[*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 all hanging in there. Welcome back to Cis Day of Visibility: a bit that arguably went too far.

[Relaxed, beachy background music plays]

**Tuck:** For folks who are like, [in a singing voice] “Hey Tuck, why the hell are you talking to cis people? Isn’t your whole thing that you don’t talk to cis people?”, I hear you. And that is why I originally wanted to run all of these interviews on the *same* day, so that it was very quick and easy to skip. But it turns out that making several weeks’ worth of podcasts in one week is humanly impossible for a team of two people. So, they’re going to be a bit spread out. Anyway, that said, I think you’re really going to like today’s conversation! I had a total blast talking with *It’s Been A Minute* host Sam Sanders for this episode, which is, of course, part 2 of our Cis Day of Visibility Episode 100 Extravaganza.

[Background music ends]

**Tuck:** Sam and I chatted about pushing the limits of NPR’s objectivity rules, which you *know* I loved.

**Sam** **[voice clip]:** I think for a long time newsroom leadership was convinced that if a place like NPR was objective enough, certain parts of, like, right-wing Twitter would stop being mean to us.

**Tuck:** We also talk about balding solidarity, the cis gay use of “girl,” and creating space for richer black and trans narratives.

**Sam [voice clip]:** I refuse to only talk about black people as if all we do is suffer!

**Tuck:** Just a lightning quick reminder, before we get to that, that our July merch collection is only available for a couple more days at [Bit.ly/GenderMerch](bit.ly/gendermerch), where we’ve got stickers that say “the local gender is flourishing” and t-shirts that say “hot trans summer” and a fanny pack that says “$5 misgendering fee.” By the way, I know someone who did a $5 misgendering fee recently—made $40. Worth it! Anyway, also a reminder that if you’re looking for sneak peeks of future guests, exclusive essays, merch discounts, and pictures of my cats, you’ll want to sign-up for our weekly newsletter, which you can do by pledging just $1 a month (or more) at [Patreon.com/Gender](patreon.com/gender). Okay, we’ve got a little TheyMail message for you today about another trans podcast. It says:

“Today I want to recommend a podcast to you called *Our Opinions Are Correct*, hosted by Charlie Jane Anders and Annalee Newitz. Every other week, *Our Opinions Are Correct* dissects a different topic related to science fiction, science, and everything in between. They’ve talked about everything from how to write a good fight scene to the death of the universe. Charlie Jane Anders is an award-winning author of several science fiction novels, including recently released *Victories Greater Than Death*. Annalee Newitz is an award-winning science journalist who writes for *The New York Times* and *The Atlantic*. Together, they will befriend cosmic monsters! Subscribe to *Our Opinions Are Correct* on Apple Podcasts and anywhere else you listen to podcasts.”

[Transition sound effect, with low metallic chimes and hi-hats plays briefly]

[*Gender Reveal* theme music starts]

**Tuck:** Sam Sanders is a loud, Texan procrastinator and NPR talker.

[*Gender Reveal* theme music ends]

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

**Sam:** I describe myself as, uh, male. Um… yeah!

**Tuck:** How…how do you know?

**Sam:** Oh my goodness, no one has ever asked me that. Huh! How do I know? You know, it’s interesting, cause I’ve been thinking *a lot*, particularly in this pandemic year, about how my presentation of self over the last few years has become more (at least visually) heternormative and like cisgendered male, even as my identity, I think spiritually, becomes more queer. Like, at no other phase in my life have I been as comfortable being gay. But also, in no other phase of my life have I looked more like a heteronormative dude. Like, I’m bald now, which is particularly cisgendered, I think. I have a beard, which has gray hairs in it, you know? I exercise more now, so my shoulders have filled out. And so, like, I present to the world as more butch than I was 10 years ago, even though I’m actually more gay than I was 10 years ago. But I also think that in some ways, my general disposition is probably predisposed to, like, look “traditionally male,” to the extent where I don’t even question it. Like, I grew up in a religious family in South Texas and like, yeah, it’s just like part of the cultural DNA. There was a phase in my youth, I think, where I would sneak in and put on my mother’s high heels and was like, “Oh is this for me?” and then I was just like, “No, they hurt and I tripped, I don’t wanna wear those.” [Tuck laughs] I don’t know. [Laughs]

**Tuck:** You know, you talked about growing up a little bit. How do you feel like whatever space you were in growing up, and whoever you were surrounded by growing up, how do you feel like that influenced the way you thought about gender and the way you saw the possibilities of gender?

