and there's some overlap between those. Again, for reasons of like financial access. But I like, I went through a period of time where I was like, looking for more kink

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spaces to be in, and so I did a kind of like, tour of the, what's called the "pansexual scene," which actually just means, it's just code for straight.

Hannah (Host): Wait, how did pansexual become code for straight?

Carly: Pansexual doesn't mean straight when you're talking about an individual person, but if you're talking about a pansexual play party that's a straight party where women can kiss.

Hannah (Host): Oh, huh. It's kind of a bummer.

Carly: It's huge bummer.

Hannah (Host): Yeah.

Carly: So I did a kind of like, tour of those parties in Toronto to see if there were spaces that I felt good in, and that I want it to be a part of, and if there are people that I wanted to play with in them, and the answer was largely no. And it felt like the, the politics of normative society and of rape culture, we're way more present in those spaces.

Hannah (Host): Oooh. That's interesting. So, so the, the Venn Diagram is one where like, kink is not inherently attached to a particular sexuality, but is sort of played out and played with differently in different communities.

Carly: Definitely.

Hannah (Host): So where does, sort of, in your experience, where does— how do I word this question? I'm still picturing this sort of Venn Diagram of like, not all kink as queer and not all queers are kinky.

Carly: Yes.

Hannah (Host): So what is it about the overlap of that that sort of produces something new and exciting?

Carly: Hm. Yeah, I guess it's like, like I think there's something kind of, there doesn't have to be, but I think there is something kind of like sex radical about being queer. And I think like, public sex or semi-public sex also has been part of queer community for a really long time, and that's like, everything from kind of like, sex in a dungeon to like sex in a park.

Hannah (Host): Yes.

Carly: And so it's like, about really that kind of like, the personalist political, the private is public.

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- Hannah (Host): Yeah. Yes! Yes. Okay. Yeah.
- Carly: Like, bringing our sex lives out of the bedroom and into a space where we're interacting with other people who we share a community with, I think there's a lot of power in that.
- Hannah (Host): Thank you for that. That was really beautifully articulated. You are reminding me of a talk that I saw a couple of years ago when I was back at the U of A, and I will have to look up who the speaker was, but it was the argument that they were making is that queer studies needs to go back to talking about actual sex, because the actual sex got lost from queer studies along the way.
- Carly: [Laughs] Yeah, totally.
- Hannah (Host): And it became all about, you know, queering things, but not talking about fucking ever. And the speaker's argument was all kinds of nuanced at various levels that, that missed me to various degrees, because queer theory is often a little bit too dense for me.
- Carly: Me too.
- Hannah (Host): Too smart. But you know, one of the basic arguments they were making was that, that sort of what we're talking about is this sort of— oh, what's the, what's the phrase for the way that queerness gets sort of like normalized within existing heteronormative and capitalist culture? You know, the "queers, they're just like us" Modern Family version that says, you know, there is nothing threatening happening here. Nobody's doing anything weird. Nobody's breaking any rules. Calm down. We're not challenging anything.
- Carly: Yeah. And I'm like, "that's bullshit." [Laughs] I think maybe the term, the academic term for that, that I might be misusing as homo nationalism.
- Hannah (Host): Yes! Homo nationalism. Thank you. Great job. All of these academic terms.
- Carly: I had to ask people what homo nationalism means a lot of times.
- Hannah (Host): I'll like, find an article about it and link it in the show notes and we can all learn together.
- Carly: But yeah, I think there's really something to that of being like, "no, actually we are against the nuclear family as the like structuring piece of society. We are against, you know, sex only happening in dark private rooms where no one can tell you that you're doing it in a way that's violent." Like...
- Hannah (Host): Yeah, like we do actually want to threaten the norms that structure society right now, for sure.

