Tuck: They’re back, baby. The Bistitchual yarn shop offers a wide range of beautiful, queer, and/or Canadian indie-dyed yarn and handmade accessories. They ship internationally with free shipping on orders over $100 and offer beginner and not-so-beginner knitting and crochet Zoom classes, so you can join from anywhere in the world. Visit them in person on Annette Street in Toronto, or online at bistitchual.ca.

[Gender Reveal theme music plays]

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.

[Music ends]

Tuck: Hey everyone! Hope you’re all hanging in there. This week on the show, I am very excited to share my chat with writer and organizer K Agbebiyi. K and I cover a lot of ground in this episode. Topics include reproductive justice, disability justice, and K’s work as a co-creator of 8 to Abolition.

K [interview excerpt]: 8 to Abolition was really impactful, but also it was just a glorified Google Doc.

Tuck: Plus, trans prisoner support, harm in leftist spaces, and the difference between nonprofits and mutual aid.

K [interview excerpt]: It’s not just giving away stuff, it’s also building power, and forcing people to ask questions like, “So why do people have to fundraise for simple things, like having enough food to eat?”

Tuck: But before we get to that, it’s time for This Week in Gender.

[This Week in Gender music plays]

Tuck: So there’s no big gender news to dive into this week—or at least none that isn’t terrible. So I just wanted to take a quick moment to say something to all the cool babies out there who are still grappling with coming out in some way, shape, or form. When I was sorting through advice questions for last week’s episodes, I saw a lot of people say something like, “How do I balance my desire to go on T with my girlfriend’s dislike of men?” Or, “How do I balance my desire to come out to my friend with the knowledge that they’re having a hard time right now?” Or, “How do I balance my desire to use they/them pronouns with my need to not cause a distraction at work?” And I could write an essay on each of those questions, but right now I just wanted to say that your gender is your gender, whether or not it is convenient to other people. And you deserve to be referred to correctly and treated with respect regardless of what the circumstances are.

And also, when we don’t tell people our names, or pronouns, or genders because we are worried about asking too much of them, we are denying them the opportunity to see and respect and care for who we really are. And that’s not to say that it’s going to go great every time, but it’s going to go well more often than you think. And it’s certainly going to feel better than it feels to be living with one foot in your gender and one foot wherever you’re pretending to be.

When I say that your gender is your gender whether or not it’s convenient to other people, that’s not to say that you shouldn’t play around with your gender based on what is more convenient for you. We all make decisions based on safety and cost/benefit analysis, and sometimes we make decisions based on which bathroom is cleaner. But if you are an adult whose physical, financial, and emotional safety would not be jeopardized by expressing your gender the way you want to express it, or playing around with hormones, or listing your actual pronouns, I am strongly urging you to just try doing it.

Feeling like your identity is too much of a burden for other people is an extremely common baby trans and baby queer thing. I have absolutely been there. I mean, I really only came out publicly as trans in order to make this show. But suppressing your desires, your internal sense of self in order to seem more likeable to a straight people, is a very cis-het thing to do. And I promise you that it is not a sustainable long-term solution to your happiness. We’re better than that, and we deserve better than that. And are there nuances here? Of course. And I’m sure that we’ll walk through some of them on future advice episodes of this show.

Feel free to send me your specific questions via the link in the show notes, and maybe we’ll answer one on a future episode. But in the meantime, this is just me, passing along a general friendly reminder that being trans is a gift, and that being yourself is a gift, and hiding that gift is not in service of yourself or the world. But like no presh—do you, baby! This has been This Week in Gender.

[Music plays]

Tuck: If you don’t want to hear about alcohol, skip ahead 30 seconds because this week’s episode is sponsored by Reverend Nat’s hard cider who offers shipping nearly nationwide to 41 states plus Washington, DC. I pretty much always have Rev Nat’s at home. They have many different kinds of cider made from many different fruits, like pineapple, pear, citrus, cherry, or of course, apple. And they’re offering 20% off your first cider order using the promo code “SNACKS.” Learn more and place an order at RevNats.com.

[Gender Reveal theme music plays]

Tuck: K Agbebiyi is an organizer and writer based in Atlanta, Georgia. The majority of their work revolves around ending the prison industrial complex.

[Music ends]

Tuck: The way we always start the show is by asking, in terms of gender, how do you describe yourself?

K: All right, this is such a scary question, because for the past six years, if you had asked me this, I would have been like, “Oh yeah, I’m a nonbinary femme.” But right now, within the past couple of months, I actually don’t know what my gender is. I know I’m trans in some way, but that’s all I really know right now.

Tuck: I love that. Do you know what changed to make you less sure?

K: Yeah, I think it was…. So I was living in Brooklyn, and then coming back to Georgia, where I’m originally from, I guess it kind of opened up my mind to exploring other genders. And I’ve always just been really afraid to explore. After I picked one gender, I was kind of like, “This is it. You can’t ever change or learn more.” Something that has really been impactful is having a genderqueer, or I guess they identify as gender nonconforming, therapist who is like 50. And their presentation is so… that’s my dream gender. So for the first half of our relationship, our therapy relationship… I was like, “Do I have a crush on them?” But now I just realize that I want to look like them. So, that’s kind of where I’m at right now. But they don’t know that. [Laughs]

Tuck: I love that, that’s so good. I think it’s so helpful with gender to be able to look at someone and be like, “Oh yeah, that. What if it was that? It never occurred to me before.” That’s so good. Well, I’m excited for you to keep exploring. Pronouns-wise, what are you feeling right now?

