Tuck: Shopping for sex toys can sometimes feel overwhelming or dysphoric. But shopenby.com aims to make a better experience for the queer, trans, and gender nonconforming community. Like, there are all sorts of sex toy stores online, but this one has a section called “Homo goods,” and there are two things in it right now, and one is ceramic wall tiddie, and the other is bondage bears, and I just think that’s fun as like, the two genders. But anyway, 2% of all profits are donated to organizations focused on improving the lives of queer and trans people of color. So visit shopenby.com, that’s shopenby.com, and use the code “Gender Reveal” to get 10% off your order and support the show.

[Gender Reveal theme music plays]

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.

[Music ends]

Tuck: Hey everyone. Hope you’re all hanging in there. This week on the show, I’m excited to share my chat with Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha. Leah is perhaps best known as the author of *Care Work: Dreaming Disability Justice*, and the co-editor of *Beyond Survival: Strategies and Stories from the Transformative Justice Movement*. Leah has written so many books, and done so much rad art and organizing work. In this episode, Leah talks about creating access to care networks and community, whether there are people out there who don’t exist under the disability umbrella...

Leah: Are abled people a myth? Like, probably.

Tuck: And how transness and disability intersect.

Leah: One thing I do think about autistic culture is we just look at society, and we’re like, “What the fuck is that? I’m gonna go my own way. I am gonna be my kind of fuckin’ weird!”

Tuck: Before we get into the interview, I just want to note that we had to use the backup Zoom audio for this one, so it’s a little blown out in places maybe. And you may have noticed we also had to use the backup Zoom audio last week, so thank you for bearing with us. I promise next week, we’ll be back to normal. I also wanted to let you know about two other podcast episodes you might want to check out if you are a fan of listening to me talk about trans stuff. Last week, I was on the TransLash podcast hosted by Gender Reveal alum Imara Jones, talking about trans mutual aid and the Gender Reveal grant program. And then tomorrow, August 2nd, I’ve got an episode of NPR’s Life Kit podcast coming out, which is about changing your name as a trans person. We had six trans people involved in making that piece, including Gender Reveal alum Denne Michelle Norris, and I really tried to make it useful to a big range of people, so check it out if you’d like. Again, that is the Life Kit podcast, and the TransLash podcast. And now, it’s time for This Week in Gender.

[This Week in Gender music plays]

Tuck: This week, as per use, there is not a lot of really good news for trans people broadly, but I thought this was cute. Last week, San Francisco Marathon was the first marathon in California to offer a special nonbinary-plus division for nonbinary athletes. So, I looked up the results, and there were seven nonbinary runners who completed the marathon, with an age range of 24 to 41 years old. There were also a bunch of nonbinary competitors in the other races that took place that weekend, like a half-marathon, 10k, 5k. So overall, the nonbinary category is already getting a bunch of good use. The winner of the nonbinary marathon division was someone named Cal Calamia, which is an incredibly powerful trans name, and they ran the marathon in three hours flat, which is wild. And also speaking of flat, well, NBC described Cal as a San Francisco–based high school teacher and advocate for nonbinary inclusion at races. So I decided to do a little googling, and it turns out that Cal is also a co-founder of a group called 2 Hot 4 Hoodies, which provides free chest binders to trans and nonbinary youth in need. So like, hell yeah! If you want to learn more, or donate, or check out their merch, which kind of slaps, they are on Instagram at @2hot4hoodies. And that’s it, that was the one nice thing I found. This has been, This Week in Gender.

[This Week in Gender music plays]

[Gender Reveal theme music plays]

Tuck: Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha is a disabled, autistic, nonbinary femme writer, cultural worker, disability and transformative justice movement worker, and crack-ass uncle on the porch. The author or co-editor of nine books, including *Beyond Survival, Tonguebreaker, Care Work*, and *Dirty River*, their work has won the Lambda and the Jeanne Córdova Prize for Lesbian and Queer Nonfiction. They are a 2020 Disability Futures Fellow and have been a lead artist with Sins Invalid since 2009. Their next book, *The Future is Disabled: Prophecies, Love Notes, and Mourning Songs*, is out on Arsenal Pulp in October 2022.

