[*Gender Reveal* theme song begins]

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

[*Gender Reveal* theme song ends]

Hey everyone. Hope you're all hanging in there. Just a couple of really exciting announcements this week. The first is that Maia Kobabe, the subject of last week's podcast, will be at Books With Pictures, the really amazing queer, feminist comic book store in Portland, Oregon on Wednesday, July 31st for an evening of reading, signing, and visiting. I am planning to be there. I would love to see you. I'm sure Maia would love to see you. And also, July 31st Harry Potter's birthday, and we all know that Maia loves Harry Potter very deeply, so who knows what will happen.

Also, right after I published last week's episode, I realized that I had totally failed to mention that it was our 50th full episode, which is absolutely amazing and incredible, and I would definitely not be here without the support of every single one of you who listen, who tell your friends about the show, who post about it on social media, who hang out with us via Slack, who donate via Patreon. Your support means so much to me. I don't even know how to put it into words. I feel like I try to say it every episode, but for real, fifty episodes in 18 months is absolutely bananas, so thank you for being along for the ride, I really, really appreciate your support.

I've got a short episode for you today because I had to finish the episode by Wednesday, and I have two other jobs and occasionally even friends and relationships, so this week on the show, I am very excited to introduce you to the first of our Spring 2019 Gender Reveal grant winners. As you know, twice a year we hand out as much money as we can in grants to trans artists and activists around the world. This round, we specifically focused on Black and Indigenous people and People of Color who are also trans or otherwise not cis, and we'll be talking to them about their work throughout the season. For this week's mini interview, I spoke with Nwaobiala about Nigerian queer history, community care versus self care, African LGBTQ media staples, whether feminine and masculine energy exist, and of course, the two projects they're doing that will be supported by the Gender Reveal grant.

But first, it's time for This Week in Gender.

[This Week in Gender intro music]

[contemplative music plays and fades out within first few sentences of Molly speaking]

This week in gender, I just wanted to provide some updates for last week's segment. Firstly, I wanted to mention that just a few days after Hawaii became the sixth state to explicitly ban gay and trans panic legal defenses, New York state governor, Andrew Cuomo, signed a similar bill into law, making New York, yes, the seventh state to ban LGBTQ panic defenses. Cuomo, who signed the bill during World Pride tweeted that signing the bill into law was, quote, “The best way to kick off the #PrideNYC march!”

I also wanted to clarify a bit about gay and trans panic defenses more broadly. As we know, a gay or trans panic defense is literally a defendant in court saying that the reason they committed a crime against someone was because they were startled to learn that that person was gay or trans. Its obviously disgusting and shouldn't be a defense for doing anything horrible to anyone, that's literally what a hate crime is. Anyway, in 2013, no state legislature had passed any legislation to ban the gay and trans panic defenses. But that year, the American Bar Association unanimously approved a resolution that called for state legislatures to eliminate gay and trans panic defenses. So, in 2014, California became the first state to do so, and now we have seven states in total who have done so. There's a great paper on all of this published by the Williams Institute, which is a think tank at UCLA, and I will put that link in the show notes.

Finally, after last week's episode, I got a tip from a listener that I think is actually maybe breaking national news? Felix, listener Felix, thank you Felix, says, “Hey, I was listening to your most recent episode and didn't hear Pennsylvania listed as a state that had issued X gender markers on licenses. As far as I can tell, it's not official policy here, but some folx in Philly have had luck with bringing a letter from a therapist or social worker and just writing a third option, 'unspecified,' which gets printed out as an X on the license. Just wanted to share because it's a secret option that's not being broadcast.” And, they included a photo of their license, which does, in fact, have an X on it. So, thank you, Felix, and congrats to Philly.

Also, just another vote for making your own forms and making your new options on forms. That's a tip that I got from Lake Perriguey, who was the attorney who worked with the first person to become legally non-binary in the United States, and his advise was basically like, if you don't see yourself represented on a form, don't use the form, don't fill out the form if you can, or literally, physically write a new option on the form. The way that the first legally non-binary person in the United States became the first legally non-binary person in the United States was doing the same thing, was writing a third box on the form. So, I guess what I'm saying is, go be a gender rebel and let me know how it goes.

This has been This Week in Gender.

