[*Gender Reveal* theme music plays]

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

[*Gender Reveal* theme music ends]

Hey Friends! Hope you’re all hanging in there!

This week on this show I chat with Gender Reveal grant winner Kai Minosh Pyle about finding indigenous language to describe yourself, being an actual gender detective, and exploring two-spirit identities, histories, misconceptions, futures, and more.

[Excerpt] **Kai:** You know, being indigenous, it’s like, I think each community is gonna have their own way that they figure out gender.

**Molly:** But first, a very extra special exciting announcement that I've been waiting a long time to make - you may have noticed, I actually snuck it into the end of last week’s episode: We have merch now!

It is sort of a high concept merch store, so let me explain. If you go to bit.ly/gendermerch, you will find totes, T-shirts, stickers, pillows even. Every single thing you see in the shop is designed by a trans and/or non-binary person, and we are giving 50% of the proceeds to the trans person who designed the thing, and 50% of the proceeds to an organization of the designer’s choice that benefits trans and, more broadly, LGBTQ folks. So, for example, if you look at the amazing T-shirt and sticker designed by friend of the show Beth Easton, you see that half the proceeds are going to Beth and half the proceeds are going to a UK organization called Gendered Intelligence.

The proceeds aren’t huge, because everything is priced pretty low, because I wanted it to be accessible to folks. So, I’m using Teespring, and Teespring has a price that they suggest for each item, and all my prices are lower than the suggested price, because I want you to be able to buy things. Also, everything ends in 69 cents, because it was funny to me, and now I’m just doing it on everything - it’s never not funny. Pretty much everything in the store is a limited run, it will only be available for a month, maybe two months. If it’s really popular, maybe we’ll bring it back, but the concept is that items are rotating in and out of the store all the time, so that we can offer as many opportunities to as many trans artists and trans orgs as possible. So, if you see something you like, I highly recommend ordering it now, if you can. The good news is that when those items rotate out, we'll have new merch from new people.

Which brings me to an important point, which is that if you are a trans artist or designer who wants to make something for the store, reach out to me via our website, genderpodcast.com, and maybe we can do a thing.

Again, you can check out all of the merch at bit.ly/gendermerch. We have *Gender is a Spooky Ghost* tote bags, we have sort of *End Gender* T-shirts, we have a pillow with the Gender Reveal logo on it, in case you ever wanted to fuck on a podcast - or sleep on a podcast, there’s no need to be crass, Molly. Anyway, that’s bit.ly/gendermerch.

Also, you’ll notice that the 50/50 split doesn’t leave me any space to become compensated for my time on this, unless you buy the Spooky Ghost stuff for which half the proceeds are being donated to Gender Reveal, but don’t worry, because you can always support me via paypal.me/mollywoodstock or patreon.com/gender, where you can also get stickers and pens that you can’t buy in the merch store.

Anyway, some of you may be cringing that I have found yet another way to ask for money, but honestly, capitalism is messed up, and the only things I really take joy in buying are things that are made by trans people for trans people, and so I hope that you enjoy this as much as I do.

And now, it’s time for This Week in Gender.

[*This Week in Gender* theme music plays]

[Soothing upbeat background music plays]

**Molly:** This Week in Gender, I want to read a message from a listener named Ana, who actually sent this back in June, but whose message I’m just now seeing, because of the way Twitter is.

Ana writes: I was just listening to the episode with Kirby Conrod, and when you started speaking about very gendered languages, I thought I would appear and maybe add a bit more to the conversation. I’m Brazilian, AFAB, bi, and it’s been a year since I finally figured out I’m non-binary, but I’m still very much in the closet about it. I’m not a linguist or a sociologist, so everything I say comes from experience or observation. Also, besides Portuguese, I speak Italian and understand/read Spanish, and I'm super curious about what mechanisms are being used to construct a more gender-neutral language.

First thing I should say is that using the @ sign and x at the end of words to erase gender markers is something that we are trying to discontinue, because not only is it something that is hard or impossible to pronounce, it is also not an inclusive writing method, as it makes things harder for people with dyslexia to understand, as well as most text readers, used by low visibility and blind people.