[Gender Reveal theme music plays]

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

Leah: [Laughs] I would describe myself as a nonbinary, hot, haggard, brown femme over 45. And I would also add in that I very much identify as an uncle femme.

Tuck: Yeah, I love that you said your age also, because I remember, I think years ago at this point, someone was saying that we never interviewed people older than, I don’t know, 20s, maybe early 30s on the show. And I’m like, we do, it’s just that we all have trans face, and so when people don’t say their age, you don’t guess that they’re in their 40s.

Leah: Right, like, trans face, gay face, fat face, black and brown face. I was just like—cause all my gray came in, and I was like, I love it, but I’m kind of self-conscious. And my friend’s like, “You’re a tiny fat with melanin, you’re forever 35.” And I’m like, “Right, this is true.”

Tuck: It’s true!

Leah: I guess just my post-amble to that is that’s it’s very important for me to say. Because what you just said about people being like, “You never talk to anyone who’s like, not fuckin’ forever 21,” and I’m just like, yeah, *that*. And also, you know, like a lot of queer/trans everybody, I could not imagine a future for myself—I couldn’t imagine myself living over 25, I’m one of those people.

Tuck: Right, yeah, same.

Leah: I also really couldn’t picture life after 40, and I think that’s really important to me, and that is about the intersection of race, class, gender, and ability. Because for me, I think specifically, as someone who’s disabled, brown, not cis, queer, I think that when those places come together there’s kind of two pictures. I think specifically where disability meets everything else, where we don’t get pictures of disabled people over 40, right, there’s kind of two pictures. One is like, oh, somehow you magically get cured and you live to a ripe old age of like, able-bodied normality, and then you die. Or you are beautiful and young and you die like Beth from *Little Women*, and that’s it. And I was like, I don’t see myself getting cured, and I did have a fear image in my head for a long time of like, oh, I’m already disabled, like what happens when it gets worse? Am I gonna be institutionalized, am I gonna die young, what’s gonna happen? And I feel like in a lot of my writing in the last decade, I’ve really been trying to write my own possibility model for myself, I guess. Because I’m just like, oh, this is what it’s like to still be disabled, to still be a survivor, to not be married, to not be cis, to be brown, and to not be neurotypical and be 47. And to be imagining like, oh, this is how 57 could look like, and 67, and it’s not just this blur.

Tuck: Mm. Well, we have a tradition on this show that if someone self-describes as femme, we ask what femme means to them.

Leah: Ooh, I love that story.

Tuck: Yeah, and I’d say you say “femme” on *maybe* every single page of Care Work alone? [Leah laughs] So… what does it mean to you?

Leah: Yeah, I would say that femme is a multiverse. It’s always important for me to say, like, it’s one big, huge ocean with a lot of different currents in it. It’s a lot of different kinds of queer, and I think there’s ways specifically for me, as I’ve been able to name myself as nonbinary as a word in the last five or six years or so, or more than that even, it’s really taken me back to like, what’s my femme root? And it’s a thing that I think that is maybe not true for every femme who came up in the 90’s, but for me and a lot of people I know it is. I’m like, “femme” was never “girl,” and it was never “woman.” I wouldn’t have said, “Oh, it's a genderqueer identity”—other people did, like Cyrée Jarelle Johnson has amazing early writing where he’s like, “No, femme is always nonbinary, it’s *always* trans,” and he makes some really amazing arguments that way. If you’d asked me in ’96, “Is femme genderqueer?”, I would have been like, [doubtfully] “Mmmhhh....” But what I did know was that, like, my friend Amira made this really beautiful sculpture that just says, “Femme is for free,” and I was like, yeah, it’s like a portal out of all the ways that being somebody who’s feminized is about pain and oppression and violence. And for me, it was always, again without using that word, a genderqueer identity. It was like, I’m not a girl. I’m not a woman. I kinda itch when I hear those things. And then later on, ironically, as there was more organized femme community, I would go to the femme conferences that were happening that were amazing spaces—and that really, I’ve got to say, never were like, “Oh, no, no, this is just for the *ladies*, the cis ladies.” But I was like, “Oh, there are a lot of femmes out there that are like cis women who really like a 1950’s rockabilly look,” and that’s so not me. And I didn’t know it was gender feels, but I was like, “Wow, I feel really ugly next to you. And I feel like I’m trying to do your look, and it’s just not working. And it makes me want to rip my skin off.”

