Kim Edgar (KE): I remember reading somewhere that it's like, we can be more engaged looking at a bunch of trees than like looking at a TV. I don't know how that is for other people. But for me, I really feel a sense of deep calm just like being out in nature – looking at trees or watching ladybugs lay eggs or something. It's just like a real fascinating thing. And I love watching the patterns, right?

[Coco Nielsen (CN): This is On Being Ill a show about creativity, disability and identity. I'm your host, Coco Nielsen.

[Music grows then fades]

I'm usually a behind the scenes producer here at On Being Ill but today, I'm excited to jump into the hosting chair and share a conversation I had with visual artist Kim Edgar. Kim is based on the territories of the Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in, in Dawson City, Yukon. Their work ranges from comic books, to experimental noise and electronic music, to their large-scale drawing and painting practice. They oftentimes depict stories of illness, disability, and transness – showing their viewers how those who cross or occupy these liminal spaces hold special kinds of knowledge.

We talked about this threshold, along with what it was like to start a comics micropress up North, and the vitality that comes from connecting with the natural world around us.

Here’s that conversation.

CN: Kim, thank you so much for chatting with me today. I really appreciate it. And I'm very excited for our conversation.

KE: Me too. Yay!

CN: Sweet. So just to begin, I was hoping that you could introduce yourself.
KE: Ah, yes. I am Kim – Kim Edgar. I am a visual artist – an interdisciplinary artist – I guess. I also do music and sometimes video and a lot of stuff. But I think primarily I'm a visual artist and a comic book artist. And I live in Dawson City. Oh, and my pronouns are they/them. I never know how to introduce myself. I'm autistic. And I have celiac disease – possible other autoimmune diseases – fibromyalgia…and so between all of the autism and that, and the ADHD and stuff, I feel like I have a very broad experience of different kinds of physical and cognitive disabilities.

CN: Sweet. Thank you for presencing that and forgiving that intro. And I know you chatted a little bit about this. But could you also just tell us a little bit about what your current artistic practice looks like? I know you mentioned comics. But yeah, just give us more of a sense of that.

KE: Yeah, I lead my practice based on the things that are interesting to me or like that are giving me dopamine at the moment. And so I have a practice of large-scale drawings that I am slowly but surely chipping away at…it's like five feet by three and a half feet. And they're more larger, more serious work, I suppose, usually dealing with themes of disability, transness, queerness, that sort of stuff. But in a figurative way, and with a lot of art history references, literature references, that sort of stuff. But then I also have my graphic novel process. So like, I've made a lot of short comics, and currently writing a graphic novel, which I actually at this point made progress on. And I'm very proud of myself. I think last time we talked, I hadn't. I'm very happy about that. So I do comics, which is like a visual storytelling. I have slowed down in the last year and a bit, because I channelled a lot of my comic energy into a small press called Hecate Press that I was running, which was publishing other people's comics. And then also I do…I've been really going into a lot of textile work, that's based on plant textiles and stuff. So going real deep into the process of harvesting local plants that you can…and turning them into textiles through a process of like different kinds of rotting or peeling or drying or manipulation and stuff. So like nettles or fireweed, or willow….basketry is also part of that. I don't fully know yet how that textile practice ties in with my, I guess more like, “fine art” practice. But like, you actually told me something really interesting last time we talked about the tie-in being the plants themselves because plants figures so much into my drawings and into my stories and stuff that I've been thinking about that a lot since you mentioned. So yeah, there's the textiles. I also do music – experimental stuff with a lot of synths. And I've been performing and I have made some videos for that, that I have been experimenting with sort of video practice and stuff on a very small, slow scale. Yeah, I think that's most of the stuff that I do. Yeah, I dabble in a lot of different things.

CN: Well not just dabble. I mean, you have such an extensive repertoire. And it's cool to hear about your pivots toward more like land-based practices, it seems like you're getting into but also maintaining your very regular and prolific comic practice. And then, yeah, the first time that I saw your artwork in person was seeing your large-scale drawings at the Odd Gallery in Dawson City. And that is an exhibit that was called “We are Sacred When We Straddle Both Sides, An Altar to the Threshold.” I'm definitely interested to talk to you about that theme of threshold. You
described in the exhibition text “There is a sacredness to those who exist on a threshold. People who transcend opposites have knowledge and freedoms that frighten others, whether they transcend the binary of gender, or the binary of life and death, or the binary of spirit and material worlds.” And that just so resonated for me, and I found it such a dense piece of text to read that, and looking at your work more deeply, I just see that come up in so many things that you do – that presencing of the threshold, that talking around the threshold, animating that threshold, it's so beautiful, and it's so rich, I was wondering if you could just elaborate a little bit about, yeah, what it is to exist on the threshold and what it is to represent that threshold in your art practice?

