

Transcript of Interview with Gan by Kit Heintzman

Interviewee: Melissa Gan

Interviewer: Kit Heintzman

Date: 05/07/2021

Location (Interviewee): Saskatoon, Saskatchewan

(Interviewer):

Transcribed By: Angelica S Ramos

Some of the things we discussed include:

The normal life cycle of releasing music and how the pandemic interrupted that. Gallery exhibition. Lots of travel pre-pandemic followed by the shift in 2020 career plans, canceling tours in Canada and Europe. The difference between live performances and live streaming. Shifting timelines in the pandemic and how arbitrary deadlines are. Becoming desensitized to the pandemic. Reference points from zombies and dystopias. Negative encounters with health care professionals, avoiding doctors and therapists, poor access to therapy, and the consequences of medical avoidance. The importance of medical and scientific literacy. The harm of being misgendered. Eating disorders and fatphobia. Being a part of the care community of a friend with cancer during the pandemic. Being single at the beginning of the pandemic and becoming more in touch with the body. The intensity of living with a roommate during lockdown. Masks as a physical representation of asserted boundaries. How disconnected a globalized world can still feel. Avoiding news and social media. Saskatchewan's re-opening. Parents getting vaccinated. Indigenous people, Wet'suwet'en pipeline protests. A deeper history of anti-Asian racism in Canada. Canada's financial policies during the pandemic: CERB. Universal Basic Income. The pandemic and a collective awakening.

Kit Heintzman 00:00

Hello

Gan 00:01

Hello

Kit Heintzman 00:02

Would you please start by telling me your full name, the date, the time and your location?

Gan 00:07

Yeah, my name is Melissa Gan. And it is May 7 9:06am on May 7 2021. And I'm located here on treaty six territory in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan.

Kit Heintzman 00:21

And do you consent to having this interview, recorded, digitally uploaded and publicly released under a Creative Commons license attribution noncommercial sharealike?

Gan 00:31

Yes, I do.

Kit Heintzman 00:32

I'd like to just start by asking you to introduce yourself to anyone who might find themselves listening to this at some point in the future, what would you want them to know about you and the place that you're speaking from?

Gan 00:44

Yeah, so I go by Gan. And I identify as agender or just like, don't identify with any gender. I am 30 years old, I am Chinese Malaysia, and my parents are immigrants from Malaysia. So I'm first or second generation which however people classify that I'm a settler on indigenous land. And I somehow become like a full time musician slash artist. It's a very like permeable kind of space. But I move between doing like musical performance composition, some sorts of like writing or like installation kinds of things. It's just a very open space to explore. By upbringing upbringing was like in a mostly kind of, basically, middle class kind of family. My dad is a civil engineer, I would say like, what, in my childhood, we are definitely much more strapped for money than we are now. And a big part of that is because of his education. And my mom is a homemaker. And I have one older brother as well, who works in chemistry, lab technology kind of things. Um, you can't think of other things myself right now. So I'll leave it at that. I might bring up more at the end.

Kit Heintzman 02:09

What is the word pandemic come to mean to you?

Gan 02:14

Um, in a way, I would say by now, since it's been over a year, it actually feels kind of desensitized. Like, I think, in the early days, it or even before before COVID actually started, we would think of pandemics and like movies, and everything's like in chaos. People are like, it's like, you could see diseases being spread on people like a zombie type of thing. And it felt very like, like, everything is scary, and like, dirty, and you just want to avoid everything. And now it just become it feels so mundane. In a strange way. Like, it's it's almost this, like cognitive dissonance where we know there's a pandemic going on, but I look outside and there's like children running around in a park, because people are just tired of having to restrict or whatever, they're just like, I'm going to try to go back to my normal life. So I would say it's like shifted, at this point, right now, when I hear pandemic, it doesn't have that same kind of that same kind of panicked effect that I might have had early on thinking, Oh, no, there's a pandemic and we're gonna have to be like this. Now I know what living in one is like, and it's, it's already become normal, a new normal.

Kit Heintzman 03:28

To the extent that you're comfortable sharing, would you say something about your experiences of health and healthcare infrastructure prior to the pandemic?

Gan 03:35

Um, so just like, what accessing health care was like, for me?

Kit Heintzman 03:42

Sure.

Gan 03:44

Um, yeah, so I would say, I often have avoided as much as possible, going to visit either doctors or therapists and that sort of thing, because a big part of it was because of gender, because I never knew what how people would

like treat me or like, react and sorts of things. And whenever I need to, like visit for those kinds of reasons, I'm already feeling quite vulnerable. And so it would, I would always kind of leave it until like, it was absolutely, like, you know, it's, you can't avoid this anywhere you need to get a kind of thing. And when I did finally go, it was usually kind of like half and half or actually, like less, fewer times that it was positive and majority of the times that it was like fairly negative where you feel like almost regretful that you went, but you also felt like I also just had to do this to take care of myself. And specifically with and I think for the most part, I've been lucky to not have had to visit like the hospital very often for myself. And yeah, that's like a big part of like with my class privilege and stuff to have been able to just like been taken care of well by my parents and have good supports and that sort Another thing I'd say with therapy, along with gender, there's like just other other intersections with like, my own my race and, and other sorts of like, parts of my identity that I was never able to really find like a good match between. And so I always had to settle with just like whoever was available at the Health Region here, you can access free therapy, but it's for like a six week or usually around a six week kind of like, course, and they try to focus on just like one thing, and you're supposed to kind of like, get to the end of it, but but over those six weeks, and so it's kind of difficult when you can't pinpoint, like one thing that you can work on it, you have just like a lot of intersecting different things that are going on. So I've often ended up avoiding things until it got much worse. And I also Oh, I guess Yeah, I think that I forgot to mention early on is that I've dealt with an eating disorder for like, well over 10 years, and that is very much wrapped up again with like my gender, and fat phobia, and my race and, and ideas of beauty and all those sorts of things. And I avoided going to the dentist for very many years as well, again, because of gender things, gender kind of like just not knowing when you'd be misgendered by people and most institutions not really having much awareness or education about that. So just not wanting to subject yourself to that kind of like situation if you if you can avoid it. But also a big part of that was with like my own eating disorder and knowing that they in especially in a dental office, they're not really thinking about mental health. And so when your teeth have deteriorated because of mental health, there isn't much like language or space to address it. So it felt much more scarier than it needed to be. And I've only recently started going back. So my general pattern is avoiding until I can't avoid any lock, unfortunately.

