[*Gender Reveal* theme song plays]

**Tuck:** Welcome to Gender Reveal. A podcast that hopefully gets us 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]

Hey everyone, it’s me, your friend Molly Woodstock. Except I just changed all my by-lines and social media handles to Tuck, so maybe I’ll introduce myself as that in the future. It’s a weird time to change my name, but as I say later in this episode, I love to take transition steps when nobody is paying any attention. So, we’ll see. Anyway, I hope you’re all hanging in there, it is an absolute buckwild time to be alive, but I am so glad that you are alive and here with us. Whatever you’ve been up to this week, I hope that you are safe, I hope that you are healthy. I have been spending most of the nights covering the protests on Portland as a freelancer with the *Portland Mercury*, so I went to bed at 3 last night, the night before that, the night before that… and by the way you can follow all of that coverage on twitter @TuckWoodstock. But anyway, despite all that I really wanted to find the time to share this conversation with activist Vidhya Aravind so I’ve been working on getting it up when I’m not in the field or asleep or eating Taco Bell, and here we are, somehow more or less on time.

In this episode Vidhya talks about so many things that are relevant to the current moment, including the value of failure in organizing, what a world without police would look like, why non-profits won’t save trans people, and–maybe my personal favorite–getting into activism by being “a dumb bitch who cares a lot.” That’s a quote, by the way, I wouldn’t say that. Anyway, as I recorded and edited this episode, I wrote down so many quotes, because there is just so much to take away from this and I hope you can share your favorite parts of this conversation with your community as well. Vidhya and I spoke on Skype, so the sound quality is not ideal, a few words dropped entirely, a few words got like weirdly elongated, but I am 100% confident that this is both very listenable and very worth listening to, so thank you for sticking with it.

A few quick announcements before we get started, we had another donation challenge this week, so thank you to the two folks who asked to be anonymous who both donated to the Black Trans Protestors Emergency Fund and to our friend Ira for donating to Okra Project. If any of y’all donate more than $60 to a Black-led organization, I would love to shout you out on the show, just send us your screenshots. We have a great list of Black, trans organizations in our most recent Instagram post @Gendereveal.

Also, if you have become a Gender Reveal Patron lately, thank you so much. I just wanted to let you know that physical Patreon rewards are a little delayed right now, because I need to write 25 thank-you notes and I just haven’t had the capacity in the last week or two. But I do thank you and I do love you, your support makes this work possible. And also, I encourage you, again, to donated directly to Black trans folks right now, as well.

Finally, we’ve got a bunch of new limited edition Pride merch in the shop at [bit.ly/gendermerch](http://bit.ly/gendermerch), which I do feel comfortable plugging, because all of the proceeds go to trans folks and Black folks and sex workers. I told you last week that I would tell you the story about this one piece of merch we have, so here we go. You know how “Nancy” got cancelled? So I was talking to Tobin Low about Nancy getting cancelled and about Pride not happening this year–this was before all the protests happened–and I was just talking about Pride events being cancelled and I just said “worst Pride ever.” And Tobin said “oh my god, make those shirts, I would buy a shirt that said ‘Worst Pride Ever.’” And so I reached out to our friend Niko, who made the iconic “Surf Don’t TERF” shirt and was like “Niko, what is the weirdest thing you can do with “Worst Pride Ever,” and Niko designed this shirt that’s a really sad rainbow lion that says “Worst Pride Ever,” so I don’t know, just trying to have a good time.

I don’t know that it is the worst Pride ever anymore, because this is maybe like the truest Pride ever, right? Because we’re out there protesting, rioting in the street. But, if you buy a “Worst Pride Ever” piece of merch, there’s shirts and tanks and totes. Niko is not taking any of the money, I’m not taking any of the money. It’s split between Maggie’s, which is a sex workers’ project in Toronto, and Black Lives Matter Toronto. So yeah, if you want a “Worst Pride Ever” shirt, just know that it’s a collaboration between me, Niko Stratis, Tobin Low, and the sad lion. That’s at [bit.ly/gendermerch](http://bit.ly/gendermerch)

That brings us to This Week in Gender.

[*This Week in Gender* theme music, a newsy fanfare, plays.]

This Week in Gender: Fuck JK Rowling.

This has been This Week in Gender.

[*This Week in Gender* theme music, a newsy fanfare, plays.]

[background music plays, continues throughout Tuck’s intro of Vidhya]

**Tuck:** Vidhya Aravind is the Learning Director for We the People Michigan, and current Co-Chair of the Huron Valley Democratic Socialists of America. While a graduate student at the University of Michigan, she participated in labor, trans, anti-fascist, police accountability and solidarity activism and was instrumental in contract wins for the graduate employees organization 3550. She’s passionate about helping activists grow and does that both in and out of her job through coaching, facilitation, and political education. In her quote-unquote “spare time,” she does whatever she can to build towards a sustainable, caring, local trans community.

[background music finishes]

**Tuck:** The way we always start the show is by asking: In terms of gender, how do you identify?

**Vidhya:** I mean, the short answer is as a trans woman. The slightly longer answer is that I have a very complicated relationship to it. Because my—the way I’m trans is a very western way of understanding being trans, because I grew up in the US, but I’m a child of immigrants, and it does feel like the way I engage with gender is like a white way of engaging with gender. So the complicated answer is that it’s complicated and I’m unsure.