[This Week in Gender music plays]

[transition music plays]

Nwaobiala is a Princes George's County bred, Nigeria bled, Black, queer, and non-binary creative. As an experimental artist who looks at the world as a series of interlocking lines and intersectional spaces, their art spans across film, photography, digital design, poetry, writing, and engineering. Based in Boston, Massachusetts, Nwaobiala uses their art to reflect upon Black femmehood, Blackness, African queerness, culture, Black mental health, Black public health, inter-generational trauma, male preference, and everything in between.

[transition music ends]

**Nwaobiala**: I am Nwaobiala, my pronouns are they/them. I am a Black and queer experimental artist from Prince George's County and Nigeria.

**Molly**: So, you mention that you grew up in Maryland and then went to Nigeria and then came back. Because gender is obviously like socially constructed, I'm interested in how both of those places influenced your concepts of gender and gender roles?

**Nwaobiala**: Growing up in a Nigerian household to begin with, I always hated the fact that I was restricted as a girl. Like, there were these things that I just had to do because I was a girl. And like, my mom would always frame cooking around “You have to learn how to cook so you can get a husband,” and naturally, I didn't learn how to cook cuz fuck that. Like, I don't understand why my life would have to revolve around someone other than myself. Like that just doesn't make any sense to me. And someone who, like, I don't even know this person yet. [laughs] So why am I preparing for this person that I don't even know. And that also causes me a little bit of shame because I'm the first daughter of my family, so I should know how to cook, and like, it's not something I could bring up around my relatives. I ended up learning how to cook via YouTube. I know my ancestors could've never imagined, but here I am.

And, I think, growing up, I was definitely a tomboy, played soccer, Pokemon was really my shit. I have three brothers. I really looked up to my older brother, so I was doing everything that he did. And then I went to Nigeria, and it became even more gendered. There was a girls' dormitory, there was a boys' dormitory, there were certain things that I couldn't do as a girl again. Even the way I walked was critiqued a lot. They said I slouched like a boy, and just like, a variety of things that didn't make any sense. But on the flip side of that, I was also hyper-sexualized, so whenever I was with boys, even just talking, they would call me a prostitute, like, and these were just like, everyone - students, people who were above me, people who were supposed to be looking out for me, like adults who were supposed to be looking out for me would call me a prostitute to shame me, which was a weird time. And I was also a little bit older than most of my peers, so I was, like, hitting puberty faster than they were, and wanting to explore, but I didn't have that space. Oh, for context, in Nigeria, I went to a Catholic boarding school. A mess. Truly a mess. So that just made me really angry. And they're super sexist down there, it's like everyone. I just couldn't take it.

But, I was always arguing with people. I was always doing things that were like, I would sag, just cuz. Just cuz boys get to sag, so why can't I? And I was doing stuff like that, always competing with the boys. I wanted to play soccer. There was always this like, boys played soccer and girls gossiped. And I didn't want to gossip. Like, that makes me uncomfortable anyways. But it was always hard to, like, wrangle up people to play soccer and stuff like that. So I tried to stay active, but yeah. It was a rough time.

Then, when I came back here, I still identified as a girl, I kept identifying as a woman, but then I got to college, and I started going to the slam poetry scene. And that's where everyone was just, like, queer as hell, gay as shit, and I was like, oh, this is kinda lit, this is great. And then I realized, I don't want to be tied down to my gender. And I don't want people to think I have to wear certain things because I am this gender. I think that's just weird. I just want to exist. And to me, being non-binary is just, I'm whatever the fuck, I'm existing as I want to.

**Molly**: Have you have conversations with your family about the way that you experience gender?

**Nwaobiala**: Ugh. I have such a hard time confronting, even like my friends, I have a hard time correcting people publicly because everyone misgenders me. At home, I don't even try. I'm just like, hmm, I guess I'm at home, so they're going to misgender me.

**Molly**: So, I asked you before we started what you wanted to make sure we talked about, and a lot of it was about your family, about dealing with pressures of marriage? You're young, right? How old are you?  
  
**Nwaobiala**: Twenty.

**Molly**: Yeah, that's too young. [both laugh] So, yeah, can you tell me more about dealing with those things with your family?

**Nwaobiala**: Yeah, the whole marriage thing is super weird to me. Like, this has been pressure I've been feeling since like eight years old. This is just, like, always something that keeps coming up. And I remember, I think it was high school, maybe my junior or senior year, I told my dad that getting married is not a priority in my life, and he forced me to apologize to him and told me I should never say something like that again. It's just so weird, I'm not even 21, but everyone keeps talking about marriage around me. So, like, I went to China for an internship, and when I came back, one of my uncles was like, 'Oh, where's your Chinese husband?' And I was like, this is weird. Or sometimes my grandmother would like, 'What about your boyfriend?'

