(theme music plays and stops)

**Tuck**: Welcome to Gender Reveal, a podcast where we hopefully get a little bit closer to understanding what the hell gender is. I’m your host and resident gender detective, Tuck Woodstock.

**Tuck**: Hey everyone, I hope you’re all still hanging in there. Welcome to 2021, baby, we did it! Even if this year is just as bad as last year somehow, you survived 2020 and nobody can take that away from you so, good job. This week on the show, one of my very favorite interviews of the season, and that is saying a lot, author Kai Cheng Thom is here to talk about, well obviously her books.

**Kai Cheng:** I wish I could rewrite “I Hope We Choose Love” actually all the time.

**Tuck:** But we also talk about Kai Cheng’s current life in the white Goop lady world, why she stopped being a therapist, the history of the word femme, surviving in various leftist spaces…

**Kai Cheng:** What’s gonna happen when we are problematic? Well we’d have to be gotten rid of so then we develop a complex around, well, I can never be problematic.

**Tuck:** It’s such a good conversation and it is spicy.

**Kai Cheng:** This is a daring thing to say, so you know I take responsibility for if it’s wrong.

**Tuck:** I do want to warn y’all that in the interview we touch upon concepts of assault and violence and suicidality. There are no details shared, but just a heads up, please take care of yourselves. But first, a different heads up! A heads up that our merch shop resets at the end of every month, as you probably know. So we’ve go three new designs on the site now, including one by Gender Reveal alum Maya Kovai. In addition to the new designs we’ve got a mini version of Beth’s “trans kids are wonderful,” a beautiful fanny pack version of Ariana’s “gender is a boundless expanse” artwork. I promise I got the printing boundaries right this time, and we rereleased Verrn’s “Not Gay as in Happy but Queer as in Fuck You” t-shirt and stickers, because we’re still getting away with selling a thing that says “fuck” somehow. Maybe that’s allowed. So check out the entire merch collection at bit.ly/gendermerch and if you would like to submit a design to the shop, you can reach out with ideas at genderpodcast.com. And now, it’s time for “This Week in Gender”.

(slow music plays)

**Tuck**: Okay, this is the longest interview we’ve ever run, so I’m going to make “This Week in Gender” very short, lightening round, politics news edition. So here we go, three things. One: In 2016 the Ohio Department of Health teamed up with the office of then Governor John Kasich to ban transgender Ohioans from updating the gender marker on their birth certificate. That is not news. The news is that last month a federal judge struck down that policy, clearing the way for trans people in Ohio to fix the gender marker on their birth certificates. In writing that “The court finds that the defendant’s proffered justifications are nothing more than thinly-veiled, post hoc rationales to deflect from the discriminatory impact of the policy.” Hell yeah, judge! Number two: thank you to Gender Reveal Alum Jerry Che for sharing that back in September the president of Argentina, Alberto Fernandez, signed a decree establishing a 1% employment quota for transgender people in the public sector. So, for every 100 people that the government hires, one needs to be trans, by my understanding. This is huge in general, but is especially huge because according to LGBTQ activists in Argentina, nearly 100% of transgender folks there have never had formal employment, so this is literally their first time getting a paycheck. And finally, number three: Joe Biden added a trans woman, former U.S. Navy Commander Shawn Skelly to his presidential transition team, and I bring this up only to say that now that we’re adding trans people to the transition team, it really makes me wonder why a single cis person has ever been allowed on something that’s called the transition team.

(music continues and stops)

**Tuck:** This has been, “This Week in Gender.”

(theme music plays)

**Tuck:** Kai Cheng Thom is a writer, performer, community worker, somatic educator, lasagna lover, and wicked witch. She is the author of four award-winning books in various genres, including the novel “Fierce Femmes and Notorious Liars,” which was featured on Emma Watsons’ feminist book club and the essay collection “I Hope We Choose Love.” Kai Cheng has spoken and published widely on the topics of trauma and transformative justice. A lifelong student of healing and change work, Kai Cheng is currently pursuing deep study in mindfulness meditation, breath-work facilitation, and conflict resolution.

(theme music stops).

**Tuck**: So, the way we always start the show is by asking, in terms of gender, how do you identify?

**Kai Cheng**: I identify as a woman, also as a trans woman, also as a non-binary trans woman.

**Tuck:** Yeah, I see you often refer to yourself as a transsexual and I would love to hear what appeals to you about the word transsexual specifically?

**Kai Cheng:** Oh that’s a really great question and I super want to answer it because I think it’s really juicy. You guess, you know, I’m a little protective of the word transsexual. I sort of wrap my arms around it and am like, nobody come for this word (laughs). And I say that because I’ve heard some really virulent takedowns of the term, transsexual, and I sort of get where their coming from but I still have that tenderness in me. Like I love the word transsexual. It doesn’t pop to mind as the first thing when I’m meeting a person, but, let me see, so. How do I come into being a transsexual? I certainly did not start out calling myself that when I first came out, which was when I was in my mid-teens as a kid in Vancouver, Canada. It was like the late 2000s, early 2010s.

The word transgender was newly in vogue, not trans quite yet, definitely not trans\*, nonbinary was not quite a thing where I was. It was beginning but it was not as big as it is now as an understood identity and it was still the time when cross-dresser and transvestite were considered [unintelligible] but still used by some people you know, my age. So transsexual, I remember I was being trained to give these workshops in high schools about homophobia and queerness and I would always say, “What do we think transgender is? Transgender is an umbrella term blah, blah, blah.” And then I would say “What do we think transsexual is? Transsexual is a term that refers to people who have had a medical transition. It comes from the medical-industrial complex blah, blah, blah.” Already even then, this sort of shade of disdain, it comes from the medical complex.