In Portuguese, the neutral option we are trying to adopt is using an e, or u when e is already used by the gendered word, as terminations. In Italian, they’re mostly dropping the terminations, and in Spanish, there’s a mix between dropping and substituting.

Unfortunately, at least in Brazil, it’s pretty rare to find someone who actually uses gender-neutral pronouns and language as their primary or only option. I guess mostly it is due to the fact that even the best allies don’t really know, or are willing to put in “that much effort” in doing it. If just substituting gendered pronouns for “they” as a singular is already such a big deal for some folks, imagine "inventing" terminations and changing pretty much every single word in a language. At least with "they", you get to say, “actually singular they has been in use for a long long long long time.” It’s not something we get to do. Hell, I still think that the neutral construction sounds weird, and use it way too little with myself.

So, what I mostly see people do in the three languages is

1. Picking one of the already existing pronouns, usually the one that was not assigned to them

2. Constructing genderless sentences when it is possible and avoiding pronouns

3. Mixing and matching different options

Another thing I wanted to add on is the bit where Kirby talks about how a lot of non-binary people around the globe are just using English, and the social value of it to communicate queerness. Over this last year more and more I’ve realized that when I’m by myself, I’ll usually think in English, especially when I'm thinking about myself. And yeah, in one way it is pretty dope to think there is one language that is becoming this way of communicating queerness, but in another, it pains me so much that my own mother tongue doesn’t allow me to truly communicate myself. I see time and time again this “our pronouns have yet to be invented” idea around non-binary online circles, but imagine lacking a whole lot more than just pronouns. No matter how “cool” English becoming a queer form of communicating queerness seems at first glance, it is honestly harmful af, and I don’t think we should be celebrating it that much. Every time I think about coming out to someone, I realize that honestly, I don’t have the language in Portuguese to explain myself. But I also can’t expect to only have gender conversations in English. Nor do I want to, because that’s not accessible either, and if we don’t start to create ways to speak out about gender in non-English languages, we’ll leave way too many folks out of the conversation.

Ana, thank you so much for writing in. I really, really appreciate it. If anyone else has any insight on how other languages are evolving to accommodate non-binary folks or not, I'd love to hear it. Please feel free to reach out to us any time via our website, genderpodcast.com.

This has been This Week in Gender.

[*This Week in Gender* theme music plays]

**Molly**: Kai Minosh Pyle is a two-spirit Michif and Sault Sainte Marie Anishinaabe writer, currently living on the Dakota people’s homelands in occupied Bde Ota Otunwe, also known as Minneapolis, Minnesota. Born and raised in Green Bay, Wisconsin, they are a student, a former youth group leader, and always an advocate for indigenous languages. In addition to their creative writing, they’re currently working on a project researching Anishinaabe two-spirit history, language, and literature.

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

**Kai**: I mostly just try to avoid identifying altogether.

**Molly**: That’s fair

**Kai**: Yeah, I never thought I would become one of those people who's like: I don’t like labels.

**Molly**: [laughing]

**Kai**: Because when I was younger, really, labels were super important to me. But now I’m like, you can call me two-spirit, you can call me queer, trans, non-binary, those are all words that kind of apply to me, as other people understand them. I’m still trying to search for a word in my languages that I feel really fits me, and until I have found one of those, I don’t know, I just feel like there is not a word that I really identify with. But that said, I do use they/them pronouns.

**Molly**: I just started re-re-re-re-learning Spanish, and when I did that, the first thing that I did was look for words like queer, trans, non-binary in Spanish. So what is your exploration been like looking for words to describe yourself in a language that’s not as ubiquitous as Spanish, for example.