KE: Yeah, absolutely. I think a lot of it started with...my partner is also trans. And we talked a lot about transition as sort of crossing a threshold. I mean, that's what the prefix trans means is crossing something, when she started transitioning. And then, of course, when I started transitioning, still thinking about it. But I think that we talked a lot about the ritual of going across the threshold and how, you know, in past times, in previous cultures, all over the world, people who can cross some sort of threshold or binary are considered quite sacred. Like, I think a lot of healing people were people who could maybe have a relationship with the spirit world, or with an alternative reality. And I think about that, too, in terms of like, the Mad Pride movement, like the idea of alternative realities and the different realities we all experience, and not thinking that there's one objective reality. You know, like holding, with honour, the different realities that we might experience in different kinds of brain states. So, yeah, like people who are healers could often cross a certain threshold that other people could not, you know. And in a lot of cultures, I know the position of gender nonconformity, or like, what we now call transness, but had many different names in many different societies, was a really useful thing — it was considered very special, because those are people who could understand, you know, maybe two seemingly opposing experiences of like, quote unquote, “women” quote, unquote, “men,” you know, and like people, they could be gonna have a go between, have a fluid understanding that could explain things to other people. Yeah, so it started from me talking to my partner about this and about maybe the rather secular way we treat queerness — at least in my and her experience as like white settler Canadians, there's a secularness with which queerness is treated that we wanted there to be more ritual for. There is something about having like a group of people on the other side, or like ushering you through...I think of almost like doulas, you know, like somebody to like, help people through. That ritual is like a really important community building time, right. And that just led me to think a lot about the other sort of thresholds that get crossed, like with disability and chronic illness. And my experience of chronic illnesses is...like a lot of people who... I grew up disabled by autism, although I didn't know I had it, so that was a different experience. But my physical chronic illnesses [laughs]...my physical chronic illnesses started when I was like 24. And I've been thinking about it, because they've recently gone into remission and gotten a lot better in the last few months. And I'm 30...I'm gonna be 34 in May. I'm 33. So that's like nine years of my adult life where, on some level, I was extremely sick. And I started withdrawing a lot from social situations. I didn't experience the 20s really, that a lot of people do, where they're going out and having a lot of fun. Like, I couldn't; I couldn't become a party person, I couldn't be really social, like, I was fatigued all the time. And it got really really bad after a while. And now that I'm experiencing a bit of a reprieve, I'm noticing that I'm going out all the time and seeing people and talking to people, and it's like, I feel like I'm in my early
20s again, because I didn't have that. But that experience of not being able to do the things you're supposed to at a life stage or...you're told that like life is supposed to be like...in your youth you're doing these things, you know. It's like this sort of weird in-between state where it's like, I'm not dead, but I'm not living in a way that I think I was told I was supposed to...I was able to, you know, I'm not living in a way that like people have a narrative for. And so I think that there's an in between state there as well as just the in between state for people with, like, illnesses that are fatal or they're going to die or they're told they're going to die. It's like that experience of like, you're not dead yet, but there's like, already a death coming. And there's like, there's sort of this, like, in-between space between life and death that I think a lot of disabled people or chronically ill people experience. That's not to say...disability and chronically ill overlap, but they don't...they're always the same. So I think yeah, thinking about those things...also, yeah, the in between state of like, for folks who experience psychosis. I've only very mildly experienced it in small ways. But you know, psychosis is interesting to me, because I do have my own personal set of beliefs about the world and like, the spirit of things. And so when I have experienced in the past, small bits of psychosis, I don't know if it's...if I'm just pathologizing a spiritual experience, or if I'm spiritualizing a medical experience, or like, if there's anything wrong with that, you know. So thinking about threshold a lot, about, like, sitting on a threshold, crossing a previously thought threshold – like where you thought that you couldn't cross that, you know. I think that's like something that imbues a lot of wisdom, and knowledge that's to be celebrated, as opposed to like, you know, just shoving all the transes and disableds into a corner so we don't see them. You know, it's like, no, we should be asking these people questions. Like, as soon as I started medically transitioning, I was like, why is nobody asking me about this? Why is no... this is fascinating! Like, why is no one asking me...like, I just it's, which is like, yeah,...it's a little facetious, but like, it's, it feels like a sacred experience that I'm able to experience, you know, so...and I know not everyone is able to experience that who wants to, but it's like, I just don't know why it seems taboo, when I'm like, this shouldn't be seen as like... why are people flocking to me? Yeah. Yeah, why aren't people respectfully asking questions of trans people? Because I feel like people who have medically transitioned have just hormonal and an understanding and knowledge and have gone through puberty twice. And like, there's, there's just a richness of information there that like – and same with disability, same with so many things, same with madness, but it's just like, I don't know. It's a fount of wisdom, I think, for all the people who experienced that.