**Sam:** It was a weird… well, not weird. It was in some ways this beautiful... dichotomy. So, I was raised Pentecostal. Black Pentecostal. So this is like an extremely charismatic Christian, everyone’s speaking in tongues, all of the tropes you think of like a black, rambunctious church, that was my church. And so it was a very socially traditional space. So, like, we couldn’t go to the movies, we had to beg to go to school dances, the women didn’t wear jewelry or makeup or cut their hair, we only listened to Christian music. Like, it was very strict and severe. Yet it was a space in which the women were just as empowered as the men. Our pastor forever was a woman, and women had equal rights in the church, as far as being ministers or speaking behind the pulpit, which was novel for that time. And, at home, also, my mother worked, my dad was kinda the stay-at-home retired dad, and she was kind of in charge of the house. So I grew up in this religiously conservative space, in which there was gender parity? [Laughs] And I think it let me know from an early, early point in my life that like, these boundaries that we’ve shaped for ourselves are fluid, and we think they’re rules when they’re just norms, and you can do what you want to do and create your own way. And so while in *no way* did I grow up in an environment that was, you know, actually friendly towards trans people, I did grow up with this sense that, like, the script that we have about what men do and what women do is just a script, and you can write a different one.

**Tuck:** Yeah! In 2019, you tweeted this screenshot of this transphobic comment that y’all got, and under it you said, “We will continue discussing trans rights on my show.” So, I’m interested in what you see as your role in trans rights discourse.

**Sam:** Yeah, I think the best version of this show allows me to be a proxy for the listener. The goal is for you to feel, when you hear the show, that I’m kinda asking questions on your behalf. And that I’m speaking, if not for you, with you, right? I think when I’m having conversations about trans issues, what I’m trying to do with my listenership (which I know is mostly cisgender), is say to them, “Hey, you, listener-who-maybe-doesn’t-have-much-experience-with-that! You can come into this conversation with me, and I am also someone-who-doesn’t-have-too-much-experience-with that, and we can be open to these things and learn together.” I don’t want to play dumb, but I also want to ask some of the questions that I think they would have, even if it’s a little 101 sometimes. And there’s a balance too, right? Cause on the one hand I’m like, “All of y’all have motherfucking Google.” *But* I want my listeners to feel like we’re in this thing together. And so that’s the constant… well, it’s not a struggle, it’s a fun exercise. But that is the constant thing that I’m thinking about.

**Tuck:** Yeah. I mean, I do want to say that I think you do a really good job. And I was trying to figure out, okay, like, “What does Sam do when he talks to like, Patti [Harrison] or Torrey [Peters] or like Jules [Gill-Peterson] or whoever, that feels different?” And I was like, “Oh, you literally just don’t treat trans people like aliens.” So, I’m curious, in your work at NPR, do you feel like that’s a conversation that’s being had in the newsroom? About, like, how to talk about trans topics and how to talk to trans people without treating them like aliens?

**Sam:** Yeah, I think it’s a larger conversation for me about how we talk to and about marginalized people, period, in a space like NPR which is still pretty heteronormative and white-dominated, right? And I think for me, just being a black journalist working in a majority-white space like NPR for 12 years now, I’ve just really internalized, for me it’s like, I refuse to talk about black people as if all we do is suffer! And if that’s been my rule for years now when it comes to talking about black shit, I kinda just apply the same rule to everything else. It is not *fair* to talk about trans people only in regards to their suffering. It is not *fair* to talk about queer people *just* in terms of their suffering. One, that means we’re seeing these folks through the lens of their oppressors. Not cool! Not fair! Don’t like it! And two, trans people and queer people and black people and women, we get to be as multifaceted as the white people. And if we can have stories in which white people are having fun, and white people are also doing this, and white people are doing that, we can have the same diversity of stories about people from marginalized backgrounds. And that’s just one of the founding principles of the show. And it of course extends to conversations with trans folks. I wanted to talk to Torrey Peters just cause I loved the fucking book, you know? I wanted to talk to Patti [Harrison] just cause I loved the fucking movie. And of course we’re going to talk about how identity plays into your work, but like, that’s one of many questions. It’s not the only question!