K: They/them.

Tuck: Perfect. And then, you use two different names.

K: Yes.

Tuck: I’m just curious how you decide what name to use in what context?

K: Yeah, that’s a really good question, and one that I’m still figuring out the answer to. I tend to use K in a professional context because that’s what a lot of people know me as, and it’s easier to look me up that way, but I started going by Toyin, which is a variation of my middle name. I started playing around with that within the past couple of years. And it’s definitely been more important to me since my grandma passed away, for me to use my Nigerian middle name. But the people who call me that are usually, at this point, people who are really close to me. So that’s what my partner calls me, or that’s what my mom calls me. And I always give strangers the option to use both, but they tend to use K, so I just kind of stick with that.

Tuck: Interesting. What a fun Rorschach test, right? What people use. Hmm. Well, I want to dive straight into abolition, because that’s a lot of what we’re here to talk about. Can you start, just to make sure we’re all on the same page, just by reminding us what 8 to Abolition was, and what it was created in response to?

K: Yeah, so 8 to Abolition was mainly a website... graphic... starting point, that’s what I would say, a starting point for people who were just learning about abolition to see what that would actually look like in their day-to-day lives. And it was created in response to 8 Can’t Wait, which was a set of 8 reforms that a campaign, I think it’s called Campaign Zero? [Laughs] Yeah, what are their names?

Tuck: I couldn’t remember either. Whatever. [Laughs]

K: It’s for the best. They released a set of 8 reforms that included stuff like banning chokeholds. And I don’t know if this was on there, but probably something along the lines of more body cameras. We just came up with an abolitionist response to that, because studies have shown that there’s still instances of police violence even when those reforms are implemented. And also, as abolitionists, we believe that the institution of policing *is* violence. And so we wanted to come up with something that could broaden people’s horizons when they were thinking about what a world without police would look like. And then it kind of just took off in ways that none of us imagined. We thought we would post it and our abolitionist friends would be like, “Haha, this is so cool.” And maybe for a couple of days people would be sharing it. But as soon as I posted it, it was getting hundreds of retweets. People were like, “Wow, this is amazing.” A lot of people were really excited about it. People were printing off flyers, bringing them to protests, and things like that. But there has been a lot of confusion over what we are. To this day, people are like, is it a nonprofit? [Tuck laughs] Yeah, I get that a lot.

Tuck: In like, a rude way? Because I feel like that’s an insult in leftist spaces.

K: Yeah. Yeah, a lot of it is not as an insult. Some people genuinely just want to know, like these students at Princeton were interviewing me, and halfway through the interview I was like, “Oh wait, you think 8 to Abolition is an organization of some sort.” And so I had to break it down. But I can see how it can be confusing. But just the fact that people think that we made a nonprofit when… I mean, 8 to Abolition was really impactful, but also it was just a glorified Google Doc. It was just stuff that we wrote that just later was made into a website. So it’s not that deep. That’s what I want to tell them.

Tuck: Yeah, it’s so funny how professional anything seems if you make a website for it. I have a consulting company, and people are like, “How do you get into consulting?” And I’m like, “Literally you make a website, and then you’re like, I did it!”

K: Yeah! [Laughs]

Tuck: Well, is there anything looking back that all y’all at 8 to Abolition feel like you would have done differently in retrospect, either in terms of what the 8 to Abolition was, or just the way it was presented out into the world?

K: Totally! Well, I can only speak for myself, but when 8 to Abolition first came out, some disability justice activists pretty much called us in for not including a disability justice framework in our work. And at the time, I was a baby disabled person, and there were other disabled people on the creation team for 8 to Abolition, and we were kind of like, “Well, how is this *not* disability justice? There’s disabled people who helped create this!” And now looking back, I’m just like, *what* were you talking about? We didn’t even have the bare minimum. We didn’t have image descriptions. I’m not even sure how many times disability was mentioned at all through it, and then when we had the opportunity to do a webinar with Heard DC, which is this amazing disability justice org, we were not ready. Even simple stuff about working with ASL interpreters and making sure that your content is given to them ahead of time, speaking slowly, we didn’t even have that.

So for us to not even have that foundation and then to go into saying, “Oh we want a world without prisons,” without really honoring the disability justice activists who have done so much work around this, and also recognizing just how disabling the existence of prisons is, is just a huge error on our part. But I think it was just a really good learning opportunity for me, especially as a disabled person, to just realize, just because a disabled person is on a project, doesn’t mean it’s actually aligned with disability justice.

Tuck: Yeah, absolutely. Can you talk more about the disabling nature of prisons?

K: Yeah, so statistics are kind of still out, but I want to say the majority of people who are in prisons are disabled, or have a disability of some sort. But if they don’t, I mean, when you’re in an environment where you are literally fighting for your life every single day without access to adequate food, water, or healthcare, it’s very easy for a disability to start, or for pre-existing disabilities to be exacerbated. And especially when incarcerated people are also facing retaliation and violence from prison officials and other incarcerated people. And also, just being in a prison—there is no way that environment can be conducive for mental health. I think that’s something that we also were called in about, was just expanding our analysis of disability and including mental illness. And there’s just literally no logical way that someone can go into prison and leave and not have an inkling of trauma. Because that’s the environment. That’s what it’s built on.

