

## Episode 4.16 Choosing Love with Kai Cheng Thom

March 20, 2020

- Hannah McGregor: [00:00](#) [Theme Music: "Mesh Shirt" by Mom Jeans] Hi, I'm Hannah McGregor and this is *Secret Feminist Agenda*. And, hey, yikes everybody, huh? It has been a fortnight and I don't know about you, but I still feel like I am processing the whiplash of the past couple of weeks, how rapidly the global spread of the coronavirus has impacted so many of us. The wide-scale shutdowns, cancellations, border closures, calls for social distancing that I'm sure for a lot of people listening right now have really changed what your life looks like in a really short period of time. I'm lucky. I work for a university, we've moved our classes online, but we only have a month left. And because I'm on a salary, my income is stable and I'm stably housed. And even then I have been finding these rapid changes and the uncertainty of the future have been wreaking havoc on my mental health. And of course, I'm trying really hard to keep in mind people who are being laid off, who are not necessarily housing-secure, and who are going to need communities to rally around them to keep them safe, to make sure that they make it through this time of upheaval and uncertainty.
- Hannah McGregor: [01:36](#) In some ways, it feels wildly pointless to be making a podcast in the midst of a crisis like this. And at the same time I know that for me listening to podcasts has been one of the top things that's been getting me through the days. And so, I'm going to keep making *Secret Feminist Agenda*. Marcelle and I have booted the *Witch, Please* Twitter back up to start doing some *Witch, Please* movie watch-alongs. And I'm gonna try to do my small part to provide some kind of comfort or distraction. And of course I'm donating to fundraisers and local charities, staying in touch with friends who I know are in less secure positions to make sure they have what they need. It's a really important time for us all to be staying in touch with each other and lifting each other up in whatever ways we can.
- Hannah McGregor: [02:29](#) I want to note the conversation that I'm about to have talks quite a bit, in the beginning, about coronavirus and the kinds of social changes that we're facing as a result of them. We don't talk for the entire time about it, but we do talk about it. So if you are looking for content that doesn't engage with it at all or will let you just sort of escape, this is not necessarily the conversation for you right now. There's also a little bit of a... Some bleak apocalyptic humor going on in this conversation. I think Kai Cheng and I have a similar tendency to use humor to

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feel our ways through these kinds of hard topics. So, again, if that's not where you're at right now, feel free to give this one a miss. Otherwise, let's meet Kai Cheng. [Theme Music: "Mesh Shirt" by Mom Jeans]

- Hannah McGregor: [03:17](#) Kai Cheng Thom is a writer, performance artist, and community healer in Toronto. She is the author of the novel *Fierce Femmes and Notorious Liars: A Dangerous Trans Girl's Confabulous Memoir* published by Metonymy Press; the poetry collection *A Place Called No Homeland*; an American Library Association Stonewall Honor book in 2018; and the children's picture book *From the Stars in the Sky to the Fish in the Sea* illustrated by Kai Yun Ching and Wai-Yant Li. Her latest book is the essay collection *I Hope We Choose Love: A Trans Girl's Notes at* [sic: should read "from"] *the End of the World*, an American Library Association Stonewall Honor book in 2020. Kai Cheng won the Writers' Trust of Canada's Dayne Ogilvie Prize for LGBTQ Emerging Writers in 2017. [Kai Cheng's Theme Music: "Piece of Me" by Britney Spears]
- Hannah McGregor: [04:13](#) Okay, hi! Thanks so much.
- Kai Cheng Thom: [04:16](#) Hi!
- Hannah McGregor: [04:16](#) Thanks so much for taking the time to talk with me. We were originally going to do this in person in my office this morning, but everybody is staying home in our respective cities and domiciles as much as we can. So we're going to do this video-chat style instead.
- Kai Cheng Thom: [04:33](#) We're distancing, socially. Social distance!
- Hannah McGregor: [04:37](#) I've seen a lot of really good jokes about social distancing.
- Kai Cheng Thom: [04:41](#) Mhm.
- Hannah McGregor: [04:41](#) One was that Vancouver set the trend of social distancing years ago.
- Kai Cheng Thom: [04:46](#) [Laughs] Ah, yes.
- Hannah McGregor: [04:47](#) Which I really enjoyed. But there was also some sort of, sort of *Onion* or otherwise parody article that said that people are turning to emotionally negligent fathers for tips on social distancing.
- Kai Cheng Thom: [05:00](#) I saw that as well. That was also very good.

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- Hannah McGregor: [05:01](#) I was like, good, this is great. This is great. Humour in the face of the apocalypse is very, very much my survival strategy.
- Kai Cheng Thom: [05:10](#) Oh yeah. We gotta laugh.
- Hannah McGregor: [05:12](#) Yeah. [Laughs]
- Kai Cheng Thom: [05:17](#) Ha ha ha.
- Hannah McGregor: [05:17](#) Said so bleakly: "Gotta laugh." Oh, here we are.
- Kai Cheng Thom: [05:22](#) [Laughs] Yes. Great.
- Hannah McGregor: [05:24](#) I was asking a friend of the podcast, Dina Del Bucchia, recently--
- Kai Cheng Thom: [05:28](#) [Gasps]
- Hannah McGregor: [05:28](#) --if she thought that there had been any dope memes during the times of the plague, that if maybe people were making sort of funny jokes about those like cool masks...
- Kai Cheng Thom: [05:38](#) I have seen a lot of cool masks, I have to say like, I don't know how it is in Vancouver, but in Toronto people are accessorizing.
- Hannah McGregor: [05:45](#) Yeah. There's a lot of beautiful mask chic.
- Kai Cheng Thom: [05:48](#) Yeah, I've seen like sequined masks and like colour-coordinated with outfit masks and ninja masks. And it really is, it's, you know... The, the resilience of the human tendency toward fashion is actually inspiring. You know? Like, we can't talk to anyone or touch anyone, but we're still gonna look fucking fierce.
- Hannah McGregor: [06:11](#) [Laughs]
- Kai Cheng Thom: [06:11](#) Or maybe because we can't talk to or touch anyone we're going to look even fiercer. It's this very interesting, beautiful development and, and, and you know, we need more. We need more creativity and small ways to comfort ourselves as we, as we edge ever closer to the collapse of human society as we currently know it.
- Hannah McGregor: [06:32](#) I was thinking about... I saw your post yesterday when you were talking about sort of what we are going to need to survive, collectively survive. Not individually, collectively survive this particular disaster.

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- Kai Cheng Thom: [06:44](#) Yes, yes, yes.
- Hannah McGregor: [06:44](#) And you really emphasize there creativity as well.
- Kai Cheng Thom: [06:48](#) Oh yeah!
- Hannah McGregor: [06:48](#) That capacity to sort of reimagine how we can live together and how we can care for each other is what lets us collectively make it through times like this.
- Kai Cheng Thom: [06:57](#) Well, yeah, I mean I'm not saying that I am this creative...
- Hannah And Kai Cheng: [07:01](#) [Laughs]
- Kai Cheng Thom: [07:01](#) I just want to be clear. Like, it's so funny because I talk such a big game about like collective survival and love. And then today I got a message from my friend that was like, "Do you want to go into lockdown with me?" And I was like, "Definitely not. Not with you."
- Hannah McGregor: [07:16](#) [Whispers] Oh, I'm so [inaudible]--
- Hannah And Kai Cheng: [07:16](#) [Laughs]
- Kai Cheng Thom: [07:16](#) I joke, I joke, I do want to go into lockdown with you, friend. But it's like, it's funny how like, you know, my instinct, especially if it's stuff like in any crisis, I actually just want to be alone. You know, that's trauma actually, right? Like, you know, a huge part of experiencing interpersonal trauma, as many queer and trans and you know, marginalized people do, is the instinct to be alone is because often we only experienced safety when we were alone.
- Hannah McGregor: [07:39](#) Mmm.
- Kai Cheng Thom: [07:39](#) Some... But, but of course, you know, the drawback is then you are isolated and alone. And so what's really fascinating is that all apocalyptic, kind of mainstream apocalypse prep scenarios really pushed this kind of self-isolation as survival concept. Right?
- Hannah McGregor: [07:57](#) Mhm.
- Kai Cheng Thom: [07:57](#) Like, lock your bunker, stock it with peas, shoot everyone on sight. Literally, you know, my boyfriend's family—not his immediate family, his extended family—were talking about like,

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"We're buying guns," you know? Which is like, oh my gosh, like we're already in danger because of the virus.