**Tuck:** Yeah absolutely. Have you done any work into sort of de-colonizing those thoughts around gender?

**Vidhya:** I mean, I’ve tried. I talk to trans women of color all the time on Twitter. We talk to each other about how sometimes quote-unquote “participating in gender” feels like re-enacting whiteness. We’ve talked about our past and present dealing with assimilation. I don’t really have goods way of understanding what Indian ways of being trans are. I fully assimilated when I grew up, right? So I grew up basically in the same way that the white kids around me were growing up. It is something I’m looking to hopefully find time to do in the future.

**Tuck:** This podcast is–generally–a podcast in which I have a very narrow lens into making sure most of the questions tie into gender in some way and we’re not going to do that here because your work as an activist is really interesting and really relevant right now. So there will be some gender questions, but I would love if you could start by just talking about your history as an activist.

**Vidhya:** Sure. So I came out as trans in 2016. I tell people I picked an excellent year to do that. Then November 2016 happened. Up until that point, I have been doing a lot of aggressive tweeting about transness and trans issues in the sort of way that I think is really easy for a lot of people early in transition to reach for and do. And that does have its own uses. But I hadn’t meaningfully done any organizing or work to think about material conditions or changing material conditions or anything like that. It had just basically been just in the service of education.

Then November 2016, there was a whole election, it was bad. That night, a lot of trans people were having a really bad time for very obvious reasons. One of my friends DMed me on Twitter and said that she was very grateful that I would be around for the upcoming fight that we would find ourselves in, or something to that effect. I had very very deep impostor syndrome about receiving that comment because it felt like all I ever did was tweeted. So literally what I did was searched Facebook for actions that were happening. There was an upcoming rally a week from the election that was in defense of DACA. I messaged the organizers, which were a multi-racial group of people and said “Hey, I’m an Indian trans woman, I’m looking to, like, start doing things. Can I help out with this?” They said “Sure.” And that was sort of how I jumped in.

That ended up being like a 1200 person rally in my first week of organizing. It was a complete shitshow, but it was a very enjoyable shitshow that I learned a lot from, I guess. I didn’t actually know what DACA was until the rally happened and I learned like during the speak outs what it was. I was just organizing for it ‘cause it felt like the right people were organizing it with and I wanted to be organizing with those people. Then ever since then I stuck around and did do organizing for a while. This was all while I was in grad school. I organized a lot for racial justice, because, you know, racial justice continued to be necessary in 2016 and 2017 and there were a handful of actions about it.

Eventually our grad student union reached out to me and asked me to support a campaign that they were in to get unionized positions that were doing quote-unquote “diversity labor,” so the people who were on inclusivity teams or whatever. I didn’t know much about a union or what a unionized position was, but they told me what the union benefits were. A unionized position for a grad students at UofM pays upwards of $30/hour and has better healthcare than most people that I know in the world. At the time I was getting $11/hour for diversity work and didn’t have health insurance, right? So even though I didn’t know what a labor union was, I sure could tell the difference between that kind of position and where I was at. So I offered to help out in sort of a similar way. Again, I sort of got the vibe that this is the right place for me to be and the right people for me to be with and I then learned what I was doing along the way.

That contract campaign…We ended up getting some of those positions and I ended up getting one through the rest of grad school. So I was getting a much better paycheck, and my tuition was covered, and I had really good healthcare for doing the kind of diversity work that I was already being tokenized for.

About a month after that contract campaign, I was elected to be in the leadership of the union. So, again, this is like 3 months after meeting these people and diving into the work. For two years, I led their Solidarity Committee, which was charged with figuring out how a labor union was doing messaging and education and being in relationship with other activist causes, particularly outside of the University that were still local.

And then I graduated and I got really lucky to be able to get a job in this sort of non-profit activist space, which does have all sorts of issues that still needs to to work out and work on. But I mean, I do get to do a lot of really cool educational work. I get to do the organizing I wanna do. I’ve taken on this role of being like a mentor or a guide, or sometimes I refer to it I as a sort of movement therapist for other organizers that we work with. I get to do cool conflict resolution work. It’s really exciting, and that’s where I kind of am now, four years later.

**Tuck:** Yes, thank you so much for that overview. I think that my follow-up questions are going to be the rest of the interview, but I really appreciate that context. So before we had started recording you said to me, “I also love to talk about being dumb and not needing much knowledge to jump into the work.” Can you talk more about that, is that referring to the fact that you’ve organized for things where you didn’t really know what they were until the organizing was part-way done?

**Vidhya**: Yeah. Yeah, yeah, yeah. So I didn’t know what DACA was until they talked about it at the rally I organized and I didn’t know what a labor union was until like 2 weeks before I was in charge of one. I mean, all I had to do was be in solidarity with the people I was organizing with, find a space that kind of like cared for and valued me, just sort of jump in and try shit. I think that there’s so much fear of doing the wrong thing in social justice. I don’t want to say, like, cancel culture and I don’t wanna buy into the more gross narratives about this, but there is a real social fear of saying the wrong—or doing the wrong thing. And that ties into the ways that people don’t just jump in and don’t just awkwardly message Facebook groups or Facebook organizers and they don’t just try shit, because the wrong thing genuinely does hurt people and can often exacerbate the systems that we’re fighting against. But I sort of accepted very early on that these people felt like I was valuable here, so I was going to be here. I was just going to do whatever felt right to all of us as a group for me to be doing, I would learn along the way, I would fail a lot. I did fail a lot.

I think that’s true of organizing writ-large. Most organizing is, in the short term, failure. Right? Like most, most of our campaigns that are super radical and are the things we want–we either have to accept very severe compromises or they just don’t work. But over the long term we build a lot of power and a lot of experience and like lead to the kind of mass movements that we’re seeing happen this week. So, I was very willing to get things wrong, I was very willing to talk about how I got things wrong, work with people to repair the kind of harms that were done when we got things wrong, and just keep trying shit. Because, like, I don’t know. It feels like if we don’t try shit, nothing changes.

