Tuck: Urbody is a gender-affirming underwear and activewear brand that designs gender-inclusive collections by and for the community that address the fit, functionality, and style needs of those across the gender spectrum. Urbody created its own sizing and grading system that’s built to fit trans, nonbinary, and gender-nonconforming folks. Use the code TUCK15 for 15% off your first Urbody purchase. Is it “tuck” like my name, or “tuck” like what you might do with the underwear? Truly impossible to know. Shop based on fit and style, and remember: you deserve to get dressed for the day with confidence, and that starts with what's underneath.

[Gender Reveal intro 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 intro music ends]

Tuck: Hey everyone, hope you’re all hanging in there. Welcome to the ninth season of the Gender Reveal podcast! You’d think we’d run out of people to talk to by now, but it turns out, we’re all doing a really good job doing social contagion. We’ve got a really fun season planned for you, and we are kicking it off with one of our most frequently requested guests. You probably already know River Butcher as an actor and as a standup comic. In this episode, River and I talk about untangling manhood and patriarchy, transitioning in public, straddling bisexuality and dyke-suality…

River [interview excerpt]: Lesbian is also cultural, a little. You know what I mean? It’s an ethnicity, almost.

Tuck: …and of course, the Che Diaz of it all. But first, some quick and exciting announcements. Actually, before I say anything else, our beloved Gender Reveal producer has an important reveal for us all, so I will let them take it away.

Ozzy: Hi everyone! This is the podcaster formerly known as Producer Jules. I have a little announcement for you all: I have a new name! So, from now on I am Producer Ozzy. Did working on Gender Reveal make me so trans that I had to change my name? Well, not no. But it’s probably a little more accurate to say that getting to work on this show while changing my name made it feel a lot easier to be public about it, and to share that news with all of you. If any of you are out there considering changing your name, in time to celebrate Hot Trans Spring, a thing I just made up, please feel free to consider this your sign from the universe to go for it. And now, back to Tuck.

Tuck: Okay, our nonprofit merch shop is restocking designs that you are going to love, particularly if you’re in the mood to be vaguely threatening. We’ve got a shirt that says “No More Cis,” a pink hoodie with trans knives on it, and an instantly iconic sticker, encouraging everyone to skip school and take hormones, among other things. If you’re looking for something more family friendly, we’ve also got “Trans Kids Are Wonderful” shirts, restocked in kids and adult sizes, and gorgeous “Protect Trans Kids” stickers. That’s all at bit.ly/gendermerch, and as always, proceeds go to trans artists and trans organizations. Bit.ly/gendermerch.

And speaking of stuff you’re going to love, we recently created a Patreon-only podcast feed for all of the bonus content that we just don’t have space for in this main feed, plus some stuff that’s just too chaotic to release to the general public. We’ve also recorded our first Patreon bonus episode. We will be releasing it very soon, and you can get access to that and everything else by joining us at patreon.com/gender. Last but not least, thanks to all of you, we raised $2,600 during our Trans Day of Visibility and/or Staying in and Having a Nice Snack Fundraiser, which is absolutely amazing. I’ve been sending out $100 payments to the more than 200 people who applied for mutual aid funds, so that will be done by the end of this month, and meanwhile it is also time to start back up our Spring Grant Program. Already! Time truly does fly when you’re in the early stages of societal collapse. So, if you are a trans person of color doing some kind of cool art or organizing work, you can apply for a $500 grant at bit.ly/tpoc22. That’ll be open now through April 30th. Everyone else, please help us spread the word to trans folks of color in your community. And now, it’s time for This Week in Gender.

[This Week in Gender theme music plays]

Tuck: All right everyone. This is our news segment, and there has been just so much news since we last spoke, it’s hard to even know where to start. So, as I sometimes do, I asked the fine folks of twitter.com if there was anything in particular they wanted to hear, and they said, “I don’t know, just something good.” And I love y'all so much, but I cannot reshape reality for you, and the fact of the matter is that the news right now is… not very good. So, if any of you have heard of something good happening to or for trans people, please let us know for future segments. In the meantime, here’s something.

[Music plays]

Tuck: Did you hear that our famously cisgender president commemorated Trans Day of Visibility by announcing some actual policy changes that attempt to make trans peoples’ lives easier? Too soon to say how much it will improve our lives, but it’s more than I was expecting, which was literally nothing. Regarding what exactly is in this Trans Day of Visibility press release, I have seen a lot of talk about one aspect of it, which is that X markers are finally available on passports. That is for sure notable, but we’ve also known that’s been in the works for a long time; we’ve been talking about it on the show for months and months. You can learn more about getting an X on your passport at travel.state.gov/gender, but we’re going to talk about some other stuff.

What I didn’t expect the Biden administration to do, for example, is to try to turn the TSA, aka the people who professionally grope us at the airport, into some kind of transgender allies. Most notably, TSA will apparently be updating their body scanning technology to be gender neutral, presumably in the hopes that more transfemmes will be able to get through security without being flagged for a suspicious package… I’m sorry, I had to. These updates are expected to take several months, but in the meantime, TSA is allegedly updating their operating procedures to reduce the number of gender-induced pat downs until the new neutral scanners are in place. Will it work? We’ll find out. For those of you who already bought pre-check to avoid the pat downs we’re talking about, you should know that the operating procedure updates also include removing “gender considerations” at security checkpoints. That will “avoid unnecessary delays caused by a mismatch in gender information on the boarding pass and ID and/or the gender presentation of the traveler.”

