

MG Episode 4, Goblin Mode x the Abject with McKayla Coyle

SPEAKERS

Hannah McGregor, Marcelle Kosman, McKayla Coyle

[Material Girls Theme plays: “Shopping Mall” by Jay Arner and Jessica Delisle]

Hannah McGregor 00:29

Hello and welcome to *Material Girls*, a scholarly podcast about popular culture. I'm Hannah McGregor.

Marcelle Kosman 00:36

And I'm Marcelle Kosman. And joining us this week is a very special guest please. Welcome McKayla Coyle, pronouns (they/them), a lesbian writer from Anchorage, Alaska. They're the engagement editor for the website Literary Hub, and they hold an MFA in fiction from the New School. In their free time they read fantasy novels and make a lot of jam. They're also the author of the brand new book available now, everywhere fine books are sold, *Goblin Mode: How to Get Cozy, Embrace Imperfection, and Thrive in the Muck*. Welcome, McKayla.

McKayla Coyle 01:16

Hi, thank you.

Marcelle Kosman 01:17

Thank you so much for being here.

McKayla Coyle 01:19

It's very exciting. I'm ready to have a goblin morning. **[Hannah and Marcelle laugh]**

Hannah McGregor 01:24

Okay, I'm really excited to get into talking about this book and about the idea of goblin mode and about why we're all going goblin mode these days. But to like, warm us up, I'm wondering if you can tell us, McKayla, what is the most goblin-y thing you've done this week?

McKayla Coyle 01:42

I imagine that there are probably many, many things that I am just like, that's normal. But it's actually maybe not. **[Hannah laughs]** Yesterday, I got really excited about a bird. So that felt kind of goblin-y. I ran around the house to tell my siblings about it. It was a really cool bird moment.

We have ornamental rhubarb growing in the backyard, which has like these huge, huge leaves that are faced up and so they fill with water when it rains. And there was a little bird using one like a bird bath. Oh, that's crazy. That's like nature in action.

Hannah McGregor 02:18

That is nature in action.

McKayla Coyle 02:18

Yeah. And then I also switched to a natural laundry powdered soap instead of Tide pods. So that is also my other goblin thing, I think. Highly recommend. I'm super into laundry.

Hannah McGregor 02:28

Oh my god, I hate doing laundry.

McKayla Coyle 02:31

[McKayla laughs] It still kind of sucks.

Hannah McGregor 02:32

I hate it so much. I think the number of times I rewear my clothes before washing them is one of the most goblin-y things about me. There's a lot of goblin things about me. I'm disgusting.

[McKayla laughs]

Marcelle Kosman 02:44

I know that this is not an episode about laundry. But McKayla, have you tried laundry strips?

McKayla Coyle 02:50

I have not.

Marcelle Kosman 02:51

I am evangelical about laundry strips. They're-

Hannah McGregor 02:55

That's where instead of washing your clothes, you just get nude? [McKayla laughs]

Marcelle Kosman 02:58

No. No, Hannah, I would never.

Hannah McGregor 03:04

Marcelle's a never-nude. **[All three laugh]**

Marcelle Kosman 02:09

No, It's the same idea as laundry powder, except it's like condensed into strips. And so you just rip off a strip. And if you're feeling fancy, you can rip it into smaller strips and sprinkle it into your laundry and it reduces packaging. It reduces plastic. It reduces water consumption. I'm a big fan. I don't know if that's goblin-y, but...

McKayla Coyle 03:30

Well, I wrote the book and I am saying that it is.

Marcelle Kosman 03:33

Okay. Okay. I have to say, like, your bird example, McKayla, was like, okay, good. I know what goblin mode is. But then the laundry soap? I was like, oh, no, I don't know what goblin mode is anymore. So-

Hannah McGregor 03:43

Well. You know what? Let's find out.

Marcelle Kosman 03:46

Oh, good idea.

[Upbeat interlude music plays]

It's time for "Why this, Why Now?" where we ask the materialist question; What are or were the historical, ideological and material conditions for our object of study to become Zeitgeist-y?

Hannah McGregor 04:06

Oh, God, I love the word Zeitgeist-y. Okay, in this episode, we are asking why goblin mode is so dang Zeitgeist-y that it was the 2022 Word of the Year chosen by the Oxford English Dictionary.

McKayla Coyle 04:24

Great free marketing for me.

Marcelle Kosman 04:25

Fancy!

Hannah McGregor 04:26

Right? **[Marcelle and McKayla laugh]** Like, really helpful. So I was like, Okay, well, let's start with what the OED has to say about this word. So they define it as, quote, “a type of behavior which is unapologetically self indulgent, lazy, slovenly or greedy, typically in a way that rejects social norms or expectations,” end quote. And they offer us the following first example of use because that's the fun thing the OED does is that they record early examples of usage, which is why it's the best dictionary. Anyways, it was a 2009 tweet by somebody named Jen F. who wrote, “Jen was in full hyperactive goblin mode last night. It was as if she ate a bag of sugar coated candy then washed it down with a few Red Bulls.”

McKayla Coyle 05:12

That's a good night. But bad morning.

Marcelle Kosman 05:15

Okay, but then it went viral. Right, Hannah?

Hannah McGregor 05:16

Yeah. Then it went viral. So it sort of picked up momentum between 2009 and 2022. But it's sort of big breakout moment as a term was a made up headline that Twitter user, PuddingPerson created. Like they Photoshopped this, but it says “Julia Fox opened up about her difficult relationship with Kanye West quote, he didn't like when I went goblin mode.” End quote. And that was kind of the moment that goblin mode broke into, like, I guess, mainstream media, certainly when it got the attention of institutions like the OED. So, McKayla, could you tell us how you came across gobble mode? Was it one of these tweets?

