

Episode 1.1 Eyeliner & Astrology with Xine Yao

July 14, 2017

Hannah (Host): [Music: "Mesh Shirt" by Mom Jeans] Hi, I'm Hannah McGregor and this is *Secret Feminist Agenda*. I'm so excited to be bringing you the first official episode of this new podcast dedicated to the mundane nefarious and even insidious ways we enact feminism in our daily lives. Before I introduce you to this week's guest, I want to tell you what my secret feminist agenda is this week. [Music: "Mesh Shirt" by Mom Jeans]

Hannah (Host): In her memoir, *Shrill: Notes from a Loud Woman*, Lindy West offers an easy, one-step approach to body acceptance. Quote, "Look at pictures of fat women on the Internet until they don't make you uncomfortable anymore," end quote. That, she says, is the entire process. Learning to look at pictures of fat women has been literally life-changing for me. Finding and following radical fat woman has completely reshaped my conception of beauty and bodies, others and my own. It's made me love my own body in ways that to a teenage me were absolutely inconceivable and it's helped me to approach other people's relationships with their bodies, with greater compassion. If you too would like to fill your Instagram feed with gorgeous fat women, I'd recommend @VirgieTovar, @MissLionHunter, @GlitterAndLazers, @CynaraGee, @HentaiHoney, and @RadFatVegan just for a start. If you have any favorite internet fats you'd like to share, tweet at me using the hashtag #secretfeministagenda. [Music: "Mesh Shirt" by Mom Jeans]

Hannah (Host): And now I'd like you to meet my friend, Xine. Xine is a SSHRC postdoctoral fellow at the University of British Columbia in the Department of English. She works on intersections of affect, race, gender, and sexuality in relation to science and law through long 19th century American literature. That just means, like, the 19th century and like a little bit on either end. She's also the co-host of *PhDivas*, a podcast about academia, culture and social justice across the STEM-humanities divide. We went out for dinner last week and then I lured her to a park bench to talk about her secret feminist agenda. Here's what she had to say. [Music: "History Maker" by Dean Fujioka]

Hannah (Host): How's it going?

Xine (Guest): It's good.

Hannah (Host): Yeah.

Xine (Guest): I'm wearing your pink poncho sitting in a park in Vancouver.

Hannah (Host): Yeah. You look great in the pink poncho.

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Xine (Guest): For the benefit of our listeners, I have to say that this entire week I've been a new makeup technique specifically so I could have dinner with Hannah, which is the cut crease, so. Cut crease eye shadow.

Hannah (Host): It's a really remarkable cut crease and there's like a sort of a lighter pink. There's like, a liquid black eyeliner cat's eye with a lighter pink cat's eye over top of it, and then cut crease. It's very beautiful.

Xine (Guest): Well, thank you.

Hannah (Host): And the poncho was the same color as the pink.

Xine (Guest): So, it all works.

Hannah (Host): The poncho was meant to be. So, yeah, this is, this is the first time I've done this for this new podcast, so I am not sure yet what form that's going to take. It was just like the, like the thing, the conversation was really interested in having with people is like, you know, I think in academia in particular, we talk a lot about feminism as a theory and feminism as a method, but I'm really interested in what feminism looks like for feminists as, like, a lived practice. So like, you know, what does it mean for you on a daily basis to be like living feminism as an actual practice of your life?

Xine (Guest): That's a very interesting question. And on the, on the one hand I feel like it's easy for me to give a stock answer precisely because I've been on the, you know, I'm going to go on the academic job market so I have like certain elevator pitches I can give, ideologically, but I don't want to do that for you guys. I want to try and think of something spontaneous, or at least something that doesn't sound quite as rehearsed. And so on the way here I was trying, I was thinking very much about how I am very invested in identity as being high femme as the cut crease probably is an indicator. And what exactly does that mean for my pedagogical practice and my research? Uh, so what this looks like for me is, and I think for femmes in general, is like how does one claim femininity under patriarchy? And, for me, it's this question of like, especially within the realm of higher education, where I think it's much easier for us to talk about radical things as opposed to do radical things or talk about radical texts as opposed to having radically reorganizing who's in a conference room talking about it, what does it mean to claim a type of exaggerated femininity that goes against ideas of naturalness? And so what that means for me is like say mastering things like, again, the cut crease or bright pink lipstick, bright red lipstick, wearing lots of different dresses. And to show then in the classroom or when I give a presentation that these are not diametrically opposed to my intellectual practices. And I think this is, for me, it's really important, uh, especially to perform this in front of my students. And I think that there's also within academia, even though I think that we've had so many conversations about the way that mainstream feminism excludes certain types of bodies and so forth,

nonetheless, like there does tend to be this sort of wariness about to what extent can you talk about certain types of self-care.