**Kai**: I’m super passionate about languages in general, and also about my indigenous languages specifically. So, my two indigenous languages, Michif and Ojibwe, are not super gendered, in terms of like, there is not pronouns that are gendered, it's just one word for he/she/they, all of those. But people still say woman, man, and so I’ve been trying to find words that refer to people who might be outside of that binary, which has been, really, actually a fun journey, but I still haven’t quite found the one for me. But for sure, I also have taken Spanish and French, and also other indigenous languages like Oneida, which is very gendered – like, all the verbs, you have to conjugate them for masculine or feminine, and so it was a really interesting conversation, because I’m not Oneida, working with elders and speakers to find things that they understood but that I was also comfortable with.

**Molly**: So, how many languages do you speak – is that six?

**Kai**: [laugh] I don’t know, it depends on what your definition of speaking is, for sure. I would not say I speak Oneida. I was conversational at one point, but I’ve forgotten a lot of it since I moved away from Green Bay. But Michif, Ojibwe, Spanish, those are my best three. I read French.

**Molly**: At this point, are there any languages that you feel like you can get close to approximating how you feel about gender or are you still looking for those elusive words?

**Kai**: I would say I’m still looking, although there are a few words in Ojibwe and Michif, and also Cree, which is very closely related to both of those. There’s a word eyekwe in Ojibwe, and it’s pronounced ayahkwêw in Cree, which historically seems to have referred mostly to people who were assigned male at birth and took on either women’s roles, or a kind of mixed-gender identity. But I’ve also heard from some people that it described, like, for anybody, a sort of third gender, and if that’s the case, then I would feel, that is how I feel. I would say, the most accurate description of my gender is like a third gender, not one or the other or anything else. But I’m not sure yet that that’s appropriate for me to take on, so I’m still learning.

**Molly**: Totally. We’ve had other two-spirit folks talk on the show, and I do gender trainings and transgender competency and inclusion and equity trainings, and I always mention the concept of two-spirit peoples, but even though I feel like I have a knowledge of what it means, I have a really hard time succinctly describing it to other people who haven’t ever heard it before, because it can mean so many different things to different people. So, since you are a two-spirit educator, I was hoping you would have a suggestion for how to more succinctly and clearly describe two-spirit identities to folks who‘ve never heard that before.

**Kai**: Yeah, I’ve been thinking a lot about the fact that I’ve talked to so many other two-spirit people, and everyone has their own interpretation of what two-spirit means, and so that is really difficult. But the best way that I found to explain it to people is to tell the story of how it came into existence as a term, which is something that I’ve done a decent amount of research on now. So the way I explain it is: In 1990, there was the third annual gathering of LGBTQ indigenous people in North America, and the summer before that conference happened, a woman named Myra Laramee, who is a Cree and Anishinaabe elder, had a dream while she was engaged in some indigenous-related protests. And in the dream, she received this term “two-spirit” as a way to refer to a certain kind of people. She shared it at this conference, and people were talking about the fact that historically, our peoples have had certain unique roles for people who are outside of the gender binary, and today, we have unique experiences that are not reflected by the mainstream LGBTQ identity categories, and so they wanted a term that would reflect both that history and those present-day experiences. And the word that Myra Laramee offered was the word *two-spirit*, and so it became this umbrella term that would recognize our histories as well as our present experiences as LGBTQ+ and beyond people. That’s not very succinct, I guess, but that’s how I explain it.

**Molly**: No, that’s really helpful. Did you say it was 1990?

**Kai**: Yeah.

**Molly**: My understanding is that you’re a doctoral student at University of Minnesota studying two-spirit histories, is that correct?

**Kai**: Yes, that is.

**Molly**: So, do you have any difficulty doing that research? I understand that words to describe different identities go back thousands of years, but is that at all difficult to research the history of these things when this word has just been invented, like, 30 years ago?

**Kai**: Yeah, for sure. One of the main projects that is a chapter in my dissertation and that I’m working on right now in that summer course/research course that I’m taking is collecting words in Ojibwe and Cree and Michif that refer to what we would now call two-spirit people, and one of the strategies that I've taken is... because if you look in a missionary dictionary from the 1800s and you look up two-spirit, you’ll not going to find anything. So you have to guess what or look very carefully for what words they might have used. A place where you find these words is, there’s a particular line in the Bible, in the Gospel of Matthew, and that was a gospel that was very often translated into indigenous languages. So, there is this line where they reference eunuchs, and people who are born eunuchs, or made eunuchs, or some related thing. And that particular line, often you’ll find those traditional words for two-spirit people, because they were like: eunuchs are kind of people who are not male or female, so it’s the closest concept that they could relate it to. So, that’s, like, a lot of detective work that I’m trying to do.

