

Episode 2.6 Capitalism & Colonialism is Killing Us All with Alicia Elliott

February 23, 2018

Hannah (Host): [Music: "Mesh Shirt" by Mom Jeans] I'm Hannah McGregor and this is *Secret Feminist Agenda*. Welcome back all you brilliant and amazing people. I have a really wonderful episode for you this week, but before we jump into it, I'm going to add a piece of context. The conversation you're about to hear was recorded two weeks ago. Since then, two very significant things have happened. On February 9, 2018, a Saskatchewan jury found Gerald Stanley not guilty of killing Colten Boushie, a 22-year-old resident of the Cree Red Pheasant First Nation. And then today on February 22nd, a Manitoba jury found Raymond Cormier not guilty of second degree murder in the death of Tina Fontaine, a 15 year old girl from Sagkeeng First Nation, who had been in the care of Manitoba Child and Family Services. This profound failure of the Canadian justice system to offer anything like justice in the murder of Indigenous youth and children is an urgent reminder that Canada, like all colonial nation states, is built on a foundation of violence and injustice. And you're about to hear a conversation about some of those foundations. But I imagine that this conversation would have unfolded very differently, had it been recorded two weeks later. I don't have any words yet for the horror of these verdicts and the lie they make of Canada, so called Project of Reconciliation. What I do have for you is a lot of really brilliant and generous thoughts, from a really brilliant and generous guests. So let's go meet Alicia. [Music: "Mesh Shirt" by Mom Jeans]. Alicia Elliot is a Tuscarora writer living in Brantford, Ontario with her husband and child. Her writing has been published by *The Malahat Review*, *The New Quarterly*, *The Walrus*, *Maclean's*, *Global and Mail*, and many others. Her essay, "A Mind Spread Out on the Ground," won gold at the National Magazine Awards and has been selected to be published in Best Canadian Essays 2017. She has most recently been named the 2017/2018 Jeffery and Margaret Andrew Fellow at UBC. Her book of essays *A Mind Spread Out on the Ground* is forthcoming from Doubleday Canada in spring 2019. We sat down in her UBC office here in Vancouver to chat. [Music: Rockers to Swallow" by the Yeah Yeah Yeahs]

Hannah (Host): --as little as possible. We're sitting right now in a very lovely, half empty visiting faculty office at a beautiful grey-skyed, miserable, rainy UBC campus. And, you know, like set the scene. It's so cozy. It is actually really cozy in here. I like this tiny little writing desk you have. [Laughs] As soon as I sat down and asked like, "so tell me your thoughts about feminism," you if you had a, an immediate reaction of like, "oh, possibly fraught and here's why," and immediately started naming a history that was not a history that I know about the history of 19th century feminism. And that I suspect is also not a history that a number of people who listen to this podcast know. So I wondering if you could tell us a little about that history.

Secret Feminist Agenda Transcript

Alicia: Okay. It's interesting. So basically Elizabeth Cady Stanton, who's a 19th century feminist, was visiting with Oneida people and she was watching kind of how the, the power dynamic worked essentially, what she perceived as the power dynamic, and saw that the men were very respectful of the women, that they were deferring to them for decisions, that they were in basically in control of the way that the village worked because they were the ones who were mostly there while the men usually we're going off hunting, or if they were at war they would be gone, and the women would be there to take care of the village and do like, the farming and stuff like that. So, you know, all of these decisions were like, it was around the women because they were there all the time. Right? And so anyway, so she observed this and she basically was just like, like, "what is happening here? This is nothing like what I experience, you know, where I have to defer to a husband all the time. He gets to control my life. Like these women have freedom that I don't have." And she basically was kind of awestruck and she, she developed relationships with the Oneida people and was kind of writing about why that couldn't be the case for essentially white women, because I don't think she really cared that much about Black women.

Hannah (Host): That sounds likely.