Kit Heintzman 07:09

Staying in pre pandemic timeframe, would you say a little bit about what your day to day life was looking like before March 2020.

Gan 07:19

So in, in the past couple years, especially like 2018 and 2019, my kind of music career was taking off in a lot of ways. I was doing a lot of touring, all of a sudden, it was strange, because I wasn't really the type of person that was like, I need to make it like I have like this plan. I have to do these things. But it just kind of was like, Oh, I can I can go play here now. Okay, I guess I'll do it. And then a lot of other things just like kind of like started flowing in. So I think, yeah, on average, I would go on tour like two or three times a year. And it was a mix between touring around Canada and touring over in Europe, I got to do that twice. The states is like the sole other difficult thing, somehow it's much easier to cross an ocean. And I did a lot of just like live performance here in the city as well. And also a lot of collaboration with other artists. I had, I'm involved with a few different organizations in the city such as like Girls Rock Camp. And so we would do a lot of like planning. Also, obviously always in person kind of thing. Like we would have like committees and then like larger, like committee gatherings and that sort of thing. And then we would have like an intensive two week camp with with youth in the summer times. So it was a lot of I was kind of in and out of my home a lot of the time despite being a homebody, I was very often. Yeah, it was a lot of it was a lot of traveling.

Kit Heintzman 08:59

Would you give a bit of a story arc about how that had to change during the pandemic. So what the change looked like, at the beginning, as it became sort of more normal to now.

Gan 09:19

Yeah, so. So I was kind of start at like March 2020, because that's when it kind of locked down was called. And I was I was already feeling fairly stressed about all the things that I need to do like career wise. I had a tour that was being booked for April and I was supposed to I gotten into a few festivals over in like Ontario and eastern Canada. So I was planning like this whole route, figuring out all the money in the flights and where to stay and trying to find places to play and just like all the moving parts, and that was going to be about like a month or if I think it was closer to five six weeks away from home. And so it was like almost being locked in place. But there was still like missing pieces. And then the pandemic was just like called. Oh, and actually the weekend that the lockdown was called was when the Juno Awards, which is like the Canadian Music Awards were supposed to happen in Saskatoon. And I was supposed to perform. And that was until that like, last week, I was kind of like, oh, like, you know, I think we're going to be okay, like, we don't need to panic. My mom was definitely getting more like worried than the rest of us. We're all like, no, no, no, don't worry, you don't need to wear a mask. That's like overkill. And suddenly, I was like, Wait, there's people from like, across the country, bringing germs into our small city, because we're not usually a destination. So that we felt insulated in that way. We're like, Oh, we're small. We're like, in the middle of like the prairies. Not a lot of people are coming here. So I, that's when I was like, Oh, I don't want to perform, actually, like, I will just cancel my slot. I don't want to get paid for this thing anymore. And I just want to stay home. And so then, I was kind of I felt relieved when actually everything got shut down. And I didn't have to cancel any of my plans myself. Everything was canceled for me. Like it's like, I can't travel because not because I am flaking on anyone but because everyone can't travel. No shows are happening. And I can just stay home. I also had another project on the go with, with it was my it's my it was my first big project at a gallery, they were at the main gallery in Saskatoon. They chose me as like their emerging artist. And so it was a very ambiguous timeline. But it was supposed to be like maybe it'll get set up in like may or installed or something like that. And I felt really intimidated. I wasn't really sure what I was doing. And that the the project was still kind of forming itself. Like I was doing some archive research and trying to get an idea what I wanted to do. And so the Pantone actually gave me a lot of like, way more space. And it showed like how arbitrary deadlines are like, I don't need to stress over a made deadline when I can just be like, maybe I'll do it in September. You know, like it really the light, like, life just keeps going on. And so, you know, I felt relieved. Surprisingly, despite like, yeah, obviously, it was it was such mixed emotions of being like, oh, like, this is a very intense and stressful time. But I'm relieved to feel like I can get off this hamster wheel for a little bit. Because I think with Yes, with like, within the arts world, at least, there's sometimes feel like there's like these seasonal cycles, like, oh, you need to do this thing before the summer or you need to release this thing before the fall, in order to be able to do the next thing if you miss that, oh, you have to wait a year or whatever. And so it was yeah, it felt good to be able to take that time be do a lot of things at home that it was I called it like my own at home, like personal residency and being like, oh, I can just read it, or like teach myself some things that I want to teach myself instead of worrying about all these other details that I was trying to, like fill in, in the timeframe because other things had been decided outside of my own outside of my own schedule. And so it was a little bit, it was strange, but it felt like I was given back some of my agency with my own direction. And then I guess I stopped for a while I stopped seeking out like, I think I stopped applying, like try reaching out to try and find more opportunities because I just felt tired. The pandemic has been very tiring for so many different reasons. And so it

