

All Ears with Abigail Disney
Season 3 Episode 3: Jia Tolentino
Writer Jia Tolentino: Feminism, Fatalism and the Ego-Death of Motherhood
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Jia: Hi!

Abby: Hi, Jia! I'm Abby!

Jia: Oh, my headphones aren't working.

Abby: Can you hear me? No.

Jia: Yes, I can hear you guys now. The headphones had just popped out of the jack. That was all.

Abby: Okay, we're good, so we can start?

Jia: I will caveat this with—I'm in a small house with a baby and a dog, and the baby's asleep right now. You know, there might be a sound intrusion but this is where I've been recording all this stuff. So it'll be fine.

Abby: Okay. And I have two dogs, so there may be sounds emanating from them.

Jia: What kind of dogs do you have?

Abby: Welcome to All Ears, I'm Abigail Disney. This fall was supposed to be back to school, back to work, back to normal. Well clearly, that's not happening, and let's face it, for a lot of folks, especially women, the old normal wasn't so hot anyway. The list of crappy things we should be doing better on? Well, lemme see. Sexism, racism, unequal pay, unaffordable childcare... need I go on? This season my guests are women. Women who are envisioning a new and better normal for all of us, because lord knows we still have so far to go.

My guest today is Jia Tolentino, and I have to say, I wish I had known her all of my life, which would have been a neat trick since she's 30 years younger than I am, but her voice and her sensibility are so compelling. She speaks with consistent, ethical clarity, and self honesty, which is no easy feat. Jia is a writer whose book of essays, *Trick Mirror* had me whipping out a pen and putting stars and exclamation points in the margins. There were so many profound insights and wholly original perspectives to be

found there. It was refreshing and challenging and a little astonishing. Jia started out blogging for sites like The Hairpin and Jezebel. She wrote about women, pop culture, and social issues with such speed, dexterity and wit that she was snapped up by the New Yorker in her twenties to be a staff writer. She has made great use of her platform there, taking on internet misogyny, the fall of Harvey Weinstein, the rise of Brett Kavanaugh, and the depredations of social media. Particularly of interest to me is her take on the feminist movement in all its glorious-ness and failures, as well as her unrelenting focus on how America treats its least powerful. And I'm excited to talk to her about one of her most recent accomplishments, a new baby. So, welcome Jia.

Jia: Thank you for that introduction. I really—that means so much to me, your generosity in reading my work, especially because, in the past 18 months, my brain has felt so stagnant from lack of contact with other people, you know? So thank you so much.

Abby: Oh, you're so welcome. And believe me, I totally understand this brain issue because I have four of my own. I couldn't put a sentence together if my life depended on it for a good six months. And what was amazing to me about those babies was I really loved them and I just did not know that would happen, which is a crazy thing to say.

Jia: Yeah, I have to say I've enjoyed the experience much more than I thought I would. I was just talking about this with a pregnant friend who, you know, is looking at what's happening in Texas and the flooding in the city. And, you know, is just like, 'What have I done?' And I was like, well, I'm not sure that this will be a cheerful thing to say to my friend who's going through a crisis. But I was like, I thought of this as a deeply unethical decision that I was deciding to do anyway. And I don't know. I think I tried to set my expectations really low, and I know that caregiving is so difficult and I have been so surprised. Like, I think I now want to have a second kid a lot more than I wanted to have a first, which is interesting.

Abby: Yeah.

Jia: I was saying to my friend that I think it inevitably shows you reserves of how you can absolutely expend every last bit of energy you have caring for someone and it will be rewarding, right? Like I think it's kind of awakened reaches of capacity within me that, right now, are mostly directed towards this baby, but for the rest of my life, I hope are very much turned outwards to the maximum extent they can be. Like that I've found really bracing. That you can just totally give all of yourself and actually—and have more to give.

Abby: So that was going to be my first question to you. Has your worldview changed a little since you've had the child, has it shaken you up a little bit?

Jia: No, I don't think so. I think that parts about my thinking have changed. I mean, I think that having Paloma has accelerated me into ways of thinking that I had been trying to cultivate for the previous—at least few years, but the ways in which having a baby has altered my worldview is—I've been really, you know, this is all sort of acid trip language. But I think I've been trying for a while to more readily access non egocentric scales of time, and space even. Right? To, you know, walk further towards that sort of ego death that motherhood inflicts on you instantly. You know?