Alicia: Yeah. But anyways, so she, so she's using this, this history and the thing is though, is that she brings her own cultural background and her understanding of the way that things work to it and kind of interprets the relationships that we have as Haudenosaunee people between men and women were, you know, your gender is, is your responsibility, essentially. So like you have certain responsibilities, like, you know, if you're a woman you have to be taking care of like, the crops and stuff like that. Like, you're a caretaker of the land. The men have to go out and they have to do the hunting and stuff like that, and they have to do protection and carry messages and stuff like that. Like, the chiefs are supposed to be carrying the messages of the people. It's not like a leadership type situation where you say, and then everyone listens, you know. It's, it's more of like, "okay, what are we, what's best for us? This is the message I'm going to carry to the confederacy and we're gonna talk, talk things through and then work till we reach consensus." And then it's best for everybody. So this was obviously very different from what she knew and so she's, she looks at this and she basically sees it as like, a power thing where like women should have as much power as men as opposed to, you know, they're both equal and their roles are seen as equal within the society because they're both integral to how the society works. So, you know, she kind of took it and ran with it in a certain way. And I think that, that really says a lot about the way that particularly American feminism started. And it's kind of interesting because, you know, you talk about appropriation and stuff like that, and even with Stanton staying with like, Oneida people and developing relationships with them, it seemed like she still just didn't totally understand what was going on before she kind of like, took it and ran with it. You know, this feminist that is like, you know, is very, very important and they're like, "okay, but what about the people that influenced her and like that society that's totally different?" You know what I mean? So she definitely was thinking of it in terms of, of capitalism and stuff like

Secret Feminist Agenda Transcript

that and how it would relate as opposed to thinking of it in terms of like, community based relationships where it's not just individualistic, it's about everybody. So it's kind of interesting to me the way that I feel like that's almost like the most fitting origin story for a particular brand of white feminism that kind of is like, "oh that looks cool, I'm going to take that, but only apply it to the people that I care about, which are very specific, I would say middle class white women and talk about that to the exclusion of all else." You know? And so I, I think that it's interesting that that's happened and I think that that sort of feminism is still very much in play today and we see it all the time.

Hannah (Host): Yeah. That's like the "lean in," pant suit brand of feminism, right? Which is all about, sort of, middle class white women moving out into the professional world and realizing sort of capitalist version of equality via primarily income earning capacity, which is why so many white feminists are so obsessed with the wage gap as the primary signal of the ongoing need for feminism as though the rest of the world doesn't exist outside of the experience of middle class white women.

Alicia: Oh yeah. For sure. It's a little bit ridiculous because too you're thinking about it in terms of the globe, like you know, talking about how feminism is enacted in a place like Canada or the US and how that is dependent on the subjugation of women in other countries. You know what I mean? And they don't have fair wages at all. Yeah. It's just so selective, right? I think it just speaks a lot to the way that capitalism relies on dehumanization for people to feel good about it, right? So like how do you continue to be okay with yourself knowing that you could only afford to buy clothes that were made by people who were basically slaves. You know what I mean? Like, how do you deal with that? Because it makes us so that we can't think about these things because otherwise we'll basically break down, which--

Hannah (Host): Yup. Yeah. I was actually on my walk over here, as I do sometimes, just thinking about Foucault. Specifically about Foucault's, he had this series of lectures that weren't translated until relatively recently, that are about his understanding of race in the 20th century and sort of racial capitalism, which he argued was sort of distinguished from the sort of feudal social organization. So under feudalism you have a monarch who has the power to let people live or make people die, and so power his power over death, which is why public executions are so important, but under capitalism, what the government has is the power to let people die or make people live and so power is exerted over life and it's about sort of obsessive control of life and what constitutes life and neglect is how is how people are allowed, like you're outside of power is how you die. I taught this to some students a couple of years ago in the example that that was sort of fresh in their minds at the moment was lead in the water in Flint, Michigan. The way in which it's not an overt exercise of power as violence. It's a total neglect. It's allowing people to die and that's that dehumanization. If a particular version of success and happiness that capitalism relies on is going to be possible, a lot of people need to be let die, and I'm putting that in scare quotes because the like the "let" I think is a powerful turn of phrase for how fundamental to the logics

Secret Feminist Agenda Transcript

of like success and thriving like this, this fundamental dehumanization of so many people is. This is just like what I think about when I'm drinking my morning coffee, I'm real fun. I was listening to a podcast episode about a woman on the autism spectrum who's obese, who's got pregnant and her friends told her that it was unethical for her to carry a child, and she should abort it. And about how like present eugenics still are in our, in our logics of like, who's allowed to have kids. Anyway, this is taking me down a stream, but--

Alicia: I feel like it's an okay stream.

Hannah (Host): It's an okay, right? Like, it's all important because this stuff is all tied together. But that, to go back to that sort of moment in history that you drew us to, what seems so key there is the way that Stanton sees something that she wants and lifts it out of its actual, sort of, rooted context into her world to make it not for everyone. Like, the sort of who, who deserves equality, which doesn't even make sense as a, logically equality has to be for everyone or it's not for anyone. But the idea that "no, I deserve all of the rights and freedoms that come with feminism. But like, obviously Black women don't because that's different."