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- Carly: I want to radically reshape the world that we live in.
- Hannah (Host): So you should, in fact, find me threatening, for sure. [Laughs] Which for me comes through in the language of perversion.
- Carly: Yeah.
- Hannah (Host): Which is confrontational language in the best way--
- Carly: Yeah, I agree.
- Hannah (Host): --Yeah, that's resonant with the sort of, the reclaiming of the word "queer" as well. So if we go back to to play, it's something, it's almost, it's so sweet. Like, it stands out against the language of perversion in such interesting ways
- Carly: Yeah.
- Hannah (Host): Because it is a, it is a claiming of a thing that is, you know, associated with children.
- Carly: Yes. And like, that's my experience of those spaces is that they're like, very earnest and very sweet.
- New Speaker: [Laughs] That's tender.
- Carly: Yeah. Totally. Even like, in a room where people are like hitting each other and crying, like there's so much tenderness. And like one of the ways that that's kind of demonstrated is, that like another kind of like, community norm is that one of the things you negotiate in addition to like, the weird shit you're going to do together is aftercare.
- Hannah (Host): Oh, so do negotiations happen before the scene.?
- Carly: Yeah.
- Hannah (Host): That's beautiful. Like, that's beautiful that a negotiation that is not only sort of setting limits and establishing, you know, personal boundaries, but also establishing like, a vocabulary and a practice of care upfront.
- Carly: Yeah. It says like, when our, our, like sexual or kinky interaction is over like, we don't stop being responsible to each other.
- Hannah (Host): Yeah. Wow. That's so humanizing.
- Carly: Yeah, and there's like, I mean everybody has different like, approaches to aftercare and feelings about it and ways that that looks, but it is, you know, in

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the communities that I move in, it's considered a pretty standard part of negotiation to at least like, have a chat about it.

Hannah (Host): Yeah.

Carly: "What does aftercare look like for you? What do you think you might need after we do this?" I think one of the, one of the things that's really cool about that community is also that like, leather culture is like, historical and so it's also one of the few kinds of queer spaces that I access that's really intergenerational.

Hannah (Host): Oh, wow.

Carly: And so it's like, it's where I met queers who are in their fifties and sixties and seventies.

Hannah (Host): Which doesn't happen in a lot of queer spaces. Like, they do end up generationally split off.

Carly: Yeah.

Hannah (Host): Like, I've been to, well, okay, one. I've been to one queer dance party in the past year. I'm old. I don't go out very much. But I was one of the oldest people there.

Carly: Totally.

Hannah (Host): Like, "oh, wow. This is new. What has happened?"

Carly: And like, because I've also, like I've worked in community for a long time, like was gay for pay since I was like 23, in spaces where I was working, I was often on the older end. So doing peer work or doing community organizing with young queers by the time you're 25, you're kind of old, and then I would go to kink stuff where I would be one of the youngest people in the room and it was really exciting for me to meet like, mentors and possibility models, people who are still like, learning new things, discovering their sexuality, trying new ways of being at 50, 60 and 70.

Hannah (Host): That is such an important reminder too about the kinds of ageism that structure so many of our communities and that are so often sort of thread through conversations about sex and sexuality and the capacity for radicalism.

Carly: Yeah. And also because kink is a community where there are, there kind of like, skillsets. There's also a lot of like really beautiful intergenerational mentorship that happens.

Hannah (Host): Oh yeah. Of course.

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- Carly: You know, like if you want to learn about how to do the thing, you'd go to the person who's been doing it for 20 years.
- Hannah (Host): Which then, you know, you have sort of a model of like, community elders who, who carry forms of expertise that are respected.
- Carly: And they're not desexualized.
- Hannah (Host): That is also pretty incredible. I have two questions that are gonna lead in opposite directions, but I was wondering if you could talk a little bit more about what constitutes the leather scene, because I'm guessing for a number of listeners they don't know what that means.
- Carly: Totally. So again, like I'm only speaking about like, my own experiences.
- Hannah (Host): Of course. Yeah.
- Carly: But I think like, leather is a kind of like, a more formalized approach to BDSM and kink. So in leather scenes there are groups of people that think of themselves as leather families, so you can like, officially join a kind of like, family or be invited into a family. And I think that speaks a lot to times that are like, still ongoing but in a more intense way historically where people were not able to continue being part of their bio families. And so a formalized system of forming new families kind of like, emerged in the scene of leather. And there's also a like, formalized systems of leadership. So there is like, a Miss Leather Toronto, there is a Mr. Leather Toronto, there is an International Miss Leather.
- Hannah (Host): And what does that kind of leadership mean?
- Carly: Those are folks who, I mean they're chosen by people, people in the like, formalized leather world that I would say I'm like, adjacent to, not like, entirely in would like, not like me to use the word "pageant."
- Hannah (Host): [Laughs]
- Carly: They prefer the word "contest."
- Hannah (Host): Gotcha, gotcha. Because there is no sash at the end.
- Carly: There is a sash [laughs].
- Hannah (Host): There's, okay, listen.
- Carly: It's made of leather.
- Hannah (Host): Still a sash! If you wear it across your chest, it is a sash, unless it's a bandolier.