was like, I can't, if I'm tired, I can't force myself to try and you know, make something happen or create something new. And, and I had to it was learning to like be comfortable with not having work sometimes and being okay with that. And just like because that's part of the lifecycle of artists anyways, but usually ebbs and flows a little bit more than it does where it's like last year was like just like down for a long time then maybe up a little bit but mostly. And so I ended in the past year, I did do a lot of nude things that I usually haven't done because I wasn't doing any of this live performance. And I personally wasn't really into all the video like live streaming stuff. My music is very like I do kind of like experimental soundscape things with my violin. And it's it's very like kind of meticulous or intricate and you kinda want to really be there to like witness both like the sound and like the physical movements with the violin to understand everything. And so it doesn't translate that well to video. And it also would be like, Oh, you have to sit here for like, half an hour or so like it's quite long. And so I it helped me start thinking and creative ways of how else can I engage with people. And I did a lot more composition things which I hadn't done before. I was able to do this six week course to learn Ableton that was presented through So Ken, and it was specifically for women and non binary producers. And because of the pandemic, I was able to do it, because they usually did it in person in Toronto. And there's no way I would have been able to fly to another city just to learn a course, like for an hour a day or two hours a day, for six weeks. So that was really, that was really good. And that helped. Because I was already doing a lot more composition and recording at home. This helped open up like the quality and like just like the exploration, I was able to do with that, as well. And and then yeah, I kept morphing, like, Yeah, I did this installation with the art museum. And that, that involves like building something like building like a gait structure. And I would have not had the time. If I had been on my regular schedule of being like, oh, I need to like be leaving here by mid September or whatever. And like, and all these other projects on the go, I suddenly had all this time to let my mind just like plan and think, and then also to like, figure out how to build something on my own. And to just be able to do that and not worry. And, and I did some writing as well. So there was another another gallery in New Brunswick, they approached me and they said, we have this, we have this show. Here's the really broad topic. And I was like, I guess I'll write a short story, because I have the time. Why not? So it's, yeah, it's, it's been actually quite refreshing for me to be to give to have that kind of mental space, in some ways to not have to worry with all these other details that I kind of felt more obligated in some ways or kind of like, pushed into, and to just have the space to just explore and learn and try out and, and have a lot of idle time to let that happen.

Kit Heintzman 17:38

Do you remember? So you had already touched on some of this, but what do you remember about your initial reaction when hearing about the pandemic? And then hearing about sort of initial public health responses?

Gan 17:54

Yeah, so it's, it's, it was interesting how like, obviously, early on, everyone was just hearing about China on the news, and how we're so used to thinking, Oh, it's over there. It's none of our business despite living in such a globalized world. And so. And it was even funny how, in late February, I was even in Vancouver that recently before like the, like, lockdown happened. And I was out for like, a meal with like, my brother. And we're, we're both like, yeah, like, it kind of sounds like it's it's simmering down. Like it's probably getting better. Because we hadn't really it kind of like maybe fell off the news cycle for a little bit or something. And my friends were like, No, I think Italy is like doing really badly. We were like, Oh, really. And, and, and it stayed. Again. It was like this feeling of like, Oh, it's just moms being worried, like mom's panicking. But like, it's actually not that much to worry about. And that's like a few weeks later, oh, like, actually, and I think a partially response was that I was I didn't I kind of what I overcompensated of being too lacks about things being like, I don't need to read about that

news. Because maybe it's just my social media bubble of people being like, you know, in overdrive, so I was avoiding a lot of that news on purpose. And then and then suddenly being like, actually, this is important. Initially, when like, I think Saskatoon only ever had this like really true lockdown in the first kind of month, where everyone stayed home. We only went out like that was the time when people were like stockpiling toilet paper and hand sanitizer just like disappeared and you couldn't find cleaning supplies. And me and my roommate would coordinate like every two weeks we'd make like a big shopping list and I would usually go out and do the shopping because she was working as a psychologist from home so she's doing like the nine to five thing. So we just really really didn't leave our home we just stay Dude inside our house all the time. And that felt secure. Because I was like, I don't want any, like, they're talking about spread, they're talking about all these things. I don't want to make any risks for any people if we can, like, we should just try to do that. And then after a month, the SAS government announced, they're like, Okay, we're gonna open up, you know, golf courses, things like things to like, so we can barbecue in the summer, like gatherings and stuff like that. And I felt really worried and uncomfortable. Like that felt way too soon that they were like phase one, we're reopening again. And I would say still don't agree with most of the things they've done. They've never, everything's always been a recommendation anyways, they've never enforced much stuff. But obviously, these recommendations have a big impact on the way that the public is working. So I felt I personally would have tried to, I personally stayed home more, but I wish that like in an overall like communal and like, public way that there was more, more being done to try and like, you know, keep everyone safe. Rather than trying to like, stay go back to like a normal life. Yeah.

Kit Heintzman 21:19

So COVID was only a part of what has been a pretty big political last two years. I'm wondering what some of the big issues on your mind have been and if you see them intersecting with COVID, and if so, how?

Gan 21:33

Um, yeah, like, I mean, right before, like, lockdown got called, again, I was like in Vancouver, and all throughout, especially January and February, the whatsover button, um, like protests against pipelines coming through their land had been really escalating and a lot of like blockades on railways are happening as well and blockades of like important intersections within Vancouver and stuff like that. And it, I just remember it feeling so ironic. And so many people feeling so upset when, you know, these blockades were happening, they were calling for a shutdown of like these industries, and there was just like, no response. And then as soon as you know, white middle class rich folks feel threatened by a virus, everything shuts down. And we just like, we can't even gather to protest anymore. And like that's been, that's it's always like, different cycle. But it's the same issue of like land and oil and indigenous peoples just being like, disposable in the state sort of thing. And so I think it got highlighted, but it also got pushed to the side. You know, it was like, actually, that's not significant anymore. Right now, right? Now we have to concentrate on staying home or wearing masks or whatever, that sort of thing. So that's been frustrating. But it's also like, it's, it's strange, because I do I still have a few degrees of separation from that. I'm like, I'm living at home in a basement suite. I'm not, I'm not actually, you know, on those front lines or anything like that. But yeah, I do remember that being one a very stark contrast, when that came in. Obviously, the anti Asian violence and racism has been really highlighted this year. And there's, again, that degree of like, a bit of frustration, because we've been having these conversations for many, many years. And one of my friends in particular, one of my artists, friends, who influenced like the project that I made, because she'd been she's done a lot of like archival research about, about local Chinese histories. And when she came to the prairie to do some research for her own project, we visited things like there's this tunnel tour in Moose Jaw, and they talk about, it's a fabricated story, but they talk about like Chinese Laundry workers living underground and tunnels and, and just

