[*theme music plays*]

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

[*music continues, then stops*]

**Molly:** Hey everyone! I’m recording this episode from the past. Obviously all podcasts are recorded from the past, but this one is *extra* from the past. I’m recording this on August 1st, by the time you hear this it will be at least August 13th, if not later, and by August 13th I should be off the PCT and back into the regular world of cell phone reception and push notifications about the world being on fire and running water and showers. But, by August 13th I will just gotten off the trail and I don’t think I’m gonna want to get off the trail and immediately just spend like an entire day and a half making a new podcast. So to give myself some wiggle room- and because who knows what the hell’s gonna happen, there’s like fires everywhere- anyway. Just in case, I’ve prepared another special guest bonus episode for you!

**Molly**: This episode is the second ever episode of a brand new podcast called Public Trans. Now remember, I’m recording from the past. Public Trans has not launched yet, but theoretically by the time you’re hearing this, the first episode is out in the world. Public Trans talks about what it means to be trans in the public eye, and breaks down questions that trans folks face every day. Questions include: “How do you ‘pass’ if you don’t identify as a binary gender? How do we raise children with or without gender? What challenges do the modern dating landscape confront us with? What are the failings of mainstream androgyny?” Public Trans is a product of two theys- I don’t know if it’s okay to call people who use they/them pronouns a “they,” but I do this all the time. When people misgender me and say “oh, *she* didn’t order the biscuits,” and I’m just like “actually, I’m a they” and they’re like “what?” and I’m like “I’m not a she, I’m a they.” Um, because if I just say I’m non-binary, that doesn’t mean anything – non-binary people use all sorts of pronouns.

**Molly:** So anyway, Ave and Mac are the two theys who make this podcast. Ave Bisesi is a scientist and educator based in Cleveland, and Mac Maclean is a poet and visual artist based out of Boston. I’m very excited to share their second episode with you! I hope you have a good time. We will almost definitely be back next week with a brand new episode, a brand new interview.

**Molly:**  I appreciate your patience over the last two weeks while I was gone. I try not to take breaks in the middle of seasons, but everyone on the planet keeps telling me that I need to take breaks, especially because I don’t take breaks between seasons, I just produce a bunch of interviews in that time. Anyway, what I’m trying to say is I’m trying to set boundaries and take time to relax sometimes. And apparently the way I relax is by walking twenty-five miles a day! All right. I love you very much. I hope the world’s okay. I hope you’re okay. I hope I’m okay. Don’t forget to track down Public Trans, if you have a good time and it actually exists in the world- I’m sure it does- track it down, subscribe. I will stop rambling. I will go on this hike. I hope you have a good week! Bye!

[*music plays*]

**Mac:** Welcome to this week’s episode of Public Trans, a podcast where we take on questions big and small about gender and being non-binary and trans, all during your morning commute. We hope you loved our first episode and are back and ready for more!

**Ave:** In this episode we’re gonna talk about brain scans. But more importantly we’re going to talk about passing. What it means to pass as a gender non-conforming person, and why passing can be so important to trans people. Then we’ll hear from you, our listeners, on the platform.

[*music plays*]

**Mac:** In case you missed us last time, or just need a reminder: I’m Mac Maclean, they/them, a non-binary poet from southern Virginia with a taste for dairy and an unforgiving intolerance for lactose.

**Ave:** And I’m Ave Bisesi, they/them, a sweet midwestern boy secretly yearning for lowkey Instagram fame and highkey science fame

**Mac:** And Public Trans is our place to speak about our experiences as trans folks, from coming out, to dating, to navigating our professional lives. We’re glad you’re here to listen and to share!

[*music plays*]

**Ave:** You know what time it is! It’s the Morning Cup of Gender! Put that pot of coffee on and pull up your Twitter feed so that we can dish about some of our fave tepid takes that have been making the media rounds recently.

[*music stops*]

**Ave:** This one’s near and dear to my heart as a trans scientist. I’m really excited to take on the articles that have been making the rounds as of late, claiming that brain scans prove that trans people’s brains match their gender identity and not their biological sex. Basically, some scientists at the University of Belgium want you to believe that trans women have female brains and trans men have male brains. But don’t bother asking them what *I* have!

**Mac:** The tepid take for this week is from the Telegraph, out of the U.K., called- the article is titled “Transgender brain scans promised as study shows structural differences in people with gender dysphoria.” And, it- Ave, why don’t you give us a little “layman’s terms” synopsis here?

**Ave:** Basically, these scientists at a university in Belgium are finding some sort of structural differences, and differences in brain activity, that seem to align with, you know, trans women seem to have the same sort of brain activity and response to the same stimuli as cis women. And vice-versa for cis men and trans men. And so they’re sort of using that to say, OK, maybe we’re reinforcing this “mismatch” hypothesis that’s been making the rounds pretty frequently lately in terms of trying to figure out, you know, transgender dysphoria and why that happens. And, you know, scientists they like to pick everything apart, whatever, whatever. And so the idea is just sort of that you were born with the wrong brain in the wrong body, and this is why you have this gender dysphoria. So more or less this article is just kind of summarizing, very cursorarily, that research. And basically, it’s not well-summarized. It’s not a great article. It doesn’t give you a lot of insights. But even more that that, *what* it’s summarizing is not especially useful. To say “you’re trans just because your brain doesn’t match your body” - like, what does that really mean? And why are we so interested in believing that narrative? Why can’t we just believe that a person is trans, and that their gender is what they say it is?

