[*Gender Reveal* theme music plays]

**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 fades out]

**Molly:** Hey everyone, welcome to the season finale of Gender Reveal, season 3. It has been such an incredible season. We spoke to cartoonists, like Archie Bongiovanni and Carta Monir. We talked about decolonization with a lot of folks like Sonalee Rashatwar and Caleb Luna, and we talked to some of my personal best friends and favorite people like Zee Griffler and Aubri Qian. If you haven’t listened to last week’s episode yet with Jack Malstrom, I really hope you do. I learned *so* much. Talking about indigenous history and culture is so important to me. I was so excited, as I am with every episode with indigenous folks, and I really hope you’ll take a listen.

Anyway, this week on the show I am so excited to share my chat with Thomas Page McBee, author of *Man Alive* and *Amateur*. We talked about dismantling toxic masculinity and celebrating trans joy.

**Thomas:** Obviously dysphoria can be real, and it’s really scary, and it’s important to talk about amongst ourselves, and it’s a real thing that happens to people. But also it’s not even close to 1%, for me anyway, of what defines my experience of being trans, and I think that idea of trans joy and joy about our bodies and about gender, and even though we live in a world where gender is such an oppressive structure for so many people including maybe many of us, it’s also, we are people who have figured out how to break free or liberate ourselves from so many expectations and what an amazing community we are for that.

[background piano music plays]

**Molly:** Speaking of Thomas’ books, I am giving away my personal copy of *Man Alive* to one lucky listener. It could be you. All you need to do to enter to win is make a post about why you love *Gender Reveal* and tag us, and you will be entered to win. If your profile is private or if you want to make a Facebook post, please just screenshot whatever post you make, and send it to us on Twitter or Instagram. We will pick a winner at the end of March. I will throw in some buttons and stickers in there too just to make it even more exciting. And speaking of giveaways, of course our grant is in full swing. We are giving away two $350 grants and two $150 grants to people who don’t identify as cis or white so if you are a trans BIPOC person, that is black, indigenous, and/or person of color, and you’re doing some sort of cool work around gender or doing something that benefits trans folks, you can apply for me to just hand you some money at [genderpodcast.com/grant](https://www.genderpodcast.com/grant). That is genderpodcast.com/grant. Link is in the show notes so apply now, and tell your friends.

Of course these grants, and indeed this entire podcast is 100% funded by listeners just like you who step up to support trans people and trans media. If you would like to help us keep the show going for a fourth season, a fifth season, and beyond, you can do so by joining us at [patreon.com/gender](https://www.patreon.com/gender) or make a one time donation at [PayPal](https://www.paypal.me/mollywoodstock) or [Cash App](https://cash.app/%24MollyWoodstock). There’s also [theymail](https://docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLSe9hcijFTh0xyt9o4VR4rXoVajQl_qgYWY9T13Z5yYNIf-1yw/viewform), little messages that we read on the show. We have one this week; I’m about to read it, or you can buy buttons on [Sticktoresist](https://www.etsy.com/shop/sticktoresist). Sticktoresist sells all sorts of 50 cent pins, where 100% of those sales goes straight to us, or you can just tell a friend about the show, which you’re already going to do because when you make a post about how much you love Gender Reveal and tag us, you’ll be submitted to win that *Man Alive* book from 30 seconds ago.

Thank you so much to everyone who does support the show, who continues to make the show possible, and who will continue to support the show even during the season break. This means everything to me. I appreciate you so so much.

Speaking of theymail, this is a message from the [Queer Spectra Arts Festival](http://www.callforentries.com/queer-spectra-arts-festival.html):

Queer Spectra Arts Festival is looking for LGBTQIA+ identified artists from all disciplines to submit their work for consideration for our inaugural festival, which will be held on May 25th, 2019 in Salt Lake City, Utah. Our theme for this year is “BE/LONGING”. The deadline is April 19th, 2019. More details on our website, [queerspectra.com](https://www.queerspectra.com/). And now, it’s time for This Week in Gender.

[background piano music ends]

[*This Week in Gender* intro plays]

**Molly:** This week in gender, because there’s so much to get to before we wrap for the season, I’m not going to take a super deep dive into anything. I’m just going to tell you some things. These topics are entirely provided by our Gender Reveal Slack community. Just a reminder that you can join our very cute and wholesome and supporting Gender Reveal Slack community. Link is in the show notes.

Indiana is now issuing non-binary X markers on licenses and state IDs, although it’s worth noting that applicants are required to have a doctor’s note or an amended birth certificate in order to obtain a non-binary license. And speaking of birth certificates, Indiana is also allegedly offering a U for “unidentified” on birth certificates. Cool progressive moves, although we would obviously prefer that gender be based on self-identification rather than a physician’s note. It’s also worth noting there are no statewide legal protections for LGBTQ+ folks in the state, and so if you get an X on your license, it is legal for folks to discriminate against you because of it.

Maryland, meanwhile, just passed a bill through the Senate that would add an X option on driver’s licenses. That same bill explicitly prevents the motor vehicle administration from requiring proof of sex or gender. So, in this case you can just walk into the DMV and say, “I would like an X please,” and they have to say, “Yes.” This bill is not 100% made into law. It is now at the governor’s desk for a signature.

