**Transcript–– Gender Reveal Season 11, Episode 160: Raquel Willis**

Tuck: Shopping for sex toys can sometimes feel overwhelming or dysphoric, but ShopEnby.com aims to create a better experience for the queer, trans, and gender nonconforming community. ShopEnby.com is a Black and trans-owned sex toy company and 2% of all proceeds are donated to organizations focused on improving the lives of queer and trans people of color. ShopEnby.com is also a carbon negative company, and every sale funds renewable energy and forest conservation projects. Visit ShopEnby.com. S-H-O-P-E-N-B-Y.com and use the code GenderReveal at checkout to get 10% off and bring more pleasure and affirmation into your life.

[Gender Reveal theme music plays]

Tuck: 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, Tuck Woodstock.

 [Gender Reveal theme music ends]

Tuck: Hey everyone, hope you're all hangin' in there. Here we are! It is the final episode of Gender Reveal Season 11. If you're new here, this episode is actually a great place to start. But we also have little starter packs on our website where we've grouped episodes based on topic and theme. So if you're staring into the depths of our back catalog, and you aren't sure where to go next, you can check those out at genderpodcast.com/starterpacks. Anyway, this week, I am very excited to share my conversation with author and activist Raquel Willis. I've wanted to have Raquel on the show for a long, long time. And I'm so excited that her upcoming memoir finally gave us an excuse to chat. In this episode, Raquel and I talk about shaking off respectability politics and reconciling your feminism with your transsexuality.

Raquel: Everyone fucking has desires for their body, right? Like it's actually not just a trans thing.

Tuck: We also talk about the way that Black trans women can be written off in queer spaces, and why it's weird that some people conflate being a woman with not having radical gender politics?

Raquel: To live your life trying to appear or be the most radical, is its own prison of expectations.

Tuck: But before we get to that, and before we wrap up for the season, I've got some time sensitive announcements and reminders. I'm going to be talking a little more than normal–– bear with me.

[Ambient music plays]

Tuck: First of all, merch is back. Very limited time. Halloween is fast approaching and I brought back some seasonal classics like the No Cis Vampires sweatshirt, the Trans Ghouls United hoodie, the Gender is Dead hoodie, the Mothman "We will always be freaks" t-shirts, a whole bunch of other designs, and as always, everything is trans-designed, sizes go up to 5XL, and all proceeds are split between trans artists and trans-led organizations. Take a look at the whole shop at bit.ly/gendermerch by October 15th, to make sure you don't miss out. I might run them a little bit past then, I might not. So take a look by October 15th, bit.ly/gendermerch.

And speaking of Halloween approaching, that means that we also have a new grant cycle coming up. If you are a trans person of color doing some kind of rad art or organizing work anywhere in the world, we would love for you to apply for a Gender Reveal grant so that we can give you $500 towards your great work. Grant applications will be open sometime next week, TBD. And will stay open through Halloween. And we will be posting that application link all over Instagram, Twitter, Bluesky I guess, any other website I hack into, so keep an eye out for that next week. You can also see a full list of our past grant winners –– there's over a hundred of them I believe –– at genderpodcast.com/grant.

If you are going to be in the Los Angeles area on November 10th, I would love to see you at the North Figueroa bookstore at 7pm, where I will be doing a 2 Trans 2 Furious book event. This is not one of the book events that are also live shows with 10 segments. This is like a more traditional book event. It includes a couple of short readings by me and Mckenzee and then a short conversation with Gender Reveal alum Tre'vell Anderson. Tre'vell recently wrote the book We See Each Other: A Black, Trans Journey Through TV and Film, and I felt like their expertise in actual trans film would be an incredible lens with which to discuss my trans book about an incredibly not trans film series, although maybe it is –– have to read the book to find out. Anyway, that's all at North Figueroa on November 10th. I am hoping and praying that by the time I drop this episode there will be an eventbrite link. So check the show notes, hopefully something's in there. It is a free event but I would love for you to RSVP, just so we have an idea of how many people are coming. Everyone else, if you're looking for a copy of 2 Trans 2 Furious, we're really close to running out now. The best way to get one at this point is to request that your local bookstore place an order with us, or even have an event with us. Or you can order one online from someone else's local bookshop like Moon Palace books in Minneapolis. Last time I checked, they have like 17 copies still. You can also grab a PDF of the book for $8 anytime. I don't see that going away anytime soon. If you'd like to get the full list of ways to obtain this weird book-shaped object, you can learn more at tuckwoodstock.com/2-trans-2-furious. Okay, thank you for sticking with me through all of that. I know it was a lot. And now it's time for me to talk even more. That's right, it's time for This Week in Gender.

 [This Week in Gender segment chime theme music plays]

Tuck: So, as you know it's the end of the season, and as per us, we have ended up with a big stack of new books by trans authors that we were not able to squeeze into this season. It is a great problem to have. Back when I first started the show like six years ago, it really did feel like I could talk to every single trans author with a new book out, and now we can't get even remotely close to doing that, and I think that's beautiful, except the part where we need to leave a bunch of people out. So today I wanted to recommend three and a half books that have come out in the last month or so that didn't quite fit into this season. But you know, might fit into a future season and if we ever get to talk to any of the authors on the show in the future, you'll have a little head start for that. Okay, one disclaimer before we get started: I have read some of all of these books. I have finished basically none of these books, I have a little bit left in all of 'em. So if any of them end really weird, that's not on me. You're rolling the dice baby.