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- Carly: So there, there are these contests where people compete and they compete both with kind of like, performance and also with kind of like, speeches about their like, ethics and what they plan to bring to a kind of leadership position. And then those folks do a lot of like, traveling and teaching and mentorship and community building around like kink and BDSM and leather culture.
- Hannah (Host): Like, I'm having this sort of Harry Potter moment where I've first been shown Diagon Alley. It's like there's this whole magical world that I didn't know was happening and there's fucking pageants in it.
- Carly: Yeah, it's real.
- Hannah (Host): And just how incredibly wonderful like, how perfect. So that actually didn't lead as far away from the other question I wanted to ask. I should have known all things are leading back to conversations about community because your point just now about sort of leather families sort of had me thinking about a sort of characteristic of queer communities, which is the like decentralizing of singular relationships as the entirety of somebody's sexual, emotional, and legal life.
- Carly: Yes, totally.
- Hannah (Host): So the way that you know, like monogamy and heteronormativity established these sort of particular legally sanctioned relationships needing to somehow contain everything, which, you know, has historically set women up to be incredibly vulnerable in those relationships, but also just sets up in like, single relationships to bear this burden that is non-sustainable for a lot of relationships, and that is framed as failure, obviously. Whereas in a lot of queer communities, emotional labor, sex, intimacy, cohabitation, parenting are like, laterally spread out across networks of communities in this way that sort of makes life more sustainable.
- Carly: Totally. Yeah. And you're also making me think about like, disposability and also how that kind of plays into communities where like, you know, if you're in the, the wide world of straight dating, it's actually kind of plausible to break up with someone and never see them again unless you like, have children together or share some other kind of like intense identity based or practice based community. But if you're queer and kinky and there's like one space where those things intersect, you just continue to be in community with people that you've had lots of different kinds of relationships with.
- Hannah (Host): Yes. So you cannot like, burn down relationships, or ghost people, or, you know, treat people, like you said, like they're disposable.
- Carly: There's also another like, community practice that I think really rules and could also be shared like, way vaster than kink community is like, getting references.
- Hannah (Host): Oh, tell me more.

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- Carly: So like, if somebody approaches me to play and I don't know them, before I would agree to do that. I would be like, "tell me three other people you've played with that I might know and I will ask them how that was."
- Hannah (Host): That is absolutely something that could be imported into all kinds of other communities.
- Carly: Right? But it's like, that's like, a very acceptable practice in kink spaces and I think it's like, not as acceptable in a lot of dating, but I think it really could and should be. Yeah.
- Hannah (Host): Yeah, no kidding. I mean like, "I would like to enter into a relationship with you. Could I speak to some previous people you have had relationships with?"
- Carly: Yes.
- Hannah (Host): To like, double check that like, they're okay. Yeah.
- Carly: And I think it's also because it's a community norm, it's also done with a lot of care. So if somebody approaches me to ask about someone I've played with, even if I didn't have, you know, the greatest experience, like the way that that gets talked about is more like, "let me tell you about my experience. And also it was this long ago." You know? And like, "here are some ways I've seen that person shift, but maybe here's a couple of things to keep your eyes open for."
- Hannah (Host): I mean that's the sort of, the ideal of a community where things are happening accountably and publicly, or semi--publicly, is one in which like, it's not sort of a panoptic like, people get to talk about you but you don't get to know what people are saying about you. It's like, you're accountable to how you've treated other people in your community, but then other people in the community are also accountable for how they respond to you.
- Carly: Yeah.
- Hannah (Host): Like, it makes me think about the sort of like, "calling in" dimension of like, restorative justice. Like, even if you have erred in the past, it's not a sense of like shunning or being cast out, because that's not for the most part how accountability works. I'm wondering if you have a sense that that abuse is less common in communities, in kink communities, where these sort of practices and language around consent are so much clearer.
- Carly: I don't know that it is less common, I'd really like to be able to say that it is, but I don't, I don't feel confident saying that.
- Hannah (Host): Yeah.