First of all, assumptions that I'm straight, but also like, where's this even coming from? You guys... they police me all the time. Like, I've never felt like it was okay for me to have a boyfriend, and all of a sudden everyone expects me to have a boyfriend. And even my mom, like, the other day she was like, 'Oh, what about that friend you used to talk to on FaceTime?' This person, I would always hide them from her. Like, whenever I'm on FaceTime with a boy or something like that, I would have to hide from her, so the fact that she's, like, bringing it up again... It just makes me feel uncomfortable. What makes you think we even have this relationship where I can tell you things? Like, obviously not. [laughs]

But it's super weird because the brother right under me has a girlfriend and tells my mom everything about her. He's had girlfriends since middle school, and my mom has known about every single one of them. And she's just fine with it. And she'll like, help him buy gifts for her and stuff like that, but for me, it was always, don't talk to boys, don't come home pregnant, you come home pregnant it's literally the end of your life. Just a variety of terrible things.

**Molly**: How do you identify in terms of sexual orientation?  
  
**Nwaobiala**: I identify as pansexual.

**Molly**: A lot of your work centers on African queerness, and I was wondering if you would be up to talk about sort of like, the precolonial history of African queerness, and also like, how it exists in the world today?  
  
**Nwaobiala**: Yeah. So precolonial, first of all, it's hard to get that information. So what I've been doing is trying to seek out some really amazing books. One that I just finished reading called *She Called Me Woman* is just about queer Nigerian women currently just talking about their experiences being queer Nigerian, in Nigeria, and some of them are actually in America as well. So that was super eye-opening because you, like, if anyone talks to you about Nigeria and queerness, they'll tell you that's not real, like Nigerians do not accept queerness, they do not believe it's part of their culture. But it's really the opposite. So, in some of these accounts these women were talking about, it was a spectrum. Like, whenever they came out to their parents, or their grandparents, or their family, the ones that did come out, some of them, it was like a range of reactions. So I remember, there were a few accounts where they would be like, oh, I came out to my mother and she didn't like it, but when I came out to my grandmother, she was fine with it. And that's because back then, there was a lot of polygamy. So, men had multiple wives, and like, the wives are doing things. And it was very normal. A lot of people did that.

And it was also talking about, there's an Igbo tradition where—and Igbo is the ethnicity that I come from—and there's an Igbo tradition where if the first wife can't bear a child for the husband, she can marry another wife, for, I mean, it's for the husband, but she can marry another wife. So there are these parts of our actual tradition that welcomes queerness and it's fine, and people have lived with it for so long, but because Nigerians can't separate colonial religion with their actual traditions, it's like an amnesia. Like everyone all of a sudden forgot that queer people exist and that there are so many of them.

Another really disheartening thing that was a theme throughout the book was, it seemed like a lot of women were lying to themselves about their queerness. And having to marry men and just being unsatisfied. Cheating with the men, and like sometimes they'll be with a woman one time and then all of a sudden, they're married to this man. It's just really, really sad. But I do think that a lot of the younger generation is definitely more open-minded. We're moving towards it. Like, super slowly, but still. There's progress being made.

**Molly**: I think that when people just imagine queerness, like, a lot of them do just think of white American queer culture, so, what are some hallmarks of African queer culture?  
  
**Nwaobiala**: So, the ones I'm more familiar with, speaking broadly within African queer culture, there are some magazine publications. There's one called *A Nasty Boy*, really amazing, for Nigerian gay men, and totally like, just a great concept, and very booming. Unfortunately, the founder was assaulted recently, which was really, really sad to hear. But he's back in the United States and doing okay, stable now, but the publication is still happening. So that's really reassuring to hear. Then on the East African side, *Rafiki* has come out. And I think it's out in the United States now, so that is just, oh my god, it makes me so happy that something like that can even exist. And it was selling out *everywhere*! What does that tell you?  
  
**Molly**: I saw *Rafiki* in Portland, and I love it so, so much, but can you describe what it is for people who don't know?  
  
**Nwaobiala**: It's a film about, just two girls that like each other. And it's really weird the way it's framed, too, because a lot of outlets frame it as this lesbian film, but they're never identified as lesbian in the film, so it's like, how can you know they're lesbians? And that just shows you that, like, when we talk about queerness, it's either, it's one or the other, you're either straight or you're not. Or you're gay or a lesbian. It's not a huge hurdle for the queer Nigerian Americans that I have interviewed for my project. They talk about how they don't like the term lesbian. It's because it's weaponized against queer people, even though I know a lot of them are lesbians, they will never call themselves that. And it's just really sad.