like having a hard life and that sort of thing, like in the early 1900s. And you can just trace this like thread of anti Asian, or just like different forms of racism, usually the same message but just like changing from which groups of people that they like focus it on, right. And so we've been talking about that all the time. And people have been talking about like Chinatown being displaced and they also so many different things and and so it was it was kind of strange the way it's suddenly had this bubble in the news, but that it's obviously that it only gets presented in one very specific way like oh, this this person was attacked. Oh, no, we need to like protest attacking or like protests, hate crimes, when it's like much broader systemic things. And I think also the fact that everyone is home so much more now and has a lot more free time. They were getting like a Very, maybe skewed kind of perspective on the news or like, the way that we get immersed in these stories we were we because we're like focusing on it so much more or when we have more time to like, comment and have like opinions and things that we like share on social media and stuff like that a lot of these conversations often just get kind of like into these circular kind of like spots that don't actually try to, again, don't aren't able to address like the broader things that are actually causing them and stuff. So it's, it is mixed with a lot of frustration. But again, it's not I feel this strange thing where I'm like, I feel frustrated, but I'm also like, but I also don't feel like I'm like, oh, but we should be doing this, but like I don't have like a solution or, or that something that I feel like I'm actively doing to address it either. So I feel frustrated with myself even or just like frustrated Fiat staying at home, hearing these like things constantly coming up hearing these new cycles, and then eventually feeling like, yeah, I have to just like kind of set boundaries with what information that I take in and that sort of thing. And, like, it was, it was three big things like land back. And like, I guess stop Asian hate is the testing that encompasses it. And Black Lives Matter. Like, again, those are all, they've all been going on for so long. But they got highlighted in these in this very specific different way, during the pandemic, it feels like. And it was wonderful that black lives matter was able to have that big groundswell of support, again, because people had like that time to like, be educated and to like come out to protests, where a lot of the time people were like I'm working, or I have to get to this appointment. People could actually like show up in like in that support. But then again, I think also people were looking for those quick solutions that like I went to the protests, like why isn't there an outcome yet? And it's like, people have been protesting these things. For years, people have been trying to abolish prisons for years. It's not that simple. And so I think a lot of people got involved that haven't usually been involved because of that time, and they weren't given like the right kind of enough, like support and context to like, really understand how to be involved in and what, what they need, what what kind of work needs to go into that kind of stuff.

Kit Heintzman 27:32

I'm curious, what does health mean to you?

Gan 27:39

Oh, boy. I'm just, I'm going to more directly answer that question. But I'm going to I there's one big anecdote, during this pandemic that I haven't mentioned yet, which is that close friend and colleague of mine was diagnosed with cancer, like right at the beginning of like when lockdown happened. And they're like a big, they initially were like, my role model and like celebrity idol and stuff, their names Ray Spoon, and they, they're a big like, activist and artists within the trans community. And they're from Calgary, and they're just like really pioneering, especially for the trans community and like the prairies, and as a trans icon. And so they, they asked me to go and be part of their care team in Victoria basically be part of their COVID bubble, with like a group of four of us that like Ray included, so Ray plus three others helping to care for them. And I stayed in Victoria for just over two months, two and a half months, helping them like just like, navigate chemo and radiation. And this is related to health because it was so difficult seeing how much like how gender is like completely disregarded within that

health system within the hospitals. And, and a lot of like, cancers are like very gendered, because of like, the specific organs that they targeted that they think that only men only women have to deal with these things. And they because they're taught that way, they only think and address them that way. Like even the way that their treatment was being was being planned. They were diagnosed with cervical cancer. So they were just like, like the treatment was constantly talking about like preserving your reproductive organs. And they're saying, like, I don't need, I don't need that and they weren't listening to that. And so just like feel like seeing that, obviously, like despair and anger and like, just like exhaustion of having to navigate that system. And knowing that a lot of us have to go through that and that it could be it could also be me like at any time. It just like felt like there's such this disconnect where we I think mental health gets talked about a lot More now or like it's been more trendy in the last maybe decade or something, but that it hasn't fully translated into how it gets incorporated into all other forms of health. Again, what I mentioned about like, even like visiting the dentist, or or visiting any sort of institution feeling when you're already feeling vulnerable, and knowing that you might also like face other forms of like, violence, or like hurtful things that like affect you. So I guess like health is just like, to me. It's, it's, it's totally personal. Like, I think for a long time, I've had to try to unlearn this idea that there's like this specific, like measurement that everyone's supposed to try to fit in, like, if your body is functioning to this way you are healthy, and if you're minded, like everyone has their own way of knowing that they're healthy. And for me, when I feel healthiest is when I feel like content with myself, like if I'm like, I'm not hurting, either physically or emotionally, or mentally or anything like that, I feel content, and that, I don't have to be completely without discomfort like that, that can, that, that trying to get rid of any sort of like pain or discomfort is like not a healthy balance. Either, that it's like that, that can be like numbing, or whatever the sort of thing is, but just like content, that it's like, this is like, not not only tolerable, but that it's like it is like an enjoyable state to be in. That's, that's what I would classify as healthy for me. And that includes not feeling scared, or like feeling stressed, right?

Kit Heintzman 31:45

With that in mind, what are some of the things that you want for your health and the health of people around you? And how, what do you think would need to change for that to become attainable?