**Molly**: Something that I know about two-spirit identities, or at least I think I know, is that two-spirit peoples often had very specific roles in their communities, but I don’t hear a lot about what those roles were, so is that something that you’re looking at at all, what specific community roles those people filled?

**Kai**: One of the things that might be helpful to share is: I’ve seen people give these lists sometimes, they’re like, two-spirit people in indigenous communities were healers, and medicine people, and name-givers, and basket-weavers, and all these other things, and it's like, in which community?

**Molly**: Totally!

**Kai**: … In which place? My dissertation is specifically focused on Anishinaabe people, Ojibwe people mainly, that’s where I’m most knowledgeable, but I also have friends who are Dakota, because I’m living on Dakota land right now. So I’m really interested in looking at the history of two-spirit people in Ojibwe communities and how they were similar and different from Dakota two-spirit people.

One example that I like to share a lot - and I’ve posted about it on Twitter in very, like, blunt terms - that there is a lot of evidence for Anishinaabe people that historically people like that, who were assigned male at birth that took on women’s roles were just totally viewed as women within their society. I mean, there was an understanding that they were different from certain other women in society that we might call cis today, but all the sources that I found are like, these people were just treated as women by the Indians, that is the kind of language that is used there. Whereas in some other tribal communities, certain two-spirit people had roles that were more mixed, where they would do some masculine things, some feminine things. And the other thing with Anishinaabe or Ojibwe people, we always, for everybody had kind of very fluid gender roles, where women, whether they’re cis or trans or whatever, could hunt, or even go to war, and men could do bead work and make clothing and things like that. It’s always been pretty fluid for us. But in in some other people’s cultures, it’s much more rigid on the gender lines.

**Molly**: That makes sense. So, my next question was how the research that you’ve done over historical Anishinaabe two-spirit identities has influenced the way that you think about yourself as a two-spirit person?

**Kai**: I think the way that I got interested in this, aside from just the fact that I’ve always been a big history nerd, is that I’m involved really heavily with language and cultural revitalization programs and things like that. My other passion besides history is language, as I said before, so I needed to find these ways to talk about myself, and to find ways to fit in in ceremony, and even just in everyday activities. And one of the ways that I found was a way to to discover those roles was to go back and look at the history, because whether for good or for bad, in indigenous communities in particular, appealing to tradition as something that has been done before is a way that people become more comfortable with difference.

**Molly**: Have you experienced any push-back to your identities that has necessitated you using those sort of traditional roles as a point that you need to make?

**Kai**: Yeah, for sure. I mean, it’s almost a stereotype at this point, or a cliche, the whole debate within indigenous communities about whether people either, depending on who you ask, women, or people assigned female at birth, or people who menstruate, or whatever is the thing at the moment, whether they have to wear skirts in ceremony, and for me that was a really frustrating thing that kept me from participating in ceremony for a long time because I didn’t feel comfortable fitting into those roles that I was being placed in by other people, because of how they perceived me. And it’s just difficult because especially in ceremony things are even more gendered than in everyday life. That’s definitely places where I feel like saying hey, these traditions have always been with us, and we just need to look for them, and then also, it’s OK if we make new traditions, too.

**Molly**: Yeah, absolutely.

**Kai**: Which is a little controversial depending on who you talk to

**Molly**: Absolutely. So, I was looking over some of your work that you’ve published and I came across the phrase trans-temporal kinship. Would you be willing to sort of explain what that means?

