

Becoming the People Podcast

hosted by Prentis Hemphill

with guest Kai Cheng Thom

Transcript

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**BECOMING
THE PEOPLE**
WITH PRENTIS HEMPHILL

00:07 - 00:48

Prentis: Hi everybody. Welcome to Becoming the People. I wonder if this is true for other people, but there are certain people whose work I read, I listen to them on podcasts when I can, I follow them on social media, and I have kind of a running conversation with them happening only in my mind? Kai Cheng Thom is 1 of those people for me. She often shares things or writes pieces that I find deeply evocative, really challenging often for me. They kind of challenge the edges or things that I've come to understand. And she also writes with such

00:48 - 01:33

Prentis: a beauty and a tenderness that I feel compelled and somehow capable of interrogating those edges or those limits I had before. We also have a lot in common. We're both somatic practitioners. We are both authors. We also work on issues of transformative justice. We work with groups in conflict. We work with organizations. And so I think about her as a peer and teacher to me. And this is the first time that we've ever had a conversation, so you'll probably hear me being pretty geeked out about being able to share some space with her, to witness her,

01:33 - 02:09

Prentis: experience her. And I'm really, really grateful that I had this time to just ask even a fraction of the questions that I have for her. If you're not yet familiar with Kai Cheng Thom, As I said, she's a somatic practitioner. She's a performance artist. She's a community healer. And a lot of her work is about the revolutionary potential of radical love. And she focuses on the intersection of social justice, pleasure activism, and transformative approaches to healing conflict. She has a new book out called Falling Back in Love with Being Human. It's a national bestseller in Canada

02:10 - 02:55

Prentis: and it's really, really a gorgeous book that I would encourage you to pick up, spend time with, make friends with. It's deeply intimate and beautiful. In this conversation today, we explore all kinds of exciting and maybe dangerous themes around monster-making, harm and revenge, queerness and love, and I found it to be a really sweet and exciting conversation, and I hope you enjoy it. Okay, So this is 1 of those moments where I realized that part of the reason why I started doing podcasting in the first place was just to be able to talk to people that

02:55 - 02:57

Prentis: I really want to talk to.

02:57 - 03:02

Kai: What a great idea. That's amazing. I should start a podcast for that reason, but then I don't want to put the podcast out.

03:07 - 03:34

Prentis: This is that for me. And maybe it's also revealing some of my own social awkwardness, because maybe I could have just reached out and been like, hey, can we talk to each other? But I have this podcast as an excuse to reach out to you and say, Kai Cheng, Tom, I would like to talk to you. I feel really inspired by you. And I feel excited to talk to you right now and to get to meet you right now. So thank you.

03:35 - 03:57

Kai: Wow. Thanks for saying so. I mean, let me just say you totally reach out at any time. And there was such delight for me in getting your invitation to this podcast because I was like, I don't know, I felt like Cinderella or something and I got my invitation to the ball. I'm like, really? You want to talk to me?

03:57 - 03:59

Prentis: Oh my god.

03:59 - 04:00

Kai: Made me very,

04:03 - 04:19

Prentis: very happy. Oh my gosh. Yeah, I've been wanting to talk to you for years. So I want to start with just a question that kind of ground us. Can you tell us a little bit about your upbringing and something about it that kind of situates you here in this moment that brings you here right now.

04:20 - 05:13

Kai: Wow. Nobody's ever asked me that on a podcast before. Thank you. My upbringing. I grew up on the unceded territories of the Musqueam, Slawatuth and Salish peoples in colonially known Vancouver in a Chinese family where the family as a whole was very working class, but my parents were class ascendant. So my mom was working on med school around the time that I was born. And then like made this like amazing, shocking, incredible, like leap

into like being a doctor And it transformed all of us, you know? And it was amazing in terms of class access and

05:13 - 05:55

Kai: material privilege, I think, in terms of where my parents started and then where they were when I was born. And also like the trappings of like working classness and poverty and intergenerational trauma were like still living in my parents' bodies. So that kind of juxtaposition of like, I had a relatively high access to things like educational privilege and material needs, like food and stuff, but that was kind of mixed with this, the behaviors and like the experiences of my parents around like acting like food was scarce, even though it actually wasn't for our family, right? And

05:55 - 06:24

Kai: like the confusion of that. And then I guess, I don't know, I also, the last thing I'll say is like, I grew up in the 90s and like the X-Men cartoon was on TV and the word gay lord was like in high fashion among the six-year-olds of the day and that shaping is like deep in me that kind of like superheroes larger than life I love like sugary cereals, like all of that. I don't know. I just I feel so informed by the 90s.

06:25 - 06:39

Prentis: Yeah. Well, thank you for that. I want to talk a little bit about a kind of shared background that I see with us, and we can figure out how shared it is. But I know that you you were trained as a therapist.