She's so young still, she's only a year old, but I wondered how things would be once I started having hopes for her, you know, and what those hopes would be. Because I have a really difficult time thinking in concrete terms about the future. I have rarely set goals for myself at all. It's always like you do whatever you can today and you do that over and over, and that will eventually lead you to the life that you want. But it's almost like it's like maybe I've smoked too much weed in my life to even like, be able to substantively engage with the future. Like, I really find it difficult. And with Paloma, I know this, like everything, is so likely to change, but when I think about what I want for her future, I have no sense of individual ambition for her or for me, you know, or really as a concept anymore. And obviously the pandemic has enlarged this frame of mind, right? My sense of ambition for her is entirely collective. It's entirely in terms of the kind of world that I hope she's making choices in.

Abby: Right, right. I'm a lot the same way myself about the future.

Jia: Interesting.

Abby: Which I think is a blessing, right?

Jia: Yeah I do too.

Abby: Because, you know, you're more likely to be disappointed than anything else. And I'm the same way about my kids in that what I wanted for them was fulfillment and joy. And the more I have specific hopes for them, the more I found that along the way, you have to discard those hopes because your child always engages with the world in a way that's completely unexpected to you and the world engages with your child in so many ways that you can't control. And one of the things that drove me nuts was the way it was constantly trying to educate my children about gender, and I resented that so incredibly. Are you seeing that kind of messaging now?

Jia: Yeah. Well, that was one blessing about being—it was a strange experience to be pregnant almost completely in private, you know? And in a lot of ways it was really wonderful because there was nobody talking to me about the gender binary. There was no one offering unsolicited advice that I think pregnant people get in droves. And, it was nuts, you know, because my baby is a girl, or, you know, she's biologically identified as a girl at birth. But it's like, you know, she's one, she's a—she's a baby. Like gender is meaningless. Right. And she wears a lot of hand-me-downs from her cousins who—the older one is a boy. So she wears a ton of boys' clothes and is constantly mistaken for a boy. And sometimes people will ask her name after they say, you know, he's so cute or whatever, and I'll say Paloma, and they'll get so apologetic. Like, Oh my God, I'm so sorry. She is so beautiful and sweet and you know, a princess, and I'm like, it doesn't matter. But yeah, I've definitely had those moments of spiraling. I think right around when she turned the age where they're not wearing interchangeable onesies, I was like, okay, maybe I'll get her some pants or something. And, you know, I went to like, Baby Gap and was just remembering the intensity of the yeah—gender indoctrination, starting at an age that you are, you know—you're two years from being able to even verbalize anything.

Abby: There's just a craziness in the way we talk to babies and about babies around this issue. So by the time they get to nursery school, I mean, it's set, they have ideas.

Jia: Yeah. I mean, the instinctive cues that you as a girl or as a woman are valued most when you are sort of adored and decorative. I was very much raised as sort of like a title nine, nineties child where it was just like this kind of... the Spice Girls, girl power, like youth soccer of it all.

Abby: *laughs* Yeah.

Jia: And it was quite clear to me from as long as I could remember that my path through the world would be smoother if I could please people along those lines and that has shaped me, you know, despite everything that I know, despite everything that I was articulating to myself, even as a middle schooler or a high schooler, I have never been able to completely undo. And I don't think I'm scarred by it, but it has affected me at a level that I—it is impossible to scrub out.

Abby: So would you have described yourself as a feminist when you got to college?

Jia: Well, I started college in 2009 and had come out of an environment where I had certainly—I don't think I'd ever heard the word feminist spoken out loud let alone met a

person that had ever voted Democrat, you know? And so I started at the University of Virginia in 2005 and maybe I wasn't fully aware of it, but I would not describe the University of Virginia in 2005 as any sort of bastion of any sort of progressive anything, you know? There was like an activist wing that was considered very much not in the mainstream. And I think my own, quite blinkered point of view was that it was almost that of post-feminism right. That feminism had accomplished what it needed to, and there was still inequality, but we were past the need for a movement or something. That was sort of the default assumption that I slid into. And then just towards the end of school, like understood, no, actually, I am a feminist and, you know, then within three years was an editor at Jezebel. I slid in through such a strange way.