Vermont, meanwhile, is also planning to offer another gender marker option on IDs starting this summer. This would be an X marker, and X stands for other, which doesn’t have an X in it, but you get it.

In non-driver’s license news, Arizona just hosted the state’s first Two-Spirit powwow. There’s an article with a lot of really beautiful photos and a description that explains more what a Two-Spirit powwow is. I will link to it in the show notes.

Last, but certainly not least, Google aka Android, is introducing a third gender option to dozens of emojis, such as person facepalming, person juggling, construction worker, super villain, and zombie. And by third gender, I mean third haircut because it’s basically just the same emojis but dykier? A lot of these emojis also have multiple race options, which means if you want to send the person shrugging emoji, and you do, you will now potentially have a delicious menu of 18 variations of person shrugging based on skin color and haircut. Now I personally am of the belief that we already have far too many emojis and that in terms of race and gender, we should skip the whole thing and all go back to the genderless blobs that Android used to use. But if you want to pick the emoji gesturing yes or no, or getting a haircut, who looks the most like you, sure, I get it. Representation is important. And if we really need an allegedly gender neutral vampire or elf or merperson, then sure, fine, whatever, I get it. The one thing I can’t get over is that they’re making a gender neutral police officer. Because the only thing more neoliberal than thinking that you’re fixing our justice system by hiring a black and trans cops, is thinking that you’re fixing anything by creating a black non-binary cop emoji. This has been *This Week in Gender*.

[*This Week in Gender* outro music plays]

[*Gender Reveal* background music plays]

**Molly:** Thomas Page McBee was the first transgender man to box in Madison Square Garden. A masculinity expert for Vice, and the author of the columns *Self-Made Man* [the Rumpus](https://therumpus.net/topics/self-made-man/), *The American Man for* [Pacific Standard](https://psmag.com/tag/the-american-man) and *Amateur* for [them](https://www.them.us/contributor/thomas-page-mcbee). His award winning memoirs, *Man Alive* and *Amateur* were named a best book of 2014 and 2018, respectively by a slew of respected national and international publications. A former senior editor at Quartz, his essays and reportage have appeared in the New York Times, Playboy, Glamour, Out, The Cut, and more. He lives in Brooklyn with his wife.

[background music ends]

**Molly:** I have a very specific way that I always start the show, but before we start can you share your rule about audience questions? I know we do not have a live audience, but I just really love your audience question.

**Thomas:** Oh thanks, so my rule for, well just to say I really love Q&As. I like live events. I like doing public talks so this is coming from a place of genuinely enjoying and engaging with people, but early on I got asked enough questions that were uncomfortable that I realized that a way to curb them quickly was to have a rule. So I always say right before a Q&A that my one rule is that anything you ask me, I can ask you back. That’s great, because I’ve only had to employ it once actually. And the one time I did employ was amazing for me actually because I ended up, I learned a lot about myself in that moment.

This was sort of random, but I was talking to all of these seniors at an LGBT center, and it was not the thing I normally do. It was more of a one on one conversation about trans stuff a few years ago, and this one person raised their hand at the end, and they were sort of curmudgeonly. And they said, “so do you feel like you have a male brain or a female brain?” And I was so startled, like what does that mean? And kind of offended and also that’s scientifically impossible that brains are… [Both laugh] But I was like, what are they getting at? So I said, “Do you feel like you have a male brain or a female brain?” And this person said, “well, I thought I had a female brain, but after listening to your talk I’m wondering if maybe I have a male brain.” And it occurred to me, oh they’re wondering if they’re trans, and they’re trying to figure out how to make it make sense for them, you know. And once I understood that, then it was such a different conversation than what it would’ve been if I had just stumbled through an answer and felt uncomfortable or shut it down or whatever, so I feel like it can work both ways because sometimes we don’t have the right language for what we’re trying to say, but if another person is willing to be vulnerable and meet me there, then we can get somewhere.

**Molly:** Totally. I think that’s a really important story because I think that I definitely have a tendency to answer questions before I fully understand what people are trying to ask, so…

**Thomas:** Totally!

**Molly:** Great. And I love that rule, and I feel like more trans folks should carry it around with them at all times because it’s awesome. So the way we do always start the show is by asking in terms of gender, how do you identify?

**Thomas:** Oh, uh, I am a trans queer man.

**Molly:** In recent interviews, I’ve heard you say that you realize that having the trans modifier in front of man feels important for your identity. Can you talk about that?

**Thomas:** Yeah, I guess that in the first few years after I transitioned medically, like a lot of people, it maybe took me a minute to kind of realign myself, especially around my queer identity because I came out at 14. I actually literally don’t have a memory, socially, as any of kind of adult or post-adolescent memory of not being queer. And so it was really a lot in the beginning when I transitioned when I was 30 to try to figure out my place in the world where I wasn’t this visibly queer person because I take testosterone, and I pass as cis, so that was really complicated for me. Of all the things I was thinking about, that wasn’t the thing that was top of my mind of how it would feel to suddenly be invisibly queer, but I think it became actually really important really quickly because I didn’t realize how much of my life was organized around, you know, the queer head nod and all of those things.