06:39 - 06:40

Kai: Yeah. Yeah.

06:40 - 06:53

Prentis: Social worker. And you've also arrived to somatics and embodiment work. And I'm just wondering about that journey. I'm also a former therapist. I know. Sort of how I

06:53 - 06:58

Kai: identify. I know. I'm recovering therapy. Yeah, exactly.

07:00 - 07:06

Prentis: And so I'm curious what got you there to doing therapy work and what got you out?

07:07 - 07:47

Kai: So I'm a middle child and I feel like there's like research that shows there's a disproportionate number of middle children in the therapy world. But yeah, you know, like I said, my family had a lot of like intergenerational trauma shaping like what family doesn't mine certainly did. And I was the queer kid in the family in that kind of weird space of like, I wasn't doing masculinity properly, so I received negative feedback about that, but I was good at listening to people talk about hard things. And that became the way that I acquired connection in my

07:47 - 08:16

Kai: family. I would listen to my dad talk about like all the bad things that happened in his childhood, which probably now wasn't that appropriate now that I think about it. I would listen to my mom do the same thing and then I was like, okay, when I grow up this is my calling. This is how I'm gonna be a person of worth and meaning and lovability in the world. And I went into social work first in my undergrad years because there was still enough working classness in my family where I was like a practical degree that

08:16 - 08:48

Kai: will lead to a job, you know, and its values aligned. How great is that? And then I, of course, you know, got into social work and was like, oh, this is not as values aligned as I thought it was. So then I went back to school, trained as a therapist, And at the time, you know, it was my early 20s, it was I was on a mission to rescue queer and trans kids, which, you know, again, this is the fatal mistake of the people who go into therapy is we probably shouldn't be on a miscue to

08:48 - 09:32

Kai: rescue, but there it is. And I very quickly became promoted to full clinical status, working with tons and tons of queer and trans kids and families. Because like you, I was a family therapist too. I did a lot of family system stuff and it was too much for me. I was like 25 and seeing youth, some of whom were 25 or 26, their families. And many came close to dying or died, and I can hear my own voice changing as I'm talking about it, and I could feel the system killing me as it was killing them.

09:33 - 10:09

Kai: And I heard from a colleague about this thing called somatics and it was actually very funny because she was like you know in America I'm from Canada in America they have this thing called generative somatics which is the cool political 1 but here in Canada we only have somatic experiencing. And I couldn't afford to go to the Bay Area and get into GS, so I went to a somatic experiencing training and yeah, I mean, that was both good and bad. It's, you know, somatics in the mainstream are like extremely white and depoliticized and they were especially

10:09 - 10:46

Kai: at that time. And, but yeah, that was the thread. That was the thread of like, oh, maybe like embodiment could be the way. Because I started to think about what was happening to the animal of me in relation to sweet, wonderful, mysterious, powerful animal bodies of the youth and parents I was working with. And more and more I got tapped into what embodiment could be as like movement rather than like therapeutic practice. Yeah, that's more but I'll just stop there. Yeah, that's how I got into it. Yeah.

10:47 - 10:57

Prentis: Yeah, I feel so much Synergy there and also a lot of curiosity, I. I'm a middle child, too.

10:57 - 11:02

Kai: Oh, yes. I'm saying there's something to it.

11:02 - 11:36

Prentis: There's something about it. There's something about it. Yeah, I mean, I really resonate with a lot of what you shared because as a middle child, I think there's a lot of making space for others and figuring out how to make space for others, including parents. And I actually, you know, I was doing political work before I became a therapist. And I think I found somatics before I started studying to be a therapist. Because I lived in Oakland, I lived in the Bay.

11:36 - 11:38

Kai: Right, the heart of GS. Yeah.

11:40 - 12:08

Prentis: Yeah, and I actually, I worked at an organization called Generation 5 that some folks may know that was working on how to end childhood sexual abuse in 5 generations and the founder of Generation 5 went on to found generative somatics, Stacey Haynes. And So when I started working at Gen 5, I was offered and encouraged to start studying somatics. And I was actually very resistant in the beginning.

12:09 - 12:09

Kai: Really?

12:09 - 12:18

Prentis: I think for a lot of people that knew me before, I think I was a similar age as you, I think a lot of people are shocked that this is the time

12:19 - 12:25

Kai: I ended up on. Are you shocked?

12:27 - 12:42

Prentis: Sometimes, sometimes. I was not A feelings person back then. I wasn't at all. I was like, ew, feelings? No.

12:44 - 12:46

Kai: Sometimes I still feel that way.