Abby: You know when I was in college, I was terrified of the feminists. I graduated in 1982 so the iteration of feminism that I sort of became introduced to was characterized by people like Catharine MacKinnon, who had, what many people describe as an anti-sex position. Maybe Andrea Dworkin might be the person that people will remember most vividly from that period. Of course, these were people who were always mis-characterized, and over simplified. But, that was the takeaway much of mainstream society took from what they talked about and I was deeply insecure and I was raised in an incredibly conservative family, so I just steered a wide berth. So I kind of never engaged with it until a friend asked me to come and I was pregnant with my second child to this big feminist breakfast in the New York Women's Foundation. And what I found there, I now understand as what I call the feminism of yes. As opposed to the feminism of no. Which was all I had encountered up to that point. And the feminism of yes, is like, "Try this, be open to that. Maybe this is possible." That was when I became involved in the movement, was in the nineties, because the eighties had struck me as just the darkest, hardest kind of feminism. So now when I look on the internet and I see, you know, just this kind of constant shredding of each other and judgment it feels again like we're back at no. Is that a crazy thing to be thinking, especially around social media?

Jia: Do you feel that specific in any way that specifically concentrated on feminism or is it just something that, you know—are you talking about just the general—

Abby: Well, you know, you're right. That it does generally apply to a lot of things, but it does feel to me that around feminism it's harsher, we're harder on each other, I think, and less open to the idea that everybody has a different way of structuring it.

Jia: It's interesting. My point of view has been, again, I've always been really conscious of my gratitude towards previous generations and micro generations of feminists or people who negotiated all of these issues, whether or not they did it within like any sort

of formal movement structure. Right. Because by the time I was entering adulthood—I basically like graduated college and websites like double X and Jezebel, there was kind of available, vibrant, colloquial, funny, and fractious often, feminist thinking that was just widely available anytime you got onto the internet. But I have found the friction within feminism to be so, mostly—I mean, this is also probably my broken brain from having worked at a website like Jezebel for so long and getting so used to people like emailing me pictures of aborted fetuses anytime I wrote about abortion, like my brain is broken, my shell is too hard because of that, but that's how the movement changes, right? Like that's why the feminism that I was inculcated into or that I was able to step into quite easily, you know, as a 22 year old was so much more... it was so different than the feminism that was dominant when you were around the same age. Right? And the entire history of feminism getting from Seneca Falls to now, it's like the continual productive change within the movement it has all come from, I think, pretty acrimonious conflict, you know? Ultimately, I kind of find it exciting. Maybe this comes from also growing up in a very, very conservative, religious community where I often did not agree with anything that anyone was saying around me, but I was like, that's fine. That's actually okay. I kind of learned to become a little bit overly comfortable with disagreement, I think, in a way that suited me for the internet. But I find, specifically where feminism is concerned, I find the discourse, however jagged it often gets and however, like terribly rude and personal it gets, I find it mostly exciting because it's a sign that ideas are moving, things aren't stagnant.

Abby: You know, you're giving me a whole new attitude. I'm grateful to you for that. Because to me it sometimes feels so harsh and unloving.

Jia: Yeah. Well, I agree though. But I just place all that blame onto the internet. I place that blame all onto the systems that are more powerful than nation states, they are structured to monetize conflict and making it almost impossible for ambiguity or ambivalence or reticence or hesitation, within the digital architecture of the places where people speak in public.

Abby: Yeah. You mentioned growing up in a conservative home. That is a superpower, I think. Or has been for me in the sense that I think of myself as bilingual. I know how to have a conversation and stay in the conversation with people I wildly object to some of the things that they say, because I understand in the very bottom of it all, they usually want the same things I want.