They are also updating precheck to include an X gender marker option, and speaking of X markers, Biden’s Trans Day of Visibility press release is very long, and a lot of the bullet points are just about adding X’s to things. Do you want an X on your passport? Do you want an X on the White House visitor paperwork? Do you want an X on the form that you fill out when you’re filing an employment discrimination complaint with the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission? Congrats, baby! Now, you’ll have one. Most notably, the Social Security Administration is removing the requirement that trans people get a doctor’s note or court order to update their gender on their social security card, which I think is objectively good. They’re also exploring “possible future policy and systems updates” that would allow folks to get an X on their social security cards one day as well. Of course, if you are a person of X gender experience, you still get to decide whether you personally feel safe and comfortable registering yourself as a gender deviant in a time where lawmakers are attempting to eradicate the existence of trans people. I personally am torn on the issue, as I don’t love a legal nonbinary gender for me, but I do love a legal decline-to-state/none-of-your-business marker, which is typically what the X stands for in many cases.

If you want to see the full press release with everything the Biden administration claims to have done for trans people in the last year, we will put a link to that in the show notes. A lot of it is like, “We made a website full of resources,” or, “We told the states to stop being sooo bad.” But my favorite line item is that Biden’s proposed 2023 budget includes dedicating $10 million to research how to put gender and sexual orientation questions on the census. I don’t think it’ll happen because of the political climate, but if it does, I just feel like some of us should be able to figure out a way to grift some of that $10 million. $10 million, for a form question! I’ve got to raise my consulting rates. This has been, This Week in Gender.

[This Week in Gender theme music plays]

Tuck: We’ve got a theymail message for you today. Theymails are little messages from listeners, and this one says: “Dazzling, queer, inclusive, celestial, with indigenous ancestral heart, Greyhound Americans by award-winning poet Moncho Ollin Alvarado confronts a family history of borderland politics by discovering a legacy of violence, grief, trauma, and survival. Through poems that have an unmistakable spirit, tenderness, intimacy, and humility, these poems’ persistent resilience creates a constellation of songs, food, flowers, family, community, and trans joy that, by the end, wants you to feel loved, nourished, and wants you to remember to say, ‘I’m alive, I’m alive, I’m alive.’ Now available at monchoalvarado.com, Amazon, and bookshop.org.”

[Music starts]

Tuck: River Butcher is a standup comic, actor, writer, producer, and baseball player. They’ve been on Adam Ruins Everything and Good Trouble, and done standup on Ellen, Conan, and HBO. His new standup special, A Different Kind of Dude, premiered this January on Comedy Central’s youtube.com to great reviews. I swear to god it says “Comedy Central’s youtube.com.”

[Music ends]

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

River: Oh man. (River laughs) That’s a great question. I feel like I was always trying to have some sort of static or perfect answer to this question up until pretty recently, even if that static or perfect answer was “I don’t know,” you know? But right now, I’m just really excited about accepting myself as a male person, you know? Like, really accepting that very deeply, because I think for a very long time, I felt as though that was the one thing I couldn’t be.

Tuck: Yes, can you say more about that?

River: Oh, of course. I mean, how much time do we have, Tuck? (River laughs) You know, I’m a feminist person to start; that’s the first fence that I put up. And this is not what feminism is about, but my brain, or any brain, could sort of take any information and weaponize it against yourself, to keep yourself from being loved, free, liberated, whatever you want to say, you know? And I think that I sort of weaponized internalized misogyny and used that—my critical voice inside of me, or whatever you want to call it, used that—to say, “Well, if you are male then that means you hate women,” or something. You know, “If you are rejecting your own femaleness, for lack of a better word, then you must be a misogynist,” you know. And that was just a place that my brain hung out in for a really long time, and I thought I needed to transcend that as opposed to accept it, you know.

Tuck: Yeah, there’s something that, I don’t even know if it’s a question so much as an observation that I want to hand to you, but something that I’ve been thinking about a lot is this reaction from transmasc nonbinary people who still have this gut instinct that’s like, “Yes, I am transmasculine, but I’m not a *man* because men are disgusting and I never want to be seen as one.” Can we work through that? Because on one hand, yes men have hurt literally all of us and it makes perfect sense to be like, “No thank you,” but then also, “Is that internalized…” I was going to say misogyny, but that’s wrong.

River: Misandry. (River laughs)

Tuck: Is that internalized transphobia? You know what I mean? There’s so much to work through.

River: Ultimately, the reality is men haven’t hurt me. A patriarchal system of oppression has hurt me, you know. And have I been hurt by people who happen to be men? Yes. Have I been hurt by people who happen to be women? Yes. (River laughs) And it’s like, at a certain point, I have to actually look at what is it that’s hurting me, because if we take this conversation outside of the personal and look towards the, I don’t know, legislative right now, it is a system of patriarchal oppression, white supremacist patriarchal oppression that is also cisgender and hetero-centric, right, that is seeking to destroy us—which it can’t, ultimately. But it is not simply men who are doing this, there are plenty of cisgender women who are signing anti-abortion legislation. They are willingly saying that they are weaker, these cisgender women who are saying, “We must protect the integrity of women’s’ sports, because we are the weaker sex.” This is not feminism, this is not liberation, it’s literally oppression. They’re oppressing themselves to oppress other people.

So I say all that, to bring it back into that sort of thing where you have to just set it down, you know. I’ve had to set it down. I have been accepted and loved by people who are cisgender men. That has happened, and I no longer am waiting for them to hurt me, because I’ve let go of the idea that it is men, the people, the individual people, that are hurting me. Which is not to say that people have not been hurt by men, you know, I’m not negating that. And I also understand if you don’t want to be a man, that’s totally your prerogative. But my acceptance of myself as a man has allowed for a lot of healing and liberation of myself, because there’s this assumption that when I accept myself as a man, I’m turning into this thing you think that is. (River laughs) And I can’t free you from that. Only you can—and I don’t mean you, Tuck. I mean other people.

