[theme music]

**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.

[theme music ends]

**Molly:** This week on Gender Reveal, I’m still sick, I keep losing my voice, but I love you! So I’m still here. And speaking of love, I’ve been so blown away by all of the positive feedback from y’all. We’ve gotten so many nice messages, DMs, emails of encouragement from, honestly, around the world. We’ve gotten a few new Patreon donors, we’ve got 50 something iTunes reviews which is incredible, so if you’re behind any of that, thank you so much. I really appreciate your support and feedback, it literally would not be possible to do the show without all of you so thank you so, so much.

If you’d like to become a Patreon donor, you can do so at Patreon.com/gender, and whether you’re donating at $1 a month or $20 or $40 a month, it means so much to me that you’re willing to help out, and thank you so much from the bottom of my heart.

And speaking of people who support the show, thank you as always to our friends at Glad Rags. Glad Rags is a Portland-based, woman-owned company that makes really fantastic menstrual cups and menstrual pads, I really cannot recommend them enough. They’re cute, they’re eco-friendly, and best of all they last for years and years so you save a ton of money and a ton of hassle. If you head to Glad Rags right now and sign up for their newsletter, you’ll get a great discount code and you’ll also be actively supporting the show if you tell them that we sent you. So thank you so much, and thank you to Glad Rags at Gladrags.com.

Finally, thank you so much to Open Hand Health. Open Hand Health is a gender-affirming, body-positive and queer owned business offering massage therapy and naturopathic medicine. They’re located southeast Portland Oregon and they are currently accepting new patients with and without insurance. Find them at openhandhealth.com for more info and online booking. Again that is openhandhealth.com.

And with that, it’s time for a segment called This Week In Gender.

[trumpeting news music]

**Molly:** This week in gender we’ve got some really, really bad news, and a little bit of cheerful news. First the bad news: Last week, the US education department said it wouldn’t be pursuing any civil rights complaints from transgender students who are barred from using the school bathrooms that corresponds with their gender. More specifically, the department is arguing that Title IX covers sex discrimination, not gender identity discrimination, so trans kids apparently have no right to access the bathroom that corresponds with their gender. Betsy DeVos wrote, “Please note that this does not leave students without protections from discrimination, bullying or harassment. All schools must ensure that all students, including LGBT students, are able to learn and thrive in a safe environment.” But like, it’s clearly bullshit. So I don’t know what to tell you on that.

In better news, a 30-year-old transgender woman successfully breastfed her child. Doctors in New York used a combination of hormones, anti-nausea medication, and a breast milk pump, and it worked. This was the first known time that functional lactation has been induced in a transgender woman.

This has been, this week in gender.

[trumpeting news music]

[Theme music]

**Molly:** This week on Gender Reveal, I’m delighted to chat with Soleil Ho. Soleil is a Vietnamese-American chef, writer and podcaster with as many addresses as Carmen San Diego. Her writing has appeared in Brooklyn Magazine, the Atlas Review, Paste, On She Goes, Edible Manhattan, Taste and Bitch Media. She currently hosts Popaganda, the feminist pop culture podcast from Bitch Media, and Racist Sandwich, an award nominated podcast on food, race, class and gender.

[Theme music ends]

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

**Soleil:** I identify as a woman, and my pronouns are she/her.

**Molly:** So, because you identify as a woman, I’m going to ask you all of the questions that nonbinary people usually get asked and trans people usually get asked, because it’s fun to flip the script. I’m going to ask you, what does being a woman mean to you and how do you know that you’re a woman?

**Soleil:** So that’s a really interesting set of questions, thank you for asking me that. I really appreicate you asking because I think my relationship to my gender and sex were really tumultuous. When I was a kid, or I guess when, I don’t know--I feel like in middle school and high school I had this really dark feelings towards gender. And I was like, ‘Why am I this? Why am I in this body?’ And you know, there was a particular period in high school where I wore binders and I presented as male in a lot of sort of strange contexts? Sort of like when I wasn’t dealing with people I knew. It was really pleasurable to me in a sense, it felt right. So for awhile I was just really confused. And, um, lost. I didn’t know what to do about it because I didn’t know anyone I could talk to about those things. So, uh. I don’t know what happened. All of a sudden I think I just kind of fell into the whole being a woman thing, and now here I am.

**Molly:** Uh, do you feel like you still carry that teen boy with you? Or does that feel totally alien to you now to want to present as more masculine?

**Soleil:** I think I still carry that person with me. And I’m sort of open to that person coming back or really having never left. I’m not completely married to the idea of being woman or presenting as a woman.

