# Bad Midwest Feminist Podcast - Episode 3

00:00
**HOST**: Welcome to our third episode of Bad Midwest Feminist, where we're exploring what it means to be a feminist in the Central Midwest, the direction of feminism, and whether or not it's on the right track. After getting picked up on the side of the road from my first attempt to reach the source. I am happy to announce that I did successfully drive to Cedar Falls, Iowa, and spoke with Dr. Jesse Swan, professor of English and chair of the Women and Gender Studies Department at the University of Northern Iowa.

Jesse had a lot to say about feminist theory and literature and in practice in the Midwest, and we delved into a lot of modern feminist tension points inside his metaphor of feminism as a foggy mist. So let's get into it.

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**HOST**: Can I call you Jesse?

**SWAN:** Yes. Please do.

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**HOST:** Do you identify as a feminist?

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**SWAN:** Oh, absolutely.

**HOST:** Yeah. And can you speak as to why

01:00
**SWAN:** Forever, now, it seems like, feminism is a part of humanism to me. And that's just a valuing of everything it is to be human, in all of our variety. And because of the history of the West, and especially the Anglophone West, that is to say, the English speaking West, women have often been left out of thinking of what it is to be human, and feminism corrects that.

It says, ‘Hey, let's think about women as essential and constitutive components of the human. And so I just said, ‘Oh, well, I have to be a feminist because I'm very interested in humanity.’

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**HOST:** How did you originally get involved in the field of women in gender studies?

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**SWAN:** I suppose, you know, kind of formally, academically, formally. It was because I wanted to read with a specific professor, Nancy Gutierrez. I applied to grad school there to read with her. So, I got in, I read with her. I then I kept reading with her through my PhD. She is a feminist. She is a women's studies scholar in English. And, the English renaissance, the early modern period.

But she's also a scholar of Elizabeth Cary, who was the first woman to write a play in English that was published. And so that I did a dissertation on Elizabeth Cary with Gutierrez, and I demonstrated that Elizabeth Cary is also the first woman to write a modern history in English. And that is the history of Edward the second. And then I've gone on to my career doing that.

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**HOST:** Is anyone ever surprised that you work in women in gender studies?

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**SWAN:** Yes, yes. Yes. And a simple thing right along those lines years ago when I was on the job market, as we say, applying for assistant professorships a few years ago, somebody nominated me, to be chair of a department, and the committee seemed to be very interested. They brought me out to interview. And when I was picked up right, the first thing he said was, “You're a man.” I said, “yeah, yeah, yeah” I never indicated or said otherwise and but something about my research, maybe the way I write, I don't think so. I think I write kind of like a guy, but maybe not. Maybe not. I don't know, really. Just reads to everybody as female, As a woman.

04:02
**HOST:** Yeah. Why do you think that is?

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**SWAN:** Well, I think it's huge, sexism. Huge, masculine expectations, that anyone who does women's studies, studies women writers, especially way back then, has to be a woman, that a guy isn’t going to be interested in thinking about women on women's terms. I who there's something else. I write about women and women's studies, I think that's part of it.

And so, if that's it, well, maybe it's not male privilege, masculinity, toxic masculinity as much as oh, well, this is who thinks in terms that women have published and theorized as other women do that. Yeah. So maybe that's true. But plenty of women, of course, forever have thought quote unquote, like men, and that was the only way to think and write, to get degrees, to to move forward in this sort of thing.

05:08
**HOST:** I saw you, already mentioned this, but one of your, research interests is William Shakespeare. So are you, are you familiar, I'm sure you are, with Virginia Woolf's,story from 'A Room of One's Own' about Shakespeare's mystery sister.

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**SWAN:** Oh sure, yeah, Judith.

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**HOST:** Exactly. Do you ever think about that when you're researching, or analyzing Shakespeare's works, that there is this fictional persona that was that was crafted that really exemplified the differences like in that time period?

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**SWAN:** Yes, absolutely. And lots and lots of other women and women scholars of that period do that. And they lots of people think of Elizabeth Cary as a kind of this Shakespeare in that, kind of tradition. At the same time, I do think and lots of other people do, too, about women writers, women intellectuals of Shakespeare's day, of their day, the early modern period, very differently from the way Woolf thought about gender and thought about women, trying to put them in their context, in their cultural environment, how they did think, because their culture had certain values and assumptions about truth and reality, that Virginia Woolf didn't have and her culture didn't have, and so then that the people are just very, very different.

