[Gender Reveal theme music starts]

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

[Gender Reveal theme music ends]

**Tuck:** Hey everyone. I hope you’re hanging in there. Welcome to the last Gender Reveal episode of 2020. Between the full episodes and the mini bonus episodes and the feed drops, we put out 28 episodes in your feed this year and honestly, feelin’ okay about that considering the global pandemic and the 100+ nights of protest and me getting broken up with twice by the same person and all that stuff.

So. This week on the show, I’m excited to share my chat with A.B.O. Comix co-founder Casper Cendre. Casper has dedicated their life to advocating for queer prisoners and helping them in the fight towards liberation, and I learned so much from Casper in this conversation. We talk about why incarcerated queer folx are not a monolith, and why some trans women don’t want to be transferred to women’s prisons. We also talk about transitioning in prison, about not being allowed to touch anyone even before the pandemic—

**Casper [voice clip]:** Any sort of physical affection is barred; romantic relationships are barred.

**Tuck:** —and advice for getting involved in prison abolition work.

**Casper [voice clip]:** To me, abolition really means more community building than anything else because we have to have strong communities to even entertain the idea of not having prisons.

**Tuck:** But before we get to that, real quick, I know everyone is always grabbing at your money this time of year; I just want to say that if you like the work we do on the show, the best way to support us is by joining us at Patreon.com/gender, where you will receive our weekly newsletter for as little as $1/month, or by simply incessantly telling everyone you know to subscribe to Gender Reveal. This show does not have sponsors, we don’t have a network that pays us; it is mostly just me in my literal closet and sometimes other trans folx that help us out in various ways, which we pay for with the Patreon. So, we appreciate you helping us out and in the meantime, it’s time for This Week in Gender.

This week in gender, if I had an editor or a boss or really anyone reviewing the episodes before I release them into the world, they might say, “Tuck, there is so much trans news all the time, please talk about the trans news, please do not talk about the gay Christmas movie, we are done with that now.” But it’s the holidays; I don’t want to talk about the news, I want to talk about the gay Christmas movie.

[tranquil background music]

**Tuck:** If you don’t want to hear about Happiest Season, just skip ahead five minutes. If you are really interested in this topic, you will want to check out the Happiest Season episode of the Bechdel Cast. That’s a podcast in which the movie is discussed at length by our friend Jay Loftus and a straight host whose name I don’t know as well as Jes Tom, who is a non-binary actor and comedian who actually, spoilers, auditioned for the part of Riley. And let me just say it is interesting that they auditioned non-binary trans-masc people like Jes Tom and Rhea Butcher for the role of Riley, and maybe one day they will actually get to be in the movie.

Okay, Happiest Season. It is a movie starring one straight person (Mackenzie Davis) and three queers (Kristen Stewart playing Abby, Aubrey Plaza playing Riley, and Dan Levy more or less playing Dan Levy, but his name is technically John). And it’s directed by Clea DuVall, who you may know for playing a lesbian in But I’m a Cheerleader, playing a lesbian in VEEP, playing a lesbian in American Horror Story...playing a lesbian in various other movies. And it’s co-written by DuVall and Mary Holland, who is a heterosexual individual.

For these reasons, you would think that this movie would be probably for gay people. But this is a big Hollywood movie with stars and what was supposed to be a theatrical release back when theatres existed, so they had to get approval and funding from lots of straight people, and for one reason or another I would argue that this movie is largely for straight people. And here is my evidence.

One is I could be misremembering, but I don’t think there are gay in-group references in the film. And secondly, and much more importantly, this movie kind of sucks to watch as a queer person. I don’t want to speak for everyone; I’m sure some of you had a great time. But for me, I don’t want to see queer people getting shoved back into the closet by shitty rich Republicans; I don’t want to see queer people be violently outed; I don’t want to see queer people feel alienated during the holidays; I don’t want to see queer people being treated like shit by their partners. And there’s a character who’s not neurotypical; she’s also treated like shit, and I’d argue that most queers don’t want to see that either.

There are parts of this movie that I really like. I was thinking about it today: all of those moments are when two queer people are talking to each other and straight people aren’t involved. Why are there so many straight people in this movie?

[tranquil background music fades out]

**Tuck:** Anyway, Clea DuVall is allowed to make a movie that I don’t love. There are hundreds of films that I don’t love. But this is at least partially a film about gay people having a bad time because of homophobia, and I was thinking about that, and then I was thinking about the gay movies that I do love, like But I’m a Cheerleader and Rafiki and Moonlight, and they’re also about gay people having a bad time because of homophobia. And I just so deeply in my heart of hearts need to watch two queers make out and experience joy without being constantly reminded that there are people out there who inexplicably hate us!