And so I know that being trans is part of the universal fabric of most cultures, and the way in which it gets othered and differentiated is problematic, but I also think within my greater American culture, I think that being trans, to me, is a very separate kind of experience and a separate childhood and a separate adolescence and a separate experience, in the way same way that being queer is. And so I think understanding that and kind of connecting those identities help me get back my more holistic sense of self, and so that’s become much more important to me, to make that point, on a personal level, and of course just on a visibility level. It’s important to be clear about who I am so that people who are coming behind me or who don’t have as much privilege as I do can maybe benefit from me being visible in the way I am.

**Molly:** Yeah, absolutely. So you’re a masculinity expert, which is so rad because I have so many questions about masculinity. [both laugh] So I just wanted to start by saying, I think a lot of folks when we think of masculinity, a lot of us think of elements of toxic masculinity like violence and dominance and repressing emotions, and I’m wondering when we strip the toxic elements out of masculinity, what do you think is left? What does that look like?

**Thomas:** Oh wow, that’s a really great and challenging first question because I think, like a lot of people, like you just said, I also for a long time thought that toxic masculinity and masculinity were kind of the same thing. I sort of understood obviously that there was queer masculinity, which weren’t always toxic, that people who weren’t cis men, obviously, could have masculinity. I understood that all ephemerally, and in my own way, I always tried to embody masculinity in my way. But I didn’t know how to, in a more global sense, once I transitioned, walking around the world once I left my apartment, figure out how to move through life with the privileges I suddenly had, and with the constrictions that came with toxic masculinity, and the man box, and all the ways in which men are policing each other around what “being a man” means, and trying to achieve being a real man, having their masculinities threatened. All of that was such a weird soup, toxic soup literally, to be moving around in that it took me a long time to even get through it, I guess, and try to start imagining something else.

But for me, I think the answer to the question became first of all, defining, what is toxic masculinity? And what is a set of socialized behaviors? It’s not innate, it’s not related to testosterone. It’s not about something that cis men are born with or that testosterone gives trans men. It’s not something that quote, “comes naturally.” But it’s a set of socialized behaviors that are very deeply entrenched and systemic. And so I think understanding what those are, which are like you said, dominance-based behaviors, behaviors that are about detaching from your own empathetic response, behaviors that are about policing other people’s masculinities. All of those things are toxic. And that’s how we often end a conversation on what being a man is. And part of it, sort of ironically, in the pyramid scheme of manhood, is that you spend all of this time policing or guarding yourself from being policed around this set of behaviors that you don’t even notice that you’re in the box in the first place.

So knowing you’re in the box: that’s the first step to getting out from under toxic masculinity. And then the next step I think, is actually wide open. After that, masculinity can kind of be whatever people want it to be. And for me, personally, in some ways I have a more traditional binary gender identity, and in a certain way in that I really appreciate and vibe on many more sort of butch aspects of masculinity. But I also feel a lot of liberation around not having to perform my gender in any way that is uncomfortable for me. And I think understanding what toxic masculinity was and why I felt so much pressure to do that kind of performance has helped me finally liberate myself from it, and also, that’s a daily act I’m constantly trying to divest from toxic masculinity.

**Molly:** Yeah, you mentioned testosterone. It’s a commonly held belief that testosterone causes aggression, and that’s why men are more prone to participate in violence, but your research found that that’s not true, and I was wondering if you could tell folks a little bit more about that.

**Thomas:** Yeah, that’s my favorite fact that I learned when I was reporting my book, *Amateur*. I talked to Robert Sapolsky who is a really famous neuroscientist. I believe he’s a MacArthur fellow. He’s a really interesting guy, and he works out of Stanford. And I asked him, does testosterone cause aggression? And he said, no, there are no aggression receptors in the brain. That’s actually the biggest myth about testosterone, but he said interestingly, they’ve run economic games where… testosterone causes status seeking behavior, that’s that what testosterone causes, and they’ve run economic games where the point of the game is to cooperate. And so men in those games, who have the highest testosterone often win because they are the most cooperative. But when they give men a placebo shot and tell them it’s testosterone, those men, in the same games, will act like jerks. So obviously our idea of what testosterone is is very very powerful, but the reality is is that it’s not what we think it is.

**Molly:** Yeah, so I’ve seen some trans men struggle to accept their own gender because they’ve spent a lot of their lives being afraid of men or disliking men, and then they’re like, “oh, but I am a man, and I don’t know how to reconcile those two feelings.” And I was wondering if that’s something you related to at all, or if you had advice for people who felt that way?