Hannah And Kai Cheng: [08:14](#)

[Laughs]

New Speaker: [08:14](#)

You know? We don't need more dude-bros with bullets! I'm sorry, Jake. [Cringes] I love your family. I love youuu [Unclear] family, but you don't need more guns! [Laughs] I'm just going to say whatever I think now because it's the apocalypse.

Hannah McGregor: [08:26](#)

Yeah, yeah, yeah! What are, what are we saving these thoughts for?

Kai Cheng Thom: [08:30](#)

[Laughs] So, yeah, we, you know, we come back to collective survival and I have a couple things to say about that, which is—and this creativity idea, right?—which is we have... Because we're so trained by capitalism, which, it would not have been the case, you know, necessarily in other societies in other times. But because we're trained to think of survival as isolating, cutting off, being alone, and because you know, our brain really easily adapts to that, right, that's such a, you know, that's the flight instinct, we have to be able to be creative, we have to be able to imagine, oh, you know, what does collective survival look like? And we have to because we won't actually survive in the isolationist scenario. Like if we all get the guns, like a lot of us are just going to die and like, you know, I'm sorry for you preppers out there, but you don't know, probably how to take care of yourself in the event of a medical emergency. Like actually we need it... We're going to rely on each other to survive.

Kai Cheng Thom: [09:18](#)

So I think about, and you know, there's been a lot of comparisons to the AIDS crisis which are not accurate because of course HIV/AIDS is a, you know, it's an extremely different scenario, just in terms of, you know, like the pure, you know, kind of biological mechanical functions of those two different viruses and also 'cause of, you know, different social discourse. But something that was very... that is very similar I think that we can learn from the AIDS crisis is how creative and deeply loving queer community was to one another during that time. Right? And there's something that's horrifying about the pandemic apocalypse scenario is it damages our ability to trust in the body, our own bodies and the bodies of others. You know, we already are primed to not trust one another, but then we have this literal fear. Everyone we love, right, could betray us, our own bodies could betray us. And that was the case with HIV and the queer community. You know, this like feeling of like, "Oh my

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gosh, even physical love, this thing that we come together around that we're demonized for now, it's suddenly unsafe." And so what happened was, you know, people still found ways to do community care and they didn't know at the time how HIV was transmitted, right?

Hannah McGregor: [10:23](#)

Yep.

Kai Cheng Thom: [10:23](#)

People were afraid to be in rooms with HIV positive people or just with gay people in general. And I mean, I really think about the beautiful development actually of lesbian communities going into gay men's homes and providing nursing, like actual physical touch, sometimes even, you know, erotic or sensual touch, to care for all of the needs of, you know, queer communities. And there was, there was a sexologist named—there's, I mean, there still is, he's still alive.

Hannah And Kai Cheng: [10:48](#)

[Laughs]

Kai Cheng Thom: [10:49](#)

—There's a sexologist named Joseph Kramer who developed actually like, like a form of erotic massage that was based on like skin-to-skin contact but not fluid transmission that would allow for queer partners to connect with one another at that time. And you know, that incredible ferocity and resilience, creativity, devotion to love in the face of danger is something we can learn from now. And of course, you know, I'm not saying... You know, don't go out and touch people right now.

Hannah McGregor: [11:14](#)

[Laughs]

Kai Cheng Thom: [11:14](#)

That's probably not what's called for. Again, extremely different viruses.

Hannah McGregor: [11:18](#)

Yeah.

Kai Cheng Thom: [11:18](#)

What we want is to be committed to love like that. Right?

Hannah McGregor: [11:21](#)

Yep.

Kai Cheng Thom: [11:21](#)

And you know, you and I are, we're, we're, we're, you know, we're using the gift of the internet, [Laughs] you know, incredible problem-solver, apparently, the internet. I dunno. Like we are... We're able to connect in this way and we live, we have to use the technology we have, you know?

Hannah McGregor: [11:36](#)

Mhm.

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- Kai Cheng Thom: [11:36](#) We have to use the skills we have and we have to admit new ones to be able to be present for one another. And the great thing about this moment in time is that we do have so many technological means of accessing one another from quarantine or from isolation, social distance. And I think that is, you know, a huge tool we can use for organizing, for people to make their needs known, for those of us who aren't as affected to, you know, safely deliver material supplies, to, to watch movies together, to chat. Like in some ways, actually, we're being pushed to imagine an accessible form of loving that many of our disabled and immunocompromised community members have been advocating for for a long time.
- Hannah McGregor: [12:16](#) Yeah.
- Kai Cheng Thom: [12:16](#) So, you know, we... We're going to invent, we're going to have to invent these new skills or actually, you know, learn the ones that our disabled and immunocompromised comrades have already created and we're gonna keep... We're going to have to keep using them! Because this is not, this is, you know, this isn't a one-time event. And, and you know, in some ways we should have done this earlier anyway.
- Hannah McGregor: [12:34](#) Yeah, I've been thinking about that a lot. That as I think about what it looks like to maintain a sense of community, to maintain connection in the light of the sort of, you know, inability to gather with people... And some of my major forms of community are, you know... I, I sing in an all-women's chorus--
- Kai Cheng Thom: [12:51](#) Mhm, mhm.
- Hannah McGregor: [12:51](#) --that has been... All of our competitions and shows have all been cancelled for the foreseeable future. You know?
- Kai Cheng Thom: [12:56](#) Yep.
- Hannah McGregor: [12:56](#) So these things that are... We can't gather in that way anymore, but like, can we get together and sing online? And I have been thinking about how much I have learned already recently from reading the work of people like Leah Lakshmi who, you know, produced these sort of images of what community can look like otherwise. And it's also a lesson... Those of us who are college and university teachers, colleges and universities across the world are closing down right now--
- Kai Cheng Thom: [13:22](#) Oh, yeah.

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- Hannah McGregor: [13:22](#) --and demanding that everybody continue to administer their courses electronically.
- Kai Cheng Thom: [13:27](#) Mhm.
- Hannah McGregor: [13:27](#) Ideally without any interruption in the original plan--
- Kai Cheng Thom: [13:33](#) [Laughs Incredulously]
- Hannah McGregor: [13:33](#) --for the course.
- Kai Cheng Thom: [13:33](#) Yeah, okay.
- Hannah McGregor: [13:33](#) Which is hilarious and absurd, and I think is another kind of opportunity to say like, "Okay, you know, how can I use this opportunity to be as loving as possible towards my students and as creative as possible in terms of how I think about what success would look like in this scenario?" But also like, you know, if you're looking at your course and thinking, "Oh it's impossible to deliver this course successfully without being in the same room as students," I'm like, "Well then how have you designed your course so that a disabled or chronically ill student couldn't possibly participate?"
- Kai Cheng Thom: [14:07](#) Yeah, yeah exactly.
- Hannah McGregor: [14:07](#) Because if physical presence in the classroom... Like disabled, chronically ill, working class and has jobs outside of the classroom, has responsibilities you don't know about, like there's so many reasons students don't show up in the class. So there, there is sort of that like... As I look at what isn't working now that we have to figure out things over the internet, I'm like, "Okay, what can, what can I learn about how I've already designed things and how I could do it differently?"
- Kai Cheng Thom: [14:32](#) Oh yeah. And I think there's, that's... The one of... The example of university and college classes is a super interesting one because there's... I think there's, to me that there... It seems like there's two major issues present, right? Like one is a labour issue, which is this, like universities are like, "Oh yeah, hello adjuncts. Like, we pay you nothing. Just, you know, develop an entirely new form of pedagogy." [Laughs] "You know, now!" [Laughs] "And make it perfect."
- Hannah McGregor: [14:56](#) Tomorrow.