**Mac:** Yeah, yeah. There’s- and the article really implies that this is for, like, the well-being of trans people. That this is what we need to get some sort of closure with our gender, to have it pop up on an MRI and tell us, like “Congratulations! You’re baby is trans!” or something like that, right? As if that’s truly the path to- I don’t know.

**Ave:** To something? I mean, I think the idea is sort of, if we’re able to identify children with gender dysphoria earlier in their lives, maybe we can somehow save them the pain of not understanding what’s going on, or that sort of thing? And we can get them psychiatric help sooner? Which I think are like- they’re not bad impulses in and of themselves. But I definitely think that the way- first of all, it’s a very patronizing thing. Right? You know, like- as much as people have said and people try to claim, “Being trans isn’t an illness, we shouldn’t treat it like an illness. Why do we have to look at someone’s brain so they can be diagnosed with gender dysphoria? What does that mean?” Especially, you know, when people are telling you something. Like, “I feel this way about my gender.” You know? Isn’t that enough?

**Mac:** Yeah, yeah. It seems like there’s such an urge to make gender clinical.

**Ave:** To pathologize?

**Mac:** Yeah, pathologize, that’s the word- When gender is so much more of a social thing than a-

**Ave:** A biological thing. I mean, I think- I think that the arguments of biological essentialism, they’re so insidious! Right? You know, so it’s not just these scans and this “mismatch” hypothesis- it extends to like, “Should trans women be able to compete in the women’s divisions?” You know? That sort of idea that something about our biology is more important than our identities as people, and the idea that biology sort of supercedes any sort of sociological training or anything like that. You know? And it’s just not true!

**Mac:** Yeah, yeah. And the idea of these scans, while at face value what they’re saying sounds kind of nice- if I have like a feeling, oh I might be trans, I could go get a brain scan and I’d just know. But also, like, who else has access to the scans? Like something about it makes me nervous, you know? There just being an easy way to identify who is trans among us, and like- in the same way that like, now being able to, in some places, being able to change your gender on your license in some places to a third gender makes me nervous. Because it instantly marks you, demarcates you, as an “other.” You know? And like identifiably.

**Ave:** And certainly if- I mean, it feels uncomfortable in this political climate.

**Mac:** Yeah, yeah. It makes me afraid of lists and, um, a way in which the government-

**Ave:** Yeah, can track you as a trans person.

**Mac:** Yeah, and that scares me. But luckily, uh, with all- with this tepid take we have a hot take, a great take, from *them*, a great child website? Um, of *Vogue…* a *Teen Vogue,* it’s not like-

**Ave:** It’s relatively new. It was launched- I mean-

**Mac:** From January.

**Ave:** Something like that, yeah, yeah.

**Mac:** It’s great!

**Ave:** But this particular article was called, “Why we don’t need brain scans to confirm trans people are actually trans.”

**Mac:** Written by Sophie Searcy.

**Ave:** Mm-hmm.

**Mac:** And it’s good.

**Ave:** Yeah, it’s a great article! It really really well lays out all the different research that’s been done, why it doesn’t really make any sense, and also why this sort of research is actually- it does a lot more damage than I think people realize. You know, I think everyone that goes into this field of research is like “Oh, I’m going to help people. I’m going to help them understand why they feel this way.” But it doesn’t do that, you know? Because in a lot of ways, saying “you know, your brain is just mismatched with your body” is another way of saying “you know, something’s a little bit off with you. Like it’s not quite normal, it’s sort of normal, but it’s not quite normal.” And that- you know, there’s still stigma around being trans, if you think of it that way. In the way that they’re like, it doesn’t have to be that.

**Mac:** And you were saying there was some research in here about how it just kind of like, uh, in this *them* article, that disproves a lot of the research done- or, talked about in the *Telegraph* article about-

**Ave:** I mean, the bottom line here is that this research is *extremely* inconclusive. You know? You’ll have- and- and, I’ll have to preface this by saying that, for most aspects of science, you can pull out twenty different articles about the same thing and they’ll all say something slightly different. And it’s very rare to get every single article on a single topic to show the same findings. And that’s very much the case when you’re talking about trans people’s brains, which is, you know, an emerging field of research. And there are tons of papers that say, you know, there aren’t really any differences. Just as much as there are ones that say, yeah, you know, if you’re a trans girl then your brain is like a cis girl. You know? So there are- it’s just really inconclusive research. It’s still very much in its infancy. But I think ultimately, it’s not research that’s necessary! I mean, first of all, MRIs are extremely costly!