And then, I don’t remember quite who or where but there seemed to be these extra critiques layered onto that. Like, “and it’s sexual, it foregrounds sex, but being trans is not about sexuality, its about gender, so why are we making it all about sex, that’s sort of voyeuristic”. And then people were saying “and it’s old and it’s so much about the body, and why aren’t we thinking about larger structures then the individual body, we should be doing big gender critiques.” I went to University by that time so, I was getting all these heavy things and I was like “okay, I guess” so I sort of just absorbed this idea that transgender was me, especially because I hadn’t had any medical transition at the time, and also because it was more fashionable and politically cool and stuff. And then I started medical transition and I went on hormones and became really tied to the medical-industrial complex in that way that any of us who rely on a medication or surgical procedure, we become tied to the medical/industrial complex and I felt shame.

I also became more tied into networks of women of color who identified as transsexual and it became clear to me that many of the critiques of transsexual as being somehow sexually dirty and not intelligently revolutionary and too individualistic, those terms were, part of my shame, part of it was just me. And then largely these critiques, I had heard them from white, upper-class transmasculine people that I met at University, at McGill University in Montreal and so around that time I started to hear trans women of color my age really, beautifully reclaiming that term “transsexual.” You know there’s an amazing, quite a few amazing videos of people saying “I’m not transgender, I’m transsexual, fuck you!” because it foregrounds the need for medical rights, for determination over one’s own body, and the right to a sexuality even as trans. And so yeah, I was really into that for a while but then I stopped doing medical transition, I went off hormones because I felt like I needed to, and I was like, maybe I’m not a transsexual anymore, so I went through this whole thing, and I’m not quite sure where I land in terms of am I a transsexual or not these days, but I certainly think that we all have a right to the gender and sexuality identity terms that feel right for us. And I have such, such a tender spot for anyone who identifies as transsexual or for transsexuality, I just think that’s something that is deeply worthy. So that’s how I feel about it.

**Tuck:** Yeah, I appreciate you sharing all that so much. You know, you have an advice column, it’s called “Advice for the Apocalypse”. You have the book where the subtitle is “a trans girl’s notes from the end of the world.” Both of these were titled pre-pandemic. Then I keep trying to write a question and I’m just like “???” I think I just want to hear, compared to the mindset that you were in when you were titling these things, how end-of-the-worldy are you feeling? Does it feel the same, does it feel different, does it feel more or less apocalyptic I guess is my question?

**Kai Cheng:** Oh, that’s so funny, because I thought your question was going to be “Did you see the future?” (laughs) “Are you prophetic or something?” I love this question, I’m glad you noticed that my brand is apocalypse-themed right now. You know, I’ve gone through so many answers for this. I feel like a really cool, social justice answer would be “the world was ending since before we were born.” Which it was. Very literally, many, many people’s worlds, indigenous people’s worlds, were ended by European colonization and by other kinds of imperialism as well, so that’s an important, politically astute answer as well. I think, another, more personal to me answer is, my world started falling apart, well, I guess always, but my queer world really fell apart around 2015, 2016. And that was maybe particular to my cohort of anarchist, Montreal, queer friends. The thing you need to know about Montreal is that it is sort of like Berlin. The rent is cheaper than most places, like most major cities, so there’s a lot of artists, and sex nerds, and cool folks, a lot of queers and a lot of punks. And queerness and punkness and anarchism are so connected in Montreal in ways that they just aren’t in New York or Toronto where I am now. There’s still a heavy queer punk contingent but in Montreal you really can’t be queer without being a little punk and you really can’t be punk without being an anarchist. At least you couldn’t at the time. And there were all of these horrible tragedies that happened in my group of early twenty-something queers, late teens queers, where people experienced assault at the hands of each other and there were some attempts at addressing that and they went really wrong, most of those attempts, so. So for me I think, the end of that world was like, I really had to grow up but when I was forced to see that these ideas that I was really, sort of strongly indoctrinated in. I don’t say that in a negative way, I believed them strongly and I still kinda do, just a little less now, about community being better equipped than the authorities to handle interpersonal violence, I had to really question that because that was not the evidence in front of my eyes. And I am still a police abolitionist and a prison abolitionist in a very deep way, but I really lost my faith that normal people have a better way or better knowledge of how to deal with violence. We create so much more violence. Police create violence, prisons create violence, and also, to a lesser extent, but in a different way, your normal, everyday, anarchist queer also creates violence. And that was a deep tragedy for me, my world ended then, and now it’s the pandemic, there’s all other kinds of worlds ending. Does it feel more apocalyptic to me now then it did in 2016? No, I guess. Because you know I was always ready for economic devastation, I don’t know why, I think maybe it’s being a child abuse survivor but I always sort of thought “ah yes, well, my family will die, and the economy will collapse, and my house will burn down.” But it was this emotional devastation that really, really sunk in around 2015, 2016. You know of course you can’t count on the bigger system, of course you can’t count on capitalism, but I guess a really naïve part of me thought that I could count on my friends and on my community in a really particular way and you know, I really learned that I couldn’t in 2015, 2016. This is not to be nihilistic, I have lots of close friends and I believe in the power of friendship, My Little Pony, and stuff but there was an unfair, childish, I think a little naïve expectation I had that you could take young, or even older, traumatized people, and put them under conditions of extreme stress, right, extreme stress, extreme violence, and then expect that we would magically figure out how to replace the prison-industrial complex all on our own, by Tuesday. That was naïve. And so, I don’t feel like it is more apocalyptic now in that way because that was always true, I just came to see it in that year.

**Tuck:** Yeah, in your book “I Hope We Choose Love”, that book takes its title from this essay on love-based justice and I know that justice is a huge part of the work that you do, the writing that you do. It seems like you’ve gone through different iterations of what justice has meant to you or looked like to you, as you were just referring to. Can you speak to what justice means to you now and how you think we can work towards justice in queer and trans communities if that’s a thing you think we should work towards.