Tuck: Yeah, that makes so much sense. I know you created a disability justice mutual aid fund in 2020. I’m just curious, when we’re thinking about how we can better incorporate a disability justice framework, what type of things were you hoping to fund with that mutual aid? And I’m asking this so we can all sort of think about what sort of resources we should be putting out in the world, all the time.

K: Yeah! The mutual aid fund was amazing. Especially because most of the planning/organizing team from that fund later went on to work on the Free Ashley Now campaign. The money went to anything. Initially it was, people were using it for money to go to protests and things like that. Or maybe to make banners, or some people were sending out self-care kits to other disabled people or other disabled organizers. But then we really broadened the scope when more money came in. People were using it for transportation, they were using it for therapy, they were using it to get safer housing. All of these people were… they identified as organizers, and they were naming that their disability was impacting the way that they organized. And not just in that particular moment, because the mutual aid fund was short-term, but it was impacting all of their organizing.

And so when I’m thinking about how people can incorporate a disability justice framework into their work, I think the first thing that needs to happen is we all need to acknowledge that we live in an ableist society. So that means that we’re all internalizing ableist ideas and values day in and day out. And so something that happens to me, I think, is that a lot of ableds will be like, “Oh, was I ableist when I did this? Or when I did that?” And I’m like, “Yes, you were, because we *all* are ableist to varying degrees.” And it’s not helpful to be like, well you should say this to a disabled person, or always make sure that you have this. It’s not helpful to fixate on those little individual things. But I think people need to really question what we’re doing as a society to make sure that we’re making the world safer and more inhabitable for disabled people. And so when it comes to incorporating disability justice, I think recognizing that you’re always going to be learning every single day for the rest of your life is a really good starting point, because that’s something that I’ve had to realize, and it took me years to realize.

Tuck: Yes, absolutely. You mentioned the Free Ashley Now Campaign. Can you talk about who Ashley Diamond is, what she’s done as an activist, and what we can now do for her, or in support of her?

K: Ashley Diamond is a Black trans woman who was incarcerated in Coastal State Prison, Georgia. She’s also an activist, an entertainer, an amazing friend; she loves being in the spotlight. I met Ashley several years ago when I was organizing for an LGBTQ org called Get Equal when I was an undergrad. And I met Ashley at her welcome home party, because she had just been recently freed. Her case at the time was groundbreaking in the sense that she filed a lawsuit against the Georgia Department of Corrections because they were incarcerating her with the wrong gender, and also denying her access to hormones and medical treatment. And she actually won that lawsuit, and it set a precedent that helped, as much as possible, helped other trans people who are incarcerated.

But yeah, now Ashley is back in prison in a men’s facility fighting for her life, because of a technical parole violation. And the Free Ashley Now campaign started when I realized that Ashley was re-incarcerated, and I hit up the organizers from the disability justice mutual aid fund and asked them if they’d be interested in doing something, so it’s kind of grown from there. We’ve been around for about a year now, and we’ve done a lot of amazing work. I’ve been organizing for seven and a half years, and I would say this is the hardest thing that I’ve ever worked on. Just because it’s very slow-moving, and there’s a lot of legal issues that I didn’t know about previously. And also it’s just really hard, it’s really disheartening to see your friend suffer.

Tuck: Yeah, how is it possible that she is once again incarcerated with men when she famously won a lawsuit that said she shouldn’t have been incarcerated with men?

K: *Exactly*. [Laughs] That’s a very good question that literally no one knows the answer to.

Tuck: Okay, cool.

K: And because Georgia, I mean every prison is bad, but Georgia’s prisons are notoriously bad, and the subjects of so many lawsuits. It’s kind of just like when people stopped paying attention to Ashley’s case, the state was kind of like, “All right, well, let’s go back to business as usual.” So that’s just something that we’ve been working against. Ashley should be free, but also…so the lawsuit? Does anyone remember that? Hello? I’m so glad you asked that, because I forget actually how ridiculous that is. After a while, I forget it, but when I’m explaining it to someone else, I’m like, wait, okay…that actually makes no sense.

Tuck: Yeah, when I was asking it, I was like, I don’t know if this is one of those questions where there’s absolutely no answer, or did I just miss something?

K: Yeah.

Tuck. Anyway, our producer Jules contributes a lot of questions, but I wanted to read this question sort of word for word, because I thought they put it really well. They said, “I feel like one issue that comes up a lot for my trans friends who aren’t 100% into abolition yet is how to improve trans peoples’ experiences in prisons and making sure people have access to HRT and mental healthcare. But then that can also sometimes just mean giving more resources to a terrible prison healthcare system. How do you decide whether a reform, like more money for healthcare for incarcerated people, is truly helpful or just feeding more power into the prison industrial complex, and how do you decide which of those efforts to support?