[*both laugh*]

**Mac:** Doctor Bisesi in the house!

**Ave:** Doctor Bisesi in the house. MRIs are extremely costly, at least, you know, in United States health care. Do you think that a trans person can just waltz into the doctor’s office and be like “Please give me an MRI because I’m experiencing gender dysphoria” and be able to pay for that? That stuff is-

**Mac:** Yeah, a lot of trans people would rather buy new clothes-

**Ave:** Or *live*. Or just do literally anything else!

**Mac:** Or maybe like get a surgery, hormones, *rent*.

**Ave:** And I think this article in *them* makes a really good point: we can validate peoples’ genders without spending thousands of dollars on an MRI. We can just ask them-

**Both:** And believe them.

[*music plays*]

**Mac:** All right, let’s settle in to the commute. I know personally my commute marks the first time strangers decide who I am. They judge my clothing choices, my hair, my accessories, mannerisms, and they decide if I’m a man or a woman- whether I want them to or not. For some trans people this moment is gratifying, for some terrifying, for some isolating- but it all comes down to how we “pass.” And that’s what we’re thinking about today on The Commute. So if- what the heck- what the heck is passing?

**Ave:** That is a good question, Mac. Passing is something that means a little bit- something a little bit different to everyone, I think. I think for me, passing is really complicated! But I think even as a non-binary person, for whatever reason I still think of passing as those moments where I’m identified as a dude, which happens to me a lot! A lot. Until I open my mouth and talk, and then everyone’s like “Oh! Sorry, ma’am!” Um, so. I think that for whatever reason, as much as I am- You know, I am a non-binary person, and I want to feel like, you know, passing can be me looking like not a man or a woman, somehow in my brain it’s still very much tied up with passing as a dude. Which I think is years of internalized misogyny and all that good stuff, and transphobia. But um- so, yeah, for me that is still what it means. What about for you?

**Mac:** I think for me, passing is getting people to look twice? Because, I don’t often get “sir”ed anymore. Sometimes it happens if people are not paying attention. But usually, usually not. But if I can get people to have a double-take moment, and like [*inaudible*]

**Ave:** Yeah, the moment of discomfort where they’re deciding, you know?

**Mac:** Yeah, that gives me pleasure. Um, that I usually- I usually don’t get to experience the feeling of passing. Because I think that what I’m trying to achieve is so unattainable-

**Ave:** Right, I agree.

**Mac:** -which is like passing for non-binary, which it feels like so few people are looking for. Or like have that in mind when looking into a crowd of people. There are very few spaces that I go into where people are thinking about that, especially public spaces, you know?

**Ave:** Yeah. And there might be like- people recognize that you’re gender non-conforming, but they don’t make the connection in their brains, necessarily, that like maybe this person’s pronouns are different or maybe this person doesn’t want to be called a woman or a man.

**Mac:** Yeah, yeah. It’s very rare that that ever happens. So that is my ultimate passing goal.

**Ave:** I agree. Right there with you.

**Mac:** Minor passing goals are like the double take, [*inaudible*]. Usually that happens at restaurants. I remember one time – story time!- I was in Greece recently, with my partner and we were trying to find a place to eat. We walked past this place, and all the restaurants- the owners or whoever were outside, trying to get you to come in or whatever. At first they saw my partner, who is pretty feminine, walk by, and they were like “beautiful lady! Come in, sit down!” And they saw me walking behind her, and were like “Beautiful couple! Beautiful couple!” And then he saw me again, and he was like “Oh. Beautiful friends, beautiful friends. Come sit!”

[*both laugh*]

**Ave:** Oh, that is so funny!

**Mac:** No thanks, but thanks. So now we are- beautiful friends.

**Ave:** You *are* beautiful friends!

**Mac:** Thank you. She is my beautiful friend.

**Ave:** She is your beautiful friend!

**Mac:** Yeah!

**Ave:** It’s really interesting that you think about- I mean, I think for a really long time I thought of passing in a similar way. And then, sort of, post-top-surgery, I don’t really get “ma’am”ed anymore. Like really, ever. And so the double-takes don’t really happen until I talk, and then it’s not really a double-take it’s just the person looking kind of horrified, of “Oh God, what have I done?” And I mean sometimes like- I was Indiana recently, visiting my family- and there were several times when people just didn’t even change. They were like, “oh yeah, that boy just has a high voice.”

[*Ave laughs*]

**Ave:** So, yeah, I think that it’s like- it’s really changed my perception of passing. Um, because now I just like, there’s no way I can ever go into a women’s restroom. Basically I like have to go into the men’s, or I’ll definitely be stopped. It’s just like totally changed my world. It’s really interesting.

**Mac:** Damn. Well, we could talk about that forever. Let’s talk about the definition of passing that is on the internet. Would you like to read that?

**Ave:** I would. So, passing is defined as, in the context of gender: “It applies to a transgender individual who is generally perceived as cisgender. Typically, passing involves a mixture of physical gender cues, for example hairstyle or clothing, as well as certain behavioral attributes that tend to be culturally associated with a particular gender.”

**Mac:** Yeah, so, we were along those lines.

**Ave:** Yeah. Basically means that, if you’re trans, everyone things you’re cis. Going stealth is sort of the cultural definition of passing.