Tuck: Only *I* can, specifically.

River: Right, only you can, Tuck. You are it. But it’s a tremendous shift, but it’s not anything outside of myself. It’s only within myself, you know.

Tuck: Right. I mean, and speaking of, not only have there been cis women who have harmed me, cis men who have harmed me, cis men who have been great, cis women have been great—trans men *rule*. And if you’re trans, and you’re turning into a guy, you’re turning into a *trans* guy, and so many of my very closest friends who have supported me and nurtured me, and guided me throughout my life, specifically in the last few years, have been trans men, and so yeah, you’re not suddenly turning into Brad over there.

River: Right, but you’re just Brad over here, you know. It’s also, I can fall into this trap that like, “Oh, because I’m a trans man, I’m some better ideal version,” or whatever. And I’m actually just as flawed as anybody else.

Tuck: Right.

River: And for me, I just want to offer the distinction that I have felt recently, because…. The whole impetus for this part of the conversation is to describe my gender, which is, I feel like I’m returning to what I started as, that got changed by a society. And thank god, you know. In some ways, I’m so grateful for that, because I’ve gotten to really know myself more than other people who don’t question those things, or haven’t had that existence, you know. Which I think is ultimately what so many people are so afraid of, whether they realize they’re afraid of it or not.

Tuck: Yeah, well I was thinking about…. So when I was growing up, I was just read a girl 100% of the time, and so I had this experience that I think is common among people who are nonbinary, at least at some point in their journey, where you start moving towards wanting ambiguity, and wanting people to look at you and be confused and not sure what to say. But you have this different experience that many other people, not just you, have had, where you have always been in that middle space, and you’ve always had people be confused, and so deciding at some point that you were nonbinary wasn’t a big presentation transition, so much as just naming a thing that was already happening. So you moving towards manhood, going on testosterone, do you feel like that is an intentional moving away from that ambiguity, or do you think that that’s something that’s always a part of you?

River: I mean, that’s an important distinction that I hadn’t really thought about in that way, in such certain terms of like—oh yeah. That makes sense that if you were read in a binary way as a queer person, then, yeah, moving towards that ambiguity or that middle space or middle pole or whatever, makes so much sense. And it makes so much sense to me that I would want to move away from that, you know, because it’s been so liberating to just get to walk through the world. And a cisgender person, specifically women, read that as me wanting to join the patriarchy, you know. They read that as me leaving the team or, you know, joining up with the powerful team, and it’s like, “No man, I just want to walk through the airport, and not have people give me shit.” (River laughs) You know, I just want to go to the bathroom and *go to the bathroom*, and I can’t force society, I can’t bend society around that, so I have accepted some things about myself, and those needs and wants and desires, and then gone towards the things that have helped me to receive that in the world. Because I’m very loved and accepted by my inner circle; it’s the outside world that we have a difficult time moving through. And I would also say that those changes and those desires and needs in the outside world of society doesn’t mean that I’ve then given up my siblings who want the ambiguity, and also want that. My preference would be to go in a bathroom that everybody’s in. (River laughs) You know? That is truly it. I’m not like, “Ah, well, I’ve gotten the relief, so I don’t really care about you guys.” I want all of it, you know. I want all of it.

Tuck: Yeah, there is a lot to be said at some point for how much of my transition has been because I am tired. You know? And so I completely relate to that. Well, I was thinking, so you and I started T almost exactly the same time. I think we were a couple weeks apart.

River: Oh really?

Tuck: And I know that because you talked publicly about when you started T, and other things that you’ve done, like when you filed your name change paperwork, stuff like that, and I intentionally keep that stuff off of main, and I only talk about it when it is relevant to the interview. I’m just curious, not to be like, “This is not how I do things, so why would you do it this way?” But I’m just curious why you make that choice, to sort of talk about that stuff publicly.

River: Totally. It’s so funny that you’re asking me these questions, because I’m literally—I was doing these podcasts and was having so many second thoughts. (River laughs) I’ve been thinking about that so much, and so it’s just such good timing that you’re asking me these questions, because I’m literally *wondering*, you know. But here’s the thing. Even if I didn’t put those things out publicly, I would still be going on podcasts, and people would still ask me, because people think they can; they think it’s okay, you know. And so I question it all the time: Is this a good idea? And I don’t know if the answer is always yes, but I guess I’ve just been a person that has shared my experience a lot, and I do share that, because you’re in this position as a queer person of being an example to people. And a lot of feedback that I’ve gotten throughout my… career? Whatever you want to call it, performance—that people say, you know, “You are the first person that looked like me or felt like me that I saw in the world,” you know? And I don’t feel responsible to change people’s lives or anything, but as I change, there’s a certain amount of sharing that I want to do. And I also didn’t know, like, “How do I do this?” I haven’t shared dosages and minute details of everything. I haven’t shared my voice changes. It’s changing. It’s just, I have a public job that I cannot avoid those changes, so I felt like maybe there are some things I can share, because the people who shared their lives with me helped me change mine, you know, helped me grow and find these things for myself, so I felt like perhaps sharing that a little bit…. And I fully respect and appreciate what you’re doing too, because I think that’s also important to see that as an example.

Tuck: Yeah, but I mean, it’s true what you’re saying that they still know. It’s very obvious when my voice drops an octave that I went on testosterone.

River: Right. River: There’s hair on my face.

