Gender Reveal - Caleb Luna

**Molly:** Welcome to Gender Reveal, a podcast where we ask intrusive personal questions and hopefully get a little bit closer to understanding what the hell gender is. I’m your host and resident gender detective, Molly Woodstock.

Hey, everyone!

Hope you’re all hanging in there. This week I am thrilled and honored to share my conversation with writer, activist, teacher, performer and all-around babe, Caleb Luna. We talked a lot about how gender can be racialized, how fatness and disability can make gender less legible, and how we should decolonize *everything.*

**C:** I feel like there’s a lot of acknowledgement that like… a lot of our problems have to do with questions of civilizations.

**Molly:** But first, just a gentle reminder that Gender Reveal is 100% funded by listeners like you. Without ordinary folks stepping up and joining the Patreon out of the kindness of their hearts, we wouldn’t have our grant program, we wouldn’t have a website, we wouldn’t have buttons and stickers, and, honestly, we wouldn’t have a podcast. So thank you, thank you, thank you, thank you to all of you who continue to make this possible every week. It really means so much. If you would like to join us and support trans media you can do that at patreon.com/gender, on Paypal or Cashapp or by writing a little Theymail message to read on the show, or by buying fifty-cent pronoun buttons or select pride flag pins from Stick to Resist.

As always, links to all that in the show notes. And with that, it’s time for this week in gender.

[This Week in Gender theme plays]

**Molly:** Okay. So, this season y’all requested that we focus on positive news. And I’ve mostly done that, but this week we’re gonna talk about some not-so cheerful news. Mostly because I want to say “no homo promo.” So, if you’re queer or trans and not up for that, that’s totally fine. Just skip ahead a couple minutes and we’ll be back to the show real soon.

So, you may already know this, but seven U.S. states have laws prohibiting teachers from discussing queer people or LGBT topics in a positive light, if at all. These laws are often called “no promo homo” laws, and they currently exist in Alabama, Arizona, Louisiana, Mississippi, Oklahoma, South Carolina and Texas. To quote GLSN, “not only do these laws prevent LGBTQ young people from learning critical information about their health, but they also serve to further stigmatize LGBTQ students by providing K-12 students false, misleading, or incomplete information about LGBTQ people.”

For example, in Alabama, sexual health education classes must, and I quote, “emphasize in a factual manner and from a public health perspective that homosexuality is not a lifestyle acceptable to the general public and that homosexual conduct is a criminal offense under the laws of the state.”

You might think that can’t possibly be real, but it is. I looked it up myself. Welcome to Hell.

So, last Tuesday the South Dakota state legislature passed a bill that would essentially be the country’s first no promo trans law, which is just as evil as no promo homo and not nearly as catchy. The bill says that, quote, “no instruction in gender dysphoria may be provided to any student in kindergarten through grade seven in any public school in the state.”

And that brings up a few questions such as, are kids in kindergarten through grades seven typically getting gender dysphoria instruction? What does instruction in gender dysphoria mean? It’s unclear, because that sentence is really all we have to go on. But people are assuming that could mean banning books and it could be used to ban instructions by teachers on either trans issues or just in general. But also, if a kid transitions in class, it could even be used to prevent teachers from telling the kids how to correctly and respectfully treat that trans student.

This is just one of four anti-trans bills introduced in the South Dakota legislature this year — none of which have passed, thank God. This bill currently awaits a hearing in the Republican-controlled South Dakota senate, so we’ll see what happens with that. In the meantime, catch me passing promo homo laws all day because there is nothing I like more than promoting homosexuality.

This has been this week in gender.

[This Week in Gender outro music]

**Molly:** Caleb Luna is a writer, activist, teacher, performer, fat babe and PHD student in performance studies at The University of California Berkeley. They’re interested in the culture and sociohistorical meanings ascribed to fatness and the current colonial moment and how meaning is mapped onto bodies, broadly for the purposes of establishing and maintaining a colonial hierarchy. We’ll talk about that in the show.