Alicia: Yeah. It's interesting because I feel like, you know, I've been doing a lot of reading about my people and everything. Specifically his book by Susan Hill, *The Land*-- Oh my gosh, I'm so terrible at remembering these things off the top of my head.

Hannah (Host): I'll look it up and put it in the show notes.

Alicia: *The Land That*, I think it's something like, *The Land We are Made Of*, or something along those lines. And it's interesting because, you know, she talks a lot about the process of adoption, which is like the way that you would think about it in terms of if you were to compare it to, you know, other nations or whatever, it's about immigration, right? So like you have a loss of people due to war or due to like, illness or whatever, you need to build back up your nation and the Haudenosaunee would do that through adoption. And specifically on the Six Nations, the Grand River territory, we adopted a few nations that basically were like, "we need asylum because we have no lands left." And they were like, "okay, cool. I mean like you can come in and you can keep your practices or whatever. Like that's totally your thing. You can just be with us. Just make sure that you agree to this tenant of peace," you know what I mean? And they were like, "yeah, okay." So I feel like that's such a, a different way to view immigration as opposed to like forced assimilation, or you have to do this or you have to do that. It was kind of like, "okay, well you guys can be over there and like, we'll be over here and let us know if you need anything. Like, you know, this is our land together." And I feel like it, I feel like I'm, I keep harping on it, but to me it just keeps coming back to like the whole, all of the tenants of capitalism where you have to look out for number one. So if you're, you know, if you're only looking out for yourself to you, it's bad if other people come in because that increases competition. That means that you might not get the promotion because maybe this person is more qualified than you, and so it's better for you

Secret Feminist Agenda Transcript

if these people aren't here as opposed to, you know, "oh well this is land for all of us to share. Let's figure out how to share it together." Like it's just, it's just such a shift in thinking that I think is so, it's so unfortunate and it is so alienating to so many people.

Hannah (Host): ,Yeah, and it's, it's scarcity, right? Like capitalism deliberately create scarcity to drive competition, to drive the labor machine. And, and that sense of like the fear of immigrants is seated by capitalism and a sense of scarcity. There aren't enough jobs, there aren't enough homes, there isn't enough money, which is absurd in countries like Canada and the US where there's a ostentatious and uncontrollable level of wealth. Like to say that there's not enough to go around is patently untrue. But that question, like I think Marxism response, traditional like Marx himself responded to by saying, "well, there's no such thing as scarcity. There's enough for everybody. And so we'll seize the means of production and we'll use it." But Marx was also wrong because there isn't enough. We can't keep using resources at the rate at which we're using them. So there's like this third possibility, which is neither the sort of unlimited extraction but shared, nor the scarcity model of like, "if I'm going to have enough, you can't have anything," which is like maybe sustainability. Maybe that's the word that it is, where it's like what there is, is for everyone, but that doesn't mean everybody gets as much as they want all the time, which is like I, I so many times have had sort of liberal leaning people say to me that they feel really comfortable with their left wing politics because it doesn't hurt them. They don't have to give up anything. They have nothing to lose. And I'm like, "yeah, on a larger scale. Yes. Because you know, after the revolution the world will be better. But also you might have to give up some stuff."

Alicia: Yeah. Well it's interesting just in terms of thinking about sustainability and stuff like that. It made me think of the ways that, in particular, Inuit people who rely on seal hunting for their everyday living expenses, you know, like they rely on this to survive. But when you think about the ways that they've been targeted by animal rights activists groups and stuff like that, it's pretty ridiculous, especially considering like, the Inuit people know that land, they know those populations. Like, they are the people who are going to make sure that it's done sustainably. They're going to make sure that it's done in a way that is quick as possible so that it's not painful, because they feel empathy for these creatures and they respect them and, you know, like there's a respect there that's not there in like, a chicken farm or something like that, you know, where they don't have any light or anything. And so I just get so worked up over it because I'm just like, "you know, you're saying these people are terrible because they're clubbing this thing," which like that's not even accurate, but anyways, like, they're, they're hunting an animal and they're doing it so that the population can be maintained still. Like, they're very aware of these things and it's super regulated. But like, you're, you're going to target them. These people who are Indigenous and this is their way of life. This is how they rely on things to survive, but like McDonald's...

Hannah (Host): Let's choose our fights here, people. Like...