Tuck: But that—I mean, speaking of, we were talking in the interview, but also before the interview, about people just feeling entitled to ask about things. And once people clocked that I was on T, they started commenting on things about my body that have always been there, but they felt like it was now affirming to observe them. And I just have a rule where if someone that I don’t know very well comments about anything about my body on social media, I will respond and be like, “Please do not talk about my body.” Regardless of whether they think it’s positive or not! Right? Because there’s just this entitlement to be like, “Oh, I see you’re transitioning and I want to demonstrate that I see it, because I want to win the game.”

River: Yeah, “I want the points,” or whatever. I also feel like this is something that’s very new too, which is that I feel like people think they can comment on my body because I am a man, like it’s okay now, like it wasn’t okay before because we don’t do that because that’s…. We’re discussing the ways in which women go through the world and are treated that needed to be discussed. It’s like there’s this thread of like, “Well, we need to do it back for justice,” and doing it back is not actually justice, you know. And me saying this is not me putting men ahead of women. It’s literally like, that’s not how justice works. Reparations is not revenge, and that feels very vengeful to me, and it also makes sense that society’s very focused on those kinds of things, you know. Everything has to be back and forth, you know. (River laughs) Everything’s a currency exchange and has a price and a cost and everything.

Tuck: Yeah, so yesterday, I was talking to Avery from Girlpool who transitioned towards being a man while being in a band called Girlpool. And you had something similar where when you were first sort of publicly gendering, a lot of your creative projects were built around being a lesbian and a wife on a show called Take My Wife. That was the context, right? Now, your name’s different, your pronoun’s different, you’re divorced—so obviously you made it work; you went past all of that. But I’m curious if there was ever a time in sort of early grappling with these things where you were like, “I can’t do this because it’ll mess up my career. Changing my name will mess up my career. Changing my gender will mess up my career.” Not that I think that would be true, but I think those are struggles that I think a lot of us deal with.

River: 100%. (River laughs) You know, I thought I had, you know…. Again, it’s that sort of static belief system, or lack, as opposed to abundance, that like, “Oh, it will ruin everything.” As opposed to, “What if there’s possibility?” Not even like, “What if it’s better?” Which it is, ultimately, because I’m myself. I’m *more* myself. I was myself then, and I’m more myself now, you know. It’s not like I was living some lie, I was continually understanding myself. But it’s the trick of being a human where you just think, “Well, if you do this, I’m going to lose everything that I have,” as opposed to like, “What do I stand to receive?” You know, not even gain, but what do I stand to receive? And, I said this—I went to a college the other night, and I was performing in the gym. I just so deeply wanted to say, and I did, I said, “I’ve never performed in a gym before, and I can’t believe that that’s true because of everything about me.” (Tuck laughs) And I said, you know, as…. I’m trying to remember exactly how I said it, but I just said something about being a lesbian. I was like, “But I mean, I’m not a lesbian, but I’m not *not* a lesbian,” you know what I mean? All these college students were cracking up, because that is the experience of many people, but also I think a younger generation is just way more open to how these things sort of layer, as opposed to having rigid boundaries, you know. And I say so often, publicly, “I’m not a lesbian,” because in my comedy life, I’m very much labeled that, you know? And people are like, “A lesbian comic,” or whatever, you know, and now people are going like, “trans comic,” and it’s like, could I just be a comic that’s trans as opposed to…. Just move it to the other—Do you know what I mean? It’s just an ordering question. Lesbian is also cultural, a little bit. It’s like an ethnicity, almost. There’s not really a word for it, you know what I mean? I come from it; I come through it. It’s not gone, and it wasn’t wrong, but that’s only if you have a very rigid understanding of what lesbianism is, you know.

Tuck: Yeah, absolutely. I was talking to a friend the other day, and she was like, “Oh yeah, I have this friend who thinks that they might be a man, but also they’re a lesbian, and they don’t know what to do,” and they’re 40 or something. And I’m like, “Please tell them that we already solved this, and you can be a man who’s a lesbian, and we all know this, and it’s fine.”

River: Yeah. Those two things are not in opposition, you know, and it’s also like, perhaps the word that I would use more is “dyke.”

Tuck: I was going to say, a man of dyke experience is very, very common. Many trans men are of dyke experience.

River: It’s super common. Because to me the inverse—I don’t want to say opposite, because there’s no such real thing—but the polar experience of that is being within the community or experience of lesbianism, and the sort of rejection of butchness because, “Well, why don’t you just go date a man?” And it’s like, “No, it’s all here.” To me that’s lesbianism. Lesbianism is like, “It’s all here,” as opposed to, “Not that.” I want less to define myself by what I am not, and more of what I am, you know what I mean? I don’t want to be using the “I’m into everything but this,” you know. It’s like, “No, I’m just into everything!” you know? This is what makes me up as a person, as opposed to these things being not in my life is what makes me up as a person. Does that make sense?

Tuck: Yeah, well, speaking of which, I saw you were promoting a different podcast you were on, and you were like, “In this podcast, I almost disclose my bi/pansexuality.” (River laughs)

River: So close, right on the edge!

Tuck: I’m naming it buddy. What’s going on?