**Mac:** Yeah. But definitely, this definition is super binary.

**Ave:** Super binary. Doesn’t apply to a lot of trans people, maybe even most trans people.

**Mac:** Definitely I think it’s the passing that we see most often represented in media, that we see most strived for or sought after.

**Ave:** In representation, that’s true.

**Mac:** So if this is what we’re supposed to want, you know, supposedly-

**Ave:** To be cisgender?

**Mac:** Yeah. The ultimate goal!

**Ave:** Hashtag #goals.

**Mac:** Hashtag #cisgoals. What does it mean when we can’t pass? Which I feel like, feels more often than not. Even if we are, it feels like we’re not, because we are in our own heads and we’re constantly on guard and constantly a little afraid that someone’s going to say something, do something, whatever.

**Ave:** “Sir/Ma’am? Sir/Ma’am?”

**Mac:** What are you doing here? Get out! I’ll cut you!

**Ave:** It’s deadly!

**Mac:** So what does it mean when we can’t pass how we want, and how does our ability to pass or not pass- as you were saying, just a minute ago- impacted how you present yourself and how you think about being trans?

**Ave:** Yeah, I think it is really interesting to have experienced that shift. You know? Because my entire life basically, I have wanted to be more androgynous. There were certain things where I wanted to be more masculine looking, but that was just because I was socialized as a woman, and I still feel that way. Very much so. It’s not that there was anything inherently about being a dude where I was like, yes, I’m a dude and that’s what I want. You know? It was more just like, if I look a little bit more masculine, then I’ll just appear more androgynous. And so I really relate to what you were saying about passing as being non-binary. You know? I would love for that to be something I could pass as. And it’s been really interesting for much of my life to be identified as a woman no matter what I did, and now without any huge shift, to suddenly be identified as a dude- other than, like, top surgery. Um, and it’s been really interesting. Because for a while I was like, you know, maybe I would go on T, maybe these sort of things I would want to look more androgynous- and then I realized, you know, sort of recently, I was like you know if I go on hormones, there is no going back. I will never get ma’am again. I will never even get the moment of confusion again. Because I already don’t, really. And it’s only when I open my mouth and say something that people are like “oh, wait, what?” Um, and even that, doesn’t happen that often anymore. So that has really impacted the way I think about transitioning, if there really is a transition that I’m going through, and what does it really mean to me to pass? Because now I’m sort of thinking, how do I move back towards the middle? How does that happen for me? What about you?

**Mac:** I think that not being able to pass the way I want to has really made me realize the limitlessness of my gender. And it has really opened me up, I think, to feeling a little more free to express myself in ways that I, in my youth- “my youth,” *so long ago*, I’m only 22!- um, haven’t been able to. Or felt like I was able to. So, like, experimenting more with femininity and feminine stuff has felt less daunting and like less scary. Especially, like, for one I’m graduating from college and I’m leaving a social structure where I felt trapped into my gender presentation. Has been [*inaudible*]. But also like realizing post-college that people are going to see me the way that they want to, and it didn’t exactly matter if I dressed masculine or more feminine, I was usually going to get just one response. And I could do what I want, so I might as well. And that’s pretty freeing, and fun, and I’m definitely still working on that. I definitely do a lot of that alone. I haven’t done a lot of public, like, “I am wearing a dress.” I have two in my closet that I don’t wear outside. But you know, maybe someday we’ll get there? But it’s definitely made me think more about how gender expression- the quest for androgyny doesn’t have to be masculine.

**Ave:** It doesn’t. It really doesn’t.

**Mac:** So often, the ultimate goal seems to be, even in like the high fashion world, androgyny is masculine.

**Ave:** It is masculine. It’s thin, and it’s white, and it’s masculine.

**Mac:** Yeah, and that’s like the most desirable thing. And I know that I can’t be all those things. And so I’d rather make what I can of it, and make it my own.

**Ave:** It’s really interesting that you say that, too, because I have historically felt some of the same impulses, you know? Recently I was like, asking my partner to show me how to do make-up, because that’s something that I’ve never done in my whole life. But it is really interesting too to recognize that, like, after starting to be identified as a dude regularly, I feel weirdly pulled by this, like, cult of masculinity. Where it’s like once you have it, if you throw it away, then there’s something *wrong* with you. That to be a feminine-looking masculine person, is just like, that’s trash and you’re terrible. You know? And I’m really trying to push back against that internally, and also in the way I present myself. But it’s really interesting to feel that toxic pull, and how quickly it happens. And like even as someone who doesn’t identify as a dude, it still is there.

**Mac:** It’s like that same, I don’t know- when I was a kid, I hated everything girly, blah blah blah. That was probably up until college, where I thought everything associated with being a girl was dumb and bad. And like, what’s the word for that? I don’t know.

**Ave:** Misogyny?

**Mac:** Misogyny, yeah. Basically. Yeah.

**Ave:** Internalized misogyny.

**Mac:** Yeah, yeah, that. Um, that’s so simple, why did I forget that? Yeah, misogyny is just everywhere-

**Ave:** And it’s insidious.

**Mac:** And it creeps in no matter where you go, how ya are. Um, and, I feel like to resist it must be a very conscious effort. And it’s also good to resist it.