Gan 31:57

Oh, boy, that's a really big one. I guess like, a thing that's like, just like constantly on my mind all the time is stuff about, like, fat phobia. Because of how, because of what I deal with, like my eating disorder, like really made me see, um, like, gave me a lens, I guess, on the world of just like, how, how prevalent it is, and just like society, and how it's woven into so many different things about health and about beauty and about value of people and that sort of thing. And about race and, and gender and all those sorts of things. They all intersect together. Can you repeat the question? Sorry.

Kit Heintzman 32:51

Yeah, of course. What are some of the things that you want for your health and the health of people around you? And how do we get there? What kinds of changes would need to happen in order for that kind of health to be attainable?

Gan 33:02

Oh, my gosh, my mind is I get I mean, I mentioned that but actually, the biggest thing about health is that is is changing access, right? Like we have so so many, all this, like technology, we have all this research, we have all these, you know, institutions and sort of things that exist, but the way that they are accessible is only like, it's very

specific. Like if you, as a more specific example to show that is like my roommate's mom right now has been has this has this mysterious sickness right now. They're trying to figure out what it is. And she was saying like, because her mom works within the Health Region, she actually knows what kinds of questions to ask who to ask those to, so that she's able to get answers or like results in in the timely manner that she needs. Versus if someone didn't have any of those connections, they didn't have any of that vocabulary. It would maybe take six months to find out you know, what is this or like to know who to go to next to ask that thing. And sometimes that six months makes a big difference in like, how you treat something or or how someone's health can like deteriorate or something like that. So I think the way that the system is structured is still very much geared towards you know, yeah, having connections having knowledge having money. And, and that's and that shows like, who we value society, right? Like, oh, we just like people who are poor people who we don't get like trans health about like accessing any like health affirming surgeries or that sort of thing. It's all very much inaccessible, and it's because it's not, it's not as important to them. I don't, but the thing is, I don't know how you would change like that's what that, that's what's very overwhelming to think about is like, what? What would make that better? What would make that more accessible? People still complain about publicly accessible health care even in like, yeah, places where we have it even though it then like it's beneficial. But that there's still like, they're like, oh, it's always backlogged or like the quality is not as good or something like that. And I think, I think that's, it's like partially stigma, but it's also partially the way that the system is set up that yeah, it actually is, like, not very efficient in the way that it can address dress people and that sort of thing. I don't know, that maybe that might be my answer is that it's, it's a big question to grapple with. I'm not going to try to pretend to have a solution.

Kit Heintzman 35:58

Well, I have a really nice, small question for you now. What does safety mean to you? Like, easy [both laughing]

Gan 36:08

No. I guess I guess like, if I said health was about like being content, then safety is like, feeling like, and never feeling more than an uncomfortable amount of like fear. Like, like, you can seek out fear, like for a thriller, whatever. But that you shouldn't have to feel like scared for your, for your own for your own self, or for the people around you that you shouldn't be like, kept up at night worrying about whether someone is going to be okay, or whether they are at risk of things or that sort of thing. So yeah, I would I would tie safety to fear and that. Yeah, yeah, I think that's pretty much.

Kit Heintzman 36:59

So there's been this really narrow, narrow narrative of what is safety and what is safer under COVID-19. And thinking under that smaller framework, how have you been negotiating what feels safe for you and negotiating now especially with other people in your life?

Gan 37:18

Like, because people have different ideas of like, oh, it's safe together with 10 people or Oh, yeah, that sort of thing. Yeah, it has been an interesting. Like, I was like, a very, like, the masks is a very physical example of boundaries, right? And then, and of people who won't wear masks, they take on that air of being like, oh, like, I'm not, I'm not paranoid, like the rest of you. And they see that as, like a sort of strength. I think it's, it's a, in the early days, I often felt again, like this need to compromise in a sort of sense. And, and that was, that's just a part, that's something I've been grappling with, in my life, a lot of the time of being like, oh, like, sort of people pleasing, or like, just being like, Oh, you're all doing that, I don't want to make you uncomfortable. So I'm gonna, like, take off

my mask as well, even though it makes me feel uncomfortable in this situation. And so I was thinking about that, and being like, I don't need to do that I like, whatever, if it's a mask or whatever, if I need to say no to like an engagement or say, like, I don't think that's okay. Learning to be able to, like assert that, but also, knowing that it isn't up, it shouldn't be up to me that it shouldn't it like that's what, that's what public health is supposed to be for. So, again, like, it's like, dealing with, you know, navigating these boundaries, but knowing that I shouldn't place like, guilt or like, like, pressure on myself because of having to navigate those kinds of things. That the whole the idea of, like, boundaries often gets, like portrayed as, like some sort of social justice, like lingo being like, Oh, you're talking about boundaries, when people deal with them all the time, and suddenly, we're all dealing with them in a very, very specific context of being like, Oh, don't come closer to me or you know, don't, I'm not. Why are you having a party or, you know, all these types of things. I, I've had a lot of like, friends, unfortunately, have to, like kind of leave their friend group because they've had such different boundaries of like, what is safe and what is not okay. And that's, that's been a really tough thing to do. But it's, uh, for me personally, it's been a good exercise. It was literally one of the things that my therapist is like, you we need to work on boundaries, like, like if you think about yourself having like, your boundaries or like this fence that can like that can bend or like be permeable, you are of of it. I'm always kind of stretching my further than it needs. needs to be, and there's no reason to do that. It can be I can keep mine at a comfortable tension, basically.

Kit Heintzman 40:11

How's your relationship to touch changed over the course of the pandemic?