[Acoustic string music begins to play]

Okay, first up, we have Girlfriends by Emily Zhou. Girlfriends is the new title by LittlePuss Press, who you might be familiar with from the times we've spoken with LittlePuss Press co-founders, Cat Fitzpatrick and Casey Plett. I think Girlfriends is actually a great recommendation for anyone who enjoys Casey Plett's work specifically. It is a collection of seven short stories about mostly queer and trans young women. Mckenzee read the whole thing on my couch and loved it. I've loved the stories that I've read so far. And it's less than 160 pages, so like easy, breezy, Cover Girl. We love it.

If you're looking for something longer, you might want to check out Idlewild by James Frankie Thomas. This is a story about two teens that go to a Manhattan Quaker school, and that school is based off of a real Manhattan Quaker school that several of my friends went to. Maybe you went there too, I don't know! The book takes place in the aftermath of 9/11 and it came out on 9/12 which I think is very brave marketing. It is about two queer teens trying to figure out kind of their whole deals. It is full of LiveJournal, slash fic, AIM chats, Othello, I just think you'll have a great time.

Next up we've got People Collide, the sophomore novel by Isle McElroy. People Collide is I believe the first novel that Isle wrote since being out as trans, and boy howdy they really went hard in the trans subtext paint with this one. This novel is about a husband and wife who body swap. At one point they have sex about it, which I think is the strong selling point that everyone is talking about. But look, there are a lot of beautiful similes in there too. So plenty of stuff to like.

Last but not least, we've got what I previously described as half a book because it is a short comic entitled The Jester Versus Human Bat in Laugh Riot. This was written by our dear friend Io and beautifully illustrated by Jonas Goonface. If you don't like comics or superheroes, that doesn't matter at all. This is truly my favorite comic I have ever read. I'm not exaggerating, it is about anarchy and mutual aid and collective liberation, and then there's like a little bit of discussion about how Batman and the Joker are like clearly doing a kink thing. That's available now from the BumLung Etsy shop.

 [Acoustic string music ends]

Tuck: So in review, if you are killing time before the next season of Gender Reveal drops, maybe check out *Girlfriends, Idlewild, People Collide*, *Laugh Riot,* every book we've talked about this season by Alison or Casey or Katie or Hal or M.E. or Gus. And also I hear there's this all-trans *Fast and Furious* anthology out. Hmmmmm. This has been This Week in Gender.

[This Week in Gender segment chime theme music plays]

Tuck: We don't have a TheyMail message this week, so instead, we have a MeMail message–– by which I mean I have one more thing to say to you. We are about to take a season break as you know, which means there will not be any new episodes for a couple of months. So if you want to keep that good, good gender detective content coming, you will definitely want to join us at patreon.com/gender. That's where we share our weekly newsletter featuring behind the scenes looks at our upcoming season, plus lots of pictures of my cat. And that's also where you can subscribe to our bonus podcast Gender Conceal, where we share one or more bonus episodes every month throughout the break. Patreon will automatically give you a little link so you can conveniently add Gender Conceal into the podcast app of your choice and it'll be like we never left. That's all at patreon.com/gender. And by signing up, you will be directly enabling Ozzy and I to keep having jobs and we really appreciate that. patreon.com/gender.

[Gender Reveal theme music by Breakmaster Cylinder plays]

Tuck: Raquel Willis is an award winning author, activist and media strategist dedicated to Black transgender liberation. She has formerly served as Director of Communications for Ms. Foundation For Women, Executive Editor of *Out* Magazine and National Organizer for Transgender Law Center. She co-founded Transgender Week of Visibility and Action, and currently serves as an Executive Producer for iHeartMedia's Outspoken, and President of the Solutions NOT Punishment Collaborative's Executive Board. Her debut memoir, *The Risk It Takes to Bloom: On Life and Liberation* will be released in November via St. Martin's Press.

[Gender Reveal theme music plays out and ends]

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

Raquel: So I describe myself as a trans woman, as a power femme, you know, my blackness is always a part of it. So I think that, you know, I have to always talk about that, and I always have to talk about my southerness. Like, I think that's also a part of all of my identity as well.

Tuck: Yeah, do you feel like your southerness influences the way you think about gender?

Raquel: I do, because it's interesting, I feel like when I think about womanhood and femininity and being descended from like Black women in the South, there's something particular there. You know, it's interesting, because I –– as a feminist and what I have learned about feminism, especially kind of from like a more general space, it's often painted that the most radical thing is to not subscribe to femininity. But because I come from a long line of Black women and femmes who were denied access to their womanhood and femininity, I feel like me showing up in that full power is radical for me.

Tuck: Yeah. So I was reading your memoir, and something that I did not realize about you at all, is that you spent college around a lot of drag kings and trans guys and that the first couple of people you dated were trans as well, and I, I just was wondering how you felt like that maybe informed how you think about gender, because that feels like such a rare experience to me.