**Tuck:** Related to this, I think, we talk a lot on this show about like, quote-unquote “journalistic objectivity,” and I know that you also talk about this. And I can see you *pushing* the *limits* of NPR’s objectivity rules. And I mean, I can think of a lot of examples of this, but I’m specifically thinking of your discussion of how those rules of “objectivity” can be rooted in making as much money as possible as much as it is about, like, telling the truth.

**Sam:** Oh yeah!

**Tuck:** Yeah! I’m really curious about how you have navigated being a black gay man in a space where straight white people get to make the rules about what you can and cannot talk about.

**Sam:** Yeah. I think in general, the line you think has been drawn for you to not cross, you should probably just… gingerly cross it, once or twice a month, and see what happens. And usually what happens is no one challenges you on it, and you just move your line, you know? And I think that like, the work has just been subtly moving the line without them even knowing it. And I think that for a while I was dead set on making the newsroom or NPR leadership rewrite the rules for the company about “objectivity.” And I realized: it doesn’t matter. If I can move my line, myself, on my show, that’s the most productive way to do it. And they’ll catch up. [Laughs] And I think with “objectivity” what the bosses are really asking the talent to do is not get them in trouble. “Objectivity” is a moving target. It changes based on cultural whims at that time, right? So, it’s impossible for a newsroom leader to ask you to clearly adhere to these rules, cause there *are* no clear rules. And so, knowing that, as long as you make sure that they don’t think that you’re gonna get them in trouble, do what the fuck you gotta do, man. I mean like, that's kinda my thing. I think that because I’ve been at NPR so long, I know really well what I can and can’t get away with, and how to just gradually push that envelope. But it’s a process. In general, if I’m moving towards any good point to make about this, it’s just like: stop asking permission. I think that the big thing that has to happen in these discussions of “objectivity” is to realize that even if you are reaching towards that quote-unquote “ideal of the objective,” it’s still not gonna make everybody happy. I think for a long time, newsroom leadership was convinced that if a place like NPR was objective enough, certain parts of, like, right-wing Twitter would stop being mean to us. That’s never gonna happen!

**Tuck:** [Chuckling] Right.

**Sam:** That’s never gonna happen. So why should any part of my work be concerned with what those folks might be tweeting? And I think that NPR has to get to a place where it says: not everything that NPR makes is for everybody. What if the intended audience of my show is *different*, inherently, than the intended audience of *Morning Edition*. That’s *okay*! And that’s actually *smart business strategy*!

**Tuck:** Yes. Yes, it *is* actually better. [Laughs]

**Sam:** Yeah. Yeah!

**Tuck:** Well, I could talk about that forever, but I want us to go back a little bit. We talked about Torrey [Peters], we talked about Patti [Harrison], some other folks. Can you think of a guest—cis, trans, whoever—who changed the way you think about gender on your show?

**Sam:** Hmmm. One of my earliest author interviews was with a cis woman, Danzy Senna. She’s black, but she wrote a book called *New People*. And this was years ago, I think we talked in 2017. It was a novel all about this young interracial couple, but it really is all about the performance of race and the way that even if you don’t think you’re doing it, you’re doing it. Even black people are doing it. And a lot of the chat was kinda just me and her talking about how, like, all of personhood is a kind of performance. We are putting on some kind of armor to present ourselves to the world every day. And the better that we start seeing all of the ways in which we perform, the more we can understand ourselves and others. And I think *that* chat really has made me just look at myself a little bit more holistically since then. It’s like, “What am I performing today?” And I think for a long time, like most cis folks, it’s like, [mocking tone] “Well, gender’s not performance, it’s just how I look, it’s just the clothes I want to wear.” Well, no, it’s performance! It’s performance, and there’s a certain choice in it, and understanding that and just thinking about it, I think it allows you to just be a little more open to all kinds of conversations about, you know, the fluidity of all of us. Sorry, I don’t know if that was a good answer.

