[*Gender Reveal* theme music starts]

**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.

[*Gender Reveal* theme music ends]

Hey everyone, I hope you’re all doing well. This week I’m psyched to finally share my interview with Mac Bolt which I recorded way back in May - whoops! Mac is a queer anthropologist who has travelled all across the United States interviewing nonbinary and genderqueer folks of all backgrounds about their experiences. I am really excited to dig into their findings. But before we get to that I have some quick news for you.

I don’t know if any of y’all have used Slack, it’s sort of a chat platform for businesses, but I’ve also seen it work really well as an online community space, and in my ongoing quest to both build online trans community and get off facebook.com, I decided to make a Slack space for Gender Reveal listeners and trans folks and anyone else who thinks about gender too much. Anyone who listens to this podcast is welcome to join the Slack. If you’ve never used Slack before, you’ll figure it out real quick. I put an invite link in the show notes, so feel free to pause the show and join if you want to. I just want say that right now it’s very small, because I just put a little post on Twitter, and so it’s just like a cute little group. I don’t know if it’ll get way bigger or a little bigger or if it’ll die off - I don’t know, it’s just a weird gender experiment! But I’m excited to be in community with you, so I hope we can hang on the internet real soon.

Okay, while we’re here, just a quick reminder that this show is 100% funded by listeners like you, so if you haven’t chipped in to help us pay for transcriptions and tape syncs and web hosting and grants and all of that, and if you have the means to do that, please consider doing so at patreon.com/gender. If you donate $6 or more, I will send you stickers and a sparkly button, and that can be a little nice holiday present to you that’s also a nice holiday present to us. And in the meantime, it’s time for This Week in Gender.

[This Week In Gender intro music plays]

Last week I asked what y’all wanted to hear on This Week in Gender, and the top answer was good news, so here’s some good news! Last week San Francisco created what’s being billed as the world’s first legally recognized transgender district. Located in the Lower Tenderloin, the Compton’s Transgender Cultural District includes the recently renamed Compton’s Cafeteria Way, and Vicki Mar Lane. The former is of course named for the 1966 Compton’s Cafeteria riot, which predated Stonewall by three years, and is the first known instance of collective militant queer resistance to police harassment in United States history. It’s basically a really important riot for transgender rights. Anyway, the latter street is named for Vicki Mar Lane, get it - Vicki, Mar, Lane? Anyway Vicki Marlane was a famous transgender performer and community activist. Organizers of the Compton’s Transgender Cultural District hope it will be a place to honor the community’s history, as well as a hub of services and economic opportunities for existing, contemporary trans and gender nonconforming communities. Okay but quick side note, what does gender nonconforming mean and who does it include? Well, be sure to subscribe to Gender Reveal because that’s coming up on a future edition of This Week in Gender.

[This Week in Gender outro music]

[Transition music starts]

Born and raised in central Arkansas, Mac is a proud lifelong resident of the queer south. They recently graduated from the University of Arkansas Little Rock, where they became passionate about queer anthropology and began doing research about the experiences of people who don’t fit into gender binaries. When they aren’t focused on their research, Mac can be found reading insatiably, organizing with other members of the local activist community, gardening with their partners, playing with their dog, and working as a bookseller.

[Transition music ends]

**Molly:** So the way we always start the show is by asking with regards to gender, how do you identify?

**Mac:** I identify as agender, meaning I don’t identify with any gender. In some ways even the word agender sounds weird, because I just don’t associate with any. I just consider myself out of it. But I use they/them pronouns. Personally, I never really thought that much about my gender identity for most of my life. I didn’t really ever feel comfortable with ‘womanhood.’ I always thought shaving my legs was weird, and having to dress a certain way was weird, and I don’t know, all my friends around me were super feminine, and it just felt alienating to me. I think I just took this feminist stance about it, of I just don’t want to fit into these gender roles. And that’s totally fine, that’s what a lot of people do, and I support that.

But when I was in college I took a class, and it had nothing to do with gender; it was actually about race. It was called “The Philosophy of Race” and it was about the way that colonizers socially constructed the concept of race to make people think that there were essentialist differences between these different racial groups, in order to be able to oppress them. And while I had always known that there weren’t these essential differences between racial groups, I hadn’t really ever thought about it in the framework of someone else constructing those differences.