Gan 40:18

Um, well, I would say, I never grew up in a very life touching household to begin with, we're not like, big on hugging and that sort of thing. Um, and I had, I've been in like, a, an intimate relationship, right up until like, maybe like half a year before COVID hit. So I'd had like a, like, Yeah, six months of being like, Okay, I'm single now. And what does that feel like? And like, already had already been in this mode of like, what do I want to do? What do I like? What do I like, like relearning myself in a sort of sense. And, and I think that's what a big part of like, being at home in quarantining, like locked down has been is like, oh, like listening to myself listening to my body, or like listening to my cues and my cravings, and that sort of thing. And, and learning what kind of interests or like things that bring me joy, that sort of thing. I don't know if touch has, has affected me that much. Because, yeah, like I said, I haven't grown up around it. That often. I don't think I like seek it out very, very much. I know, like, the few times me and my roommate did hug she was like, like, she was overflowing being like, I can hug you? And I was like, oh, yeah, yeah, I can, but I wasn't ever like, we need to, like, hug more, or like, whatever, because I can't hug anyone else. It's never it's never been a it's never been a hot, super high priority, or, like really like my kind of like, love language, either.

Kit Heintzman 41:53

How are you feeling about the immediate future?

Gan 41:57

Um, the immediate future I actually met, so my, my roommate just moved, like, two days ago. And that was the dynamic of living at home together, like suddenly so intensely, actually became was probably one of the most tiring parts of lockdown. Like I said, she worked like a nine to five. And she, she actually kept her desk kind of more out in like, the living room. And so And because she was like a psychologist, a lot of the calls that she had things, it was like, private. So I needed to, like, make sure I wasn't like trying to ea accidentally listening in or

anything. So a lot of our home essentially became her home office for like, the majority of the day. And, and, like, I could understand, I obviously understood why that needed to happen. But it was also it became difficult being like, I'm at home in my room, or something like that, like trying to, like dance around someone else's work time, or like how much noise I make, or that sort of thing. And, and so, I am currently now just like, at home by myself for the, until I find a new replacement roommate, so probably to like next month. And so right now I'm just like, oh my god, I can do, I can sing at like 10am in the morning, but like it, you know, I can just like, it's like my own little playground. And that feels quite exciting. And strangely, because of the way like, I don't restrictions are set up right now. Because I live at home, it means that I feel comfortable, like visiting my parents again. Versus like, I think they said like, if you live on your own, you can visit one other household, but if you have like shared people, but stick to just your household. So now instead of just being stuck at home with with my roommate, I can like visit my parents who are like they've at least gotten their first vaccinations because they're, they're older. And so I can also not worry about them, but also I can visit them so I don't worry about them, you know, being lonely and like really getting on each other's nerves and that sort of thing. And then like the mental health side of things. So I'm currently feeling like pretty good. And I also just am coming out of another kind of like, open slump of not really having that much work. And like I I personally haven't. It's strange like it's like I don't mind not having work other than the money part. Like I'm not a person that's like I live to work like I need to do work to like feel productive. I'm like no like I like I like working with people I love like that. I like that inspiration and stuff like that, but I don't I don't need to constantly seek it out so I didn't have like really intensive work coming in for like the past like two months. And now they're starting to be a new flow of like projects or like just like things come into my inbox. And so that's exciting. And so like, yeah, it feels good to be like, Oh, I have like something that I'm looking forward to or my brain feels really like is stimulated to, like start digging into. And the other big thing that I kind of forgot to mention was that having the serve the like, the just like, a regular paycheck that I could actually depend on helped a lot. Like, I'm not used to that, obviously, it's like, oh, maybe I'll get paid this month for a project, or maybe there won't be anything for the next like, couple of months or something like that. Like, it's always it's very, it fluctuates a lot versus being like, oh, every two weeks, I can just say, oh, I need another paycheck, because I need to just like have a healthy life and not worry about having a home or having food to eat or any of that sort of thing. And it, it stopped for a while. Like I think they cut it off in September, but it got reintroduced in January, again, with slightly different parameters, similar to EI believe. And so that's been nice to again, not feel not feel stressed about that. And also to like so that the people around me also aren't stressed. They're like, Oh, no, you're an artist, like Are you do you okay? And I've actually like, I feel, I feel great. I'm enjoying not having to constantly feel busy. I think I'm still learning to not make excuses. Like, I think I often still feel like I have to tell people like, oh, yeah, I have worked out like I'm doing these things with actually I'm like, I'm just enjoying my hobbies for the next two weeks. And like, it's almost like a vacation. But it's sometimes hard to give yourself a vacation when you're a freelance person.

Kit Heintzman 46:52

Would you talk a bit about how your parents vaccination changed sort of what you and they saw around mobility?

Gan 47:04

You mean mobility in terms of like, once they had it, they felt like free to move around and stuff like that?

Kit Heintzman 47:09

And you had said, once your roommate moved out that that had been, yea.

Gan 47:13

Yeah, yeah. Um, well, it was kind of it was sort of self imposed. Like, I think at any point, if I really wanted to, like, go over and visit my parents I could have, but I really want to make sure that I did wasn't just like, putting any any sort of unnecessary, you know, risks with like, exposing them or anything like that. I mean, as soon as they got my mom got her vaccination first, and I would probably felt the most worried about her, because she's like, the oldest. And so it was just so nice to feel like a peace, in a sense of you like, not that it's like, everything's good now, but it's just like one more factor that will help protect her. And then I don't have to worry about, um, let me think for a second about like, mobility. I don't know if a lot has changed, like, I would say, my family has kept it. Like, we've kept it very tight, I would say I visit my parents more than my brother did. And that was because my brother lives with his girlfriend. And his girlfriend has two nieces. And she was also working as an education assistant. So she would occasionally go to schools. So their bubble was kind of like a lot larger than mine. Mine was like, mostly at home, goes to the grocery store. And so it was, I think, my parents, they weren't doing very, like, my dad would still occasionally go into like his workplace and that sort of thing. So it was it was strange that they actually were had like a much lack. My parents had a more lacks approach to the the kind of pandemic restrictions. And then me and my brother did, we felt like we had to be the ones that held back from that or like, kind of enforce these things more than they did. Like, they'd be like, Oh, we should all get like, get together for a big family meal. And we said, oh, maybe we should wait until it's like a bit safer. And they'd be like, Are you sure we can't just have tea like yeah, we're like, oh, I'm having tea versus a whole makes a huge difference. Like we're all going to be getting together anyways, kinds of things. So I'm not sure if that really answers your question about mobility. Like

Kit Heintzman 49:40

Whatever answer you give me is perfect.