**Tuck:** I think so! I mean, cause there’s a phenomenon… I mean, there’s always trans people coming out all the time. But there seems to be a specific phenomenon of trans people who came out during the pandemic, because they realized for the first time that they were performing their gender. Like they looked at the gender that they were doing when they didn’t have to be perceived by everyone for like a month, and they were like, “Oh, actually, that’s different.” Like, gender isn’t all about presentation, but that was the first time that they really got to, like, interrogate that. So I think what you’re saying is not only rooted in gender theory that we could cite, you know, Judith Butler and whoever, but also just rooted in the experience that people are having right now. I mean, I’m curious, you were talking about the intersection of black folks and trans folks, and how that informs your interviews. Like, your lived experiences as a black person informing the way you want other marginalized people to be treated. I’m curious how you feel, like, being black impacts your experiences of gender.

**Sam:** I think when you’re black, you’re always trying to hear what’s unsaid. Cause there’s just some shit folks won’t say to your face. And you’re always looking around for context clues to see the way power is playing out in this space and whether you’re in danger or not. And I think when you do those things consistently, and it’s just part of who you are, it makes you a better interviewer because you’re asking questions that just inherently, hopefully, get past the obvious. There’s always a spirit of like, [dubious tone] “Well, *actually,*” in my work. Or like, [dubious tone] “Well that is what everyone’s saying, but *is it*?” There’s like that shoulder raise, like [dubious, questioning sound]. And once you have that, you realize that [dubious, questioning sound] makes for the best interview questions. That [dubious tone] “Well, I don’t actually know, maybe it’s different,” that is actually the conversation you want to have. And I think that little shoulder raise, you just, by the time you’re 8 years old and black you have it, cause you have to see the world that way.

**Tuck:** Yeah. You know, as a gay man, I have to assume that, you know, you’re sometimes like “she/her”d or “girl”d by other gays, cause that’s, like, a trope of gay male culture. And I was just curious about how that feels with regards to gender, because we make *such* a big deal about trans people and their pronouns.

**Sam:** I love it! I do it a lot. My gay friends do it with me a lot. I maybe do it a little bit *too much*, it might piss some people off, but I’m always like, “girl, girl, girl” all the time. And I think that you have to be aware of when you’re doing it and how and in what spaces, but I also think that, in general, I’m intrigued by linguistic playfulness, especially when it comes to labels like that. And I don’t know where I’m trying to push it when I’m saying “girl” a lot, but I don’t mind it, and I *like* it. And I think that if gay men using “girl” all the time can help just diffuse some of the like, strictness and rigidity around gender, then it’s helpful. But I *don’t* want to be the funny gay guy who’s saying “girl” in a way that is pissing some people off, too. And do people feel empowered enough to say, “You shouldn’t have called me girl, when you just did”? I don’t know. And I hope that I’m not delivering it in a way that people don’t feel empowered enough to say, “I don’t like that you did that.” Sorry, this is just me circling around the drain and not having a clear answer, but…

**Tuck:** No, I mean, I don’t know that there is a clear answer! I just think it’s so interesting. Like, I was interviewing two gay men who own a taqueria in Portland, and I was like, “Just to make sure, your pronouns are he/him, right?” And they were like, “Yeah, I guess so. We only ever use she/her for each other, but I guess they *are* he/him.” I think that’s what’s so interesting, like, when I asked you your pronouns, you said he/him. That makes sense, because you’re like, “You should use he/him pronouns for me.” But also, there are spaces, assuredly, where your pronouns are effectively she/her, right?

**Sam:** Yeah!

**Tuck:** And like, what does *that* mean for gender?

**Sam:** And I think it is all about familiarity. If I feel like I know you and you feel like you know me, we can play around with “girl.” But if you don’t, don’t do it. In the same way that, like, the only person that gets to call their partner “baby” is the partner. You know, like you can’t call someone else’s partner baby, cause you’re not with them! Like, a lot of the usage depends on familiarity.

**Tuck:** For sure, but can you imagine that trans people also do this? And we are like, “Oh yeah, I use he/him in this context, and they/them in this context,” and people are like, “What the hell are you talking about?” Right? Like it’s *so* interesting to me how it's, like, so much more legible.

**Sam:** I don’t know, is what I’m hearing kinda this desire of like, the quote-unquote “mainstream” to make everything that’s trans seem more difficult and harder than it really is?