12:46 - 13:35

Prentis: I mean, I feel that way, I think daily, but I have other ways of blending with that feeling. But yeah, so I kind of reluctantly started studying somatics and then it opened up my whole world. Yeah. Yeah, it's fun. I also think this thing is interesting. When you talked about somatic experiencing and how white it was at the time, and in a way it's you and other folks that are changing that landscape of what semantics is. You're changing the way that it's understood, practiced, and who is in those rooms. And so I think when I started

13:35 - 14:11

Prentis: doing somatics, people were like, well, how can you do somatics? Because there's an assumed wrongness about our relationships to our bodies. So I wonder if you've ever encountered that even inside of yourself, like how do I do embodiment from this body that has

so much projection and so much, There's so much projection onto, I think, non-binary and trans bodies about what we mean and where we are allowed. So I'm just curious if that sparks anything for you.

14:13 - 15:00

Kai: Ah, I felt like a swirl of sparks. Like, they're surrounded by fireflies right now. Yeah, totally. Yeah, I think the piece that really resonates with like some grief is that assumed wrongness of the body and how many people still in the somatic world and the world assume that a trans woman of color like myself or like black trans non-binary people, like that they assume a wrongness and assume, I think, even like a monstrosity, like a vileness, repulsiveness, aggression, sneakiness, like all these like terrible things that get attached to our bodies, stories that weave their way in.

15:03 - 15:34

Kai: And like even just like things like the way that there's supposedly like a masculine inside like a particular body and a feminine inside a particular body. And if you haven't got that right, then you must be confused or something like that. But here's the piece that I like. There's this rebellious little flame in me that's like, but I never felt wrong about my body. I never felt that. I was like, I knew. And in fact, I have this whole little mythology that I like to say, I'm going to make it very short, but I just, I

15:34 - 16:15

Kai: think that queer and trans people, particularly racialized queer and trans people, are actually deeper and often more capacity for this thing we call somatics than regular Joe, whoever regular Joe is. Because what it means to be queer or trans is to feel a deep knowing inside the body. A calling that is often beyond culture, like it's not something we've been taught could exist, but we follow that call into embodying existence. I am a trans woman, not because anyone said trans women exist and you could be 1. It was very much the opposite, right? I am because

16:15 - 16:41

Kai: my body knew. And that is so much more profound a somatic experience than anything I could learn from, with respect, anything I could learn from Peter Levine or Pat Ogden or whatever, white cis somatic people. I am the beginning. And that is what I want all the queer and trans somatic practitioners to know. They are the beginning.

16:43 - 16:51

Prentis: Wow. You just really touched something really deep in me and I want to thank you for that. I feel really moved by what you just shared. I'm the beginning.

16:52 - 16:57

Kai: You are! You are! You're Prentice Hephill! You're the beginning!

16:59 - 17:39

Prentis: That's it's such an offering though I think for so many people because yeah my gender experience is the experience of my body. It's my body in relationship to the world and other

people and there is a knowing kind of embedded in that, the way that we are subverting the binary of it all, but it originates in a knowing, and I just love that. I wanna just hang out a minute here on you mentioned the word monstrosity, And I hear you talk about this word a lot, monstrosity. And sometimes I hear you talk about the villain or

17:39 - 18:17

Prentis: villainess and the things that get projected onto our bodies. And in your most recent book, I think there's a point at which in the book you talk about like, okay, this is put on us and you're talking specifically to trans women and I think trans women of color, but this is put on to us, so how do we take what's inside the image of the monster and make it both useful and shine. It's like the shining, the visible, all of these pieces of the monster, the monstrosity. Let's use that. And I'm just curious about how you

18:17 - 18:27

Prentis: think about monstrosity and the monsters that we make and how we navigate our power inside of these projections.

18:29 - 18:38

Kai: You're asking my favorite questions! Yes! Okay, Can I be super annoying and answer by starting with a question?

18:39 - 18:40

Prentis: You can do whatever you want. Honestly.

18:41 - 18:49

Kai: Right. Yes. Okay. Do you have a favorite monster like, you know, from myth or TV or story or something like a like a favorite 1.

18:50 - 19:16

Prentis: Well, that's really fun. That's a fun question. Do I have a favorite monster? I am, I will just say, I'm kind of notoriously a scaredy cat. As a kid, I was always like, monsters. I think, okay, here's 1. I love, I love Ursula from the animated Little Mermaid.

19:17 - 19:19

Kai: Yes, I love Ursula too.