**Kai Cheng:** I like to say a lot, and I said this all the time on the tour for “I Hope We Choose Love.” I hope we choose love, I don’t think we’ll choose love, but also, you know, 2016 was the year I lost faith in community, but I didn’t’ lose hope in community. And that’s an interesting, that does tie actually into my obsession with yoga and meditation and wellness culture, which we might talk about later in this podcast I suppose, because that’s a non-dualism; to lose faith but not hope. To hope but not believe. How do we hold those tww really contradictory things? That was sort of the dilemma that broke my brain a little bit. What does that mean for justice? Well, I think we need to keep working towards a loving, healing, transformative justice and I don’t just say that as an affect. I wish I could rewrite “I Hope We Choose Love” all the time, actually, because “I Hope We Choose Love” was heavy on affect, on emotion, and analysis but it was not super big on concrete, structured solutions, which would have been a lot to ask of a 25-year-old, 24 year old, writer, at the time. Now that I’m at the ripe age of 29 (Tuck laughs) you know.

**Tuck:** Yes, as a fellow 29-year-old, we know everything.

**Kai Cheng:** Exactly, wise elders looking down, right? (laughter) That’s funny. The sad thing, of course, is that most of us at 29 as 29 year old transsexuals or transgenders we haven’t had trans older people right. I don’t have real trans elders really, apart from maybe, I don’t really know if I do. But it takes more than feeling like we want to replace the prison system or the police system, which we have lots of that now, we have lots of feeling, but you might notice. This is a daring thing to say so I take responsibility for if it sounds wrong in anyway. You might notice though that a lot of the people in media and social media, and perhaps also real life, who are saying “I want to abolish the police” in another moment of stress, and feeling threatened might say “throw those other people in prison,” right? There’s a lot of people saying “I’m an abolitionist but abusers should bet the death sentence,” right? And that is not, to my thinking, an abolitionist framework.

There are lots of, like, I believe in revenge fantasies, I like revenge fantasies and I believe that we have the right to anger, but if we are to have a coherent, workable, politic that drives community action, we need to be able to separate our fantasy of revenge and our emotion of anger from a consistent ethic of abolitionism. Or we don’t and then we can make a clear choice about that. I’m just saying we need actual structures. Like what is community mediation? We need to know the answer to that question. This is what I’m doing now, I’m doing a certificate in alternative dispute resolution. Like what are the nuts and bolts of how, for example, mediation works or restorative justice circle, how do you actually do that? How does transformative justice work? And I really like this sort of nuts and bolts approach because you take a real case-study, you take an example from your life, I mean I’m getting in a conflict all the time, I just had a few yesterday, but each one becomes its own little laboratory for what are the actual skill-sets and frameworks that I can use to resolve them, hopefully in a more loving way, and if one looks into transformative justice you’ll see a lot of people in queer communities saying “transformative and restorative justice, transformative and restorative justice” as if that were a single phrase, and people sort of think that means that you get together in a circle and you talk about all the bad things, and that is kind of true but actually there is deep theory, deep scholarship, deep practice, many, many, many, many nuances but I don’t mean like thought nuances, I mean like practice nuances.

 Like when do you bring people together after a harm? What do you do first? What do you do after? What do you do if someone in an accountability process decides to call the police or decides to sue someone? Like, what are all the steps that you can do to make these things safer, more likely to succeed? How do you define success? Like no one is going to be holding hands and singing Kumbaya probably after a serious harm and accountability process, so how will you know you’ve succeeded? These very tangible measures are how I tend to look at justice now, like what’s actually happening at the end. And if what’s happening at the end is like, oh well, some more people got hurt then at the beginning of the process, I’m not super inclined to look at that as a success.

**Tuck:** So you used to be a therapist, what made you leave the therapy profession?

**Kai Cheng:** Partly, I’ll just say I was burnt out. I was a very devoted therapist, hopefully my clients would agree with me (laughs). I was very devoted and I worked in the public sector, so I wasn’t someone who had my own business and people paid me money to see me. I worked in an agency and people came to see me for free off a waitlist. I started practicing therapy as a student, when I was 21, which was probably too young. And the very first year, I remember, I saw this pair of psychiatrists who were running a sexuality and gender clinic at a hospital in Montreal and they said “Oh you” they didn’t really say this but “who’s this kid, ok, we’ll help you out.” So then they gave me this practicum and immediately I had seven or eight clients on a caseload who were deeply traumatized, queer people, for the most part, not all of them. And I mean, I have such respect for those people working with little, young me, with great forbearance. And then, as I got older, I realized, it was very clear to me that I had to learn a ton, so I started listening to therapy podcasts and reading all these therapy books and I really, you know, people were counting on me.

And by the time I got my first professional job, I had been kind of slotted into doing trans therapy work. And in Canada, I’m still, to this day, the only Master’s degree level clinician, even though I’m not practicing, I’m still the only one, who is an open trans woman, today in Canada, I’ve never met another, ever. So you know, you can imagine, since I was working also for free that I got a lot of referrals for people who were in some really tough circumstances. When one is working with wealthier people, mental health work is a wonderful thing. You’re working on thoughts and feelings and you know, traumas. When one is working with people who don’t have a ton of money, or in this case lots of folks were in pretty difficult financial circumstances, it’s a lot harder. Because there is no real way that you can heal a trauma, like feel safer, when maybe your living situation is actually unsafe right? So the burnout factor was high.

And then the other piece is that I got really interested in what happens outside of the therapy bubble, outside of this one-on-one interaction. We have all of this knowledge about healing individuals that’s a bit useless if the individual doesn’t have access to a better world, so the question is, you make the better world for them. And I sort of, because of my own experiences, and interests, landed on this, well I don’t have a ton of power over the social welfare system or anything, but I bet I could do some work around making our communities a bit better at dealing with conflict, we’ll see how much success I have. I’m deeply interested in conflict, I’m studying conflict, I’m not yet very good at conflict (laughs) so we will see.