**Thomas:** Yeah, that’s kind of my life story.

**Molly:** Yeah. [both laugh]

**Thomas:** I wrote two different books about this because it was so hard, and I think, you know, I’m 37, and I feel like I’m finally starting to feel like I’m having some answers to that question because we all grow up in a society where toxic masculinity is the dominant expression of masculinity. And for me, what was really helpful… Well first of all, maybe I can tell you a little bit about the story of how I came to write my book, *Amateur* because I think it kind of gets at this. I had been on testosterone for a few years, and I was noticing all of the ways in which my socialization was happening to me. And my background is queer. My background is feminist. I really thought I would be immune to these social ways in which I felt I was being shaped around the way…you know, I felt very policed around expressing emotion, and I felt like there were a lot of expectations that I behave in a way that was strong and all these many many subtle ways in which people treated me differently, and then I felt, without meaning to… unconsciously I started to behave differently. And then of course the privileges I was gaining, that I was trying to be so mindful of, but I also had this sense that I wasn’t totally always aware of. I knew that I had privilege, but I wasn’t always sure exactly what it was and how it was operating. It was really uncomfortable, and I felt really bad a lot of the time about it. And it was really frustrating because I felt like I had gone through this whole challenging experience of transitioning, and then come out the other side and felt restricted in a whole new way. Or felt like I wasn’t being myself in a new way, and that sucked.

And then my mom died. And so I was in grief, and if you’ve ever been in grief, it’s like you don’t really have a lot of control about how your emotions come out. You just feel what you feel, and so I was really upset and sad. And I felt like all of that energy was going towards anger because it felt like I was struggling to express anything else because of the “man box” and toxic masculinity. And anyway, this was in 2014 that she died, and in 2015, a few months after, I went through the summer where three months in a row, guys tried to street fight me. And I think in retrospect it was because I was probably walking around with a lot of anger, and they were picking up on it. And also it was right before the election, you know, all the sort of anger that was under the surface was sort of in an animal way, happening between me and other men. The last almost-fight really almost became a fight. It was really prolonged, and this guy thought I was taking a picture of his car, and I wasn’t. And he just wanted to fight me, and I really couldn’t figure out how to get out from under the situation, and in the very end, it didn’t come to blows. But I think, for me it was a final straw, and I was like, I have got to figure out the answer to your question: how do I not become the worst kind of man? Because that’s what I’m most afraid of. I had also been abused growing up by my own stepfather. And I had not the best male role models. The only way I could figure out to try to handle this question was to start doing the one thing you’re not supposed to do when you’re a man, which is start asking questions about masculinity, and I learned that role really early. Every time you question masculinity, you’re putting yourself forward as someone who doesn’t understand it, and masculinity becomes more fragile. Now I understand that’s all part of the man box and toxic masculinity, but I didn’t then.

And so I just took a leap of faith, and I had this question of, why do men fight? And so I decided I would pitch a story to my job at Quartz, where I was senior editor at the time, and I got involved in a charity boxing outfit, and ended up learning how to box. And through that process had a bunch of other questions that came up that I just decided to ask with a complete open heart. So that’s what I did. I basically asked every single embarrassing, silly question I had about masculinity. I just decided to ask it to experts so I talked to sociologists, to historians, and biologists, and so on. And I guess what I got from the end of it after all this time and thinking was really, yes, a lot of my associations about men and violence and fears of being the kind of man I most disliked in the world. All of those things were coming from a reality, and that many other men shared those fears, trans and cis. And that there were a lot of people thinking about these questions, and that there’s a whole, many academic studies and many disciplines where people are trying to figure out how to resolve toxic masculinity. And in a strange way, I think that gave me a community of people and a lot of access to different ways of thinking about my own masculinity once I realized that this wasn’t just an isolated traumatic experience for me, but in fact actually probably one of the more central pressing issues of our time. How can we resolve toxic masculinity before it literally destroys the environment and all the rest of us in the process?

**Molly:** Yeah, there’s so much to respond in that, so thank you so much for that. [both chuckle] Isn’t it amazing to be a journalist or someone who gets to ask questions for a living and just go into something and ask every single expert the most basic questions and be like, “explain this whole field to me, thank you!”

**Thomas:** Yess, it’s so great, and I think yes for that reason, but also I don’t think I totally understood because transitioning was so complicated and hard on so many levels, and obviously joyful too, et cetera, but I don’t think I realized how much my instinct to question was being tempered by the social ways I was being taught to behave. So I had so many questions about being a man that were sort of dismissed out of hand by people around me. People often said, men often said, if I had a question they would say either one of two things. They would say, “well that’s just how guys are,” or “well, you’re not that kind of guy,” if I had a question about male behavior. It kind of felt like that’s what men say to themselves. And so yeah, to be able to turn all of that on its head and ask questions from a journalistic perspective was so freeing, and you’re right, exactly. That’s the way I got to sort of come back to myself, was to remember that I’ve always been able to have a curious mind and come at things from that angle.

**Molly:** Yeah, so you had mentioned in your previous answer about how important it is to dismantle toxic masculinity, and obviously that is very important. I’m wondering as someone who doesn’t really identify as masculine and who doesn’t identify as a man, are there things that folks like me can do to work towards dismantling toxic masculinity? Because sometimes I feel like because I’m not a man, men are never going to listen to me about what it means to be a man, which makes sense. Of course they wouldn’t, but what can I do other than just stay out of the way? [both laugh] And don’t get hurt?