So for me, I had an experience in the early 2000’s where there were transmasculine people and femmes. And femmes were not assumed to be trans or nonbinary at all. There were a few exceptions, like I had a few friends who were trans women or transfems who were partnered with trans guys, but that was pretty rare. And in a lot of kind of AFAB queer community, it was just like, there’s trans guys and there’s femmes, and to be femme was to kind of be the girl’s auxiliary of this setup. There was just so few representations of, I don’t know, transmasculinity of color, you know, and a lot of the models out there that I knew of that I saw around being trans were really binaried. And that wasn’t the fault of any of us, I mean it was the fault of, we were still dealing with the Harry Benjamin system, where it was like, “You’ve got to be a *guy* if you want to get T,” and there’s no middle ground. And there was a lot of language then about like, “Yeah, your job is to kind of be the perfect girlfriend, the perfect support person,” and there was a lot of language of, “Oh, you know, transmasculine people are going through this second boyhood, this second teenagerhood, so you’ve gotta really be the *girl* to make them feel like the *boy*.” And there were just so many ways that binary stuff, sexist stuff, gender stuff, was really not questioned at all in there. And there wasn’t room for me to be like, “Hey, I’m femme, but I’m not cis! And I’m not this kind of perfect girlfriend who my gender is existing to kind of maximize your gender.”

And so I think out of that kind of shmear of reality, a lot of femmes I know of different genders have come out about being nonbinary or trans, or we’ve figured out different ways to inhabit our genders or explore gender in the past decade-ish, definitely in the past, like, five or six years, and I think a lot of it has to do with both the enormous work that as femmes we’ve done to create femme community where there’s a multiplicity of femmes speaking to each other, to the work of transfems to really unpack the misogyny and sexism in a lot of femme and trans communities. And also things like the beginnings of just harm reduction and openness, and doing away with the Harry Benjamin standard so that people can go and get, can try out microdosing hormones or be like, “I want this kind of surgery, this kind of gender-affirming care. I don’t just have to kind of get this thing that’s off the rack. I get to kind of design my own gender care.” And I think that all this together has created room for all femmes, and all people, but I want to say specifically a lot of femmes who are Generation X or older femmes, to be able to really explore our genders and come out as trans and nonbinary, and inhabit the world in our bodies and our genders the way we want them to be. Which we did not have room to do or even really think about 15, 20, 30 years ago. Yeah, I mean I guess the TL;DR is like, femme is for free, and if it’s not about freedom, then it’s not femme. That’s my answer. That’s my story.

Tuck: So, when you started to talk about femme, you said something I think about it being, like, this ocean of possibility. And speaking of labels, I think, that are just oceans of possibility, I do want to talk about disability as a label. Because you were on adrienne maree brown’s podcast a few years back, and on it you said, “Every time I do a workshop that’s primarily Black and brown about disability justice, I’m like, ‘You might be coming thinking this is some foreign population you’re learning about, and you might realize at the beginning of these three hours that you are disabled.’” And it made me laugh, because there’s this running joke about how many people have realized they’re trans by listening to this podcast, and so in some ways, right, we’re like maybe doing similar work by guiding people towards communities they’re already a part of. But I’d love to hear more about your experience of guiding people to this realization.