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- Carly: But I think in my experience I feel more hopeful inside of kink community about people's ability to be held accountable and to like, shift behaviors.
- Hannah (Host): That's a really interesting distinction and I think one that, that is productive for all kinds of conversations around sort of abusing consent, which is like, the point isn't to somehow create a perfect utopian world in which nobody ever hurts anyone or violates their boundaries.
- Carly: Yes.
- Hannah (Host): Because we're humans and we're going to fuck up. But one in which we know what to do when that happens.
- Carly: Exactly. And I have a few people in my life from these communities have also started thinking about how to share those practices when they have happened and happened well. So I'm thinking of an example of a few people I know who in a scene that went kind of awry, someone ended up with a concussion.
- Hannah (Host): Oh wow.
- Carly: And without like, speaking about too much of the like, details of those humans or what went down, those people are still in relationship with each other and have figured out how to like, care for each other through that experience--
- Hannah (Host): Yeah.
- Carly: --and also try to prevent it from happening to other people. And the way you do that is by talking about it.
- Hannah (Host): Yeah, absolutely.
- Carly: So like, yeah, fucking up isn't like, to be avoided at all costs because that's not possible, you know, particularly when you're engaging in activities that like, carry risk, and some BDSM things carry like, physical risks. Also emotional risks. It is about kind of figuring out like, how do we respond when that happens rather than trying to avoid it at all costs.
- Hannah (Host): Yeah. And part of having the capacity to respond is having established something like clear language around boundaries in advance--
- Carly: Totally.
- Hannah (Host): --so that, so that you have some way to sort of articulate, you know, where something went wrong or how or why.
- Carly: I think another thing that it makes me think about is that, one of the things that I really like about play and kink settings is that, you kind of strip away some of

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the like, implicit assumptions about what an activity means and you get to kind of like, ascribe it your own meaning.

Hannah (Host): Tell me more.

Carly: I'm trying to think of an example. So like I did, I did a breakup ritual with a couple of friends of mine where the like, activity we were doing is that two people were sewing gold chains to my skin. And the purpose of that for me and that we discussed together was that I wanted to feel kind of like, challenged and pushed and also like, beautiful and respected--

Hannah (Host): Oh, yeah.

Carly: --as a way to like move out of the like, grief place that I was in about the, this relationship ending. And that's like, if there was an outsider looking in on that scene, they might have lots of guesses about like, what we were doing and why and what it meant. But the only people who actually know are the people who are doing it.

Hannah (Host): Yeah. So it sort of destabilizes that like, particular actions have inherent meanings--

Carly: Yeah,

Hannah (Host): --such that you, you have the sort of freedom to, to articulate like, ceremony and practice for yourself.

Carly: Yeah. So like, if you walk into a dungeon and you see somebody's shining someone else's boots, right? You don't know whether the person who's having their boots shined is like, the master who is being like, attended to by their submissive or whether it's actually the exact opposite.

Hannah (Host): Yeah, the collar is something that sort of when I was first like, meeting and making friends with people who were involved in the kink community, something that like, really sort of I, I struggled to understand not the significance but like, the actual signification like, what it meant. Because like, old school, second wave feminist upbringing said "women wearing collars is bad."

Carly: Totally.

Hannah (Host): Right? Like that, just that basic like, "I'm pretty sure that's what we were fighting against." And so to, to come to understand the way that the, all of the sort of like, naturalized vocabulary of gestures and activities and hierarchies and relationships is being fucked with, and, and that therein lies, to go back to the very first thing you said about play, like you sort of, you were talking about being interested in, in sexuality and play, and the first thing that came to my mind is the sort of playful treatment of sexuality and gender signifiers in

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general. You know, to bring it back there, there is this, this playing with meaning that also seems possible.

Carly: Yeah. Yeah, that makes sense to me.

Hannah (Host): I can't remember. I will try to. I always try to look up my sources afterwards, but I was reading an article about trans drag queens responding to Ru Paul's comments about trans women not being welcome on *Drag Race*.

Carly: Uh huh.

Hannah (Host): And one of the writers said that the whole point of drag is that it turns gender into a fart joke, which I thought was pretty incredible.

Carly: Yep.

Hannah (Host): But like, that's the other sort of resonance of play that sort of is in the back of my head as well here, is like play also as like a, a sort of fucking with.

Carly: Totally. And there's a lot of like, people finding ways to eroticize and get joy from also ways that they are like, marginalized or violence is done to them in the world.

Hannah (Host): Yeah.