Secret Feminist Agenda Transcript

Alicia: I'm like, okay, so I don't know. When I think about sustainability and stuff like that, I think about the ways that, you know, Indigenous people have to keep that in mind. And that's the whole difference between looking at land as a resource and land as something you're responsible to. Because my people and I think a lot of Indigenous people, I obviously I can't speak for all nations or anything, you know, see land is something that you have to care for as something that you're responsible to as something that provides for you and so are responsible to basically make sure that it's okay. And so it's just so difficult when, you know, you have a whole group of people who are like talking about poisoning water and stuff like that and saying like, "well this is how we're making this money and we're, you know, we're doing so much for the economy and stuff like that." And yet, Nestle is taking water from my rez and like, they can't renew a license right now until my rez agrees to consult with them. And so now they're sucking up to us, but like they bottle water when like only nine percent of our rez has like, running water. So what the hell? You know, like, what? [Laughs] This is ridiculous. Are you kidding me?

Hannah (Host): Yeah, yeah. "What the hell?" is right?

Alicia: Yeah, like, it's just, it's just so absurd to me that like, you know, like, oh, well let's, let's bottle this and send this away to other people. But like you guys can't have water or the fact that Nestle argued that water is not a human right.

Hannah (Host): Oh, that was a real special moment for them. That was a real. Like capitalism reveals the fact that it is literally a monster that eats children.

Alicia: [Laughs] Yes. So it's just, so, it's just so strange to me, but I mean, this is where I think that when I think about my feminism, I think about it in terms of not just humans, but also some people refer to it as non-human kin. So like in the way that we're talking about the trees and like, the animals and stuff like that and the waterways, these are all not human, but that doesn't mean that they're not worthy of respect and like, we should treat them like they're family because they provide for us. That's how we stay alive, you know, if there's no more trees we can't breathe. I feel like that's a very integral part of, not just my feminism, but I think like my outlook in general, I guess.

Hannah (Host): There's a couple of pieces in that that I want to pull out. One is I just want to, to come back to the phrase that you used about your relationship to the land which was "responsible to," which I think is a really important difference from "responsible for." Sort of "responsible for" is like a stewardship model. It's still about ownership. It might be about, you know, an attempt at responsible ownership, you know, like good practices of ownership. But there's still that premise. Like the "for" is a kind of paternalism. But "responsible to" is about acknowledging like, you are responsible to a person, you are responsible to someone with whom you have an equal relationship, but like are in a relationship. I just wanted to, I just wanted to like put a gold, put it up, I dunno. Highlight, highlight that phrase. But the other one I want to come back to is the sort of like, PETA's anti-seal hunt propaganda, which is driven primarily, as PETA

Secret Feminist Agenda Transcript

in general is, by white women and animal rights, like particularly sort of PETA brand of animal rights actually links back to the same moment of white feminism as Stanton did. Right? It's like 19th century, First Wave Victorian feminists who were super involved in anti-vivisection protests. And that, that part of feminism was about identifying multiple forms of cruelty. But there's something really important that happens in that moment in white feminism that is about acknowledging the personhood of animals before acknowledging the personhood of people of color that is central to the same kind of thing that Stanton did with like, this appropriation of the gender roles that appealed to her. And that we see totally at work in the way that sort of white vegans and settler vegans talk about Inuit peoples relationship with seals, which is like, "I care about the seals more than I care about you."

Alicia: Yes.

Hannah (Host): Which is, which is sort of goes back to that like there is a fundamental thread of white supremacy running through early forms of feminism.

Alicia: Well, it's funny because, I think that the interesting thing when we get into things like veganism or vegetarianism and stuff like that is— I actually have been working on an essay about food and colonialism and stuff like that, and so been doing a lot of, a lot of fun research. And one of the things I found was that Canada did a food survey in the sixties where they, they wanted to find out how people were eating and across the country. Interesting thing is that they separated the, like, they separated by age, but in terms of race, there was only three designations. There was Canadians and then there was Inuit and there were Indians. And so you will, you're kind of like, why would they not be separating any further by race? You know what I mean, like that's strange because they're at in the sixties there was still like there were other races in Canada, so, so why these designations? And then when you read into like, the kind of the things that they were finding and, and, and, and things like that, you kind of get more of a picture of the dubious kind of nature of this kind of research was because they started talking about like, the ways that Indigenous people, Inuit people, and like non-Inuit people, people in other areas, that the types of food that they relied on primarily for their diets were called country foods and they were considered not good for a full diet. So they would say like, "you guys are not eating according to this standard," which is the food pyramid.