You know who does a great job of this, by the way, is Dan Levy. When he made Schitt’s Creek, he was very clear in interviews that he wanted to make a show about gay people in which they get to do everything straight people do, like have emotional arcs and fall in love and have conflict that isn’t about their sexuality, and all of that stuff, and that, I think, is probably one of the reasons why so many gay people love Schitt’s Creek. Right? We get to live in a magical world where homophobia doesn’t exist.

All that is to say it is fine to make a movie that makes me feel deeply sad as a queer person. People do that all of the time. But as a person who has a degree in film production for some reason, let me present three endings I would personally prefer.

[bell dings]

My top choice is that Kristen leaves with Dan Levy, they have a nice Christmas together, we all think about the power of chosen family, Harper isn’t involved. At some point let’s say Kristen hooks up with Aubrey Plaza and maybe they get married, à la Carmen Maria Machado’s actual life. If you don’t know, now you know.

[bell dings]

If we have to accept the premise that the leads stay together because it’s a rom-com and lesbians are always getting broken up at the end, Harper and Abbey, let’s say they have Christmas together, they’re reconnecting, but they take a lot of space from Harper’s family—they definitely don’t stay there the next day; maybe that space lasts forever—and also Harper and Abby go to therapy.

[bell dings]

Okay. If we must accept the family, can we at least acknowledge—and I know we can’t—but can we at least acknowledge that it would take more than 12 hours for that whole family to just change their entire mindset on homosexuality? I know it’s a rom-com, but when I see the family be like, “Oops! We have immediately seen the error of our ways and are now in PFLAG,” it actually hurts my feelings a little bit because it erases the fact that many queer people cannot magically make their families not hompohobic simply by being brave.

[tranquil background music fades in]

**Tuck:** And more than that, seeing everyone cozy and happy together literally one day later ignores the fact that if people have treated you like shit for a very long time, and one day they start acting very nice as if there was never a problem between y’all in the first place, you may not feel good and you may not feel safe because why would you possibly feel safe? How would you possibly be able to trust this goodwill to last? And how would you be able to immediately break down the emotional barriers that you put up over the course of your life in order to keep yourself safe? It’s okay! You don’t have to use every scrap of kindness that a straight cis person shows you in order to beat yourself up for feeling like shit in the past. You can still want space from people even if they’re currently being nice to you. You don’t have to trust them. It’s not your fault.

This movie is not the movie to tackle those themes, obviously. But if we’re not going to use a bunch of queers making a big-budget queer movie to tackle complex queer scenarios, I would at least like to feel good.

We’re selling shirts for a few more days; they say “Abby and Riley should have made out in the dive bar.” It’s a joke and a fundraiser for Black Transwomen Inc. I don’t know why anyone is buying these shirts, but the reason this sentence is soothing to me personally is because watching two queers talk in the drag bar was the only part I feel safe in the whole movie. Nobody is being homophobic; no one is being neglectful; I just wanted the movie to stay in the dive bar.

And honestly, I woke up sad and wrote this essay sitting on the kitchen floor feeling sad and gay and I would personally still like to be in the dive bar.

This was supposed to be short and fun, but... oops!

This has been, This Week in Gender.

[tranquil background music ends]

[theme music]

**Tuck:** Casper Cendre is the co-founder and director of A.B.O. Comix, a small press and prisoner advocacy group that works to amplify the voices of LGBT people in prison. Casper collaborates with and publishes the work of incarcerated artists through a yearly comic anthology, zines, and solo graphic novel collections. All profits generated through A.B.O. Comix are donated to queer, transgender, and HIV+ prisoners so they can access commissary goods, medical co-pays, legal counsel, and art supplies.

[theme music ends]

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

**Casper:** I identify as non-binary or transmasculine.

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

**Casper:** He or they pronouns.

**Tuck:** And do you have a preference or do you prefer people mix it up?

**Casper:** I don’t really have a preference; different people in my life use different pronouns for me and I’m fine with either he or they.

**Tuck:** Awesome. We are here primarily to talk about A.B.O. Comix—can you tell us the origin story of how A.B.O. Comix came to be?