06:47
**[STORY ADVERTISMENT]**

**LIZ ROSA:** Hey there, it's Liz Rosa, and I'm the art director of Urban Plains. We all have parents, older friends, advisors, or have been informed by the media about the sexy, glamorous lives of bands. But what happens when you pop a band in the middle of nowhere? You know, the Midwest? Well, I followed a band on three tour stops to truly understand the complexities of Midwest touring. You can read about it soon on the Urban Plains website.

**EMMETT MCMENAMY:** Visit urban-plains.com to read the story.

07:26
**HOST:** Do you have any, stories, any like, specific stories you can recall of students coming into your classroom saying,‘Oh, like, I was just required to take this course. I'm not going to I'm not going to take it seriously or anything.’ And then just like once the semester is complete, leaving the class being so I'm amazed at what they learned, what they accomplished.

07:47
**SWAN:** The simple answer is yes, and it's even bigger. I mean, I've had students come in and you know, not a not at the very beginning say, ‘It was just required,’ but basically having that feeling and then reading, and, and getting more and more outraged at what they're being asked to complain about. And, you really do say, ‘Gosh, you of course, you hate the content. You really hate me,’ because I’m kind of an insistent professor. It's just an idea. Just think about it. And then they sign up for me the next semester, and I see her, every class, so you hated that?

No, no, no, it's my favorite class. Over time. These are intelligent people, of course, who do this keeps thinking. And then something, I guess gets it. And you get different things at different times, right? I've had several students like that, and I'm just so shocked. What are you doing in this class? You know, and to take this class, and then they take me and get upset in that class because new, different ideas and then go on. So, yeah. And this is largely a lot around WGS, women and gender studies, sexuality studies, ideas, facts and, ways of critiquing and thinking.

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**HOST:** Now, in your in your teaching and in your research, how do you see students engaging with feminism differently than, say, a decade ago? Do you think has there been a difference?

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**SWAN:** Yeah. I'm trying not to kind of explode. Yeah. I feel like I don't know how to characterize it today because it's not quite right. What I typically say, and I can't believe I'm saying it, but, they just don't care about women anymore. And I, I don't know, they're not interested in thinking about women distinctly, distinct experiences from men, culturally. Lots, lots of people. And I don't know why they're not interested. Like 10 years ago, they were plenty of people who, quote unquote, weren't interested, but their lack of interest was actually hostile.

So they were hostile to it. And it's because they wanted to live lives that feminism generally critiques and actually says those lives are actually pernicious. They actually do hurt, certainly liberated, women or women who are working to be liberated. Today, I don't feel like the people who are not interested are so hostile to feminism. We still have students who seem just not to care. Just so I'm just not interested in women. I mean, they're so not interested that they don't even like saying saying it.

10:54
**HOST:** Yeah.

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**SWAN:** They'd rather it just not be around, not be like, you know, like the Greek gods. Well, I know that that's in the books, but it's just not in their lives.

11:07
**HOST:** Would you think it's, correct to assume that your students who don't much care about researching or reading about feminism or, feminist authors or women authors, would you say, you know, they think they think of feminism as, 'Oh, that that's all been solved. There's no problems now that women face.'

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**SWAN:** I mean, I don't know, maybe five, maybe 10 years ago, I would be able to recognize that and maybe I'm not recognizing it today because I just think, oh my God, what's so good, like, you're totally oppressed more and more of deliberate manufactured oppression. I guess if people especially, I don't want to say especially women, because men are oppressed when

women are oppressed. Yes. Maybe it's it's a little less direct, a little more distant, but it's it's there, women are human. We are oppressed humans. We're repressing humans. But especially with it, I think. “How how do you not feel oppressed with what's literally happening to women today in the United States?” We don't have to say the whole West.

So it could be. But I think that's then, an additional problem of, just sort of not being awake to life. Right? That it could be. I mean, that could be, they, they think, but that's all been solved. There are people, men and women students who do feel that the new oppressions, the removal of bodily autonomy, especially in, in terms of reproductive, health and rights, that that is a good thing. They don't experience that as an oppression and I do.

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**HOST:** Yeah.

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**SWAN:** So that's a different phenomena, to say,‘Oh, things have been fixed now. They were broken by feminism and now they’re fixed. I do know that, I do see them,and recognize and acknowledge.

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**HOST**: One of the people who I interviewed, the person that I interviewed before you, actually, they were saying to me like, okay, ‘Well, like when you have somebody who's concerned about inflation, the price of their groceries, if they're going to make their rent on time, they, they don't have like the emotional bandwidth to worry about. Oh, if oh, my, access to abortion is being cut off or lessened.