CN: Yeah, that is so interesting. And I think you're absolutely right, that there's so many taboo subjects that ought not be and I think, as well, we lack the grace or the interest to ask people about what their experience is at the threshold. And the fact that you're speaking at the threshold, you're populating the threshold, you're animating the threshold, you're painting the threshold is such a gift, and you're creating that kind of ritual for people, even if it's not people that you have direct contact with, that you yearned for. And so thank you for that.

KE: Thank you. I also like...I think about it in terms of disability with ritual as well, there's been a lot of friends who I have who have found themselves disabled, suddenly, through injuries or through the diagnosis of an illness. And I know when I first got diagnosed with celiac – which I thought was the answer to all my problems – it wasn't. But like, it was the first time that I was
like, maybe I'm not ageing, at 26. Maybe this is actually an illness. And I've gone to people who I
knew had autoimmune diseases, and I talked to them. And it really helped. And so other friends
of mine, when they kind of go through this experience of like, negotiating, like, oh, maybe I'm
disabled now. Or maybe I have different needs. I think it's really helpful to have somebody
around to be just like, this is some stuff you might find helpful or like, you know, allow yourself to
rest or like having that community in that like ritual of like, ah welcome, yes, this is hard. Let's do
it together. You know, I want there to be more sort of rituals around that as well. You know, like, I
wish I had more community when I first got diagnosed, but I had a little bit and I really cherished
the stuff that I had, you know, like, it was really important for me to be able to talk to other
people. And like I learned through community and through talking to someone else who had
Crohn's disease, just like a lot of tips that she gave me where she was like…especially
navigating like digestive disease and like having to change a diet so radically, and find all these
like trigger foods and stuff, or like go completely gluten-free with celiac disease. She was just
like, sometimes I literally just eat to survive. Sometimes it makes no sense as a meal.
Sometimes it's a can of tuna in an apple, and like, I just was like, oh, that's actually a really good
framework for me, you know. So like things like passing on knowledge like that happens in
community, happens with mentorship, happens with ritual. And so I just wanted to add the
disability part to that as well.

**CN:** Yeah, I resonate with that just having, at the age of 27, gone to a doctor with chronic back
pain and now 10 years later, still living with that chronic pain, and it being a very lonely
experience, and having the only relief come from other people who talk to me about chronic
pain and things that have worked for them. So I really do resonate with that. And I thank you for
presencing that. There's many places of ritual that are important to acknowledge. And one of
those is the ritual also of talking to other people who are chronically ill, or in or in pain, and it's a
rich place, and it can become a rich community as well. Can you…I know that you've said that
your work envisions the physical land as a literal body. And I know you mentioned off the top a
little bit about the presence of plants in your work. And we see that in your visual work. And we
know the connection that you make in your kind of more current practice of weaving and natural
dye extraction and things like that. But can you elaborate a little bit about that connection
between the body and the natural world?