**Casper:** Sure. A.B.O. Comix was founded in 2017 by myself and two of my really awesome friends named Io and Bluth. They were really big in the comic book industry at the time and were really interested in just making comic book art, and I was heavily involved in prisoner advocacy and still am. I’ve been doing prisoner advocacy work for about 10 years now. So we got together one day and we were hanging out in the community garden here in Oakland, and we thought it might be cool to bridge some of the people I had been pen palling with in prison for a long time, to bridge their artistic expertise with comic books. So we decided to reach out to all my incarcerated pen pals who were artists and ask if they would be interested in submitting something to a comic book anthology for queer prisoner art. And there was a lot of interest in that. All of my friends were really excited to submit, so we ended up actually taking out a call for submissions ad in the Black and Pink newspaper, which circulates to a couple thousand incarcerated queer people, and the response there was extremely huge as well. We got back a couple hundred letters in the first few months.

So in 2017 we put together our first anthology of queer prisoner comics. It was so much fun, we had a blast doing it, and so many people submitted and found value in it and encouraged us to keep going with the project. So now we’re in our fourth year, we’re about to publish the fourth anthology, and we’ve also branched out into a whole bunch of other publications. So we’re helping people publish their solo graphic novels, their solo omnibus collections, as well as we’re just branching out into zines and hopefully maybe even podcasting in the future.

**Tuck:** How did you get into prisoner advocacy work in the first place? You said you’ve been in it for more than 10 years?

**Casper:** I’ve had a couple family members who have been incarcerated, so I did some prison visits when I was a kid, and that kind of got me a little bit interested in the sort of dynamics of prison life and what happens on the other side of walls that we don’t, you know, get a real good glimpse into more than just sort of the Hollywood cinematic depiction of prison life. Andyeah, growing up, I saw my family members inside prison, saw the things they were going through, saw the lack of access they had to community and family members on the outside, and just kind of saw what prisons did to people’s psyches and emotional state. And that got me interested in corresponding with people in prison.

So when I was in high school, I started writing, or just pen palling, with a couple people inside prison—a couple queer people. And they introduced me to their friends in prison, so my pen pal group just grew larger and larger, and then when I moved up to the Bay Area in 2015, I got involved with Black and Pink, which is a prison abolitionist group who primarily focus on linking up free world people with incarcerated pen pals. And I just kind of found my family in that, and started forming a huge community of friends and loved ones on the inside, and so it just kind of involves my entire life at this point. My life is just sort of prison abolition work now.

**Tuck:** Is that literally your full-time job? I’m just curious.

**Casper:** Yeah! It is, it is. When we started A.B.O. Comix I was working two jobs and then also doing this project in my free time, so I would work 10 hours a day and then come home and work another, just, seven or eight hours at night and get, like, three hours of sleep. And after, you know, a couple years of that, I thought, “I love this work so much, I want this to be my full-time job.” So I quit all my other jobs and invested 100% into doing ABO Comix, although it’s still entirely volunteer-run, so I don’t take a paycheck from it, so trying to figure out my own finances has been a fun juggling experiment! [laughs]

**Tuck:** Wait, how do you live?!

**Casper:** Um...not well! [laughs] So I’m hoping that next year we can actually—we’ve been sort of subsisting off of grant funding for a couple years so I’m actually hoping that for the first time next year I’ll be able to write a salary into our grant funding so that I might actually be able to, you know, have this be my job and get paid for it.

**Tuck:** Yeah, I would love that for you!

**Casper:** Yeah! [laughs]

**Tuck:** Before I forget, can you tell us where the name A.B.O. Comix comes from?

**Casper:** Mmhmm. It’s kind of a funny story. It was something we bounced around a lot when we were starting this project and we kind of just had it as a placeholder name as short for “abolition,” and then it just kind of stuck. We have a ton of acronyms now that we’ve been playing around with, like Anarchists Breaking Out. We have Always Been Optimistic, since that’s a constant struggle when you’re dealing with the prison industrial complex, so we’ve taken on a ton of different acronyms for the meaning of A.B.O., but it’s short for “abolition.”

**Tuck:** So you’re receiving these comics that are mailed to you from people who are incarcerated. Do prison employees censor what can be said in the comics or letters going in and out?