Raquel: It was a rare experience. I feel very blessed that my first romantic tiptoes were with trans masculine folks. We were able to wade through our individual dysphoria together. So there were some things that we didn't have to get too deep about, because we just kind of understood. I think we also extended grace to each other around the ever-changing relationship that we were having with our bodies at that time, because we were also at similar spots in our transitions too, right? So it–– that felt comforting in a way. And I will say right, I think what ended up being more of a division point was the race piece of it because I –– my first partner was a white trans man, my second partner was multiracial, but white and of Latinx descent. And so white and Brown, right. And so it was interesting being their Black partner, because I felt like, in some ways, I wasn't as accepted or as affirmed, particularly in how they talked about romance with their families. What I sense was that they carried a bit of fear around their family’s reaction to their Black trans partner.

Tuck: Yeah. Well something that I pulled out from your book because I thought it was so interesting was you were talking about how after those experiences, you were moving more towards cishet land for dating, and you said there's an uninterrogated way that Black trans women are seen as untouchable spectacles in queer spaces, only valued if we're performers or serving immaculate beauty, and I was just wondering if you –– I thought that was just like such an interesting perspective, because I would guess that most people not in your position would be like, "Well, why wouldn't you want to date queer people if you could?" I just wanted to know if you could talk more about those experiences.

Raquel: Yeah, I mean, I –– a lot of it also was me speaking from the point where I was at. And I think I still feel those dynamics, but I have a more nuanced perspective on them now, but I think at that time, and this is what, like, 2014ish, I did feel like I wasn't desirable in those spaces. And I do sometimes still feel that way, right? I think that there's a way that I move through the world now that people read me as very binary, people read me as invested in the binary, which I am not, right? Even though I, I don't consider myself nonbinary, I do consider myself as someone with a nonbinary politic. But I think being read as someone who is binary can be intimidating. I think it can also be off-putting even to some people in the queer community, right? Because there's often this idea that especially in mixed racial spaces, that again, it's more radical to fuck with gender and be noticeably fucking with gender than to not be. And I think for Black trans women who move through the world adhering to certain beauty standards or falling within certain beauty standards, we're often written off within queer spaces. And I think that people sense that there's a reductive element to how we approach our identities, and I don't think that that's fair.

Tuck: Yeah. The phrase Black trans women reminded me, in the book you use the word Afrotransmisogyny, and I had never seen that word used, and then I was like, oh, I wonder where that word is from. It's clear what it means from the parts of the word. And I googled it, and just nothing, nothing came up. Google said zero. Where did that word come from?

Raquel: I coined it.

Tuck: Beautiful!

Raquel: I felt like I needed a word that spoke to my experience as a Black trans woman and the experiences of Black trans femmes. Also knowing that femme is a very nuanced term for a lot of people, right? We don't all approach it the same way. And I felt like we didn't have a word that spoke to it, that was just easy to like, parse out, right. I, and I know right, transmisogynoir exists, but I don't speak French, right? [Tuck laughs] And it also is a mouthful of syllables that has never truly felt organic for me. And so that was kind of my attempt to kind of make something that did feel more organic and accessible. And so you know, it's a word, I don't know if it will land well for people. But I felt like it worked to describe a lot of the experiences I was describing in the book.

Tuck: I'm sure it'll catch on! But, um..

Raquel: You know, these words catch on, and then, you know, inevitably get diluted down. And...

Tuck: Yeah, you'll know it's caught on when Target says Afrotransmisogyny. [both laugh] Uh, okay, so obviously, I've been alluding to, what's in your book, but I wanted to talk about the concept of writing the book, and I have a lot of a lot of questions about that. But I think reading your work over the years, like, you're so skilled at highlighting other organizers and elders and people who really deserve more attention than they're getting, even victims of violence. And even in your memoir, you take a lot of time sort of stopping to explain who other people are and the significance of them. And I have the experience of like, not wanting to center my own story and instead talk to other people about theirs, which is why I have an interview podcast because I'm like, "Well, you can talk about your life, I'll just be here asking questions." So I was just wondering, like, what that experience was like for you of like, you have to be the main character of your own biography. [laughs] What was it like to have *you* be the centerpiece?

Raquel: Yeah, that is a good question! Um, it's interesting because I, I have always written personal essays. But so much of my work has been about utilizing my access or my privilege to elevate others, right? And I like that role, I think that it is a good use of all of those privileges that I've had along the way. So writing this memoir was difficult. And there were times where I found myself decentering myself. And that's what I carry, I think as a Black trans woman who came into her identity in college, right? I mean, to have educational access as a Black trans woman is, you know, not the typical experience, right, or to come from a middle class background with parents who had higher education, quote, unquote, experiences, who could evolve alongside me, was a privilege, right? To have socioeconomic privilege. And, you know, I talk about in the book, you know, the first time that I was laid off from a job, right and didn't have any career prospects was when I was laid off from Out Magazine. That was a privilege. So, I think understanding those privileges when I finally was able to be in Black trans community in Atlanta, made me realize that I needed to figure out what my balance was around telling my own story, and also providing pathways for others to tell their stories, too. So all of that to say, it was a dance for sure, and I definitely, in some early drafts, had people that I love who read it, tell me, you know, there's a barrier between you and the page, like, you know, center yourself, where's your story?