**KE:** Yeah, sometimes, how I understand things is through, like, little truisms or something that I
make up, that are poetic and make sense politically, and then I find out how it makes more
sense later. It's like a little aphorism or something that I like, repeat. And so the land is the body
or the body is land is like, it came from thinking of like, the way that the land is irrevocably
changed by climate change, you know, you can't go back, it's like, things change, and they
change in one direction, you know. And similarly, the body is evocatively changed by illness,
often, and it changes in one direction. Like, even if you find a cure, or you get better, it's like,
your body still has, like scars from things, you know – internally, mentally, it changes you. And
so yeah, I was thinking about that quite a lot. I was thinking about the way that land can
sometimes can look like bodies lying down, you know; the fertility of the land, and like, fertility
less in a giving birth way, and more just like the...ah, there's a word...the vitality of a person!
You know, and just thinking about the relationship of like...just from my experience with like, a
lot of fatigue and with the autism too, which leads you to be very easily overwhelmed, sensorially. I remember reading somewhere that it's like, we can be more engaged looking at a bunch of trees than like looking at a TV. I don't know how true that is for other people. But for me, I really feel a sense of deep calm, just like being out in nature, like looking at trees, or watching ladybugs lay eggs or something. It's just like a real fascinating thing. And I love watching the patterns, right? And so I find that to be something that calms my nervous system. And it's like, my autistic brain can take in all the sensory information at once and process it. Whereas like other scenarios that are maybe more social or more urban, it's like ahhh, and my brains like, nope. So yeah, there's like, definitely a relationship there, as well. And just from my drawings, like, I think a lot of them are like body in landscape and landscape in body, that sort of stuff. So that's the sort of...I was trying to like, kind of overlap the two concepts, see what happens? Yeah.

CN: Yeah, the health of the land and how it affects our bodily health as well, watching something that's vital, as you say, and that having kind of a calming or vitality-enriching experience for you, versus, you know, the sort of climate grief that many of us experience when we are looking at an unwell ecosystem. I'm curious about the deepening of that with your natural fibre, natural dye work that's been more recent.

KE: Yeah, I think also, like, the climate grief thing is always in the background of it. And I think something that's maybe good about living so fucking far from everything in the world is that...I mean, not to say that, like current events don't affect us here. They absolutely do. Climate change disproportionately affects people in the polls, as well as people on the...near the equator and in hot countries and stuff. But I think there's just so much information that you could be taking in about how the world's exploding at any given moment, I don't think the human brain was meant to take in that much news all of the time. And so going outside and watching a ladybug crawl around and lay an egg or like looking at the lichens on the trees or the way the ice clings to the branches. What it does is it routes me in the presence of, like, right now. And it's like, sometimes when I get overwhelmed by the broadness of the world's problems, I have to like withdraw and focus on what is directly in front of me in my community, or physically in front of me, like, literally in front of me, you know, and so it does, I think have a healing aspect and being like, I might not be able to solve, like some horrible problem, but I can cultivate this plant in front of me, I can water it, I can make sure that ladybug that's laying the eggs is safe, you know, like, it's just small things like that, that like bring the locus control back to me. Yeah.

CN: That makes total sense. Absolutely. And that connection between nurturing the land around you, and also community around you makes me wonder about how important is it or how relevant is it, the kind of community you have up in Dawson City?

KE: Yeah, I think the artistic community here is like, integral to my practice. I feel supported by people here. But also, on top of that, just the community of living somewhere small and rural. I mean, rent prices are also going up here, it's not...nowhere's safe, you know. But I do feel like I live in a place where I can afford to have a studio space, you know, and there is a little bit more relaxation when it comes to like...like I know people who, like, trade labour for studio spaces, or
like…do you know what I mean? Like, there's like a little bit less…it's like, when you're at the end of the road there's a lot more trade economy, that's really nice, like a favour based economy and that sort of thing. People are kind. You know, the art community in the Yukon is like, so rich, we're lucky to have access to quite a bit of funding. And yeah, and then I really liked doing things like my small press. Hecate press. Yeah, I really enjoy engaging with the community through those projects, when I'm able to do them – when I'm able is the key. But yeah, like, I don't really think I necessarily come up with original ideas, like everything that I think is like a reflection of the conversations I have with the world around me, right. So without this community and me living here and my experiences here, none of the work that I created would be the same, like it would not exist. So yeah, in that sense, because it's been such a profound place for me as a person and then anything that affects me as a person affects my work. Like that you can't really separate the two you know?