Leah: Yeah, the thing about the BIPOC-only workshops and what happens is still true. And what I would add is, when me and my friend and comrade Stacey Park Milbern, who passed away two years ago, were doing a lot of workshop stuff together, we made a decision at a certain point that was both about like the spoons we had, the capacity, and also just like our political strategy. Because people would be like, “Can you let in just a *few* white people?”, or “Can you do like this white disability thing?” And we were like, “No, actually, we want to focus our limited energy on creating BIPOC-only spaces to learn about disability,” because we’re like, we know there’s so many fucking disabled, neurodivergent, sick, deaf, hard-of-hearing Black and brown people out there who are closeted about it, or they’ll be like, “Well, I have a *condition*.” And Mia Mingus has this quote I go back to over and over again, where she’s like, “Yeah, over and over I meet other disabled women of color who don’t identify as disabled despite having the lived experience of it.” And then she says that, “And this is for a lot of reasons, because it can be very dangerous to identify as something if your survival depends on denying it.” And so, when we would get these asks about, “Can we just let these like three white people into the workshop?”, we would be like, “No,” and I’m like, still no! Because not only are people in the workshop gonna have an oh-shit-I’m-disabled moment in the middle of the workshop, it’s not gonna be like some kind of abstract, no-feelings thing. To be a disabled Black, Indigenous, person of color and to be grappling with that is to grapple with histories of slavery, genocide, prison, war, working in the fields and getting poisoned by pesticides, uranium, like all of this stuff that’s really, like, talk about intergenerational trauma. It’s, yeah, we’re *in* it, and we can barely talk about that when it’s a closed space, let alone when there’s well-meaning white people who are like, “Oh my god, I just really *feel* your *pain*.”

And so, I also know this is really gonna make you feel some stuff. You’re gonna remember your uncle, you’re gonna remember the histories of medical experimentation in your communities. And I always do the modeling thing of like, “Yeah, would my father have called himself disabled? No. Is he a Sri Lankan refugee with PTSD who’s an alcoholic to cope, and who definitely has mental health disability? Yeah, absolutely.” My mom, who’s white and Roma, I have this story I tell a lot, where you know, she’s a polio survivor, she was one of the last folks to get it in the U.S. before the vaccine. And she was born in ’38, worked two or three jobs her whole life, and the ADA passed, and we were going on like, we would go on these slow walks in our neighborhood, because it was like free exercise. And I don’t know how it came up, but she was just like, “You know that I can’t walk more than 50 yards without pain, right?” And I was like, “No! You’ve never said that in your life.” And I was like, very 19-year-old naïve, and I was like, “Are you gonna ask for accommodations at work now?” And she was like, “No, they will fire me and they will hire someone younger who does not have a degree from Worcester State who’s not asking for anything.” And I was like, “Right.” That’s my mom’s whole pre-ADA story. And a million people have a version of that, of like we don’t talk about it, and we survived by not talking about it.

And so, I feel like some of the role that I try and play, which was played for me by other disabled BIPOC people, is like, if I can be somebody—I was thinking lately, wow, I would even use the language of like, I’ve got 13, 14 years “out,” as like, someone who’s publicly claiming disability. I got physically sick and disabled in 1997, and so that’s 25 years, but I went in and out of the closet, because at first, I was barely surviving. I was in an abusive relationship, I was 22, I was in Toronto. I was, you know, a privileged immigrant because I had U.S. citizenship, but I was still like, married to an asshole boyfriend who was sponsoring my papers. And then I was just like, I mean, like my mother, I was like, “I can’t claim disability. I have to work, I have to get a job. I have to have some social capital. I have to have friends. And if I have this inconvenient body that needs something, I’m not gonna be cool.” And so, jumping back full circle, for me, during those workshops, I’m like, yeah, I’m gonna model it. I’m gonna be someone who’s been out for 13 years. And who uses, walks in with my cane, and who also still always, it’s not a fixed point, I’m always growing and learning about my shit all the time. And my body’s changing all the time. But just being able to model it, being able to even name like yes, this is unsafe for us. Yes, these are histories of so much pain and oppression, and also, we’re creating these zones where it’s possible. There’s like a reason to buy in, where you can actually get something out of it. And yeah, I guess the TL;DR would be like, I think that in BIPOC disabled spaces we bring each other home a lot of the time, and we model for each other. Alice Wong has this thing where she just said that like, she believes in storytelling as a form of activism, that’s very specifically physically disabled QTPOC and BIPOC, because she’s like, “It’s like we’re throwing seeds out there for each other.” And some fuckin’ sick brown person in fuckin’, the middle of Illinois, is gonna be listening to a podcast and is gonna be like, “Oh shit, okay. I’m gonna try and find these people.” Yeah. So that’s some of it.