Hannah (Host): I was going to say, "isn't that shitty food pyramid?" That's like, I'm sorry, people living in the north, not enough cereals and grains.

Alicia: Yeah. So like, it was totally biased towards this very colonial idea, and a white idea of, of what is, what makes that balanced healthy diet, not taking into account at all the fact that so many people got moved by Canada from where they originally were. So like, they might have had like, more of an idea of what kind of foods they could rely on before and now they're like, "okay, well what can I eat now, because I don't have the same access to the same animals or the plants," or you know what I mean? Like, so they didn't take into account that.

Secret Feminist Agenda Transcript

They didn't take into account the ways that at— cuz at the time residential schools were still in full effect and all of these kids were being like, malnourished and stuff like that. You know what I mean? Like, they didn't take into account that either or the impact that that had on communities when people came back from there not knowing how to, you know, utilize the food that they would have if they were in their communities they would have known how to utilize. And you know, they don't take into account any of these things, or you know, the ways that, for example, they legislate against allowing Indigenous people to fish for example, when they rely on primarily fish. You know, like, "oh well you can't fish because the white farmers or the white fishers and the commercial fishers have to fish. So you can't do this. Like it's illegal," or "you can't hunt because you're like, this isn't your treaty right," you know what I mean? So like, these kinds of arguments all impacted Indigenous people being able to eat even, you know what I mean? And so it's interesting because then they kind of come to these conclusions that are like, "well they need a lot of help being able to eat properly." And so for them, them helping is them interfering more and you know, taking kids out of homes and putting them in other houses like Sixties Scoop style, and saying like, "you know, well they can't feed their kids so we're going to put them in homes were with white families who can feed their kids." And, and so it, it's just very devious the way that they kind of use this food survey to kind of create more assimilation and interfere more in Indigenous peoples lives. It's, yeah.

Hannah (Host): Yeah, yeah, yeah.

Alicia: Anyways, it's just really, really messed up.

Hannah (Host): Super messed up, and it goes back to that "responsible to" versus "responsible for," because it's paternalism and it's rankest form, Indigenous people as wards of the state who the state is always justified to intervene into. And like, also goes back to the violence of making people live in particular ways, right. The "make live" versus "let die." Like, how is the state like, forcing what life looks like to adhere to particular kinds of standards that serve the state in a particular way. It's sort of like possibility for a legitimate multitude of ways for life to be lived is like a threat to the state. Like all of this. And also I saw a presentation relatively recently, I believe it was Deanna rater talking about— Oh sorry listeners. Deanna Reder is a really fantastic English and Native Studies, I think the department's called at SFU, professor at SFU, my institution— and she was talking about her own sort of personal movement from being skeptical of information she knew about her people and her family's history by word of mouth to then eventually finding scholarship that supported things that her family had told her and realizing the way she'd internalized a sort of hierarchy of knowledge that counts at knowledge that doesn't. An example that she gave was somebody talking about seeing people put a mysterious white powder into the flour that was being used for bread, and then very recently a food studies scholar finding documents proving that nutritional experiments were being done on students at residential schools. And so it wasn't just this, sort of, "you need to be fed properly and so you must be institutionalized," but then once

Secret Feminist Agenda Transcript

institutionalized, you were going to be further dehumanized by being used as subjects for a test, for, for experiments on, on the new nutrition, whatever that's going to be.

Alicia: Yeah. Well, it's interesting because, well and by "interesting" I mean, "oh my God. Depressing and horrifying." Yeah. yeah, so--

Hannah (Host): Those panic laughs like [laughs]

Alicia: Yes, exactly. Because I read, I read it, I've read a Ian Mosby, he does a lot of work around this where he was doing research on the ways that they've done, they've done, they've done these nutritional experiments and basically the way that these scientists come and they're like, "look, this is the perfect control group because they're already malnourished, so we're going to do these studies on malnourishment, and we don't have to malnourish kids because they're already malnourished," and like, the way they rationalize it that way and don't think about like, what are the ethics involved here? You know what I mean? How is it ethical for me to continue to allow these kids to be malnourished instead of demanding that they get food? Because then now that interferes with their experiment. Right? So it kind of puts them in these positions where like, they have to do these things for their, well they don't have to, but like they think they convinced themselves that they have to and therefore it's justified. And then you have people who, who come forward and basically say that, you know, people didn't know that this was going on in residential schools. They knew. There were, there are so many documents that prove that they knew this, that there were like people who went into these institutions that were like, "this is awful, this is an abomination. Like you need to step in here" to the government. And the government is just like, "well, I mean that's kind of what we want to happen. So it's fine."