**Thomas:** Yeah, I think honestly in so many ways the issues around masculinity really are a problem that cis men and trans men need to solve together, or people who are moving through the world and gaining these privileges. This is a responsibility that’s coming with the privileges and also that are constricting us within those privileges. So my pitch is always, men should be interested in resolving this because as soon as you see this pyramid scheme, you’ll see that you yourself are getting screwed over by it, unless you’re the literally 1%, in which case maybe it’s worth it to those people who control all of the wealth on the planet. Although I would argue that the spiritually bereftness of that is not worth what you get. So I don’t think it’s the problem with the people who aren’t getting these privileges to solve, but also yes of course, it still affects everyone else. So what can you do about it.

Something that comes up a lot at my events is parents asking about boys, and what we can do about boys. And maybe this is a way that’s valuable for everyone to think about. I mean, and you don’t really need this lesson, but what I often say to parents who ask this question, because actually, every expert I spoke to pointed me back to boyhood. Pretty much everyone I talked to said, well, let’s look at how boys are socialized. And that actually gave me a lot of empathy for men. Not in the sense where I think that excuses behavior that happens later. You’re still accountable to that, to the way in which you now as an adult with frontal lobes can imagine masculinity differently. But if I was confused as a queer feminist in my 30s by a lot of the things that were happening to me, I can’t imagine what it’s like to be a 12 year old boy and not have any sense of any other possibility, and just be socialized into this way of being. And that is what *happens*. And that’s been measured, the way in which we socialize boys in all kinds of different directions from developmental psychology to sociology, so that’s a pretty universal event that happens at least, I can say, in North American culture. But also I’m sure much more broadly than that.

So with boys, when parents ask that question, there’s not like an intervention you can do at home. I tell people that the first thing that you can do is think about your own gender and actually have a relationship with gender identity in general because it’s very hard to, if you don’t know any of this and you don’t reflect on it in yourself and you don’t think about the way gender works, how can you model for your kids how to navigate this in a better way. And so, that doesn’t apply to you, but I think for people who are not cis men or for people who aren’t passing trans men, it’s meaningful to really make sure you understand gender identity, your own. And that you can I guess model for people that there’s many kinds of genders and many ways to engage with gender, and it makes it a lot easier to talk about when you yourself are doing that work and not just sort of passing through the world not ever thinking about anything and then suddenly caring about boys or masculinity or whatever. That doesn’t seem to be something that you personally are struggling with. [both laugh]

But I guess the other kind of, this is a little bit of a dodgy area, but something I do think a lot about, but if you are attracted to men, in what ways is your attraction to masculinity operating? Is the way in which you engage with the men in your life, is it reinforcing behaviors? Even if you’re not attracted to men, even in your friendships with men, are you consciously or not reinforcing expectations of masculinity that are actually harmful. And a lot of people I’ve talked to often find themselves, even people who study this stuff, shared stories with me about being really surprised in their interpersonal relationships, how often, women especially, how often they actually were reinforcing the very things they knew were problematic but they just… that’s part of culture too, is what we’re encultured to be attracted to and to prop up and to be frustrated with and all of those things about the men around us.

So I don’t know, that’s probably not the best answer in the world. I just think this is really work that people really need to do who are actually experiencing this stuff and I think pointing to the men and cis men and trans men in your life towards these resources., and engaging them in these conversations if you have the emotional time and labor to do it is great. But also not adding or piling on to the problem in your own expectations of men would be the not fun but true answer. Maybe an even better answer is if you care about this at all, which I think we actually should all care about because we know we live in a patriarchy that is really run by toxic masculinity, so I think taking the time to understand gender as a power dynamic, which is fundamentally what it often is in terms of structure, and so I think understanding what is toxic masculinity? What is the “man box”? What is this idea of men have to behave in this very constricted way because then when you see it in the men in your lives, you can hopefully point out to them, or you have some sort of understanding of what’s going on- this person who is normally so sweet is behaving in this way that’s so problematic, and if you understand that he probably feels like he can’t ask for help because he’s literally been socialized not to ask for help. It’s useful to encourage people, men, to therapy but also I at least think it’s useful if you can say not just, “you should go to therapy,” but look, on a much larger level I get why you aren’t even thinking about therapy because you probably learned that going to therapy was a really… even if you don’t consciously feel aware of this, you’ve been taught that you should never do that, that you should never ask for help. And if you care about, if you’re in my life and you’re the kind of person who cares about changing this way that masculinity works, how about you start by starting with yourself and actually taking care of yourself and doing things differently so that the people around you can see you doing that, and we can have more models. I think that that’s a way in. But I’ll also always feel nervous to suggest that people should take responsibility for other people. [laughs]

**Molly:** Yeah, of course of course of course. Like obviously I can’t make anyone else change in any way, or do any work they don’t want to do. But also it sucks to sit here and be like, “hmmm well…” [laughs]

**Thomas:** Yes!

**Molly:** So…

**Thomas:** And I think, I guess what I found if it’s helpful to share, what I found with the men in my life is when people feel that their identity is threatened, they tend to double down into that identity, which is what I think what we’re seeing with cis white men right now. And so, obviously people are angry. A lot of people are angry, and have every right to be angry at sexism and patriarchy and toxic masculinity, but I think if you’re talking about literally an individual in your life who is a cis man or a cis white man, especially who you want to address behaviors with who you think has the capacity to grow and change, I’ve found that starting with boyhood or talking about this as a socialized and systemic situation that started before you could even consent to your socialization is a helpful way into a conversation about change, rather than… there’s always a place for expressing anger, and that’s its own thing, but I’m saying in the exact same situation of what do we do with men where it seems like they could grow, but they seem limited by culture. How do you start at that conversation? I think starting with boys.