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- Kai Cheng Thom: [14:58](#) "Tomorrow." Right? So like...Like, that's ridiculous. And, and I've been seeing the memes kind of go around about like, "Oh, you know, university instructors don't do this perfectly. Actually, do an extremely bad job." Because, you know, the, the, the burden, the financial and the economic burden of a pandemic cannot land on the shoulders of, you know, marginalized, precarious workers. Right? And then the other issue, of course, is the access issue that's always been, been present in classrooms. And so there's this kind of, this is kind of, again, this return to creativity. We can't see things as a single issue. It's a labour issue and it's an access issue. And those things do in some ways come into tension.
- Hannah McGregor: [15:35](#) Mhm.
- Kai Cheng Thom: [15:35](#) But you know... You know, I'm not a... currently a university educator, but I have taught, right, in a university before.
- Hannah McGregor: [15:42](#) Mhm.
- Kai Cheng Thom: [15:42](#) And now I'm thinking about like... Well, yeah, I used to teach social work too, which is hilarious because it's like, I'm very much not like... Like a lot of it had to be in person. Right? But you know, like... We can now think about like, okay, so as we're kind of thinking about how to use our platforms differently and how to connect using technology and all this sort of thing, what are we going to be like? What is the communication that's gonna happen in a more accessible way? Hopefully not "Okay, you know, students," [Laughs] "like you have to just keep reading and doing your assignments and do your exams all on time." Like, no!
- Hannah McGregor: [16:14](#) Yeah.
- Kai Cheng Thom: [16:14](#) That's not an attuned response to like a global pandemic crisis. But, you know, we could really imagine, you know, a beautiful insurrectionary thing that could happen would be university educators saying like, "Okay, like, you know, who's come up with great strategies for, you know, maintaining prescription medications? Or, you know, whose got hand sanitizer that they want to share?" Right? Like, you know, because we're already connected and because you're a learning community, that social bond actually could become a network where people receive a necessary care even if it's actually just social care. And you could still talk about the material or a lot of courses.
- Hannah McGregor: [16:50](#) Mhm.

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- Kai Cheng Thom: [16:50](#) Especially humanities, right? But, you know, this is also an opportunity to not do business as usual.
- Hannah McGregor: [16:55](#) Yeah.
- Kai Cheng Thom: [16:55](#) Which doesn't mean we're not gonna do anything at all.
- Hannah McGregor: [16:57](#) Yeah. I mean, I teach publishing classes.
- Kai Cheng Thom: [16:59](#) [Laughs]
- Hannah McGregor: [16:59](#) So, the opportunity to talk about like what kinds of conversations can we have in digital spaces and--
- Kai Cheng Thom: [17:05](#) Absolutely.
- Hannah McGregor: [17:05](#) --how can we care for each other? And particularly, I mean, just in my publishing history class yesterday, you know, we were talking about the history of newspaper publishing--
- Kai Cheng Thom: [17:15](#) Ooh.
- Hannah McGregor: [17:15](#) --and how Victorian audiences received newspapers as information overload and turned to strategies like scrapbooking as a way of sort of--
- Kai Cheng Thom: [17:24](#) Ohh!
- Hannah McGregor: [17:24](#) --managing that overload.
- Kai Cheng Thom: [17:26](#) That's nice.
- Hannah McGregor: [17:26](#) And there's a particularly interesting history of African-American readers using scrapbooks to generate counter-histories.
- Kai Cheng Thom: [17:35](#) Mhm.
- Hannah McGregor: [17:35](#) So they would cut stories out of sort of mainstream—so white and racist—papers and then use those to sort of write their own counter-histories through scrapbooking. Like absolutely remarkable stuff.
- Kai Cheng Thom: [17:48](#) Wow, that's incredible.
- Hannah McGregor: [17:48](#) And we sort of use that as an opportunity to talk about like, right in this moment, the kind of information overload that is

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just making us all feel so panicked. Because there's just so much information coming in all the time and like, alright--

- Kai Cheng Thom: [18:04](#) Oh, yeah...
- Hannah McGregor: [18:04](#) --what strategies do we have now for like, navigating that information ecosystem and managing how, not only what we're going to believe in and what we're not going to believe, but also like how it affects—I mean, to go back to that like nervous system thing, right?—Like how it is--
- Kai Cheng Thom: [18:20](#) Oh, yeah.
- Hannah McGregor: [18:20](#) --actually affecting us physically to be getting--
- Kai Cheng Thom: [18:23](#) Oh, yeah.
- Hannah McGregor: [18:23](#) --so much information all the time.
- Kai Cheng Thom: [18:26](#) So much panicked--
- Hannah McGregor: [18:27](#) Yes.
- Kai Cheng Thom: [18:27](#) --like intense, you know, high, high velocity kind of information.
- Hannah McGregor: [18:32](#) Yep.
- Kai Cheng Thom: [18:32](#) Yeah. And it's all the messaging, too, about "Don't panic!" But also, right, like, but also maybe it's... "Maybe we're all going to die," you know?
- Hannah McGregor: [18:40](#) [Laughs] Yeah.
- Kai Cheng Thom: [18:40](#) It's kind of like absurd like, "Oh, how are, how are we going to not panic? Maybe we should be panicking, but we can, we can make it... Can we manage our panic?" Right?
- Hannah McGregor: [18:47](#) Yeah.
- Kai Cheng Thom: [18:47](#) "Can we, can we be meaningfully frightened? You know, can we turn our fear for ourselves into care for others?" You know? And this, this... I'm going to say what... I'm going to say this kind of carefully, right? But you know, this thing about social distancing while also maintaining connection is horrible because it's a horrible position to be put in. But also it's an opportunity for us to practice like, "Oh, how do I do care with a boundary?"

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Because the boundary is now life or death for both parties, right?

Hannah McGregor: [19:15](#)

Mhm.

Kai Cheng Thom: [19:15](#)

Or all parties. But also care is life or death. And this is actually the situation that we're in all the time and you know, metaphorically and literally, in almost every human-to-human situation, how do I care for someone when I also have to maintain an amount of distance that preserves myself? And so, yeah, I mean I just think that it's returning to the nervous system and, and this idea of information overload and, and having to be creative, like it's really present with us and it's this moment for us to all actually to shine, right?

Hannah McGregor: [19:42](#)

Uh-huh.

Kai Cheng Thom: [19:42](#)

I mean, some of us are shining awfully like hoarding Lysol wipes and then selling them at a markup. [Laughs]

Hannah McGregor: [19:49](#)

Oh my gosh... Can you imagine!

Kai Cheng Thom: [19:49](#)

That also is where creativity can go, I guess.

Hannah And Kai Cheng: [19:53](#)

[Laughs]

Kai Cheng Thom: [19:53](#)

But like imagine if they could have afforded all those Lysol wipes, if they had taken them and then delivered them. You know, in their car to, to, to home-bound seniors.

Hannah McGregor: [20:04](#)

Yep.

Kai Cheng Thom: [20:04](#)

Right? Right. Like small, small adjustments.