Hannah (Host): Mm, yeah.

Xine (Guest): Whereas it, where it becomes seen as indulgent or excessive and I really have to credit not just my interest in feminism but also queer theory, um, in terms—and pithy drag culture—for the type of project of self-creation that I see myself as being engaged with. So I'm sure as Hannah will mention, like, I go by Xine, X-I-N-E. This is not my real name, but it's the name I prefer to go by. My real name is Christine and I chose to create the name Zine like in grade nine because [laughter]—

Hannah (Host): It's beautiful.

Xine (Guest): Yeah. So the part, there's a number of different factors. Like my, my family is very Catholic. I always went to Catholic school. There were a lot of Christines. So I wanted something that would stand out. I really loved the letter X because of the way it was used in science fiction. And also I think I was intrigued, knowing how Malcolm X, for example, chose his name and like all the, you know, the mathematical significance of X. So, and also there's the double—there's also the much older tradition that X can actually replace Christ. Um, so in much older texts, I think you can see Xtianity. So I was like, "Oh, logically then if you take the Christ out of Christine and replace with X, it's Xine." So it was for me, it signified a lot of different things, um, as an adolescent going through my asshole atheist phase, as I like to refer to it. And since then, I've been able to go to new spaces and ask my new colleagues, even like my new superiors when as a graduate student, ask faculty call me by Xine was a part of this project of self-creation. And likewise the liquid black eyeliner is a part of that for me too. It's all about this very deliberate crafting of myself in a, in a space which is sort of structurally hostile. Um, that being said, I think that I'm also interested in pushing the boundaries of what high femme can mean for me. There's some things I'm not high femme about. Like, I am not good at nail polish.

Hannah (Host): [laughter] No, me neither. I chew it right off.

Xine (Guest): Yes, yes. And I'm just so bad at it. Like, you need to practice and I'm just awful at it because I only try every couple of years. So I'm like this, that is not going to be part of my high femme practice.

Hannah (Host): I have a friend in Edmonton who, you know, very frequently wears her hair back in a pony tail, no makeup, jeans and tee shirt, but always has long, manicured, beautifully-painted nails that she does herself and creative, fascinating manicures that she—I asked her once about it and she said, "You know, this is my, my art, like this is the way I practice art, and by practicing on my body, it becomes a way that sort of I make my body my own through my art." And I was like, that is absolutely incredible.

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Xine (Guest): Yeah. I remember seeing a piece recently about how nail art is like this new form of feminist art precisely because it is so outside the patriarchy as an aesthetic form. Um, but anyways, sorry, a little bit of divergence. So I'm a high femme person but also someone who identifies as high femme person who likes to lift and I feel like this is something—

Hannah (Host): [encouraging noises] [laughter]

Xine (Guest): Yes. So I'm very proud of the fact that I could both squat and deadlift more than my body weight. Um, today—

Hannah (Host): That's very exciting.

Xine (Guest): Like I think there's something so powerful about being often the only woman in the, uh, doing squats in the squat rack or being able to, to bench press and so forth. And that for me is just as much a part of the process of creation and what it means to be high, high femme for me. I like these sort of contrasts between like what is considered to be like stereotypically feminine appearance and stereotypically masculine interests or practices. For example, I'm very much into I love violent video games. I love violent movies. I like comic books, like things that have been more recently reclaimed by feminists and queers, but like, uh, when I entered it at a much younger age was still a very masculine, white space. And I have to say that, like, so a part of the thing that I do find difficult is that I feel like my love of lifting and the high femme-ness has recently sort of come up against each other, which is just that because I've been doing so much lifting, my chest is now a bigger, so now I can't zip up a lot of the dresses I love so much.

Hannah (Host): Because you're too ripped!

Xine (Guest): I guess so, yeah.