Hannah (Host): "Why would we intervene? This is literally the plan."

Alicia: Yeah.

Hannah (Host): I mean this is what like the fact that somehow, how many years it been since the TRC's final report came out like two, three?

Alicia: Yeah, it was 2015.

Hannah (Host): 2015. So three years now, just barely, and we're already entering a somehow a historical moment of residential school denial. Like how, I mean I can't, like I literally can't wrap my head around it. It's not like, it's not conceivable to me as anything other than deliberate villainy, which maybe it is. But central to the way that a number of conservative commentators in Canada are trying to deny what the TRC tells us— for non Canadian listeners, that's the Truth and Reconciliation Commission that we did in Canada I'll put some, some links about this in the show notes as well— but people are trying to deny what is included in those

Secret Feminist Agenda Transcript

reports. And one of the basic premises is nobody had any way of knowing that it was wrong at the time. So let's talk about that. One, we have documents proving otherwise. Two, the basic premise of that is that the people whose children are getting taken away are nobody because lots of people knew it was wrong. It's the people who it's being done to who know that it's wrong, and you can only make that argument if the only subjectivity that you recognize as the subjectivity of people performing violent acts, which is deeply fucked up. and also like not how history works. Yeah.

Alicia: Well, the thing that really bothers me too, especially is about these, you know, residential school deniers— I can't believe that's a thing that we have to say. The thing that really, really annoys me is that they have not even read the Truth and Reconciliation Commission report and they're, they're criticizing it. I'm like, "you haven't read it!" Like, and I remember I wrote an article with another Indigenous writer, Mel— Oh my gosh. I'm going to say her last name wrong— leb-eh-fair? I'm so sorry, Mel.

Hannah (Host): Lefebvre?

Alicia: Maybe, I don't know?

Hannah (Host): L E F E B V R E?

Alicia: Yes.

Hannah (Host): I mean if it's pronounced like the Ottawa-based skiing store, Tommy and Lefebvre then it's Lefebvre.

Alicia: Yes, hopefully that's right. If not, I'm so sorry. I had never heard your name said out loud. But anyways, I wrote an article with her for *The Walrus* about Indigenous identity, and I remember we were like, "okay, well let's give people an idea of like, ways that they can like, educate themselves and stuff." And we recommended reading the Truth and Reconciliation Commission report and--

Hannah (Host): Just the final volume, like there's a summary. It's a long series of books and not everybody's going to read all of them, but very helpfully they released a summary volume that is super, super readable and everyone should read it.

Alicia: And the thing is is that, that's so funny. It's like we didn't specifically say "you could just read this summary volume." And so, and so a certain conservative pundit basically was criticize, like he read the whole article and criticized that we had said, "oh, so we have to read a thousand page report." And I'm like, "well, I mean if you're gonna talk about Indigenous issues and not read that, then I mean you're really revealing how lazy you are for one, and how ignorant you are and how you don't, you don't belong in these conversations because you're not even willing to do the barest amount of work." You know, like, oh my God. We even made a joke in the article about how like "guys, it's a thousand pages.

Secret Feminist Agenda Transcript

That's a lot. But I mean like come on, the new *Game of Thrones* book is gonna be longer than that. So..."

Hannah (Host): [Laughs] Yeah. It's, it's really true. Like you know what, read the whole goddamn thing. And there was even, there was this really lovely initiative right after it came out that was particularly directed to Canadian settlers and it was a website that was about holding you accountable to reading the volume and you signed on to the site and said "I'm going to do it," and then you checked in as you read like the whole, all of the volumes. What are there like, seven or eight? Like it's, it's a significant work.

Alicia: It is.

Hannah (Host): But like, it was a significant act. Very few countries in the world have had truth and reconciliation commissions. It's a remarkable act of both organization and generosity on the part of the people who have offered their stories. And I mean nobody, literally nobody can make you read it. Like I teach, I can't, I can't make anybody read anything, I assure you. Which is, as an aside real funny, whenever people are like, "oh these damn leftist professors indoctrinating their students." Like, "Oh, I'm trying to indoctrinate my students into doing the readings for this week." That's, that's as far as I'm getting. But like, nobody can make you read it, but I don't know, it's a privilege to have that report in existence. So like, acknowledge that by putting the time in, and if you don't then shut the fuck up about the history of residential schools.