McKayla Coyle 06:10

I imagine that it probably was the Julia Fox tweet or a riff on that particular meme. I think the first one that I really saw was like, a tweet or a meme or something that said, like, “Your Honor, I'm sorry, I was going goblin mode” was also a classic. **[Hannah and Marcelle laugh]** I just thought it was funny. It meant nothing to me. Now it means everything. **[McKayla and Hannah laugh]**

Marcelle Kosman 06:37

So I have an important follow up question. At what point did you write the book though, was it when it still meant nothing, And now it means everything? Tell me.

McKayla Coyle 06:47

So it's actually, the way that I wrote the book is interesting. I was hired to write it by the publishing company, which is not something that people ever talk about, but it's very common,

because publishers will see a hole in the market. And they'll be like, well, we want to write a book about teens living in New York. So let's do Gossip Girl. Gossip Girl is another such book, Warrior Cats was another such book. I don't know what hole in the market they were seeing. I mean, they were right.

Hannah McGregor 07:14

They were like, there are not enough warrior cats. **[Sound bite of a cat meowing plays]** So part of what we've got to do collectively here is understand why goblin mode became a big enough deal that a publisher, like, reached out to somebody and was like, Hey, you have an MFA, write us a book about goblin mode. Like, you know, how does it become significant enough? So for me, the obvious context for the rise of goblin mode is the COVID-19 pandemic. And the various kinds of psychological and emotional impacts that lockdown and reemergence had on us, including things like a really significant shift in the norms of professional dress and behavior.

That, like, we're all working from our homes, so everybody gets really into being sort of comfy. And when you're never leaving your house, you sort of gradually turn it into a smelly little burrow. **[McKayla laughs]** Your workspace is just like a pile of blankets full of chip crumbs, like, just me? No, surely not.

Marcelle Kosman 08:23

A nice little nest.

Hannah McGregor 08:24

I also think that the pandemic accelerated conversations about gender performance and dress in a way that opened up a lot of conversations about rethinking our relationship to like the performance of our genders. And in general, I think it just sort of made us all into weird, feral little guys.

Marcelle Kosman 08:46

And I think because so many professional people had to start working from home, we got to see the interiority of their weird little feral lives that we would never have seen otherwise, like, do you remember the news anchor or like special reporter who was-

Hannah McGregor 09:03

Yeah, the British fancy man, who was talking to BBC-

Marcelle Kosman 09:08

And then his kid who was like doo doo doo doo doo doo. We all remember, the kid just comes charging into the room, crawling all over the floor. The mom is trying to drag a child out.

[McKayla laughs]

Hannah McGregor 09:23

Yeah. In that particular case, it's like, oh, a reminder that this very serious man is not necessarily a goblin, but certainly *lives* with a goblin. **[Marcelle and McKayla laugh]** At least one goblin in his home.

Marcelle Kosman 09:40

Yeah. And that goblin is like 50% his DNA. **[Marcelle and McKayla laugh]**

Hannah McGregor 09:46

Yeah, which suggests you've got some goblin in you somewhere and we can all tell now.

Marcelle Kosman 09:51

Yeah, I love that. I love that as a moment when we all just had to acknowledge that professionalism is an act. It's not real.

Hannah McGregor 10:03

It's just a performance. Underneath every fancy pundit or expert is so many sticky jam hands.

McKayla Coyle 10:12

[McKayla laughs] It's sticky jam hands all the way down. **[Marcelle laughs]**

Hannah McGregor 10:16

Yeah. So usually, I go on at length in this segment about other sorts of possible responses to the question, "Why this, Why now," but I figured we've got an expert. So maybe, McKayla, you can tell us, since you've written a whole book on the topic, if you've got a sense of why goblins are really emerging into the... What's a word you might use for this? Oh, Zeitgeist?

McKayla Coyle 10:41

Yeah, I mean, I think that like before the pandemic, we spent so much time outside of our houses, and we didn't really have to think about the space in which we actually lived. And then being locked down you're like, oh, man, it's ugly in here. Or like, it's not cozy. Or like, I need more blankets, and more chip crumbs. Stat. And so I think that that, like, just made us more aware of the fact that we need a little more coziness in our lives, that we are capable of bringing that into our lives. And it just really shifted everybody's priorities in so many ways. But I think it

definitely emphasized, the pandemic, I mean, definitely emphasized the ways that we can take care of ourselves in sort of small, simple ways. And also, it emphasized the fact that like, there's so much acting that goes on when you have to interact with people constantly. And when you're suddenly alone all the time, you have to face all of this performance and be like, Oh, maybe that's not really who I am. Maybe I am way weirder. And stickier than that.

Hannah McGregor 11:51

Yeah.

Marcelle Kosman 11:53

McKayla, can I ask you about the OED's definition? Because the way that you're describing goblin mode sounds like oh, we needed to find a way to take care of ourselves. We needed to like, make ourselves more comfortable or recognize the things that weren't working for us. But the terms "unapologetically self indulgent, lazy, slovenly or greedy" really feel judgy.

McKayla Coyle 12:24

Oh, they feel so judgy. **[Hannah laughs]**

Marcelle Kosman 12:26

Yeah, and your description of goblin mode is very like, No, this is good. This is good for us. And it's good for the world. Whereas the OED is like, we've observed that this sucks. This is bad, and people who do it are bad. **[Hannah laughs]**

McKayla Coyle 12:40

Exactly. Yeah, I think that my book, *Goblin Mode*, it's about the goblin core lifestyle, which is not exactly the same thing as goblin mode. They overlap in a lot of ways because they are about sort of being feral, being a little guy. But I think that goblin core is more of like, a sort of warm lifestyle, where you're trying to return to nature a little bit, like, care for yourself more like, be more part of a community, whereas the phrase goblin mode doesn't necessarily have like, an explicit community and culture surrounding it.