They are a co-author of the forthcoming “Body Sovereignty: Fat Politics and the Fight for Human Rights.” You can find more of their writing on Black Girl Dangerous, Everyday Feminism and The Body Is Not An Apology, and Nepantla: An Anthology Dedicated to Queer Poets of Color.

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

**C:** I identify as gender nonconforming or nonbinary. It always feels like a complicated question because I feel like I’ve written about the way that my body informs my gender. I feel like I have to sort of do some reverse engineering as far as gender identity, if that makes sense.

**Molly:** Yeah, you have written and talked a lot about the way body size and shape informs gender identity and gender presentation. I was wondering if you could talk more about that. I know that specifically at one point you wrote “I fell like my fatness has excommunicated me from masculinity and perhaps gender as a whole,” and I would love to hear you unpack that a little bit more.

**C:** Yeah. So, I wrote that article, “The Gender Nonconformity of My Fatness,” about the ways that I feel like – it’s not just about being a fat person, but it’s about the type of fat that I am and the way that the fatness sits on my body. And it has something to do with how I dress also, because I do perform, or like feminine waistlines, and those kinds of things, but beyond that… even before I started intentionally claiming femininity, I feel like my gender was very confusing for people because of just the way my body is shaped. And I think that that continues to happen.

You know, I’m having these experiences, like being the men’s room at the gym and people seeing my body and feeling kind of confused about what’s happening. Yeah. So, I think there’s something about fat bodies — not all fat bodies necessarily, but something specifically about mine that kind of pushes me outside binary gender. You know, I have these breasts… you know my genitals look kind of a different way than some other people, so I think that because the normative gender signifiers on my body — they’re a little bit different or modeled — I think that that is where when I say I have to reverse-engineer my gender. It’s like, that’s what I’m talking about.

When I was in middle school, you know, it was the first time someone was confused about my gender and they thought I was a girl because I had these breasts. It was kind of horrific in the moment because I was like 13, or whatever. But looking back on it, I feel like it’s indicative of the ways that my body challenges normative binaries, cisgenders… yeah.

**Molly:** Yeah. It sounds like a lot of folks are really struggling to read your gender presentation. Like a lot of the confusion seems to be external, and I’m wondering: if that wasn’t an issue — if you didn’t have to worry about whether your gender identity was going to be legible to other people — do you feel like you would still identify the same way?

**C:** That’s a great question because I feel like, yeah, for me, the way I experience gender it does feel almost entirely external, where I feel like in some ways my body and the way the I dress and present confuse people about my gender. I remember in the days when I was working in retail, sometimes customers would misgender me and then get all horrified and apologetic and I’m like, it’s really not a big deal… like... you’re not that far off.

Yeah. So I feel very much aware that whenever people are gendering me, it’s based on their perception. Like, I still do get gendered in a binary “he-him-sir” kind of way most of the time, which always feels interesting to me because I know that I’m not fitting into these ideas of what you think that those bodies look like, but it just feels like the closest approximation to how they can understand my body. It’s another way that I feel like I don’t necessarily have control over how my gender is read. Or I kind of relinquish that control a little bit, which is another thing that I was talking about in that article.

It doesn’t really matter what I do, people are going to read my gender in different ways just because of my body. I’ve thought about if I had a different body how that would affect my gender, and I really honestly don’t know. Because there’s so much that’s tied up in being exhausted and wanting things to be easier, and how much of that is also just about fatness? So, yeah, I think that’s a difficult question for me to answer.

However, I also feel like a little bit suspicious of cis men… and I…

[Molly laughs.]

**C:** I have some questions about… what does it mean to hold onto this identity? I don’t know. This is like — obviously this is some of my own shit — but I’m kind of like, what is the redemptive possibility of manhood? So, I don’t know if I would continue to identify as a man, even if I had a different body and was assigned the same gender at birth.

You know, I think there are individual men who seem pretty chill. [Laughs.] So I don’t want to… I want to be cautious about being so totalizing. But, I do have questions.