**Molly:** So do you identify as cis and binary?

**Soleil:** I mean...I think, honestly because you’re asking me, I really don’t. But I say it because it’s convenient. There are times when I feel more or less cis, you know?

**Molly:** Definitely, that makes perfect sense to me.

**Soleil:** I’m so glad, it makes no sense to me! I’m glad it makes sense to someone!

**Molly:** I mean, it [laughs], it makes sense in that it resonates with me. It doesn’t make sense in that I can articulate it necessarily any better than you can, but there’s something that you’re saying that feels familiar to me.

**Soleil:** It’s funny because I think I give off nonbinary, gay vibes a lot. I just have to, I think it’s that person inside of me just pushing out and being like, ‘Hey, I’m here!’ And I think for me it’s very cyclical, and not cyclical like, you know, every time has a turn, but more just my attitude towards this whole thing, the gender thing changes all the time. My inconsistancy is my consistancy.

**Molly:** You’ve worked in kitchens for a long time, and like almost every industry, the food industry is notoriously awful to be a woman in. Do you think you presenting sort of non-conventionally and giving off these gay, non-binary vibes I think is what you said--do you think that makes it easier or harder to survive in that white male, macho kitchen?

**Soleil:** I think it makes it easier, honestly. There’s definitely been moments where I had, where I was presented with the other side, I guess, people with a more comfortable relationship to their female-ness in coworkers or whatever, and I think my relative unscathed-ness being in this industry is because I didn’t fit that mold, and there was always someone else who was more female or more woman-presenting who bore the brunt of people’s judgement and stereotyping, and I just wasn’t ever that person. And, you know, there’s an element of ‘I’m complicit in their treatment as well,’ I didn’t perpetuate it, but I think on some level me just being in that environment made some people feel like it was okay? Like, ‘Soleil’s not crying while cooking, what’s wrong with this person?’ That sort of thing.

Molly: Yeah, I was reading an NBC news article about you. It said you told your cohost on Racist Sandwich, which is a podcast that you host that we’ll get to in a minute, that culinary schools graduate men and women at relatively equal rates, but women don’t advance in their careers? And I was wondering if you could talk about the barriers women face in that industry and why they’re not moving up.

**Soleil:** Yeah, so. There’s a lot. As you said, the culinary industry, the food industry at large is really hostile towards women. And you know, a lot of the places where you know people start are kind of where women end. So for example, there’s a lot of people of color in the industry, a lot of women of color in the industry, and they tend to just be kind of funneled into fast food and fast casual places. That’s where most of us end up working.

And I think it’s just because people don’t recognize themselves in us, you know, the people in charge who are mainly white men. The managers and the chefs and the maitre-d’s and the service managers. So we’re not often the ones who are tapped for advancement. And we’re not often the ones who are chosen to represent the establishment for clientele. So it’s really on everyone’s shoulders, on consumers and the people who are running the business.

Another sort of thing, and sort of the bigger problem too, of just, there’s harassment. Now we know there’s tons of examples of sort of bro culture and sexual assault being sort of the norm at places. Speaking of, the John Besh group of restaurants in New Orleans, for example. Those are huge push factors that push women and women of color out of the industry. Because on a whole, as with many industries, women make a lot less money. And a lot of us has too much at stake to speak up about the treatment we get, and it’s so much easier to quit and find a job somewhere else or do anything else. And, you know, there’s a lot. There’s so much! [Laughs]

**Molly:** There is so much, it’s hard to know what even to ask because the questions are so broad, and so you host Racist Sandwich which is a podcast about food, gender, race and class. And so I’m tempted to ask something like, ‘So, how do you think that your gender and race and class and sexuality impact your life in the culinary industry?’ but like that question is your entire podcast, right? [Laughs] There’s like a hundred episodes of you answering that question, so it’s hard to even know where to start with this. But is there something about the culinary world as it pertains to gender and identity that you want to make absolutely sure that we talk about on this episode?

**Soleil:** Gosh, yeah. So, you know, there’s definitely periods in my life where I identified more with the men who ran the restaurants that I worked at. And I was very much into that kill-or-be-killed sort of attitude where you just have to keep paddling, you have to fight, and you can’t just, you know, react in the typically sort of shrinking, feminine, stereotyped way and react to the harassment. You can’t show them that you’re in pain. And I realized later on that sort of thing really exacerbated tendencies that I had that were really destructive to me mentally and psychologically, tendencies that came from gender conditioning and also just trauma from my past.