River: Yeah, name it! Oh, I just—It was so funny, because it wasn’t a conscious choice that I wasn’t saying it. It’s just something I haven’t talked about very much so it’s not…. And also, just in my home life, you know, as opposed to public life, it’s just so accepted and normal. It’s not ever been anything I needed to be—I don’t feel like it’s something I need to “come out” about. I don’t feel as though I need to come out about anything, anymore, really. It’s like, I came out once, and the closet was smashed, and so now it’s just like, “Oh, what are the new flavors and experiences of my life?” But I guess, something that I did not expect was going to happen in transition, and sort of recovering myself, was this understanding, acceptance, and love around the relationships and attraction that I had to cisgender men. That was okay, and I didn’t have to…. That was a thing that I felt I needed to do to be accepted as a lesbian, was I had to only assign traumatic experience to that, and that it was wrong and it was bad and it was never good, because that’s not true. (River laughs) You know? Because that’s not true. That’s not actually true; that’s not actually my experience. And it doesn’t negate my lesbian, queer, dyke experience at all, at *all* actually. You know, because there’s the whole “gold star” thing, and you feel like that’s what you need to be, and, you know, whatever. And again, this is not blaming any person. It’s my internalizing of it. But I’ve been able to accept each relationship as something, you know, positive.

Tuck: Yeah.

River: Except for the negative, you know. It’s like, there was a negative one and that doesn’t negate the other. (River laughs) And then my experience of people, I’m not only attracted to cisgender people. I’m in a relationship with a person who is, you know, nonbinary, and so, the pansexuality/bisexuality of it is that there’s just not a limit. And I also respect people who have a limit, you know, that’s not forcing any sort of thing on anybody else, but it’s more retroactive than anything.

Tuck: Yeah, yeah more observational of like, “Well, this is how my attraction is showing up, so….”

River: Right.

Tuck: Yeah. I love the straight for boys, gay for girls, gay for boys pipeline also. It’s a really pleasurable thing to come back to it and be like, “Oh, this actually feels a lot better now that it is gay.”

River: Yes.

Tuck: Gay for everyone.

River: Yeah, and when I look back, my attraction to cis men was from a male place.

Tuck: Yeah!

River: You know, it was, and that was what didn’t work. It wasn’t this other thing. It was actually that I wasn’t able to access fully where my attraction to that person was coming from. Like you were saying, it’s that pipeline, and that just kind of continues where I’m like, “Oh, that was a queer relationship,” you know. That person might not be queer, but the relationship was, you know. (River laughs)

Tuck: Deeply relate to that. I wanted to circle back to something you were saying about being a comic who is trans, rather than a trans comic because something that really eats away at me much more than it should is the fact that this podcast has been going on…. We’re going on our fifth year.

River: Congratulations.

Tuck: Thank you! And we have, you know, a significant following for just an indie podcast that I make in my closet, and yet, we are never on lists of podcasts that are good. We are only on lists of podcasts that are LGBT. And even then, it is normally a list of LGB podcasts that I then yell at the person who made it, “You forgot to put any trans people on here,” and then I force them to put three trans podcasts on there, and sometimes it was your baseball podcast, and that was the one trans podcast, and was like, “Well, that is technically a trans podcast.” Does that get to you, that it feels hard to assess your own ability? Because for me, I’m like, “Is this because my show just isn’t good?” Or, “Would I be doing better if I wasn’t making a podcast about trans people? Would I be doing somehow worse if I wasn’t making a podcast about trans people?” I don’t think that’s true, but you know, it’s a question. Is that something that affects you at all, or are you good at staying in your lane, doing your thing?

River: I mean, both. Because the question is, what do you do? You know, because it goes back to the same stuff of like, you were asking me about, you know, being public about certain aspects of my transition, and it’s like, “Okay, so if I don’t talk about it, who will?” You know? And that’s not to say it has to be me or anything, but I could stand on stage and not talk about being trans at all, and I will still be called a trans comic. It’s still going to happen, because we live in a white, cisgender, hetero-centric society, and if you are other, you will be othered no matter what, and so if I accept that—which does not mean I have to like it. All this talk of acceptance on here, I just want to make very clear to people that just because I’m accepting something doesn’t mean I have to like it. I don’t have to approve of it. That does not mean I condone it, but I am accepting that it *is*, you know. Because if I do not accept that that is a part of this, all these things you just said, Tuck, then I’m going to keep fighting something that’s in the air, you know. I’m going to keep spinning my wheels and using up all my energy toward something that I absolutely cannot change.

Tuck: Yeah.

River: So like you said, it is a continual—for me, the practice is a continual checking in. I ask places to not call me a trans comic. It’s evident. These things are evident. You don’t need to point them out to people, you know. Wanda Sykes has this great bit about coming out, that like, she never had to come out as Black, and then she does this whole act out, basically, of what it would have been like to come out as Black to her parents, you know, and how silly that concept is to us. So I think coming out is really important for people, and I think it’s like becoming, evolving into this positive self-determination point as opposed to, “I have to come out of the closet,” you know. We don’t actually have the public closet to the same degree that we used to, where people had to do that. And people still do—I’m not going to be naive or whatever, but the consciousness-raising of that experience has actually happened where I believe that the coming out experience is more of a claiming of one’s self that I wish for everyone, not just homos or queers. I wish that, actually, for everyone, and I think that what the fascists are clinging to is that they do not want that. They want the group mentality. They do not want the individual mentality. They do not want the, sort of, connection to the spirit that gives you. They want to wipe out gender identity and sexual orientation that is not cisgender and heterosexual because it’s *other*, and you can’t have that.

Tuck: I wanted to ask how it feels to have worked so hard for so long, and then have the most famous trans comedian be Che Diaz.

River: (River laughs) Oh god! Well, I mean, that’s a fictional character, so I don’t have to compete, you know what I mean. (River laughs) Because I would also say the shows that I’ve done, I have mentioned their name, and they do not get a lot of applause.

Tuck: Interesting!