**Molly:** Yeah, what are your questions?

**C:** Well, I mean… I just... I don’t know! What does it mean to be a man? And, like, hold onto that? And how are you working through that? And how… I feel like I do see examples of men who hold their masculinity in really what seems like non-harmful ways, but because I’m not privy to all of their experiences, it’s hard for me to say, you know? And especially because we all hurt. [Laughs.]

This gets kind of dramatic, but you know we’re all a process. We all make mistakes and we all learn from them. Hopefully we all learn from them, but we definitely all make mistakes. And men fall under that category, so it’s a question of what mistakes have you made and who have you harmed in order to be less harmful? Which, again, is not exclusive to men, but is a question that I have for men.

[Both laugh.]

**Molly:** Yeah, I loved that. I wanted to ask you, in that same article, “The Gender Nonconformity of My Fatness,” you also talk about how gender is racialized and how gender performance relies on a non-disabled body to really be legible, and I was just wondering if you could talk a little bit about that as well.

**C:** Yeah. So, for larger context, I’m an academic. I’m in grad school right now. And so we have all this time to read and think about theory. And so in my context, I feel like a lot of people are familiar with the ideas around gender performance from Judith Butler, right, who says gender is a performance and that there’s no original, and so on and so forth, and says a lot of interesting and accurate things about the way gender is a social construct. So, there’s that part, right?

And then there’s another academic named Hortense Spillers, who is a black woman, and she wrote an article called “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book,” that talks about the ways gender is racialized inherently. Like, thinking about the transatlantic slave trade and the ways that people who would, like, under contemporary gender constructions be considered a woman, like, they were not granted the same protections and in some ways it is talking about the privilege in being a white woman and the ways that black women have always been excluded from those. And the fact that “woman” has been constructed in this way that is about a white womanhood — this idea of a white, pure, innocent, harmless, needs-to-be-protected white woman. That black women, like during the transatlantic slave trade, have never had access to, right?

So, not just womanhood is racialized, but also masculinity and manhood, because by the same way that black women under the transatlantic slave trade were not treated as women, under the historically relevant idea of a woman, in the same way black men were not treated as men. It’s always been racialized, it’s always been about aspiring to this ideal of gender that is completely wrapped up in race and whiteness, right? And it’s like… cis men are, like, you know… beyond having particular body parts and having a particular aesthetic, like… they have these qualities that are about masculinity and protection and like… whatever. [Laughs]

And women have these other qualities that are supposed to be, like, complimentary to those qualities of a man. And we see how when we incorporate race into that, then men and women of color have never…. Are always going to feel those standards because of the different ways that our racial consideration has shifted our gender just a little bit to always fail by these white ideals, right?

And by the same token, this white ideal is not just cis and straight, but they’re usually not fat, like… I feel like there are some ways to be a white man and be fat and have your masculinity intact. But they’re definitely not disabled. Like, they’re certainly not only not physically disabled, but they have no mental illness or mental disabilities, right? They’re like, fully able-bodied and neurotypical. And so these things are always interacting together in the same way that I think gender has always been racialized.

Ideas like ability and health have always been racialized, right? People of color have never had the same level of access in ability and mobility that white folks have had. Yeah.

**Molly:** I want to back up just a second because I got excited up front. What pronouns do you use?

**C:** Yeah, they and them.

**Molly:** Perfect. And I’ve listened to you on a couple of other podcasts, and both times you managed to incorporate that you were a Leo, which I love. So can you please tell me your sun, moon, and rising?

**C:** Yes. Thank you for asking. I am a Leo Sun, a Pisces rising and a Taurus moon.

**Molly:** Wow — what a spread!

**C:** Yeah… I got my birth chart read and my astrologer said “this is not normal.”

[Both laugh.]

**Molly:** I was reading, you know, through some of your work and I saw you mentioned that you were indigenous and I’m also indigenous, so I was very excited and I was just wondering if you were willing to share what more specifically your background was?