**Kai**: Yeah, sure, That’s like, from my very academic EPs. It's a concept that I coined on the fly, and then I've actually ended up thinking through in a lot more detail recently. Trans-temporal kinship is just a fancy way of saying we are related over and across and through time to other people. I apply the term specifically for two-spirit people, saying: through our languages, if you look at the fact that this one word was used in 1840, and in 1940, and now I heard it from an elder in 2017, that is a recognition that two-spirit people today have a kinship with people who lived 200 years ago. We may not have the exact same experience of gender, we may not have the same understandings of the world, but within our communities, other people and ourselves, recognized as being some kind of relation, and family, and kin. That's basically the idea behind trans-temporal kinship.

**Molly**: That's awesome. That actually feels very valuable to me. You mentioned that was a very academic article, but I know that you also work really hard on making your work accessible to non-academics, which as a non-academic, I very much appreciate. So I was wondering if you could talk about the project you're working on that the Gender Reveal grant will help fund. The zines and whatnot.

**Kai**: Yeah. I'm taking the information that I gathered for that academic article, and I'm trying to turn it into - originally, the idea was a zine, now, I'm thinking about possibly also having a website, but I'm still thinking through all the implications of that. Basically, that will be an introduction to some of these words in Ojibwe, Cree, and Michif, specifically for youth, but also for any two-spirit person of any age, and really also for their community members to just have this as a resource so that they can ask people in their communities, hey, have you ever heard these words before? Or use it as a way to reintroduce some of these terms that maybe other people can relate to. And I have a lot of friends who work with queer and trans native youth, or in harm-reduction capacities. So I have a lot of people in different communities that I'm hoping that I can distribute it through. That's the big project that I am working on.

**Molly**: In contemporary western white American society, there's this notion, I guess it's true, that more folks are coming out as trans and non-binary than ever before. Not to say that they didn't exist before, but they're coming out in greater numbers. Is that something that exists, that you've observed in indigenous communities as well? Do you feel there are more folks identifying as genders other than male or female? Do you feel that's happening more, or do you feel like that's always been happening, and this is just a white thing that we're finally catching up to gender?

**Kai**: That's a really good question, and I'm not sure I have the answer. Unfortunately, one of the things I'm interested in that I'm still struggling to figure out how to learn more about is 20th century, pre-1970 indigenous queer and trans history. Because we have this gap where anthropologists were super interested in the traditional what they called the “berdache,” which is their word for two-spirit people. And they would record up to the thirties, when they were like, “nd that's when the last traditional berdaches disappeared.” And then native queer and trans people reappear in the 1970s, when Gay American Indians was founded as a society in the 70s, on the West Coast.

But there is this whole middle period that people don't talk about. So the only way we can really access that is through oral tradition from queer and trans indigenous elders, and it's really hard because there is a lot of prejudice and stuff, in general and in indigenous communities specifically, so it's often hard to find those elders to talk to.

That's a long way of saying I'm not really sure, but I would say, if I had to guess, based on my own experiences with people, I do think that it's becoming more acceptable - even in indigenous communities - for people to identify not just as a man or a woman, or like a cis man or a cis woman. But the difference, I think then, with non-indigenous communities, specifically with people of European descent is: for people of European descent, it's been a really long time, probably, since that last happened, before Christianization maybe, which is like a thousand years ago, whereas for a lot of indigenous communities, this was part of our daily lives as recently as a hundred years ago. I read a document from a non-native person who was traveling through indigenous Ojibwe communities in the 1940s, and he was like, yeah, pretty much every community that I go to has one of these people who are, you know, not quite male or female, and gee, isn't that interesting? Like, every town had a two-spirit person. And that was in 1940, that wasn't that long ago.