Hannah (Host): [laughter]

Xine (Guest): Like at first, the first time I noticed this was um, it seems very allegorical. I was a part of this play at UBC called *Votes for Women*, which is the first suffrage play at the beginning of the 20th century. And we're putting on costumes that were these Edwardian costumes and I couldn't fit into, I literally could not fit into the outfit of the Edwardian woman. And I was like, okay, I feel really powerful, then I not going to feel that bad about it. But then when I went home and went to my wardrobe and all these dresses that had been such a huge part of my identity, suddenly I couldn't zip them up anymore. Um, and so for a while I thought like, do I just, do I have to choose in this very, like, part of it's also because I wasn't sure if I had the money to replace all those dresses.

Hannah (Host): Of course, yeah.

Xine (Guest): And also there's all the memories involved. Like, should I just do less bench pressing or fewer overhead lifts to make up for, so I could fit into these dresses again? But then I realized that that was ridiculous and the way I should think about it is all the new dresses I could buy that will accommodate my new frame.

Hannah (Host): Yeah. That's beautiful. You're making me think of, um, a lot of really interesting experiences I had with sort of thinking seriously about bodies and gender during my PhD when my two closest women friends... Um, so I am a fat woman. Um, and my two closest friends, one is an incredibly strong woman who has like such incredibly, beautifully muscular arms that she frequently struggles to find blazers that can fit on her. She's a climber and so she's just ripped. And then the other friend is a six foot five and thinking about the ways that the three of us all, uh, in different ways sort of subvert expected models of femininity: too tall, too strong, too fat, right? Which becomes part of the larger category of too much: too loud, too mean, too... whatever. Um, and, and what it means, you know, high femme as another facet of embracing too much-ness, which is like the thing, the number one thing we're not allowed to be.

Xine (Guest): I think I need to address this, of course, is that I think that this also very loaded to, like, indulge in femme-ness as an Asian woman. Precisely because, um, in terms of our racialized position. Positioning, we're posed as being very feminized. Like our men are always queered and feminized, for example. And so then Asian woman tend to be seen as being hyper feminized. And then part of that is also being seen as submissive. So for me it's about reclaiming a type of weaponized femininity that does not adhere to these ideas of, like, of the passive Madame Butterfly, and also being a powerful Asian woman that can, that defies those types of ideas. That being said, I feel like even coming here, taking public transit, being dressed like this, I always still feel self-conscious. I find that's often the case of a lot of friends who are not even familiar with wearing makeup on a regular basis. The first time he put on a bold lip is always the really scary one. It's not just about mastering the application. As I was practicing this cut crease every night this week, coming up to a meeting Hannah, but then like going out in public wearing it. It does feel really scary. And I feel like the way that I'm read as a high femme Asian woman in public, probably connotes very different things than I'm than I am. But I have to also be okay with that.

Hannah (Host): That's. So, that's so interesting. I, um, you know, the racialized and gender politics of this are very different, but I was thinking during my recent travels in Europe, I was in England and Ireland for a while, and I have recently in my life in the past sort of year or so gotten deeply into bold lips and like further and further down the sort of, like, from a lot of sort of red and dark pink into like purples and burgundys and like very sort of, very dark lips, um, which you really, much like the very dramatic sort of cut crease—Um, I was looking for the actual aesthetic of that. I was going to say art deco, but that's not right. [laughter] Like the Mod cut crease, right? It's such a strong and decisive aesthetic that you have to just wear it and say like, yes, yes! You have to commit to it. And um, I noticed

this really interesting thing happening where everywhere I went, strangers were talking to me to a degree that I have not experienced while traveling before. Like, people, particularly men just wanted to talk to me a lot and it did feel like there is this way in which through a sort of bold public assertion of femininity, I seem to be inviting a kind of intention that, or a kind of attention that was not... clearly not what I was going for, but then becomes the sort of side effect, right? Of, like, the way I'm moving through the world now.

Xine (Guest): That's interesting because I find that I feel like I intimidate people more. Um, like with the very bold makeup. Like, also say the way that I dress, one of my favorite coats is a faux leopard print coat, for example. Like, I feel like, I know it's a lot, but I embrace that it's a lot and I feel that people are sort of sometimes scared to talk to me, but also I don't feel like that's entirely a bad thing. Um.

Hannah (Host): I would love people—I mean, I, I do for the most part just scare people. I'm not, I am not generally someone who people just come up and talk to. I actually very carefully craft a persona that discourages public intercourse of any kind. Um, I, I have crafted intimidation as one of my strategies for moving through the world. But yeah, I feel like there was something about the lip that says, like the very strong lip, that says, like, "I'm doing something on purpose to my face. Ask me how." [laughter]

Xine (Guest): That's great. That's great. And I think that's also, like, I remember there's this terrible piece of piece of evo psych that maybe goes back to Desmond Morris that tries to argue the reason why that women wear red lips. Have you heard, come across this?