Hannah McGregor: [20:06](#)

Yep.

Kai Cheng Thom: [20:06](#)

But big, huge shift in impact.

Hannah McGregor: [20:09](#)

Yeah, yep. Just yesterday, I was like, you know... I went and I did an unusually large grocery shop for me because my standard is [Laughs] no food in the house ever at all. And I was like, "Oh, I should probably...do better than that." And then after I got home, was like, well fuck, if I can afford to go out and buy three weeks worth of groceries at one time without that being a disaster scenario for me, like I can afford--

Kai Cheng Thom: [20:35](#)

Mm.

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- Hannah McGregor: [20:35](#) --to also go make a big donation to the, like, Downtown Eastside Women's Shelter, who is going to get hit really hard by this. Like if this is not a disaster for me, then I can also mitigate it being less of a disaster for other people. Or I could hoard Lysol wipes. I do have some Lysol wipes in my office, I could probably get \$5.00 a pop for those.
- Kai Cheng Thom: [20:56](#) [Laughs] Yeah, you could, I guess.
- Hannah McGregor: [20:58](#) Yep.
- Kai Cheng Thom: [20:58](#) I mean, here's this other thing about survival, though. You know, it is an extremely white, colonial, kind of biomechanical understanding of survival to be like, "Oh, I want to live in my bunker with my Lysol wipes."
- Hannah McGregor: [21:10](#) Mhm.
- Kai Cheng Thom: [21:10](#) "Or you know, sell my Lysol wipes so that I can pay to go and be in the woods by myself" and whatever. And I, you know, it's funny because actually, you know, the popular consciousness shows us a not flattering and not fun image of that person. Like even the, you know, like the prepper TV shows and all the kind of post-apocalyptic movies, we don't want to be that kind of lonely, hollowed-out person living in their bunker by themselves. Like, what is surviving actually, right? Like I would rather, and this is just me maybe, but I would actually rather die earlier having survived in a sense of integrity, you know? Like I would rather live in this world knowing that I had preserved something in myself, right? Rather than just kind of like prolong my lonely post-pandemic existence.
- Hannah McGregor: [21:56](#) [Laughs]
- Kai Cheng Thom: [21:56](#) Like that just sounds awful.
- Hannah McGregor: [21:59](#) Sounds so bad.
- Kai Cheng Thom: [21:59](#) You know, like, please no.
- Hannah And Kai Cheng: [22:02](#) [Laughs]
- Kai Cheng Thom: [22:02](#) Like, what is surviving and, and what are we surviving for? Right? Like I think... I was just talking... I just went to the office, which I might not be doing much longer, [Laughs] you know, we'll see. But I went to the office, visiting a colleague who has children, right? And we... This fear around children is so valid

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also. But it's great that children don't seem to be as you know vulnerable to infection as anyone else. So that's good. But you have this thinking about like, okay, so, you know, our children are going to grow up in an extremely stressful, like social environment. This pandemic is not going to be the end of that. Already 2020 had a lot of stressful things going on.

Hannah McGregor: [22:34](#)

[Whispers] It's so bad...

Kai Cheng Thom: [22:34](#)

And it's like, it's not going to be an easier world.

Hannah McGregor: [22:38](#)

No.

Kai Cheng Thom: [22:38](#)

But then, you know, I don't know that we raise or have children so that they can have easy lives. We raise them so they can have meaningful lives. And you know, I think the thing about children is that they're going to—the children of right now—is, they're going to have to choose. They're going to have some very clear choices between heroism and villainy, right? Like Lysol hoarder or Lysol savior.

Hannah And Kai Cheng: [22:56](#)

[Laughs]

Kai Cheng Thom: [22:59](#)

And my colleague was, "Oh, well how do I raise a hero?" And, and you know, I think we all landed, in the office at the answer at the same moment is we have to be heroes, right?

Hannah McGregor: [23:08](#)

Yeah.

Kai Cheng Thom: [23:08](#)

We have to choose. So what are we living for? We are living to see how good we can be, right? In our darkest moments, we discover who we are. We want to discover that we are good people with compassion, who cared about others. I would rather die earlier knowing that.

Hannah McGregor: [23:26](#)

Yep.

Kai Cheng Thom: [23:26](#)

Then just live alone in the woods with, with my, with my kidney beans.

Hannah McGregor: [23:30](#)

"With my kidney beans." [Laughs] You are really making me think of a conversation I had recently with, also friend of the podcast, Jen Sookfong Lee, about garrison mentality.

Kai Cheng Thom: [23:40](#)

That is so funny, I have been on a pod-, a different podcast with all of those people.

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- Hannah McGregor: [23:43](#) Yeah. Right? Like this is... there's ten people in Vancouver.
- Kai Cheng Thom: [23:46](#) [Laughs]
- Hannah McGregor: [23:46](#) And even though you're not physically in Vancouver, you're still counted in that ten.
- Kai Cheng Thom: [23:53](#) My spirit's there...
- Hannah And Kai Cheng: [23:53](#) [Laughs]
- Hannah McGregor: [23:53](#) And we were talking about, yeah, garrison mentality and you know, Margaret Atwood's *Survival* and these sort of meta-narratives of Canadian literature and how profoundly based they are in settler colonial white patriarchy.
- Kai Cheng Thom: [24:09](#) Oh, yeah.
- Hannah McGregor: [24:09](#) Like all of these, all of these constructs and the image of, you know, the theme of Canadian literature is white people hiding in a garrison from the dangers of the wilderness.
- Kai Cheng Thom: [24:19](#) Yeah, what the fuck.
- Hannah McGregor: [24:19](#) And Jen just being like, you know, that's not the theme of Chinese-Canadian literature. That's not our story. That's not our history, that--
- Kai Cheng Thom: [24:26](#) It's really not.
- Hannah McGregor: [24:26](#) --that none of that applies. And so starting to think like, oh, there's a history to this notion of my job is to survive versus all of the other stories that we can tell about how we respond to disaster.
- Kai Cheng Thom: [24:40](#) Oh yeah. Like, "My job is to survive." Like what? Like, or is it my job to, to, to protect the next generation?
- Hannah McGregor: [24:46](#) Yeah.
- Kai Cheng Thom: [24:46](#) Is it my job... I mean, you know, Larissa Lai, the great prophet, Chinese-Canadian author that she is, wrote a book called *The Tiger Flu* last year.
- Hannah McGregor: [24:54](#) I love that book so much. I should reread that book. That's a perfect book for this pandemic!

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- Kai Cheng Thom: [25:00](#) We all need to read or reread *The Tiger Flu* right now.
- Hannah McGregor: [25:04](#) Yess.
- Kai Cheng Thom: [25:04](#) Right the fuck now.
- Hannah McGregor: [25:06](#) Yeah.
- Kai Cheng Thom: [25:06](#) Because it's about what happens in actually, in, on the West Coast--
- Hannah McGregor: [25:09](#) Yep!
- Kai Cheng Thom: [25:09](#) [Laughs] --in a pandemic and you know, the future that arises out of that. You know, Larissa talks a lot about—in that book also in general—about the association of the Asian body and Asian female body, particularly, with disease.
- but  
the
- Hannah McGregor: [25:23](#) Mhm.
- Kai Cheng Thom: [25:23](#) And you know, as an Asian trans woman, I think about, yeah, the intersection too. You know, gay men and trans women and, you know, the intersection with disease. And it's like kind of this fear we have of being, you know, the carriers of an invisible malevolence.
- Hannah McGregor: [25:34](#) Mhm.
- Kai Cheng Thom: [25:34](#) And you know, the opposite of that, right, is that we are carriers of an enormous love, right? Like the community legacy of enormous sacrifice for others. You know, both, both Chinese-Canadians and queer, queer men and trans women or just queer community in general, I should say. You know? And we can, we can choose which legacy we lean into. I'm like, we can't talk about Chinese-Canadian literature without talking about other literatures. So like Indigenous Turtle Island literature is so much often about how the apocalypse arrived in the form of disease brought by European colonists centuries ago. Right? Like so not... None of this is new [Laughs] and... Which is not necessarily a guarantee of our survival.
- Hannah McGregor: [26:11](#) No. [Laughs]
- Kai Cheng Thom: [26:11](#) Right? But again, what are we living for?
- Hannah McGregor: [26:14](#) Yeah.
- Kai Cheng Thom: [26:14](#) What are we living for?