**Ave:** It’s good to resist it, for sure.

**Mac:** Everyone should resist it. Listeners, resist it! Um, yeah. Being feminine, there’s nothing bad about it. You don’t have to do it, but you can’t hate it. Those are the rules!

**Ave:** Those are the rules!

**Mac:** Um, yeah, we have rambled.

[*both laugh*]

**Ave:** Well we were talking about what it means when you can’t pass the way you want to, which I think you know for us always comes back to passing for non-binary, and what that means. And I think that there is also, culturally, like you were saying, the ideal is masculinity- to be androgynous, and usually on people assigned female at birth, that sort of thing. So I think there’s also a tendency, I think for me, and maybe for you as well, when I see a masculine looking woman or a feminine man- you know I try not to gender anyone but there’s still a part of my brain that’s like “oh, maybe I found another non-binary person!” You know? Because that’s how we think of those sort of gender transgressions, right? Because if you’re on one side “naturally,” whatever that means, then you’re gonna have to cross that boundary slightly to sort of cancel that out. And like, that *does not* have to be what it means! And I’ve noticed there’s a tendency to sort of disbelieve people who look like femme women but are non-binary, you know? There’s a huge tendency to be like, no, that’s not real, you can’t be non-binary if you look that way.

**Mac:** Yeah, I think the people who get misgendered the most are the people who don’t defy the gender presentation they were, like, born into. The ones who say no, I love this, but these are my pronouns, [*inaudible*] pronouns, this is my name, *et cetera*. Those are the people who- yeah, you’re right. People have a harder time expecting that.

**Ave:** I mean, I think that gender non-conforming in terms of dress and appearance is somewhat easier for people to grasp, but it is not the bedrock of being non-binary. You know? Being gender non-conforming and being non-binary are not necessarily the same thing. They can be, and that’s great, but they are not for every person every time.

**Mac:** Yeah. And I know something that I’ll do, is I’ll see a gender non-conforming woman who’s like really butch, and like accidentally use “they” pronouns for her, like all the time. And keep having to be like, oh, shit, and correct myself. Because like, I don’t know, I just want all of them to be “one of us.” But it’s misgendering too, and I think there’s this internal assumption for me that people who are androgynous or who are gender non-conforming should start [*inaudible*] being non-binary, but it’s just not true. It’s unfortunate. I mean, it’s a shame, and maybe they should reconsider! But there’s an assumption of transness there for me.

**Ave:** And I think all forms of gender transgressions of all forms are wonderful and should be celebrated, for sure.

**Mac:** Um, but passing isn’t always- or passing is. Uh, I don’t know, we’ve been talking about it in kind of a light-hearted way, but it isn’t always uh, you know, cute outfits and overalls.

**Ave:** Yeah, it’s not always like being celebrated by the mainstream media at New York Fashion Week, and “oh look at this edgy non-binary person.” Like, that’s not what passing is most of the time.

**Mac:** Yeah, passing for a lot of people is a matter of day-to-day safety.

**Ave:** And life or death, truly.

**Mac:** Yeah, and life and death. Especially for a lot of trans women, and trans women of color, it’s a risk to not pass.

**Ave:** And it has this huge idea of “deceit” and “trickery” that plays into passing. If someone is like attracted to you, or convinced by your display as a trans person, and then they realize that you’re not cis, a lot of people react very violently to that. Especially cis men to trans women, because cis men are the worst.

**Mac:** Yeah, and there’s the cause of so many deaths of so many trans women of color in the past year. Or, the past many many years, is these types of situations. And they’ve gone very much unreported. And it’s all because of this- as a culture, our ideas about gender and sex. And passing- I don’t know. It’s something like, you know, people on the train look at each other, don’t think too hard about each other, but suddenly become a whole lot more invested in people’s private lives when it comes to people being trans and things like that.

**Ave:** Everyone feels really entitled to know your genitalia. I’ve noticed that’s a really big thing people say, is like, “I shouldn’t have to be around someone or sleep with them if I don’t know what kind of genitalia they have beforehand.” It’s like, hmm, interesting. Okay.

**Mac:** It’s really not a big deal, and it’s really none of your business.

**Ave:** And it really goes back to that biological essentialism that we were talking about earlier with the trans brain scans. It’s just, there’s so many layers and it’s so messy. But it really is like for us, or at least for me, passing is like an academic exercise more often than not. Something I think about in a “oh it would be great if” way, but there are times in my life when I do realize it as a life or death thing. And for most, many many trans people, it is very much an issue of safety.

**Mac:** Yeah, I know that if I wasn’t living in a bigger city, like, it would be more on my mind. It would be on my mind a lot more of the time, and I would think about it every time I got ready to go out. And like when I was growing up, I definitely thought about it more, even though I hadn’t realized I was trans. I was certainly gender non-conforming, and got a lot of shit in high school-

**Ave:** [*sarcastically*] Yeah, high school’s *the best!*

**Mac:** Woo, high school forever! But, yeah. Coming to a bigger city, it became easier for me to sort of fall away into the crowd.