Carly: Yeah. I mean I'm thinking of things like service. So the idea of like, like cooking for someone, or cleaning their house, or shining their boots, things like that that are like, assumed to be like, natural things that women do, and that are like not recognized or appreciated. If you have negotiated service relationship with someone and you do those things and in exchange,, whether it's like a literal exchange or just like, in the context of a relationship, you get back, appreciation, quality time, a like, sexual activity you think is really fun. That's a way of kind of like, making that kind of like, implicit assumed work into something that can be like, celebrated and noticed and important.

Hannah (Host): That has value because it becomes part of a negotiated relationship.

Carly: Yeah.

Hannah (Host): Which is just reminding me of your, your friend who, who has pitched to *Witch, Please* a reading of house elves as a service bottoms, which just, which we are, we are going to follow up on and do an episode about that because it is just, again, why do I keep bringing this back to Harry Potter? I normally don't, I swear. it's one of those moments I was like, "Whoa! Yeah, absolutely." Again, it's like a decoupling the, the signified and signifier.

Carly: Totally.

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- Hannah (Host): I mean it's, it's unnatural on purpose, right? Because the category of the natural is super oppressive for a lot of us.
- Carly: Yeah.
- Hannah (Host): Are there any sort of questions or aspects of this that you wish I had asked about but I haven't.
- Carly: Oh yeah. I think I wanted to do a talk a little bit about a kind of like, model consent that's another one I think has some applicability even like, outside of the dungeon.
- Hannah (Host): Yeah?
- Carly: And so I think I was talking earlier a little bit about kind of like, in a dungeon there might be an agreed upon safe word.
- Hannah (Host): Mmhmm.
- Carly: And safe words, in general, I think are like a pretty cool idea, that there's like something that you can say that makes everything stop. Just that as an idea I think is powerful, but also that it, it doesn't have to be "no."
- Hannah (Host): [Laughs]
- Carly: Right? For some people like, "no" might just be a hard thing to say, or "no" might be part of what you're playing with, but to have something that feels like reliable and sturdy as a way to stop what's going on I think is a really powerful idea. And also like whatever, rape culture tells us that "no" won't be listened to anyway. So like,, why bother?
- Hannah (Host): Yeah.
- Carly: But also there's like, some people use like a stoplight system. So like "red" means absolutely stop, "green" means like, "this is great. Continue." "Yellow" might mean like, "I'm getting to a limit" or like, "I need things to slow down," or, "I'm almost ready to stop." And then some people also use a fourth one that's like blue or some other color, and that kind of means like, "I need something to change, but I don't want to stop." So "blue" could be like, "I need to change the position of my body because my foot's falling asleep."
- Hannah (Host): But that doesn't mean that I'm done.
- Carly: Yeah. That there's just like, so much of the consent narratives that we get in the kind of like, more mainstream thing are all about this kind of really binary like "yes or no."

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- Hannah (Host): Uh huh.
- Hannah (Host): And one of the reasons that people are sometimes scared to say "no" in addition to like all the stuff that's about violence is that they might not want to stop the interaction completely or reject the person. They just want something about what's going on to change.
- Hannah (Host): Yeah, I was thinking that one of the primary relationships where I've encountered language around boundaries that is so clear is RMTS, massage therapists.
- Carly: Yeah, totally.
- Hannah (Host): Absolutely. Also like, body workers, right? Who you have to have a conversation with about, you know, it begins with "undress to your level of comfort,"
- Carly: Yeah.
- Hannah (Host): And then extends to all of this sort of articulation of like, how are we going to negotiate a relationship between our bodies right now that is safe for you? And that even that which is fairly in some ways fairly perfunctory transaction, requires a kind of nuance that that is entirely lacking from how we teach youth to think about sexuality.
- Carly: Totally.
- Hannah (Host): That we aren't equipping people with the language and resources to articulate consent and limitation and like, all of the exciting nuanced complex things that happen within an experience that is not simply "I want this" or "I don't want this."
- Carly: Yeah.
- Hannah (Host): And it doesn't seem impossible to give people that language.
- Carly: Yeah.
- Hannah (Host): If I can figure that out with my massage therapist, then, then that is something that we could be like, offering to a lot of people.
- Carly: Totally. Totally. And then I think the other thing I was thinking about was like, boundaries is something that I like, think and talk about a lot and kind of like all of the pieces of my life and work and it feels like there's this really strong link for me between a piece that I say about boundaries in workshops about like, supporting peers through like, crisis, which is like "a 'no' makes a 'yes' more believable." That having boundaries is actually like a trust building exercise and a tool of containment, and that that's, that's something that I learned in BDSM.