19:20 - 19:32

Prentis: She's just so glamorous and yeah, she's incredible. She's in her body in a way that no 1 else in the film is. I love

19:32 - 20:14

Kai: Ursula. Yeah. Thank you. I love Ursula too. Thank you. Oh my god. Thanks for playing. I love it. I mean, if we just like, that's the thing. So Ursula is this like tentacled, huge. I read her as racialized though. She's purple, but I read her as racialized and I read her as trans actually and she has this sensuality and she wants to overthrow the mermaid monarchy and she is like

this witch who pursues what she wants even though she's in exile. And like, I feel like any time we tap into like a favorite monster, like something

20:14 - 20:45

Kai: that we are, you know, and I'm a notorious security cat too, but like something that like calls to us, even though like it's kind of horrifying, we find a part of ourselves that has the power or like resonates with the power. And I think this is the thing about monsters. And you know, I'm just I'm grateful to I'm thinking about the lineage of trans women thinkers who write about the monster Susan Stryker, I think is like a like a big 1. But monsters are this isn't my idea either. I read it somewhere like monsters are harbingers

20:45 - 21:16

Kai: of change. They show us the fault lines in society, like they show us the parts of ourselves that like we don't want to look at and I just know that's what I actually am. Like when I walk on the street, like I'm noticeably trans, my voice like tips people off or whatever it is. I don't know, I mean I walk into a room and the cis straight men are afraid! They feel fear! And although that's kind of bad because sometimes it turns into violence, what they are afraid of is their desire, their longing, their own femininity.

21:17 - 21:40

Kai: And like inside of that first is like my power to like, to remind the cisgender, like patriarchal, like, like imperium that they are vulnerable to fear. They feel something around me. And then also I remind them that something else is possible. And I frickin love that.

21:46 - 22:02

Prentis: Wow. It's almost like I'm imagining what arises in your wake when you enter a room and the kind of quivering that can happen. And the power of that, it's really, Yeah, that's incredible to think about.

22:03 - 22:31

Kai: And I mean, it's lonely too, right? Because sometimes we want our wake to leave sweetness and fond feelings and not terror and accusations of being inherently evil or predatory. But we are given the embodiment that we are given. And if the power is there, then I suppose we might as well own it.

22:32 - 22:51

Prentis: Wow. Thank you. I love that. I feel excited by that. I resonate with that. I think there's... I'm just going to thread this in here and we can go in any direction you want, But I think another thing, a place where we share practice is transformative justice.

22:52 - 22:52

Kai: And

22:54 - 22:58

Prentis: you do this really cool thing where you make like visuals, like infographics.

22:58 - 23:00

Kai: Infographics are my favorite.

23:01 - 23:32

Prentis: It's like so cool that you do that and that you think in infographics. I'm just like, oh yeah, that's so helpful to see how that connects, what that's opposite of. And I think in this, you know, terrain of our emotions, our emotional lives, a lot of us don't think about the power that the visualization can give us and the choice it can offer us to do that. So anyway, I just wanted to nerd out for a minute and say,

23:32 - 23:33

Kai: oh, yeah, thank you.

23:33 - 23:34

Prentis: Cool thing that you do.

23:35 - 23:46

Kai: I'm sweating because you think that's cool. I was like, oh, my God, really? Because I think of it as this like slightly shameful nerdy thing that I do. I'm like, truly touched.

23:47 - 24:23

Prentis: Oh, no, it's so delightful. And I think there's a lot of people that feel that way, I'm sure. And the people that are going to check them out after this episode, I think will be delighted by that. It's such an offering and a unique offering to, you know, 1 of my teachers always says, the map is never the territory, but yet we need a map, you know. And I think you offer the map, you offer maps, maps that are really useful for us in these moments of, yeah, where it's hard to find the kind of path

24:23 - 24:30

Prentis: or the ground. So thank you for that. And also, I'm a super nerd about emotions and feelings.

24:30 - 24:35

Kai: Oh, great. Oh, good. Okay. Yeah. Let's let's let's nerd and make terminology and diagrams forever.

24:36 - 25:20

Prentis: Oh my God, can we? I would really love that. Excellent. I would really, really love that. Okay, transformative justice. So I want to know everything about your practice of it, but 1, I'm just curious what it means to you at this point in your kind of facilitation and practice. What do you think is really happening inside of what we might call transformative justice? And I'm also really curious about the kind of edges of the practice and the framework or the places where you are in question, curiosity or feeling limits if there are some. So, yeah.

25:21 - 25:23

Kai: Yeah. OK, let's see. Succinct, Kai Cheng, succinct.

25:24 - 25:25

Prentis: No, no, no, no, no. You don't

25:25 - 25:27

Kai: have to. OK, flowing, open, free.