**Ave:** Easier to hide, in a lot of ways.

**Mac:** That’s what it’s like for me. I realize that’s not what it’s like for every trans person. And I don’t have to like explain myself and my non-binariness to every person I meet on the street, whereas some people are constantly forced to give explanation to, like, complete strangers.

**Ave:** And I feel like a lot of this is perpetuated by a lot of cis peoples’ ideas that you should be transitioning *somewhere*, that you should be going from one binary to another. It’s just how they understand transness, and how the mainstream media has perpetuated these ideas of transness.

**Mac:** Fifty, sixty, seventy-plus years it’s been like, you go from one station to the other station.

**Ave:** Yeah, so that everyone who’s has a goal, and they’re trying to get to that goal, and the only way to do that is to medical transition. And I think both of our existences are proof that is not really the case. And I think that there are a lot of people who have begun to understand transness, but are not ready to take that next leap. You know? They can say “fine if you want to be a-” the way that they say it, I would never say it this way, obviously, but you know all of the people who are like “fine if this man wants to be a woman, but like, you can’t be anything in between” you know?

**Mac:** Yeah. I feel like most people would not understand what “anything in between” would mean, but like, welcome to our podcast!

[*both laugh*]

**Ave:** We’re glad you’re here! The Twilight Zone!

**Mac:** But I always like to make the joke of “Transition? Where to?” um, ‘cause you know I just don’t feel that I have anywhere that I’m going. Or if I do, it’s to like a different place every day.

**Ave:** And I also think that people really associate medical transitioning with going from one gender to another, whatever. But like as someone who’s had top surgery, for me that wasn’t about “becoming a man.” And for some people it is, which is totally legit and real and I honor and celebrate that. But for me, it was not about becoming a man, it was just about existing in my body in a way that feels good. And I think that confused a lot of people. A lot of people were like, “Wait, what? And you’re telling me you’re not a man?” And I’m like, “Yes. That’s correct.”

**Mac:** Yeah, yeah. It’s a lot of like- I feel like maybe someday we’ll get to the point where people hear “XYZ is getting top surgery” or “XYZ is on estrogen” or whatever, and people will be like “Oh, great!”

**Ave:** Yeah, instead of “XYZ is a woman now.” You know.

**Mac:** Yeah, and instead of “oh and so, they, she? He? Um oh my God I’m terrible!” You know, some day, we’ll get there. But for now, just say “Okay, cool.” Because at the end of the day we know best for ourselves. Trans people know best for themselves. And, I don’t know, the whole like goalposts of transitioning from one place to another- there’s a medical aspect of it, and also like throughout time and everything it’s also this transition of gender rules and expectations for society-

**Ave:** Behavior, yeah.

**Mac:** Behavior, so like. For trans women, you can really only be accepted as a woman in society if you’re like the most womanly woman of all women. Super feminine, nails done, hair done, dresses. Never pants! Very very rarely pants. Always looking amazing. Like, there can never be a moment of like flaws. And for trans men, it’s like buff buff buff.

**Ave:** Yeah, you just have to be like an inflatable Arnold Schwarzenegger blow-up doll.

**Mac:** Yeah, most like very famous- well, I guess kind of famous trans men, are like body builders. That guy who was on the Men’s Health magazine that one time?

**Ave:** Oh yeah, Aden.

**Mac:** Super buff dude. Um, like, gotta be- gotta be a super dude.

**Ave:** Right I mean I’ve actually heard people make jokes about how it’s actually better to date a trans man, because they’re way more interested in their appearance than cis men. And I was like, oh God.

**Mac:** Yeah, that’s- that’s the whole reason why. You should date trans men.

**Ave:** Yeah, and there’s that whole idea that if you’re transitioning then you have to *be* that ideal, or you have not achieved what you were going for. Which is just, like, obviously stupid.

**Mac:** There are such extremes that you have to go to to pass, like, passing for binary trans people has to be extreme passing for like ultimate acceptance.

**Ave:** Right, which is part of why passing as a non-binary person is in large part impossible. Because as soon as you’re passing as a trans person, you’re just like on other side, so far, as far as you can possibly get.

**Mac:** And it feels like what extreme passing- this is a new phrase, coined by me, Mac, extreme passing TM. It’s also gonna be a show, extreme passing ninja warriors! For non-binary people, it’s that ultimate androgynous fantasy of like super angular, super white, thin, masculine-

**Ave:** Baggy clothes.

**Mac:** Baggy clothes. Ah, baggy clothes- God, I really want to wear baggy clothes. They look so cool! They look so cool, but I can’t.

**Ave:** Baggy- I mean, they only look good on people who are that one ideal. You know? That’s who they’re marketed to. That’s the whole point!