**Molly**: Yeah, that's actually kinda great to hear. I really like that news [laughs].

Great. You mention that it can be frustrating when folks are talking about how two-spirit folks are always filling specific roles, and you're like no, it varies from group to group. Are there any other misconceptions about two-spirit folks that you would like to correct when you're on the record now? [laughs]

**Kai**: Hmm, I should've thought of this one beforehand. You know, I don't know if this is a misconception, but there's a debate I hear a lot. It's not so much a debate in the sense that people don't really openly fight about it, but there's varying opinions. Some people feel really strongly that two-spirit is a term that is not just about being gay and Indian, it's not like gay plus Indian equals two-spirit. Which I agree, in the sense that there's a lot that went into the coining of the term two-spirit, there is a lot of meaning that it has within tribally-specific communities. At the same time, I do worry that it can turn into a kind of gate-keeping where it's like “you're not traditional enough to be two-spirit.” And I worry about that because for me, when I was younger, finding the term two-spirit was really important, because it expressed all these things about my particular experiences that I hadn't really been getting from something like non-binary or genderqueer or transgender. So I don't want potentially two-spirit youth to be scared away from identifying as two-spirit, because it was created as a term, as a way to be inclusive of indigenous people all through North America.

**Molly**: Yeah, I really like that. When you've been doing your research for your dissertation, or, I guess, anything you've been doing, doing research for the zine, doing research in any capacity, is there anything that particularly surprised you or particularly stood out to you?

**Kai:** There is so many things that have been amazing that it's hard to pick one. I think that probably the thing that’s been most awe-inspiring for me was with this word ayahkwêw/eyekwe, was realizing, when I heard that in 2017 from an elder, I was like: oh my gosh, this is a word that we have recorded in like the 1830s. And for that to have survivedso long even despite the intense persecution that two-spirit people have faced, that an elder, not even a two-spirit elder, it was just like a cis straight elder woman who grew up speaking Ojibwe. We met Menishikabe, who is a two-spirit writer and elder who speaks Ojibwe as her first language, and she had told us her story, and afterwards some of the elders who were fluent were talking about, “oh, yeah, when I was a kid, we called people like that eyekwe.” And I wasn't even in the conversation, I just overheard it and then later talked to some other people who had been in the conversation, I was like, is that what she said, eyekwe? And they were like, yeah, and I was amazed, because it's that same word from 200 years ago.

**Molly**: Yeah! That's amazing. How can people find you on the Internet and check out your work?

**Kai**: It's unfortunately not super easy, because my Internet presence is all under my Ojibwe name [laugh] which can be a little tricky to spell. I'm on Twitter as @mekadebinesikwe, and that's also the name of my website, mekadebinesikwe.com.

**Molly**: Well, the way we always end this show is by asking: in your ideal world, what would the future of gender look like?

**Kai**: I was prepared for that question, because I've listened to the show before, and I'm still am like, oh my god, what will I say? [laugh] If I'm being really honest, I think that we cannot possibly imagine. I think that it's gonna be something that we don't even expect. And I think it's gonna look different depending on where we are, because I think, being indigenous, each community is gonna have their own way that they figure out gender. And I personally hope that it will involve a lot of people feeling more comfortable and more autonomous and able to be the way that they want to be in the world, but yeah, I really think it's gonna be determined in very specific ways in different places, and we're not gonna see it coming.

[*Gender Reveal* theme music plays]

**Molly**: That's gonna do it for this week's show. If this episode was thought-provoking, or educational, or otherwise valuable to you, please share the show with folks in your community. And if you value our ability to give grants to people like Kai, please consider pitching in at patreon.com/gender. When you donate any amount to our show and our grant fund, you'll get access to our newsletter-type product as well as other perks. You can find the link to Kai's website and Twitter in the show notes, where you can also find links to our Twitter and Instagram, our website, genderpodcast.com, and our Slack community, which you can join at bit.ly/genderslack. Don't forget to check out our new merch, our T-shirts, pillows, totes, stickers, all conveniently located at bit.ly/gendermerch. You've only got a few weeks to order some of these items, so take a peek. If you don't like them, check back again in a few weeks and we'll have new stuff!

Today's episode was produced and edited by me, Molly Woodstock. Our logo is by the talented Michelle Leigh, our theme song is by Breakmaster Cylinder. Additional music this week, and most weeks, by Blue Dot Sessions.

I'm out of town *again* this weekend, but cross your fingers, I'll get something done early, we will hopefully be back next week with more feelings about gender.

[*Gender Reveal* theme song ends]