So I think about that a lot. I don’t know how to talk about that on Racist Sandwich because it’s so personal, but you know, there’s parts of my experience in the industry that brought out some really bad parts that I think were very much informed by my gender.

**Molly:** So you mentioned consumers a while back and I’m wondering if there are ways as consumers that we can help advocate for the rights of women and other marginalized folks in the restaurant industry, like--

**Soleil:** Right, so I have a couple answers to that. First, easy-ish answer is to become a more informed consumer, because I think consumers, especially in Portland, where we were together. People are used to asking questions about the food, ‘Is this gluten-free?’ ‘Is this ethical meat?’ ‘Is this from so-and-so farm?’ Like ‘What farms do you use?’ And you know, it’s not such a big leap to ask the questions about personnel. You know? Like ‘Who is your chef? Are your workers, do they make a living wage?’ It’s more awkward, but sometimes you have to just do the awkward thing, because yes it’s easier to ask about chickens than it is to ask about humans, but sometimes--[chuckles] if you want things to change, if you want people to know that you care about those things, you have to vocalize it.

And I guess another thing to is that a lot of harassment and mistreatment in the restaurant world comes from customers towards staff. And if you are in a group and you notice like one of your friends or colleagues or whoever in that group is acting a certain way, acting up to the server based on their gender or sexuality you have to say something. Please say something. You know, so many times I have, in various places I’ve worked, you know people will come up to the server and will like apologize, like ‘I’m so sorry for my friend, he’s being a total jerk, I’m so sorry.’ But in the moment they don’t say anything, they don’t want to be rude or weird to their friend. But you know, the actual apology is so rare, you can see the actual people at the table being uncomfortable but they don’t say anything. So intervening in those moments, and you know--you know those moments happen. Intervening is so important, and letting the server know that you see them as a person is so important.

**Molly:** I’m so glad that you said that, because I think that a lot of people do want to say something but feel like they need permission, so I feel like you sort of just gave permission to a lot of folks to say something and stand up, and I think that’s really cool!

**Soleil:** Yeah! Yeah, and I think the server, you need to realize too, we have a culture in the U.S. where the customer is always right, and servers and restaurant, even restaurant owners, don’t have the language to intervene. It’s so taboo for restaurant people to stick up for themselves at restaurants, and it shouldn’t be, but that’s how the system is set up. So the easiest thing for a consumer to do is do that for us.

**Molly:** Yeah, so regarding Racist Sandwich, I’ve heard you and your co-host Zahir [Janmohamed] say it’s hard to do certain stories about gender specifically because often times the women involved don’t feel comfortable coming on the show, and I was wondering if you could tell me in broad terms some of the ideas you wanted to do on Racist Sandwich that it was hard to figure out how to do.

**Soleil:** One thing, and this was conversations we had before the Me Too movement really hit the mainstream, right, like in the last couple months. And more and more people are coming out about abuse and harassment that they’ve suffered which is amazing and powerful, and so, before that point it was really hard to get anyone to come on record and say these things, because of course you can report anonymous stories, you can report as many anonymous stories as you want, but they don’t have the same impact as someone just saying, ‘My name is so and so and I experienced this.’ And as people who attempt journalism [laughs], Z is more of a journalist than I am. I just rant on the internet--

**Molly:** You’re a journalist! [Laughs]

**Soleil:** It’s, it’s just challenging from an ethical standpoint, right? Because you want to be able to vet the story, you want to be able to stand by it and its truth, and it can be so much harder when all you have is one source who isn’t willing to go on the record. And for a podcast who, until now had a budget of close to pocket change essentially, it’s really hard to follow through on that stuff.

**Molly:** I just learned today and was sooo excited to learn that you’re also taking over hosting the Bitch podcast Popaganda? Can you tell me more about how you came to take that position and what you’re excited about to do on the show?

**Soleil:** Yeah! I think this is my first real public statement about it, so that’s exciting! Off of Twitter. So, yeah, I had no idea anything was going on with Popaganda, I knew Sarah, the previous host, was leaving, but I didn’t know they were looking for a new host or anything, and all of a sudden I got an email from Lisa Factora-Borchers, who is sort of the editorial director, saying, “Hey, we like what you do, and we would love for you to host Popaganda!” and I was like what?! [Laughs] Uhm, it was a total surprise for me. And I’ve worked with Bitch before and I’m always so excited to have bylines on their site and in their magazine, so I was just so honored to be asked.