Tuck: Yeah, I heard from my producer, that this book perhaps started or was at one point more of like cultural criticism essays, and then became a memoir. We know that trans people have like a fraught relationship at times with them, or at least a complicated relationship with memoir. I was wondering like how you chose to write more of a traditional memoir?

Raquel: Yeah, that's true. I mean, initially, it was more of an essay collection idea. So I started writing fragments years ago, I mean, really, in college, I knew there was this story that I wanted to tell. And I had a lot of these perspectives, and they were still fairly novel then because this was like 2013. And so, I was interested in writing more essays and cultural criticism. I talk about this in the book, but when I graduated from college, that summer was the summer that Orange Is the New Black premiered. This was before even Janet Mock, who I love so much, and discuss in the book at various points, left her footprint, right? So I was really interested in talking about everything from like my relationship to feminism, my relationship to my body, and relationships, and family. And I think I was fearful of trying to write a memoir, because I felt like I didn't have enough of a story. You know, there had been more memoirs that came out, since I was in college to when I really started chewing on what a book length work would look like, in around 2017. And so I was like, "Well, I don't have anything interesting to say," you know, like, I wasn't living stealth that long, right? So that wasn't a piece of my story. I didn't have a life, or part of my life where I was engaged in sex work, right? You know, all of these narratives that we are told are the Black trans woman narratives, or what make our narratives interesting. So I had to figure that out, and I think, around 2020, when, of course George Floyd was unfortunately murdered, and there was that seismic energy around social justice, I was able to kind of look back and think, oh, wow, I've seen these different waves of movements. And I've also had this personal life at the same time. What is the story there? What's the conversation there? And it seemed like there was an appetite to hear that perspective, then.

Tuck: Then. Hmm, the use of the word 'then,' you don't mean like, as opposed to now, right? You're not like and now there's not three years later, or do you think that? [laughs]

Raquel: Well, even since I started writing, so much has shifted.

Tuck: Yeah.

Raquel: I mean, the anti-trans legislation. But I... to be honest, like I always feel like a girl from the future that's like trying to figure out how to live in a time that's still not ready for me.

Tuck: Yeah, mmhm.

Raquel: And I think a lot of trans people feel that way. And queer people. So I've had to move to a point where I'm not as much invested in like how it's received per se, other than I don't want it to alienate or make folks in our community feel harmed in a way or that I'm positioning anything monolithically. But other than that, this is my offering, this is my life. People can take it or leave it. But I'm just glad I was able to make it through so that I can be freed up to also create other things too.

Tuck: Totally, oh, my gosh, [Raquel laughs] writing a book is so much work. I ask this a lot, I didn't have this, like, front of mind to ask you, but I will cuz we're talking about it. Like, I just think there's something again, like so vulnerable about having your full story out there. Was there –– I mean, not full, like, obviously, everyone makes editorial decisions, but a lot of your story out there. Was there ever, like a moment where you were like, do I want all of this out in the public record?

Raquel: [sighs] There have definitely been moments. I think talking about my body in very specific ways has been interesting for me, because I guess I am kind of from that like, I mean, I'm an Auntie in our movement now, right? Which is funny. So I come from that, like older era, a little bit of like, us not wanting to be reduced to our bodies. And so one of the ways that we didn't want to be reduced to our bodies, particularly for trans women and trans women of color, was to not discuss the details of like surgery and certain things. And so I had to figure out what my balance for that was. Like, what were the things I was going to keep to myself? And honestly, a lot of my experience with my medical transition was not so much about the recovery, or the actual procedure itself. It was like me making sense of where my feminist values in particular fit with me crafting the body and the life that I deserve, right? And the one that I want, and figuring out, well, are these desires valid? Or can I have these desires and still have dignity for who I am, right? [laughs]

Tuck: I mean, I would actually love to hear you talk more about how you like did resolve those within yourself, because we get a lot of advice questions from people, and there is a whole sort of section of advice questions that we kind of jokingly call, "is it anti-feminist to transition?" You know, because that's on both sides, you know, both like, regardless of what your gender is, or what you're trying to do, there's always a way to be like, "is it anti-feminist for me to have the body that I want, or the life that I want, or the gender I want?" And you said in the memoir that you did think about that, but obviously, you you got through it to the point where you [laughs] became the person you want to be. So, how did you kind of self soothe that you are allowed to have the things that you want? And it didn't make you like a bad feminist somehow?

Raquel: Well, I think a lot of it was giving myself grace for having desires for my body. And understanding that like, everyone fucking has desires for their body, right? Like it's, it's actually not just a trans thing. Plenty of cis people access what should be considered gender-affirming care.

Tuck: Yeah, literally HRT, gender-affirming surgeries, all the time. All the time.