Alicia: Yes. exactly. Because the thing that is so annoying is as a, you know, you have these people who are saying, "oh, well, you know, there were good things that happened in those schools." No, it's not like the, there were good things are happening in those schools. It was that, you know, people came out and were like, "yeah, it was okay after I came out of it. And you know, I had a good experience there. I had good teachers or whatever, you know, I ended up making something of that." Like, that is fine, that's valid. That's, those are their experiences. But those are in the report.

Hannah (Host): They sure are.

Alicia: There's a whole thing of it, like a whole section!

Hannah (Host): A section that's like "fond memories," or something. And honest to God, if the best thing you can say about your institution is not literally everyone was irrevocably traumatized.

Alicia: [Laughs]

Hannah (Host): I'd say set the bar higher.

Secret Feminist Agenda Transcript

Alicia: [Laughs] Yes, it's true. And I'm like, you know, I remember I went to the residential school that my people, my community went to was the Mohawk Institute in Brantford, Ontario. And you know, all the survivors, they're called it the Mush Hole because of like the food that they were given to eat, right? So I remember going there because the Woodland Cultural Center is right next-door and they do a lot of amazing stuff around raising awareness around residential schools and stuff like that. And they're trying to do this campaign called Save the Evidence Campaign, where they collect enough money to restore the building so that they can turn it into a museum and stuff like that. Which I think is amazing and they haven't gotten funding for it from the government, which is hilarious because they're like, "reconciliation" but also like not like that. Destroy the documents and also don't like don't release them to the people who need them for their court cases against St. Anne's residential school. And then also if that building falls apart, I mean, oh well, you know. So it's, it's a lot of mixed messages basically. But anyways, they had this really amazing exhibit where they had a lot of artists come in and, kind of, do different works throughout the residential school itself. And there was one woman who was telling a story about this woman who had gone there as a student and had gone through and went to become a teacher and came back and taught there. So she was an Indigenous woman who went through the Mush Hole and then went and got her education and came back as a teacher. And when I think about that, I think about the ways that, you know, like you, it makes me very like, emotional because I just am like, "wow, she thought that she could like do this stuff for her community. And she was like, I need to come back because I need to try and help as much as I can and show those students the care and the concern that they deserve as much as I can in this institution." Right? And it was interesting too because like, you know, the teachers were like, they had a farm on that property and like, the kids were mostly working out the farms as opposed to learning, which is the other thing is that these were almost like slave institutions a lot of the time they were doing a lot of work more so than they were learning. So anyways, it was interesting because she was like, I as a student, she was eating all this terrible mush, that had sometimes worms in it and stuff like that, like this porridge. And then as a teacher she was eating the produce from like, the garden and to be able to like, have that both ways. Or she can walk in the front door now as opposed to when she was a student, they could only enter through the side doors. These kinds of things. I always think about this woman and how that must have affected her to think about how this system forces her to uphold it essentially. Because what's she going to do? Is she going to like, go and make sure that all of these kids get this food when she doesn't really have the power in that situation? You know what I mean? Like to put people in these situations where they have to like, feel their powerlessness even when they're trying to enact good. That really just sticks with me, you know?

Hannah (Host): Yeah. And also at the same time, the capacity to, to keep doing that good in that situation. That is, that, that must have been so traumatic on a daily basis to still say, "I can't break the system open. I can't and these schools, but like I can be here, I can do, I can do this for these people." Which is pretty remarkable.

Secret Feminist Agenda Transcript

Alicia: Yeah. One thing that I love about my community is actually that there was a family that was like well-off from Six Nations that sent their kids away to school elsewhere and they got educated and when they came back they created schools that were on the rez that were run by Six Nations people. And because they had that background, they were able to cater it enough to the Canadian government where they're like, "okay, well that's, that's acceptable if the kids want to go there." So like there were other schools on the rez that our people could go to that weren't just the, you know, the Mush Hole. So like when I think about that, that's what I think about resilience. That's when I think about people like, trying to take the system and turn it against itself. Right? Which is so brilliant. And then you know, like this is the kind of stuff that people have to do all the time to try and like, work against this terrible, terrible, this terrible system.