A lot of the shit we try, even when it doesn’t work, right, like the police accountability work I did, for example. We ended up with a sort of police accountability commission that has former cops on it and doesn’t have any teeth and doesn’t do any of the things we wanted it to do. But I made relationships with the Black elders that give me a huge hug every time they see and I never would have met them if I didn’t do that organizing. So there’s like, even if we fail as a group or fail individually, there’s still a lot of individual benefit to organizing and learning and growing and building relationships and that contributes to a much longer game where we eventually kind of have things in place that we need to take care of each other and they do work because we’ve failed enough for us to learn enough lessons for the things to work effectively.

I often frame it as just like being a dumb bitch who cares a lot. Because I want, I want more people to carry that attitude where like, sure we don’t know anything but we give a shit enough to show up and try and then we’re going to try and see what happens.

One of the reasons I want that is because we have this culture where failure feels so bad internally it ends up being like the same 5 organizers that do everything all the time and we end up getting this celebrity organizer culture where a handful of very burnt out organizers are looked up to by everyone for direction. It would be much better if we were able distribute that labor because lots of people are trying things and growing into organizers rather than thinking that activism was this special, inaccessible that they couldn’t get to.

**Tuck:** So, you know,in the last couple days, actually just yesterday the day that we’re recording this, we saw a lot of people trying to be allies by putting black squares on their instagram. I have seen at protests, folks who show up to march but then spend a lot of time and energy trying to befriend the cops by being like “March with us, take a knee, let me reason with you about my life.” My initial question was going to be like how can we grow those good intentions into meaningful change, but honestly after listening to what you just said, I almost wonder if a more relevant question is like, how can we have patience with those people and see the good intentions? And work with folks who are clearly putting their toes into activism for the first time into the most productive possible thing… Maybe the same question but maybe with more of a lens of me feeling like an asshole about it, so thank you. [giggles]

**Vidhya**: The first two things I’ll say: it’s important to do our best to not recognize those things as individual failings. Because if we treat them like failings, if we treat every person posting a black square or every person befriending cops at a protest as an individual mistake, we miss the forest for the trees and we don’t see the systems that are conditioning the people to act like that. And it’s also perfectly reasonable to be mad about that shit, because it is damaging, it’s more obvious to people who’ve been in movements for a while the ways that that’s damaging, right? So, it’s very easy to not have that patience and very reasonable to not have that patience, but I do think some number of us do have to have that patience. I don’t think that’s necessarily a role that we all have to fill, but I was talking about how I was seeing myself in more of like a coaching or mentoring or teaching role.

In that role, I have developed a lot of patience for these conversations. And I do think that some fraction of the movement has to be these kinds of guides and mentors and teachers that do have patience. Because we’re socially conditioned to love cops. Like, *Paw Patrol* is a thing that exists. So we’re brought up from like age 2 thinking that cops are good and they protect us and we have such a deep yearning in out heart for that to be true that it’s really easy for us to treat individual bad cops as individual wrongs that those cops need to be punished. It’s really easy for us to befriend the good cops and hope that their goodness spreads or whatever. It’s really hard for us to come to a place of believing in full abolition, in believing that the only acceptable thing is no incarceration and no police. I think that losing that patience is reasonable and I think that getting angry when you see those things is reasonable, I don’t think what’s reasonable is acting on that impatience because I don’t think that that meaningfully builds something better.

And I also don’t think that it’s reasonable for us to kind of forget where we came from, right? In 2014 and 2015 I was on tumblr learning whatever it was that people on tumblr were posting and I’m not gonna pretend that most of it was good or abolitionist or radical in very caring and loving ways–it’s tumblr. We’re all just kind of struggling and doing our best to learn and we all kind of come from somewhere we all have our own backgrounds and we’re all subject to a lot of the same social conditioning. And so when we carry that impatience into the work that we’re doing and we work in sort of an impatient way with these people, we fail to kind of make space for our own past and we fail to help people grow. Way I try to frame it a lot is, like, a lot of people say we have to meet people where they’re at, especially to marginalized people. I’m sure you’ve heard that a ton, too, and that fucking sucks. But in order to take someone with us, we do have to meet them where they’re at. We have to meet people where they’re at and then make sure we don’t leave them there. For the people who don’t have that patience or who have lost that patience–completely reasonable–I think it would be best to kind of focus your role on not engaging with new organizers or with the crowd at protests, and focus on doing the kinds of things that drew you to movement work and that fulfill you these days, even if that’s not the sort of popular education work.

This might be going into a tangent, but I think we don’t have a very good culture of archiving our activism or learning from our activism. There’s no built-up, shared knowledge about what a movement looks like. And so when people get into organizing they think they have to do everything, right? They think they have to be the ones to send out all the window memes, they think they have to be the people to write all the literature, they think they have to be the people who speak, they think they have to be the people who organize de-escalation teams at rallies. There’s a million of these roles and we think we have to do all of them and we don’t really specialize into that the things that actually fulfill us and make the work sustainable. And so I think that’s something important for us to look to, to the future both from this moment and as we carry this moment forward, right? There’s enough movement work for us all to find things that fulfill us and that actually give us life so our organizing doesn’t have to feel miserable all the time. Now I think part of that misery is from people giving themselves the expectation of having to teach everyone around them, which fucking sucks.

**Tuck:** Yeah, that was so useful. Thank you so much. I realized, as you were speaking, how much of my frustration comes from the disdain that I have for myself for my own learning process. So I think I sort of had a therapy moment “I am hard on other people because I am so hard on myself. For not knowing everything all the time from day one.” So I really appreciate all of that.