**Casper:** Yeah, they do. So all incoming letters are screened by prison guards—generally read, at least skimmed, and that includes all our publications as well. We’ve had a couple things rejected on the grounds that “This could incite a riot,” because, you know, because we have an abolitionist perspective. So we try to be very, very careful about the correspondence that we send in. We want to make sure that we don’t get any of our friends or loved ones on the inside in trouble. We’re very careful about the language and correspondence that we use. But yes, we have seen a lot of censorship. I’d say a good 10% of my job is just being on the phone with people in the mailroom in prison or prison wardens just being like, “Hey, why is this happening? Why is this getting rejected?” and them just being like, “We don’t really have a good answer for you!” and letting it in after being on the phone with them 20 minutes presenting my case. [laughs] So that’s been a constant kind of issue we’ve run into for the past couple years.

**Tuck:** So the third anthology that you released is about COVID specifically, and I want to talk about that a little bit. But before that, in the first two anthologies—I haven’t gotten to read those, but I assume there are themes that have emerged just in general in the comics and letters that people have sent you. I’m curious about what the main themes or most common topics are when folx are sending you stuff for A.B.O. Comix.

**Casper:** Sure, yeah. With the exception of our COVID-19 anthology, which is of course about the pandemic inside prisons, our first three anthologies are about the queer experience inside prison. So the common linking theme of course is, “What is it like to be a queer person or a transgender person or an HIV+ person in prison? What are the experiences you have and that you’ve gone through?”

I’d say apart from that central linking theme, something I’ve seen pop up time and time again is just this craving for the feeling of being human and being treated as a human being, because that seems to be missing from so many people’s daily lives. They are told what to do, when to do it, how to do it, and then constantly criticized pretty much for it and told they’re doing it wrong. So that just essential human need to talk to other people, to have human affection, to have, you know, human touch with other people, is something very missing from a lot of incarcerated people’s lives.

Something that we see in the comics quite a bit is, “Hey, I’m looking for a pen pal, I’m looking for outside support, I’m looking for some sort of human contact outside of these grim, bleak brick walls.” So that’s something that we also really heavily advocate for is trying to link people up with pen pals just because access to the outside world is so limited and that takes such a hard emotional toll on people while they’re serving their prison sentence.

**Tuck:** Yeah, so if people are listening to this and they’re thinking, “I would love to be a pen pal to one of these folx,” how would they go about getting linked up?

**Casper:** So this year we started a pen pal portion of our website. If you go to ABOComix.com and then click on our Pen pal section, we’ve got quite a few bios from our contributors up and then we have a little contact form so you can tell us who you would like to write with. But Black and Pink is also a national pen pal organization that links up free world people with incarcerated LGBT people. And they’re incredible; they just revamped their entire website, and it’s looking great. So that’s a great resource. And also our friends at Abolition Apostles are doing a pen pal program, and so you can go to AbolitionApostles.com as well. So those are a couple different resources.

There are of course hundreds of thousands of people in prison who are looking for any sort of contact with the outside world and looking to build friendships and relationships with people in the free world, so even if you just do a search for “prison pen pals” or something like that, a ton of organizations should come up.

**Tuck:** You are specifically focuses on queer and trans people who are incarcerated as well as folx with HIV. I’m curious more about how the demographics break down.

**Casper:** Sure, of course. It’s interesting, definitely. There are more people incarcerated in men’s facilities than there are in women’s, so we do just by proxy correspond with people in men’s prisons more. But that also means we correspond very heavily with transgender women, especially in Texas, where there is—basically the biggest prison population in the United States is in Texas—so that’s where most of our folx are, although we have a pretty good smattering of people all over the United States.

We started collecting demographic information two years ago for our grant funders and it’s been really interesting. I haven’t seen really a common theme; we’ve got trans people, we have cisgender people, we’ve got non-binary people, we’ve got people across all genders, races, national origins. We just have a really broad, diverse, eclectic mix of people who write in with us.

Are you in contact with any trans women who have been housed in women’s prisons?

Yeah. With the exception of some of the trans women who we write with in California, who are actually incarcerated in women’s facilities, the majority of trans people that we write with are incarcerated in the facility that aligns with the sex that they were assigned at birth, which is a mouthful.

It’s been an interesting conversation that I’ve had with a lot of the trans folx that we write with. Some very, very much want to have sex reassignment surgery and then go to the facility that aligns with their gender identity, and some are very heavily against that—they want to stay in men’s facilities. It’s been an interesting conversation because there’s no monolithic viewpoint that I’ve been able to pinpoint, really. There have been some concerns that have been brought up from my trans friends in Texas, saying, like, “I don’t want to be housed in a women’s facility because I feel like I might be subject to even more discrimination there. Plus, I like being around people I’m attracted to,” and, you know, stuff like that.