**Tuck:** Yeah!

**Sam:** So like, when gay, cis men are saying “girl,” everyone’s like, “I get that!” But when trans people do it, they’re like, “[gasp!] I think this might be confusing because I’m *supposed* to be confused about trans people,” right? And it’s like, no, we’re just playing with words, like they get to play with motherfucking words! And not everything about a group you don’t know about has to be mysterious. Sometimes it’s just a fun use of language, and I think that like, we’re all people here! None of this is, like, actually rocket science.

**Tuck:** Totally. Well, I wanted to give *you* a chance. Do you have any questions about trans people or gender for me?

**Sam:** Hmmm. I think I want to know where to start reading about detransition. It came up a little bit in my chat with Torrey Peters, and I remember, just because the two of us mentioned it and talked about it briefly, some portions of the internet were *outraged*. And I was like, “Let me not touch that with a ten-foot pole, cause I don’t even know enough yet to respond to these tweets.” But I kept saying to myself since then, “Read up on it, and figure out what’s going on here.” So I think I would say, like, where do I start reading on that if I want to learn about that?

**Tuck:** Yeah. That’s a good question. I mean, this isn’t reading, but we have an interview with someone named TC Frost who talks about detransition and retransition, which I think is a really interesting lens. But yeah, that’s a really hard thing to weigh in on, right? Cause there are people who have detransitioned who feel *very* passionately, like, anti-trans at this point. But also, there are a *lot* of people, including friends of mine, who detransitioned and feel like *very chill* about it, and do not in any way regret anything, and are just like, “Yeah, I identified as nonbinary and now I identify as a man,” or like “I identified as a trans man and now I identify as a cis woman,” right? The majority of people who detransition seem to do it because it is exhausting to be trans, and not because they *aren’t* trans. But regardless, some of them detransition because they decide they aren’t trans, but are like, “That was fine and chill.” [Laughs] You know? Like, “That was fine, that was part of a gender journey.” You know? Like, there are cis woman who identified as nonbinary or a trans man, and had top surgery, and now are cis women again, but *aren’t* traumatized by that and are just like, “That’s fine. Top surgery is chill as hell.” [Laughs] You know? But it’s hard to find those voices.

**Sam:** Also, a much less serious question that I always kind of wondered but thought, “How do I say this in the right way?”, but now I’m just gonna say it! Do you ever get annoyed when, like, a hetero cis dude goes out of his way to say his pronouns all the time just to prove that he gets it? You know, like, a 6’3” Chad with a full beard being like, “he/him! he/him! he/him!” all the livelong day, and you’re like, “We get it, bro.” Does that ever get annoying? Because it annoys me sometimes.

**Tuck:** I think the thing that’s annoying is when cis people are really performative about their pronouns but misgender *other* people. Or when cis people are really performative about their pronouns but are *only* asking people who they think look trans for their pronouns. Like, that is *the thing*. If someone is like, weird about their pronouns, but is always gendering every single person correctly, and is doing that weird thing to cis people as well as trans people, that’s fine! But like, if you’re like, “I have my pronouns in my bio, and I told you my pronouns, and I asked you your pronouns pointedly because you look trans to me, but then I still misgendered you,” or, “I gendered you correctly but in some weird emphasis where you’re like, ‘How is… [unsure tone] *he* doing?’” you know? Then like, yeah, obviously go fuck off.

**Sam:** Yeah, cause they’re like, oh my god, sometimes I’ll be like, “Everything about you, Chad, should say nothing right now. [Laughs] In this room, someone else needs to talk! And you making the biggest point that you understand the concept of pronouns is not helpful to the discourse right now. Just shut up!” It annoys me sometimes, the Chads. To all the Chads listening… don’t take it personally.

**Tuck:** It is funny, though, at the very, very, very, beginning when you were like, “Baldness, which is cisgender,” because… T makes you go bald! And so, so many trans men go bald early.