K: That’s a good question. I think that that’s something that’s happening in Georgia right now, where there’s a lot of increased violence within prisons, and prison officials and the state are like, “Well, the reason that violence is so high is that we’re understaffed. So, we need more money for staffing.” And that’s just a really difficult situation, because on the one hand, hiring more staff is feeding the prison industrial complex, but on the other hand, there’s incarcerated people right now who are asking for more staff just because they feel like that’s the only viable way that safety can improve. And I don’t have the answers to that. I think for something who’s on the fence regarding this specific question, especially trans health care…. [Sighs] It’s really hard.

It’s a mix of doing the reading and making sure that you have a clear political analysis regarding abolition and prisons, but also it is listening to the lived experiences of trans people who are currently incarcerated. And you can really only do that when you have a personal relationship, so for me, if I really wanted to know how a lack of healthcare access was impacting trans people, I would want to make sure that I already previously had relationships with them to see what they think about the issue, and what they want. Because each person’s different. Some people might be like, “I want medical care now.” And then some people are like, “Whatever, just get me out immediately.” So it really depends situation to situation. So, I feel like that’s not a good answer, but…

Tuck: No I think that it is, because making the point that the most useful thing you can do is build connections with people who are incarcerated I think is always good advice. And advice that always seems obvious when someone says it, but doesn’t seem obvious until you hear it, you know? You’re like, oh right, of course.

K: Yeah!

Tuck: On that note of abolition though, a lot has happened since you worked on 8 to Abolition last summer. And public sentiment and media sentiment seems to be swinging away from their very small tolerance of abolitionist ideas. I mean, I live in Portland. We were in the streets a hundred nights straight to protest police brutality, and a few days ago, City Council just refunded most of the tiny budget cuts that were passed last year. Even though, some really great local journalists did research and showed that “crime” in Portland has no proportional relationship to how many police officers there are. And like, meh, who cares…. So, I’m curious how organizers might be strategizing differently during this sort of backlash period, compared to maybe last year when public sentiment seemed to be a little bit more in favor of this kind of thing. I don’t know if it actually was, but it seemed that way?

K: It did seem that way. I think, again, everyone is different, but for me personally, I was like, great, there seems to be a moment when people are talking about abolition in a positive way, so let me make sure I bring as many people into the movement as possible. Because there’s no way in hell that this is going to last forever. For me, it was important for me to get people in my inner circle plugged into organizations, make sure they’re engaging in mutual aid or building connections with people on the inside, so that they’re ready to fight when people start saying stuff like, “Oh the reason X, Y, Z is happening is because of defunding the police,” or whatever.

So, for me…abolition is not a really popular opinion, even though it was really popular a year or two ago. Just remembering that we very, very, very much are in the minority, I think is actually really helpful for me. It might make other people feel really sad or disheartened, but for me, I think putting that into perspective makes me fight even harder because I’m like, we don’t have enough people. And it also makes me value each relationship a little bit more, I think. Just realizing how little of us there are. So yeah, I’ve just mainly been trying to help people get plugged in, and most of my organizing in the past year has been around freeing Ashley, and less about being in larger orgs and things like that. But I do wonder if there’s going to be a moment again where people are going to be talking about abolition positively, and I’m wondering how we can make that moment last a little bit longer. Because I was talking to Micah, one of the co-founders of 8 to Abolition, and we really didn’t expect the backlash to happen that quickly. It was very fast.

Tuck: Yeah. It was very fast. It was very wild. So, you were talking about how this is pushing you to work even harder, and we know that burnout is a *huge* issue in this type of work, and I was really intrigued a couple weeks ago when you tweeted, “One of the students at work asked how I keep going and don’t burnout, and I said, because I treat this like a video game.” [K laughs] Can you expand on that?

K: Yeah, so I hope my employers aren’t listening, but it’s actually really funny because in my previous job, when I left, apparently the executive director told someone on staff that they weren’t surprised I was leaving because of answers I gave in my interview. Because apparently in my interview, I said something like, “Work is not my identity, this is just how I make a living.”

Tuck: Oh my god.

K: But that’s how I feel about work, especially because I work in the nonprofit sector. You’re never about to catch me crying about paid work. Work isn’t where I can fully be myself. It’s not where I can fully bring my values. I’m working within an apparatus that I don’t agree with, the non-profit industrial complex, and I’m doing it for money. So there’s just no way, in my opinion, that I can fully show up as the organizer or the person I am if I’m getting paid, even if it is for seemingly good work. I do think that the work I do is good work. And so, by treating it like a video game, I’m like, so what do I have to do to get through the day and make sure I do my job, and make sure no one gets screwed over, and make sure that I am helping people, but I’m not using all of my energy so that I can’t make my organizing meetings after work. And so that’s kind of how I operate. When I first started off as a social worker, I was kind of one of those people who’s like, put your job in your Instagram bio or Twitter bio. Maybe I thought that I was doing the same thing that grassroots organizers were doing when I was working for a nonprofit. But now that I’ve been doing it for a couple years after my graduate program, I just feel differently. It’s just paid work that I happen to be good at. It’s not who I am.

Tuck: Yeah, I think that’s great. I think that I mean, obviously an employer isn’t going to think that’s great. [K laughs] But I think that’s great. I think that’s the way to do it. In your bio at your job, you wrote that you were most excited to create policy strategy that understands the connection between reproductive justice and ending the prison industrial complex. And I was hoping you could talk about what that connection is for folks who haven’t seen it yet.