Oh, and while we're on the topic of Kenya, especially in Nairobi, there's a lot of queer artists out there right now doing amazing work. One of them, she's a musician, she's a singer, her name is Karun, watch her Glow Up video, really amazing, like these two girls kissing in it is just like, whoa. Just, good stuff is happening, and then, I know in South Africa, Zanele Muholi is doing really, really amazing work around South African lesbians and transgender people. So, it's happening.

**Molly**: You alluded to your project. Can you tell us what your project is?  
  
**Nwaobiala**: Oh, yes! So, my project *We Are More Than Bodies* is looking at the effects of cultural homophobia on queer Nigerian Americans via the medium of digital collaging. So I'm interviewing a bunch of queer Nigerian Americans, asking them questions about how they feel about home within the context of their identity, how do they feel about their proximity to their own culture, how do they feel about just being, like [laughs] how are you existing, how are you coping with being part of the larger diaspora? Like, what does that feel like to you? How do you cope? Do you have a community? So we're talking about all of these things, and then I'm collecting pictures of them, and I'm going to put them together and form digital collages and hopefully share it.

**Molly**: So, one of your collages that exists on your website right now, there's this... I wonder if it's even on my phone, um, yeah... So, like, the caption of one of the collages is “Shouting 'self care' at people who actually need community care is how we fail people,” [Nwaobiala laughs] and, it's like a quote from someone, and it's so good. Can you expand on that a little bit? Because I like screamed when I saw it.

**Nwaobiala**: Yeah. Oh, this is major topic. Especially in this era of self care being commodified. Yes. And it's become this, like, capitalist, like, self-indulgent kind of concept when really, it was meant to be a revolutionary one. And I don't think that, I don't think we can heal alone. I really don't. I don't think... and that’s the other problem. Within the larger context of this world, when we think about climate change or the environment, people are like, oh, you should recycle. Well yeah, yeah you should recycle, but, like, individuals aren't going to fix this problem. So, like, it has to be more of a community thing, and I guess this is part of just Western culture in general, individualizing everything. And that's just not how we're going to survive, first of all. The Earth is dying, that's not how we're going to survive. [laughs] And second of all, just, as, like, a person, you are only one person. You only have your perspectives, you only have, like, what resources that you've been exposed to, and it's usually not enough. So, that's why I truly, deeply believe in community care.

**Molly**: You mention Black femmehood a lot in your work, and I love to ask people on the show what 'femme' means to them because I get a really wide range of responses. So, if you could speak to that, and also, do you identify as femme?  
  
**Nwaobiala**: Yeah, that's something I think I've been shifting away from recently. Previously, my work was definitely only Black women-centered, but as I'm becoming more exposed to just the harms that Black cis-hetero women can cause, especially for me and other queer people, I don't know. I don't know how I feel about it. And I really do want my work to start centering more queer people. And I think doing this project has definitely affirmed that for me, like the true importance of that. I think a lot of Black cis-hetero women are doing great work already, but I think that this is an area that, since I already identify as someone who is Black and queer, I should be doing work within it.

I don't necessarily know if I identify as a femme. It's hard. Labels are hard. I definitely grew up as a femme. I don't know if I feel very femme now. I don't know what, like, femme means. I tend to have a really hard time with the words 'feminine' and 'masculine.' Like, within social constructs, yeah, it makes sense, like people will interact with you different depending on where you fall, but also, if we continue to gender things like energy. Like people will be like, “Oh, you have feminine energy” or “You have masculine energy,” or “You need to balance both,” like, what the fuck does that even mean? [laughs] I just don't understand sometimes. So in that realm, I definitely push back on that because, like, that doesn't exist. Feminine and masculine energy, that's not real. But definitely the way people perceive you and react, so I like to say, like, “traditionally femme” things, or “traditionally masculine,” instead of just, like, yeah. So I hope those words get eradicated eventually. I hope we can just, like, wear clothes. I don't know.

**Molly**: Okay. I think this is the part of the show where I just ask what you want to talk about that we haven't talked about yet.