We’re inching into very different lawmaking times where, here in California, there was a large push to have trans people, if they are facing incarceration, to be able to choose the prison that they want to go to, and that was extremely controversial here. I’m actually not sure what ended up happening with that—I think it actually passed. So having people be able to choose—it seems kind of like a good thing, but at the end of the day it’s still, these people are going to prison and they’re going to be subject to all the harassment and discrimination that comes with that, as being a trans person in prison. So it’s kind of really hard to find the silver lining in any of the legislation that’s coming out recently.

**Tuck:** That *is* a really perspective, though, and I appreciate you relaying that to us because I think all of the discourse that I’ve heard around housing women in prisons meant for men is that it is extra cruel and unusual punishment to do that and they’re, you know, subject to extreme amount of harassment and, you know, assault. So I had not heard that there were women who were like “Actually, I would like to stay in this prison for men if I have to stay in a prison.” Obviously no one is like, “Please, keep me in prison!” but you know what I mean. So that’s really useful.

You mentioned that other folx want sex reassignment surgery and then to move to a women’s prison. Is that connected? Is that kind of the bar that some people have to pass, is that you have to have a vaginoplasty to be in a women’s prison?

**Casper:** Yeah, it depends state by state. Every state has different rules and regulations. It actually even breaks down by different prisons have different rules. Some states say that you have to have undergone sex reassignment surgery to be in the prison that does not align with your sex that you are assigned at birth. Some states, like California, don’t have that rule anymore and are moving more towards “you get to choose which prison you want to go to,” which doesn’t sound— [laughs] “You get to *choose* which prison you want to go to!” but you kind of get the point.

Something that has been brought up to me pretty frequently, especially since there has been legislation suggested, [is] surrounding whether or not trans people should have access to sex reassignment surgery while they are incarcerated, whether or not that is a “medically necessary procedure.” A lot of people seem very scared to undergo that surgery while they’re in prison because, you know, medical physicians that operate on prisoners tend to be either medical students who don’t have a whole lot of expertise or knowledge in that area, or they tend to be doctors who for whatever reason are barred or not able to work in hospitals for free world citizens. And that can be for a ton of reasons; it might not be, you know, because of malpractice or anything like that, could be for a ton of different reasons. But, you know, just the fact that the level of medical care within the prison system is substandard, it’s not very good, and it can take years and years to even see a doctor. One of my friends has had a broken arm for over a year now and still has not seen a doctor even though she has put in for a medical request, like, 50 times. So there’s a lot of barriers in place for trans people accessing medical care.

**Tuck:** When you were talking about that, for some reason it reminded me of the Orange Is the New Black scene when Laverne Cox’s character is trying to get back on hormones, and that brought up a question I hadn’t thought of before, which is that Laverne Cox’s character on Orange Is the New Black is probably the first time that many people, especially cis people, had ever thought of trans women at all in media, but let alone trans women in prison. So in your experience, is that a common touchstone when people are trying to be like, “Oh yeah, I know something about the experience of trans people in prison, I saw Orange Is the New Black”? Like does that happen?

**Casper:** It’s actually not something that’s been brought up to me very frequently, at least not recently, anyway. When Orange Is the New Black started airing, it was exciting for me to see a little bit of representation in mainstream media of what life is like for incarcerated people. Of course a lot of it is heavily fictionalized; it’s made as a drama series, so a lot of it is made for Hollywood mainstream audiences to kind of keep you hooked and keep you watching, so it’s not exactly like an accurate portrayal of everyday prison life for a lot of folx. But I thought it did have some really good representation and I think it appealed to some of our transgender contributors just because the idea that representation is something that was severely lacking from the world at large for them, and now finally having it be something that, you know, a lot of mainstream audiences were suddenly watching and connecting with was exciting.

**Tuck:** Yeah. So when I’ve talked to people who, you know, very admittedly *have not* been incarcerated but are trans people who are advocates for, you know, trans people who *are* incarcerated, something that they’ve brought up to me is that so many trans people—trans women of color particularly, but all trans people—are so disenfranchised from the mainstream economy that a lot of reasons that trans people end up imprisoned is because of sort of survival-based crimes. Is that something—I don’t know that you necessarily are asking people, you know, what their life story is, but is that something that you feel is accurate?

**Casper:** It is for some folx. Again, it’s kind of hard to pinpoint a monolithic, like, “Every trans person is imprisoned because of this!”