K: Yeah, a lot of people don’t know the difference between reproductive rights and reproductive justice to begin with. Reproductive rights is Planned Parenthood, it’s fighting for people to have access to contraception or abortion, versus the reproductive justice framework, which was started by women of color, a lot of them being in or from Atlanta. It basically argues that people have the right to have kids, or not have kids, in ways that actually are reflective of their dignity. Sso it’s not just about abortion access or contraceptives, it’s about people having access to fresh food or clean drinking water, or being able to have a kid and not fear that the kid is going to be murdered by the police. That’s a reproductive justice issue.

And a lot of people don’t know that, or they don’t think about it that way. So, part of my role, I think, is to make those connections really clear. And then, another thing is, I feel like a lot of repro orgs say stuff like, “Oh, abortion is criminalized.” Because it is. So you could have a miscarriage and be sent to jail. In Texas, you could help someone get an abortion in a very mild way, and you could be legally liable. But a lot of people are like, “Oh, abortion is criminalized,” but then they stop there. They’re not like, “But why?” Or, “How do we stop it?” Or, “How do we make sure no one is criminalized?” And so I see that as my work, as bridging the two movements together, especially as someone who has primarily just done work around abolition.

Tuck: So, this is more just a personal question that I am curious about, and I don’t know if this is too gossipy, but when Industry Baby came out, Lil Nas X was fundraising for The Bail Project, and you were like, “I love you, but there are many issues with The Bail Project.” And I was just wondering what the issues with The Bail Project were? [K laughs]

K: I would just say typical nonprofit shit. So a CEO or Executive Director—see, listen, I don’t even know which one they are... [Both laugh]—taking more money than they’re owed from the project, not organizing with an abolitionist lens, being cruel to people who have lower paying jobs within the organization, and not giving all their money directly to who they say they’re giving it to. And the reason I can rattle all of this off the top of my head is because it’s the typical nonprofit story.

Tuck: Yeah. So if people want to donate towards something that is more of an abolitionist lens, do you have any suggestions for organizations that folks can support? We’ve established that 8 to Abolition is not an organization! [Both laugh]

K: I mean, I’m always going to say Survived & Punished, because that was my political home when I was in New York. And they do a lot of great work. They can give money to Free Ashley. We’re always giving money to Ashley and also redistributing to other smaller survivor defense campaigns. For me, when I’m giving money away, I just get on Instagram, and I scroll, and usually there’s someone who has a mutual aid ask who needs money of some sort. And that’s kind of the route that I go to. I don’t have really any organizations where I’m like, “Oh, let me set aside some money for that.” Instead I try to, I guess, give it out that way. But something…what is the name…oh, Pocket Change Pools. It’s this group of people who, they run mini mutual aid, I guess, fundraisers for different projects. They’ll do one a day. The idea is that you empty out whatever change you have in your pocket, or whatever leftover change you have in your Venmo, and they’ve been able to raise and redistribute thousands of dollars. Yeah, so I think they do really great work, and since there’s always a new project to give money to, you can just look at who they’ve given money to in the past, too.

Tuck: Oh, that’s cool. Yeah, totally. Well, speaking again of mutual aid and also nonprofits, I saw at some point you say, “Get rid of the nonprofit in your head,” with regards to mutual aid. And I was wondering if you could talk a bit about what sets mutual aid apart from charities or nonprofits, and how that distinction can kind of be maintained? We at Gender Reveal run a mutual aid fund and a grant program, and folks have asked sometimes if we ever thought about making Gender Reveal a nonprofit, and I was like, “Absolutely not. We would lose our ability to do all of the work that we do.” And people are like, “Well, but then people would give you more money, because it’s tax deductible.” So I was wondering if someone who’s not me could sort of talk about that, the difference between those two things?

K: Yeah, I mean, it is true though, that if you’re a nonprofit you automatically have more legitimacy in people’s eyes. Or it’s just easier to take money. What we’re realizing with Ashley, and what we realized with the disability justice mutual aid fund, is even just the limits that they have on Venmo and stuff like that. It feels like every force is like, you need to start a nonprofit right now, or you need to stop. And I didn’t realize that I would feel bullied into it.

Tuck: Yeah, I talked to an accountant once, and she was a very cool radical accountant, and she was just like, “Yeah, the system is not made for you to just give away money. Like it disincentivizes you just handing money to other people.” It’s really messed up.

K: No! And this rich guy who’s very passionate about Ashley’s case, he pretty much was like, as soon as we explained our model and what we’re doing, he’s like, “No. I thought you were creating a nonprofit. And because you’re not, I’m out.” So I guess... that’s actually so funny. [Laughs] And the difference is, nonprofits are just like any other place of work. They serve interests of those who are in power, and they also are funded by corporations or evil people who want to give off the impression that they’re doing good in the world. And so, because of that, everything from what campaigns you focus on to how you clock in and out, everything has to revolve around the funder. The funder said this, the funder said that. The funder thinks this. And because it’s so funder-focused, you actually don’t even have time to think about what you’re doing.