Gan 49:42

Yeah. Okay.

Kit Heintzman 49:45

I wanted to just open a little bit of space if you wanted to say anything about now having experience CERB what that might mean for sort of longer term ideas about financial assistance in Canada.

Gan 49:59

Hmm, well, I actually do know, there, I feel like I know of at least a couple of groups that are trying to work on some sort of, obviously, like universal basic income stuff, and also like, consistent income for artists specifically. And like one group that's working on a project right now they're working to try and get like a, like a trans programming, Project blind, kind of like happening within Saskatchewan that like specifically funds, trans artists. And instead of being like, you get this much for your project, they go every two weeks, we pay you what the CERB was paying you, so that you can just, and there's no specific outcome that you're supposed to make. It's not like you have to meet these criteria. It's like, you get to live like, well. And obviously, living well will create a good environment for you to make art versus everyone thinking that art like comes out of like struggles and pain and whatnot, it's like, we have enough of those already. We want to just like be able to, like not have to worry about eating, so that we can just, like create what we need to create. So I think it's been, I think, I know, like there are specific groups that are working on it. I don't know if I've seen a lot of like, just like general out in the general public about people saying, like, Oh, we've experienced this, we need to like make, like, continue this. Because I

think when the CERB stopped, and September, I didn't, I maybe like wasn't paying attention. But I didn't see like a huge public outcry that said, like, no, you can't do this, like, we need to, we need to keep this going. I mean, ideally, for me, it's like, look at all this money that's going to like the military that's going to oil and gas. And that's going to the police, like we're over funding those three, specifically way too much. And a lot of that could actually just go towards people. And but I don't know how much like maybe like the liberal government government has into investing differently than that. But yeah, I do feel hopeful that they're at least like organizations trying to work with like, larger funding bodies to kind of like change that, sort of, to try and set up that sort of like regular kind of like payment income, versus everything always being like grant based, or project based, and that sort of thing. Because of grants itself are also still very, like academically oriented. It's kind of like what I said about the health thing of like to know the right people, but especially if you know, the right things to say and like who to talk to, then you're more likely to get money. And that's, and we shouldn't have to like prove have to prove ourselves. Yeah.

Kit Heintzman 52:54

What are some of your hopes for a longer term future?

Gan 53:04

Ah, like, just in general, or like pandemic related or?

Kit Heintzman 53:08

Anywhere you want to take it.

Gan 53:11

Ah, the first thing that came to mind was, like, how an early pandemic was how so many unions were kind of being formed with Amazon and stuff, and I would love to see more kind of collective, I guess, like, it's been a form of collective awakening that everyone was like, Whoa, we are experiencing the same thing to the, to some degree, and that we all share this and that we are affected in similar ways to and therefore we can, like, you know, organize around things in that sort of sense. It in terms of like, a long term future, I mean, the ideal things would be, like, land back. Like, like, if we made all like, if we gave land back to the indigenous folks not to kick up like the like, some people think, Oh, they're just gonna, like, send us all home, kick us off or whatever. It's like, they can just be our landlords. Like, just let them be in control of the land again, that would be amazing. We, if we had better like, we had drinkable water on like reserves and in northern communities and like actually affordable food and health care, that would be wonderful. If yeah, if we actually stopped like overfunding things like the police, I'm giving them things like planes and helicopters to like survey in our cities. That would be great. And if they were actually if yeah, like if they if they took away if they started defending them a lot more because they're already overfunded, and they're overstepping a lot of their suppose of like responsibilities and targeting mostly indigenous and black folks with like things like carding. I'd be great if that didn't happen. I think I really, I one thing I worried about, and I would love to see be able to flourish in the future is like the future of like the DIY, kind of like, artists, spaces and communities, because those have had a hard time surviving this kind of lockdown, because there's nothing to keep them open in this current climate. And I think that's where a lot of again, it's like this idea of like, not having to live up to specific measurements or expectations. That is where I feel like, as, at least to me, where a lot of like, really important and valuable like art happens, because we don't feel like that pressure or that box that we have to sit in, within inside. Um, a lot of things [laughing] I'll maybe leave it

Kit Heintzman 56:03

Uh self care has been a really prominent part of 2020 and 2021 conversation, and I'm wondering if that's been available to you what that's looked like?

Gan 56:16

Yeah. Yeah, it's been funny. Again, like self care has been on my radar a lot, but it always gets framed so much in terms of like, I guess the differentiate differentiation was [inaudible] between self care and self soothing, like, the self soothing things really get are much more marketable, like, take a bath by a candle, bake a cake, or whatever, and bake bread. And so I, I keep the I keep certain self soothing things in mind, because obviously, they're nice, and they're enjoyable. But I think the self care part was more about like setting up my life. So that I don't have to feel. Yeah, that like, insecurity or fear around things like things about like organizing all of my money expenses for tax season or whatever, like being able to, like, kind of have my life in order in that sort of thing. Then self care. Sorry, were you asking about my access to self care? Or like, what self care...

Kit Heintzman 57:28

If if you've been so not everyone, but like, sometimes when I asked this question about self care, the answer is like, No. And so trying to create a space for if self care is something that you have had time for had the energy for? What has that looked like?