River: And it’s not because they’re disliked, it’s because I literally say like, “Oh, so you guys haven’t watched the show,” and that’s the thing. And so I wonder how much of a…. I’m not debating it! I just think it’s an interesting point. (River laughs)

Tuck: No, I think that I’m only talking to other people who are also too online.

River: Right, yeah, yeah, yeah.

Tuck: So it is hard to judge. But I have a real, sort of, Che-adjacent question, which is that, my impression is that people who watch the show, which is, we’ll name it for the listeners—

River: And Just Like That.

Tuck: And Just Like That, the Sex and the City reboot. One of the things that people didn’t like about Che is that the “comedy” that we see them do is more like, sort of, inspirational rainbow TED talks.

River: Yes!

Tuck: And I wanted to ask you, as an actual real life trans comedian, who is performing, just statistically, largely for cis people—

River: Comedian *who is trans*, Tuck, let’s… (Tuck and River laugh)

Tuck: How do you talk about being queer and trans in a way that centers queer joy and is also accessible to a cis audience, and avoid making comedy concerts in the style of Che Diaz, where you’re just doing inspirational TED talks?

River: Well, I guess it’s really simple. I just write jokes. There are certainly comedians who do what Che Diaz is doing, but most of the comedians who are trans that I know also do the same thing I’m talking about, which is, you write a *joke*, you know? I’m somebody who writes setups and punchlines. I also tell stories. I think when you continue to keep the foundation of, “What’s the simplest thing I can say here? How can I simplify this, and how can I make it funny, and what are words that do that?” It’s truly, simply that, you know, because that material…. I also just want to say Sara Ramirez is doing a great job with what they’re given.

Tuck: Oh, yeah. Absolutely.

River: Performing the shit out of that. That’s why everyone’s talking about it! If they weren’t doing a good job, nobody would care, you know. It would just be like, “Ah, whatever.” But I don’t do that, because I want to make people laugh, and that doesn’t usually get laughs. It gets claps, and it gets woos, and that’s also fun. But I like to make people laugh, so I have to find what’s funny, not just what’s interesting, and I don’t always succeed. (River laughs) You know? But I used to try to write from a place of, “How can I convince somebody that isn’t queer, gay, whatever, how can I pull them in?” I am way less concerned with that now, because there’s so much transphobia. I’m not afraid of being transphobic, because I think that keeps you in a real box of like, “Oh, now I’m thinking of what not to do,” as opposed of what to do. But I think it’s really important to speak from a trans-centric place now, because otherwise, it’s very easy to fall into that.

Tuck: Yeah. Do you think about who your audience is? I’m thinking when I’m doing presentations for cis people, sometimes I’ll tell a joke and it won’t land because there’s not enough knowledge of trans things for that joke to make sense, where in other contexts it would. Do you think that your sets would be different if you were performing for just trans people, or do you feel like you’d just kind of throw that stuff out there anyway?

River: I mean, I think I just try to throw it out there no matter what. Because there’s at least one trans person, and that person’s on stage. (River laughs)

Tuck: And you’ve got to make yourself laugh, honestly.

River: Yeah, and I’m the one in the driver’s seat for that hour, or whatever. And I think when I was trying to consider my audience above anything… I think it’s a trap, for me, at least. Creatively, it’s a trap. And I don’t assume that everybody agrees with me. I don’t make that assumption or anything, but I’m just trying to find humor in my experience. That’s simply it, you know, and sometimes that experience is transphobia. There’s plenty of comics putting transphobic ideas out there, so I might as well talk about my experience, because then they’re the only people talking. And whether people hear it or not, whether I “get famous” over it or not, it’s like—I was doing air quotes there, I just want everybody to know—I can’t believe I get to do this. I can’t believe this is my job. It was a dream job that I didn’t even know I had. I thought I was going to be working retail in Akron, Ohio for the rest of my life, which I also respect. No shame or shade or anything, but I didn’t think I was going to leave my hometown.

Tuck: Yeah.

River: You know, I didn't think there was possibility outside of that. So what a blessing it is that anybody wants to hear what I have to say at *any* point, let alone paid, and have a good time, you know. It’s pretty cool. And I guess that’s kind of what bolsters me with the stuff you were talking about, being othered and put in these categories and stuff, and it’s like, if I spend a majority of my energy being mad about that, I’m doing its job even more. That’s not to say it doesn’t suck. It sucks. It sucks to not just get to *be*. It’s like my baseball podcast had to be a queer podcast. It’s like, “No, it’s a baseball podcast,” but at the same time I don’t *not* want to be that, you know. You just stop doing the dance eventually, and you’re just like, “Cool, I guess more people will know about me now,” you know. More people will hear. But I see you, and I feel that, you know. I get it, you know, I get it. I also, can I just say on this podcast, and hopefully it doesn’t ripple through and become a viral moment, but I feel like some of their material is lifted lightly (Tuck laughs) from my Two Dope Queens set. Because it sounds very similar! (River laughs) Which has a punchline! I’ll say, my punchline is not “Be yourself,” or whatever. I have a bit where the center of the bit is “There’s not enough boxes.” Anyway, their whole thing behind them literally is a neon sign that says, “Check the Box,” and I’m just like, “Interesting….” Everything is about me. You understand that ,Tuck.