**Vidhya:** Yeah.

**Tuck:** You mentioned that you worked had in police accountability before and you’ve worked in labor and anti-fascism. So I’m curious for folks who are maybe coming to these issues for the first time right now, specifically police accountability, I’m wondering how what’s going on in the last week or so fits in with the work that you and others have been doing previously.

**Vidhya:** The police accountability work is…work that we did because an elder Black woman was killed in Ann Arbor in 2014, I think, named Aura Rosser.

It’s been a demand of the Black community ever since then. Saying that we can hold the police accountable feels in the same vein as saying that the police are a system that can be fixed. And I don’t believe that. I believe that both because of their history and because of their present, they’re a system that really just exist to protect certain people and certain property and exist to enact violence on everyone else, and I don’t think there’s any making that better. Because it was a thing that Black elders wanted and because it was a thing that…wasn’t really my fight, right? Like I am a trans woman of color, I am subject to violence from police, but an elderly Black woman was killed here. I sort of raised that I think this wasn’t going to work, and then people wanted to do it, so I just did it because it’s important to me to build those relationships and build that solidarity. And it’s more important that those relationships exist than it is that individual campaign worked.

Police accountability fits in the current moment because it’s thing that everyone wants. We’re conditioned to think that it’s only individual cops that are bad and that there are individual solutions for these individual cops and, you know, stories that reflect how pervasive the problems are don’t really make the news. There is a story about a cop in New York who tried to basically snitch on his follow cops and was forcibly institutionalized by them for like three years, or maybe three months? I don’t remember the details, either is bad. And we don’t hear about what happens to quote-unquote “good cops,” or we don’t hear about the cops that quit. We only hear about individual actions every once in a while, and we don’t actually fully understand or hear about or talk about police culture.

There are a lot of calls for punishing the cops that do these things, and that kind of upholds punishment as a value. That is also something that doesn’t feel abolitionist to me. So abolition is wanting to get rid of policing and prisons, wanting to understand the root causes of the things we call crimes, and understanding what sorts of things can we do to address those root causes and actually build a caring society where these prisons aren’t necessary. If we want abolition, we should really really try to push ourselves to not think in punishment mindsets, not think that individual actors deserve to be punished. Because again, that misses systems, and that misses the forest for the trees. If these individual cops get punished, on the one hand, great, they’re off the streets they’re not hurting people and on the other hand, all the other cops that hurt people are still going to be hurting people.

There are a lot of mixed calls right now. Some people want accountability, some people want body cams, some people want abolition, some people just want to say “Black lives matter” and move on with their lives. But for me, this is like a really really good moment to look at abolition as a demand and as something reasonable. And we’re also seeing a lot of evidence for it, right? In Chicago, they cut the kind of free meal program that they were doing, effectively as sort of punishment for the rioting, and so individuals or small communities stepped up to feed each other and to create these food programs.

In Minnesota, in Minneapolis, they took over a hotel and have been housing houseless people to get them basically off the street. We’re seeing all sorts of new ways of care and addressing both kind of social and individual harms pop up as part of the movement, because you can’t really go to a protest, see something bad happen and then call the police about it. And so it’s a really really powerful moment to see abolition in action, and see care in action, and see that the cops don’t protect us but we protect us. We have a lot of power to protect us and a lot of power to build these systems and programs that protect and care for us that don’t rely on police or prisons to exist.

I think one of the things that’s being revealed right now isn’t just the harms of police and the harms of prison, but also the things we can do for each other and ways we can care for each other. And that was already getting lifted up little bit because of COVID. Now is a moment when mutual aid is deeply important and people are stepping up to take care of each other, which I think has spilled over into how we can think about how our care is a powerful tool for activism and like what the relationship is between out communities’ care and abolition as we see both the harms of police and prison and the power that we have.

**Tuck:** Yeah, absolutely. So I actually got a DM on Instagram today that said “You said in the most recent episode of Gender Reveal that we shouldn’t reform police and quote, ‘the goal is to abolish the occupation of cop.’ My question is who should I call when somebody breaks into my house if the police is gone. Any insight would be appreciated.” So that’s like a pretty common response, but yeah. How would you answer that question?

**Vidhya:** Yeah, very very common question. What do we do with the people that hurt people? One of the ways I answer that question is I help people really introspect on what do we do now with those people, right? Like when those people have power and money, when those people are your, like, Harvey Weinsteins or Jeff Epsteins or whoever’s been in the news recently, take your pick, when those people are like Jeff Bezos, who’s just like massively exploiting and stealing from his workers, his workers are being forced to like pee in bottles and still might like not get their quotas done…when these things happen what happens to those people? Those people don’t get punished in the same ways, they don’t get policed in the same ways. The reason that Harvey Weinstein did is because of massive public outrage and massive public pressure. But like that would not have happened, normally. That’s not how our systems are built. Lots of people murder and get away with it. Lots of people rape and get away with it. Lots of people steal and get away with it. The most common form of theft in the world is wage theft. Wage theft accounts for, like, I wanna say, three fourths to four fifths of all theft, and that’s just corporations breaking labor laws and unfairly paying their workers too little. And so all of these crimes and harms are happening and are going unpunished.