Like, how was your boyhood, and when did you first learn… like every man I’ve spoken to from my book has a story that I didn’t include normally because I felt a little uncomfortable sharing such personal things even though they were on the record, but people told me stories about when they first learned that the way they were carrying their bodies was unacceptable or the way that they... Niobe Way, the NYU psychologist I spoke to, she does all this work with adolescent boys and male friendships and how at around 14, boys do this thing where they go from being in these extremely intimate relationships with their best friends that are full of flowery language and they describe their best friends just like girls do, that they suddenly have this rupture in adolescence and leaves usually both boys really sort of stunned and surprised. And actually I’ve talked to a lot of men, because I didn’t have a boyhood, who have totally been, “yeah, absolutely. That happened to me. I had a best friend and then suddenly we weren’t best friends anymore, and it was really heartbreaking. And I didn’t understand what happened.” So you know, I think most men can point to things that happened in their boyhood where they did have the moment of the feeling of “why is this happening. I don’t understand why I have to change, or why I can’t walk with a sway in my hips, or I can’t be close to my friend?” But then they learn to leave it behind, and I think reconnecting with that pain is actually the first step towards reconnecting with your humanity.

**Molly:** Yeah, thank you so much for diving into all of that with me [Thomas chuckles]. I really appreciate it. I have one more question about masculinity specifically, which is that in *Amateur*, your second book, in the book you observe that when folks started seeing you as a man they started touching you a lot less, but at the boxing gym they actually touched you a lot more than in other contexts. So I’m just wondering, it seems to me that sort of indicates that men might use physical violence as an excuse to be touched in a way that doesn’t challenge their masculinity. I’m wondering if that’s how you read that as well?

**Thomas:** Yeah, like later when I was reporting… well I went through the training, and didn’t actually do any reporting while I was training so I kept a lot of notes of what was happening and then had a lot of questions later, and that was one question I had was why… I mean it was the most physically intimate space I’ve been in, in any kind of gendered space of any kind that I can remember, and when I talk to a sociologist about it, he said, “yeah, it’s the cover of violence. There’s no masculinity threat.” So when you remove masculinity threat, men longer feel like they have to prove that they are men, and then therefore, anything that might be read as quote “gay” is no longer a threat to anyone’s masculinity. And that’s really sad, but also I guess, at first I only felt that was sad, and I really was “wow, that’s so depressing.” But now, as I’ve thought about it more, and have come to understand it more deeply and how pervasive it all is, I actually feel like yeah, that’s still depressing, but also, look how easily men, even hypermasculine men can get back in touch with all of these human emotions and human needs of touch and empathy and not policing each other’s masculinity, all things that define my experience boxing were really surprising, and basically the opposite of hypermasculinity. And because that threat was removed, all of these men around me, who were from different background socioeconomically, racially, et cetera, were immediately thrown back into what seemed like a state of, I don’t know, like basic humanity?

**Molly:** Yeah. [both laugh]

**Thomas:** And so yeah, on one hand, it’s depressing that it takes this cover of violence and therefore this cover of hypermasculinity to allow that kind of freedom, but on the other hand, I think it’s kind of exciting that this was a temporary space, this was a very liminal period of time and experience. Even within that, all these men very easily returned to a place of doing a lot of the things that I think would not be considered toxic masculinity at all.

**Molly:** So you have a column on the website *them*. It’s very smart and good. People should read it. But someone wrote in that trans culture is often built around a shared self loathing, which feels very real to me, [**Thomas:** Mhm] around dysphoria and not being whatever enough, and I’m just wondering if you have advice on how we can live our trans lives in a world full of violence towards trans people without turning that violence in on ourselves.

**Thomas:** Yeahhh, when I first transitioned so much of what my energy was bound up in, and really continues to be although I think that this has gotten a lot better, was the media narratives about trans people, which I felt were so… like once I realized I was trans I was so mad because I felt like a big part of why it took so long because the stories of trans people I saw literally felt unrelated to me completely. Like, I never felt born in the wrong body. That sounds like an alien… it literally sounds like aliens are body switching. I was just like, “what is this about?” I didn’t understand it. And so much of these didactic narratives that are at their best, they’re are about authenticity, but at their worst they’re presuming this level of difference and othering that makes us feel like we’re not part of the human family. It at least makes me feel like that. I think those stories about trans people, combined obviously with systemic violence against trans people, the collective impression can feel like all we are is dysphoric, and we need to just get as much treatment as we can so we can assimilate back into culture and just be the regular ol’ men and women that we’re supposed to be, and obviously that doesn’t even include non-binary people so that whole way of thinking about being trans is so insulting to us, and I think it’s even really insulting to cis people because it’s like presuming they can’t have any nuance or any ability to relate to anything that’s not just upholding this really binary understanding of gender. And I know plenty of cis people, who are frankly, pretty queer in their gender expressions and identity too.