And once I’d started thinking about it that way, it was like “well what else is socially constructed?” And researching into gender and learning about the ways that gender has been socially constructed since, well since always. Which is something that you can see if you look at different cultural groups prior to colonization and today both, and see the different ways that gender identity is expressed. Once I realized how arbitrary it was, I was just like, literally the only reason I’ve ever thought I was a woman was because other people told me I was. And so I was just like, screw this! And I just started identifying as agender and using they/them pronouns, and it felt most comfortable to me. I think that gender is a really amazing thing and the different ways people express it are beautiful and I love it. But the constructions of gender as a strict gender binary has been something that was just created as a way to control populations - and that is something that I want to reject. So identifying as nonbinary was almost more political than personal, in some ways for that reason.

**Molly:** Wow, I loved that, thank you so much!

**Mac:** No problem!

**Molly:** So you just described yourself as a proud lifelong resident of the queer south. And I would love to hear more about that because I feel like in other parts of the country--like specifically the coasts--the whole south is portrayed as only cis straight Trump voters. And I know that that’s not the case, but I’d really like to hear what your experience is like.

**Mac:** Yeah, so I feel like there’s a lot of misconceptions about the south, but a lot of it is also true. And I feel like a lot of what is true about the queer south is true of being queer everywhere but kind of amplified. Because there’s obviously bigotry all over the country. But in the south, or at least in the bible belt where Arkansas is, it’s encouraged by the very mainstream religion here. People in this area being proud of the south’s background and the confederacy means that racism is more blatant, and the two can intersect a lot I guess.

The community in the south is really tight knit, and I feel like that’s because of a lot of trauma that queer people here have to go through, so that they often only have each other as family. I’m personally very lucky to have--I was raised in Little Rock, which is one of the bigger cities here, and both my parents were very non-religious and they’re also both northerners. So I didn’t face the same impact that a lot of people I know have faced. That’s what I see a lot, is a lot of people trying to reconcile being raised in a Christian background and being queer, and trying to find community outside of the church that they were raised in.

I think that just because a lot of the homophobia and transphobia and racism and just general bigotry here is socially accepted, and in some ways even ingrained in our forms of politeness. Because in the south saying sir and ma’am are considered polite and if you don’t do that you’re almost considered rude. It’s so ingrained in the culture that we kind of have to stick together, but at the same time that also means that accountability is super important.

I remember a few years back in Little Rock, there was a big controversy because one of our local clubs, Club Sway, had a drag queen who got in an argument with a local queer person--one of my friends, who is black--about they’re a white person wearing box braids. And instead of having a conversation about it with this person, they did a drag show the next weekend where they wore the box braids and started smashing watermelons and stuff. And it was so blatantly racist, and whenever people in the community reached out to them and offered to provide workshops to teach them how to hold themselves accountable and hold each other accountable, they rejected the offer even though the local organization offering it (Center for Artistic Revolution) was offering to do it for free. I feel like while that kind of bigotry and racism is in the LGBT community everywhere, in the south people probably feel a lot more comfortable being blatant about it. And we have to be willing to hold each other accountable and keep it out of our space.

**Molly:** So I live in Portland, which is one of the most progressive cities when it comes to gender expression and gender identity, and even here it’s really common for me to be misgendered. I was wondering as someone who uses they/them in the south, how often do you come out to people, and how often are you correctly gendered?

**Mac:** I really don’t come out to people very often unfortunately. Outside of my work and hanging out with my mum, I was spending time with members of the queer community because all my friends are in the LGBTQ community. So in those spaces I tend to be gendered correctly because we’re very protective of each other and people want to validate each other in those spaces since nobody else around here really does. But in general if I were to ask somebody to use they/them pronouns they would just be confused. I think that’s true everywhere but probably more so true here with the lack of education about it. Although there are tons of great organizations trying to fix that, or a few at least.

**Molly:** That’s right. So you work in the field of queer anthropology. Can you explain what that means and what you study?

