[*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, Molly Woodstock.

[*Gender Reveal* theme music ends]

Hey Everyone! Hope you’re all hanging in there!

This week on this show we chat with two-spirit illustrator and Gender Reveal grant winner Elijah Forbes about navigating health care systems as a trans and Indigenous person ...

**Elijah:** Honestly, the biggest gift I gave myself is being really annoying to cis people.

**Tuck:** ... experiencing censorship in trans and two-spirit art, and choosing to tell trans stories with happy endings.

**Elijah:** It's a lot easier to have a story about a tragic trans character than it is to have a story about a happy trans character who just has a pretty good time!

**Tuck:** So, full disclosure, I've been traveling since the 14th, and I wasn't sure if there was even going to be a show this week, but I ended up pulling this entire edit together in a few hours. It's a little bit more rough than usual, you may hear a little bit of typing in the background at one point, you may hear some slime at one point, you may hear that the entire guest audio is blown out, and I truly have no idea how that happened, but I'm just amazed that an episode exists at all, so let's just try to focus on these smart, funny things that Elijah is saying. Thank you so much for your patience.

But before we get to that, I wanted to let you know that I appeared on two other trans-hosted podcasts this week: friend of the show and Sylveon co-founder Cassius Adair and I discussed American trans politics on the What The Trans podcast with Michelle and Ashleigh, which I highly recommend following in general for UK trans political news, and I also gave dubious advice on the Dear Prudence podcast with Danny Lavery. You can find both these shows wherever you get your podcasts. Strangely, I'm too nervous to listen to Danny's shows, so I cannot tell you whether I make any sense there or not, but I hope you enjoy it.

I also want to thank everyone who joined us on Patreon in the last week or so, including but not limited to Rachel, Andy, Andrea, Skylar, Oliver, Quill, Nikki, Kathyrn, Ron, Stephanie, Renée and Jake. If you would like to support Gender Reveal including our grant program for trans people who are Black, Indigenous and/or people of color, you can do that at patreon.com/gender, as all of these fine people did, and thank you all so, so much for your support and generosity.

Finally, I'm going to be pulling everything out of our merch store this weekend to do a bit of inventory-ing, so if you have an eye on something in there, it is probably a good idea to head over there and snap it up just in case. You can find all of our loosely Gender Reveal-inspired, 100% trans-designed shirts, sweatshirts, mugs, stickers etc. at bit.ly/gendermerch.

And with that, it’s time for This Week in Gender.

[This Week in Gender theme music plays]

**Tuck:** So, again, this has been very hastily thrown together, so this week in gender, I don't have a news article for you, I just have a short story.

If you don't live in the United States, I don't know how much you know about the TSA - Transportation Security Administration, it was created after the 9/11 terrorist attacks and it focuses on security in airports, but it is more of a security theater, more to make you feel like something is being done for your safety than it is to actually provide safety. They are the people behind the cool rules like telling you to take your shoes off and put them through a scanner before you go on an airplane, or you can't have one 4-ounce bottle of lotion, but you can have two 3-ounce bottles of lotion, because of safety [chuckle].

Anyway, I was going through a TSA checkpoint yesterday, and, as you probably know, when you 're going through a TSA checkpoint, you have to often get into this body scanner, and what you may know is that there is a TSA agent whose job is to look at you and then press either a pink or blue button, because the scan changes depending on what gender they assign you. You know, AFAS, "assigned female at scanner." Anyway, the scan is different, so if you're a trans woman who has a penis, and they push the pink "girl" button, your penis will show up as a "suspicious package" LOL, and you will have to probably get patted down by a TSA agent, and that is why trans people hate TSA so, so much. Because if you are clocked a certain way by security, it will probably lead to you having your genitals pat-down, because they suddenly appear suspicious. And this is all just at the whims of what the TSA agent decides your gender is.

I'm always read as female, so this has never super come up for me in this way, but something hilarious happened yesterday. I got in the scanner and put my hands up, as they make you do, and the old man running the scanner just said out loud, "I don't know which button to push", and just walked away, fully walked away from the scanner, and made someone else decide which button to push. It felt powerfully trans, but the person who had to take over leaned in to ask me something, and I literally thought they were going to ask me "what gender are you?", but instead, they were like, "can you pull up your pants, please". And something in my reaction helped them decide which button to push.

I don't know if it's because I said "OK" in a high-pitched voice, I don't know if it's because I pulled up my pants in a certain way that made them decide what my genitals look like, but anyway, they let me through. And I thought maybe that was a coincidence, but a couple of people went through with no issue, and then my partner got there, and they couldn't read my partner, either, and once again, they were like "hey, can you pull your pants up a little bit". So there is some sort of trick where if the TSA asks you to pull your pants up, it might be because they try to figure out what gender you are. I don't know what's going on. I just thought it was very powerful to make a man fully quit his job and walk away from the scanner because he didn't want to have to decide my gender.