It's kind of just like a joke. So I think that the OED definition is like, yeah, it's kind of saying the same thing that I'm saying, but in a judgy way. And also it's a little bit anti semitic. Like I talked at the beginning of the book about how goblin stereotypes are historically, very anti semitic. And goblins are used to represent Jewish people and they're greedy, and they're dirty, etc. Bad, bad, bad, bad. And this uses several phrases or ideas that kind of come from that which I'm not wild about.

Hannah McGregor 13:56

You heard it here first. McKayla Coyle, not wild about anti semitism.

McKayla Coyle 14:00

I am not for it. **[All three laugh]** So I just think that's something to be aware of.

Hannah McGregor 14:08

Yeah, but there's something so profoundly queer for me in the way that goblin core takes goblin mode as a kind of like, oh, it's something we need, it's something we're all being drawn to, but like, we feel ashamed of it. Like, you feel, you know, like, you know it's bad, and you have to stop doing it. But like, Oh, you're going goblin mode. And like, the profound queerness of being like, actually, what if it's good? Actually, what if it rules? Actually what if being sticky is not something to be ashamed of, and it's kind of super cool? So, McKayla, you open the book by talking about who embraces goblin core, and why.

McKayla Coyle 14:51

So, who is goblin? I think that it's a lot of people who are not generally accepted by mainstream society, like it definitely attracts a lot of queer people, a lot of neurodivergent people, people of color, disabled people, because it's all about like, pushing back against this idea that you have to be a certain way in order to be allowed in society, or like, be a person. And you know, so many people have already just by being alive, have been pushing back against that or have had problems pushing back against that.

And so I think it's really cool that there is this movement and lifestyle that's so strongly based around like, you know, what if that's not the best way to be, like, what if being white and cis and male and able bodied is a way to be, but it's not the only way to be? There's other ways to be, I think, that a lot of people have already been, you know, pushing back against these norms, just by existing. And I think it's really cool that there's this whole lifestyle built around the idea that there's a better way, life could be different, the world could be better. And it can start small, but we can get there. You know? I really believe in that.

Marcelle Kosman 16:12

Like, it could just start with letting yourself eat chips in bed?

McKayla Coyle 16:16

Yes, it can start there. **[McKayla laughs]**

Hannah McGregor 16:19

Yeah, yeah. So as you know, one of the things we do in this here podcast is bring some theory in to help us think about our object of study. And I was sort of going back and forth about what theoretical framework I wanted to offer us until I read the following passage. And I'm actually going to ask McKayla, because this is from your book, I'm going to ask you to read this quote, please.

McKayla Coyle 16:50

Quote, "People are gross all the way down. But we're all equally gross, and we're all gross for a reason. We need earwax and snot and fingernails in order to live. Organs are icky goo sacks, but you would die without the icky goo sacks that are your brain, heart, lungs, and more." End quote.

Marcelle Kosman 17:06

Beautifully said.

Hannah McGregor 17:08

Okay, so I want to talk about icky goo sacks-

McKayla Coyle 17:13

Oh, how wonderful.

Hannah McGregor 17:14

-In the theory we need. **[Marcelle laughs]**

McKayla Coyle 17:17

I actually have to go... Uhm... **[All three laugh]**

Hannah McGregor 17:18

Nice try.

[Upbeat interlude music plays]

It's theory time and today, I finally get to talk about one of my favorite theories ever: The abject. McKayla, is this term you've encountered before?

McKayla Coyle 17:40

I have heard it used in the phrase abject horror. That's it, which I assume just always meant, like particular or something. I don't know.

Hannah McGregor 17:48

Yeah. In that phrase, it sounds like it means extreme or deep. But it means something so much grosser. **[Marcelle and McKayla laugh]** Marcelle, what about you?

Marcelle Kosman 18:00

I do have some familiarity with the abject, both personal and scholarly. **[McKayla and Hannah laugh]** So I know that the abject originally comes from Julia Kristeva. But I've never actually read Kristeva's work on the abject. I've only read Elizabeth Grosz's work on the abject.

Hannah McGregor 18:20

So Marcelle, I will be making reference both to Julia Kristeva and Elizabeth Grosz.

Marcelle Kosman 18:26

Thank goodness.

Hannah McGregor 18:28

So the abject is Kristeva's term. She invented it. It was during that great period of high theory where people were just submitting things left, right, and center.

Marcelle Kosman 18:38

Sounds nice.

Hannah McGregor 18:39

Uhuh. Sort of most famously, she wrote about it in an 1982 work called, *Powers of Horror: An essay on abjection*. But I think she'd actually coined the phrase prior to that book. So Kristeva is a living thinker and writer. She's a Bulgarian French feminist philosopher, and she's best known for her feminist and post structuralist interventions into psychoanalysis. So she writes back to and about Lacan a lot and I kind of famously refuse to understand Lacan. **[Marcelle laughs]** So we're not, we're just, we're simply, I famously won't, I don't, and I won't, so we're not going to.

But I do want to explain one key aspect of psychoanalysis just so we kind of understand what Kristeva's trying to get at, which is that what psycho analysis is trying to sort of think about a lot of the time is how we as people gradually develop our understandings of ourselves as subjects. So like how we go from being this like, baby that's like an undifferentiated part of the mother's body's ecosystem, to being a coherent, self contained individual who's tidally boundaried and distinct from the other. So we can say, this is me and this is myself and then those are other people and they're not me.

What's important here is that Kristeva is interested in how obsessed psychoanalysis is with the rejection of the mother. And she is also interested in using psychoanalysis to think about our sort of cultural disgust towards women's bodies. So she's like, cool. So there's this developmental process whereby the child needs to differentiate themselves from a mother. And that includes rejecting the mother's body and our connection to it. And that's what she's interested in is the sort of like, the subject forms through the rejection of the maternal.

Marcelle Kosman 20:43

Okay. So Hannah is the abject like exclusively maternal?