**Mac:** Anthropology as a whole field is studying humans, and that is a huge broad topic that can mean literally anything from physical remains to artifacts to our culture; which can be broken down to things like, just literally anything that you do could be studied by cultural anthropologists because a human is doing it. And my particular interest is queer anthropology. Queer anthropology focuses on the ways that people exist outside of the set generally western norms about how people should express themselves sexually and in regards to gender. And I’m interested in particular in studying people who challenge the gender binary that has been set by the western world. And while I am studying people that exist today, a lot of my research digs into history. Because what I found the more that I study people that currently exist and defy the binary is that these are people who have always existed. And the defiance of the binary is not a new thing. And that the binary’s existence in itself is very rooted in colonialism. So to understand the place where people are today I have to look into history as well I guess.

**Molly:** Totally. Can you talk a bit more about folks that have existed throughout history in ways that transgress the western concept of gender binary? Like obviously I’m just asking you to speak extemporaneously so I don’t expect a really well researched history lesson [laughs] but just briefly?

**Mac:** Yeah, yeah absolutely! What’s really unfortunate about trying to study queer history, and the history of nonbinary genders, is that it’s all through a colonizer’s lens. While anthropology today is very much focused on social justice, it’s roots are much darker. Early anthropology was often very racist, very focused on understanding air quotes “barbarians.” You know, it was really awful. So a lot of the early writings we have on genders outside of the binary are from, for example, Spanish colonizers in Latin America, seeing indigenous groups that didn’t have distinct male/female gender binaries, and trying to interpret that for their own language and trying to understand these people and basically seeing them as ungodly for being this way. It’s really hard to try to understand these people whenever what’s been written about them is from the perspective of somebody who’s already set on not really understanding them, if that makes sense.

**Molly:** That makes total sense. So, you did a project where you were interviewing nonbinary folks all across the country, which is how I first met you, and I was wondering if you could talk about how that project first started, and then how it evolved.

**Mac:** Yeah absolutely. That project is still ongoing. So it started out as a baby project. Whenever I was in school at the University of Arkansas at Little Rock, my final project was studying nonbinary people in Arkansas. So I interviewed people throughout my state about their experiences, and basically created profiles about these people to try to show how many different expressions of identity there are based on all these different intersections of a person’s identity. Like all the different ways that gender can be expressed outside of the binary, and how that interacts with the other parts of ourselves. That was my main focus. But I didn’t really want to keep it contained to Arkansas, and so I also started interviewing people through email and by travelling all around the country and meeting up with people at LGBT centers.

And these interviews were very holistic, just trying to get 99% of who this person was, their interests, what was important to them, what kind of changes they need to see; just trying to understand them and their needs basically. From the beginning of this project one of my main focuses was intersectionality and all of the different identities that create the person we are and the kind of gender we have as people who are outside of the gender binary. Because I was focusing so much on intersectionality, was the reason I wanted to do all these interviews, to try to understand nonbinary and gender identities. Because as a white person for example, I know that I can’t necessarily understand how a person of color’s gender identity developed from their particular cultural background. And so by interviewing all these people with all these different experiences I’m trying to create a more holistic picture.

But through this process of doing this research I’ve found that there are still a lot of blind spots that I missed before. I don’t feel like my research really reached poor communities as much as it could have. I don’t think it reached people of color, and it did not reach very many transfeminine people. Like the responses from surveys so far have shown that there are major communities that either didn’t see my project, didn’t feel comfortable responding to my project or the wording of my project just didn’t fit with their experience so I’ll laugh at them to think that they could. That has made me very reflective, and I’m doing research to try to understand those perspectives as well as hoping to, once I get to grad school, start collecting more data. And target those groups in my work because I want them to be represented and I want to help uplift their voices because the groups of people that were not reached by my project are the ones that were shown to be the most vulnerable when it comes to statistics about violence against them.

**Molly:** Yeah absolutely. You spoke to so many people, did you feel like you were hearing sentiments that were sort of the same time after time after time? Or did it feel like everyone’s experience with gender was like really unique and different, or maybe regionally it was different? I’m just really interested in what you came across.

**Mac:** It was really interesting because there was a lot that was really different and a lot that was pretty much the same. What I found was that probably everybody I talked to did not feel understood, did not, even people in places that have a lot of LGBT resources, didn’t feel like they really had the resources that they needed still.

**Molly:** I mean obviously there are confidentiality agreements and I don’t want to go up against any of those, but is there anything from listening to all of these stories that really stuck with you, or really touched you that you would be able to share?