So it all started to feel to me, once I understood toxic masculinity more, I was like oh right, this is another way that toxic masculinity really gets propped up because toxic masculinity is all about binaries. It’s all about men are only men because they’re not women so as many ways as possible to reinforce that, and trans people trouble that, so like, let’s as quickly as possible get these trans people sorted out so we don’t have to think about anything related to gender, you know? So I think that once you sort of see that, it can be a lot easier to see, first of all, trans people share humanity, obviously, with everyone. And I find a lot of joy in connecting with people in surprising ways about being trans. Like, for me, a big point of connection has always been pregnant women. I’ve really connected throughout my transition with women who are going through that particular experience because of similarities around going on hormones, for trans people who are on hormones. And also actually this idea of an identity change where you don’t really know… you know what you are, but you don’t know what it means yet. Or you know you’re doing a thing, but you’re not sure how it’s all going to work out. I have found that anyone in transition, pregnant women come to mind first, but anyone in transition can relate to that experience and that feeling.

As a trans person, in order to stay in my trans joy, I try to see where being trans is really…something that holds something really important about being a person, and something really exciting about being a person or a human being that we share with all kinds of people, that we’re an embodiment of something that is actually incredibly common and part of just everyone’s life and that almost leaning into that is actually, for me, a lot of joy because I’m like, yeah how many people, 1% of people get to walk around feeling in connection to this all the time. And I’m one of them, and that makes me really happy.

And then the other thing I think is really, for me, a big part of my life’s work at this point has been around diversity and narratives, and really hearing from as many people as possible about what it’s like to be trans, non-binary, agender, cis even. Like what’s everyone’s gendered experience? And for that matter, experience of race. Like everything else that are all pushed into these monolithic, palatable narratives about that are frankly just harmful for everyone. And isn’t it more interesting to hear the nuance and humanity in everyone’s story? So I really think the more stories we can hear from people, if you are trans or gender non-conforming or non-binary, the more you seek out as many stories as possible about people’s sense of gender and embodiment, I think the more you can feel like you see yourself, and that’s what everybody wants, is to feel part of the human condition and the human family. So that’s my advice, is both taking pride in the thing that makes us “different,” because that different isn’t othering and violent. It’s the difference that’s about holding something really special and important about being a person, and also when you are feeling not connected to humanity, look for the places where people are telling stories about who they are where you do feel part of humanity again. And find those stories and help elevate them because there are a lot of them.

I think your last question was really important. And I do think especially, because I know your audience is more in the trans and gender non-conforming and non-binary sphere that that’s really true, obviously dysphoria can be real, and certainly I’ve experienced it. And that’s a really, it’s really scary. It’s important to talk about amongst ourselves, and it’s a real thing that happens to people. But also it’s not even close to 1%, for me anyway, of what defines my experience of being trans, [**Molly:** Yeah] and I think that idea of trans joy and joy about our bodies and about gender, and even though we live in a world where gender is such an oppressive structure for so many people including maybe many of us. It’s also, we are people who have figured out how to break free or liberate ourselves from so many expectations. What an amazing community we are for that. I think finding the joy in that is so important and especially in this time culturally when so many of us feel under attack, I think just really remembering what beauty there is in being trans is really really crucial and important to everyone’s self-care. And if you can’t do it for you every day, sometimes I have a hard time too; I do it for everyone else.

**Molly:** Yes!

**Thomas:** That’s sort of how I think about it. That’s my best advice, and I really feel like it makes all the difference.

**Molly:** Yeah, I also think about it that way. A lot.

**Thomas:** Yeah, exactly.

**Molly:** I just feel like sometimes I debate how much I should be shouting about trans stuff all the time, and I then I’m like, well if I shout about it, maybe people will treat other trans people that they meet better, who don’t want to shout about it, so…

**Thomas:** Oh right, and I think all the time too, yeah I have the privilege to shout about it and so why wouldn’t I? It’s a way for me anyway to deal with… I do have privilege. I always had the privilege of being white. It’s weird going from sort of this androgynous person who really felt, I was pretty invisible, I think, to people. And then suddenly, it’s like I suddenly appeared on the planet, for like 90% of the rest of people on the planet, once I transitioned. And I was this legible gender, and so that was weird and problematic, even though I’m happy, that’s problematic. I feel like I have to do something with that visibility that’s helpful, not just get mine.

**Molly:** Totally. Well you talk about in *Amateur*, and probably other places, when you transitioned, folks started listening to you more, and assuming expertise. And honestly, I constantly forget that there are people who are listened to.