Versus mutual aid, which is not like that. People give their money, and then you’re like, “Okay great, back to what we were doing.” People don’t feel like you have to listen to them because they engaged in mutual aid, and also it’s a long-term political project. It’s not just giving away stuff. It’s also building power and consciousness raising, and forcing people to ask questions like, “Hey, so why do people have to fundraise for simple things like having enough food to eat? Why do we live in a world like that?” Yeah, I think that it’s really powerful, and it also just gets rid of the stigma of asking for help. So, when COVID first hit, a lot of mutual aid popped up where people were asking people to fill four-plus forms, and saying stuff on the forms like, “This is only for people who really need it.” Those types of things turn people away, because the people who really need it are people who have been told their entire lives that they don’t need it, or they don’t deserve it. But then, when I said that, people were like, but you work at a nonprofit! Okay…I’m so sorry, where exactly am I supposed to work right now?

Tuck: Totally. [Sighs] That’s funny. So, I already cited a couple of your tweets, I’ll probably cite some more tweets, but I actually wanted to ask you about Twitter, because you and I actually had our Twitter follower count kind of skyrocket at the same time for vaguely the same reason. So I don’t know if this will be an insufferable question for people who are not me, but I am personally curious, sort of what that was like for you and how you dealt with that, and how you’ve continued to deal with the fact that that happened.

K: It was actually really dramatic. And I deleted my account. And now I have a new, smaller one. But the reason I did that was, it was so great having so many people who were ready to give money, honestly. I could be like, “Hey, someone needs money,” and they’d be like, “Okay, here’s 4,000 dollars.” So that was great. It was great to have a lot of people being like, “Well, before your account I didn’t know what abolition was.” What wasn’t great was just the cruelty I experienced from people on the left who had all these preconceived notions about me when I was just…I’m just a regular person who had a lot of followers. So, the idea that because you have a lot of followers means that you have a lot of money right away, is so confusing to me. I’m like, do you think that people are like…so explain to me how this works. People would say like I was friends with people, or I was cancelled for things I didn’t do, or people would just like say cruel things to me, and the thing is, I’ve talked about this a lot, I’ve been harassed a lot throughout my organizing. For example, this men’s rights activist organization made an hour-long video about me.

Tuck: Oh my god. No.

K: Yeah, using my full name. They had this campaign to call into the National Association of Social Workers to make sure that I wasn’t licensed, which, joke’s on them—I’m not even licensed. [Both laugh] Yeah, but the National Association of Social Workers was like, “Hey we just wanted to check on you, because you’re getting death threats.” And I was like, “I am?” So yeah, I’ve had that happen, and that didn’t hurt me, because those people are not on my side, they’re clowns, whatever. But it was people on the left, who were like digging up, trying to cancel me because my dad is a doctor. Which is not true; my dad is not a doctor, and they were looking up estranged family members. Just all that stuff. So eventually, through talking to my therapist and my partner, I was spiraling. I was checking Twitter constantly. I was going to people’s accounts, knowing that they didn’t like me, to see what mean things they were saying about me. And I had to give it up. And it sounds so little, deleting your Twitter account, but a lot of people wouldn’t do it, because there were a lot of perks that came with having a lot of followers. There was a lot of clout, and if you’re insecure like I was/am, that could be a good ego boost.

But I think my proudest accomplishment was being like, hey, this is getting in the way of me doing meaningful work, and so it has to go. So that’s how I dealt with it, and now I’m back on Twitter. I’ve been seeing my therapist for over a year. I have a completely different relationship to it. I frequently log off and have my partner change my password for a week to a month. I don’t doom scroll, and it’s still… I don’t have the perfect relationship with it, but I didn’t think I would be where I am right now. Because it was a huge problem for me—I wasn’t sleeping or eating or anything because of how incessant the people online were. And something that also helped was abolition being less popular. People thought because abolition was popular and I had a lot of followers I had institutional power. And when they realized that that was not the case, they slowly moved on to the next person.

Tuck: Yeah. Well, I want to go back to some of what you said, but for a second, when you were talking about how when people think that if you have a lot of followers you automatically immediately have a lot of money, something that I know *you* know is that they also think that if you have a book deal you have a lot of money and power…

K: Yes! [Laughs]

Tuck: Which is so funny. But can you tell me…you are writing a book, right?

K: Yes, I am. It’s going to come out a very long way aways from now, but it’s the University of California Press, and it’s about abolitionist responses to sexual violence. And one of the goals of the book is just to complicate this narrative, which is…it’s just like, “Listen to survivors,” without actually questioning, who are the survivors? What are their political goals, and how do those align with ours? And so I’m talking about my experiences as an abolitionist survivor of sexual violence. But yeah, getting the book deal was really interesting because I almost turned it down, because I was like, am I the same as Bill Gates? [Both laugh]

Tuck: And were you?

K: No, and I quickly got a shit-ton of medical bills that quickly answered that question for me. So, yeah, people… I love reading. Reading is a huge source of healing for me, it’s how I spend my time. I’m always logging the books I read. And I think that being asked to write something I think is such a great honor, and who am I to say no because some faceless account on Twitter said I should? Like I said before, there’s not that many abolitionists. It’s not like I’m going to write a book or anyone’s going to write a book about certain subjects, and they’re going to be flying off the shelves. That’s not the world we live in. And if they were… okay! I’ve just had to really reassess some things, and being disabled and going through a medical scare, I guess, it really put some things into perspective for me, and it made me less ashamed of some of the things that I’ve accomplished that I am proud about. Which is, I guess, scary in some way.