So that question makes a really fatal assumption and assumes that things are working now. And they’re not. The only people who get punished are Black, Brown, trans people, other marginalized people. Whether they’ve caused harm or not, they become part of this sort of criminal justice labor exploitation enterprise. Another way I help tackle that question is I talk about what prisons really are. I think a lot of people carry this assumption that punishment is good because it both prevents other people from committing crimes and helps the person who committed a crime learn from it and do better. But that’s not what punishment is. Punishment is the removal of someone’s agency. And when we think about, in our own lives, how we’ve learned and grown and

learned how to not cause harms that we’ve caused in the past, we’ve had to come to that ourselves. We’ve had to have the agency to want our own accountability and we’ve had to have the agency to go to Tumblr, and, like, learn shit. People weren’t ever able to force us to learn things. You can’t ever force anyone to learn anything, they have to come to it themselves to learn. And that’s not what prisons are designed to do. Prisons aren’t spaces of learning, they’re spaces of labor exploitation. In prisons they get paid less than a dollar an hour for most their labor, and when their labor is really dangerous, like fighting California wildfires, they might get a dollar an hour.

So, we can really do a lot to reveal what the actual functions of police and prison are. And we can do a lot to talk about why we’re conditioned to think that police and prisons do something that they don’t do.

And then my final answer is I don’t know. We have the system we have and we need to undo that system. There are models of community care. There are models of community accountability. There are models of addressing harm without calling police or without resorting to prisons. But the truth is that’s something that we have to try. That’s something that we have to have space to try shit and iterate on when we know what works and what doesn’t. It’s probably the case that different things will work for different communities, right? There isn’t a one-size-fit all solution for how do we deal with harm in communities. It’s just important to realize that we’re not and that we have to be given space to try something different and try something better and that space doesn’t exist as long as police and prisons do. And I think that that sort of combination of things, learning about police and prisons, thinking about harm, thinking about how we’ve grown, learning about how we’ve been conditioned to believe in police. That whole cocktail of thinking often leads people to start their journeys towards thinking about abolition more seriously.

**Tuck:** Hey, did you know you’re really good at talking about these things? [laughs]

**Vidhya:** [laughs] I’ve been told.

**Tuck:** I want to make sure to talk about gender a little bit. So I’m interested in how gender has informed your activism, or how working towards trans rights has intersected with other movements you’ve been a part of.

**Vidhya:** Sure! I have a handful of answers and I don’t know if can connect them all together.

**Tuck:** It’s fine.

**Vidhya:** So one thing I wanna touch on with Carta, who’s also been a guest on this podcast, is building up trans community and our ability to care for each other. Doing that work makes you really engaged with the kind of care people need, right? Like I didn’t transition early, I came out at 28. And so I was already in grad school and I already sort of had this middle class life where I didn’t have insurance for like a year, but apart from that I was doing okay. And I’m doing okay now. And I don’t necessarily have to engage with the same harms as someone who is trans, gets kicked out at 16 deals with. I don’t have to deal with the harms of survival sex work, for example.

So trying to take care of a trans community does a lot to push you to think about mutual aid, push you to think about the power of care. We’ve actually seen a lot of trans folks, in the time that we’ve been able to take care of them, you know, stabilizes in their mental health, start thinking about what they wanted to do, you know, start making art or engaging in politics, or becoming activists in their own ways, and you start to see what people are free to do when they’re not just worried about their survival on day-to-day basis. So that’s one thing that I would tie very explicitly to gender because it’s tied explicitly to trans community and taking care of trans people.

Another thing I’ve thought and lot about and worked a lot in is trans healthcare and access to both hormones and surgeries and therapies and learning about the healthcare system. That does a really good job of teaching you that the healthcare system is an industry that doesn’t always have patients’ interest at heart. And, in its own ways, is kinda carceral and kind of bad and takes agency away from people and autonomy away from people even as it cares for their health And that of course deeply intersects with race and a lot of the things we’re seeing right now like news we’ve seen in the past about how Black mothers, you know, suffer in OBGYNs because of racisms built into the healthcare system.

I think that transitioning and engaging with being a trans woman has actually made it a lot easier to try things. Because, like, speaking in public in front of a thousand people is actually going to be less scary than wearing a skirt in public for the first time. When you are kind of presenting for the first time as something radically different from like a norm expectation of what people kind of ascribe to your body and expect from your body, that’s some of the most terrifying shit there is and any kind of activism is going to be less terrifying than that, so I might as well try it. And that kind of attitude has helped a ton, right? Like you said earlier that you think that I’m good at speaking about these things. It’s a practiced skill and that practice came because I tried it once. And then the first time I tried it, it didn’t go so great. I was drowned out by a helicopter, so no one noticed, which was perfect. But it took a lots of times of speaking in public about oppression or about issues before I would say I got good at it or eloquent at it.

Trying that shit was like very very clearly tied into trying out a new gender in public and getting over the fears of trying things. I would say even further than that, my entire process of gender has been just a journey of trying shit and seeing if it worked for me and then letting go off the things that didn’t very aggressively. I tried hormones and that worked, I tried she/her pronouns and that worked, I tried dresses and that worked, I tried being in the academy and that didn’t work. I tried activism and that did work, right? And so I see all these things as kind of wrapped up into the process of figuring out who I am in lots of different ways and I see that all as kind of gender, right? Gender as an oppressive system, is a system of social shame that kind of bullies you into behaving in certain ways and not letting yourself chase fulfillment and not letting yourself chase autonomy and not letting yourself chase your ideal aesthetic, or ideal anything. And so, you know, my gender is a lot of letting go off that. And a lot of trying shit and a lot of, you know, becoming an activist because I find it fulfilling. Working in certain movement spaces because I find them fulfilling.