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- Hannah McGregor: [26:15](#) It's such a good question and it is reminding me of the experience I had when I first read *I Hope We Choose Love*.
- Kai Cheng Thom: [26:21](#) Mm.
- Hannah McGregor: [26:21](#) Which I read right in a moment where I was feeling very, very sort of seated in and committed to anger as a feminist ethos, which I'm not, you know, I'm not quite ready to turn against anger.
- Kai Cheng Thom: [26:35](#) Yeah, don't give it up! 'Cause yeah...
- Hannah McGregor: [26:35](#) It's also, it's also a very important fuel for me. And something that I, that I believe very strongly can be an effective motivator.
- Kai Cheng Thom: [26:41](#) For sure.
- Hannah McGregor: [26:44](#) But not on its own. Anger alone... It can be deeply depleting. And when I read *I Hope We Choose Love* and started to think about what a hard choice that also is and what a valuable choice it also is, I realized I think something that I have sort of always mentally associated sort of sentiment with like failure, like feeling good--
- Kai Cheng Thom: [27:07](#) Mm.
- Hannah McGregor: [27:07](#) --is a sign that you're not paying close enough attention. And, in fact, one's task is to feel as bad as possible.
- Kai Cheng Thom: [27:14](#) Mhm, mhm!
- Hannah McGregor: [27:14](#) Which is, you know, its own particular kind of political coming to consciousness.
- Kai Cheng Thom: [27:21](#) Absolutely.
- Hannah McGregor: [27:21](#) [Laughs] But yeah, I would like to, I would like to talk about this book, you know? Since--
- Kai Cheng Thom: [27:24](#) Oh, right! Books! Okay, yeah.
- Hannah McGregor: [27:25](#) Yeah! That book. That's what I want to do. I want to talk about--
- Kai Cheng Thom: [27:28](#) Remember books?
- Hannah McGregor: [27:28](#) Remember books?

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Kai Cheng Thom: [27:30](#) [Laughs]

Hannah McGregor: [27:30](#) I know. I don't know, I've seen a lot of really great people posting their like, quarantine reading stacks and I'm like listen, if we've got nothing else, we are locked in our homes with our books, like, like nerdy, introverted children who have been given a time-out.

Kai Cheng Thom: [27:46](#) Yeah, my dream as a child.

Hannah McGregor: [27:46](#) [Laughs] Exactly!

Kai Cheng Thom: [27:47](#) I was like, "Please quarantine me in my book room."

Hannah McGregor: [27:50](#) "Please send me to my bedroom. I will stay here for hours."

Kai Cheng Thom: [27:55](#) [Laughs] Like, yay!

Hannah McGregor: [27:55](#) Yep.

Kai Cheng Thom: [27:55](#) But, I mean, yeah. Not, not right now quite so yay, but still, books, we got 'em.

Hannah McGregor: [28:01](#) Yes, "not yay, but books we got 'em." [Laughs] Yeah. So, so I'd like to start with talking a little bit about how you're thinking about love as a choice in this book, what it means to choose love. Particularly I think in terms of thinking in slightly harder ways about the interpersonal dynamics of social justice communities.

Kai Cheng Thom: [28:25](#) Oh, yeah.

Hannah McGregor: [28:25](#) Which I kind of think is, is a big part of, of why love has to be a thing that we choose and work on rather than just--

Kai Cheng Thom: [28:32](#) Oh, yeah...

Hannah McGregor: [28:33](#) --get to say, "We have good feelings here."

Kai Cheng Thom: [28:37](#) So love is not a feeling.

Hannah McGregor: [28:39](#) Yeah.

Kai Cheng Thom: [28:39](#) Love is absolutely not a feeling. Love can include feelings. You know, the feeling of warm, the feeling of intimacy, the feeling of connection and gratitude, blah, blah, blah. Love can also include the feeling of anger, rage, hatred, disappointment, frustration,

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you know, numbness. Love is all of those things. Love is an ethic. Love is a guiding force. You know, I, I was been thinking about this a lot recently because a friend of mine said to me recently like, "Oh, you know, Kai Cheng Thom, all your stuff about transformative justice doesn't feel like love because what would feel like loving is if you were on my side about beating up my abuser. And I was like, hmm... Okay, real, no, valid, super valid.

Hannah McGregor: [29:16](#)

Mhm.

Kai Cheng Thom: [29:16](#)

Super valid. And also if the only way that you are going to experience my love is by feeling that I enable you at all moments at all times, then that's not workable for me. Just to be clear. And I just, also... Not to tell people what they're going to think or feel, but I'm curious about if my enabling every single impulse in every single moment is going to feel like love in retrospect, right? Like, you know.

Hannah McGregor: [29:44](#)

Yep.

Kai Cheng Thom: [29:44](#)

So if I said, "Yes, let's go beat up, you know, this person who's hurt you." And then we did that. And then all the consequences which always flow out of responding to violence with violence, which is not always, you know, sometimes it's we need to do that. Sometimes we need to defend ourselves with violence. But there are other ways--

Hannah McGregor: [29:58](#)

Yeah, you wrote a whole novel about a girl gang. [Laughs]

Kai Cheng Thom: [30:01](#)

Yes, it did happen. I did do that.

Hannah McGregor: [30:03](#)

[Laughs]

Kai Cheng Thom: [30:03](#)

You know? Which is so funny that we just, people love the girl gang part. They don't see like how the main character is then wracked with guilt and trauma for the rest of her life. [Sarcastically] But you know, whatever, you know.

Hannah McGregor: [30:13](#)

[Laughs]

Kai Cheng Thom: [30:13](#)

But...

Hannah McGregor: [30:15](#)

Reading is hard!

Kai Cheng Thom: [30:15](#)

Reading is really hard, I get it. No, me too. I struggle sometimes. I'm like, "I don't know what to say... What's happening in that

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novel." But if I did that, would it feel like love if, you know, later when I, when, when the consequences had landed on the table and we were like, okay, so, so this happened. So, so bell hooks writes in *All About Love* about the psychiatrist Scott Peck who wrote in *The Road Less Traveled* that that feeling of like intense connection we have to someone in a moment of intimacy, you know, we might add to that, in the moment of the trauma bond, that feeling is cathexis.

- Hannah McGregor: [30:46](#) Mm.
- Kai Cheng Thom: [30:46](#) It's just a weird Greek word. We don't really need to care about this word, but that feeling of intense--
- Hannah McGregor: [30:50](#) We love weird Greek words on this podcast. We're very into them. We say praxis a lot. [Laughs]
- Kai Cheng Thom: [30:55](#) Awesome. You know, it's not the most accessible, but it's nerdy and we love it.
- Hannah McGregor: [30:59](#) Mhm.
- Kai Cheng Thom: [30:59](#) So you know, this feeling of like, "Oh, I am so into you! I love you! I'm with you! Blah, blah, blah, blah, blah," that is cathexis
- Hannah McGregor: [31:06](#) Mm.
- Kai Cheng Thom: [31:06](#) You know, in psychotherapy, we might call some of that feeling attunement or being attuned to. Someone gets my needs. Someone is with my needs. Someone is with me, holding me, you know, metaphorically or literally.
- Hannah McGregor: [31:17](#) Mhm.
- Kai Cheng Thom: [31:17](#) But love is a choice because sometimes we cannot have cathexis, you know, in the interest of the growth of our relationship. So bell hooks, again, here draws upon Scott Peck, who, in *The Road Less Traveled*, defines love as the willingness to extend one's self for the spiritual growth of oneself or another.
- Hannah McGregor: [31:37](#) Mhm.
- Kai Cheng Thom: [31:37](#) So it's a bit of a convoluted phrase. What he's saying is we need to be willing to grow and change to become bigger, better people so that others can also become bigger, better people. Mm?