Jia: Yeah, I feel two ways about the way I grew up. And one of them is certainly exactly like what you're saying. The rest of the day, I'll be writing about abortion in Texas. And you know, it helps, for example, when writing about something like that, that while I think

that there should be no legal restrictions on abortion whatsoever, I understand because I grew up around these people exclusively until I was in college. I understand how deeply people feel that life actually does begin at conception. And, you're right it is a super power to be able to understand a division as vast and truly intractable as this one. But I also, my parents themselves, they are, I would say especially now they're liberal leaning. They were always rather moderate. But I went to this Southern Baptist mega-church school for 12 years and was often there on scholarship and one thing that I feel a lot of mixed feelings about now is that it is a gift to be able to speak that language. But I feel, I don't know, a very quiet heartbreak about learning to speak the language of people in an economic class significantly above mine, basically like wealthy white people. It has given my life the kind of upward mobility that my parents dreamed of. Right? It has catapulted me into a level of security that I never expected, but I do think—sometimes I do think that's come at... I don't know a cost, right? One specific example is I've been feeling all sorts of ways about—my daughter is half Filipino, cause I'm Filipino, but she's half white and she looks very white and I've been realizing like, oh, I spent so much time in country clubs with people who had donated money to the scholarship foundations that were putting me through school, but I never went to school with a single other Filipino person. And the older I get the more I have realized that as much as that ability to speak that other language has given me, it also shaped me in ways that I'm now trying to work against as an adult, I think.

Abby: Yeah, I understand that. Do you think there's a point where you lose access to the language you grew up with or are you afraid of that happening?

Jia: Well, I've totally lost—I mean, yeah. If we're talking, yeah, the metaphor of the language, I mean, that is so literal because it's definitely too late for me to learn Tagalog. I could never really teach it to Paloma, but it's also never too late. I think this is one thing that I've been trying to think about in terms of climate change, right? That when it feels too late to do something it's like exactly when you need to do the thing that you need to do. Like it's never actually too late.

Abby: Yeah, well, again, that's where your optimism comes up, right through the center of your pessimism. It's kind of interesting. My grandmother was obsessed with—I think it was St. Jude. He was the Patron Saint of lost causes. And there is a tendency I have as well to kind of like martyr myself on what feels like a lost cause, but also feels like the only important thing that needs happening at a given moment. And I've never felt it more deeply than I'm feeling it watching the news lately.

Jia: I read this book recently called 'How to Blow up a Pipeline' by Andreas Malm that I've been forcing upon all of my friends and talking about. Part of what the book is about

is fighting the sort of exculpatory fatalism that I think enters into many of our thinking when, you know, you look at the report and it's like, 'The seas will be warming for the next 2000 years.' Or what do you know, and you're just like, 'Well.' And I find that really difficult to fight off in myself like at a spiritual level at like just the level of practical ethics. And that book in particular really has helped me clarify a way of thinking about exactly this issue.

Abby: So, you joined the Peace Corps right out of college, yeah?

Jia: Yeah. I went to Kyrgyzstan in Central Asia to a tiny village in the middle of nowhere and was teaching English. And, you know, it was a dramatic, swift education in good intentions. It was a really important learning experience, which made me feel nuts about the fact that it was like, 'Oh, am I going here to have a learning experience?' You know? But it was a beautiful and sort of devastating and important year in my life.

Abby: Yeah. It's funny. Why is it Kyrgyzstan's job to educate me?

Jia: Right. I was like, why am I going? But you know, it was truly like, what could I do right now that could be possibly useful? Right. And this was a clear idea. And then afterwards I realized that maybe I would have to change my understanding of how I could best be useful in the world.

Abby: Mhm, and cultivate some bigger better forms of being useful too.

Jia: Yeah, I remember I came to some realization at some point, which was extremely jarring and very personally depressing for me at the time, but also very galvanizing, which was like, this village would be much better off if the money that the Peace Corps was sending me every month just to pay my rent in the village. Like if I had never been there and we had just sent them this money, you know, and like had them rebuild the sort of well infrastructure at the four different places where they needed to be rebuilt. And I think about just the fact that we shouldn't have this much money that needs to be redistributed privately.

Abby: Yes, exactly. Exactly!

Jia: That on its face like no matter how much good it's doing. I mean, it's just really hard to swallow.

Abby: Exactly, exactly. How do you balance though? I mean, this is a problem in my life about how I balance really caring and also needing not to lose my mind. *laughs*

Jia: I would love to know how you do it, because I mean, I'm seeking other avenues, you know, I'm not sure I do well.

Abby: I do think how I manage myself around caring a lot about people I can't help is I've had to give up on language around saving or heroism. And to let the world flow over me in all its badness and goodness, and just try to step in when it seems like my particular unique set of baggage, you know, contains some things that might be helpful.