Hannah McGregor 20:48

Not quite. So the abject is what threatens the boundaries of the autonomous subject, and thus threatens to return us to a state of non subjectivity, like pre subjectivity, like it threatens to break us down and break our boundaries down. So here are the main examples Kristeva uses of the abject, the things that make our boundaries feel porous and disintegrating are; vomit, shit, menstrual blood, corpses, and of course, her favorite reference, the weird skin that forms on the top of milk when you warm it up, and then let it cool down again.

Marcelle Kosman 21:31

Yeah, I mean, I would definitely categorize milk skin and corpses equivalently.

Hannah McGregor 21:39

It's one of those things when you read philosophy, and you're like you were looking for examples around your kitchen. **[Marcelle and McKayla laugh]** That's why philosophers are always like, Oh, let me come up with an example... uh... a table. You're like, come on, dude. **[Marcelle and McKayla laugh]** Anyway, the point of all of these things is that they remind us, in essence, that we are made of meat. Like our bodies are leaky and porous and decaying. The way Elizabeth Grosz puts this, "the body is not only corporeal, but also has tenuous boundaries." Like literally, our bodies are like falling apart and leaking all the time.

McKayla Coyle 22:21

Uhm, I'm gonna need you to tell me who Elizabeth Grosz is, more specifically.

Hannah McGregor 22:26

She's a professor at Duke University. And she's responsible for popularizing a lot of French feminist philosophy amongst North American feminist scholars, because she was reading it, helping to translate it, writing books about it in the late 80s and early 90s. So her sort of big

contributions in this area are her 1989 book, *Sexual Subversions*, and then her 1994 follow up, *Volatile Bodies*. And *Volatile Bodies* is the one that probably if you've done a feminist philosophy course, you might have read *Volatile Bodies*, but for reasons of what books my library has available as an accessible ebook, we will be quoting from *Sexual Subversions* in this episode.

[Marcelle and McKayla laugh]

And it's fine, because she says a lot about Kristeva in that one too. So in *Sexual Subversions*, she introduces some of the key concepts in Kristeva's work, including, of course, the abject, which she describes as, quote, "a sickness at one's own body, at the body beyond that clean and proper thing, the body of the subject. Abjection is the result of recognizing that the body is more than in excess of the clean and proper," end quote.

So it's like, I want my body to be like, enclosed and tidy and manageable. I want it to sort of map onto my sense of myself as a cleanly distinguished subject. But when I remember that it doesn't, like actually my body is a colony for a billion bacteria, that freaks me out, because it reminds me that my body is in excess of what I want it to be from a perspective of my subjectivity.

Marcelle Kosman 24:19

McKayla, have you seen the movie *A League of Their Own*?

McKayla Coyle 24:22

Oh, yeah, obviously, I'm gay. **[Marcelle chuckles]**

Marcelle Kosman 24:25

So this idea makes me think of that scene in *A League of Their Own* when all of the baseball players have to go to their beauty school evaluation, where the beauty expert, I guess, walks through and decides if they are tidy enough, put together enough, beautiful enough and-

McKayla Coyle 24:46

Straight enough.

Marcelle Kosman 24:47

And that is the subtext. **[McKayla and Marcelle laugh]**

Hannah McGregor 24:51

For sure, for sure. Because the queer body is a leakier body.

McKayla Coyle 24:56

Yes, I feel... Am I a misogynist for still thinking that this is kind of gross?

Hannah McGregor 25:00

No, it's supposed to be. You know, part of Kristeva's point is that it's gross, that it's kind of instinctively gross, that you're like, oh disgusting, the things that threaten, like, we have taboos around these things for a reason. Okay, speaking of gross things, McKayla, I'm gonna ask you to read the next slightly longer quote from Elizabeth Grosz.

McKayla Coyle 25:25

Quote, "bodily fluids, wastes, refuse, feces, spit, blood, sperm, etc. are examples of corporeal byproducts provoking horror at the subjects' mortality. The subject is unable to accept that its body is a material organism, one that feeds off other organisms and in its turn sustains them. The subject recoils from its materiality, being unable to accept its bodily origins, and hence also its imminent death." End quote.

Hannah McGregor 25:57

[singing] Yeah, theory! [McKayla laughs]

Marcelle Kosman 26:00

Okay, so if I'm understanding this quote correctly, the abject is the fluids and gunk that reminds us that we're just organisms as opposed to A League of Their Own subjects.

Hannah McGregor 26:17

Yeah, I mean, to quote, a great feminist thinker McKayla Coyle, people are gross all the way down.

Marcelle Kosman 26:23

So true. So true. I had a friend once tell me that I could never be a dyke because I didn't like menstrual blood.

McKayla Coyle 26:35

[McKayla laughs] That's a fascinating take...What the hell?

Marcelle Kosman 26:40

Sorry, let me correct myself. So this friend told me that I could quote, "never be a dyke," end quote, because I didn't want to sit in a red tent with other women while we were all menstruating, and I feel vindicated. [Marcelle laughs]

Hannah McGregor 26:58

I mean, what I will say is that friend of the podcast, Claire Mulcahy, and I once presented at a Queering Ireland conference where we were both giving papers on Irish Canadian lesbian author Emma Donoghue. And Claire was specifically talking about representations of queer desire in Donoghue's work and read a quote from a short story about how much the protagonist liked going down on her girlfriend when she was menstruating. And her argument was like, part of what's subversive about that is like, a sort of queer refusal to be disgusted by menstrual blood and by menstruating bodies. And, like every man in that room made an audible sound of disgust in a way that I was like, proves the point, actually.

So I think a really important distinction, Marcelle, here is between the sort of unfair obligation your friend presented to you of like you don't get to be queer unless you like this, versus the actual impact of stigma, and a sort of shared universalized disgust with certain kinds of bodies and things that bodies do. So there are actually really good reasons why it's important that we manage human waste properly, like poop actually is full of bacteria. And if we poop near our drinking water sources we will get sick.

