[*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, hope you’re hanging in there. We are not quite ready to officially start our ninth season of Gender Reveal, but we did want to give you a little gift on this Transgender Day of Visibility and/or Action and/or Staying Home and Having a Nice Snack. So, today, we are bringing you two short segments about visibility, written by two genius friends of the show, Vidhya Aravind and Erique Zhang.

But first! We’ve got a bunch of updates for you; I will try to move through them quickly.

First, if you’re hearing this on March 31st, we have opened the applications for our spring mutual aid program. So if you are a trans person of color who is short on money for rent or meds or food or another basic need, please reach out to us at bit.ly/tdos22. That’s bit.ly/tdos22. We will send out as many mutual aid payments as we can, but we are limited by the donations we receive, so if you would like to donate to this mutual aid drive, you can do so via Venmo, Cashapp, or PayPal. There are links in the show notes and also at genderpodcast.com/donate.

You can also support the mutual aid program by buying some of our very limited edition Trans Day of Snack merch at bit.ly/gendermerch. We’ve got three new designs that are only available through April 9, after which they will disappear forever, and 50% of the proceeds from those designs go straight to our mutual aid fund. We’ve got a cupcake design, we’ve got a chocolate bar design, we’ve got a pizza design, what more could you want. Again that is all available through April 9 at bit.ly/gendermerch.

Okay, one more thing, while you’re here. As you know, 98% of the budget for this show comes from our Patreon supporters, so in an attempt to keep Producer Jules and I employed, I recently revamped our Patreon rewards, and added an exclusive, Patreon-only podcast feed. This podcast, Gender Reveal, will always be free, but now we can occasionally drop little bonus conversations that didn’t quite fit into the main show.

The new podcast is available for just $5 a month. There is also an identical tier at $10 a month if you want to help us out twice as much out of the kindness of your heart. I also added a little disclaimer suggesting that cis people do the $10 tier because of the cis/trans wage gap, but that’s not to say that you HAVE to give that amount, or that if you do give $10 you have to detransition. ANYWAY, all of that is available at patreon.com/gender. That’s patreon.com/gender.

[*Gender Reveal* transition music starts]

Okay, as I mentioned, we’ve got two short visibility-themed essays for you today. The first one you’ll hear is written by Gender Reveal alumna Vidhya Aravind and read by our very own Producer Jules, and the second is written and performed by friend of the show Erique Zhang. Without further ado, here’s Jules reading Vidhya’s essay.

[*Gender Reveal* transition music ends]

**Jules:** Despite having written an essay or speech for every Trans Day of Remembrance and Trans Day of Visibility since coming out in 2016, this week I found myself truly at a loss for words. I was considering proposing a pithy little reframing to “trans day of viability,” but the “trans day of [blank]” wordplay I’ve used in the past at political rallies seems ill-suited to the moment.

[Subdued acoustic guitar and percussion music plays]

Of course, it bears mentioning the obvious: we are more visible than we’ve ever been, and it’s only made trans people easier targets. Visibility has just highlighted something for transphobes to take aim at. Per Freedom for All Americans, by March 15th of this year, 238 anti-LGBTQ bills had already been filed in state legislatures in 2022, with two-thirds of them being specifically targeted at trans people. 2021 was itself a record year, with 191 anti-LGBTQ bills filed, 80% of which were anti-trans. We’ve already passed that in just three months of 2022. For context, in 2018, 41 such bills were filed. Since the “transgender tipping point,” our murders have never not been in the news, and all we have to show for it are calls that “transgender people are people,” and pronoun circles that our bosses ignore anyway.

Visibility can’t have always been this double-edged. It makes perfect sense that general visibility was necessary in 2009, when the day was first recognized; it took me 4 more years to learn about trans people myself. But now I can’t escape news about fresh and exciting ways our existence is being systematically attacked by power. Now that visibility is meaningful to me, I can’t seem to escape bearing witness to its naked violence. Erasure and invisibility is no longer the problem — our life expectancies are.

Historically, I’ve made calls to action for cis people to do better — to address our material needs, instead of taking a moment to acknowledge that they see and stare at us constantly. In Novembers past, around Trans Day of Remembrance, I’ve called for cis people to keep us in mind before we die. This was the original goal of Trans Day of Visibility: for cis people to pay attention. It’s clear now, however, that we can’t trust cis people at all to stop the smothering onslaught of visibility, now that it’s turned back against us. Maybe it’s time to redefine and reclaim visibility for ourselves. Now that everyone can see the closet, we need to make it safe for children to leave.