[Music: Quick, light, percussion, descending keyboard, minor tones, chill]

**CN:** You mentioned Hecate press. Can you talk about that project and explain kind of why it came into being?

**KE:** Yeah, Hecate Press is a small micro press publishing experiment I started in 2020. Yeah, I got a grant for it in fall 2020. But I published the first book in 2021. So I did two rounds. One was an anthology of northern comic artists that I curated and also did a call-out, so I could find more northern comic artists. And it went really well – it ended up winning a Broken Pencil award for best comic and it was nominated for the Doug Wright awards. And then the second year I did a series of six mini comics, and that's been going really well as well. And what I wanted to do was create paid opportunities for artists to do comic stuff. I wanted to support comic artists in all the territories. Obviously, being that I'm located in the Yukon and live here, my social circle is mostly Yukon-based. But I was hoping by doing this, I could find artists further away from me, in Northwest Territories, and Nunavut, which has been great. I've made a lot of connections with really cool artists in Nunavut and Northwest Territories and stuff to sort of broaden that community. I wanted to create a kind of territorial community, because a lot of the communication and trades and stuff in Canada goes north/south, right. So like Yukon and BC, Northwest Territories, and I guess like maybe Alberta, Saskatchewan. You know that sort of thing. There's less communication pan-territorially. So I wanted to sort of create something that would hopefully incite some kind of circumpolar community artistically, including other northern regions in Canada too like Nunavik, in Quebec, and then eastern Canada, all of those areas. There's a shared experience of living in these really remote northern communities, even though culturally there's a lot of difference, you know, but there's also so much that's the same. There's the sort of feeling of being forgotten by southern Canada. And like, you know, Northern Lights and the cold and, like, the ruggedness, and…Yeah, so I wanted to create for *The Northern Gaze* anthology that responded to the northern gaze as opposed to creating northern content that is catered to the southern gaze. Because the media…you can very clearly see who media is targeted towards by what they explain and what they don't explain. Right. So like an American show, that talks about going to prom, and they're all in high school, and they have lockers and stuff, it's like, it's kind of assumed that you know what all of those things are. You know, no one's like: a prom is like an American social ritual, where it's considered a rite of passage for youth to
like, enter adulthood. Like, no one's like explaining those things, because it's assumed to be for a North American audience. Even as Canadians when we don't know things we're assumed to know these things, so we kind of learn about them, right? And I think a lot of northern media is like, catered towards the southern audience being like: these are the northern lights, we do this here...you know? And so I wanted to curate a series of stories that were just like, for other northern audiences, like, in the sense that like, a lot of stuff wasn't explained. So yeah, that was, like, the thesis of it, I guess. And then the short comics was like an opportunity to foster six artists who I wanted to, like, give them an opportunity to make their own comic – like a 12 page thing, just like your own narrative, on whatever they wanted. And like, pay them to do that. And then they can have comics to sell and stuff. And quite a few of them were like, first time comic artists, or like they've never had anything made before really, or at least nothing published by someone. So that was really good. Because I wanted to give them confidence. And also like, when you have a comic, you can have a portfolio to bring someone else to be just like: look, I made a thing! Proof of concept! Give me a book deal! You know, so that's yeah, basically...Hecate Press serves to, like, support and celebrate northern comic artists, northern being a broad term, and give them paid opportunities and hopefully create community between them. But I've taken a hiatus this year, because I got overwhelmed by my own project. So yeah, I hope to continue with something in the future. I just have to rejig how I take on projects because I tend to take it on and be like, I'm going to do it all myself because I don't want to have to subject anyone else to doing maybe unpaid labour or labour that's not paid off or something and then I burn myself out. Yeah, so I need to...I need to rework how I do these things.

CN: That sounds familiar. I get that. Well, it's an awesome project – Hecate Press and the Northern Gaze. Is it still available for folks who are interested in purchasing that work?

KE: Yah!

CN: Cool.

KE: Yeah, all of them are available at the website, so, like, Hecatepress.bigcartel.com. Yeah.

CN: Sweet. So you mentioned off the top that you are making some progress on your debut graphic novel. Where is that project at right now?