I’m so excited about doing non-food content, which is--

**Molly:** Yeah!

**Soleil:** You know, I have anxiety about being a one trick pony, but I’m not! I can do other things.

**Molly:** [Laughs] Yeah!

**Soleil:** I love writing and talking about pop culture and just like culture at large, and I love taking things apart. It’s like my favorite thing in the world. And so our first episode is gonna be about empathy and the concept of it, and I’m so excited to talk about it. We’re gonna be talking about virtual reality and using that as a tool for building empathy and like what the limits of that technology are, and I’ll be talking to other people, sort of philosophers, theorists about the role of empathy in social justice space, activist space and the performativity of it, and affect. All these really fun things in hopefully a very accessible way for the Popaganda listeners. So that’s super exciting.

**Molly:** That sounds soo good! I can’t wait for that episode. It’s gonna be so good! Great. So I should do this right now before I forget. So if folks want to find you, they can find you at the Racist Sandwich podcast, they can find you at the Popaganda podcast, so that’s like ‘propaganda’ with no ‘r’ at the beginning. And then where else can they find you?

**Soleil:** So, I’m on Twitter of course. My username is @hooleil because ‘holeil’ was taken so it’s ‘hooleil’ [both laugh] oh whatever! It used to be a nickname that a friend had for me in college, so I love it. I have a really awful--so Roxane Gay posted about this on Twitter awhile ago, like writers please have a real website, and I still don’t have a real website and I feel very ashamed of this. I have a Tumblr, it’s soleilho.tumblr.com. And you can--

**Molly:** I love that you have a Tumblr.

**Soleil:** I update it very sporadically with things that I’ve written, I don’t know how people find the things I’ve written, it’s just madness over here. I don’t know.

**Molly:** Well speaking of Twitter, your Twitter bio describes you as ‘queer as heck.’ How important is it to you to be visible as a queer person?

**Soleil:** Um, I would say it’s really important because I think, especially for people in the Vietnamese and Vietnamese-American community it’s, uhm, or Asian-Americans in general--LGBT Asians are, I just feel like we’re so important to each other just because of that whole immigrant dynamic where our parents, they don’t really have words for these things. Our parents and grandparents just don’t know how to articulate that kind of identity, and so, uhm. A lot of us especially grew up in like Evangelical or Catholic ways, which are very not great about that stuff. So finding community in that way is so important to me. Just, identifying others and being identified so people see me out there doing the things [chuckles] and has that sort of connection.

**Molly:** Have you been able to create a queer Viet-community in spaces that you’ve lived?

**Soleil:** I think yes! I think especially in Portland it’s really awesome to find other weird Vietnamese people. I never really had that in my life, and it was wonderful.

**Molly:** It sounds really good and really important. How has it been leaving Portland, which is very much a queer destination, and moving to, I forget where you are in Mexico now.

**Soleil:** Yeah! I live in Puerto Vallarta, Mexico, although, yeah, I’m moving back to the States in the spring, so I’m excited about that.

**Molly:** Oh! Okay! Are you coming back to Portland or somewhere else?

**Soleil:** I’m going to Minneapolis, which is like Portland but without the hype. [Both laugh] Puerto Vallarta has been really good for me and I’ve learned so much about about soo many things and my American-ness, you know, is a very interesting topic I’ve explored in my writing since I’ve been here. Yeah, I haven’t really been out til the years I lived in Portland, especially because I’m married to a man, and there’s always that, you know, there’s that thing, when you’re in a relationship, you’re the one thing or you’re the other thing. And this is not a new thing, this is obviously not rocket science, but I still have the problem that a lot of people have in my position that’s like, ‘Are you a traitor?! What are you doing!’ Like, ‘Who are you? What right do you have to exist and claim this title?’ and so I’m claiming it and fuck it.

**Molly:** Absolutely! It’s such a common sentiment. It doesn’t make it any less real, but it’s so common, so many queer women are dating men or straight men, or dating cis men, and it’s really easy for us to feel not queer enough. But like you know in your heart that you’re super queer [laughs] you know! You don’t have to prove it to anymore.

**Soleil:** Yeah, and I mean honestly I feel, in my heart of hearts, that I’m like, I’m a gay person, but I’m not gonna claim, but I don’t feel comfortable yet claiming that because I’m married to a man and then of course there are so many people in this position who are like me and words always, they fail us.

**Molly:** Yeah, I just really enjoy talking to you because so much of what you say resonates with me so much. It’s really nice. But uh, okay! Just a couple more questions. You’re co-writing a queer graphic novel called Meal, can you talk about that and what it’s about?