**Tuck:** Oh yeah, of course.

**Casper:** So one thing that we tend to try to stray from with A.B.O. Comix is asking people what they’re incarcerated for, or asking details of their crimes or anything like that. But people do tend to offer that information to us pretty frequently. I’d say honestly a lot of the people we write with are incarcerated for, I would say, more violent crimes, whether that be assault or sexual assault or even murder.

Something that I’ve come to realize is that none of these crimes exist in a vacuum. You know, people didn’t wake up one day and suddenly think, “I’m going to go murder somebody,” or “I’m going to go commit an assault against somebody.” They happen because of a long line of their history and their familial relationships, of course. And I’d say that something that has been really important for me to realize is that a lot of what we see as the crimes that people have committed are stemming from unprocessed trauma, a lot of times resulting in not knowing how to process and kind of deal with their gender identity or their sexuality in an unwelcoming or un-affirming environment, and sort of internalizing that, and then that manifesting in a lot of different unhealthy ways that have contributed to people going down a path of, sometimes, self-harm, self-mutilation, and other times it manifests in aggression and violence against others. Yeah, I think a lot of it is stemming from us just not treating each other very well as human beings a lot of the time and not helping people process and deal with either trauma or just learning and growing and dealing with parts of themselves that are not so understood in society or not so understood by our families or our friends or things like that and people feeling, you know, like they don’t have a whole lot of avenues to turn to.

**Tuck:** Something that I have been curious about is—obviously the folx in prison are not a monolith—but I’m curious for cis, gay, queer, bisexual folx, I’m wondering what percent of those folx are out in prison, because I have heard some sources say, “Oh, you can’t be out in prison,” but then obviously there are people that are out in prison, we know this. And so, yeah, I’m just curious what you’ve heard from people about that.

**Casper:** Yeah, I think the majority of our contributors are actually out. We send out an information packet every year to all our contributors, a little call for submissions packet, and we ask, “Do you need us to be discreet in our mailings and stuff?” We just use plain white envelopes, we try to be as discreet as humanly possible in our correspondence with folx, especially people that we’re just hearing from for the first time and maybe don’t know their circumstances very well. And I would say maybe 90% of the people who write back are like, “No, that’s fine. I’m out, everyone knows. It’s part of my identity, and everybody knows it,” and that’s fine, and we deal with it the best we can.

I remember hearing on...what is that podcast...?

**Tuck:** Ear Hustle.

**Casper:** Ear Hustle! Thank you so much. I love that you just knew exactly what I was talking about.

**Tuck:** Oh yeah. I mean, that’s what I thought! I was like, “Oh, I remember on Ear Hustle when they talked about that and they were like, ‘No one is out!’” and I was like, “That can’t be true!”

**Casper:** Yeah, exactly! When I heard that I was shocked, I was like, “*Really?* At San Quentin in the Bay Area, *nobody* is out?!” But that has not been really my experience corresponding with people. Pretty much everyone I know is out and proud and they of course deal with discrimination and harassment, especially in more rural areas of the country because of, you know, parts of their identity, but most people I’d say here in 2020 are like, “I’m going to be out and I’m going to live my life the best I can and I’m not going to hide it and, you know, be damned anybody who disagrees or who doesn’t accept me for who I am.”

**Tuck:** Yeah. And it seems like some of those folx are able to have relationships while imprisoned as well. IS that correct?

**Casper:** Yeah, I think it’s kind of more secret relationships. I think some of the prison officials kind of turn away, do the whole “don’t ask, don’t tell” kind of stuff where it’s like, “As long as you’re not doing stuff, you know, right in broad daylight, in the middle of the day room, then, you know, whatever.” But there are of course times where some of our folx get written serious cases for the relationships that they’re engaging in with other people in prison. A lot of prisons have rules where you are not even allowed to touch another person; any sort of physical affection is barred; romantic relationships are barred.

Something we’ve seen with PREA, which is the Prison Rape Elimination Act—it was geared toward trying to make prisons safer, trying to eliminate rape from prisons, but something that it did was bar any sort of intimacy and then make it so that you can prosecute people for a crime while they’re in prison if they engage in intimacy because all of it is considered rape; there is no consent written into the legislation for prisons. So any sort of physical intimacy is considered rape inside a lot of prisons. So that can be very serious for some of our contributors because, you know, they could have consensual relationships with people and if they’re found out, then they could have—essentially they go back to a court trial and then they could have time added to their sentence for it.

**Tuck:** Yeah, that seems horrific. So in the minds of the people who wrote this, people who are imprisoned are just not supposed to have any physical contact until they’re released…?