Tuck: Yeah. What makes it scary?

K: Because no matter what you say, even if you already hate yourself out loud, people online are going to be like, “Well, you’re not hating yourself enough.” And it happened! When 8 to Abolition got big, I got to do a webinar with Angela Davis, and I was really happy about it. And some person who I’ve never met before, never even DMed before, we just have a lot of mutuals because they’re an organizer, they took the time to write a several-paragraph message about how I was becoming arrogant. And I started spiraling over that, because I was just like, “Am I? Does everyone know? Does everyone hate me?” And now, it’s a year and a half later and I’m able to be like, hey that was really weird. I actually don’t know you, so why would you send someone that? So those are the kind of things that I’m always fearful of, people saying that. But one thing that’s helped a lot is talking to Mariame Kaba, just because she has a lot of followers and a lot of haters, and just realizing that you are never going to be able to incorporate the opinions of everyone into your life. It’s impossible, and you shouldn’t have to, so just worry about the opinions of people you care about, who actually know you, versus people who don’t know you and will never know you.

Tuck: Yeah, I think that’s really, really important advice, even going so far as to just literally write down the names of some people whose opinions you care about and be like, if people are coming for me but all of these people whose opinions and morals I trust think that I am doing the right thing, I do not have to listen to the people of Twitter about it.

K: Yeah.

Tuck: Well, I said I was going to circle back to this—so you had a recent viral thread that I’m gonna read part of for folks who didn’t see it. It started with, “I wish that the right hadn’t monopolized conversations surrounding ‘cancel culture,’ because while I don’t think it exists in the ways they’re using it, I do think people on the left have difficulty forming and maintaining relationships that align with our values. So many of my friends and comrades have discussed how we are all virtually afraid of being abandoned by people we care about for saying the ‘wrong thing,’ but if we name this then we are all lumped together with abuse apologists.” So, I don’t understand, but do you understand why so many anti-cop leftists do so much policing?

K: Yeah! [Both laugh]

Tuck: I’m just curious what it would look like to bring an abolition framework to our relationships, as well as just the cops, you know?

K: Yeah, I don’t know! Well, actually, that’s a lie; I have a theory. I have post-traumatic stress disorder, and part of that lends itself to hypervigilance, so I’m constantly checking things, and trying to make myself safe. And that’s why I was obsessively consuming the accounts of people who hated me, because in my mind, I was like, “If I do this, this is how I’ll be safe. This is how I’ll beat them. This is how I’ll never be hurt, or attacked, or abandoned again. If I just make sure I know every little thing.” And I think that that is the same behavior that people are applying to their friends and their comrades. And so they’re like, “If I know every little wrong thing that this person has ever done, that’s how I make sure that there’s no abuse in leftist spaces ever again.” And unfortunately, that’s not the nature of abuse.

And so I have no issues with people…someone who has abused someone else or attacked someone else or assaulted someone else, I have no issues with that being known. The issue I have is when there’s interpersonal conflict that happens, and it’s like, “We have this conflict, and now you’re a bad person. And not only that, everyone who is friends with you is bad, and everyone who follows you is bad. Everything you do is bad, and also you can never change—it doesn’t matter if it’s a year from now or 5 years from now.” That mindset is why people don’t organize. Because it’s scary! I didn’t realize until last year when I would say to some friends, “Hey are you ever afraid that you’ll, not abuse someone, but literally say something incorrectly and then everyone in your org will drop you?” And my friends would whisper to me, and be like, “Yeah, but I would never say that out loud because then I would be…”

Tuck: Because that’s a thing that’s wrong! I can’t say anything wrong, and I can’t say that I can’t say anything wrong. Absolutely.

K: Yeah, it’s the fact that if anyone interrogates any part of it, then you are abusive and you’re covering for your abuse, and that’s why you’re saying, “Hey y’all, maybe we shouldn’t do things this way. That’s not good organizing strategy.” I don’t think being cancelled online is the same thing as being arrested or going to jail, but in order to abolish prisons, we have to organize together, and we cannot organize together if we have such a fractured movement that we’re not talking to each other and we don’t even know why. It’s just not possible. And I think that a lot of people don’t like that or like hearing that. I know I didn’t when I was younger, but I feel like that’s an uncomfortable truth.

Tuck: Yeah, I mean, when I was reporting on the protests here for months, the moment that I stepped back from it was a couple things, but one of them was the moment when there was so much infighting that there was no longer a way to report on it without people yelling at me for talking to other people. And it’s just like, “Okay, then I won’t. Then I won’t do it! That’s fine, I don’t have to, I can do something else.”

K: Yeah! And people will message me on Instagram—I can’t tell you how many messages I get where it’s like, “You’re following this person, who you’ve never ever talked to, and I want you to know that they’re being cancelled right now.” There was this one person who was de-platformed, or there was a de-platform attempt a couple weeks ago, and one of their harms was that they said that they were poor growing up, but then they later posted pictures of themself getting a haircut. That was literally listed. [Tuck laughs] And people want me to think that that is the same thing as abusing people, and I’m like, “No! It’s not.” And I’m sorry, but I don’t want to live in a world where I have to pretend that those are the same thing, because one of those things is a very normal thing, and one of those things is not. So when I saw that, I was like, this is how far we’ve gotten. That’s when I was like, I can’t do this anymore.