**Mac:** I know, but-

**Ave:** They do look cool.

**Mac:** They look so cool.

**Ave:** They look really cool. Have your clothes just hanging off of you, like a cape?

**Mac:** Just so easy-breezy, casual, like. Ah! Couldn’t care less about anything, because my clothes are so big!

[*both laugh*]

**Ave:** Everything else is unimportant!

**Mac:** ‘Cause my clothes are huge, my pockets are huge!

**Ave:** Pockets are huge- that’s a big thing!

**Mac:** Yeah, God, I need bigger pockets.

**Ave:** Who doesn’t?

**Mac:** Anyway, God. If anyone wants to send me some great clothes-

**Ave:** Or if anyone wants to have us both in New York Fashion Week, I think that-

**Mac:** Yeah, any fashion at all!

**Ave:** You don’t have to put me in the male or the female, like can we start a new non-binary category?

**Mac:** Yeah, bring us a new runway.

**Ave:** Overthrow the runway!

**Mac:** Oooh. That’s good, I like it!

**Ave:** Stay tuned!

**Mac:** Anyway, that feels like extreme passing for non-binary people, and I don’t like it, because it’s very inaccessible-

**Ave:** It’s extremely inaccessible.

**Mac:** -to so many people. And I don’t know, it just also is like- I feel like clothes can’t be what makes transness. You know? It has to be within society. It has to be culture. And we have to make *people* think, not clothes.

**Ave:** Yeah, we have to undermine, you know, traditional ideas about the gender binary and the biological essentialism that comes with it. We can’t be like “everybody can where pants!” and then have the gender revolution, you know?

**Mac:** I think we need “everyone can wear skirts.”

**Ave:** Yeah, I think that’s where we need to go. We’ve already had the “everybody can wear pants” revolution.

**Mac:** Yeah, like a hundred years ago. But uh, yeah, I think for me a big frustration is the idea that clothes make the trans person, because they don’t. That’s all I have to say!

**Ave:** Or, yeah, the non-binary trans person, for sure, yeah.

**Mac:** But you know something interesting, that I can’t remember if we talked about, that Sephora is doing make-up- free make-up tutorials for trans people. Soon, or now- by the time this comes out- probably now, or before. Um, but, pretty cool!

**Ave:** That is pretty cool!

**Mac:** You know, maybe I’ll go. I don’t know the first dipping thing about that.

**Ave:** Me neither. My partner showed me a mascara wand, and I was like “What does that do?”

**Mac:** They look kinda scary.

**Ave:** They are scary! You have to open your eyes so wide, and you’re afraid you’re gonna poke yourself in the eye. Also, like, eye shadow- what is that? How can anyone get that right? I don’t understand!

**Mac:** But you know, it’s like potions class. If like herbology were in the same class, it’d be make-up class! Right?

**Ave:** Sure. We’ll go with that. Everyone, just nod from your living rooms.

**Mac:** Just nod, and also “like” this Tweet!

**Ave:** The one that’s about to go up while we’re still live.

**Mac:** Yeah. Um, anyway that’s my big thought on make-up. It’s magic.

**Ave:** Make-up *is* magic! People do such cool things with make-up, and I wish it was more socially acceptable for masculine people to wear make-up.

**Mac:** Me too!

**Ave:** But, you know, misogyny. That’s that hard shit.

**Mac:** Yeah. Well, on that note. I think we’re just about arriving at The Platform.

[*music plays*]

**Ave:** This week on The Platform, our segment is called Open Mic, where we ask some trans people to get on the mic and tell us a story of theirs based on a prompt. This week’s prompt is based on our theme of passing, and is thus: Tell us about a situation, funny or otherwise, you found yourself in because of passing too well or not passing at all?

[*music fades*]

**Dean:** Hi, my name is Dean Grossberg. Uh, I live in California. I went to Oberlin College for four years, and my main thing is theater. I like to direct. I am a transmaculine person, I changed my name to Dean in my freshman year of college. And, um, I already knew that I wanted to mess with gender way before then, though it didn’t occur to me that’s what I was doing. When Mac gave me this prompt about passing, I was kind of stumped at first because I have never passed. I am a transmasculine person, but I have very feminine features, and for the vast majority of my life – for about ten years before about eight months ago- I had really really big tits. I was a thirty [*inaudible*] so I had a very small chest and about a G cup. So later on when I got surgery about eight months ago, the doctor revealed that that was about three and a half pounds on each side, which he brought up the salient point that that adds up to a baby!

**Dean**: round in my bathroom with looks, as I do. Which I did with masculine looks, but I also did with make-up and feminine looks. But I paid a lot of money for a fancy binder off of Amazon, and I strapped it on and I looked at myself and I liked it. And I opened the door, and there was my mother, and she asked “What are you doing?” And, my only was replied “It’s binding. It’s bound. I bound it.” And she looked at my chest, and looks back up at me, and truthteller that she is goes “That’s a bumpy bind.” And she was right! And at that moment I realized that passing was not something I was gonna do. And that really bummed me out at the time, that I didn’t have the flexibility on the public’s eye to switch between genders.