Raquel: All the time. And I love also in Disclosure, when Jen Richards was kind of talking about how a lot of the beauty standards that cis women inhabit now, like baddie culture on Instagram, right, is derived from trans women who had a particular type of transition when they were on the Stroll, right? And engaged in sex work over the last few decades, right? So that is interesting. You know, I think about Amiyah Scott who is this beauty icon, who really innovated all of the ideas around wigs and, and those aesthetics and hair as well for Black women, that Black cis women are feasting on now! I guess to get back to that point, it's like, I deserve to have desires because I'm a human. And it is a beautiful thing for me to be a person who was critical of those desires because I think it's important to know the source, or at least be curious about the source of those desires and not weaponizing those desires against other people. Which --- that is a whole nother conversation that we need to have within our community as trans folks. Like, I am not you know, a trans woman who is invested in saying that you're not trans, if you don't have medical interventions. I think that that's bullshit. And I think the people who push those narratives that you have to have a certain type of transition, or transition period, to be respected in your gender are moving from a place of their own insecurity.

Tuck: Yeah. I do think it's so interesting, you spoke about this earlier, but I have heard from a number of trans men and women that they do have this feeling that's like, "I personally, you know, am a woman who appreciates sort of a traditional feminine expression," or "I'm a man who, you know, is just sort of looking like any other dude, and because of that, younger people, especially are reading me as invested in the binary," which is what you said. And I'm just wondering, like, where that notion is coming from, that that's even a question that everyone has to be defending against, you know what I mean? I just think it's so interesting that people are looking at other people in the trans community, and then just assuming like, well, if you aren't, like visibly nonbinary in some way, then you don't think I'm valid as a nonbinary person, or whatever it is, you know, something like that. I'm just like, so I don't know that this is a question, I'm just like, [both laugh] I'm really fascinated that this keeps coming up. Um, I don't know what –– so I think what I was thinking was when you were like, trans people who are medically gatekeeping need to think about how that, you know, comes from their own insecurities, I'm like, I also wonder if nonbinary people need to think about their own insecurities too? [laughs] You know what I mean, like, why are you threatened by this?

Raquel: That's true, right? That's true as well. So you're absolutely right. There's like a duality here, because on the nonbinary side, at the risk of sounding very binary...

Tuck: It's fine.

Raquel: Check me [Tuck laughs] if you need to. I'm fine. I'm –– I'm okay with the criticism, cause I'm learning too. But I think there is this notion that like, being nonbinary is inherently radical. And if it isn't manifested... or tran-ifested... in a particular way, then you're not actually living up to these radical notions and ideas and I –– that is not fair either, like to live your life trying to appear or be the most radical is its own prison of expectations. I think that we've got to let some of these trappings go because they aren't serving us. And quite frankly, I have enough to worry about for myself. Like, why am I trying to police you and who you are and how you move through the world? When cis folks and the TERFs are like, "you're not a real woman, because you're trans"? It's right in line with like, the trans women and men who are telling nonbinary folks that you're not trans enough or telling certain trans people who haven't had certain transition interventions, that they aren't trans enough. It's on the same spectrum. And a lot of it, I mean, all of it really is in service to the patriarchy. Because you think that holding down this hierarchy is going to get you better standing within the cisheteropatriarchy, and it's not honey! It really is not.

Tuck: Yeah, that's never worked and people are still trying it, you know? [both laugh] Well, one more question about writing your book, because you mentioned Janet Mock, and I was so excited when I heard in another interview that you did, that you talked to Janet about your book, and that she specifically was like, "do not feel like you need to do the 101 , because that was one of the things that I was trying to do in my book, is do the 101 so that other people wouldn't have to." So I was just wondering, like, who you feel like your primary audience was in your head when you were writing and how you decided like, how much to explain or not explain?

Raquel: Yeah. Well, what's interesting... so that part is interesting. And Janet has been, you know, such a tremendous support just throughout my career. So I appreciate her. And so there is a bit of a running start that I think a lot of trans writers, whether you're Black and trans or not, have because of her literary contributions. So I'm so grateful for those, and you know, also Monica Roberts, right? Her contributions to the discourse around trans experiences also gave us a bit of a running start as well. So I think about them and I think, you know, for me, my target audience is always, you know, cause I –– I gotta be good on every Marsha P. Johnson Boulevard, honey. So like, even though I'm writing this book that will be consumed by a general public and a lot of cis people, I was never invested in writing something that my homies would clock me on, right?

Tuck: Totally.

Raquel: Like whatever it is, like that is something that is so important to me, is that authenticity piece. Cause I would be eaten alive by the fraudulent feelings if what I had written for better or worse, was not authentic. And I would feel really like I did a disservice to our community by not utilizing this position to advocate for myself to just show up. Because I you know, I'm–– I'm a bridge to something. I don't know what that is, right? Like, we're talking about how Janet has been a bridge for so many of us. I'm aware that I'm I'm a bridge to something, I don't know what that is. But I do want it to be easier for the next folks, right? So the the bit of respectability I could shake off to create this, I hope the next folks are able to shake even more elements of respectability off.

Tuck: Well speaking of this concept of sort of shaking off respectability, I really appreciate and admire the way that you hold companies and organizations and LGBTQ organizations like to account for how they actually are treating trans people, Black trans people, and I know that you're choosy with, like, who you choose to partner with, and I was just wondering, like, what benchmarks you use to evaluate if you're gonna work with someone, or if you feel like an organization or company is like actually walking the walk instead of just, you know, slapping a rainbow on something?