25:27 - 25:29

Prentis: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

25:30 - 26:09

Kai: OK, so I got into TJ. I feel like the way a lot of like urban weirdo-queerdos get into transformative justice, which is like, something bad happened in my group of friends. And to be really clear, like, I mean, like, there was like sexualized or intimate harm and violence happening in my group of friends and then we wanted to fix it without calling police. Like many people, I picked up a copy of the revolution starts at home edited by... Yes, you pointed to it, but I think mine is in the orange section of my bookshelf. I know

26:09 - 26:45

Kai: it's orange, but like the... Yeah, edited of course by the election me and perhaps the summer Senha and Ching and Chen and probably like a lot of people, the first transformative justice process, you were calling them accountability processes at the time, like, did not work. Like, it was like an abysmal failure on all counts, like, you know, whatever measure of success we could have used, I feel like we didn't get there. You know? The heartbreak. And then the second 1 also had a physical failure, and the third 1, you know, more and more physical failures. And

26:46 - 27:30

Kai: I think my problem is that when I fail at something, I become obsessed with it. And like, I want to keep doing it. And like, something as deep as intimate harm, you know, for sure, I became obsessed with that. And with like, the spiritual crisis, I think, that came up around watching people behave in ways that I couldn't support or don't believe in. And I think the mind-bending, edgy part of transformative justice for me, is there's all these like kind of values that don't seem to fully cohere in practice. Like we want to always believe and

27:30 - 28:20

Kai: center and give empowerment to survivors. And also sometimes we want to abolish punitive justice systems and make room for second, third, fourth, fifth, sixth chances and not throw anybody away and make space for the fact that many perpetrators are survivors, or all perpetrators are survivors, or some of something, right? And sometimes the survivor of a harm calls for vengeance. Sometimes the community calls for blood. And how are we to make these truths cohere in reality? This is the deep edge. And so I think the Practice for me is 2 things. 1 is like, whatever vestiges of

28:20 - 28:51

Kai: like working classness, like bachelor level social worker are still in me are like in practice applied. There are people in front of me who are saying they need something and I believe them. So I'm going to try and like, what is the practice is like, how do you support somebody who has survived a harm and support somebody who's done a harm and maybe everybody's saying everybody harmed everybody else and so like, how do you slow things down and get people to a little bit more safety and kind of untangle the stories. And then maybe there's some

28:51 - 29:27

Kai: kind of redress or a healing or something, right? Those are like, that's like the practical steps of practice and like really the holding the frame of like, everybody gets what they need. Everybody gets to live. Everybody gets to be heard, like holding, holding, holding. And then deep inside the spiritual practice, the mission is like, my heart breaks every time. Like, you know, like, I'm like, oh, no, like, my community is falling apart. My interior is falling apart. I have to believe that we can do better this time.

29:31 - 29:52

Prentis: Yeah. It's a gift and it's a it takes a toll to kind of hold that space of, I don't know if it's quite hope, but maybe something akin to it, that we can revisit this and yeah. I'm curious, just out of curiosity for myself, It's something I've been thinking about a lot. What do you think vengeance is in us? Like, what is it doing?

29:53 - 29:56

Kai: Oh, it's itchy, it's itchy.

30:00 - 30:35

Prentis: I think about this a lot. It's like, you know, your questions about or sorry, you're thinking about the monstrous, you know, and how when we take back, I mean, I think 1 of the things I hear when you talk about monstrosity is, I'm like, oh, you're willing to take in the monster. And I think a lot of people are not willing to take in the monster. It doesn't mean that there's not that. And when I think about vengeance, I'm like, I know that feeling. I know that feeling. And I don't want to pretend like good people

30:35 - 31:01

Prentis: don't have the feeling of vengeance, whatever that is. It's like, we can suppress this feeling. So I've been thinking a lot about what is vengeance trying to do? And how does that get cared for, expressed? Where might it need to be acted out in some way? What is vengeance doing? Because I think it has a message. So I'm just curious if you have any feelings or thoughts.

31:02 - 31:44

Kai: Oh, so many. Yeah. I also, I want to echo this. Like, it's not that good people don't have longings for vengeance. Or if they don't, I'm not a good people because I long for vengeance daily. Daily. And not even in an abstract way. This is the situation I'm even working on right now where I felt quite betrayed and harmed by somebody I was dating last year. And I kid you not, Prentice, like, at least once a week I have this thought of like, this man did that to me? Does he know who I am? Why I

31:44 - 32:18

Kai: could launch an internet campaign that would end his life, you know? And I want to. I really, really want to. And if I just think about that inside myself, like, what is that wanting, trying to do? I don't know what vengeance is doing for other people necessarily, though I have some guesses. You know, the fight response deep in the tissues, restoring our power, mobility. But like, honestly, on a petty level, which I think is somewhat profound, is like, I want that guy to know that I mattered.

32:20 - 32:20

Prentis: Yeah.

32:21 - 32:47

Kai: He can't just treat me like garbage and throw me away like garbage. I mattered. And then I think like I'm trying to tell myself that, you know, like I matter, I have power. People can't do that to me, except he did. And my vengeance wouldn't change that. And it would make me more of the monster than I would like to be.