Anyway, solidarity to everyone dealing with all this bullshit every single day. This has been a tiny This Week in Gender.

[This Week in Gender theme music plays]

[Upbeat music plays, then fades into background]

**Tuck:** Elijah Forbes is a two-spirited trans man illustrator and head of the two-spirit group of Petoskey, Michigan. He is currently [running a Patreon](https://www.patreon.com/twospiritgroup) to support his work in Indigenous gender-diverse community, as well as looking for future clients in illustration. His focus is on transgender joy despite circumstances, and he hopes to create content that resonates with others that have no interest in performing binary identities.

[Music ends]

The way that we always start is by asking, in terms of gender, how do you identify?

**Elijah:** I identify as a two-spirit trans masc person. It's really complicated, but basically, a non-binary trans man, more or less.

**Tuck**: Yeah! And what pronouns do you use?

**Elijah:** I use he/him pronouns.

**Tuck**: So, we've had several two-spirit folks on the show, so I'm not trying to ask you for an empirical definition of two-spirit, but I am curious what resonates with you about it, because I've heard some folks who see it as a gender identity, and others that see it as a cultural role, and there's all sorts of different ways that people approach that concept.

**Elijah:** Right. Basically, what I've come to describe it as, and with talking to a bunch of other two-spirited people, come to recognize is that every single person you ask is going to have their own definition of what that means, just because that's something that you have such a personal experience with. And that's something we have in a lot of our own communities, where from a spiritual level to everything else, everything is so personalized to your own spirits. Being a two-spirit person, for me, is a way of describing a group of people that are Indigenous and have their gender and sexuality affected in a certain way by virtue of being Indigenous. That's what I would say is the simplest way to describe it. The way that we would say two-spirit for my community would be Niizhoo Jijaakook, which is a much older version than the variety that you use today when you say two-spirited person - it's supposed to be just a umbrella, whereas there is a version of that in community that goes back farther than anyone even knows when that would have started. It's a mixed bag - depending on who you're talking to, they're going to have a different relationship to it, but if someone says they're two-spirit, they are not going to be cishet, in one way or another.

**Tuck**: Totally. So, you lead a two-spirit group in Michigan, and I was wondering if you could tell us about that group and your involvement in it.

**Elijah:** Sure. So, that is a group I started some time back in, I want to say, last August, and we've been meeting pretty regularly, we meet every fourth Monday, and it's something that we really needed to do for a while. I've been looking for something that was like that, and there wasn't anything like that out there. So, my tribe has this little secret Facebook group, and someone had messaged in there like months ago: "Hey, is there any resources for this?" And the person that had messaged that, one of the language department folks that knew me talked to me about it, and was like "Hey, I know you're asking questions about this, why don't you talk to this person." So, we ended up creating our own group, and it's been a really really good opportunity to be able to reach out to the larger community. Because with a lot of issues that come with the whole bag of colonization, you have a lot of people who don't accept anywhere on the LGBT and beyond spectrum. So having the opportunity to re-center that and talk about older ceremonies, and how we can bring that kind of respect back, has been really good, along with giving us a platform where I've started to talk to the medical center, the clinic for the tribe, and I talk about how to be more inclusive and not make everyone really uncomfortable at the clinic, which is always exciting!

**Tuck**: Yeah! What has the reception been like to your group working with the larger community?

**Elijah:** It's been back and forth. You have a lot of folks who are really supportive. Oddly enough, there is a church group that is partially native-owned, they were really supportive and have been from the get-go. But you also have some other people that are the opposite, and it doesn't really seem to have a delineation across a religion, or a certain people group, or whatever, but there has been some pushback within the tribe. Within the larger community in Northern Michigan, it's been even more iffy. We actually had homophobic hate crimes happening downtown, and in response to that, one of the folks I know out here started a Pride Flag Day, and she thought it was going to be her and five of her friends, and it ended up being hundreds of people coming out, which was great

**Tuck:** ohh!

**Elijah:** so because of that we're probably, fingers crossed, going to have Petoskey's first actual Pride this next summer. We'll see!

There has been an iffy back and forth and because of the fact that I am non-binary, I don't really ... I have to pass so that I don't get some Midwest hate crimes on me [Molly: yes, yes], but I don't have a strong investment in that. And because of that, I have experienced the entire gamut of what you can get out here. We're still not quite there.