Raquel: Absolutely. For me, it's about asking questions around what actually is your connection to community? You have trans folks of color on staff...how are you treating them? You know, what does the health care look like? Are they a part of this campaign? Because if you got trans people there who may be interested, bring them to the table. So I can see you, you know, what's really going on, like looking under the hood. So that feels very important, especially in the corporate spaces, right? Often, I think a first question is like, do you have trans people on staff or folks of color on staff? But you know, I think the next questions then are, well, what actually is your theory of change? What kind of trans specific programming are you doing? You know, who who are the trans folks in community, since, you know, you may want to use us, and our struggles as line items in your budget, or as a part of your proposal, or as a line in one of your speeches. Who are the trans folks that you're actually in community with? And actually serving? So it really is like a case by case basis. But these are kind of the general starting points when I'm approached about an opportunity. And I oftentimes have to walk away or, you know, as I'm working with my team, like have to be like, this isn't the right fit, you know? It might –– maybe it will be the next time, come back the next time, but earlier in your process. So we can tease out some of these things. Because it took me a while to understand, but oftentimes, if a company or an organization is coming to me, they want to be good on every Marsha P. Johnson Boulevard too. [Tuck laughs]

Tuck: Totally!

Raquel: And I have to make that clear for them that that's also a part of the reason that you came to me. So if you're not actually fully listening to what my suggestions are, or to my lens, then you're not understanding how this relationship is supposed to work.

Tuck: No, absolutely. I mean, it's like a clout thing, like you said, and like, I feel like so often, companies will just bring you in at the very end to do like a checkbox that says like, "this project was approved by Raquel Willis, and thus you cannot cancel us" [both laugh] and it's like, okay but like...

Raquel: Right.

Tuck: Did you get anyone involved, you know, the first 99%? And so often it's like, "no." So then even if you do have suggestions at the end, they're like, "We don't have time to implement those suggestions." We're running this, you know, campaign starting on Monday. We just wanted to make sure that you signed off that we didn't say a slur. [laughs] It's just like...

Raquel: It can be so ridiculous. And I hate when, you know, a company comes to me about a campaign or something and they're like, "Oh, well, we already chose the beneficiary." Like you don't have the range to do that. That's why you're coming to me, in part, is because you're not actually in community. So how do you think you could just choose who the beneficiary is? So that often bothers me. And especially when I hear that it's one of like, the big five, or however many it is, depending on the year, that are always getting the bulk of the resources, I have a problem with that. I also think it's a problem when they only support national organizations, when they could be supporting a handful of local organizations where they are taking up space, you know, with their properties and factories and whatever else. So that's also very important to me, too.

Tuck: I think it is so hard often to convince companies to donate to a smaller place, or god forbid, a place that is not tax deductible, and they would just be helping to help. [both laugh] You know, just like, they hate that. [laughs]

Raquel: Yeah, they're always like, "Do they have the 501(c)(3) designation?"

Tuck: Actually speaking of that a little bit, so you and Chase Strangio, who's also been on the show, have rebranded in a way Trans Day of Visibility, built it into this beautiful Trans Week of Visibility and Action, and I realized we almost have like a cute connection there, cause we have also on the show rebranded Trans Day of Visibility, but in a much less long-term helpful way, and more in a "we're just gonna buy 10,000 people snacks" way, so I don't know, maybe we need both. But I was wondering, because of kind of that connection and contrast, like, there's so much need in our communities all the time –– how do you balance that like long-term strategy and organizing, that both of you are doing with also like immediate, acute needs in our community, you know, today, tomorrow, the next day?

Raquel: Yeah, that's real. So I think so much of my work now is longer term, especially the narrative change work. So for instance, like working with iHeartMedi on their Outspoken network, which elevates LGBTQ voices, it's about longer term investment in LGBTQ narrative change. But I think that when we were working, we were trying to build out Trans Week of Visibility and Action, a lot of our conversations was about, okay, the visibility is a thing, but we know that the visibility doesn't actually lead to vitality. Or encourage vitality. So, how can we use this as an arm to beef up political education for cis folks who see what's going on, but are not tapped in or not fully understanding what's going on? How do we elevate grassroots organizations that do need immediate support, particularly in these hotbed states that are facing the staunchest versions of legislation? So I –– for me, it's also like, and this is almost, you know, connected to, I guess, the memoir conversation, but I'm not a person that needs to be told that I'm creating something new. You know, I really approach all of this work as like, building on what has come before. I'm very humble about it, like, look, yes, I'm brilliant, fabulous, [Tuck laughs] all of these things, but I'm building on foundations that have already been here, and just remixing them and all of that, and Chase is the same way, right? Like, especially with his palette of organizing in the legal world, right? And so much of the legal world is building upon what has already existed, right? Thanks to people like Pauli Murray, and so many others, right? So...

Tuck: You mentioned this new podcasting position. My understanding is that you are developing a couple of podcasts yourself, including one with one of my favorite people in the world, Julia Furlan.