Tuck: Absolutely. Well, I know you have said in the past that you’re not an activist and that, you know, you’re trying to do comedy, but I feel like, I was looking at your twitter, and you retweet—

River: Whoops. (River laughs)

Tuck: You retweet my friends, slash our friends, I assume, about trans shit more than you’re talking about comedy. Which makes sense because the trans stuff is very urgent! But also when you’re trying to do podcasts, I would assume about comedy, all this trans shit is coming up because people feel like they need to talk to you about it, and then you need to correct them because they’re saying wild things, and they’re talking about people identifying as things, and you have a very good instinct that I also have of saying like, “Do not say ‘identify,’ just say ‘is,’ which I appreciate you also fighting that fight, because I’m screaming about it all the time. Anyway, all that is to say, I do see you sort of shifting more towards activism mode just because it’s inescapable in this moment, and I was wondering if you’re starting to see yourself more that way, or if you’re more resistant to it still.

River: Well, I mean I think my impulse has always been to say, “I’m not an activist,” because I think that…. To circle back to earlier, when we were talking about shifting away from nonbinary, I do just want to add that my internal compass is nonbinary. My internal spiritual experience of the world *is* that, even though my external experience may not present that way. So that goes to this, which is: It’s not black and white. You’re not either an activist or not. I look at it like, I do what I can with what I’ve been given, and so, I also just sort of would rile at people calling me an activist because in certain places, in certain interviews, it’s, again, sort of diminishing and othering. There’s just certain comics who are constantly talking about political ideas and they’re not labeled activists. They’re not labeled right-wing activists, or whatever, because that’s a center, and so I would sort of rile at that from a personal place. And then second, I know people who are activists, who are living in a car that’s parked, stopping a pipeline. You know what I mean? I am not doing that.

Tuck: Yeah.

River: You know, so in a way, I don’t want to hold up that mantle, because I also see people who are corporate activists, you know. There’s this activism, especially in LGBT, specifically *LGBT* world, not queer world, of rainbow capitalist activism. And I do not want to be aligned with that, where my opinion is activism, and that’s not—I don’t want to practice that at all. But at the same time, you know, speaking to these things is also important, which is to some extent activism, so I don’t know. It’s just, I hesitate to label, to put that identification on myself, because I think my own ego will run with it, and I need to keep a certain amount of humility, which is that I simply use…. Because, you know, people will be like, “You need to use your platform.” That’s like, “Yes.” So that’s why I retweet people, because I have a certain amount of followers, and I have a certain amount of reach that I can use. But I’m not driven by that, because I think that’s also false, you know, a false concept. And it’s also like, you know, I said the other day on Instagram, it’s like, “I wish my friends didn’t have to be activists.” It’s like, every person that is in my circle, my reach, my experience of my life, my friends who are indigenous and are actors, it’s like, they don’t get to just be actors. They have to be activists for indigenous—and it’s like, “Yes”, I also am like, “It’s powerful and incredible,” but like, we just want to be here, you know. That’s also part of it, too. I both respect and appreciate and am humbled by the work that people do as activists, but also, I wish they didn’t have to do it! And I know they feel that way too.

Tuck: And also, not everyone has the skillset, and especially for queer and trans identities where you can be a person of a certain profile and status, and you come out, and from day two, you’re expected to speak for the trans community, and it’s like, you don’t know anything yet.! You just came out. It takes time to learn from people in your community, so yeah. I feel like we see it all the time.

River: Yeah, and I also feel like, just to say, I also feel like day one, you *can* speak to those things, you know. I think both things are true. It’s just that the expectation, and I would also say, to circle back to whiteness, I feel like I’m given that mantle because I’m white.

Tuck: Right.

River: And so, that is why I also try to retweet other people, because I don’t want to be speaking consistently *for* anyone or anything.

Tuck: Last Twitter question. A couple months ago, you tweeted, “If y’all like my first name, wait until you hear my middle name.” (River laughs) When is the new middle name dropping?

River: I want to wait until I have a physical copy that’s not just the letter from the court. I will share this as just a human being, because I feel like this is something that you can resonate with whether you’re trans or not, but as soon as I started to get into the paperwork aspect of that, I felt so small and incapable. That’s something else that I wanted to share, is just like how much bureaucracy and government—all these things are just so oppressive simply by existing. It’s just so immediately, I felt so incapable, and then, thankfully, I have things in place where I’m able to ask people for help, and you know, not just throw my hands in the air and go, “Well, I can’t do it, and I’m not good enough,” you know. But *man*, was it a real experience of that, and I just don’t wish that for my fellow human beings. I think that’s the other thing that cisgender people just don’t really understand when they ask us all these questions, is like, I have had to be granted this experience by so many other people who have not had this—who are not trans! I have had to ask permission from cis people through every step of the way, and now you’re asking me more questions like it’s just some topic of conversation. It’s like, “Dude, I have had to go through so many of these things, and you can’t even comprehend it, because you haven’t had to do it. You just have to go get an oil change, and guess what, me too!” You know? (River laughs) All these things that you do that are so annoying in your life, we also have to go through X amount of extra stuff simply by being birthed into this society this way.

Tuck: Yeah. Yeah, I wasn’t going to ask about this because we’re running low on time, and also we talk about this constantly, but I will. How are you doing dealing with knowing that your old name and voice and material is just going to be zooming around the internet, kind of forever? Because it’s hard.

River: It is. It is. I mean, Tuck, it’s a daily practice. It’s hard. I mean, I wish I could just flip a switch, but nobody can, you know. Nobody can, ultimately. Nobody really can, but it’s tough, because I think I’ve been strong-arming it. I think I’ve been stiff-arming this thing, and just falling into the old, old trap and old, old mental behavior that, “Oh, I can deal with it,” and I actually can’t. It actually hurts sometimes that I have to continually tell people, “Stop doing that! Please stop doing that.” I just don’t know how else to do it. I just don’t know. You know what I mean? It’s like, my name is literally burned into television shows that I cannot change. I cannot change them. And so I also understand people don’t get it, but at the same time, it’s like, “Why would you do that? My name is on the Zoom. It’s right there. I’ve changed it everywhere that I can so far, and you’re still bringing it up. Why would you do that, you know?” I’m just sort of left sometimes, just spiritually on my knees, of like, “Why are you doing that?” But I don’t know, and it’s not up to me to understand that either. I guess I just get to have my feelings.