**Tuck**: It sounds like you have complicated feelings about the concept of passing. Do you want to talk about that at all?

**Elijah:** Basically, my issue with it is: from the beginning of my transition, which has only been a couple of years, I wanted initially to totally pass, and I thought that for sure I wanted top surgery, and I wanted to do everything, and I just wanted to melt into the background. And as I actually started getting more confident in myself, and be able to think about what is it about this that I like and what does being a man mean, and how attached to those meanings am I, it started making me think about why certain people need to pass, and what those different levels are. I am obviously in my community, but I am a white-passing person, so I also have that perspective to it, where I know a lot of other Indigenous trans guys with darker skin than me who have completely different issues that they end up coming across. So basically, I don't really like the concept of passing as a whole, because everything is so interrelational, and depends on who you're seeing where, so you have this weird dichotomy where you want people to see you as what you identify as, but you don't really want to make it so that this is what you're supposed to do in order to be that person.

**Tuck**: If it was a world where you didn't have to worry about some good, good trans hate crimes [Elijah laughs], what do you think you would do differently, or present differently in your life?

**Elijah:** One of the first things that comes to mind is, there's this thing called ribbon skirts that a lot of native people wear. It's a more recent thing, but I have been obsessed with ribbon skirts for years, and have wanted to wear them forever. It's one of those things where I probably, if anything, would be wearing them to a pride day, but not anything other than that, because that's the situation I'm in. And if I ever - if I were ever- actually working from home, I guess I could then [both laugh]. There's a lot of stuff with gender - clothing, beadwork, ceremonies, all that stuff, that gets so messy, but probably, gender presentation, being able to dress more in a way that makes me comfortable, would be the main thing. When I was living up in Sault-Ste-Marie, right next to Canada, I ended up starting to [wear] clothes I liked more, that were not exactly as masculine as they happen. And I gave it a shot, and went outside, and I was like: ok, everything is cool, and I had to get gas, so I was with the normal gas station Midwesterners, and I was like: this is no longer cool, I understand.

**Tuck**: You also mentioned going to educate folks at clinics, and I was wondering: obviously, trans folks have a really really difficult time accessing adequate health care, and also, Indigenous folks have a difficult time accessing adequate health care

**Elijah:** I know

**Tuck:** --do you feel there is a unique experience in that intersection that you can speak to at all?

**Elijah:** There is. It's an odd position to be in, since you have Indigenous clinics - having all those issues with people getting health care in the first place, we have our own clinics to make sure our own people are taken care of. They are actually much more open to talking than probably a more mainstream clinic would be. I ended up talking to one of the people who is the head director of the clinic, and laying out, these are the issues I came across, I'll email you a bunch of resources on how to educate your staff. And then she was saying, oh, that's great, I'm going to go talk to the board of directors, and this other group that is a bunch of tribal clinic heads, and we'll talk about these issues.

I don't think if I had walked into the, I don't know, the McLaren hospital, that they really would have given me the time of day, so in that way it's a lot nicer, just because everyone knows each other, and if you just keep [bothering] them, eventually they have to talk to you, because you're not going to go away, because they're going to see you eventually. But I think its something you can definitely scale to other communities. Once I transitioned and became more comfortable with myself, the weirdest thing to say about... Honestly, the biggest gift I gave myself was being really annoying to cis people. [both laugh] So if you're willing to be the annoying trans person, if you're in a situation where you can do that, then that is fantastic. Even where I work, I'm working at this horrible fast food thing, and it's not fantastic, but I am just making sure that we're not going to be sexist, we're not going to be racist, we're not going to be homophobic [laughs]. As long as you can be *the* most annoying transgender person that they can meet, then you're going to be fine. [both laugh]

**Tuck**: Totally. Oh my gosh, that's so funny! So, you won this Gender Reveal grant, and one of the things that you talked about was all of the artwork that you do to represent Indigenous trans and two-spirit folks, and I was just wondering if you could tell us about the art that you make and what themes you explore in that art.

**Elijah:** A lot of the artwork I made over the past couple of months has made really a harsh turn into comics, which has been really good. I don't know if I can say what they are yet, but I'm going to be in two anthologies, so I'm excited about that [Molly: yeaah!]. That's exciting. So basically, all of the art I make is either two-spirit or trans-oriented in some way. I actually, right before we started this call, was working on a poster for my group that focuses on uplifting transgender and two-spirit people, that sort of thing. In all my stuff I try to push as positive of a mindset in terms of transgender issues as I can. I do definitely get in some of the really really heavy topics, but for the most part I try not to focus as much on the doom and gloom side of how hard it is to, you know, exist. Because there's so much negativity already, and I think that a lot of mainstream stuff has a much easier time interfacing with negativity in that way, where it's a lot easier to have a story about a tragic trans character than it is about a happy transgender character who just has a pretty good time, and has a happy ending. That's the sort of stuff that I'm way more interested in now.