**Thomas:** Exactly, yeah. And it was startling to me to suddenly have the experience of being listened to, but also I think that advice that I got, whether it was said out loud or not, was “yeah, disappear back into the night.”You got what you wanted, now you’re a man. People pay attention to you, all those things, great. Don’t talk about it.” That’s part of joining the club; You just don’t saying anything, and you accept this as some sort of god-given gift. And I feel like that’s not what it is. It’s not true. And whether or not you're visibly queer or if you’re a cis woman who’s extremely feminine or whatever it is, you are not having that experience. And I know it, and I feel like every time I talk about that or say it, it’s like a palatable relief to the people around me who aren’t experiencing it because I’m not going to gaslight them and say that’s not true. It is true. And all of these things are small things, but hopefully the more people, the more men, trans and not, who can speak to this and acknowledge it and say that this is happening, the more we can build a coalition with the people in our lives who really genuinely want to end this toxic masculinity, that is, again, harming all of us, cis men included. We’re taking them along for the ride either way because they’re going to benefit too. And it would be great to have them part of this allyship.

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

**Thomas:** You know, this is going to sound weird to say, but I feel a lot of excitement about younger people right now. I feel like I love getting on Instagram and seeing so many people of so many gender expressions showing off their nuanced and beautiful ways of being, and I kind of feel like the future of gender is coming. I feel like it’s right behind me, or it’s happening now. We’re going to look back and remember this is the moment things changed. In my mind what it looks like is this: not just people who are trans and queer, even cis straight guys who are experimenting more and being more in touch with their femininity. Not just that, but the general dilution of toxic masculinity. I think the more that we get away from one understanding of what being a man means or being a woman means, the more we’re all benefitting from that, even if you’re the most binary cis person on the planet, there’s no way that every single aspect of what you’re “supposed to do,” quote unquote, is resonating with you. So I think that the more people can continue to diversify and model, I don’t know… and engage relationship with gender. I think that that’s exciting. And I think it’s happening and that feminism has helped make that happen, and hopefully this conversation about masculinity that’s happening right now is making it happen, and trans people are making it happen, and non-binary people are making it happen. All of us are I think shifting this way gender is looked at, and I’m excited to see where it goes. I hope I live long enough to see an amazing array of genders just be commonplace.

And it won’t all be about everyone’s identity. I think yeah, people have a million identities, and that’s cool and interesting. But I also think even if you don’t have a radically different identity than man or woman, you’re going to have a much more nuanced perspective of what that means. That’s when we know things have totally shifted; in the same way that feminism shifted what it meant to be a woman for all women, and continues to be shifting that. I think that that’s what needs to keep happening for men and needs to be happening for people of all genders. I don’t think there’s going to be one way it all shifts, but I do think there’s so many different people thinking about this from so many different angles, and reimagining it from so many different angles, that it’s going to be happening... literally it’s going to be inescapable, which I’m glad to be part of the inescapable wave of reimagining gender.

[*Gender Reveal* theme music plays]

**Molly:** That’s going to do it for season 3 of Gender Reveal. Thank you so much to each and every one of you for listening to the show, for supporting the show in whatever way makes sense to you. You’re all really really wonderful, and I am just so proud and happy to share this time with you every week. And I look forward to doing it again soon. I am already hard at work on season 4 of Gender Reveal. The full season will start in a few months. In the meantime, I have bonus content lined up for you so stay subscribed, and we’ll be back soon.

Just a reminder that we’re giving away a copy of Thomas’ book, *Man Alive*. Stay through after the credits to find out how I feel about that book. Anyway, we’re giving away a copy. All you need to do is post on social media about why you love Gender Reveal, tag us in it, or send a screenshot of it, and we will send you a copy if you win, and some other fun stuff.

If you really want mail from us, you could also donate at least $5 to Gender Reveal at [patreon.com/gender](https://www.patreon.com/gender). We will send you stickers, perhaps a button, perhaps a letter depending what level you pledge at. And speaking of Patreon, I am hoping during the break to post a bunch of Patreon-only content. Will it happen, I have no idea, but it might happen! So might as well donate a dollar.

One more reminder we have a grant going for trans BIPOC folks. Please tell your friends. Grant is open until April 30th. Of course you can always find us on [Twitter](https://twitter.com/gendereveal) and [Instagram](https://www.instagram.com/gendereveal/) at @gendereveal or [genderpodcast.com](https://www.genderpodcast.com/). You can also find transcripts of pretty much every episode. Similarly, you can find me on [Twitter](https://twitter.com/mollywoodstock) and [Instagram](https://www.instagram.com/molly.woodstock/) and [mollywoodstock.com](https://mollywoodstock.com/) which is full of powerfully gay and trans photos of me.

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

We’ll be gone for a little while, but just know I’m thinking of you all the time, and you can reach me anytime in a whole host of ways. We’ll be back so soon with more feelings about gender.

[*Gender Reveal* theme music ends]

**Molly:** I also realized that I didn’t get a chance to tell you how much I love both of your books. I love both of your books. *Man Alive* fucked me right up. [both laugh]

**Thomas:** Awww good. I’m always aiming to fuck people up. That’s my brand. [laughs]