**Nwaobiala**: Oh. Okay. [laughs] I have this hitch, right? I think... my mother would be happier is she was with a woman. But she is so, like, ingrained in homophobia and just, like, respectability politics. My father stresses my mom. She's like... my father is the number one thing that stresses my mother out. So it's really interesting to me when she's like shaming other women who, like, their husbands left or something, nothing related to the women, to be honest. And she'll be like, “Oh, at least I have my man,” but I'm like, but he stresses you out! You don't like him! What's up, why, what's the point? What are you really gaining from this?

But then when she talks about her friends, it's always like, there's more love there. There's more support. And she's so happy to see them. She's so happy to hang out with them. But my father, like, she don't want to hang out with him. I don't know. So, I think she'd be happier with a woman, but due to, like, homophobia and misogyny, that's not what would happen.

Oh, another thing that I think... sometimes I think that children are what their parents could've been if not for the constraints, if not for the bigotry and their religion. I have a friend who, honestly, one day we were just walking in the train station, and she was right next to her mother, and literally they were dressed the same. The same hairstyle, dressed the same, like, they look the same. And her mother loves jewelry. Like, she loves accessories, like her whole arm would be filled with bracelets and rings, always wearing earrings. But when my friend started getting, like, other ear piercings other than, like, the lobes, her mom was like, “Why are you doing that? You shouldn't be doing that.” Her mom is Haitian. Um, so, it's looked down upon for you to get piercings, I guess, it means you're, like a bad person or whatever. But, given, if she wasn't in that context where, like, piercings were seen as bad, I think her mom would've loved to get more piercings because that just seems like the type of person she is anyway.

And the same thing with my mom. Like, I think my mom is a free spirit who is just tied down by my father's anxieties and debt. American debt. And I think in a different world, she'd honestly be living her life. So I guess I just have to live mine whether they like it or not. Like, can't end up like that, so....

**Molly**: Yeah. When I was looking at your website and grant application, there's so much work that you've already done in so many different genres, so many different subjects. You're very young. What do you have envisioned going forward that you'd like to work on?  
  
**Nwaobiala**: I would for sure like to work with the youth. I don't know in what capacity. But I have to., because I literally love children. Like, I love children to death. Me and my friend, just this past semester, we co-created and we co-led this eight-week photography workshop for these kids. We had food all the time cuz we have to feed them. You just, you have to feed them. And it was just an amazing experience, giving them the opportunity to not only, like, learn how to use the equipment, but also see work that reflects them. And we usually picked from Black artists, so it was really just important for them to know that, like, not only are you represented in this work, but this is work that you can do as well, and you can tell your own story, and there are different methods for you to tell your story. We also talked about valuing your work and not under-charging. Not letting people use your services for free cuz your camera costs money! Your travel costs money, your editing software costs money. And getting them to that point while also providing for their general needs. I love being able to feed them because I feel like a lot of those students, they're struggling and they won't say it.

So, definitely working with youth is a huge, huge future plan.

**Molly**: All right. I want to talk to you forever. But. The way we always end the show is by asking, in your ideal world, what would the future of gender look like?  
  
**Nwaobiala**: Oh, there wouldn't be gender. Period. [laughs] Period. No, we'll just be existing and living however we want to be.

[*Gender Reveal* outro music plays]

**Molly**: That's going to do it for this week's mini episode. If you learned a thing or had a good time, please share the show with a friend, and please consider donating to Gender Reveal so that we can continue to fund projects like what Nwaobiala is doing. You can do that at [patreon.com/gender](https://www.patreon.com/gender). We also take [PayPal](https://www.genderpodcast.com/donate) and [Cash App](https://www.genderpodcast.com/donate).

Find Nwaobiala's amazing work on Instagram or [nwaobiala.com](https://www.nwaobiala.com/). You can also find us on [Twitter](https://twitter.com/gendereveal?lang=en), [Instagram](https://www.instagram.com/gendereveal/?hl=en), [genderpodcast.com](https://www.genderpodcast.com/), you can join our beautiful, lovely Slack community. The way to join that is to go to [bit.ly/genderslack](http://bit.ly/genderslack). There's all sort of ways to connect with us, and I hope you will because it's a beautiful li’l trans community, and it's so affirming and I love it so much, and you will, too.

This week's episode was produced and edited by me, Molly Woodstock. Our logo is by the talented [Michelle Leigh](http://www.michelleleigh.co/). Our theme song is by [Breakmaster Cylinder](https://breakmastercylinder.bandcamp.com/). Additional music this week by [Blue Dot Sessions](https://www.sessions.blue/). We'll be back next week with more feelings about gender.

[*Gender Reveal* outro music ends]