**C:** Woah – well, that’s interesting. I’m doing a lot of thinking and reformulating around my racial identity a lot recently and I don’t know that I would identify as Indigenous anymore. Like, I definitely have Indigenous ancestry but because of the ills of colonization, my Indigenous ancestry has been obscured in a way that has kind of made me rethink my own position in the racial project, especially as a light-skinned person.

In that process, I’ve thought a lot about the way my family has navigated racialization and how some of that has been to assimilate very self-awarely. Like, made strong efforts to assimilate for protection, which makes sense, but it also makes me question not just my own claim to Indigeneity, but I’ve been thinking a lot more about what it means to be a Mestizo, or these groups of people who are the product of Indigenous people and colonial... frequently rape, or other relationships. And, yeah… I’ve been doing a lot of thinking about how that operates in a longer history of coloniality and racialization.

Specifically, with my feeling like… I feel like there was a lot of efforts to be made to… again, for complicated reasons, assimilating into dominant power structures. So I now feel a little bit more complicated about identifying as Indigenous. You know, for those reasons, on top of the fact that in my family there’s no specific tribe or nation that we have kept a connection to or a history to, so it would be hard to trace that back.

There’s then essay, “Settler Colonialism and the Elimination of the Native,” by a guy named Patrick Woof that discusses colonization in a U.S. context. One of the ways a settler colonialism worked in the US was that they would have white settlers reproduce with Indigenous people — forcefully, often — and then produce these babies that looked more European or white. And it’s a way there were these efforts made to erase the Indigenous folks and replace them with white people who then had entitlement to the land. And I feel like, for mestizos, we were frequently used in a similar fashion. For me, I’m like… in what ways has this process also benefitted me?

**Molly:** Yeah, of course.

**C:** Yeah, I want to make sure we’re still asking this. We’re still asking ourselves this question.

**Molly:** For sure.

**C:** And I think a lot of this has also come out of my relationship with a very good friend of mine named Alon Lopez, who is Indigenous — they’re Zapotec, I’m sorry — and they’ve written an essay called “The X in Latinx is a Wound” that kind of speaks a lot to this, too. So, like, a lot of my rethinking has come from our relationship and the work that they’ve been putting out as well.

**Molly:** I just feel like… like all of the Indigenous people I know have… and I’m not trying to put this back onto you, but all of the Indigenous people I now have a complicated relationship with it. You know? And I think a lot of people have been culturally removed and unsure how much they can reclaim, but then not reclaiming sort of can feel like you’re complicit in colonization and genocide… so… [Both laugh.] So, it can be really, really hard. So I just wanted to acknowledge that a lot of what you said is resonating with me.

So, I’m glad we brought up colonization because you talk a lot about colonization and on this show we talk a lot about colonization. So, specifically you said in the bio you sent to me that you are, quote, “interested in the cultural and sociohistorical meanings ascribed to fatness and the current colonial moment and how meaning is mapped onto bodies broadly for the purposes of establishing and maintaining a colonial hierarchy,” and I wanted to give you a chance to unpack that in case people couldn’t parse it by themselves from the bio.

**C:** Yeah! I feel like there’s a lot of acknowledgement that a lot of our problems have to do with like Western civilization and just the ongoing expansion of it? Thinking about the ways that Greek consumptions of the body have endured and been exported throughout the world through colonialism. Specifically around fatness, because a lot of our ideas about what a healthy body looks like, what a sexy body looks like, like what a bad body looks like, like a lot of those… fat-phobic, shallow bullshit… that assumption around body size and health I feel like very clearly come from Greek ideas of the body.

And then it’s just been accepted that those were right and correct. And yeah, so I’m just really trying to draw attention, specifically around body size and around consumptions of health. How those are really specific constructions that are not universal and are coming from a very specific place that is also because it of its geographic placement and because of the way it’s been taken up under western history. Under western civilization, we think about the Greeks as the founders. Yeah, that it’s really like… been neutralized. And it’s not!