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- Hannah McGregor: [31:47](#) Mm.
- Kai Cheng Thom: [31:49](#) And in the mission of that, you know, seeking to improve ourselves for ourselves or to improve ourselves for others. And then Scott Peck has this whole thing about spirituality, which we won't... We're not gonna go into it right now because no everyone's gonna agree with it.
- Hannah McGregor: [32:00](#) [Laughs]
- Kai Cheng Thom: [32:00](#) Right? But like this whole thing about like, you know, connecting to greater purpose, to our inner internal compass, the ethic with which we want to recreate the world. And so we are not always going to have cathexis in that. It is just not possible because I mean, so a great feminist example, that's very easy for people to kind of take down now it's like, oh, when you turn to your white colleague and you're like, "Hey Karen, you're being a racist." Right? Or, you know, you turn to your, your, your man-friend and you're like, "Dude, stop. Stop, mansplaining, stop manspreading stop talking over women. You know, stop. Stop treating women like they exist to please you." That is not cathexis.
- Hannah McGregor: [32:39](#) No.
- Kai Cheng Thom: [32:39](#) The person you're talking to is not going to feel attuned to in that moment. But if delivered in the right way and there's many, many right ways, right?
- Hannah McGregor: [32:48](#) Yeah.
- Kai Cheng Thom: [32:48](#) You know, for depending on the context, then the person who's going to grow because you loved them enough to break cathexis and say you gotta change. And I'm changing, too, in doing this. Right? Like you know, and then Octavia Butler talks about you know, how all we touch, we change. And we have to become brave, assertive, honest, authentic, in order to do this work. And so when we bring that back to social justice community and issues of abuse and accountability and social justice community, someone has to be brave. We all have to be brave, actually, and turn to each other and say, you know what, if we solve every problem of violence with more violence, problem's not going to be solved.
- Hannah McGregor: [33:24](#) Yeah.

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- Kai Cheng Thom: [33:24](#) If we immediately get rid of people who are problematic, we're all going to be gotten rid of.
- Hannah McGregor: [33:30](#) Yeah.
- Kai Cheng Thom: [33:30](#) And if we turn to punishment as our only form of feminist or social justice pedagogy and praxis, we are going to end up duplicating the system we are trying to break.
- Hannah McGregor: [33:42](#) Yeah. And I see so much of it and it feels really difficult in this particular moment to figure out what to do in that moment where you see, you know, everyone turned to punishment and...
- Kai Cheng Thom: [33:58](#) Oh yeah.
- Hannah McGregor: [33:58](#) And on this... You know, online in particular, which is this environment--
- Kai Cheng Thom: [34:01](#) Mhm.
- Hannah McGregor: [34:01](#) --where...you wrote a Twitter thread a little while ago that I think about a lot...where you asked if we would be so quick to sort of heap punishment on somebody if we had to do it in person rather than--
- Kai Cheng Thom: [34:16](#) Oh, yeah.
- Hannah McGregor: [34:16](#) --being able to do it online and the way that we move so quickly to a human being being, you know, thrown out like they're garbage.
- Kai Cheng Thom: [34:27](#) Mhm.
- Hannah McGregor: [34:27](#) And would, would we do that? Like, would we be so ready and willing to embrace that kind of cruelty if we actually had to do it to somebody's face?
- Kai Cheng Thom: [34:36](#) I don't know. I mean, for sure. I love this question because you could, so you might say automatically no, because you know the internet allows us to dehumanize, but also--
- Hannah McGregor: [34:46](#) But we got lots of historical examples. [Laughs]
- Kai Cheng Thom: [34:49](#) Yeah! We have lived in... You know, through the world—ancient world—in which in many cultures and societies, people absolutely were like scapegoated and thrown away. And you

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know, we still live in a culture where people are very easily, you know, kind of like stoned and dehumanized.

Hannah McGregor: [35:03](#)

Mhm.

Kai Cheng Thom: [35:03](#)

Every, every continent, every society, right? So it's, it's possible that yes, we would. But you know, that question kind of gets into do we feel in the body the action that we take to defend ourselves. So people often... I think especially as people start to get like the, the caricatured version Kai Cheng Thom, which, which I love. I mean, I love the caricature version of myself. I... You know, sometimes... I just put out a tweet thread about how I'm basically just Sarah Crewe from *A Little Princess*. You know? Just like, [Puts On A Falsetto] "Oh, I'm so virtuous or whatever."

Hannah McGregor: [35:32](#)

[Laughs]

Kai Cheng Thom: [35:32](#)

Like you know, [Laughs] like because--

Hannah McGregor: [35:34](#)

In an attic, I believe? She was in an attic? I believe she was in an attic.

Kai Cheng Thom: [35:37](#)

In an attic constantly being dumped upon, but she still remains kind and generous. Like, this is me and my caricatured form. Right? Which is also not me at all, but the question is about... People kind of think Kai Cheng Thom is against violence, which is not true actually. I'm actually... I hesitate to say this, but it's the end of the world. I am pro-revolutionary violence. I am pro-direct action. And I think we're going to need a lot of that now. [Laughs] But you know, also a lot of love and adoration. But you know what I'm saying is we need to be landed in the body. We need to... If we're going to choose violence as a part of choosing love, we have to *choose*.

Hannah McGregor: [36:15](#)

Mmm.

Kai Cheng Thom: [36:17](#)

And that really means, like... If you're going to say, "I want someone out of community. I want someone to be cut off from the resources that community offers..." Particularly if we're talking about trans women and sex workers and people who rely on community--

Hannah McGregor: [36:32](#)

Yep.

Kai Cheng Thom: [36:32](#)

--for, for life. We have to be mindful that we are choosing possible death.

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- Hannah McGregor: [36:36](#) Yeah.
- Kai Cheng Thom: [36:36](#) We are choosing possible death. We are *responsible*. And that's all I'm actually... It's all I'm advocating for right now, is if we're going to choose death for people, we have to feel that in our bodies.
- Hannah McGregor: [36:47](#) Yeah.
- Kai Cheng Thom: [36:47](#) In the same way that if we're going to eat animals—which I am not against; I eat animals all the time. Probably gonna eat some after this—
- Hannah McGregor: [36:52](#) [Laughs]
- Kai Cheng Thom: [36:52](#) Yum, yum, yum, animal flesh. You know, we have to be aware. We are choosing the death of an, of a creature for our own lives, our own purposes, our own, our pleasures.
- Hannah McGregor: [37:01](#) Yeah.
- Kai Cheng Thom: [37:01](#) You know. This is what's wrong or this is what happens in a colonial legal system is... The law says, "Oh, you can do this, you can write off a person to prison. You can say the RCMP can go onto someone else's land and use whatever means to get them off it."
- Hannah McGregor: [37:15](#) Mhm.
- Kai Cheng Thom: [37:15](#) And because the law says so, you know, this dark magic of the written word says so, we don't have to feel it.
- Hannah McGregor: [37:23](#) [Sadly] Yeah.
- Kai Cheng Thom: [37:23](#) It's okay. We're morally absolved. And we are not.
- Hannah McGregor: [37:26](#) No.
- Kai Cheng Thom: [37:26](#) We are not. And in a revolutionary feminist ethic of care and ethic of love, we know that the boundaries we hold have consequences. And that's all I'm saying.
- Hannah McGregor: [37:35](#) It has been remarkable watching how much people have, like people who I thought were like a little bit smarter than this, have invoked rule of law in light of the Wet'suwet'en protests in particular.