Jia: Yeah. Well, I noticed, you know—I was looking up the groups that—it's the Daphne foundation, is that what it's called?

Abby: The Daphne foundation, for those of you who don't know, it's a foundation my husband and I started in 1991 to support community-based, grassroots organizations that support low income communities across New York City.

Jia: Yeah I mean that's it. It's the de-centering. I love all of those groups that you have been funding and it's like what you were just saying about the headspace that one tries to live in, in respect to all of these things. One thing that I've been thinking about a lot is, it's like we're often signaled that what's required to do something good, right, is action and like re-stamping whatever our version of good is onto as many places as possible. Right? When in fact, I think that so much about what is actually going to be required of us, you know, those of us who are lucky in this world, it's surrender, you know? It's the exact opposite, right? It's making our stamp as small as we can. We've been shaped towards a vision of living as a good person that involves more, when I think what's required now is that we accept less or something like that.

Abby: So, the Daphne Foundation is interesting. It was an attempt to sort of like, ensure that always in my home and my backyard, I was being a good neighbor. But what happened for me along those years was starting a slow evolution toward recognizing that first of all what needed to change was the systems and the structures. I mean, that sounds so obvious right now, as I say it, but it wasn't to me then. Which is why I wish philanthropy, and billionaires in particular, involved in philanthropy, had a little more humility about how it operates because your whole thing about it happening fast and getting to scale and doing it as cheaply as possible, and maybe even bringing markets into it is bullshit and destructive. And I have watched small community-based programs in the city get completely screwed over by this idea that if you can't measure it, it didn't happen.

Jia: Right, right, right. If it doesn't fit into the annual report.

Abby: Yeah. And honestly, I have to say it was, you know, philanthropy's interesting because it's dominated by men, but the closer you get to the ground, you find more women, which is kind of the way all structures are, right? Because the closer you get to the actual money, the fewer women are there.

Jia: Right.

Abby: I really loved your essay "Always Be Optimizing." I freaking hate the beauty industry. Much as I—I want to be pretty and I want to wear pretty clothes. I'm willing to walk around in aching feet, you know, because I like high heels. So I do a lot of the dumb things that we all do because we want to be pretty.

Jia: Totally. Same. *laughs*

Abby: You arrive at a point around talking about market friendly feminists. And I love that. I call it Fem-lite, I wrote a piece about Ivanka and this, and like the idea that you can actually with a straight face say my father's a feminist, which she said during the campaign in 2016.

Jia: Oh my God. I must've blocked that out. I must've immediately blacked out and fallen over on the floor.

Abby: Yeah, yeah exactly. It went around like a knot in my brain until I wrote this thing down because I just couldn't take it. Because that is—when feminism fails it is when it kind of surrenders to patriarchal structures and not in the more obvious ways of tolerating the awfulness of Donald Trump, but in the highly valorizing of the individual over the collective ways.

Jia: Exactly.

Abby: And if you're about collectivity, then the issues of race and class and intersectionality and the rest of it are unavoidable things. But if you're the feminism that's hyper-focused on the individual, you will find yourself talking about, "Who's the CEO? Who's going to be president?" I mean, it is so easily hijacked by conservatives.

Jia: Yeah. And I think, you know, all of this also speaks to how seductive it is. Right. Because I think when women have been denied the opportunity to make free choices and to test their potential in true ways, you know, for the vast majority of modern history, it can seem so sensible to be like, the epitome of feminism should be individual women

taking their talents as far as they can go. Right. Like it's not incorrect. It's just very woefully incomplete. And it also inevitably clicks back into older market-based visions of what a good life should be. I mean, that has been a big turn in feminism in the last ten years. I remember when everyone was reading 'Lean In' and I was so irritated, but couldn't exactly place why, but now it is quite—you know the language is there. And you even had Sheryl Sandberg walking back her own comments, right. Like people understand that this vision of the CEO version of feminism, it's unsatisfactory. It's incomplete. I mean, I always say I think that the most important feminist work is Fight for 15. Which is the national movement to get a \$15 minimum wage, which has been successful in many places. I truly think of this as one of the most important feminist movements of the last few years.