Hannah (Host): Please tell me it's about making mouths look like vaginas.

Xine (Guest): Yes, there's that one. And also I can't help but think like, what vulvas have you been looking at.

Hannah (Host): Not this color.

Xine (Guest): I know, I know. To me that makes absolutely no sense. So like the, the claiming of this type of bold lip and especially like in more exaggerated, even in quote unquote unnatural shades, is really helping to float that heteronormative assumption that of course we want to wear a vulva, our aroused vulvas, on our faces. Ugh, yeah.

Hannah (Host): [laughter] I like it because both my mouth and my vulva have very sharp, very sharp teeth in them and are angry at you, um, so that's good. Uh, yeah, I really liked the way that you also sort of linked this practice of sort of, like, performative high femme fashion back to like queer and trans communities. Uh, I was, I interviewed a little while ago, Virgie Tovar, who's this really awesome fat activist who does most of her work on Instagram and who's talking about how like, you know, the fat activism community needs to continuously recognize its roots not in like white cis femininity, which are, those are the celebrities who

have come to the forefront of it, but in queer communities of color, where all of these ideas of the sort of strategic and deliberate politics of fashion are rooted.

Xine (Guest): Yeah. Like I've been a fan of Gabby Fresh for a long time and I feel like she deserves so much more mainstream attention. Like she is [in-awe sigh], her eye for style is amazing.

Hannah (Host): Absolutely. Instagram is... I don't know, coming into my feminist body politics happened in a large way for me on Instagram as a platform because it was a place where I could sort of really start to deliberately curate the kinds of people who I followed and I sort of divorced fashion magazines and took on Instagram as the place where I would experience fashion and it changed everything for me.

Xine (Guest): That's fascinating because I've been afraid of going on Instagram precisely for the opposite reasons, which I couldn't help but think from what little I've seen of Instagram that would just exacerbate all my anxieties about appearance and body.

Hannah (Host): It's wonderful because there are, because you can really carefully curate the kind of people you follow. So I have an Instagram feed that is 100 percent fat women, which means that every day when I like go to look at awesome makeup and awesome high femme fashion and, you know, beautiful shots of women and queers living joyously, I'm just looking at fat bodies and that's overtime has just transformed the way that I think about fatness in a way that's like been really central to my own wellbeing. Highly recommend. So this is a plug for Instagram. I don't know if you guys have heard of it. It's a little—

Xine (Guest): Cutting edge.

Hannah (Host): It's just a start up.

Xine (Guest): Get in it before the celebrities do. [laughter]

Hannah (Host): [laughter] Yeah. Now while it's still cool. Um, yeah. I'm wondering if from your perspective there's like a continuity between your thinking about fashion and your high femme aesthetic and your thinking about, um, like going out for beautiful meals, drinking beautiful cocktails, like that kind of—and documenting those practices?

Xine (Guest): So, um, so this is the funny thing. It's actually odd that I'm not an Instagram because I've been taking photos of food forever and I've, I'm sort of obsessed with both documenting my food and making us that as aesthetically pleasing as possible, and also the act of sharing it with my friends and then to have the pleasure of my food amplified by the photo and then amplified yet again when my friends enjoy it. It's something that's really important to me. For me, I think, I can't help but wonder if it has to do with the Catholic background. Like, this sort of fascination with imminence as opposed to transcendence and the material. I mean, I feel like this is very intellectual take, like I'm just making this

connection, but I don't know if that's actually true at all. That being said, I do feel like there was a point in my life when I was very unhappy and very depressed, where I sort of erased all signs of myself. And then this project of building myself up again involved this affirmation of life and the material, my body, to the things that I enjoyed. And when I curate all these things on my Facebook, I have these long running albums which I just call "good eats" and I just put the year. And I have several thousand photos of food and, like, so I've good eats and have "good times" where there's one with friends. And so I try to also collect these moments, which I think are usually denigrated in popular culture as being narcissistic and hey, if this is narcissism, I totally embrace it, but I sometimes need to remember that good things exist in my life.