**Casper:** Correct, yes.

**Tuck:** That’s so wild, especially—I know so many people experiencing a dearth of physical contact just due to the virus, and imagining having that be court mandated is wild.

As we mentioned, your most recent comics collection is about COVID-19 specifically, and based from the dates that I saw written on the content, it seems like it was mostly written in April, near the beginning of the pandemic. And then, people were describing making their own masks out of bed sheets and underwear and toilet paper because they weren’t being given any supplies. Do you know if that is still the case?

**Casper:** It is in some places. Some prisons started distributing masks and, you know, hand sanitizer and stuff, but I think we saw especially at the beginning of the pandemic, we saw a huge shortage of those supplies everywhere. You know, if you went to a grocery store, there was no toilet paper, there were no gloves, there were no masks. And in prison, I think the scarcity there was even worse.

But something else that we saw was that a lot of guards and a lot of prison administration were not taking the virus very seriously at the very start of it. You know, guards would go out; they would go home to their families, they would come back the next day, and then they would be in contact with hundreds of prisoners. So, you know, if they were a carrier for it, and they didn’t know—they weren’t manifesting any symptoms or something like that, but then they brought it into the prison—it just kind of spread like wildfire. So we saw huge amounts of outbreaks nationwide. There was a very large death toll amongst prisons who had a higher level of—like, older prison population. They kind of just confined all of the sick people together as best they could and then quarantined everyone, but there has been a lot of death this year in prisons, which has been very hard for many of our contributors. A lot of our contributors have also lost family on the outside that they didn’t get a chance to say goodbye to, essentially, so it’s been a really hard year for a lot of folx.

I think things are kind of slowly getting a little bit better now that we’ve realized kind of the precautions that people need to take and what they can do to keep themselves safe, which demographics are a little bit more at risk for it being fatal. So we’ve seen a lot of information being distributed by organizations like Black and Pink, we try to send out a mass mailer to everybody with information about it as well. So I feel like things are kind of slowly getting better.

A lot of our contributors did come down with COVID and thankfully they recovered; we haven’t lost any of our family on the inside, which I’m extremely grateful for, but it has been a very scary year.

**Tuck:** I asked you earlier about if people want to be penpals, but sort of more broadly, I think there are a lot of folx who hate prisons, who hate the prison industrial complex, but don’t know how to tackle something that huge. Do you have advice for people who are interested in prison abolition and who would like to get more involved actively?

**Casper:** Yeah, absolutely. It can be a very big, scary monster to try and think of to tackle and it is—it’s so embedded in our society, in our structures. I’d say, to me, abolition really means more community building than anything else because we need to have strong communities to even entertain the idea of not having prisons anymore. Because we need to have strong societal structures in place with resources, I think most importantly, with kindness and compassion for people, especially when they make mistakes.

My advice to anybody who might be interested in pursuing work in prison abolition is really just, you need to get to know the people who are in prison. It’s all about centering and uplifting their voices and their experiences, and so I think you really need to get to know people one-on-one and create community that way. Something that we’ve tried very hard to do is build a community of folx that bridge across prison walls so that when people are experiencing hardship inside prisons, we’re able to assist the best we can with grievances, with parole letters, with building portfolios, you know, with medical co-pays and all of that sort of stuff, but also build community for when people are getting out of prison so that they have resources, they have friends and loved ones who are on the outside who are looking out for them, and who might be able to help with anything from housing, or getting clothes, or finding a cell phone, or finding work or something like that. So I’d say that pen palling honestly is one of the best things anybody who’s looking to get involved in this work could start doing. And again, you can go to our website, our Pen Pal section, and that has a ton of information. We have an entire letter writing guide set up on our website and how to get started with all of that stuff.

**Tuck:** As you do this work, I’m wondering what myths or misconceptions you’ve run into from folx in the free world not understanding the reality of life for folx on the inside, or maybe even something you didn’t know when you first got into it.

**Casper:** Sure, yeah. I think something that be kind of a little bit of a misconception is that prisons are just the epitome of sadness and despair and bleakness and every day there is just torture for so many people. And in a lot of ways, prisons are not made to be happy, wonderful, sunshine-filled places, of course. But something that has constantly inspired me is the resiliency of the human spirit and people’s ability to find joy and happiness and relationships in even the worst of circumstances. So every letter that we receive—you know, we do receive a lot of letters asking for help or saying, “This really bad thing is happening, can you help me out with this?” But the majority of letters we receive are just so filled with light and hope and love and joy and humour, and that’s a lot of the comics that we receive as well are just, you know, silly, funny things that are happening in people’s everyday lives. Because for many people, this is just their everyday life, and humans kind of get used to anything they have to go through and then they make the best of it.