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Kinky environments were the first ones where somebody thanked me for saying no to something.

Hannah (Host): Because that meant that they knew that you trusted them.

Carly: They knew that I trusted them and they knew that I would say no if something wasn't okay.

Hannah (Host): Yeah.

Carly: There's a lot of vulnerability in being a top and being someone who's kind of like, doing things that carry risk of injury that, you know, so to say "no" is a real like, trust building activity. And having my "no" valued was like a really transformative experience for me.

Hannah (Host): That's really remarkable. The friend who sort of taught me about boundaries is also the first person who modeled to me like, exactly that thing that you were describing, which is like, one day I was apologizing to her for having— I was having a panic attack and texted her and she sort of, you know, walked me through it. And then I said like, "I'm sorry, I feel like I sort of came out of the blue with that," and she responded and said, "you know, if I am ever not able to provide you with the emotional labor that you're requesting, I will say 'no' to you." It wasn't quite the same, you know, it wasn't a "no" in that moment, but a confirmation that somebody will say "no" means a great deal. It means like, I feel comfortable now to know that I'm not accidentally hurting or exploiting you.

Carly: Yeah, and if you don't know where those boundaries are, or you don't feel confident that they can exist, it's really hard to believe that someone else acting from a place of like, care or desire and not from a place of obligation or fear.

Hannah (Host): Yeah. And on the flip side, if you want to know that somebody isn't acting out of obligation or fear, you will make sure that they have ways to say "no" to you.

Carly: Yes. And I think it's also like that, that kind of dynamic about that negotiation of consent requires that you be a decision maker. Like requires that you be an active agent in a sexual situation, which is not what women are taught our role is, right? We are supposed to be passive recipients of like, male sexuality. And so having it be required of me to know what my desires are and to articulate them and to also articulate my limits and my "no's" was a really like, transformative understanding of my own sexuality.

Hannah (Host): Are there workshops on that?

Carly: [Laughs] I think so, yeah.

Hannah (Host): Great.

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Carly: Maybe not in that way, but like, I have co-taught a workshop called "Flirting and Negotiation for Shy Perverts--"

Hannah (Host): [Laughs].

Carly: --with a friend of mine where we talk a lot about, kind of like, the communication pieces. And I think there's also lots of people who teach in different ways about kind of like, finding your desires and figuring out ways to talk about them.

Hannah (Host): That's wonderful. And again, sort of speaks back to that like, evangelism that you referred to earlier and how important it is for sort of opening out these communities for people who, for whatever reason, might not feel like they are welcome or might not see themselves there.

Carly: Yeah, totally.

Hannah (Host): Yeah. Finding ways to tell, to tell shy people, for example, that you too can figure out how to articulate your desires clearly. What are remarkably difficult thing to do though? Huh?

Carly: Oh my gosh. It's so difficult.

Hannah (Host): Yeah.

Carly: And it's so powerful.

Hannah (Host): I mean, because articulating your desire wouldn't be something that is discouraged if it wasn't powerful.

Carly: Yes, totally. And also like, we're talking about like, what is, what is good sex or like good, like erotic relating. Consensual is actually a pretty fucking low bar.

Hannah (Host): [Laughs] Oh my God.

Carly: Great, the sex you're having is not explicitly violent against you and your autonomy. Cool. Like, I think we can do fucking better than that.

Hannah (Host): Oh wow. That's the dream, huh? [Laughs]

Carly: Yeah, and it's like, I mean, dream the impossible dream, because it's like actually really possible.

Hannah (Host): Alright, wonderful. We're at an hour and 11 minutes of recorded conversation.

Carly: [Laughs] Have fun editing! [Music: "Fists City" by Loretta Lynn]

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Hannah (Host): [Laughs]. If you'd like more from Carly you can follow her on Instagram @tinylanterntarot, all one word, or check out their website at tinylegendtarot.com. Those will be linked in the show notes, which you can find along with previous episodes at secretfeministagenda.com. You can follow me on Twitter @hkpmcgregor and tweet about the podcast using the hashtag #secretfeministagenda and don't forget to head on to iTunes and leave a rating and a review. It's a huge way to help people find 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. Carly's theme song was "Fists City" by Loretta Lynn. *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]