I would say that part of my gender is refusing to send out window memes because I hate that shit. And part of my gender is loving coaching new activists because that is a thing that fulfills me. And my gender…my gender journey, for lack of a better phrase, is just finding out the things I like and doing them, and finding my own power and own autonomy in the world. In that way and with that framing, my journey to gender is not just similar to my journey to becoming an activist or my journey to, I don’t know, figuring out what I wanna do in the world but it’s all the same journey. And it’s all the same process of exploring new things with my body and new things with my work. That’s kind of all I need towards who I am today and towards the person I am today. I think a lot of time when we talk about gender we don’t think about gender as this very holistic thing, but that’s how it feels to me.

**Tuck:** Yeah. I keep learning so much about myself as you’re talking. Not to make everything about me, but I was thinking about everything you’re saying, which is really really insightful to me and thinking about how the two times that I’ve taken big steps in my transition as a trans person are 2016 and right now. And I think there’s something about being like “well, fuck it, everything sort of going to shit”–not that it’s not always going to shit, because it is–but in these especially charged moments when there’s so many things that are more important than thinking about my gender is, I think, the time when I give myself space to be like “look this isn’t the highest stakes thing in the entire world.” Which is not exactly what you’re saying, but I think it’s–for me, it’s me taking the step of changing my name or changing my pronouns, or you know, going on T or whatever is not the highest stake thing in the world so maybe I can just do it and and not overthink it for my entire life.

**Vidhya:** Yeah, it’s on the one hand not related, and on the other hand very related because you’re figuring out what it is in your life that gives you the freedom to take chances and try shit, which is how we escape from all of this.

**Tuck:** Yeah [heavy sigh], so you work in the non-profit world and you said to me, before this conversation, that you’ve been talking about how non-profits won’t save trans people, so I would love to hear you expand on what you’re referring to when you say that.

**Vidhya:** Yeah, so first I’ll say Dean Spade says this better than I probably ever could and has written a book about it and the books is called “Normal Life” and is very very worth reading.

The way non-profits work is that they’re largely driven by large donations, and these usually come from philanthropists, right? Some of my salary actually comes form the Ford Foundation, some of it comes from Open Society’s Foundation, which is actually George Soros’s foundation. So, you know, in one respect, I am a George Soros paid actor. There’s all this ludicrously rich money involved in setting up a sustainable non-profit and we’re sustainable based on the grants we get. We are not funded by the people that we’re fighting for. And that’s critical because if we’re thinking about reclaiming our own power and we’re thinking about being able to care for each other, to me that’s not really coherent with the existence of rich people and with the existence of capitalism. But George Soros and Ford and the Waltons and whoever, they’re not gonna abolish themselves. They’re never gonna fund work that redistributes wealth, they’re never going to fund very radical work that detaches people from the systems of power we’re subject to because they control those systems. And so a lot of the work that gets done in this non-profit space ends up not being able to do the most radical things in the world or say the most radical things in the world.

Even at my work, which I think is one of the most radical non-profits I’ve seen, we are, you know, sort of necessarily limited in our freedom to completely change the world.

I also think that, you know, because we’re funded by rich people, rich people think the world changes in a specific way and they only want the world to change in a specific way and a lot of that usually has to do with very slow, incremental policy changes and being involved in elections. For those of use who don’t think that’s how the world changes or for those of us whose theory of change includes kind of a reclamation of power, non-profits don’t give us the space to explore that and non-profits don’t give us the space to do things that aren’t just slow policy changes that benefit, you know, rich white people first and then may or may not eventually benefit poor trans women of color.

So both from an angle of what non-profits are kind of forced to fight for and based on who non-profits ultimately serve, they’re really not going to be able to liberate us from the systems that oppress us because they are necessarily part of those systems. I do think a lot of trans non-profits do a lot of important work. It is important that lawyers show up, that trans lobbying exists. But also there is a lot of really good work happening outside of trans non-profits that needs a lot of attention paid to it, like a lot of community building, lot of mutual aid work, a lot of housing work, a lot of ways that we’re taking care of each other. And I think the only way that gets very visibilized in the trans movement is some of this non-profit work, is stuff like the Trans Center For Equality and things like that. But the work where we take care of each other on our own is the real thing that will eventually lead to us getting the space to set ourselves free.

**Tuck:** As trans people and folks of color and other marginalized folks, I know we talk a lot about passing the same $20 around in a circle, because so many of us have so little access to resources. And I know for me personally I get really really frustrated when I’m doing fundraising through Gender Reveal and I’m fundraising for trans folks of color and the people who are donating are other trans folks. That’s good, they should be donating, but there’re also so many people with so much more institutional power and privilege and so much more wealth that are not donating. And, as you said, part of this is that folks with power wanna maintain power are they’re not gonna fund things that destabilize that power. That also comes up, you know, in media, where the people who wanna do radical media are the people that don’t have funding to make media. It’s all the same sort of thread. So, I am curious if you have sort of ideas or a vision–and I’m not asking you to, like, save all of us singlehandedly–but I’m curious if you have thoughts or ideas for how we can work towards liberation, equity, at this time when we are at such a deficit of certain types of resources.

**Vidhya:** I think two things are important. One is mutual aid but also explicitly political mutual aid, right? Mutual aid can be reduced to people taking care of each other but it actually means a much more political thing where we’re sharing our suffering and sharing our power so that everyone feels cared for, right? And when we do that, that de-centers the idea that it’s only up to a handful of us to take care of all of us, and we all kind fo contribute to our own well-being. I think that has to be a part of the change. I think part of the change has to be our own growth as people.