KE: It's still, like, nascent, inchoate, I will say, like, fetal. But the other day, I just started writing down scene-by-scene a progression of the story that I'm trying to tell, which I had drawn like two or three pages, as sort of a proof of concept, again. But I started writing down the structure of this story, which was really helpful. I still don't know how it's...where it's going to end. But I have this, like, outline, I guess, which is good. Because once the outline is there, it's just sort of like, I just gotta fill it out with drawings, you know. So I think the hardest part for me about a lot of art, or not the hardest part, but the most exhausting part is the creative decision making. So with drawings, it's like the pencils, where I'm actually like, mapping out and like, doing...like I'm drawing the thing. And then the actual painting is great, you're like filling it in, adding details. Like that's like paint-by-number joy. But creating the outline of something is like, whew, it's like
pulling a lung out my body, to show to the world. Like I find that to be – creative decision making – to be quite exhausting, if also really rewarding. So I made some decisions and wrote some… like a first part of an outline. And that actually really helped clarify things for me. So yeah, proud of myself.

**CN**: That’s exciting. Well, I can’t wait to see that graphic novel, whenever it comes to full fruition. I’m sure there’s a heck of a lot of work between now and then. But yeah, it sounds like you got a really amazing foundation built. So I was gonna ask you a bit more of a broad question, not specifically about your practice anymore. But for you what does a future *for* disabled crip queer trans artists look like?

**KE**: Hmm. One in which our ability to live isn't tied to our productivity, where we just are allowed to live in safe accessible housing with safe accessible food and not have to, like, destroy our bodies to do so. I recently read something by Kai Cheng Thom, where she talked about if the extent of your activism essentially is trying to, like, change individual minds, it's a bit of a red herring, you know, structural oppression is a structural issue. And we need accessible housing, health care…like people need the basics of, like, getting by, like having food that's healthy, like all of these sorts of things. And that needs to be the focus of our activism. And I really, really resonated with that. You know, especially when you come into like people with intergenerational wealth, well, they're going to then be set up to be able to do all these other things, because they have money that has been passed down. Whereas like people who don't, like, then they're already like a leg down. Or like folks who are denied health care for a variety of reasons, or folks who, like, live in poverty. It's like, we need to be addressing very material conditions. And I think, like, that's one of the first steps of any kind of, like, liberation. And so with disability – and I've been looking into the disability program, and it's, like, at least in the Yukon, it's like, it seems like it's kind of humiliating and, like, not enough to live off of, and very unpleasant. And I'm at a crossroads: I don't think I fully qualify for it. However, I can't work enough to make a living. So, but I work more than, like, if I were to qualify for this, I would need to work less than I'm working. But I'm just like, it's like…I'm like, I can work this much; it's still not enough to make a living but it's like too much to get disability. So what, what do I do? Like, you know? And so it leaves a lot to be desired. And I know I'm not the first person to say this, and there's a lot of friends I have who are on disability or similar things, and who've been saying this for years, but it's not enough to live off of. And to have any kind of equity for disabled and chronically ill people, they need to be able to have enough to live off of and not to be penalised for having an okay amount. You know, it's a fucked up set of hoops that you have to jump through to then just be forced to live in poverty and to not be able to have more than like, I don't know, a certain amount of money in your bank account. And so yeah, it's like allowing people safe housing, accessible housing, the ability to thrive and not just survive, is like, I mean, allowing everybody that but especially for a disabled future like that needs to happen.

[Music: Ascending, bright, twinkly, uplifting, electronic]
CN: Our guest today was Kim Edgar. You can find more of Kim’s work at KimberlyEdgar.Com. You can follow them on Instagram @DeadBirdParty. And if you’re interested in Kim’s small Northern comics press, be sure to check out HecatePress.BigCartel.Com. On Being Ill is researched, recorded and produced on the traditional, unceded and treaty lands of Indigenous peoples across what is now contemporary Canada where each of us on the show is grateful to live and work. Please visit our website to learn more about our relationships with the lands and the people who live on them. This show is produced by me, Coco Nielsen, alongside Emily Blyth. And executive produced by Emilia Nielsen. Prince Shima creates all of the music you hear on our show. You can find him on Bandcamp @PrinceShima. If you liked this episode, check out more at EmiliaNielsen.com or wherever you listen to podcasts. And if you’d like to get in touch with us, please write to OnBeingIllPodcast@Gmail.Com. We’d love to hear from you. And finally, a big thank you to SSHRC, the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, who funds this work through an Insight Development Grant. Until next time, let’s create, converse, and crip the system together!

[Music rises in crescendo then fades out]

[End of transcript]

References