[Light, upbeat synth and percussion music plays]

As a teenager, I needed to see trans adults existing just to know that transition was possible. Teenagers in the present have a much better head start, but also exist in a very different world. They’re confronted by this violence of visibility all over social media and in the air, just as I am now. We need to make sure they see trans adults so they know they can not just survive, but thrive. How can we step in front of hypervisibility to give them a view of a better world? How can we create hope in such a hopeless moment? How can we make this day about hope and not violence?

For starters, as Mariame Kaba reminds us, hope is a discipline. It is a thing we create for ourselves, not a thing that always exists at hand. We create our own hope by prefiguring our own better futures, for ourselves and for each other. For this day of visibility, I challenge all of us to create the worlds we ourselves wished were visible, and to not give in to the world we already see.

At its best, the queer community has understood the stakes and fought for each others’ lives regardless of politics or pasts; but at its present, we’re hardly a community at all, much less one that can take in hordes of future trans folks who have only ever known the trauma of visibility. As the state tries to legislate trans children out of existence, let’s show these kids what communities of care are possible.

This requires work on our parts, of course. It’s no longer enough to just be visible to each other. We need to build together, which requires developing our capacity for together. It requires working on ourselves, maintaining relationships through strife and across difference, and sharing capacity to fill one another’s material needs. It may seem trite, but I urge you to take this Trans Day of Visibility and reflect on how you can be a point of brightness to the trans people who come after you.

[Music fades out]

**Erique:** There’s a moment in the documentary *Framing Agnes* when historian Jules Gill-Peterson is talking about a Black trans woman from the South named Georgia.

[Dreamy vibraphone music plays]

One of the few people of color to appear in the film, Georgia was a participant in a mid-century study of trans identity conducted by Harold Garfinkel, a sociologist at UCLA. As another trans woman of color, Gill-Peterson finds herself drawn to Georgia’s story, an impulse that she interrogates in herself: “I feel this kind of responsibility for Georgia that is totally inappropriate,” she says. “There’s what I think I know about her. There’s what I want her to mean for me.”

It’s this desire to make individuals stand in for larger questions about social inequality that structures much of how the film treats Georgia. *Framing Agnes*, which premiered at Sundance earlier this year, is the result of years of collaborative work between filmmaker Chase Joynt and sociologist Kristen Schilt. The film seeks to reframe how we understand the story of Agnes, a trans woman who famously lied to researchers at the UCLA Gender Identity Clinic in the 1950s, telling them that she was intersex. At the time, and still to this day, medical gatekeeping often meant that intersex people were coerced into undergoing the same surgeries that were denied to trans people. By maintaining this lie, Agnes was able to convince doctors at UCLA to perform gender reassignment surgery on her.

Garfinkel published a paper in 1967 about Agnes, believing she was intersex, cementing her place in trans folk history. However, she was not the only participant in his study. While poring through Garfinkel’s archives, Joynt and Schilt discovered transcripts of interviews with other trans participants. With the help of writer Morgan M. Page, they used the transcripts to produce a script, transforming the researcher’s office into a talk show featuring Joynt as a clueless host and trans actors playing the participants. These talk show interviews, filmed in black and white, are intercut with re-enactments, filmed in color, of the participants going about their everyday lives. Agnes, played by Zachary Drucker, gardens and hangs up the laundry, while Barbara, played by Jen Richards, talks with friends over the phone.

In another scene, we see Georgia, played by Angelica Ross, enter a nearly empty church, sit down in a pew, and open her bible. A pastor, noticing her, sits with her and exchanges words. This scene struck me because of its ambiguity: while the other re-enactments portrayed how fulfilling it can be for trans people to live mundane, everyday lives, this one seemed to communicate something very different. Instead, we see Georgia in a moment of vulnerability, right as Joynt says in a voiceover: “I think often about the relationship between visibility and vulnerability.”