**Tuck:** Yeah, there is this essay in your book where you talk about working with trans and gender nonconforming kids as a therapist and something I was really thinking about when I was reading it was when you talk about how some kids, like disproportionality affluent, white kids, have these parents that are giving them this open access to medical and legal transition because they’re really invested in their kids assimilating and passing and being stealth if they want to. And then there are these other kids that are, of course, disproportionately poor and non-white, who don’t have access to any of that. Really access to any resources. That makes me wonder what this new era in transness is going to look like, and I think you make that point in that book pretty well but there’s this new wave of trans kids could be really revolutionary but also some of them have this ability that they could actually assimilate more easily than you or I could. I’m curious what your thoughts are on, yeah, I didn’t mean to say the future of trans kids, but I guess that is kinda my question?

**Kai Cheng:** I have lots of thoughts on the future of trans kids. It’s funny you should ask this because I think about this all the time and I don’t get a ton of opportunities to talk about it these days but. Yeah, I have a day job but I still work in the non-profit sector in mental health, just not as a clinician, and my main function is supporting trans youth’s families these days, in a variety of different ways. And it’s really fascinating to see that there is a big sea change in trans class dynamics, I think really similar to something that happened around gay and lesbian and bisexual cis people’s class dynamics. Because it used to be much more common, it still is common in a lot of places, but it was sort of everyone’s story that if you came out, and were a gay man or a lesbian woman, then you would necessarily become, probably, at least a little bit, associated with working class folks, right, hustlers, sex workers, this kind of thing. And obviously there were exceptions to that but because the gay and lesbian and bisexual world had to be a hidden one and that was a world where classes mixed much more and where the downward class mobility was really kind of a main narrative.

And that remained true for trans people, and it still is true for trans people, it’s true for people all over the world, but there is this growing middle-class of mostly white gay and lesbians, cis people, that is. And what’s really fascinating about trans folks is that is kind of happening now too. There’s this class of liberal parents, mostly white, but not all white, who have some ideas, that are good ones about supporting trans people. So when their kids come out it’s sort of like, could be a little difficult, some stress, sadness, fear mostly, on the parts of the parents, but then they sort of buck up and get their kid a photo shoot for the next Christmas card now that the wardrobe is replaced. Then there’s appointments made at the hospital and you know, by and large, it’s worked into the process of a middle-class life. And simultaneously there are still the kids who are being kicked out of their homes or who don’t have access to medical care for reasons of class or racialized barriers, what’s really fascinating is you have this huge surge of transmasculine youth patients at gender clinics and not as many transfeminine people, and lots of questions about that.

So the future of trans kids, I mean unfortunately, I do see, like a lot of younger trans people may not have… I mean this is both fortunate and unfortunate, they might have stronger relationships with their families, which is good, but maybe less perspective on what it means to be a trans woman of color sex worker, those realities are coming further and further apart. And while I’m happy for the people who don’t have to suffer as much, I worry about what that means for our class solidarity in the trans community.

**Tuck:** Yeah, I think that is a really good point. That’s something I think about all the time because one of my main jobs is fundraising for trans people of color specifically and I have a really hard time just talking to straight, cis, white people a lot of the time because their idea of what constitutes wealth is so different, and that is something that I think comes out of transness. Like if you are trans, many of the people you know are going to be struggling so hard to find housing and healthcare and employment that you, I feel at least, I am so, I feel so acutely privileged just for having very basic needs met, and I think that perspective is really important, you know. But also, obviously, my ideal solution to that is not more people suffer (laughs). My ideal solution to that is actually less suffering.

**Kai Cheng:** Yes, exactly.

**Tuck:** But as long as there is suffering I want people to see it so, yeah. So, I want to make sure we get to talk about “Fierce Femmes and Notorious Liars.” The book is obviously very much focused around femmes, the concept, as a collective. And I try to ask every femme who comes on the show what femme means to them because it is always is a really different answer, so, what does femme mean to you and what were you trying to express about femmeness in this book?

**Kai Cheng:** Yeah, I felt this wave of sadness as I thought about it because it feels like what I was saying about femmes when I wrote “Fierce Femmes and Notorious Liars” is almost already no longer a thing. And in the really, really rapid swirl of queer culture and new culture today. When I was transitioning for the second time because I came out as a teenager and then I went back in, was like forced back in by my family, and it was bizarre. I came out and went back in and then I kinda forgot that I was trans. It is amazing what the mind does, I had a couple years where I was like “I guess I’m just cis” and then I had a near-death experience and was like “nope, I’m trans.” So I was in Montreal, Berlin, New York, perhaps some other places, San Francisco, these sort of Anglo Western queer culture was kind of having the femme-masc wars, right? 2012 and people were like “I’m a femme!” And it was popular for some reason at the time to say, among lesbians that femmes had straight-passing privilege and butches and…