32:51 - 33:41

Prentis: Yeah. I think about what you're saying of like, whatever people choose to do around a harm or how they address it. There's so many different conditions that dictate what's the move to make. And I'm interested in this question of how does that sense of I matter get restored? And in any process or in relationships with other people, how does that get reinforced and how does that question, I think the question lies kind of dormant in so many of us in a way. And then we have these relationships with people like you're describing and it activates this

33:41 - 34:14

Prentis: question that's just sitting there at the bottom of our stomachs or something. And then I'm curious how that question, what we might do as a friend group, as a society, in a process, so that that question is less potent inside of you or me, you know. And that's a big, you know, that's a big question. There's probably many things, but I'm, it's something I'm often reflecting on.

34:14 - 35:01

Kai: Yeah. Yeah, well, you know, such a good question. I think it's like, when people come to me for support around harm and transformative justice, A story I hear over and over from survivors, and these days, it's almost everyone who comes to me who identifies as a survivor. Nobody really is like, I'm the perpetrator of the situation. Very rarely. Sometimes there are, but yeah. 1 story I hear over and over again, I'm curious if this is true for you too, is feeling dropped, disappointed, betrayed by the community around them. But that feeling of like, I matter, is

35:01 - 35:40

Kai: this question really about like, maybe I don't matter. And I think the thing about harm is that so many of us experience it and the person who does the harm for their own reasons, whatever, is like you know treats us in a dehumanizing way and then like tosses us aside or

something like that. And then society behaves like that doesn't matter. I think about like racialized folks, queer and trans folks, and all the harm that happens to us that society is just like, meh, it doesn't matter. And I think the most important thing I can think

35:40 - 36:17

Kai: of is for the community to respond to our experiences of harm and violence in a way that shows us, like, that we are cared for, cared about, and that this doesn't have to necessarily always include vengeance. Like, it's weird to me that some of the most common demonstrations of solidarity and care around an experience of harm are the call-out. I'm confident that if I wanted revenge on this guy who I feel hurt by, I could do a call-out and maybe like a thousand people would join me in denouncing him on the internet. But if I put

36:17 - 36:33

Kai: a call out saying, well, my heart was broken and my body was taking advantage of, and will somebody pay my rent for a year? I'm not so sure. Not so sure. You need to change that.

36:33 - 36:38

Prentis: Are you okay with me asking a follow-up question? Because I know what you're sharing is also very personal.

36:38 - 36:40

Kai: Oh, totally, yes. I mean, I have to do it. Yeah, very interesting.

36:41 - 36:43

Prentis: What stops you from doing a call-out?

36:44 - 37:18

Kai: The technical answer is I just don't believe it would help. I believe it would harm... Like, you know, if I think about the specific person... There are many people I've wanted to call out, and I have done callouts in the past, like when I was earlier on in life and stuff, And I think there's a place for call-outs sometimes too, you know? I am pretty committed to this personal thing of not doing the call-out, and I think it's because in this situation, these kind of situations, I know it would hurt the other person. I know that

37:18 - 37:53

Kai: that person would suffer real material consequences and emotional consequences of a call-out that I don't think would make him a better person. I think it would maybe make him a worse person. And then I don't think it would help me. I think it would harm me, actually. And that's very personal. I think everybody needs to answer that question for themselves, if it is doing the call-up going to hurt us or harm us. But I think it would hurt me because I need to know in my body that my healing, my empowerment, my restoration is within my

37:53 - 38:24

Kai: power, and the power of the people who love me. It is not within the power of the person who harmed me, or the power of the randos who would like to get on the train of a call-out of a person they do not know. That power is inside me, and I don't want to enact a situation where I

give it away. And that's deeply personal. It's for me. Not everybody is going to feel that way about themselves. But I feel that way about me.

38:29 - 38:55

Prentis: I think this is powerful. I feel Similarly that there are contexts where call out makes perfect sense Absolutely makes perfect sense and what I'm hearing from you is a I kind of felt discernment of, is that what will bring healing here? Yeah. To this place?

38:55 - 38:56

Kai: Yeah, exactly.

38:58 - 39:08

Prentis: And that's an important question for all of us to ask, and it's kind of an orientation for us to be in and it's a hard 1 when you're hurting.

39:08 - 39:08

Kai: Very hard.

39:09 - 39:13

Prentis: It's a hard 1 when you're in pain and you know what the source of the pain is.

39:13 - 39:19

Kai: Yes, Yeah, but you know where that's coming from. Yeah, yeah.

39:23 - 39:37

Prentis: This kind of brings me to another question or 2 that I've had about your work, and you are. In my perception, I think of you as kind of a provocative thinker.

39:38 - 39:38

Kai: Thank you.

39:40 - 39:41

Prentis: It really excites me.

39:41 - 39:42

Kai: I try.

39:47 - 40:10

Prentis: I really do admire that in you because I think there are a lot of things that I don't say that I do feel and then you will say things and I will be like, oh, you know, whether or not I feel a line, I just feel like a relief that there's something like a dangerous thought being thought

40:10 - 40:18

Kai: in the world. Yeah, forbidden thoughts. I feel the echo of Adrienne Marie Brown in the room.