Tuck: Yeah. I mean, I feel like for me, it makes it hard to hold onto my feelings being valid. Where I’m like, “Oh, how do I explain that it really deeply affects me when you do this?”

River: Yes.

Tuck: It’s hard to justify. But okay, here on the gender podcast, we’re obviously going to talk about gender. I could talk to you for another several hours…

River: Six days.

Tuck: But is there anything else that you want to talk about? I know we haven’t really explicitly plugged anything.

River: Sure, yeah.

Tuck: Is there something you want to plug, anything you want to talk about?

River: I put out a special this year. I recorded it last year, but it’s called A Different Kind of Dude. I was going by RB then; I look even different than I do now. It’s like a fun… You know, that’s also the thing, I know we’re in the plugs, is that I just realized a little bit I had to choose between continuing my career on a daily, weekly basis, and transitioning. Or if I wanted to do it all at once, and I decided I wanted to do it all at once, and so that’s just kind of been the way that it’s gone. All this stuff that we’ve talked about is like, I didn’t feel that I had to choose between my career and this. It’s just like, I could have taken the time off and then shown up totally different, or whatever, but I guess there was so much time in my life…. I’ve known that I was trans the whole time, before I had the language, and then I had the language, and I was like, “Oh no,” you know, very scared. There was so much of my inner criticism, critical voice, and just negativity that was like, “You have to wait until it’s perfect, you have to wait until you’re done,” and that is just not a position. That’s not actually what life is like. And so, I think that’s really why I just sort of decided to continue to live my life, because living my life is doing standup comedy, so I didn’t want to stop living my life in any capacity for anything, and I realized that it was compatible, not easy, but compatible, you know.

Tuck: Yeah. Hil Malatino wrote a book called Side Effects: On Being Trans and Feeling Bad, and one of the chapters is about finding ways to live in this in between time, between the past and whatever we think the future is going to be, when we’ve “fully transitioned,” whether or not that’s a real thing. How do we stop deferring happiness to that, and start just figuring out how to exist in this weird middle time, and find joy in that? So, I think a lot of what you’re saying resonates with that, and makes a lot of sense. Because who knows if we’ll ever get to the end, you know?

River: Yeah, totally. When you kind of realize that the whole thing is the middle time. (River laughs)

Tuck: Exactly. 100%.

River: It’s always the middle time, because even the thing that I think is the end, which is that we all die, all of us, that is one thing that’s inevitable. That’s not even really the end! I mean, the idea that that’s the end is kind of debatable, so we don’t know that for sure, you know what I mean? So it’s kind of a perpetual middle, which I kind of really deeply relate to transness is that I kind of feel like, in a perpetual teenage state, and people are like, “Oh god,” and I’m like, “No, I love it! I love it.” Because I didn’t actually get to be a teenager, truly; I was staving off something the whole time. So now I’m just sort of in this perpetual youthfulness, but youthfulness in a different definition. It’s not an age thing. It’s a spiritual thing, ultimately, you know, of a continual openness to possibility to the best of my ability. I’m not doing it perfectly every day, but today, you got me on a good day, Tuck. (River laughs)

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

River: To me, trans liberation is the right to self-determination, and when I say right to self-determination, I don’t mean in a court of law. I mean, you know, transcending that—no courts, no regulation over gender. Each person gets to be who and what they are. I respect this, but I’m not one of the people that’s like, “Abolish all gender, duh duh duh duh.” I’m like, “No, I want—if that’s your vibe, that’s your vibe, but I don’t think that’s what’s freeing.” I think everybody gets to be who and what they are, and feel they are, and that can change every fucking day if they want it to, you know. That’s, to me, the future of gender. It’s just like, everybody gets to be themselves, whatever that looks like.

[Gender Reveal outro music starts]

Tuck: That’s going to do it for this week’s show. If you had a good time, please share this episode with folks in your community. It really does help us get the word out. River is performing in Fort Worth, Texas later this week, and in Los Angeles on April 30th and May 7th as part of Netflix Is A Joke. Learn more at riverbutcher.com or on Twitter and Instagram @rivbutcher. We are @gendereveal and at genderpodcast.com, where you can find transcripts of every episode of the show, and all sorts of other resources. Don’t forget, we’ve got a ton of great merch at bit.ly/gendermerch. You truly do not want to miss out on this round of designs. It runs through April 30th. We’ve also got a brand new bonus podcast feed that you can sign up for at patreon.com/gender. By donating just a few dollars a month, you are personally helping us keep the show going, and helping us fund our grant program, and speaking of which, trans artists and organizers of color can apply now to our spring grant program at bit.ly/tpoc22.

This episode is produced and edited by Ozzy Llinas Goodman, and by 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. We’ll be back next week with more feelings about gender.

[Gender Reveal outro music ends]

Tuck: I love how our shared career nemesis can be Joe Rogan— (River laughs)

River: Sure, yeah.

Tuck: Because he’s both, like, the most successful podcaster and one of the most prominent “comedians.”

River: Sure, yeah. And I actually, Tuck, I have a joke about Joe Rogan, which is that, you know, we actually have a lot in common. We both do standup comedy, we both talk about trans people *a lot*, and we both take testosterone. (Both laugh)