**Soleil:** Yeah! So, the artist and writer is Blue Delliquanti, this artist that I’ve loved and adored for years now. I followed her comic, which is like a sci-fi robot comic about a queer couple, and it’s based in Minneapolis, so that’s super cool. Yeah she reached out to me awhile ago and asked if I’d be willing to collaborate with her on this script that she wrote for Meal, so Meal is about insect cuisine, and it’s sort of themes of cultural appropriation and traditional food ways and learning how to, especially…

I think it’s a unique position that insect cuisine is in, right now it’s often bounded about as the sustainable solution to world hunger and the future of food, and it’s sort of the trendy thing. People are selling cricket crackers and cricket flour, and all of these things, right? And all the while, not quite asking questions that I think are really important, so the graphic novel is asking those questions through a sort of fictional story. I’m really excited about it, and of course at the center of it is this super cute couple, who are kind of coming into their relationship and figuring out how they feel about each other, and it’s great. I love it.

**Molly:** How do you have time to host two podcasts and work in kitchens and write books and write articles, and how--how??

**Soleil:** [Both laugh] I think the most common question I get from people is when do you sleep? [Laughs]

**Molly:** When do you sleep?

**Soleil:** I sleep pretty normally, I think. From 2:30 a.m. to 8 a.m.

**Molly:** Yeah, that sounds normal [laughter]--

**Soleil:** I mean, whatever! Yeah, it’s really wild, I don’t know what happened. Ever since I was in college, I stopped saying ‘no’ to things. And it’s given me a lot of opportunity and a lot of stuff to deal with, and I love it, I love multi-tasking and doing all these things, and I live by my calendars and my reminder lists and all my things. Honestly, I don’t think I’m that productive, which is maybe kind of fucked up to say, considering what it looks like from the outside, uhm. Somehow I still have time to just lie around and poop around in gaming chatrooms and watch like husky videos.

I think what you just have to do is set yourself some deadlines, man, and then--like I live by the small bites. I take small bites of my tasks, I respond to three emails in a day, like three long, thoughtful responses, and I feel like that’s good, and then I go to work my job job, and then somehow I get things done that way. Or sometimes I have intense writing sessions on the two days I have off from my job. And I get all that stuff done, and of course I ask for help when I need it, and that’s really important too. You know? Uh, it’s, I don’t know. I’m also super privileged, I’m so privileged in that I get to do all these things and I don’t forget that, so I try really hard not to drop any of those balls because when am I gonna get that chance again? I don’t know.

**Molly:** Well then, the way we always end the show is by asking, ‘What do you think the future of gender will be?’ or ‘In your ideal world, what would the future of gender be?’

**Soleil:** I can answer both. I think the future of gender will remain pretty similar to what it is now, which is some people have a really strong association with it and really strong need to preserve it, becaue I think there’s a lot of institutions that depend on it. And I’m talking on all sorts of points on the political spectrum. Um, in leftist spheres and right-wing spheres, gender is really important to some people. And it’s really not important to others. And um, you’re rewarded still for adhering to gender norms, and I don’t really see that changing all that much? Until we change how we frame rewards and how, I guess, the system of fitting a mold is still very important to Western Culture.

My ideal is that, uhm, of course my ideal is that we’re not kind of summed up by our efficiency or what we produce. I’m very much hoping that we do end up in that luxury automated space, queer communism [both laugh] where you know, it’s just queers in space and we don’t have to worry about what we’re worth to anyone else. I would love that.

**Molly:** You can’t see me, but I was just vigorously nodding the entire time you were talking, so that was good, but. Soleil, thank you so much again for coming on the show, I really enjoyed talking with you.

**Soleil:** Oh, thank you for having me. I appreciate it.

[Theme music starts]

**Molly:** That’s gonna do it for this big show. If you were like, ‘Wow! What a great episode!’ please share this episode with a friend or post about it on social media or leave a review or donate on Patreon.com/gender. Any of those things would be so, so appreciated. They’re not obligatory, but you know, do you. Of course, don’t forget to subscribe to Popaganda and Racist Sandwich to hear more from Soleil.

If you have thoughts, questions, feedback, you can find us at @gendereveal on Twitter or gendereveal@gmail.com, and don’t forget that both of those addresses are gendereveal with one R.

This episode was edited by me, Molly Woodstock, and Liza Yeager.

Our logo is by the talented Michelle Leigh, and our theme song is by the legendary Breakmaster Cylinder.

Thanks again to Gladrags and Open Hand Health for sponsoring this week’s show.

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

[theme music ends]