40:21 - 40:49

Prentis: Absolutely. Yeah, it's a beautiful thing. You have talked about safety. I think it relates to this transformative justice conversation. You've almost kind of like remixed or reimagined safety or kind of taken the concept and turned it in a way to see, to kind of ask what is it that we're trying to do with our practice of safety and what is not possible through how we're practicing safety. And I hope I'm articulating that.

40:49 - 40:59

Kai: Completely, I'm like very amazed that you're following that thread in my work. I'm like, wow, yay, okay, it's amazing, yeah. I mean, you are. Yeah, you are, I'm like, you're really in it.

41:04 - 41:17

Prentis: I'm not kidding about this. So yeah, I just can you pick up that thread for me and maybe just just sprinkle some of your wisdom or your questions about about safety that I find I find your thinking there exciting.

41:17 - 41:48

Kai: Thank you, I am so glad. You know, I'm just gonna name, I love this interview. You are like asking edgy questions and I love it. I love the edge, it's my favorite place. Thank you, which is the forbidden thoughts thing. I think I just feel the relief of like, oh my goodness, at least we can talk about these things. And might be wrong, like, you know, might be incorrect about these things, but we sort of have to talk about them to find out. I sort of think this inquiry around safety is very embedded for me in

41:48 - 42:21

Kai: the real world kind of experience that I have and share with like trans women of color. And it's not only us, I think that's my entryway. There's other people, other lived experience, that kind of slide into it. But the memory that comes up a lot for me is I used to work a lot in like kind of queer oriented social services, universities, community centers, that kind of thing. And there would always be at that time, kind of like a feeling of like we need this to be a safe space and so only certain kinds of behaviors

42:21 - 42:57

Kai: are allowed and they weren't so unreasonable like it was like don't misgender people don't attack people you know I was like yes those are those are good to standards however there would inevitably be people, a lot of them transfeminine, older, marginalized, houseless, or homeless people who would come in and have a hard time adhering to those rules. Who hasn't run a queer community center and then like a queer elder from the street comes in and just is misgendering everybody right and left like it's just a thing that happens and then you tell them don't misgender people

42:57 - 43:27

Kai: and they get mad they're like no I'm gonna say whatever I want and I'm like oh and then the young people like kick them out and you're like ah like what are you And then often what happens is the street involved queer elder gets kicked out. And this to me is not OK. Like, I'm like, oh, I'm very curious about how power dynamics and class and like righteousness like kind

of fit into like this idea of like, well, what do we do in the name of safety? Are we just going to get rid of the inconvenient

43:27 - 44:02

Kai: people so we can be safe? And where does that logic take us? Where does that logic come from? Who is getting rid of dangerous or inconvenient people? Who are the people getting rid of, being gotten rid of on average? And if we look at the pattern, the fractal of that pattern in society, It is poor, black, indigenous, brown people. It is trans women of color. It is sex workers. And right now, it is Palestinians in Gaza. And what is the justification for all of this getting rid of people? It is We are unsafe if they are

44:02 - 44:37

Kai: around. And we find that logic in middle class white America when they say get rid of homeless people, get rid of black and brown people, give the police some guns, more guns than they already have. We find it in Palestine. We find it in queer university centers where they say we don't want any problematic people around and this is like deeply deeply I think key to this remixing or you know this like idea around safety that I'm obsessed with is like I cannot abide in my own body a definition of safety that is about getting rid

44:37 - 44:39

Kai: of the dangerous because the dangerous are my people.

44:46 - 45:34

Prentis: Wow. Yeah. Gosh, it's such a powerful point in this moment. Often reflect and write about and talk about and everything I can do about, you know, James Baldwin talking about, he did a lot of talking and writing about the innocence and monsters. Those that have to be innocent become monsters because of that pursuit of that. Anything they do is justified to this frame of innocence. And the other is always dangerous, is always threat, is always you know and you connecting it I think to what we're seeing globally both as who is dangerous in Gaza, who's discardable

45:35 - 46:27

Prentis: in Gaza, Sudan, Congo, Haiti. We're seeing this myth-making about innocence. And I think 1 thing that is really interesting to me in this moment is how implicated, I think, many of us in, I will say, specifically in the US, because that's where I'm situated, how implicated we are in all of this. And what I hope it does is take away some of that insistence on innocence so that we can actually be among people be with the rest of the world, to be people among people doesn't mean that all of us individually are some other extreme, but

46:27 - 46:32

Prentis: it means that we are actually in here with other life, with other aliveness.

46:33 - 46:44

Kai: I so appreciate you saying that because I think the colonial kind of Christian dominant culture has embedded in it this idea that you must be innocent to be allowed to live.