One of the things I do is I facilitate relationship skills workshops for queers. And that’s really powerful work because when people can resolve their conflict, more people can be in a relationship with each even when it’s hard, our community stays stronger and a community with more people in it can take care of more people, right? The more people that spread the burden of care, the more every single person is cared for. So that’s a big component to my theory of change is building very long-term sustainable care networks and care systems where people aren’t in isolation. That work is really hard because we’re conditioned value isolation and self-sufficiency even though it’s not called that when we’re talking about independence and liberty or whatever. But I don’t actually wanna be independent. I wanna be interdependent as fuck. I want to not be self-reliant even a little bit for anything. I think that spreading that attitude and spreading that message and getting more folks to both work on themselves and work in community, so that the community is more capable of taking care of itself, is huge.

The other big thing that we have to do is that we do have to destabilize current power. Theft is dope. And looting is good. And all of these ways that we’re actually reclaiming power are going to be necessary to get power to let go off shit. It is absolutely the case that we’re not going to get anywhere without quote-unquote “violence.” There’s whole other podcast episode the definition of violence and who gets to define it and what gets called violence and what gets ignored and we don’t have to record that podcast now. But I think a lot of people are hoping for, like, a peaceful revolution and the ruling class or the people with power or the systems of oppression aren’t going to let go off themselves that easily. They’re going to hold on to it. It is going to to take some kind of fighting. That doesn’t mean everyone has to be on the front lines, that doesn’t mean everyone has to arm themselves. That doesn’t meant that we should all be training for the most violent revolution in the world. Like I said earlier there are a lot of things that are required in the movement. There are lots of ways to care, lots of ways to participate that are all important, right? The diversity of tactics is going to be super important. But it does mean that we should get over our fear of violence and our fear of rioting and our fear of destabilization. Because, in addition to building up our own capacity, that disruption is the thing that will eliminate other people’s power over us as we’re building our own power to take care of ourselves.

So my theory of change kind of has this two-fold method where we’re fighting against the power that exists and we’re building our own power and our own networks of care. You see that called dual power a lot. And I think that’s specifically more short-term, but it’s thinking about both, for example fighting for city council seats so you can do things like fight against your local power company, and for building your own micro-grid so that, like, these four houses don’t have to be on the power company’s grid. One of those is power that is counter to the power that exists and one of those is power that is alternative to the power that exists. Both of those are important. Which leaves like a million spaces to fight and I think all of those fights will have to happen in order to set us free.

**Tuck:** I understand, and have pointed out on this podcast, the inherent connection between the facts that there are widespread protests and rioting for basic human rights and decency right now and how it relates to how Pride was founded. So I’m not trying to say like “we can’t have Pride because of the current climate.” I think those things do go hand in hand, but I’m curious if there’s anything that you’re doing to sort of celebrate or acknowledge your queerness or transness. Also just because coronavirus has cancelled any sort or IRL gathering that we would have that’s not explicitly a protest–which again is maybe the most Pridey thing you can do, but?

**Vidhya:** There isn’t, but I think there should be and I don’t know what that looks like.

I think it is very important to celebrate Pride because it specifically celebrates Stonewall and it specifically celebrates a moment where people threw bricks and reclaimed power. I think Pride also celebrates things like the existence of STAR, which was Street Transvestite Action Revolutionaries. It was Sylvia Rivera’s and Marsha P. Johnson’s kind of community care and advocacy group where they took care of other trans sex workers and tried to build community in this way that I’ve been talking about. So I think there are important things to celebrate. But I think the way to celebrate them–as I’m talking I’m thinking about this–the way to celebrate them is showing up in the street and is making this relationship and this connection between how revolting has helped us in the past and how revolting will help us again in the future.

I don’t wanna say this moment doesn’t just have to be about Blackness, but I do wanna say that because it’s about Blackness it’s also about queerness. Those things are deeply interconnected. Gender and sexuality and race are deeply interconnected. And so I think this is a moment when we’re not necessarily having to pit these things against each other and say that there’s this protest about race happening so we can’t think of our sexuality, or whatever. I think this is a really critical moment to see the same struggle, the same fight. We need to celebrate the fights we’ve had in the past by having fights in the present. Whether those fights are struggling in the streets and getting tear gassed, or the fight is building a community of care at home so that other people can go out into the street and get tear gassed. I think that’s like the best way we can celebrate Pride in this moment.

And I think, as an aside, that also ties into how we should think about how Pride has changed and what Pride has become, right? Pride has become this moment for brands to kind of just signal rainbows, but not for us to critically think about our own power, which is how we got freed at Stonewall and at the cafeterias in San Francisco. There’s a group called Gay Shame that does a lot of great work. I really like their name in particular, right? Their name was kind of in contrast to Gay Pride. And the reason they called themselves Gay Shame isn’t because they think that we should be ashamed of ourselves. It’s because they think that we shouldn’t assimilate into a society that will forever be ashamed of us. I think Gay Pride has become a lot about saying “we’re just like you but gay,” or “we’re just like you but trans,” and brands have really capitalized on that. But I think the riots were like “we’re not like you, but we deserve our own human rights and our own way to exist really weirdly and you get to be as uncomfortable as you want with us and die mad about it.” And I think that carrying that attitude into these protests and carrying the attitude of “we’re all we’ve got but we’re all we need” is what Pride is really about. And so I think that we can celebrate queerness by showing up for each other right now and talking about that andtalking about its relationship to queerness.

**Tuck:** Yeah, absolutely. That question is a hold-over from other interviews I’ve done that was post-coronavirus but pre-the current protests and it’s so funny ‘cause you could–I’m sure you could hear–as I started to ask it I was like “oh this question doesn’t super make sense, let me try to change it. Then I was like “nope, there’s no way to change it because going out and protesting is Pride and organizing is Pride,” and so I appreciate you taking that question and turning it into something really great [chuckles], because it was sort of inherently contradictory to itself, to me, at least.