Hannah (Host): Yeah, absolutely. I mean, if it's an academic take, it's an academic take that I like, but I really loved the sort of emphasis on imminence. Um, which is, I don't know, can you, do you have, like, a back pocket definition of imminence versus transcendence?

Xine (Guest): Oh, I guess transcendence would, uh, this might be, well maybe look at the religious version of the Cartesian dualism. So on the one hand, Cartesian dualism is what we have to thank for this idea that the mind and body are separate and this has meant everything from the fact that of course you can't care about your appearance if you're actually intellectual, to the fact that, um, the way that we think about, say, medicine and the idea of mind over body. And whereas imminence is really about the meaning within things and this attention to the material. And I think that imminence has been really important in like non-Western ideas of ontology, particularly for a woman, queers and people of color are trying to go against this Cartesian dualism which often results in very harsh hierarchies of the human.

Hannah (Host): Yeah. So you know, the idea that not even just pleasure, but like the sacred, that the divine exists here in embodied things and in, you know, when we look at least sort of Western binaries between the body and the mind, woman and men, the sort of material and the spiritual, like what's always denigrated is that lower, that lower category. And so insisting on locating the divine and the sacred in those embodied material things still feels really subversive to me. And is, also, I think why we're seeing such an interesting resurgence in queer and feminist communities of paganism and witchcraft.

Xine (Guest): Oh yes. That's been such a fascinating thing. Like I actually have a number of friends here who are queer, who ended up doing dissertation work on the occult in different forms because, well, at least— I'm a, so I'm an early 19th century Americanist, and like spiritualism was, of course, a big moment, so I know people are doing really interesting things about histories of witchcraft and that sort of thing. I also think that what's interesting is like there's also been a lot of attention to the Zodiac, particularly I think about the feminist and queer of color communities and what does it mean to reclaim this sort of arbitrary taxonomy as a, as a mode of self-definition.

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Hannah (Host): Tell me more about that.

Xine (Guest): Again, I guess I feel like I could just speculate, um, and from what I've seen happening on social media and maybe my practices with my friends, I wonder if it's, I wonder if it's this sort of reaction to the fact that as women of color and for queers of color in particular, like it can seem that oppression makes so much of our lives over-determined. Instead this becomes a sort of artistry in terms of claiming, like, a sort of arbitrary fantastical type of taxonomy, which is completely deterministic as a mode of expression. Like it seems sort of perverse in that way. Right? But this is again pure speculation that I'm thinking of on the spot.

Hannah (Host): Yeah, I mean it's beautiful. It's beautiful speculation. I love that. Like I love the way in which, particularly in which I see a lot of communities sort of drawing on like the multiple overlapping kinds of self-description. So like your astrology charts plus your Myers Briggs types, plus your Harry Potter House, plus, you know,, like what does it mean? Like, okay, you know, I'm a Gemini with Leo Rising and Aries Moon Ravenclaw ENTJ. [laughter] It's, like, how much time can I spend describing myself through systems that I actually, when I, when my male colleagues of mine sneer at me for talking about astrology, it actually makes me like it so much.

Xine (Guest): Yes, because it's completely perverse. And as I mentioned earlier, like I used to be an asshole atheist. So this is the very sort of things that I, I turned up my nose against. I mean I used to love reading Richard Dawkins. Ah, shame! Like,

Hannah (Host): [laughter] Oh, you're in trouble.

Xine (Guest): I know I was that sort of person. Um, like, this is everything that they would exactly hate, and now I've understood what it means to be perverse and to claim these things that are seen as frivolous. [Music: "History Maker" by Dean Fujioka]

Hannah (Host): If you'd like to learn more about Xine, you can follow her on Twitter at @yao_christine, and you can check out her podcast by following @PhDivaspodcast. If you want to follow me, I'm at @hkpmcgregor and if you want to tweet about the show, use the hashtag #secretfeministagenda. To start off, why don't you tweet me some sign off suggestions because I have no idea what I'm going to say. The theme song is "Mesh Shirt" by Mom Jeans, off their album, *Chub Rub*. You can listen to their whole album on freemusicarchive.org, or follow them on Facebook. You can always find the episodes, as well as weekly reading lists, at www.secretfeministagenda.com. Finally, don't forget to rate and subscribe on your podcatcher of choice to help spread the word. This is a brand new, baby podcast and it needs all the help it can get. This has been *Secret Feminist Agenda*. Enter cool new sign off here. [Music: "Mesh Shirt" by Mom Jeans]