Marcelle Kosman 28:33

Yeah, there are several plagues in history that attest to this.

Hannah McGregor 28:37

Yeah. And also in the world of international development, it's really hard to get anybody to fund building proper toilets or sewage systems, because we have so much cultural stigma around even acknowledging the fact that people poop that nobody wants to fund proper sewage, right? Like, it's fine, menstrual blood doesn't need to be stigmatized. It doesn't need to be taboo in the same way that poop does, because there's actually nothing dangerous about menstrual blood. It's fine if it's not your thing. But our vociferous social stigma against menstrual blood and against bodies that menstruate is obviously an extremely dangerous social stigma that is aligned with misogyny and the fact that mentioning menstrual blood, and mentioning lesbians being not disgusted by it in a roomful of men, they all felt totally comfortable vocally being disgusted by references to lesbian sex, like tells us something about how we're comfortable talking about bodies. Anyway, Marcelle. I know in your case that this is definitely not misogyny because you also think cum is disgusting. **[McKayla and Marcelle laugh]** Like Marcelle is disgusted by leaky bodies. She just doesn't like the fact that bodies leak.

Marcelle Kosman 30:04

I've been indoctrinated by the taboos of our society. And I acknowledge that that is terrible. However, that is just how I am. But I don't like other people's fluids. And I know you've already absolved me because I really don't like semen. But I don't like anybody's blood, I'm very comfortable with my own, from whatever place it comes. I have no problem with my own. But the second, like when one of my kids hurts themselves and is bleeding, like they bump into something or they bite their tongue or whatever, I'm useless.

Hannah McGregor 30:43

So, you know, further to what you're saying, Marcelle. This isn't a matter really, of personal taste. The point of the object is the way that it explains how culturally we justify disgust with maternal bodies, which are like, characterized by their leakiness. And by their breaking down of the boundary between self and other because literally, you're growing another person's body in yours. So the subject as a philosophical concept, is self contained, differentiated and orderly, in part, because notions of subjectivity are rooted in philosophy written by white men. And so they're arguing that subjectivity is synonymous with the way that they exist in the world. So, the outward signifiers of being a subject, of being clean and proper, are masculinized signifiers, white signifiers, class signifiers, right? That you're expected to look and seem clean in a way that aligns both with our notions of subjectivity, but clearly aligns our notions of subjectivity with subjectivities that belong to some people and not to others.

Marcelle Kosman 32:09

Is that why instead of just having an aisle at the Shoppers Drug Mart that says "menstrual products" it says bullshit, like "feminine paper?"

Hannah McGregor 32:21

Yeah, absolutely. I think part of it is at the root, people who want to refuse a shift to language like "bodies that menstruate."

Marcelle Kosman 32:30

Right, or like "period products" instead of "feminine hygiene products."

Hannah McGregor 32:35

Part of it is like, well, we can't name it. It's just a gross thing ladies do. Right? And it's like, okay, well, one, not only ladies menstruate. And two, not all women menstruate. And three, calling it feminine products is basically like, what do we know about ladies? Ladies be bleeding.

[Marcelle laughs]

McKayla Coyle 32:59

And they just stick the word hygiene in there to make it seem like it's like science or something.

Hannah McGregor 33:04

Oh, yeah. 100%. So here's kind of where I want to leave us with this thinking about the abject, which is that in Western society, we classify some bodies as inherently more abject than others, like as less clean, as more animal, less human, less rational. And that classification is key to the political force that the concept of the abject has. So we see it play out all over the place. A couple of examples that came to mind very quickly for me, were the anti-Blackness in professional dress expectations, particularly around hairstyles, right?

So the idea that natural hairstyles are unprofessional and not appropriate for the office, or the way that gender affirming care for trans people is being reframed by the Right as mutilation, right? So like a violation of the sort of inherent self contained-ness and naturalness of the body and its boundaries. Which means that there is subversive political potential in embracing the abject for the ways that it subverts and undermines patriarchal notions of subjectivity and how bodies are supposed to be. Which leads me to my thesis statement.

Marcelle Kosman 34:25

I want to know what it is. You got to tell me.

Hannah McGregor 34:28

I can't wait to tell you.

[Upbeat interlude music plays]

Marcelle Kosman 34:34

Okay, Hannah, hit us with your best thesis.

Hannah McGregor 34:38

Okay, here we go. The COVID 19 pandemic took us out of many of the public spaces where our bodies and behaviors are consistently policed by cultural norms. Even for those frontline workers who were not subjected to stay at home orders, the norms of bodily presentation, and intersubjectivity were fundamentally disrupted. It. This disruption was amplified by the bodily anxieties that came with the awareness of a highly contagious and potentially deadly disease that constantly threatened the borders of our bodies.

The result was a heightened awareness of our bodies as abject, leaky, porous, material, and animal and particularly within the communities most marginalized by patriarchal expectations

of subjectivity and embodiment, a subversive embrace of the abject via the celebration of everything sticky, messy, slimy, dirty, and unapologetically corporeal. This subversive celebration of the abject finds its clearest form in the rise of the term goblin mode. In this essay, I will-

Marcelle Kosman 35:53

Hannah, this is so smart. You have really just brought these things together in the most beautiful, elegant, disgusting way possible.

Hannah McGregor 36:08

So disgusting.

Marcelle Kosman 36:10

I love it.

McKayla Coyle 36:11

Yeah, great, good. **[McKayla laughs]**

Hannah McGregor 36:13

Okay, we're done, bye.

McKayla Coyle 36:14

Yeah, that, you know, it's exactly what I was thinking. And you put it into words, like-

Hannah McGregor 36:21

I know, I read your book. I sandwiched it all in there.

McKayla Coyle 36:22

Yeah. And that's also exactly how I would have said it, that really smart, intelligent way.