Raquel: Yes!

Tuck: Another Gemini icon, actually. Two Gemini icons! [Raquel laughs] But can you talk about those podcasts?

Raquel: Yes! Well shout out to Julia. Yeah, so I'm doing a lot over at iHeart, honey, they got your girl workin'. [Tuck laughs] So, the Executive Producer role is really supporting them on recruiting new talent, being a bit of a liaison to make sure that talent is is supported through development and production and beyond. So that's a lot of that work. So that's the first bucket, the second bucket is actually a show focused on queer experiences of youth across the United States right now. So there's a bit of an approach of like, millennial brain, but True Life, right? Like True Life in audio form, and kind of getting these intimate portraits of what it's like for queer and trans youth right now. And some of it has like the political elements, but a lot of it is just like, what are you going through? Like, who are your crushes and your first relationships? And like, what is school like for you? What music are you tapped into? What media? And then the third bucket, which is the second show is an adaptation of the trans obituaries project that I worked on at Out Magazine. And we are chronicling in audio form, the story of Layleen Polanco, a 27 year old Afro-translatina who died in Rikers custody in 2019. So yeah, so those are the three big buckets of work with iHeart and it's so fulfilling, and I feel so supported and held, of course, by people like Julia, so many more, Jordan Bailey.

Tuck: Oh, Jordan! Yeah, uh huh.

Raquel: Yeah! There's so many folks, I'm not naming everyone. Um, but... [laughs]

Tuck: Mmmm. That's great though. I'm really excited for those shows. I mean, I do –– obviously, they're both really important. I was especially excited about the part where you were like, "it's also just what kids are going through in their lives," because I think that's, like, so much what I and other trans journalists are pushing for, in stories about trans people, and especially trans youth, where it's like, the whole story is just like a trans kid suffering. And it's like, okay, but like, I bet they also have hobbies, [laughs] do you want to talk about their hobbies?

Raquel: Right. You know, I was just having a conversation actually like earlier today, with someone who was like asking me about my work. And they were like, "Well, what is the main thing you want people to know right now?" I was like, well, I don't know if this was just like memoir brain, but like, I'm the main character of my own story like, and I think trans people deserve to know that about ourselves. And we deserve to not be painted simply as the antagonists to someone else's story. And that is so much of what we get in the media right now, and that we're getting in politics right now.

Tuck: Mmhm. Okay, I have one serious question that I was just like, this is never gonna organically flow into anything. But I do want to ask you, so.

Raquel: Okay.... [laughs]

Tuck: Totally fine if you don't want to talk about this. Your dad passed away, right as you were starting to think more about gender and transition, and that is also a thing that happened with me. And a thing that really resonated with me, and I really appreciated you talking about in the book was at one point, you mentioned feeling guilty for feeling a little bit relieved that you got to not have that interaction, which I also relate to. And –– I don't know if you want to talk about that, but I just think like, that's like a really complicated thing that we don't really talk about as much as trans people, there's a lot of space to be like, "my parents who are alive accept me" or "my parents who are alive don't accept me," there's not a lot of space to be like, "I never got to talk to my parents about that, and I don't know what would have happened if I did," you know? Or "I do know, and I don't want to think about it." Both of those options. [both laugh]

Raquel: I thought I knew when I was younger, and now I don't, because I –– because I'm older, and I've evolved, and my family has evolved, and so I've seen evolution. And so I think part of it for me is... and I'm working through this in therapy, of course, I probably will always be working through this in therapy! But there was a relief that I did not have to have these conversations with my dad about my gender. You know, my dad was, and I've said this before, the biggest police of my gender, the biggest enforcer of gender growing up, and I know where that comes from, especially as a Black man in the United States, and particularly in the South. A lot of that was his fear of what could happen to me if I strayed too far from cisheteronormative scripts, right? Also, those words mean nothing to him. [both laugh]

Tuck: Right! Totally, totally.

Raquel: But, that's what was happening. And to him, there was a particular way of moving through the world that had helped him survive. And so for me to have a whole nother bundle of like, questions and yearnings and desires that he could never understand was unfathomable and irrational to him. So, I get that. I think what gives me comfort in this time, is that just as I've given grace to so many other people, to strangers, and even to myself, it is only fair that I give grace to the father that I have in another part of the Raquel cinematic universe, who lived and witnessed me become the most ultimate version of myself, the Super Saiyan of myself. [laughs] I don't know why I have all these references right now, [Tuck laughs] you see the little bit, a little bit of nerd in me coming out. [Tuck laughs] It seeps out sometimes. But I have to give grace that he would have been able to evolve. And I want to imagine what it would be like for that Raquel, and I want to imagine that that is the Raquel that I am now too. Because I am a spiritual person, I'm not religious, you know, I got a lot of Catholic wounds. You hear some of that in the book. But I do have this idea that his spirit is around me, his spirit is still guiding me just like my grandmother, and my grandmothers. And so I want to give her spirit that grace. And that's how I'm reconciling it at this point in my life, you know, ask me in like, a year, it might be different, but I think that that's real.

Tuck: Yeah. Well, this is the part where I just ask you if there's anything else that you want to talk about today that we haven't talked about yet?