**Mac:** Yeah, well there were multiple people that I interviewed that were born with intersex conditions, and talked about the isolation of that. And for people who don’t know what people with intersex conditions, they’re people who biologically don’t fit the standards that a doctor sets for what is male and female. They kind of challenge the idea of the biological sexual binary. And because of that, there’s a lot of isolation there. And it was interesting talking to these people because they kind of reminded me that the project I was doing wasn’t exactly as contained as I thought it was. Because a lot of people who are intersex do not necessarily identify as nonbinary.

One person I interviewed identified as a woman, but because she is intersex, she has had these experiences of living in that liminal space sort of. And she reached out to me because of that, and wanted to be a part of this project. And even though she didn’t identify as nonbinary, I realized that I really needed to interview her. And I did. Because she does have experiences of not being seen as entirely within the binary. I had a few people point out to me that the very wording of my project can be exclusionary to a lot of people, because there are so many people who don’t identify as nonbinary who have the physical lived experiences of being treated as someone who doesn’t quite fit inside the binary. The very category of nonbinary is just like, also limiting some ways because of that.

Going back to thinking about the impact that colonialism has had on our ideas of gender, the very concept of transgender doesn’t make sense out of a colonial lens. Because there are people who identify as transgender other than man or woman, who, within the society that they grew up in--which may be a non-western society--is considered a normal part of their gender system. Like some indigenous societies have three or four, or sometimes more, genders. To call people within those societies nonbinary or transgender just because they don’t identify as a man or a woman is kind of erasing that society. Because to them, that is their gender system. So that has really changed the way I look at my project, considering these things, because there are a lot of people who don’t consider themselves a part of this community that still face the same oppression.

**Molly:** Yeah, totally, that’s super interesting! Once you’ve transcribed everything, which feels so bad - how many interviews did you do?

**Mac:** [laughs] I did dozens, I don’t know the exact number off the top of my head, but it was less than 100, probably more than 50.

**Molly:** Oh my gosh, what a nightmare.

**Mac:** I know, and I’m going do more. [laughs again]

**Molly:** What do you plan to do with all this information? Is there any sort of public facing thing you might create that people could check out one day?

**Mac:** Yes, I am hoping to write a book. I was hoping to be in the writing phase at this point but as I started working on it I realized how much really goes into writing a book. I’m constantly reading stuff that is relevant to it to try to shape my own understanding of it with other people’s work. And so what I’m trying to create is a book that combines the narratives of all of these people from all of these different kinds of walks of life with academic understandings of gender theory, but in a way the average person can understand.

I’m hoping that using these people’s personal narratives will help bridge the gap between the academia of gender theory, that can be really alienating to people, and people’s real lives, so it can be really understandable to people. I want it to be accessible, but also to make people think and be able to access stuff that otherwise they might not be able to access if they weren’t in a college classroom like us. Because one trend that I did find interviewing people was that a huge number of them would never have known they were nonbinary if they had not had some form of education. If they hadn’t gone to a gender studies class, if they hadn’t picked up a particular book, if they hadn’t been on Tumblr at the right time and on the right pages.

And so I feel like that’s another group of people that my project didn’t reach. Is people that just haven’t had the education to have the language around what their identity is. And so I’m hoping to write a book that’ll make that kind of education accessible.

**Molly:** In addition to this project, imagine the future: you’ve written your book, it’s so good. If you had a grant that gave you unlimited time and money to study anything in the field of gender and queerness, what would you want to do next?

**Mac:** Hmm. That’s an excellent question. I am very interested in researching the ways that gender nonconforming people are criminalize and treated within the criminal system. That includes people in prisons and detention centers, and who are caught up in the criminal justice system basically in any way.

For anybody else interested in this, I really recommend the book *Captive Genders.* That’s the book that got me interested in the first place. It’s a compilation of all of these different essays and stories about the experiences and statistics surrounding the criminalization of gender nonconforming people. So that’s what’s really interesting to me. But more than research, I would rather be doing advocacy work. Just because I’m one of those people that always wants to be doing something. Similar to my research interests, when it comes to advocacy work I’m pretty interested in working with the most marginalized numbers of the LGBTQ community, which to me seems to be incarcerated and undocumented queer people.