Hannah McGregor 36:27

No, because you're writing a book for people to read and enjoy. **[McKayla laughs]** So you said it differently.

McKayla Coyle 36:34

I mean, I think there is definitely like, in Goblin core, like a celebration of decay. And like, especially in nature, like, especially fungus and things like that, things that sort of rise up after a death occurs, the way that things naturally deteriorate over time, I think that those are like really central to goblin core and goblin mode.

Hannah McGregor 37:02

You know, the abject and the leakiness, and the porousness of our bodies, is linked to a lot of feminist thinking around intersubjectivity, as opposed to like, firm, like, I'm a person over here, and you're a person over there. It's like, oh, actually, the way we are in relation to each other is inherent to who we are. So like, part of what is me is you and part of what is you is me, and that understanding that our boundaries are more porous than Western philosophy would have us believe makes me think about the queer and feminist celebration of mushrooms.

Because there's so much fascination with the way they are these complex, intersubjective, networked roots of connection that are sort of like under the surface, like you see a mushroom pop up, and it's like, oh, underneath, there's this mycelium network that connects the mushroom in with all of these other things. And it's like, feeding off decay, and living in the disintegrating material of its own death. It's like punk rock and goth and witchy and weird as hell. And it's like, it is this sort of rejection of fear of intersubjectivity, fear of death, fear of impermanence, fear of the fact that like, I'm a little guy made out of meat, and one day, my body will break down.

Marcelle Kosman 38:38

And then other little guys will just pop up all over it.

Hannah McGregor 38:41

Sorry, guys. I hate to break it to you. But when I die, you have to bury me in the yard and then a bunch of tiny little Hannah's are going to pop up. **[Marcelle and McKayla laugh]** Little tiny ones.

Marcelle Kosman 38:51

Okay, so something that I'm thinking about right now is the way that goblin core as you describe it, McKayla, as something that emerges during the COVID 19 pandemic. Goblin core really seems to conflict with the kind of individualist resistance to public health mandates that we saw happening in a lot of places. Do you want to talk about like, what it is about goblin core that like, because it kind of sounds individualistic, but it doesn't seem to have that same kind of hostility that, "I'm not wearing a mask" kind of does.

McKayla Coyle 39:32

Yeah, no, I get it. I mean, I think that whenever we talk about a form of self care, it automatically brings up this idea of self centeredness, which I think is like, you know, not great, because I think it's important to take care of ourselves. I do also think that the idea of self care has been very co opted by capitalism, and it's less meaningful now. But I think that the goblin form is

more about genuinely checking in with yourself, seeing how you're actually feeling in any given situation, seeing how you can like, actually improve your experience, in small ways, you know, you don't have to buy anything to be goblin core.

Like, you just have to care about yourself a little bit more. And I think that even though the idea of caring about yourself seems sort of individualistic, I think it is an important step to caring about others. Because I do think that you can care about others better if you are comfortable with yourself, and in your environment. And if you feel more stable and good, it's easier to look out for others. And I also think that the goblin form of self care is a lot of things that are inherently good for others also, like, it's like, oh, living a lifestyle that uses less waste. That's good for you. But it's also good for the earth. Living a lifestyle where you're, you know, celebrating nature more good for you also can be good for others. There's so many things that are good for us that are just good. You know? We don't have to make it a selfish thing, I guess.

Marcelle Kosman 41:06

You got to don your mask before you help the person next to you put on their mask in an airplane.

McKayla Coyle 41:15

It's important for you to wear your mask too.

Hannah McGregor 41:16

Yeah, it makes me think of how much in your book, McKayla, you emphasize the sort of like, collectivity and community inherent that like, it's okay, if as a goblin, you want to have your own little burrow, where you go off by yourself, but like, you're also always part of a community of other goblins. What you just made me think about when you're talking about taking care of yourself first, is like, okay, you know, you work in a workplace where there are particular expectations of dress. But let's say you're a little neuro spicy, and uncomfortable binding clothes make it really hard for you to function.

And like, maybe the pandemic means that you like, really are just not willing to put on a binding garment again. And it's like, actually, if you let me show up dressed in 17 layered scarves, then like, I'm actually gonna be able to show up for everybody a lot more. So like, if we let go of some of these really absurd, outwardly signifying norms of what it means to be ready to be in public spaces with other people, then more of us are going to be able to actually show up for each other in a way that actually makes a difference.

McKayla Coyle 42:32

And if you show up wearing your 17 scarves, then maybe there's other people in your workplace, who are probably also uncomfortable in their clothes and are like, Oh, wait, maybe I can wear what I want. And then they're also working better. You know, I think that people seeing you show up for yourself is actually a really impactful, meaningful thing, because it's so like, we don't do that. We never show up for ourselves in a visible public way. And I think that when you do that in a way that other people can see, I don't know, it can meet a lot of people.

Hannah McGregor 43:04

Yeah, we seem to have this cultural narrative around self care, that insists on separating it out from community care. Like even that oft used metaphor of like, you've got to put your own oxygen mask on first. It's not like, because your life also matters, it's like, because if you pass out, you won't be able to be awake to help other people stay alive. Like it's your job to stay alive, because you've got work to do, often feels like the subtext of that version of put your oxygen mask on first, right? Like, keep yourself functioning, because you've got kids to take care of. And so actually, it's irresponsible of you to fall apart like, often feels to me like the lesson.

And when we look at the idea of doing a good deed, it's like, oh, we kind of admire it more when it comes at the expense. Like it's purer when the person doesn't experience any pleasure in it themselves. Like if you've really sacrificed yourself, that's really giving to your community. And that feels like a very strategic capitalist message that leads us away from the realities of intersubjectivity. And the fact that it's like, I'm not talking about an oxygen mask now, I'm talking about a pandemic mask is not “wear a mask because you don't want to get sick,” it’s “wear a mask, because it does both.” Because we are so much more biologically connected to each other than we often want to pretend that we are.