**Tuck:** I remember this.

**Kai Cheng: …**were oppressed. Was a serious argument at the time. And at the same time femmes were noticing that femininity was being really devalued especially among lesbian and trans AFAB communities. We were just starting to use AFAB then I guess. And then among gay men and trans women, there was this kind of noticing that gay male culture was so obviously hypermasc in some ways and that the femininity of those time was also really denigrated. So there was this hot, shining second where all these people of different, feminine persuasions were coming together and being like “Femme, we’re into it!” And I loved that moment but there was always this question of are trans women femmes or shouldn’t trans women be a different category or whatever. And I loved being a femme, I loved, I mean this is going to sound really shallow, but I loved the heels and the makeup and the dress part of it. Not just because I wanted to be girly, although I really did that too, but I loved the power of that. Like the transgression, saying that femininity, for all of its stereotyping and problematicness, is also valuable. That the way towards a more feminist world was not to strip away these things like beauty, frivolity, gracefulness, these things that are stereotypically associated with the feminine but to celebrate care and beauty and ornamentation and all of this stuff. And I really wanted trans women to have a part in that. So when I wrote “Fierce Femmes” I substituted the word trans or transgender or trans woman, a lot of the time, with the word femme, because that was sort of how we were using it at the time and it was sort of an echo of the time when, I mean still today, when lesbian femmes would say things like “hey femme” to each other, where there was this mutual recognition of the femme sisterhood. I still have that with some of my older femme friends so, yeah, that is what femme is to me. It’s deep history and beauty and unfortunately or maybe fortunately, I don’t know, I see that politic has already gone away and there’s whole new politics. And then there’s critiques of the femme politic, what about the butch trans women, and what about that, and there’s just all this stuff about femme and masc that don’t quite work for everyone. So I like the critique but I do have nostalgia for the days of the High Femmes, Low Femmes, Glory Femmes, I do miss that.

**Tuck:** Yeah, it’s so funny because this show is only three years old, a little more than three years old, and I realized when I was asking you that question, I almost didn’t ask it because I felt like the landscape has changed so much since when I started asking people that question, but yeah, still wanted to glad that I did…

**Kai Cheng:** Me too.

**Tuck:** …. Great, great answer. Well this book is fiction but it’s subtitled “a dangerous trans girl’s confabulous memoir” and you write at the very beginning “someone had to write us trans girls a dangerous story, a transgender memoir but not like most of the 11,378 transgender memoirs out there.” And like, that really tapped into the frustration I have with a lot of trans memoir, #NotAllTransMemoir, but I get a lot of galley copies as someone who does this job and so many trans memoirs sound exactly the same and they’re so clearly written for cis people and so yeah, can you just talk, I know you’ve done this before, but can you talk about the tropes you were trying to avoid in this book?

**Kai Cheng:** Oh for sure, I’ve done it before but I never tire of it (laughs). Well, as you say, the memoir was sort of the original, in the Western, European canon at least, and I imagine in other canons too. Sort of the prototypical trans prose format, the tell-all, the memoir, the autobiography, the story of my shocking sex change, and it was almost always trans women writing that story. There’s quite a few transmasculine versions of it too, but I think trans women sort of kicked off the genre. You know that line in “Fierce Femmes” that you quote is sort of flippant, speaking as Kai Cheng Thom, the author, I have a lot of softness, tenderness around trans memoir too because it takes so much courage to write one, for most people, and they paved the way but also like the tropes are like, well when I was young I was always different, marked for difference, sort of like the Rudolph story, all the other reindeer laughed and called me names and then I found a doctor and there was something that happened with my family and it was either tragic or I thought it would be tragic but there was a plot twist and they supported me. Then I had a difficult romance and someone broke up with me because I was trans and then very unfortunately there’s a trope, which I think is kinda true to life, trans people getting sexually harmed in their forays into romance and this desperate pursuit of surgery and always wanting what’s… (dramatic voice) what I see in the mirror to match what I feel on the inside, right?

**Tuck:** Yeah, I’ve watched Mulan recently, I’ve seen that.

**Kai Cheng:** (laughs) I love that song, don’t get me wrong, I’ve done burlesque to that song. But it is a trope and it feels trapped. And I’ll tell you something interesting, I’m not sure I’ve mentioned this on an interview before. I really wanted to write a trans memoir, I just wanted to write one that was really interesting and that people liked and the fashion was really changing right at that time that “Fierce Femmes” was being written. There was a wave of new trans literature, also mostly trans women though not entirely, starting with “Nevada” from Topside Press, and it was a lot of white trans women too, not to knock that but just to say that that’s what it was. And there was this strong, strong push to be like “No to the memoir! No to self-disclosure! No to the lone trans person character! Like we want multiple trans person characters, inter-trans dialogue.” And I was kinda like, that’s awesome but I also want a book that’s like a road map, TS Roadmap, right, how do I become trans? So that’s kinda what, I was thinking about this, you know why is the memoir not satisfying but also why am I not satisfied by, not that I disliked it, I loved “Nevada,” but why do I feel like I have something to add to this conversation that’s not there yet. And “Fierce Femmes” is a roadmap. It is meant to be a how-to in certain ways, not in others, obviously, but it’s, it’s not a how-to how to do murder, no friend (laughs). But it is a how-to about survival, because I wasn’t looking for a how-to about how do I get hormones and survive a sexual assault, I was looking for a how-to about how do I be brave, and fierce, and find sisterhood, and that kind of thing, and that’s kinda of how “Fierce Femmes” and its sort of anti-memoir got born.

**Tuck:** Yeah, and definitely not to knock trans memoir and particularly the trans memoir that did get us here, like the trans memoir of years past. I think all of my frustration is misguided, to be clear, because there are so many books by cis people, why am I not frustrated? But I think my frustration with recent trans memoir is my feeling that comes up with a lot of trans media oriented towards cis people, which is “we have seen this already, and this already exists, and what is a new thing that we can contribute.” Which is why I appreciate you being like “this is a new thing I can contribute,” because your book is well known for a reason because it is doing something that we don’t see often.

**Kai Cheng:** Thank you, can I say something daring that you might not sort of be heading toward but I’m sort of going to push myself into deep possible hot water? I hear you because I respect trans memoir and I love trans memoir and, and and and, ooh, this is the daring thing, here it comes: I think that in the recent years, like maybe past 5, 10 years there’s been trans memoir that’s come out that feels very commercial.