Tuck: Right. And then sometimes there is no naming of what the issue is, and you can’t ask because there’s sometimes good reasons for not naming it, but then it creates a dynamic where someone you’ve never talked to and no one has vouched for, and you have no connections to is DMing you being like, this person who you know is deeply harmful. And just it’s like okay…well, I have no idea what to do with this. [Laughs]

K: Yeah, and it’s funny because, again, if I don’t unfollow this person fast enough, then I could be next, or I’m bad. But… [Sighs] another thing is, we don’t stop abuse through isolating people, and just shunning them. I’m sorry, but we don’t. And it doesn’t mean that the survivors or the victims of someone’s abuse need to be involved with rehabilitating them or involved in their accountability, but we also should not create a culture where people who are helping their friends or peers take accountability are…they’re deemed bad. For example, in Atlanta this group was doing an accountability process with this person, and they had made all the steps of the accountability process very clear. And because people who were working within this accountability process were interacting with the person who had been abusive, they were called out for it. And I’m like, so how were they supposed to foster accountability by never talking to this person? Like how does that work? It makes me upset to think about, and I know it made me upset when I was newer to this. But yeah, it’s just…it’s uncomfortable to have discussions about.

Tuck: Yeah, well I appreciate you opening up that discussion on Twitter, not known for being a place to even have a discussion.

K: [Laughs] Exactly.

Tuck: So, very brave of you. I want to respect your time, but I also want to respect that you told us that you wanted to talk about dating, gender, and sexuality, which is *very* broad. [K laughs] What do you want to talk about with dating, gender, and sexuality?

K: I guess…so, I’m in a non-monogamous relationship, and my partner and I started dating three weeks before COVID shut everything down, so we never really got a chance to practice. And now that I’ve moved, and things are opening up again, and I’m feeling better, I feel like I’m re-learning what it means to be gay. [Both laugh] I don’t know. Yeah, and so it’s just really scary. That’s why I was like, okay I’m open to talking about that, because I literally…I just don’t know what’s going on, and I thought that I would have had everything figured out by now. And now that I’m saying that, I’m like, okay I’m very young. But I think it feels that way sometimes, that you have to have it all figured out.

Tuck: Oh, for sure. Yeah, absolutely. So when you’re saying “relearning being gay,” what do you mean by that?

K: [Laughs] Well that’s the thing, I’m like, am I gay? Who am I? But also how do I interact with other lesbians, or what are the spaces that I feel comfortable in? Because a lot of the time, when I was coming out, and I guess even in New York, I associated being in gay or queer spaces with partying, or being out, or drinking, or dancing, or wearing really great outfits. But getting older and being disabled has really changed how I feel about it. So now I’m having a friend come over tonight, and she’s queer, and I’m like, okay this is a queer space. Yeah, we’re just hanging out, but I spent the first part of my gender and sexuality journey thinking that anything queer or gay, it has to be a big to-do, it has to be a humongous thing. Now I’m like, okay, yeah, you actually are still a lesbian even if you can’t go to a lesbian bar regularly, which doesn’t sound like normal, but that’s the thought process I had.

Tuck: No, I think that’s actually really useful re-framing. And I do really like that because I think that because being gay is rooted in sexual orientation, it creates this sort of “to practice being gay is to practice these sort of specific behaviors in a public way, or in a relationship way, or in a sexual way,” when in reality practicing being gay, practicing being queer—not practicing as in “practice makes perfect,” but as in the practice of being gay—can just be you and your friend coming over. I love that. That’s so good. Amazing. Yeah, my whole house is trans, so it’s just like, we’re trans all the time.

K: Yeah, you’re doing good work. [Laughs]

Tuck: Yeah, thank you, that’s praxis. Well, the way we always end the show is by asking in your ideal world, what would the future of gender look like?

K: Oooh. The first thing I started thinking of is robots. [Both laugh] I don’t know why.

Tuck: Because it’s the future!

K: Literally. Okay, so this is kind of sad, but Sophie, the trans pop artist, when she passed away it was really hard for me, even though she wasn’t… I mean, I loved her music, but she wasn’t like my go-to musician. It was just really hard for me, because I felt like she encapsulated a gender of the future through her music, which is so hard to explain. But it was just so technological and trans, even though it was club music, and I always felt like listening to her music was an emotional experience for me. It felt like coming home. So when I think about the future, I’m like maybe a future of gender…it would look like how Sophie’s music made me feel.

[Sophie’s music plays]

[Gender Reveal theme music plays]

Tuck: That’s gonna do it for this week’s show. If you had a good time or learned something, please share this episode with your friends and community. You can find K’s work at kagbebiyi.com and freeashlediamond.com. We are at genderpodcast.com and on social media @gendereveal. And you can sign up for our weekly newsletter and support the show at patreon.com/gender. This show was produced and edited by Julia Llinas Goodman and by me, Tuck Woodstock. Our logo is by 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.

[Music ends]