**Dean:** But, um, you know fortunately my parents got on board with the program enough to even pay for a surgery later, for a full double mastectomy, this past year. And, funny thing is, passing has stopped mattering to me so much. So much so that I have almost the same wardrobe as I did when I had tits, the difference is everything fits better, including the women’s clothes. Everything looks way, way better now. But passing for a long time felt very secondary to me, especially because I knew it wasn’t going to happen. I eliminated it as a possibility. So I focused instead on making myself the hottest chick I possibly could. To use my tits to my advantage, to look porn-y, almost, and so on. To look as hot as possible, sometimes made me feel better about not passing for the gender- or passing for something close to the gender that I identify as. So, it’s uh- sometimes my priority is looking hot, and sometimes my priority is looking like me. And that’s my limited experience with passing!

**Tyler:** Hi everyone! My name is Tyler Coles, and I use he/they pronouns. With growing up in the mountains of southwest Virginia in a multiracial household, gender, sexuality, and even religion were just assumed. Assumed in the sense that Christianity is the default, and that people assigned male at birth were boys who would grow up to be men who married women who would then go off to have two point five kids and a dog and a house (if you’re lucky). Yet reflecting back on some of my earliest memories, those neatly defined boundaries and predisposed assumptions of who I was and should be never quite fit. I could give examples of how I was transgressive and boundary-blurring even back then, but we all have those stories to some extent. Yet it was not until middle school that I began the long, hard, and even messy process of naming myself as a whole person. I guess you could say that I was an *early* bloomer, y’all!

**Tyler:** This first started with me naming myself proudly as biracial, a person of mixed heritage born to a white mother and a Black father. Then soon came my sexual orientation. I can recall the moment as if it was yesterday that I first heard the word “bisexual.” It was as if the heavens opened up and a voice from on high loudly proclaimed, “Duh, Tyler! It’s about time you realized who *I* made you to be.” In those months and years following, I went through what seemed like the first of many initiations. My identities were coming into focus. My involvement in religious community emerged, thrived, and then imploded. I name these moments and these realizations, not haphazardly, but proudly. Because naming and claiming has an extraordinary value, and more often than not, we miss that value due to the various snares of our Western culture that seeks to shame us for being anything other than white, Christian, straight, non-trans, middle- to upper-class, able bodied, educated and male. But I also named these because we are children of the earth, creatures of creation, and like everything in the black starry galaxy, we continuously change and evolve over the course of our lifetime.

**Tyler:** It was in college while attending a conference for LGBTQI students that I heard the word “queer,” used as an empowering identifier by a presenter involved in Southerners on New Ground, or SONG for short. SONG is a multi-racial political organization invested in the liberation of the South, organizing at the intersections of being pro-Black, pro-queer, pro-immigrant, pro-sex worker, and pro-rural and working. Again, the heavens opened, but this time they said “Now get to work!” Not only did my sexual identity shift, but so did my gender identity. It wouldn’t be for another several years that I would be able to pull all the pieces together, thanks in part to beautiful prophets like Mac, and RJ, and Sarah, that I was able to name myself as being fully and completely queer: sexually queer, and gender queer. Not only am I whole, but I am holy. Fully and completely evolving.

**Tyler:** Since claiming myself, I am becoming unapologetic in identifying myself, knowing that not only do I run the risk of outing myself as a queer gender non-conforming person with a masculine gender expression, but that more often than not, I simply pass as cis male. This has happened in religious community, in organizing in spaces, in my work environments, and even in my own friend group. It is important to name my own passing not as a form as shaming or even damnation, but to name and claim the immense privilege and power my presentation has. We are not responsible for one another, we are responsible *to* one another. Naming and claiming my privilege allows me the opportunity to make space in solidarity with my queer and trans siblings so that not only may they be at the table, but that we all may be present at the table. After all, Creation’s aim is collective liberation, and we can only be free when *all of us* are free.

[*music plays*]

**Ave:** As always, thank you so much to everyone who contributed to our show today on The Platform.

**Mac:** If you’re tuning in and want to share your thoughts, you know where to find us. Shoot us an email at [publictranspodcast@gmail.com](mailto:publictranspodcast@gmail.com), or even DM us on Facebook, Instagram, or Twitter. Plus, we’d like to extend our official invitation for you to ask us for all of your preferably trans-related advice! And here on the show we’ll tell you exactly what we think. Again, that’s [publictranspodcast@gmail.com](mailto:publictranspodcast@gmail.com). We’d love to hear from ya’ll and help you out with any problems, big or small, that you may have.

**Ave:** Plus, if you love this episode, please give us a shoutout on Facebook, Instagram, or Twitter, or drop us a review on iTunes.

**Mac:** Please do that!

**Ave:** Please, please. Share us with your friends and family and your coworkers and the people on the street that you pass and the people sitting across from you on the train. Anyone.

[*music plays*]

**Mac:** Public Trans is Mac and Ave. Our music is produced by Alex Fiorentini. Our editing is done by Savannah Tracy. The people you heard on The Platform today were Tyler Coles and Dean Grosbard. You can find us on Instagram at public.trans.podcast, on Twitter at trans\_public, and on Facebook at Public Trans Podcast. Drop us a “like,” follow us, tell your friends! Subscribe to Public Trans where you get your podcasts, to be the first to know when our next episode comes out. We are so excited to be on Gender Reveal this week! Thanks for having us, Molly!

[*music continues through end of podcast*]