The film’s participants proceed to talk about what visibility means for trans people, particularly trans women of color. As a researcher and a trans femme of color myself, I find trans visibility to be a complicated topic, one that I interrogate in my research. And I’m certainly not alone in this critique; other trans activists and scholars before me have written about the trap of visibility, noting that more mainstream representation has not resulted in more safety for trans folks. In fact, every year we see rising numbers of reported murders of trans people, chief among them trans women of color, and it seems like every week another bill is introduced somewhere in the US that seeks to roll back trans rights.

On Trans Day of Visibility, I think a lot about what visibility does, who it serves. Whose stories get to be told, and how do we tell their stories? As Richards points out, Black trans women like Laverne Cox, Janet Mock, and Angelica Ross have become de facto faces of the trans rights movement, even while Black trans women remain the most at risk in the community. Indeed, the specter of the Black trans woman as victim has become a symbol in trans activism of anti-trans violence more broadly. Who among us chronically online trans folks has not encountered the out-of-context statistic that the average life expectancy of trans women of color is 35 years?

I fear that this pessimistic form of visibility that centers trans suffering teaches young trans people to fear for their deaths rather than to embrace their lives. I worry even more about what we’re communicating about the value of Black trans women’s lives when we focus on their pain while simultaneously making them into spokespeople for the community. *Framing Agnes* gives in to that impulse, too, by framing Georgia’s experience around the hardships in her life.

[Subdued piano and acoustic guitar music plays]

I keep returning to that scene of Georgia in the church. Especially in Black communities, the church is symbolic both of sanctuary and of community. So why is Georgia entering the church alone? What is she looking for—solace, peace, answers? What is the pastor telling her? The meaning of this scene is hard to parse, but to me it seemed to show Georgia as an outcast, someone in need of salvation and community. Meanwhile, we cut intermittently to shots of Agnes in her garden or driving in her convertible, enjoying a domestic, middle-class life in the suburbs.

As these scenes play out, we listen to Gill-Peterson compare the two: “Agnes is iconic in this positive sense that she was very visible. But then we have to go and ask, how is Georgia iconic? People don’t know her story, but people think they know who she is when they see her.”

Of course, Agnes is iconic because Garfinkel chose to publish a paper about her and not the other participants. But Agnes is also iconic because she represents trans hope and trans resourcefulness, as a figure who was able to outwit the gatekeepers to get what she wanted. Georgia becomes iconic for the opposite reasons, as someone unable to escape the intersecting structures of Jim Crow-era racism and transphobia. As she tells the host, “This whole thing just has me so sick with worry.” She sees no way out, no hope of the life that Agnes was able to achieve.

The church scene ends with a shot of Georgia standing up and walking out. As she opens the door, she gazes back briefly at the camera with a contented look on her face, and then she steps out. This gesture is repeated towards the end of the film as Agnes, clearly annoyed with the host’s ignorance, stands up, walks off set, and exits through the back door. She, too, looks back at the camera before walking outside. This gesture of refusal seems to show the two women reclaiming their agency, but what does it tell us about them and about visibility?

Gill-Peterson concludes the film by saying, poignantly, “One of the many lies about visibility is that being seen is your emancipation. What would it feel like to be left alone? What’s the right to be invisible?” But the question that stayed with me as I left the film was: Who gets to be invisible? Who do we afford that right, and who do we deny it?

[Music fades out]

[*Gender Reveal* theme music starts]

**Tuck:** That’s going to do it for this week’s Trans day of visibility very special episode. You can find Erique at eriquezhang.com and at @er\_ique on twitter. Vidhya is at @kid\_vidh on twitter, and you can also hear her in episode 74 of this very podcast, although please skip the first, like, one minute of the episode for name reasons, thanks so much.

As we mentioned up top, you can support our spring mutual aid drive by buying some of our limited edition trans day of snack merch at bit.ly/gendermerch, or by making a donation via Venmo, PayPal, or Cashapp, all of those links are in the shownotes. You can also help us continue to make the show and pay contributors like Vidhya and Erique by joining us at patreon.com/gender, where just $5 a month gets you access to our new exclusive audio feed, which doesn’t have anything in it but one day it will!

This episode was produced and edited by Julia Llinas Goodman and me, Tuck Woodstock. Our logo is by Ira M. Leigh. Our theme song is by Breakmaster Cylinder. Additional music this week by Blue Dot Sessions.

Stay safe, enjoy your snacks, doing something fun with your one wild and precious day of being perceivable, and we will be back in three weeks with more feelings about gender.

[*Gender Reveal* theme music ends]