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**SWAN:** Well, I mean, I’m the sort of person to say, well, there's truth to it, that's what you see. If that's your experience, 1,000 people are doing that certainly. would then be true if you feel that's the case. I mean, I don't know, sort of objectively, if that's how, I don't think people are machines, and so I don't think we can sort of say there's only a certain amount of memory or, you know, worry that you can cache your, your CPU brain. I don't think that's the case. I think people can worry about inflation, the price of eggs, gas, getting to work and bodily autonomy, liberty, rights, and to to live the sort of physical life that makes me happy. I think they can. And that seems more upset. But, you know, actually that's always abstract is the price of eggs, you say, well, I have to pay for it.

What do you pay? You're using money. That's an abstraction that you invest in and feel where you can feel other abstractions as well. And people do. People feel religious abstractions, for example, even more than they feel these financial abstractions. That's why so many people on the Left are always just befuddled that, people seem to not care about their money, seem not, to not care that they, they can't afford groceries because they, but they do care about some religious abstractions. And I said, well, that's how it works. How ever, wherever your feelingsare

with your abstractions, that's then what's going to dictate how you, how you act and express yourself.

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**HOST:** How do you think feminism and like the, and the difficulties you've encountered, with teaching it and people interacting with the material, how do you think that is specific and special to the, to the Midwest? You know, like how, how is, how is that different in the Midwest than, say, the East Coast?

16:05
**SWAN:** Well, just something simple, and very common you say there is this sense of niceness. And then with that comes all these restrictions, because so many things that are important to feminism to articulate and critique are then, considered theories to be not nice, sometimes rude. So that's part about niceness. But also just sometimes, even obscene or something like that.

And so I just don't think, for example, on the coasts, you don't have this burden of being nice all the time. And this is, this is a Midwestern thing and not a gender thing, you might have on the coasts, oh, well, ladies or something, are nice, but no, no, no, everyone. in the Midwest is constrained by this niceness. So yes, you can have smiles in every aisle, but that is a constraint. You must smile, and you must smile at a certain way and not another way.

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**HOST:** How has your relationship with the women, the women in your life, how has that impacted and framed how you've become this feminist scholar, this feminist teacher?

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**SWAN:** Well, a lot. And feminism, in my education has transformed my relationship with important women of my life. And so, for example, my mother and my late wife, I could talk about importantly and universally, feminism and education and my embracing it and living it out has radically helped me, have better, and better, and better relationships, with both of those women. So I had a very fraught and vexed relationship with my mother in my teenage years. Not uncommon, right?

But, so, it was pretty typical, that feminism in college helped me transform into not just the most profound love I have felt in my life, had in my life, and then felt going out, by coming to see my mother as a human and specifically a woman human in her context, and then she became astounding to me. All the things that I kind of were, you know, complaining about became marvels to me. And this is because of feminism. They think about women on their terms. You're a guy. You have terms that are legitimate terms, but you can also think and you could think differently. And it really is expansive. Yeah.

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**HOST:** Was there a specific moment where the the light bulb went over your head and you and you were like, 'Oh, I need to think about this, I need to think about the way that I, live and work in the world differently.'

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**SWAN:** Yeah, I like that. The simple answer is no, but it's very interesting because you say, oh, well, when did you start being a feminist? And I cannot answer that in any empirical way. So the light bulb is this great sort of image, metaphor of empiricism that we can market in linear time. And I really can't. I could say, well, I think I was a feminist when I was eight in some way.

I mean being a queer boy, kind of involves you in feminism. It involves you in it, I mean, it's not even my choice necessarily. But I did, but I did think women were hugely important and different from men. And I valued it and thought about it. So, I don't know. In some ways, I was a feminist there. I, I cannot remember ever, not objecting to misogynistic tendencies or expressions, even against women I hated.

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**HOST**: Yeah.

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**SWAN:** I said, well, you know, you hate that person, not her gender, not, you know, and eight years old. I remember resisting that. So anyway, that's, so it's all these different degrees and cognizants, self-consciousness going on.

**HOST:** Would you, would you say that feminism is kind of like a spectrum?

**SWAN:** I don't know, I think that just stabilizes it more than I believe is good and helpful. I, I don't know, a different kind of metaphor might be It's kind of maybe a mist, and it gets thicker and lighter different times, and sets of circumstances. Very a, a positive, a wholesomeness and that when it's thin where does, that doesn't have to be that it's bad, like when I was eight-years-old, I would say what the mist was relatively thin of feminism. But that's in part because I was eight.

Yeah. Eight-year-olds can't really know stuff at the same way 28-year- olds can, or something like that. So I don't know, I don't know. I'm trying to think of another kind of metaphor for it, but maybe we could draw on something like string theory and say, well, this simultaneously, multiple kinds of feminists in me, coming out of me, at the same time, but in different dimensions.