Hannah (Host): But there is something about finding those stories, because it can all feel like a lot. Sometimes it all just feels like crushing. It's felt, I've been, I've been feeling like a little crushed this week. And when it all feels like too much, finding those stories of people who just sort of figured out how to tactically navigate the system to sort of turn it's logics against itself and build some space for their people to survive within it, knowing that they couldn't tear the whole thing down, but like just understanding it well enough to figure out ways to sort of break open a little space inside of it. Like, I think those stories are really powerful for, for figuring out what the hell to do with the world today.

Alicia: It's funny because when I think about the ways that I think a lot of settlers get nervous around the idea of self governance and having Indigenous control of the land, I think it makes me pretty sad because I just think like, you know, you have, you have a government that is not necessarily accountable to you. Like, yes, you can vote, but I mean realistically it's not an accountable government. They do things without asking your permission. You know, you think about the ways that who are, who are they accountable to? They're accountable to people who pay them, right? They're accountable to these corporations. They're not accountable to the people who they're supposed to be accountable to. So when I think about that and I think about, at least my community, a lot of people that, a lot of Indigenous people that I know are not interested in kicking people out of their homes or, you know, or like saying "this is our land, get out." You know, like that's not the idea. The idea is you guys are not thinking about the land. You guys are thinking about yourselves. So you probably shouldn't be in charge of the land because realistically, you're kind of hurting yourself by not thinking about the land because not only is this going to be affecting you probably in your lifetime, but it's going to affect your kids. It's going to affect their kids. Like, you know what I mean? You are, this is such a shortsighted thinking and decision-making. So you guys gave it a try. The land is super polluted now. So like, maybe realize that this wasn't a good call and like let's let us steward the land and, and work towards sustainability, and work towards living more harmoniously with the environment as opposed to seeing it as a resource that we can take and take and take from, you know, and then just plant a few trees and it's all square. Right? So it's just, it's, it's interesting to me because I think

Secret Feminist Agenda Transcript

that, you know, in those kinds of situations it is more about like community based decision making. So like, "is this good for our community? Let's talk about this." As opposed to, "I made this decision, good luck guys. Like if you don't like it too bad, I'm still an office for three years, I'll figure out a way to get your vote back with a tax cut at that time," you know?

Hannah (Host): "Get rid of the toll on a bridge and you'll all vote for me."

Alicia: Yes, exactly. So it just, it just kind of disappoints me. And I was talking about this with someone else recently about the ways that colonialism and capitalism work to make people think that they are integral parts of them, but they're not. They're a mentality that you have to hold onto and that, you know, colonialism and capitalism and the nation wants you to hold onto so that it maintains the power structures as they are. But does that actually serve you ultimately? Because if you know, it means that you can't have drinking water, if it means that you have to be careful about what food you're eating because you know that like this, this fish might be poisoned. Is it serving you? Really? Is it, because I don't think it is. And so, you know, taking that and thinking about the ways that, you know, you don't have to uphold that. You have a choice in the matter. You can choose to think of things through a different framework. And I think that that's what is super terrifying to Canada and that's why they target so many Indigenous activists. That's why they target so many, you know, environmental activists and stuff like that that are basically saying like, "no capitalism and colonialism is killing us all regardless of whether you know, it's killing some of us faster or slower. It's killing us all." So we need to stop this like that. That's not very good for states like Canada or the US. So that's why we're on CSIS watch lists.

Hannah (Host): That was not a joke. Just, just to clarify the laughter after that should not--

Alicia: Yeah, awkward laughter because "Oh my God, it's so real."

Hannah (Host): Because the Canadian government for sure for sure monitors Indigenous activists, without a doubt. I was so distracted by that joke that wasn't a joke. [Music: "Rockers to Swallow" by the Yeah Yeah Yeahs] [Laughs]

Hannah (Host): If you'd like more from Alicia, which obviously you do. You can follow her on Twitter @wordsandguitar, where she is entirely brilliant on a daily basis. I've also given you some links to her work in the show notes, which you can, of course, find at secretfeministagenda.com. You can follow me on Twitter @hkpmcgregor and tweet about the podcast using the hashtag #secretfeministagenda. And remember, every time you recommend the show to a friend, a feminist gets their asymmetrical haircut. 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. Alicia's theme song was "Rockers to Swallow" by the Yeah Yeah Yeahs. I'll be back next week with another minisode, possibly consisting of 15 minutes of uninterrupted

Secret Feminist Agenda Transcript

screaming. This has been *Secret Feminist Agenda*. Pass it on. [Music: "Mesh Shirt" by Mom Jeans]