**Tuck**: Yeah, why do you think that is? Why do you think that people are more comfortable with a tragic trans story than a happy one?

**Elijah:** I think they just can't really let go of the idea of punishing anything outside the norm. Even people that consider themselves more open-minded, it's really difficult to see how someone could be happy. I have been talking to cisgender or heterosexual people... you have this idea, oh, you're a trans man, well, I could never be a trans man. Well, you wouldn't be, because you're not that person. When I was talking to my mom about that, way back when, I remember going, well, if you were like me, you wouldn't be thinking what if I was a trans man, for you, it would be what if I was a trans woman. That's probably a better way to get to the heart of it. There's certain ideas that are really hard for people who never had to struggle with gender to let go of, and I think that that does apply to why there's certain stories that are easier to digest. And I think that there's nothing wrong with being interested in that kind of really difficult art, but I think if that's the only kind of art that you have to look and see yourself in the mirror, so to speak, that can honestly be worse for your psyche than anything else would be.

**Molly**: I think that you were telling me that you were trying to enter trans art in some sort of exhibition or competition or something, and they were censoring it because it had bodies. [Elijah: yeah, ok] Can you talk about the hurdles of that?

**Elijah:** I don't want to name them specifically, because I still think that people behind this group are pretty good people. So it was this zine that was focused on two-spirit people, and we ended up having this problem, where the art I made that showed a trans masc body of a person that was wearing traditional men's clothes - to a point, [???] -, they did not have a covering on their chest, so there were boobies. And some people didn't like that there were boobies. [both laugh] And my issue with it was that the entire point of the piece was that chests don't need to be gendered, because every single person's chest is going to look a little different, and there are even cis guys that have really big chests, and they get to go to the beach and not have a shirt on, and I don't.

**Tuck**: Yeah, I think about that, honestly, constantly.

**Elijah:** I see so many guys where I say you don't have to wear a binder and I do? I don't know, man. That's basically my issue, that there's a lot of, I don't even know if the right word is bio-essentialism, still, something along those lines, where you have people having a very specific idea about what categories we can put bodies into, and at what point is that body become not child-friendly. But I was a kid once, and this is my body, so I don't want to say kids shouldn't have anything ever censored, because I think there is a way to go about that where you can explain, maybe young kids don't need to be reading this yet, that's fine. But I think when the answer is that the kind of body that you have is not what children should see, that puts you in a weird kind of category, in my mind.

**Tuck**: It reminds me a lot of folks who think that mentioning queer people in front of kids is somehow salacious. No, you two heterosexuals are showing films where straight people kiss all of the time, it's no more adult when two queer people kiss, actually.

**Elijah:** One thing I come across a lot is... we actually have a non-binary person that is I think they are maybe] in fourth grade that comes to the group I run. So it's really frustrating to hear that kind of content from adults that are hopefully trying to raise their children in a way that is respectful of other people, because eventually, their kid is going to come across someone like that, so is that kid not ok to be around other children, and what is your reason for that? That's a kind of conversation people need to have with themselves, where there are certain things that I know it's hard to adjust your thinking on, but at the end of the day, those people are out there, and that's not something that you want to hide from them, because they're going to learn from someone, and it won't be you.

**Tuck:** Hmm. Yeah, that's a really good point. Although sometimes, maybe it shouldn't be you, because [both laugh]

**Elijah:** In those cases, yeah, it has to be more than you

**Tuck:** So you mentioned that you try to focus on happier themes, that you try to focus on trans joy, and maybe you're just a naturally happy person, but I am curious how you find ways to focus on that joy, as both a trans person and an Indigenous person, because I think it can be really difficult when we constantly live in hell.

**Elijah:** Yeah, I get that. What I have ended up doing is: a lot of my social experience now, I try to check in with myself on. I follow a lot of trans folks, I follow a lot of Indigenous folks, and the stories that we end up sharing on Twitter are usually the most depressing thing possible.

**Tuck:** Mhm

**Elijah:** So I try to do a thing where every couple of hours, I sort of think: Is this making me happy? Is this adding anything to my day right now? Or should I ... I can close this tab, I can just do that. That helps a lot. Also reading a lot of trans-positive media - web comics are really good for that - as well as continuing to get those sorts of work out there. There's also a good opportunity to be invested in supporting trans artists. Something I've done in the last couple of years is - branding a character as being transgender, whether it's Marvel or Disney, or something else, is always going to fall short in an incredible, probably offensive way, and those same dollars for those tickets would be a lot better spent for someone's Patreon, or their blog, or whatever else is out there. Especially as it's so much easier to find trans creators now, I think that's just the better direction to go in.