**Sam:** Oh my goodness!

**Tuck:** Like, I know so many bald trans men who are like 32. So, not to teach you how to clock trans people, but they also have full beards and are bald. [Laughs]

**Sam:** Listen, teach me everything. Open my eyes! [Laughs with Tuck]

**Tuck:** That’s like one of the main… I mean like, I know trans people who don’t want to go on T, cause they’re worried they’ll go bald. You know? So…

**Sam:** Well, to those folks who are worrying, as someone who’s been bald for many years: no matter what you think, every bald head is a beautiful head. And everyone’s head is shaped weirdly. It doesn’t matter, let it go. If the hair leaves, it leaves.

**Tuck:** I agree! I agree that you shouldn’t hold your gender back by fear of a receding hairline. But, I say that as someone with a ton of hair, so. [Sam and Tuck laugh] I have thick-hair privilege. But a couple more things before I go. I don’t want to get political on you because NPR won’t let you, but do you think that cisgender people should be allowed to play sports?

**Sam:** Hmm. I mean, I can only speak for myself, and I know that *this* cisgender man should not be allowed to play sports cause I’m so bad at it! [Tuck laughs] I’m *so* bad at it.

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

**Sam:** Mmmm. In the ideal world… the future of gender would look affirming. Where we’d have a society and governments and institutions that just find ways to support people wherever they are on that journey. [Tuck laughs] And that means a lot of things—I think it means health insurance coverage. I think it means rethinking the way that we educate our children. I think it means rethinking institutions like parenthood and marriage, and moving to something that is more holistically supportive of everyone, wherever they are on these spectrums. And just like, getting rid of the idea of “normal.” The idea of “normal” hurts everybody, even the ones who we think are “normal,” because nobody can ever actually be “normal.” And so I think my goal for our future, when it comes to not just gender but, you know, race, and all other kinds of things, is to let go of “normal,” and embrace holistic support for all of us.

**Tuck:** Mm, I love that. And also, I hate that you said “supportive government” and I laughed out loud. [Laughs] Cause I was just like, [Sam laughs] “Imagine! A government supportive of trans people!”

**Sam:** Imagine, right! Imagine! [Laughs]

[*Gender Reveal* theme music starts]

**Tuck:** That's gonna do it for today’s show. If you learned something or you had a good time, please share this episode with folks in your community. And hey, if you haven’t already, please subscribe and listen to some of our episodes with actual trans people. You can find Sam on Twitter at [@SamSanders](https://twitter.com/samsanders), and subscribe to his show *It’s Been A Minute* wherever you get this podcast, *or* listen to it on NPR if you’re fancy. We are on [Twitter](https://twitter.com/gendereveal) and [Instagram](https://www.instagram.com/gendereveal/) at @Gendereveal and at [GenderPodcast.com](genderpodcast.com), where you’ll find episode transcripts and other handy resources. Support the show and sign up for our weekly newsletter at [Patreon.com/Gender](patreon.com/gender), and take a peek at our July merch collection before it’s gone forever at [Bit.ly/GenderMerch](bit.ly/gendermerch).

Today's episode was produced by me, Tuck Woodstock, and edited by Julia Llinas Goodman. Our logo is by Ira M. Leigh, and our theme song is by Breakmaster Cylinder. We’ll be back next week with more feelings about gender.

[*Gender Reveal* theme music ends]

**Tuck:** They always try to introduce me as like, “Tuck Woodstuck, identifies as gender nonbinary, and uses the gender-neutral pronouns they and them.” And I’m like, can you say, “Tuck is a journalist, they host the podcast *Gender Reveal*”? But like, they *can’t*! Like, they *cannot* do it! [Laughs]

**Sam:** They can’t do it! This reminds me, and this is a totally different kind of thing, but kinda some parallels. Years ago, when I was first at NPR—this was like 10 years ago—whenever they would, like, have to reference like, a rapper, they’d want to say like, “Uhhhh, Jay-Z, uh, uh, a rapper who raps, in hip-hop music, which is a black artistic art form.” And I’d have to be like, “*You do know* hip-hop is old at this point? It’s been around since the 70s, *everybody* knows who Jay-Z is, and you could just say Jay-Z!” No one fricking explained bluegrass to me when I was having to listen to fucking NPR, like, [Tuck laughs] make me think that everyone loved bluegrass for 10 years! They *never* explained that to me, it was just a shit ton of fucking bluegrass.

**Tuck:** [Laughs] How dare they!