Gan 57:44

Yeah, I would say I, I'm very fortunate to have access to self care. And that I'm also kind of constantly in that, like, dissonance of thinking, like, there are so many people who just don't have that luxury because they need to, like so many people who couldn't stay home because they need to go to work so that they could put like food on the table for their family and that sort of thing. And so like, obviously, like the largest thing, again, is about like these systemic things about access, and about distribution, equity, and that sort of thing, because that's what creates the best self care is like when you're, like, valued and taking care of vices. For me, self care, has looked, has has been about learning to like, listen to myself about like, what do I need to do? It's changed the way that I like work, because I am not going to just be like, oh, this person is working this many hours. I should mirror that I can instead say like, I work for an hour. Oh, I'm feeling like I need to take a break so that I can be able to work like later. I can I can say, oh, I need to like listen to my body. Like what does it need right now? Does it need like a walk? Does it need food? Am I I'm like my own pet. Like, if I had a dog, what does the dog need? Does it need attention? Does it need, does it need a bath? Does it need just like some nice music? Or like does Yeah, just want to go for a walk or something like that. So it's a learning take care for like, yeah, sometimes it is easier to care for yourself when you kind of like almost like think of yourself separate from yourself in a way. But and, and also, like I've gotten, I've gotten back in tune with a lot of hobbies that I had in the past that I had kind of stopped for various different reasons. And so it almost felt strange. Like I was like, am I returning to high school? Because I'm I'm suddenly watching lots of I don't know British comedy shows or something. thing like that, like stuff that I used to be into that I hadn't been into for like a long time. But I had also, again, I kind of started that slightly before the pandemic hit. Because when I've been in like my previous relationship, I think a lot of the time I just took on the interests of the person I was with, I was like, oh, they like these kinds of movies. I like them too. Because I was excited to like, find things in common with them or like to be able to, like, do things together. And suddenly, when there's like, oh, I'm on my own, I don't have this person to just like leech, like self care and like interests off of. It's like, wait, what, what do I like? Like, why have I forgotten my own, like, hobbies and things

that bring me enjoyment. And so I'd already sort of started that. And then I was given this intensive time to just really like reexploring, like my own self.

Kit Heintzman 1:00:58

This is my second last question. It's a bit odd. So we know we're in this moment of a flurry of biomedical and scientific research. I'm wondering what you think scholars in the humanities and the social sciences could be working on right now to help us understand the human side of COVID-19?

Gan 1:01:34

So if you're kind of asking, what sort of because research has been so like vaccine and like spread oriented, like those kinds of measurements, what kinds of things should we can we be researching in terms of like, the human effect? Oh! [laughs] Well, a big thing that comes to mind is like how much folks like disability activists have been, have really shone a light on like, look how much how things can be accessible. And look how we've said this for years, and you didn't care until again, it finally like affected able bodied, white middle class people, like oh, no, you suddenly have to learn through a computer. But like, actually, we could have been doing that with classes the entire time. I think thinking about, yeah, disability and accessibility. Like, its institutional structures. And ways that that is still not being, like fully addressed, but that there has been like this kind of opening. Within like, a more public conscience is like really important. I think a lot about like, just like, I think, I think a lot about like the precariousness of like, a lot of working class, and like migrant workers that have had to, like, regardless of whatever health, health conditions are going on, they still have to, like, put themselves at risk, because of like, the need to continue to keep working or like for themselves for income, but also because the rest of us are like, I need food in this grocery store. Like we depend on your aspect of the cycle, to keep everything else flowing. Don't know how I would frame that as like a research question. You know, just like the inequity between who is who is able to actually protect themselves and to who it who is who's given that like luxury. And how there are ways that we can restructure that, in a sense. I think I'm kind of rambling. It's a big question. So I'll just leave it for now.

Kit Heintzman 1:04:11

I want to assure you, there is no such thing as rambling in an oral history interview by definition, everything you hand is a part of the framework.

Gan 1:04:23

Okay.

Kit Heintzman 1:04:24

This is my last question. It's not less weird. So this is an oral history interview. And I carry with that my own assumptions as a trained historian, in a very particular moment, and one of the things historians of my generation are taught to value is to pay very close attention to what our actors thought was important. It doesn't mean believing what they believed, but understanding that if a lot of people thought that this mattered, then that's enough to make it matter. If you could speak to some imagined historian of the future one who had never lived through any part of this, what kinds of stories would you want to be sure don't get forgotten? Where would you tell them to look?

Gan 1:05:26

So So you mean like, where should what kinds of things should they make sure to like, research or like look into?

Gan 1:05:47

Don't know, but I guess maybe for me, I'm like, Oh, they would definitely have already looked at something like,

Kit Heintzman 1:05:55

Definitely don't assume that they've already done.

Gan 1:06:01

Okay, well, the first thing that comes to mind is like, the ways that big corporations so just like, snuck so many things under the table, while the rest of us have been, you know, concerned on an individual level of like, what restrictions are working for us. Or like, when vaccines or when how much spread or all these sorts of like, can I go to the beach with my friends while we're while we're kind of like caught up in that they've been able to, you know, either, like, pass so many pass, so many different like, bylaws or whatever, or like opening up new mines or, yeah, like create more and more like destruction and extraction and that sort of thing. So I think it'd be, I think I'd be curious to know, like, what, what all what all what all was happening in that realm, while the rest of us while they kind of like distract us in some ways, with like, our own our own individual worries, and like needs. Yeah.

Kit Heintzman 1:06:59

Those are all of the questions that I have for you. And I want to thank you so much for all of your answers. And at this point, I just want to open up some space if there's anything that you would like to say that my questions haven't facilitated, giving you the space to do that here.

Gan 1:07:18

Yeah, I think that's all I think that's all my brain is coming up with the moment.

Kit Heintzman 1:07:23

Brilliant. Thank you so much.