**Vidhya:** Yeah.

**Tuck:** This is the part of the show where I just ask you what else you wanna talk about that I haven’t asked you about yet.

**Vidhya:** Here’s what I’ll say. One think I’ll say is I’m writing an essay about this, which I’m saying on a recording, so now I have to do it. But I wanna talk a little bit about hope and shame which are two things I’ve been thinking a lot about. Shame is a thing we’re all struggling with, because all of our lives have changed very deeply because of COVID and now we have to be on Zoom calls where people see our unmade beds and, like, we’ve lapsed in our skin care routines, or whatever.

But, I mentioned this earlier, I’ve been thinking about shame a lot as a system of social control. When I politicize it like that, and when I think about the way that shame is meant to be isolating, and isolation is deeply antithetical to my politics, it makes it a lot easier for me to be vulnerable with people and say things like “yeah, I haven’t shaved in four days and I can’t give a fuck. I’m sad and and depressed and the world sucks.” Or “yeah, I saw that I got an email from you last week and you’re never getting a response.” When we’re that vulnerable with each other, and when we’re that honest about each other, even when it’s about things that feel bad, we’re building something better and we’re building the capacity to care for each other, right? That information I give to my friends, or that information I give to my co-workers, is a gift that I’m giving them that gives them better knowledge to take care of me and that gives them a better picture of my life and that builds a shared experience of the things I’m experiencing.

And then I’ve also been thinking about hope for very obvious reasons, it’s really hard to get on [twitter.com](http://twitter.com) right now and then feel hopeful when you see cops just…copping it up. But I think a lot about the ways I find hope. And that’s a lot about what I see wins are. I don’t see the win as upending capitalism. I mean, that’s the dream, I would love that, but that’s not what a win looks like right now. A win looks like helping a trans person pay for therapy, so they can get their life back on track and can start to become political in ways that excite them, rather than just being depressed and suicidal at home. Win looks like making cookies for your neighbor and building a relationship with your neighbor, so that you can text each other when you need things and can take care of each other. A win looks like having a political conversation and having people think about things, right? I think we need to re-conceptualize our wins so that they’re smaller, because those things are important and it’s going to be a million of those tiny, tiny wins that builds to a revolution, and it’s not going to be just this week of upending shit. And this week of upending shit is only possible because a million of those little things have happened in the past.

When we think about hope and hopelessness, we have to remember that we can find hope by reframing and recognizing the wins that we’re actually getting, even if they’re small. I think a lot about hope as a discipline. Hope as a discipline is a very common quote that you see, I think. I don’t know if Mariame Kaba originally said it, but that’s who I got it from. Hope is something that you have to practice and be intentional about to find. I also am thinking about hope as a social practice, right? When I’m alone and I’m just thinking my own thoughts, looking at twitter, I feel hopeless, but when I’m talking to someone and we’re talking about the future, we’re talking about building something or we’re just sharing sadness, I can feel myself building a relationship and can feel myself building something better. Hope is a lot easier to find in social situations than in isolation. And I think that the important thing to realize is that I’m not just hopeful that a better world is coming.

I am hopeful because I kind of recognize to some degree that a better world is here. And what I mean by that is we’re promised one version of the world, but now we’re seeing the potentials of an entirely different world where we take care of each other and where we love each other and where we center, you know, our own humanities and decenter money and profits and capitalism and these sorts of things. All of that shit is already happening and is already great. It’s a better world than what I was promised by my social conditioning growing up. When I’m thinking about how to find hope, I find hope in building and I’m not hopeful for a specific world in the future, or I’m not hopeful for a specific social system in the future. I’m hopeful because I build things with people and I see hope in other people as we’re talking and I help inspire people to just try shit. And there’s hope in the trying shit and there’s hope in the small wins.

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

**Vidhya:** I don’t wanna say in my ideal world gender doesn’t exist. What I wanna say is in my ideal world, we completely have the freedom and ability to do literally whatever the fuck we want with our bodies and lives and long as it’s not causing communal harm. And I think that is the version of gender I’m fighting for, and that is the kind of holistic picture of gender I use in my own relationship to gender. In my ideal future, gender just looks like autonomy and freedom.

[*Gender Reveal* theme music plays]

**Tuck:** That’s gonna to do it for this week’s show. Please share this episode with your community. Not because it helps the show but because I think this information really does help all of us. You can follow Vidhya on Twitter at @kid\_vidh. You can follow my reporting of the Portland protests on Twitter @tuckwoodstock, that’s also my Instagram handle now and the show is on Twitter and Instagram @gendereveal.

If you want you can pick up some weird amazing limited edition Pride merch at <bit.ly/gendermerch> with all proceeds going to trans folks, Black folks, and sex workers. Most things in the store are less than $20 before shipping.

This episode was produced and edited by me, Tuck Woodstock? Weird, I don’t know.

Our logo is by the amazing Ira M. Leigh, our theme song is by Breakmaster Cylinder.

I’m not sure whether next week’s episode will be a re-broadcast of a previous guest or a new episode, let me know if there’s something you’d like to hear, maybe an old episode you think folks should revisit right now. Regardless, we will be back real soon with more feelings about gender.

And hey, throw a brick at a cop.

[*Gender Reveal* theme music ends]

[silent pause]

**Tuck:** Hey, how are you doing?

**Vidhya:** I mean, you know.

**Tuck:** Yeah, it’s a stupid question and I shouldn’t ask it, but my reflex went on on the telephone, I feel like…

**Vidhya:** It’s fine. It’s like you don’t know how to start a conversation anymore.