And if we look at like… you know, when you think about globally and historically the different ways that bodies have been represented and thought about… these ideas about you know, the Olympics are still a thing that we carry out, right? Where it’s like… we’re gonna push our bodies to the limit for the purpose of athletic excellence. Which is like, okay, that’s a hobby! But like, it’s not politically neutral, it’s not historically neutral — like, that’s a particular way of thinking about the body that we don’t have to engage with. We don’t have to think about. Like, that doesn’t’ have to be part of our lives. We don’t have to value athleticism and whatever… and our values of athleticism has to look like achieving a body like the statue of David.

Our values and athleticism can be about very different things. I’m just trying to put pressure on that and beyond just body size, obviously our ideas about race and gender and ability are informed by coloniality, right? And informed by white ideas of bodies and of ways of relating to one another. Like, something that’s very important to me when thinking about western civilization is the fact that anti-blackness and the transatlantic slave trade are very clearly products of western civilization. And capitalism has been bolstered by both of these things, right?

So, like, western civilization isn’t necessarily democracy and philosophy, or whatever, right? It’s like categorizing bodies and placing them in hierarchies and justifying being really violent to them for different reasons because they’re different. And so those are the things that I’m trying to draw more attention to and that’s what I’m talking about when I say, like, the construction of the body and the current colonial historical moment,” that like our ways of thinking about the body are not political nor historically neutral. And they’re very much the product of these really violent histories.

**Molly:** Yeah. I saw you say on Instagram the other day that Fat Liberation requires the undoing of western civilization. And that was so big and powerful and I was also like, yeah, I’m on board, let’s do it!

[Both laugh.]

**C:** Yeah… we’ll see how far I can get with this before I’m… I was thinking, not ex-communicated, but politically on the run.

**Molly:** It’s great though. I think it’s really important work. So what you were just talking about reminded me that I’ve heard or read that you talk before about how even in majority POC spaces we can still perpetuate white supremacy, in part by just sort of fetishizing and holding up bodies that are most similar to white standards and… can you talk a little bit more about your experiences with that and about, like, racism and discrimination of various kinds? I’m sure fatphobia is also in queer scenes and also trying to date, and stuff like that.

**C:** Yeah. I mean I feel like I’ve been in so many spaces that are like… I guess, let me clarify that this is my experience, and I’m sure it can be complicated in many ways. But, yeah, I just feel like I’ve been in so many queer color spaces where it’s still like, the tall, thin, light-skinned folks are getting all the attention. Right? And, you know, you have the fat and black and dark-skinned and trans and disabled folks like... being on the margins, still.

Like, even when we’re in these spaces that claim to be radical and claim to be QPOC-centered and anti-white supremacist, you know, similar to what I was just saying, you know the ideas of aesthetic beauty looking a particular way. Like, being a tall person with a flat stomach and abs, much like the statue of David, just because those features are translated onto a body of color… it’s still speaking to white supremacist beauty standards.

It’s not just about being white or not being white. I’m thinking of a Twitter thread I saw that said “people think that Asian men aren’t sexy, but here’s this thread of Asian men to disprove that!” and it was like all these Asian men with washboard abs. There was a retweet by another Asian man that was like “it doesn’t to anything to further down the project of breaking down the idea that that’s a beauty ideal, right?” like we’re still not valuing or upholding the short and thin non-muscular Asian men. And so it’s like you still have to aspire to be the aesthetic values, even if you are a person of color in order to be deemed attractive in these normative ways. It’s hard to be any of those things in a dating space. It’s been hard for me and like, I’ve seen people who have those qualities like… have really positive experiences.

So I think it’s complicated and I think that there’s definitely stuff happening at the structural level, but I also think that there’s stuff happening at the personal and interpersonal level that’s informing that as well. You know?

**Molly:** Yeah! So in 2014, you wrote that romantic love as we understand it is a colonial construct. Is that something that you still agree with? Because I’d love to hear more about that, if so.