Raquel: I don't –– you know, what has of course, been coming up for me is... you know, the passing –– the murder of O'Shae Sibley, definitely on my heart. And, you know, one of the things I talk about a lot throughout the book, right, and I didn't realize this, you know, as we were just kind of talking about the death of my father, but like, death is such a feature in the lives of people on the margins, and the deaths that I have witnessed, whether up close or from afar, have been animating. And I think that's been true for a lot of folks. I mean, you don't have BLM without the specter of death, unfortunately, right? And so I mean, that's on my heart as like, a lot of us are grieving personally, and collectively, especially in this kind of post-2020 world. And I guess I just want to encourage people to be animated by it as much as possible, like, feel it. You know, don't dive into it, you know, don't wallow in it, but at least, you know, take a dip in it, if it hits you, because it's consuming to try to completely ignore it. And it's consuming to completely submerge yourself into it, too.

Tuck: Yeah. Mm. Okay, one more question before the last question, because I was just saying that there are all of these profiles of trans people and no one's asking them if they have any hobbies. So here's my question, do you have any hobbies?

Raquel: That is so true. Because, you know, we don't exist outside of this. Um, hobbies. I do CrossFit.

Tuck: Ooh!

Raquel: I joke that I need someone to yell at me for me to work out.

Tuck: Totally. [laughs] No, absolutely!

Raquel: But honestly, like the coaches that we have, don't yell at us at all. They're so encouraging. It's so much so that you're like annoyed because [Tuck laughs] they love what they do. And they love seeing people exert themselves or you're like, ugh I'm suffering right now.

Tuck: Yeah, sicko behavior. [laughs]

Raquel: I love CrossFit. I love playing video games when I have time, and I love a battle royale moment. [Tuck laughs] So I love Fortnite and I love Call of Duty, believe it or not. And it's so weird because of how I feel about violence and like guns and such, but uh, I like those games.

Tuck: I trust your ability to parse what is real, you know? [both laugh]

Raquel: Yeah, and then one other thing, I do trivia every now and then with some friends.

Tuck: Ooh!

Raquel: Just like bar trivia. I'm a beast at like the music category. Like I could definitely pretty much do anything 90s to now. I need to definitely work on my rock, and country, of course. But I'm good at deciphering the era. And that's usually my approach for other folks is to decipher the era. And then maybe somebody else can plop in.

Tuck: Team player. Yeah, totally.

Raquel: Yeah. So I'm pretty good at that.

Tuck: Incredible. The way we always end the show is by asking, in your ideal world, what would the future of gender look like?

Raquel: Ohhhh...... Eeuuugh!

Tuck: Totally! [laughs]

Raquel: The future of gender for me, is infinite. I mean, I don't think I really have like, anything that your listeners have never heard before. But like, to me, it's like, I love the idea of like, there being as many genders as there are people, because we all are just individual folks, you know? I mean, even the spectrum of gender can be limiting. Right? Even thinking of ourselves on a spectrum. There's still a bit of a linear quality there. And it's really more like, gradients, you know? It's almost like the like Photoshop gradient.

Tuck: Totally, yeah!

Raquel: Where it's like, the colors are all like, here, and you gotta find the right code. And like, each code is individual, like, that's what gender is for me.

Tuck: I love that. That's also a new one, so you know you did it! You did a new one! [Raquel laughs]

[Gender Reveal Theme music plays]

Tuck: That's gonna do it for this week's show. If you had a good time or learned something, please share this episode with folks in your community. It really does help us get the word out. You can find Raquel @RaquelWillis\_ on Twitter, and @raquel\_willis on Instagram. And you can pre-order The Risk It Takes to Bloom from bookshop.org or wherever you order books. We are of course at genderpodcast.com, where we've got transcripts of every episode, starter packs, an FAQ, and more. We're on Instagram @gendereveal where we will post grant updates. Keep an eye out for that. And you can also join us at patreon.com/gender to access our newsletter, bonus episodes and other fun perks. And merch for the next three weeks at bit.ly/gendermerch. All sorts of places to find us. If you are looking for more supportive trans community in your life, I welcome you to join the Gender Reveal Slack group. I will put a link in the show notes and I'm warning you now it will expire in a few weeks. So if you are listening to this later, hit me up truly anywhere online and I will send you a new link. People are always welcome. It's just hard to keep that link updated. This week's episode was produced and edited by Ozzy Llinas Goodman, and by me, Tuck Woodstock. Our logo is by Ira M. Leigh. Our theme song is by Breakmaster Cylinder. Additional music this week by Blue Dot Sessions. We're going to take a quick break to figure out Season 12, and we'll be back as soon as we can with more feelings about gender.

[Gender Reveal Theme music plays out and ends]

Raquel: Beyonce, the self-titled album, which is my favorite album by Beyonce, is her essay collection.

Tuck: Wow, mmhm.

Raquel: Whereas Lemonade feels like more of like a memoir.

Tuck: Totally.

Raquel: And then Renaissance is like more of like an anthropological take on the LGBTQ+ community.

Tuck: I love that.

Raquel: Um [laughs] those are like, my thoughts.