46:45 - 46:47

Prentis: That's right. That's right.

46:47 - 46:52

Kai: But we are, we should just be allowed to leave. Yeah.

46:54 - 47:02

Prentis: We are nearing the end of our time. And so, gosh, I still have lingering questions that I hope can be asked in relationship. Definitely.

47:02 - 47:03

Kai: Definitely. Anytime.

47:03 - 47:15

Prentis: Friendship with you. But is there anything you want to say or share before we leave? And I have 1 more question after that. But is there anything that you're like, this needs words here?

47:15 - 47:45

Kai: Yeah, 1 thing, which is just, you know, I think a lot about, so we just kind of looked at like kind of the way that in dominant culture, the safetyism and like kind of preoccupation with innocence directly serves like a colonial genocidal agenda. Because it says there are dangerous people you can get rid of well, and then all the dangerous people you wanna get rid of just happen to be, like, you know, people like us, and, you know, most of the global south. But we replicate this, I think. This is like the connection to transformative justice

47:45 - 48:23

Kai: within queer and trans communities or within BIPOC communities is that we are not free from the impulse of protect the innocent and get rid of the dangerous. And I just, I see this spreading through our movement spaces, like everybody always needing to be the innocent 1 and then the bad people have to be punished. And I think this is a big contributor to this thing I think we all know, but are afraid to say, which is the left is falling apart. The left eats the left. It's scary to be in social justice spaces sometimes. And it

48:23 - 48:53

Kai: is, I think, about this thing of we need to be able to let each other live, even if we are not innocent, which, you know, we can get into the complexities of what to do when someone has committed a harm, and we kind of did do that already, but, you know, these are like kind of the questions that I sort of want to connect. Yeah, and then I was reading, you know, some interviews you did yesterday, and you have this idea of transitional characters from family therapy. And I don't know, I just think that if we

48:53 - 49:25

Kai: have scary things to say, you know, you or I or Adrienne Marie Brown or whoever it is, you know, I hope that we say them because we find a way to say them because I think that is embodying the transitional character within the family that is social justice movement. And if we

embody that ready to be edgy but also ready to be wrong and ready to be fierce but also ready to be loving, then I think that's how we get to fix the dysfunction in the dynamics of the movements as we know it. So anyway, that's

49:25 - 49:26

Kai: my plug.

49:27 - 49:44

Prentis: Thank you so much. I love and appreciate that, and wanna talk to you so much more about that. And I think it's not a coincidence that we're middle children, middle children are out here doing this work, changing the world. Last question I have for you, are there any organizations or projects that you want to lift up in this moment?

49:45 - 50:20

Kai: Trans Praterato is an organization by and for trans folks led by a Black, Indigenous, trans woman, Monica Forrester, who I just want to give big ups to. I feel like Monica is not like in like celebrity social justice world, but is a star. Like 1 of those people has been just doing it for a little time. So just want to uplift her work here in my current home city of Toronto and also Maggie's Toronto which is like a sex work support organization that I really would love folks to uplift as well. Also, they just actually lost

50:20 - 50:56

Kai: their office in a fire recently in America, for those of you who are Americans. Not that you have to be American to support, but Red Canary Song is an organization that is like very dear to my heart. They do Asian migrant sex worker support. And I think it's like an issue that often like falls off the radar, but is like getting increasingly difficult for people's lives. So if folks wanna look into Red Canary Song, and then basically any local Palestinian organization that is like fighting for the end of genocide, I encourage people to look into.

50:57 - 51:19

Prentis: Lovely, thank you so much. We'll make sure that we put that info in the show notes so people can support. And Kai, I just want to thank you as lovely as I thought it would be to talk to you. And yeah. And I'm excited for more. This fills me with so much joy to be able to just learn from you and talk with you and yeah I'm excited.

51:20 - 51:24

Kai: Oh me too thanks for having me I can't wait to chat with you in the future.

51:25 - 52:08

Prentis: Hi everyone this is Prentis coming back just to invite you to a very special workshop that we are offering at the Embodiment Institute. On July 24th and 25th from 7 to 9 Eastern, we will be hosting a workshop called Why Feel? Healing our lineages and transforming our communities. It's a virtual workshop where we are introducing people, our community to transformational characters, and our foundational practices around embodiment. We'd love to have you there and we can't wait to see you.

Becoming the People is produced by devon de Leña. Sound engineered and edited by Michael Mayne. Bhavana Nancherla is our research assistant. Our theme song was created by Mayyadda. If you're enjoying these conversations, Please subscribe, rate, and especially please leave us a review on Apple Podcasts or wherever you listen. You can find more clips of the podcast on my Instagram @prentishemphill. And if you'd like to watch the full visual conversations and help us sustain the podcast, please join us on Patreon at Prentis Hemphill. Thank you so much for listening to Becoming the People.