**Tuck:** Yes!

**Kai Cheng:** Like super commercial, and I’m not going to say any names but I’m sure we can think of some highly, highly commercialized trans autobiographies or life narratives that’s very aimed at cis people, it’s sort of inspirational brand, and I’m like, I actually don’t like those memoirs. And you know what, you said that thing about why aren’t we frustrated with cis books, and that’s true but I am frustrated with cis books all the time. And I don’t know, if one is a like a super famous, very wealthy trans person, like on main stream TV, then of all people probably they could afford to be daring right? And I would contrast that with memoir like Janet Mock does a classic trans memoir but her memoir is very daring even though it is classic and so I see commercialized trans narratives out there and I don’t like them, I’m gonna be real.

**Tuck:** I think that is the word that I was looking for that really does define it is commercialized trans memoir.

**Kai Cheng:** That’s the thing and I actually tried to write a short story about this once, never finished it, about a dystopia where you know how there sprang up a gay wedding industry after gay marriage were legalized in the states? Well I could very easily imagine a transition industry all about like the party and the renaming and the new clothes. You have a transition coach who would coach your 16-year-old and just the intense privilege that would come up around certain trans kids and then the intense ignoring that would come up around trans kids of color, trans people in prison, older trans people, right? Just there being a respectable, liberal way to be trans and that was in opposition everything that trans liberation movements have stood for over the past 50, 60 years. I could really easily envision that happening in the next decade and I don’t want it, I reject it, I am saying no!

**Tuck:** You mention quite a few times in “I Hope We Choose Love” that you’re queer famous, or another word you use is micro-celebrity, a lot of the things you wrote about with your experience with that really spoke to me. You said “for all its edgy pretentions social justice culture had not prepared me for the havoc that abuse, mental illness, and the immense pressure of living as a known, trans woman of color in the social media era could wreak upon my soul.” Do you think there is anything that could have prepared you for that?

**Kai Cheng:** (laughs) Oh, great question. Could anything have prepared me for that? (sighs) I don’t know, I’m leaning towards probably not. However, I do wish, like an impossible kind of wish that I had had real elders, but not really like elder elders. I mean like could I have had real mentors, or good parents to be honest. I love my parents, but they didn’t know how to parent me. I was a young a person who was thrashing, just absolutely hurling myself onto the social media platforms in a desperate bid to be seen and I see that in so many trans, young people, and I guess now lots of Millennials who are not so young. You know, to be a former therapist, and also to have worked with many trans youth, I’ve worked with many trans micro-celebrities and I saw that they were struggling with the same things I was struggling with. And I wish that instead of having to go to social media for that validation, which is, people kind of knock validation and attention-seeking but let’s be real, people, especially young people, but all people, need attention, we need validation, it’s actually an essential part of mental health is to be affirmed and validated. And because so many of us just didn’t get it from our schools or our parents, we turned to social media and got stuck in a loop of, the attention of social media is love, but it isn’t.

It’s conditional, it’s dangerous, it’s very traumatic, and what it actually is, is a codependent relationship in most cases. Were so reliant on this sort of merging of minds that happens on social media, and then the minute something wrong happens, it explodes and blows up and then we delete our account and then we come on the next week. I wish that someone had kinda told me, not just told me, that someone could have been there for me. And you know I talk to a lot of, I used to have clients who are trans, young people, I still have a lot of friends who are younger than me, I try to be really conscious that the six year difference sometimes, or the four year difference, can be big, because, unfortunately, you just have to grow up so fast as a trans person. I try to say things that people matter outside of their social media presence or outside of their performance life or their art life or whatever. These things that we think are so important in the trans, queer world, like art is weirdly important to us, art is amazing but it’s not everything right?

It’s not everything to be a famous model or actress or writer or cartoonist. That we’re valuable outside of that, outside of our political expression too, is super key and, it’s funny because I say these things, I see them sort of go in and also not, right. People are like, yeah sure, I’m going to continue being an influencer and that’s good too, that’s also fine. I just would hope that we could grow healthier relationships to that, and I’m trying to go for that myself. I don’t always know that I’m succeeding but I for sure know that it’s so, so important to have friends that don’t only care about you because you’re a microceleb.

**Tuck:** Something else that really resonated with me is you writing about how being a known person in this world, in the SJW world, is like to be pushed to be perfect all the time for all people but the consequence of failure is punishment, and I’m just reading now. I guess I’m just wondering how you’ve gotten to a space, or if you’ve gotten to a space, that you felt comfortable existing in a community that is so quick to tear people down at the slightest infraction?

**Kai Cheng:** Mmm, love this, well, as I have wandered the world I have learned that it is not just us (laughs) it is not just the queers, it’s also small, religious communities, small migrant communities, different values often, different rules but the tearing down is sort of this universal, almost, thing. It’s quite new I suspect that we have this huge mainstream society, where anonymity used to be the norm, obviously it’s not now, but until like the thousands anonymity was the normish and there was this idea that you were separate from your work or your whatever. And the mainstream got everything wrong, but I do like that idea, that we can be kinda separate occasionally. I don’t know if that’s a sustainable idea but anyway, how did I become comfortable? I guess I resigned myself to interdependence, hopefully not codependence, but there’s some of that. I did a lot of thinking about how does a small community work? Because lots have worked for, you know, hundreds and hundreds of years. And how does it work to be an individual in a small community. And you know that’s an ongoing exploration, what I’ve sort of landed on is, I need to know what the values of the collective are, I need to be empathetic to the values of the collective, and I need to have my own values, like I need to do my own individuation work, really explore myself, to know what it is I believe.

And this is also kinda where I get into my yoga, meditation, wellness world love and that’s one way to go about it, but you can go about individuation in any number of ways and what I really think is important, and is not an indulgence, is not liberalism, is taking the responsibility for knowing yourself and knowing what you stand for is key, it is a key part of being an adult in a highly networked community because it is so easy, if we don’t know ourselves, and even if we do it’s still pretty easy, to relinquish responsibility for our ethical actions when we get lost in the roar of the mob. And so when the collective says, your friend is problematic, so let’s kick them out, or in my case I’ve seen “that person is problematic, so let’s beat him up,” like physically, it was a real thing. It is very easy in the fear, in the righteousness, in the not wanting to be wrong, to be like yeah, I’ll beat up my friend. Or yeah, I won’t talk to that person anymore or whatever, right?