22:06
**HOST:** Do you think the term feminist or feminism, carries a different connotation in the Midwest than elsewhere?

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**SWAN:** Well, the simple answer is yes, because I think feminism, is, so fungible anymore, it just everywhere in the Midwest, every single spot, it has a different valance. Every person who hears it feels something slightly different, sometimes hugely different.

Everybody who uses, everybody who resists using it for whatever, you know, because of their feeling, even though they are feminists and their advocating for feminist things. Right. So I really do think it's kind of all over the place. That's in many ways, I will say, too now, of course, I'm an English professor as well. Maybe that's why I feel this way. That is language, words, vocabulary.

23:04
**HOST:** Yeah.

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**SWAN:** It's all over the place. It has all different kinds of feelings.

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**HOST:** How would you define feminism in the Central Midwest?

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**SWAN:** I think of feminism and I talk about feminism as being, the belief the understanding that woman, woman as a concept, is constitutive and essential to the human. And so it's a constituent, contributing but essential, without which you don't have the human, and feminism recognizes that, and says, 'And I want to know that.' I want to know that essential constitutive component of humanity, just as I want to know  all the other constitutive parts, components of humanity.

And it's not necessarily divided. Woman doesn't have to be divided from the other constitutive parts, but it can be at least puristically at times, concentrated upon, to say what is distinct here from some other constitutive part. Like organs, vital organs, are constitutive to humanity. You're really not human if you don't have a heart, a literal heart, right? I mean organ, that's something constitutive

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**HOST:** What would you consider to be the opposite of feminism?

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**SWAN:** So, sort of the opposite would be misogyny. So, but that that's not really the opposite of my definition. Right? Because misogyny does understand woman to be, can understand it to be constitutive. But I suppose then the kind of misogyny that does deny the humanity of woman, that would be the opposite. I say my definition doesn't hold. It would say, no, you're wrong, Jesse. Woman is not essential. We don't need woman to have human.

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**HOST:** How have you seen misogyny in in the Midwest?

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**SWAN:** You do have people, just you could say something to, a farmer's wife is, oh, even if she's, does all the things a farmer does is always thought and said to be a farmer's wife Right. And that it's considered rude to call her the farmer. And it's somehow it's denigrating her husband to call her the farmer. I said, but she is a farmer, that the husband doesn't do these farming duties or, you know, does them under her direction as she's doing, you know, most or something like that?

I think that's misogynistic. And that is distinct here. You, other places are perfectly happy to say, oh, they're farmers, that it's not a farmer and his wife, they're both farmers. In the Midwest, you kind of want to be nice about the farmer's wife. And the wife, though, does often want to be known as the farmer's wife. And so this is then the, imposition on the self.

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**HOST:** Yeah.

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**SWAN:** what I consider to be, but she doesn't consider that misogynistic. She considers that honoring her womanhood. Right?

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**HOST:** Yeah. Would you say feminism is like redirecting the person kind of to to be, to think about themselves, not as the farmer's wife, but a person who is also a farmer and contributing to this farm?

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**SWAN:** Yeah. No, I think so. I mean, that said, and I think that's what women's studies and, feminism actually is trying to do. And would say, the farmer's wife, accomplished individual, who is worried about the husband instead of the husband assisting the wife, in the, in the career, this way of saying that they are not liberated women and that feminism is also for liberated women. And that's why the liberated women can see these kind of dynamics, that behavior, affects the possibility for the liberated woman to exist. That kind of, gender performance is not really as, as feminist, maybe as the liberated woman's feminism.

27:52
**HOST:** And that brings us to the end of our episode. Special thanks to Dr. Jesse Swan for contributing to this podcast and for rescheduling. What's my hot take on the episode, you ask? Good question. The Central Midwest stereotypical niceness does impede the critical analysis that feminism requires, and even Dr. Swan has taken note of the lack of interest from college students about women centered issues and interests. But we shouldn't shy away from continuing or beginning to talk about feminism in the Midwest. Be nice to your neighbors. Take 10 years to cross a four way stop, and also chat about feminism and what areas we need to see

it most. Chat about it as something that affects and oppresses everyone through a humanist perspective.

And I think that there are Midwesterners who can get behind that. I'll now leave you with some words of wisdom. “Don't be afraid to call yourself a feminist. Dive in. Explore. Imagine what women have said about what it is to be a woman, what it is to live in the society and grow from it.” Make of that what you will. And until then, I'm Caroline Siebels-Lindquist, asking you to just keep talking.