And so I can't tidally slice off my well being from your well being because that's imagining that I am autonomous, to a degree that I'm simply not, and that the pandemic really, really like uncomfortably reminded us all because we were like, oh fuck, we all breathe the same air. Like there are things coming out at you and going into me whenever I'm standing next to you. And that freaks us out.

Marcelle Kosman 45:03

Yeah, I think we're a lot more aware of how I, for example, am a lot more aware of how much spit particles come out of my face when I talk than I was before the pandemic. It never occurred to me that people were just inhaling my fluids when we were talking.

Hannah McGregor 45:24

Okay, so we're talking about capitalism, and we're talking about consumerism, and I think an anti consumerist bent is really present throughout your book that like goblin core is not about consuming things. Like it kind of seems to be inherently environmental. Can you talk a little bit more about how attention to consumerism and attention to like, the long term impacts of your decisions on the environment is part of what goblin core means?

McKayla Coyle 45:59

Yeah. So I think that, first of all, I don't think you're a bad person, if you buy things. **[Marcelle laughs]** You know? That said, I don't like the society of capitalism. I don't like the world that it creates. I think that as an individual, sometimes you buy things, fucking whatever. So I think that goblin core is like, I mean, it's pushing back on this world where you're just expected to constantly be buying and consuming and building up more stuff. And I think that capitalism is the thing that makes all of the other forms of phobias and inaccessibility and hate possible. Like, I don't think it's the only thing but I do think that it is like one of the major factors that makes it like, not only possible, but important to keep up these biases and these hatreds. And I think that since goblin mode is about not holding on to these inexplicable biases, it does push back against that.

Hannah McGregor 47:03

Yeah, I mean, this makes a lot of sense to me, like I'm thinking about how part of the capitalist obsession with consumption ties into capitalism and white supremacy, indivisible, two bad tastes that taste bad together. And rooted in both capitalism and white supremacy is this sort of fantasy of immortality that if you are clean enough, if you are self contained enough, if you are self managed enough, if you buy the right things in the right ways, you'll live forever. There's this fucking super expensive gym in Vancouver, you know, that's like selling you all of these, like weird super food stuff. And their tagline is future proof your body. And that, right, like, that's the capitalist fantasy that we see. Like, this is what tech bros are doing when they try to biohack.

It's like, if I just do everything perfectly, I'll live forever. And that idea that if you consume in the right ways that you too, like plastic will never decay, you will just live forever in the ocean, I guess, like the plastic does. But when you embrace the goblin, which includes recognizing that you're a weird little guy made of meat and you're gonna die one day, because that's what weird little guys do. They age and they decay and their bodies fall apart. And that's just all part of it. And like, actually, it's kind of neat.

McKayla Coyle 48:33

Yeah, it's not just like embracing death and decay, but like actually celebrating it and being like, I am decaying right now, at this moment, as we speak, my body is breaking down a little bit. And maybe that's cool. And maybe it's cool that everything in nature also does that and that is a connection that I have with every single living thing in the world. You know? I think that's kind of profound that we're all dying.

Hannah McGregor 48:58

Yeah! And when you actually really understand that, I think that disempowers a lot of what capitalism is trying to sell us, because it's trying to sell us this fantasy of possible immortality. And it's like, listen, I don't believe in it. I don't really want it. I don't want to live forever. And similarly, like the fantasy of non aging, like, actually, if I think aging is cool, and I think decay is neat, then I don't need to spend a million dollars trying to stay young forever, trying to stay thin, trying to future proof my body. Then a lot of the sales pitch of capitalism gets the rug pulled out from under it if I refuse to vilify the things that I'm being told I should be vilifying.

McKayla Coyle 49:42

And the world is also built in such a way that it's easier to navigate if you consume, if you future proof your body, if your body is working, quote unquote, "perfectly." You know, it's literally harder to navigate the world that we've built if you're not engaging in those things, if you're completely unable to engage. You know?

Hannah McGregor 50:01

Yeah.

Marcelle Kosman 50:02

Okay, you guys have a question. So here's my thing. So I understand that we're talking in the theoretical. But I gotta talk about the literal, because it is the fact that we don't live forever, that has allowed capitalism and the billionaires who come out of capitalism to literally destroy the planet, right? Because they're not going to be here. They are dying, while we are slowly boiling to death, right? So I'm struggling to reconcile the idea of capitalism promising immortality with the fact that immortality, if these people did live forever, I feel like climate change wouldn't be an issue. Do you know what I mean? You know? And so I don't know how to...

Hannah McGregor 50:56

They're just planning on going to Mars. Like, they literally just don't care about the rest of us. They're not like, Oh, if I live for 200 years, I better make sure that the earth is okay, because the Earth is where I live. They're like, No, I can live on a rocket ship if I want. Nobody else matters other than me and my cool cyborg body.

McKayla Coyle 51:13

It's like the mindset that allows you to be a billionaire is one that necessitates you to have an incredibly insular worldview, where you are literally the only thing that matters.

Hannah McGregor 51:24

Yeah. Sorry, you're still thinking like a feminist, Marcelle. You're like, surely, they would understand themselves as like, fundamentally intertwined with the fate of the earth. And it's like, no, they don't. That's why they want to go to space so bad. **[Marcelle laughs]**

Marcelle Kosman 51:38

Okay, team. So you know, I want to be a better person. And in this lifetime, I'm not super convinced that I'm ever going to be OK with seeing other people's blood, other people's fluids in general, I think I'm just too indoctrinated in the system. But I want to embrace the radical possibilities of the goblin. So McKayla, can you give me like a top three, top ten if you've got it- **[Marcelle laughs]**

Hannah McGregor 52:08

Just some goblin tips!