And so I’d say that kind of goes back to impressing our own judgments and ideals on people in very different circumstances, because I think most of the time people don’t see themselves as victims; they see themselves as survivors, and they’re doing the best that they can and making the best of it.

**Tuck:** We are now at the part of the show where I ask you, “Hey! What do you want to talk about that we haven’t talked about yet?”

**Casper:** Something that we’re working on right now is we’re about to publish our fourth anthology of queer prisoner comics, so that will be up for presale very soon. And the reason I really want to mention it is that every year we do a holiday commissary fundraiser. Every year we send out a couple thousand dollars in donations to people for the holidays, and that’s one of the most exciting things we get to do because people tend not to have access to a lot of commissary goods throughout the holidays; a lot of our folx don’t have funds or family members on the outside to kind of look out for them during the holidays, so it might be a little bleaker for people in prison. So we try to put a couple hundred dollars on everybody’s commissary account so that they might be able to buy food or gender affirming items, medical co-pays, legal counsel, that sort of stuff. So we’re doing a holiday commissary fundraiser right now. So if anybody has the resources to extend, you know, even a couple bucks helps out so much in helping make the holidays a little bit brighter.

**Tuck:** Perfect. I know we live in a hell world all the time, particularly right now. What is something that you’re looking forward to in your life?

**Casper:** I’m really looking forward to keeping A.B.O. Comix going and expanding. Our contributor list grew at least double this year, so we went from about 150 incarcerated contributors last year to over 250 this year, and word of mouth is kind of just spreading like wildfire, so we receive hundreds and hundreds of letters a month. And I’m really excited just to keep our community growing—I’m really hoping that in the next couple months we’ll be able to have enough grant funding to actually take on a full paid staff of hopefully formerly incarcerated people. And that’s kind of my goal for the long term is being able to build our community so much that this is a sustainable business, so that when our friends and our loved ones get out of prison, they can actually come work with us, and we can help them out with finding housing, we can help them out with long-term employment and gaining, you know, the skills to kind of stop that cycle of incarceration that we’ve seen for so many years.

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

**Casper:** I would say in my ideal world, the future of gender would just be everyone being accepted and affirmed in the gender identity that they feel is best for them. I wouldn’t want to push any sort of ideal gender utopia on the world at large because I know everybody has a very different idea of what is best for humans in general, but I think just having kind of kindness and compassion for everybody that we interact with, knowing that everyone is kind of going through their own things and processing things in their own way, you know, we’re going to get things wrong, and we’re going to get things wrong a lot, and then we’re going to hopefully start getting things a little bit more right over time. And so I’m just hoping that the world will just grow over time into a kinder and more compassionate place for everybody in it, even if, you know, we disagree on anything at all. [laughs]

[Gender Reveal theme music starts]

**Tuck:** That’s going to do it for this week’s show. Head to ABOComix.com, that is A-B-O-C-O-M-I-X dot com, to look through their big collection of merch and pre-order the new A.B.O. Comix anthology. It is going to be huge and amazing. You can also sign up for a pen pal there at ABOComix.com, or you can go to BlackandPinkPenPals.org and find a pen pal there. The holiday commissary fundraiser that Casper mentioned in the show, it’s still running; it’s like $200 away from its goal, so I’ll put a link to donate in the show notes. Please get that fundraiser to its goal; it’s so close. You can find A.B.O. Comix on Instagram @a.b.o.comix. We’re also on Instagram and Twitter @gendereveal and I’m on Twitter @tuckwoodstock, where I’m currently in a fight with Michael Barbaro—very on brand for me. Our merch store resets at the end of every month, so you’ve got three days to grab your Happiest Season shirt. Whatever else you’re looking for, that’s all at bit.ly/gendermerch. You can find transcripts of the show and other resources at genderpodcast.com. We’ve got lots of other links and info in the show notes as well.

Today’s episode was produced and edited by me, Tuck Woodstock. This season is also produced by Isaura Aceves. Our logo is by the talented Ira M. Leigh, our theme song is by Breakmaster Cylinder, additional music this week by Blue Dot Sessions. We will be back next year with more feelings about gender.

[Gender Reveal theme music ends]