**C:** Oh — I love that question specifically because I feel like my relationship to that essay specifically has changed a lot since I wrote it. But I think that I still do agree with that line, right? Like, the way that we think about romance, dating and marriage and relationships are all about these like, individualistic experiences that kind of distract us from like, a larger community, or a larger communal purpose where we still are like, oh — I have to take care of me and my family before anyone else. And that is the construction that is colonial, as opposed to like, a structure that sees that like, just because you’re married to somebody doesn’t mean you turn your back on your larger community or that your larger community no longer has any importance and it’s just you, right?

Whereas you and your partner or partners or whatever, or even the fact that you have a partner – like, the nuclear family is completely a colonial construct, right? About whiteness. And so, like we see it across cultures across the world today that have intergenerational households and that they like don’t have two parents raising a child, but they have grandparents and aunts and uncles and friends and neighborhoods.

So yeah, that line I do very much strongly agree with, and I keep looking for models of how to engage in romance so that our personal needs and wants and desires are fulfilled but in a way that doesn’t detract from like, a larger community. And our larger place with each other.

This is gonna sound really silly, and maybe it is, but… [Laughs.] There’s a show on Hulu right now that I really like called “Future Man.” One of the things I really like about it is that they do really interesting things to challenge our ideas about... it’s like, this post-apocalyptic society that has a family structure where it’s six parents, so they have this funny scene where like, this child who has six parents is talking to somebody like: “I heard you only have two parents!” and she was like “Oh, that must be so terrible for you!” And so what I appreciated about that show is those little moments offering new possibilities and kind of disrupting those ideas of normalcy.

I think it’s something that a lot of sci-fi doesn’t do. Like, when they time travel or go to different universes, their society is still a mirror of ours in a way that kind of makes it seem like obvious or inevitable or like the best social structure. I like that this show challenges that, and that’s like one way that it does it.

**Molly:** This actually all ties in super well, because the way we always end the show is by asking: In your ideal world, what would the future of gender look like?

**C:** That’s a great question. [Laughs.] I feel like I say that’s a great question every question because they are all great questions.

**Molly:** Thank you! [Laughs.]

**C:** I think that maybe gender as we understand it wouldn’t exist. It wouldn’t be like, two binary options, but like a range of options that isn’t self-determined. And that that is like understood and accepted, right? So that we can all engage in our genders in different ways that don’t foreclose what clothes you can wear, what kind of lovers we can have, what kind of sex positions we’re into… right? Where we can just be and do what we want, without the threat of like, harassment or violence or like, social exclusion.

That doesn’t feel super profound, but [laughs.] I think that’s what I think about when I think about gender.

[*Gender Reveal* theme music starts]

**Molly:** That’s gonna do it for this week’s show. As you heard, Caleb is so smart and thoughtful and good and their work is so important, so if you could send this show to your friends or post about it on social media, I’d really appreciate it.

You can support Caleb’s work at [**patreon.com/calebluna**](patreon.com/calebluna) and you can support our work at [**patreon.com/gender**](http://patreon.com/gender). Similarly, you can find caleb on Twitter and Instagram by searching their name, and you can find us on Twitter and Instagram at G-E-N-D-E-R-E-V-E-A-L. That’s “gender reveal” with one “r.” if you have questions about gender, we have a google form in the show notes and we will answer the questions on the show. You can also reach us at genderpodcast.com, which is also a great place if you’re looking for transcripts of the show. We have almost every single episode transcribed.

There’s also information for booking us for live shows or workshops or talks or really anything you want to pay me to do. Want to pay me to yell at your boss about gender? I’m there.

This week’s episode was produced and edited by me, Molly Woodstock. Our logo is by Michelle Leigh and our theme song is by Breakmaster Cylinder. Additional music this week by Blue Dot Sessions.

There are three episodes left in this season of Gender Reveal. Thank you all so much for being here. We’ll be back next week with more feelings about gender.

[*Gender Reveal* theme song ends]