And I’ve done that, I’ve made that decision, not to beat anyone up, but to drop people or bash people online or stuff. Like I’ve done that, it’s happened, and stepped out of my integrity and that is not ethical, that is not right. So it’s not that I’ve become comfortable taking a contrarian position, because I’m actually very uncomfortable all the time, but I’ve become more uncomfortable with nodding along or letting things go just because everyone else seems to be saying that’s how it has to be. And that’s because I’ve unfortunately really seen some bad shit happen, like on my watch, when I didn’t stand up for my values, and so this is like me baring my soul now but I really mean, horrible, horrible, horrible things, like life changing harm I’ve witnessed happen in community that I didn’t always stand up to, or didn’t stand up to in time, and that has made me deeply depressed, and even suicidal at some points and so my survival, like the survival of my soul, the survival of my body, in some ways the survival of others who count on me, that is predicated on being honest. And I don’t always do that well, I don’t even always do an okay job of that, but it is what I am dedicated to in this life.

**Tuck:** That reminds me of one more thing that I want to make sure that we talk about because I think it’s really important that people hear it and I think you speak to it really well. As trans people we talk a lot about how the gender binary is false and harmful and biological sex binary is false and harmful but you point out something I really like in your book, which is that there are other binaries that are false and harmful and that includes oppressor vs. oppressed and survivor vs. abuser and really problematic vs. pure. Can you talk a bit about the harm that happens when we split people into this problematic/unproblematic binary or the abuser/abused binary.

**Kai Cheng:** Oh yes, this could be a book on its own (laughs). Yeah, I mean, the harm, it could be a book because it’s vast. The harm of the binary right? And it is sort of just the same harm as the binaries that you mentioned that we’re so good at naming. We’re good at naming that the gender binary is harmful and the biological sex binary is harmful. Why? Because it erases people, it dehumanizes them and at its extreme, which we have seen many times in history, that the binary also then gives way to excuses for heinous actions on the part of the medical complex or the police complex or the justice, the supposed justice complex, and binaries have been used like that for many, many, many years to various extremes. And they can’t all be compared because they’re not all comparable but when we start to sort people into binaries, we start to dehumanize because we lose individual context. And it’s a very kinda slidey scale there when we attach moral worth to a certain part of a binary, like maybe males are better than females, or maybe straight people are better than queer people, that moral attachment really quickly becomes, then maybe all those other people who are not that valuable maybe they should disappear, or just shut up, or become subservient, like all these kinds of things.

So I want us to talk about his carefully because it requires care. The binary of good and evil, or like pure and problematic, those binaries, they do that same thing. I get why we need them or why we want them. I was just talking about values and integrity, standing in your values, and it’s so hard to stand in our values in this confusing, horrible, violent world, traumatic world. And there’s biological reasons for this too, like our brain becomes attenuated to this black and white thinking, this quick sorting, who’s a friend, who’s a foe. It becomes very tempting and in some cases very strategic to say I am just going to write this category of people off. Anybody who’s problematic they’re never going to harm me again, that’s sort of where that comes from, they are never going to hurt me again. And I’m super sympathetic to that, but we lose the context and we start to lose our discernment and that discernment is if we’re always saying that we’re going to get rid of all the problematic people, what’s going to happen when we are problematic? Well we’d have to be gotten rid of, so then we develop a complex around well, I can never be problematic.

And this is where all kinds of weird, bizarre, painful stuff can happen, our collective delusion that anyone could ever be pure, like politically pure, or not harmful. Being a human is to harm others. I harmed something today by eating a hamburger, right? It is just, that is part of our existence, that we hurt others. It’s not a good thing but we have to admit it and it is so difficult to do that work of integrating that reality that we lash out at others. And then there is lot of writing about this, I’m probably going to get cancelled just for saying this but Sarah Schulman writes about this mentality in “Conflict is Not Abuse” when she is focusing on the Israel/Palestine conflict/occupation. The idea that having suffered horrible, horrible ancestral trauma and social violence and genocide could justify a colonization of another indigenous peoples, right, that’s sort of where this binary starts to take us. And yeah, I’m not there for it. And the last binary you mentioned is the survivor/perpetrator dynamic and that’s the one that requires the most care, at least I think it does, as it’s so sensitive.

And I want to be clear, there is a lot of really shitty ways that my work and Sarah Schulman’s work and Porpentine Charity Heartscape’s work, anyone who is writing about nuance, and conflict, and transformative justice even adrienne maree brown, there’s many kinds of way this work could be used to delegitimize survivor’s truth and I hate that, I’m not there for it. There’s so many ways that any rhetoric can be used to deflect real accountability or honesty, and that’s disgusting, I hate it. But it’s also a truth, we can hold more than one truth at the same time, that being human is to harm and as Mariame Kaba says, “no one is introduced to violence as a perpetrator.” No one is introduced to violence as a perpetrator. So when we start to ask ourselves the question, how do we end violence? Actual, I just don’t believe it is a functional answer to say, we’re just going to get rid of the violent people. That’ll just be this endless cycle of trying to get rid.

We have to start talking about why do we do violence, and what does it look like when we do violence, how can we tell the truth about that? And that is so much messier than there is a group of predatory people who are all evil and they’re just hiding among us, waiting for the opportunity. The truth is that that harmful being is usually someone lashing out in their own attempt to survive, often misguided attempt to survive. And the only way were going to not have that problem in such a present way is to ask what is it that we need to survive and then make sure everybody gets that.