**Tuck**: Yeah, absolutely. Also, I don't think Disney has even tried. They maybe had gay characters ...

**Elijah:** They pretend that they have gay characters [both laugh]. Then they were like, “never again.”

**Tuck**: So I think that as trans people, everyone should be working a little bit harder to center Indigenous places in their activism, because there's such a rich history already on this land of folks that are not subscribing to the same gender norms that we're now subscribing on this land, and I think that people don't necessarily know how best to go about centering those voices and amplifying those voices, so I'm curious if you have suggestions for people who are listening who may not already be as tapped into those worlds.

**Elijah:** Sure. So I think probably the fastest and easiest way is just to make sure that you have some of those voices in your social hemisphere. Following a lot of native folks always helps, especially if you can go ahead and follow some two-spirit folks, that helps, too. There's a lot of two-spirit writers and artists that are doing really exciting things that you can just follow and be part of that conversation. Two people that came to mind are Joshua Whitehead and Jaye Simpson, and both of them were involved in a book that came out recently, it's called *Love After The End*, Arsenal Pulp put it out, and it's a two-spirit book about what we call Indigenous futurisms, which is a native way of looking at science fiction, fantasy and urban fantasy sort of storylines. I think following those sorts of people helps a lot.

If you are anywhere near a native friendship center or any of the different smaller groups that are usually around different states... if you're in the Midwest, closer to Michigan, there's Native Justice Coalition I've done a lot of work with. Supporting in that way helps. Most of those places are going to have Patreons that you can directly support, and outside of that, there's actually a hashtag that was created in the last couple of years called SettlerSaturday. If you want to monetarily support native people, that's a great way to go through what people are struggling with, and throw a couple of dollars here and there when you can.

**Tuck**: So, this is the part of the show where I ask what you want to talk about that we haven't talked about yet, if anything.

**Elijah:** I'm working on creating an Indigenous comics coalition. [Molly: Ooh!] So if anyone wants to message me about that, it's paintedturtleco@gmail.com. I'm trying to get some folks together for that. That's a little side project I'm working on and waiting to get paid by some [clients] so I can afford to have a Website for it, but it's ok. [both laugh]

**Tuck:** That's really exciting! I would love that, actually. Keep me posted on that.

**Elijah:** I definitely will.

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

**Elijah:** I think in my ideal world, the future of gender would be just so much more varied that we let it be right now, to the point where there's going to be words that we don't know yet, that we're going to describe ourselves as in the future. There becomes a lot better understanding of how to in an empathetic way let people actually be themselves. That's the future I'm looking forward to.

**Tuck:** I love that. I want that for us. I also want a future in which you get to wear ribbon skirts, because they're beautiful and amazing.

**Elijah:** Me too. Ah!

[*Gender Reveal* theme music plays]

**Tuck**: That's gonna do it for this week's show.

In the few weeks since we recorded this podcast, Elijah has launched the Indigenous comics collective that he mentioned earlier, which you can find at [i](http://indigenouscomicscollective.com/)[ndigenouscomicscollective.com](http://indigenouscomicscollective.com/). You can also find Elijah online at paintedturtleco.com, and on social media as paintedturtleco, and you can find his two-spirit group at [facebook.com/twospiritgroup](http://facebook.com/twospiritgroup), and you can support that work at [patreon.com/twospiritgroup](http://patreon.com/twospiritgroup). Love a good handle!

You can support our show at patreon.com/gender, where even a one-dollar donation gives you access to our weekly newsletter, and you can find us on social media at gendereveal, as well as at genderpodcast.com. As I mentioned earlier, our merch store is going to be down for a bit this weekend, but if you are listening before or after that time, you can find all of our shirts, sweatshirts and other fun stuff at bit.ly/gendermerch, where 100% of proceeds benefit trans designers and trans organizations. If you are a trans designer or artist, you can also submit art to be considered for the store, by emailing us through our website, genderpodcast.com.

This week's episode was produced and edited by me, Molly Woodstock. Our logo is by the amazing Ira M. Leigh, our theme song is by Breakmaster Cylinder. We'll be back next week with more feelings about gender.

[*Gender Reveal* theme song ends]

**Tuck:** Sorry, I just got distracted because I completely forgot until this moment that your whole grant was funded by me guilting people on twitter.com. [both laugh]