Abby: Right. You know, I have to plead guilty to having been there at the birth of this CEO feminism, because, you know, I was working with women like Marie Wilson, who started Take Our Daughters to Work Day and then went on to start the White House Project. And what we were saying then was it is impossible to exist in this society, given how total our erasure has been. And so that led to pushing for casting and TV shows that, you know, like Madam President and things like that. And I don't know, I guess, I wonder if you think we should have been prepared for that?

Jia: Prepared for the push against it?

Abby: Well, should we have seen that this would dovetail with the American weakness for individualism and the individualistic narrative, in a way that would come back and bite us in the ass.

Jia: You know, I mean, my instinct is like maybe? But also, there was a while, I forget when, maybe around post-Me Too, when I think feminists of the sort of second wave, you know, mid century generation. Some of them were saying things that feminists my age would get super upset about. And I can't really relate to or understand that point of view at all, because I think for me, it's like, the freedom that every feminist movement opened up that is then later pushed against and reshaped it's like, it's still widening the lane. And this is partly because—one of the reasons I feel complicated about this is that I'm so aware that feminism being corporate friendly is one of the sole reasons that I was able to have a job as, you know, as a feminist blogger for a long time. As much as I could criticize the 'Dove Real Beauty' campaign, or, you know, like Goldman Sachs Women's Day or whatever it was, it's like that is still the reason that ad dollars paid for that website that kept me employed and gave me my first real job. And so I guess I just am so aware of the many, many ways in which I have reinforced and played into and benefited from the system. It's like, how to fight against something that you're a part of,

right? How do we fight our way out of a way of consuming and living that is destroying the world, but that yet there's no easy way to step outside of it.

Abby: It's pretty much impossible to step outside of it. In Interview Magazine last year you were asked, "What has this pandemic confirmed or reinforced about your view of society?" And you said some remarkable things. You said: "That capitalist individualism has turned into a death cult. That the internet is a weak substitute for physical presence. That this country criminally undervalues its most important people and its most important forms of labor. That the material conditions of life are constructed and maintained by those best set up to exploit them. And that the way we live is not inevitable at all." There's so much in that, but "The way we live is not inevitable at all." I literally leaped up off the couch. The narrative that we've been fed since the beginning is this is the system, take it or leave it. And by the way, you can't leave it.

Jia: *laughs* Right. So you gotta take it!

Abby: So, how do we change it? I mean, I'm struggling with this myself. How will we unwind the most toxic aspects of the way our economic system works?

Jia: You know, one of the things that I think about is like—to me, one of the most obvious levers for this is like the decrease in union power. And one of the most obvious ways that things have been won throughout history are strikes and general strikes. And when you think about the general strike, which many countries in Europe still have that language within their political discourse, we don't at all. And honestly like this book, 'How to Blow Up a Pipeline,' it makes this very powerful argument that the climate movement's absolute commitment to nonviolence, to not even like property destruction, of let's say like oil and gas infrastructure, has—he basically makes the argument that if the climate crisis is, you know, it's not comparable to slavery, but if it is at least as much of a morally urgent thing, who are we to think that it will be won through marches? And it was just a reminder of what actually constitutes revolution. If this is what we want, there are so many ways, there are so many possibilities that the everyday experience of our world, especially on month 18 of a pandemic, really closes off to our vision, but that are there within history.

Abby: We just talked to Sara Nelson.

Jia: Oh she's amazing.

Abby: Who's the head of the flight attendants Union.

Jia: Yeah.

Abby: And she was talking, we were talking about general strikes just last week. So it's interesting that it's come up twice now.

Jia: I gotta listen to that.

Abby: Jia Tolentino is a staff writer for New Yorker magazine, author of a great book of essays called *Trick Mirror: Reflections on Self-Deception*. Thank you so much for joining me today. What a pleasure.

Jia: Thank you, Abby. So good to talk to you.

Abigail Disney: All Ears is a production of Fork Films. The show is produced by Alexis Pancrazi and Christine Schomer. Wren Farrell is our Assistant Producer. This episode was engineered by Florence Barrau-Adams. Bob Golden composed our theme music. The podcast team also includes VP of production, Aideen Kane. Our executive producer is Kathleen Hughes. Learn more about the podcast on our website forkfilms.com. And don't forget to rate, review and subscribe wherever you get your podcasts. Thanks for listening!