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Kai Cheng Thom: [37:46](#) Oh, yeah...

Hannah McGregor: [37:47](#) Being like, you know, "Obviously I agree with Indigenous sovereignty, but Canada is a country of rule of law" and it's like whose fucking law? Like what are you--

Kai Cheng Thom: [37:56](#) Oh, yeah.

Hannah McGregor: [37:56](#) Like how--

Kai Cheng Thom: [37:57](#) I mean, also, even like Canadian law, like--

Hannah McGregor: [38:00](#) Yeah.

Kai Cheng Thom: [38:00](#) RCMP doesn't have a right to like... It's ruled, right? Of course, if the land belongs to the Wet'suwet'en in true Canadian law...

Hannah McGregor: [38:04](#) Yep.

Kai Cheng Thom: [38:04](#) Which is an example also of how that dark magic of the law isn't actually about the law. It's about this, "Oh, we can release ourselves from responsibility for what we're advocating for or carrying out." Like, you mean, you look at... And if you look into the eyes of police people... I'm one of those people who believes that doing harm causes trauma in addition to experiencing harm. You know? And this is partly because, I, you know, I've traveled to war zones and occupation zones, you know, outside of Canada—Canada's a war zone and occupation zone—But you know... And you look into the eyes of enforcers: they are not there. To become an enforcer is to become a monster.

Hannah McGregor: [38:38](#) Yeah.

Kai Cheng Thom: [38:38](#) That kind of monster... We all become that monster sometimes.

Hannah McGregor: [38:41](#) Yep.

Kai Cheng Thom: [38:41](#) But... I've definitely done this right? You know, like when we say, "Oh, this person is not a person"--

Hannah McGregor: [38:46](#) Mhm.

Kai Cheng Thom: [38:46](#) --because of our, you know, supposed ethic. And we can just do whatever we're going to do. And we don't have to worry about the impact on our own, our own selves, our own souls, and our own bodies. We become monsters. We lose our humanity

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because we dehumanize others. This is choosing love, right? Choosing love is remembering that they are human while we hurt them, we're human while we hurt them. And sometimes you have to hurt people. But let's all be human while we do it.

Hannah McGregor: [39:11](#)

Yeah.

Kai Cheng Thom: [39:11](#)

And then because of that, I think we would do a lot less of it.

Hannah McGregor: [39:13](#)

Yeah. I'm thinking right now about a conversation I had recently with a friend about her brother who used to be an RCMP officer and the PTSD he has as a result of being an RCMP officer and how, you know, understanding that about, you know, particularly, you know... This is a person of colour who worked for the RCMP, you know, being a person of colour working within a historically white supremacist institution, but also having to both witness and participate in that kind of violence as a function of your job. And that's a really different way of thinking about the old adage, "All cops are bastards."

Kai Cheng Thom: [39:48](#)

Oh, yeah.

Hannah McGregor: [39:48](#)

Which is to say, how does policing itself as an institution, you know, transform people into something that they themselves wouldn't even want to be?

Kai Cheng Thom: [39:56](#)

Oh my God. I mean, that is the purpose of policing academies and military training, right? Like, if we think about how those things are structured, it's actually... It's funny because, you know, when I was a psychology student, you know, we learn about the psychology of cults. What is the psychology of a cult, right? Like, it removes someone from their social setting, you have to disrupt their sleep pattern, you hurl a bunch of new, very intense, oversimplified values at them, you can...you get them to exert themselves physically so they're exhausted, and you put them through, you know, a traumatic experience so they trauma bond. Oh!

Hannah McGregor: [40:24](#)

[Laughs]

Kai Cheng Thom: [40:24](#)

That's what the police academy does!

Hannah McGregor: [40:26](#)

Yeah.

Kai Cheng Thom: [40:26](#)

That is military basic training.

Hannah McGregor: [40:28](#)

Yeah.

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- Kai Cheng Thom: [40:28](#) Right?
- Hannah McGregor: [40:30](#) I've seen *G.I. Jane*. I know what it's about.
- Kai Cheng Thom: [40:30](#) [Laughs] I'm just saying, you know, the psychology of breaking a person, you know... Like this is a cult that's dedicated to saying, you know, "Your job is going to be to kill people and not feel bad about it or only feel bad about it, you know, abstractly later." There is no way a human soul could survive that intact. Right? Like it, it's a huge trauma and you know, it's, it's really intense watching some of the videos that have come from Wet'suwet'en, where of course the first people we should be worrying about are, you know, the elders and Indigenous land defenders who are being attacked. But you know, keeping those folks first and foremost in our hearts... If you look again, if you look at the bodies and the eyes and the faces of the enforcers, there is something incredibly, incredibly powerful about how you can see they know--
- Hannah McGregor: [41:15](#) Yeah...
- Kai Cheng Thom: [41:15](#) --that they're not human in that moment, but they are pushing forward anyway in their, you know, kind of their own dehumanization as they dehumanize others. And choosing love, I mean, means choosing not to be the enforcer, right?
- Hannah McGregor: [41:27](#) Yeah.
- Kai Cheng Thom: [41:27](#) Choosing, choosing to reclaim our humanity so that we can, you know, give space for others, to be human. And that is a hard choice. It's hard. Obviously it's hard for the police and the military, otherwise they'd be doing it, I hope, some of them... Some of them have, right? Like also some have, you know... Lots of, you see lots of people defecting from the military and the police all the time, but those stories don't get, you know, kinda [Laughs] plastered up too much.
- Hannah McGregor: [41:48](#) Yeah.
- Kai Cheng Thom: [41:48](#) And, and, and, you know, it's hard for us to choose it in, in social justice, particularly because we're so marginalized. Right? And it really is the darkest moment for a lot of us. Right? Like someone we know and love has done something awful. Right? Like, that's horrible.
- Hannah McGregor: [42:02](#) Mhm.

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- Kai Cheng Thom: [42:02](#) It's a big ask to say choose love and choose humanity. But I am asking it because I believe we can do it. You know? The trauma-informed movement in social justice has taken a turn in some ways toward, "Oh, because we're traumatized we can't, we can't do anything." Right? It's not... And it's true. You know, we have our limits. We, we shouldn't be, we shouldn't be asked to rise to superhuman levels, but... I believe we can.
- Hannah McGregor: [42:24](#) Which makes me think, both your reference to the dark magic of the law, but also this sort of rising to superhuman levels via love makes me think of how present witchcraft is and the figure of the witch is in--
- Kai Cheng Thom: [42:37](#) Ah, yes. [Laughs]
- Hannah McGregor: [42:38](#) --your book as well. So could you talk a little bit about sort of the role that the witch plays in this sort of--
- Kai Cheng Thom: [42:46](#) You are singing my song, Hannah.
- Hannah McGregor: [42:46](#) Imagining--
- Kai Cheng Thom: [42:46](#) Everything you're saying, it's everything I love. [Laughs]
- Hannah McGregor: [42:47](#) I just wanna talk about witches all the time.
- Kai Cheng Thom: [42:50](#) [Laughs] Yeah, a lot... Witches are so everything. I mean, I think witches are real, first of all, but I also think that witches are--
- Hannah McGregor: [42:57](#) Yeah, yeah. Obviously. [Laughs]
- Kai Cheng Thom: [42:57](#) Right? Like, c'mon. We are... This is what we are. But it's not easy to be a witch because witches... I mean, again, to mindfully choose to be a witch, right, is to mindfully choose a life of critical thinking. And if there's anything else that a witch is I think a witch is a woman who thinks critically, you know? Or, or just a person who thinks critically and follows the ethical compass of their heart. This is the greatest magic anyway, right? Because this is the opposite of the dark magic of the law, which says, "Let someone else think for you and absolve your responsibilities." The witch says, "I'm going to think for myself and feel for myself and then my responsibilities are mine." And this is why people fear the witch, right? This why people burn the witch because she takes into her own hands or his own hands. Right? There are, there are male witches obviously and non-binary witches, but you know, I'm speaking here from a bit of a weird second wave-y place, I guess, where the witch is

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always a woman. [Laughs] All trans women are witches, too. Anyway. But I'm just saying stuff now.