**Molly:** I just thought of another question I wanted to ask you earlier. So, you mentioned sir and ma’am being seen as sort of the only way to be seen as being polite, and I actually have gotten that question from quite a few cis people. Because I’m really big on not gendering strangers, and I’ve had a bunch of cis people be like “oh, but what’s the gender neutral alternative to sir and ma’am,” so I was wondering if there is one, and if not, what are we going to do?

[Both laugh]

**Mac:** You know, I don’t think there is one. But I also don’t think it matters as much as people think it does. The way that I personally feel about it is, I don’t really want people to be siring or ma’aming or whatever the gender neutral equivalent is with me. I feel like they can show their politeness and kindness towards me in other ways. And that just in generally how they interact with you they can be nice without having to do that.

I feel like siring and ma’aming people kind of puts them on a different level than you. I feel like that kind of language is reserved for very polite detached situations like at restaurants or at stores and stuff, and I don’t really like how it promotes this detachment in conversation. And it kind of--taking it away I feel like equalizes people more anyway. Although at work, I work at a bookstore, and I all the time, I have short hair right now, and all the time get “sired.” And then the people who sir me, as soon as they quote unquote “realize” that I’m not a guy, immediately are super apologetic. And it’s just, it’s just like that would have been unnecessary if you didn’t say sir or ma’am. Also you don’t need to be so apologetic, it’s not so big a deal. I never know how to interact with that situation.

**Molly:** Do you ever think about moving somewhere where you might be seen more?

**Mac:** Yes it’s really difficult. Right now I’m looking into, like I mentioned earlier, graduate school. I’m hoping that this project is something that becomes a graduate school project and that it’s published by the end of my time in grad school as my thesis. Arkansas doesn’t really have any programs relevant to what I want to do, or that kind of research. Right now I’m looking at a few schools. I’m particularly interested in University of Washington in Seattle. I’m really excited about it because I loved my time in Seattle when I was up there, it’s a great city.

But at the same time it’s really hard leaving Arkansas behind because while it is very hateful and I’m very unseen here there is also this, it’s just an amazing tight knit community like I’ve been talking about, and I want to be there for them. It’s really hard whenever all of the LGBTQ organizations around here that are holding up our state. Arkansas Transgender Equality Coalition, ATEC, and Lucy’s Place, which is a homeless shelter for LGBTQ youth, Centre for Artistic Revolution, there’s a few others but there’s very few organizations and the people running them are people I’m friends with. And they’re often involved in multiple organizations, and they’re so busy, and leaving them behind with all that work feels very awful. It feels like I’m needed most here, but at the same time it feels like I would grow more elsewhere and it’s this conflict between the two.

**Molly:** Well maybe you can go get a degree and then come back?

**Mac:** That’s kind of what I’m thinking? But I feel like once I go I might be gone. [Laughs] It’s so-

**Molly:** Maybe, we’ll find out!

**Mac:** Yeah. [Both laughing]

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

**Mac:** In my ideal world, the future of gender would be everybody being able to express themselves without arbitrary limitations, and honestly gender just not being as big of a deal. I like the idea of gender being seen as a part of a person’s personality and expression but not some innate part of them which is unchangeable.

[*Gender Reveal* theme music begins]

**Molly:** That's going do it for this week's show! If you had a good time please tell a friend or all of your friends. If you have any questions or concerns or comments or suggestions, please hit us up on Twitter - we are @gendereveal. Instagram, the same handle, genderpodcast.com, that’s us. You’ll also find on genderpodcast.com a list of ways to listen to the show, transcriptions, more information about how to hire us or bringing us to your town. Of course you can also join our experimental Gender Detectives Slack, the link is in the show notes.

If you are in the mood for charitable season giving, and you have not yet donated to Gender Reveal or you’d like to up your donation, you can do that at patreon.com/gender, PayPal link in the show notes, CashApp link in the show notes, I appreciate you all so much.

This show is produced and edited by me, Molly Woodstock.

Our theme music is by the legendary Breakmaster Cylinder, our logo is by the talented Michelle Leigh. I just did those backwards which I guess doesn’t matter but wow it feels super different.

We'll be back next week with more feelings about gender.

[*Gender Reveal* theme ends]