**Tuck:** This is the part of the show where I ask you if there is anything else you want to talk about that I haven’t asked you about yet?

**Kai Cheng:** Oooh, yes! (laughs) I’ll just have one thing, thank you.

**Tuck:** You can have as many things as you want (laughs).

**Kai Cheng:** Okay, well then, two. One really cool thing I heard about trauma from a clinician, way back when I was still doing continuing ed for social work, was that one form of trauma is the painful, embodied memory that has no words. This thing we feel that we don’t know how to speak to out loud, because literally the words aren’t there. And that has me thinking about what happens when we’re denied language, queers and trans people, sexualities and genders that are non-normative. So many of us just don’t even have any words for that, particularly those of us who grew up, you know, a little bit before the current generation. So, like that’s a trauma. And so like when we think about the stuff that so many of us are thinking and feeling about social justice community and the ways we hurt each other, but there’s no words because it’s scary to say, we haven’t even been told the ways to say it, I think that’s a trauma. I think we need to see this work of unveiling the binaries we create and building transformative justice as healing work, and it’s slow and scary but it’s healing us. Anyway, that’s my thing one. Thing two is you mentioned at the beginning of the podcast I’ve done a lot of Goop, white lady podcasts and it’s so true, I have done…

**Tuck:** Oh yeah, that was before we were recording so… (laughs)

**Kai Cheng:** That was before we were recording? (laughs)

**Tuck:** I did say that.

**Kai Cheng:** I’m trying to come out these days as a a wellness person because it is such a separate part of my life. Like I’ve got my hardcore queer anarchist friends and then I’m like, I sometimes also go to places where people end every sentence with prayer hands (laughs). Okay, I just wanted to kind of touch on wellness and meditation because it’s something that’s really important to me, like my spirituality and my somatics practice and stuff. I think there’s something really rich and beautiful in spiritual healing and personal healing that has been denied to queers, and particularly queer people of color, but also all queers right? Because we are sort of disembodied to begin with, every queer person has at some level been told that their embodied experience is wrong. That you’re not supposed to have that sexual feeling for that person or your not supposed to have this engendered feeling about yourself.

And so I’m kind of on a mission to reclaim embodiment for myself, and I want all the queers to be there with me (laughs). I’m like, oh my god let’s like get into our bodies, and love our bodies! Which is not in the way of like, I like my body, because it’s just not possible to like your body all the time, for some people it’s really hard to like it ever, but to really know that the body is important and that it has it’s own secret wisdom. I think the answers to so many of the intellectual questions we have discussed today are in the body, like how do we hold survivors and perpetrators in a nonbinary, how do we move through conflict, how do we survive this apocalyptic time? I just think the answer is in there, in the sacred knowing of a body that is alive and breathing and that there’s nothing that can contradict that. That the body is alive and that it breathes until it dies, there is something so, so profound about that, anyway, I just wanted to share my love of the embodiment world and to encourage queers to come and reclaim it with me.

**Tuck:** The way we always end this show is by asking, in your ideal world what would the future of gender look like?

**Kai Cheng:** Oh my god! (laughs) Well today my version of an ideal gender future is one that is sort of like completely free and everybody can shift and change and represent their gender and not present their gender anyway they like but there’s a little more structure to it, you know? Like I think that vast freedom is so important, but there’s also such a need for safety, and tradition, and lineage. It’s the things that help us to know who we are as a collective as well as individuals. So in my sort of fantasy future, children are born and they are maybe given a provisional, very loose gender for when they are super infants and their not, maybe it’s a neutral gender, I’m not sure.

Something very provisional for when they really have no ability to express gender and then as soon as they start to show ideas and preferences and to weave something together, they start to get maybe instruction from their parents about how important and beautiful their bodies are, and how they can adorn them with clothing or makeup or movement, to express whatever they want to be, and that it is a time of creation and exploration. And then maybe in adolescence or at other important milestones, young people can start to take steps to declare or express a gender that doesn’t have to be permanent but expresses who they are in that moment, this sort of growing into ownership of gender, being given examples of different genders where there is ritual and ceremony, and to take on previous ideas of gender that come from ancestry to, like how we can weave that in to our growing independence and individuation. So I don’t know if any of that made sense, basically it’s like a coven of witch people (laughs) where gender is like a magic spell you cast on yourself to connect to the world around you.

**Tuck:** I love that and it seems really on brand for you. (Kai Cheng laughs) So wonderful answer.

**Kai Cheng:** Oh my god! You read me so well!

(theme music plays)

**Tuck**: That’s gonna do it for this week’s show. If you had a good time or you learned something, please share this episode with a friend or all your friends or the internet at large. Kai Cheng is the author of four incredible books, including the novel, “Fierce Femmes and Notorious Liars,” a children’s book, a poetry book, and the essay collection “I Hope We Choose Love: a Trans Girl’s Notes From the End of the World.” Buy them please and learn more about Kai Cheng’s work at kaichengthom.com. If you like what we do here on the show, please consider joining us on patreon.com/gender, where a donation as low as $10.80 a year gets you access to our weekly newsletter. We are also on Twitter and Instagram @gendereveal and at genderpodcast.com where we have transcripts of every episode of the show. Don’t forget to check out our new, January merch lineup at bit.ly/gendermerch. As always, 100% of proceeds go to trans artists and trans-led organizations. Today’s episode was produced by Isaura Aceves, and it was edited by me, Tuck Woodstock, with help from Erin Wade who slid into my DMs and volunteered to [unable to transcribe name]. Erin, thank you so much, you are a hero of our times. Our logo is by the talented Ira M. Leigh. Our theme song is by Breakmaster Cylinder, additional music this week by Blue Dot Sessions. We’ll be back next week with more feelings about gender.

(theme music plays and stops)