McKayla Coyle 52:10

Yeah, I can give you tips. I think that, like, I don't know, it seems like when you're approaching a new lifestyle or aesthetic, you have to make a lot of changes and do a lot of things. But I do think that with goblin core, and if you want to go goblin mode, the idea is that you actually don't have to make any of those changes. You just have to embrace the things about yourself that you were not maybe embracing before. So I think a good place to start is just to like, do more check-ins with yourself, which takes a couple seconds, and you literally don't have to do anything, but just throughout the day be like, Am I comfortable right now? What's one thing that I could do to make myself a little bit more comfortable right now? And maybe it's like, oh, these pants suck. Or like, I need a blanket. Or a snack. You probably need a snack. If you haven't eaten a snack recently and you're listening to this, you should have a snack right now.

Marcelle Kosman 53:00

Oh, that's so true.

Hannah McGregor 53:01

Yeah, you almost definitely need a snack.

Marcelle Kosman 53:03

Hydration too. Take a sip of water. Yeah, there's water in alcohol, right? **[McKayla laughs]** It's not the right kind, not the right kind of water.

McKayla Coyle 53:11

It is a liquid.

Hannah McGregor 53:14

So check in on yourself, have a snack.

McKayla Coyle 53:17

Also starting to pay attention to the ways that you have nature immediately around you. Like I think that people who live in a city think that they have no access to nature. And it does suck to not have access to a major park or something like that. But that does not mean that there's no nature around you. There's so much nature around you. It is all nature, all of it, all the way down. I think that like, you know, just go inside and count how many trees are on your block. Count how many birds you see, count how many bugs are like hopefully not in your apartment but nearby.

Hannah McGregor 53:50

Count how many bugs are in your mouth right now.

McKayla Coyle 53:51

And how many spiders you have swallowed in your sleep.

Marcelle Kosman 53:55

Stop it! **[McKayla laughs]** You two combined are gonna make me embrace capitalism, just watch. **[McKayla and Hannah laugh]**

McKayla Coyle 54:03

Yeah, I think that just starting to notice that like, there literally is a natural world that you are part of that is surrounding you at all times. I think that's really comforting to remember, that like, you can build up a city over an area that was once wild, but it doesn't make it less part of the world. You know? And also, it's always decaying, it's always returning to the state that it wasn't before. So paying attention to nature is a second tip.

And then I would say, start paying attention to the things that gross you out about yourself or that you don't like that you do or that you think should not be allowed in public about you personally. And just start asking yourself questions about why that grosses you out. Why do you think you shouldn't be allowed to do that in public? Why do you think it's annoying that you have that one quirk or idiosyncrasy or whatever and I think that like, if you start paying attention to that stuff instead of just being like, Oh, that sucks. I'm moving on. I'm not gonna do that again. You'll start realizing that it's such a stupid thing to be concerned about. That's not me that's concerned about it. That is a society that is concerned about me presenting myself correctly. And I don't really care if I present myself correctly and I don't even know what that means, really. Yeah, it's just like, you know, be weird, go goblin mode. And then my fourth tip is I don't know if you've heard of laundry strips... **[All three laugh]**

Marcelle Kosman 55:43

Well, thank you goblins for joining us for another episode of *Material Girls*. And especially thank you McKayla Coyle for joining us as our special goblin guest!

McKayla Coyle 55:55

Anytime.

Marcelle Kosman 55:56

McKayla, if the people want to hear more from you, where can they find you?

McKayla Coyle 56:02

Well, they can get my book, *Goblin Mode* wherever books are sold. So that's, you know, Amazon, Barnes Noble, Bookshop, ideally, you know, not Amazon but whatever you guys do, I'm not gonna judge you.

Marcelle Kosman 56:11

Your local goblin bookstore.

McKayla Coyle 56:14

Yeah, your local indie. Your local library. And if you want to find me on the internet, I am on Instagram @MQcoyle. And I also have a Bookstagram where I just post cute graphics and reading lists, which is @prettyboybooks. So you can check either of those.

Marcelle Kosman 56:35

Prettyboybooks...Love it. Omg, so good.

Material Girls is a *Witch, Please* Production, and is distributed by Acast. You can find the rest of our episodes and our other podcasts- plural- on Acast or at ohwitchplease.ca. Here are some other things you can do at ohwitchplease.ca: you can sign up for our amazing newsletter, the latest banger? Oh my god, Fragile August. You can read our transcripts. You can check out our merch, you can find reading lists for our episodes, and you can learn more about our Patreon. Give us your money.

Hannah McGregor 57:12

It's a good Patreon. If you have questions, comments, concerns or praise, praise, especially praise, we live for praise. You can come hang out with us at [@ohwitchplease](https://www.instagram.com/ohwitchplease) on Instagram or X, I guess, it's called now?

Marcelle Kosman 57:27

Threads?

Hannah McGregor 57:31

Threads, for sure. And we're on Tik Tok [@ohwitchpleasepod](https://www.tiktok.com/@ohwitchpleasepod). You can also check out our Patreon at patreon.com/ohwitchplease. Special thanks to everyone on the Witch, Please Productions team, including our digital content coordinator Gaby lori **[Sound effect of BOING]**, our social media manager and marketing designer Zoe Mix **[Sound effect of a record rewinding]**, our sound engineer Erik Magnus **[Sound effect of chimes]**, and our executive producer Hannah Rehak, aka COACH **[Sound effect of a sports whistle blowing]**!

Marcelle Kosman 58:08

At the end of every episode we will thank everyone who has joined our Patreon OR boosted their tier to help make our work possible. Our enormous gratitude goes out to:

Audrey W
Michelle Y
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Larissa K
Kasim H
Alex W

Corelyn
Carrie W
Elanna B

Hannah McGregor 58:35

We'll be back next episode to tackle another piece of pop culture through a whole new theoretical lens, but until then:

McKayla Coyle 58:43

Later goblins!

[*Material Girls* Theme plays: "Shopping Mall" by Jay Arner and Jessica Delisle]