Hannah McGregor: [43:54](#) [Laughs]

Kai Cheng Thom: [43:54](#) But, let's see, like--

Hannah McGregor: [43:59](#) It's the end of the world, just say stuff!

Kai Cheng Thom: [43:59](#) Whatever, right? The witch chooses her own and accepts her own responsibility. And in so many, you know... The Wicked Witch, you know, chooses responsibility for her own pleasure and aggrandizement, which is not a bad thing necessarily. But if... It becomes bad when it comes at the expense of others, and the Good Witch—and you know, the good and evil witch can coexist in one another—the Good Witch chooses her responsibility to heal the world or to heal those around her. Right? And because she has thought critically, she has that knowledge if... Even if the knowledge is only you don't always listen to the law. And so people fear the witch because a) they feel her, they fear her power, right? She's beyond the dark magic of the law and so they have to destroy her with it [Laughs] in order to reclaim their dominance over her. And they fear her because she is a reminder that they have yet to claim their own responsibility in the world.

Hannah McGregor: [44:43](#) Mm.

Kai Cheng Thom: [44:43](#) Their own power and their own knowledge. And that fear... And this is also why people hate and fear...hated and feared gays and lesbians for so long, they still do in so many parts of the world and communities here, this is why people still hate trans women because we are so free. But a trans woman is always a witch, a trans person is always a witch because we have always chosen even, even when it's like an assimilationist trans person like Caitlyn Jenner, you know, whatever, like a trans person has always chosen to live beyond the law, always, literally--

Hannah McGregor: [45:10](#) Yep.

Kai Cheng Thom: [45:10](#) --for many years and still in many places. But for sure, like the social law, right?

Hannah McGregor: [45:15](#) Mhm.

Kai Cheng Thom: [45:15](#) We still always are breaking. We have to take responsibility for our own bodies and then we literally enact transformation upon

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ourselves. And then because we do that, we change everyone around us. And people fear this, right? They fear... Men fear trans women because they desire us and they fear not having made that choice. They're ashamed of it.

Hannah McGregor: [45:33](#)

Mhm.

Kai Cheng Thom: [45:33](#)

Women fear trans women because, you know, they fear that like, "Oh, choosing to be a woman. Like what would that mean?" Right? So the witch comes up in, in, in, *I Hope We Choose Love* because, you know, we have so much talk of witches in social justice community, blah blah blah. They've tried to burn us, et cetera, et cetera. All true. But we can't really be witches. We can't really have revolutionary magic unless we accept, you know, both the, both the sacrifice and the responsibility and the power of the witch, which is we are responsible for our own actions. You know, as abusers we are responsible, as people who are fighting abuse we are also responsible. And when we claim that together, that's when anarchist community becomes possible. It's not possible if we're not willing to take responsibility. That's why we need the law, actually people... We obviously need the law because people are crea--... We crave it, right?

Hannah McGregor: [46:21](#)

Mhm.

Kai Cheng Thom: [46:21](#)

We fear the approach of freedom. You know, Eric Fromm. We're not able to really build a feminist anarchist society until we all can take responsibility for our own integrity.

Hannah McGregor: [46:31](#)

I feel so... Talking with you is an experience very akin to reading your books, which is when I finished reading your books, I feel like it's significantly more possible to reimagine the world in a way that isn't terrifying and overwhelming all the time. And I think right at--

Kai Cheng Thom: [46:48](#)

Oh, yay!

Hannah McGregor: [46:48](#)

--at the heart of that is that sense of like, both sort of individual capacity within a loving collective. Which I think is so easily disintegrated by...

Kai Cheng Thom: [46:59](#)

Oh my goodness. Yeah.

Hannah McGregor: [47:00](#)

Neoliberalism and late capitalism--

Kai Cheng Thom: [47:02](#)

Fear and--

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- Hannah McGregor: [47:03](#) --and white supremacy.
- Kai Cheng Thom: [47:03](#) Oh my God.
- Hannah McGregor: [47:04](#) Yeah.
- Kai Cheng Thom: [47:05](#) Trauma... All that stuff. And I mean, here's the thing, is like... In you know, classic European folklore, which is someone who leaves the village and then lives in a chicken's foot hut or something--
- Hannah McGregor: [47:15](#) Goals.
- Kai Cheng Thom: [47:15](#) --in the woods.
- Hannah McGregor: [47:17](#) Yep.
- Kai Cheng Thom: [47:17](#) It's shitty because you leave the village behind. And then, you know, you have all these stories about seekers, usually on women, who go to seek the witch and that they're, you know... They don't know it, but they're in the process of becoming witches. Like Vasilisa, you know, goes to seek Baba Yaga. And in the process she's, you know, bringing home a skull of fire. [Laugh] Like, all this stuff or you know, *Hansel and Gretel*, all these kinds of things.
- Hannah McGregor: [47:36](#) Yeah.
- Kai Cheng Thom: [47:36](#) But that's the sacrifice. Is, you know... People are going to dislike you because you've become a witch and you're going to be lonely sometimes because you're a witch. But the gift of being a witch is, is that we start to be able to fear the world less despite it being so dangerous because the safety comes from within. We're not always turning and saying, you know, "Dark magic of the law, will you regulate other people to make me safe." Right? Will we close the borders to make us safe? Will we shut people in the tension to make us safe? Will we, you know, involuntarily quarantine, right, people to make us safe. We start to say, "I'll quarantine myself if I need to and I'll step out when I need to. I'll keep other people safe from the disease as I can and if I die, I die knowing I died me." And that... There's, there's nothing that can take that safety away from you.
- Hannah McGregor: [48:44](#) [Kai Cheng's Theme Music: "Piece of Me" by Britney Spears] If you want to learn more about Kai Cheng's work you can check out kaichengthom.com, that's K A I C H E N G T H O M.com or you can find her on Twitter @razorfemme. You can, of course,

find links and show notes as usual at [secretfeministagenda.com](http://secretfeministagenda.com). You can follow me on Twitter @hkpmcgregor and you can tweet about the podcast using the hashtag #secretfeministagenda. And of course, you can always review the show. After my sad plea in the last episode, we've got four new reviews from KirstieJane in Great Britain, MiaJ1999 in Australia, Joy&Rain in Canada, and Rhynoju here in Vancouver. Thank you all so much. The podcast theme song is "Mesh Shirt" by Mom Jeans off their album *Chub Rub*. You can download the entire album on [freemusicarchive.org](http://freemusicarchive.org) or follow them on Facebook. Kai Cheng's theme song was "Piece of Me" by Britney Spears. This episode was recorded on the traditional and unceded territories of the Musqueam, Squamish, and Tsleil-Waututh First Nations where I'm grateful to live and work. This has been *Secret Feminist Agenda*. Pass it on. [Theme Music: "Mesh Shirt" by Mom Jeans]