Tuck: Yeah, so on this show we often allude to the fact that this really disproportionately high number of trans people have some kind of disability, whether that’s what I think Kirby Conrod called “joint hurty disorder not otherwise specified,” or something going on in our big beautiful brains, or, you know, the fact we all have ADHD, whatever. But I think even thinking about my friends that are not trans, I really earnestly think about this all the time, and I cannot think of anyone who matches the definition of like, perfectly abled. Like, something is going on.

Leah: Mm-hm. Something’s going on.

Tuck: And so, I guess I was wondering if abled people exist? [Leah laughs] And if there’s a future in which everyone’s disabled? Because I really struggle with this—do those people exist? Are they out there? Or is it just sort of a question of who is aware of what’s going on with them, and who is not?

Leah: No. Fuck, I love that... yeah. Yeah, that’s so real. Well, I have a lot of thoughts, obviously. I just love your question of like, “Are abled people a myth?” Like, probably. And it’s kind of like, is anyone actually cis?

Tuck: Exactly.

Leah: I mean, I guess, maybe. But people act like biological sex is a thing, you know, it’s just a *fact*. And they also similarly act as if like, disabilities and diagnoses were like, carved in stone by Moses, and I’m like, “No! All of this shit’s made up. All of this shit’s made up. *All* of it is made up.” And it doesn’t mean that like, people don’t have different body-minds that are kind of similar, that are like, “Oh yeah, we do have the same genetic thing, or my muscles do have this kind of spasticity, or my brain is this way.” But you know, like, I remember in Persimmon Blackbridge’s book—she’s like an older, white, Mad and neurodivergent disabled writer from Canada. She has this book *Prozac Highway*, which is very, you know, it mostly takes place in this late 90’s chatroom for crazy people, and it’s really beautiful, where one of the people in this online mad community is like, “Yeah, when people talk about the DSM and diagnostics, I wouldn’t call it art, and it’s not science either.” And it’s just like, every five years that shit changes 180 degrees. And then Eli Clare, you know, speaking of disabled trans people, has this really brilliant piece of writing that I’m gonna try and summarize in *Brilliant Imperfection*, his last book, which is all about like, grappling with the idea of cure, where he’s like, “What if we just threw out the idea of, like, diagnosis and symptoms, and we just called it ‘body trouble’?” I mean, Patty Berne has said famously, she said, “When my access needs are met, I’m functionally non-disabled.” She’s like, “I have what’s considered a serious physical disability,” but she’s like, “when my access needs are met, I’m not really limited in anything I can do.” And that’s the social model, and that’s not everyone’s model, cause some people have cancer and some people are in pain. But it’s like you change the framework, the way the artwork looks is different.

Something that Sins Invalid said, and it’s like a core disability justice principle, where they’re like, “There’s not”—I think this is Aurora’s quote—where she’s like, “There’s not one correct body from which everyone else deviates.” She’s like, “There’s like a million bodies and minds, and they’re all unique, and that’s what it is to be human.” And that’s going against like the mainstream idea of disability, which is like there’s the one white, cis, male, abled, skinny body, and everybody else is like the dented can store, and you want to be like that body. So, I guess, long story short, I think that one place I see transness and disability connecting is I think that we’re both overlapping circles of people, like really broad overlapping, that are just, like, none of those labels and categories that people have slapped on me have worked. It’s all bullshit. None of it’s real. It is all fake. It’s all hallucination. You know, you also have this great question about, “In your ideal world, what would the future of gender look like?” and I’m just like, well, for me, it’s really similar to what the future of disability would look like, would be like you’re born, and you can, at the risk of sounding like, I don’t know, Sesame Street, you can be whoever you are. You know, you can be a *becoming*. Whatever genders you are, maybe you’re a gender people have a name for, maybe you make up some completely new shit. Maybe there’s like 40 of them. You’re born into a body and a mind, and you find out what kind it is. And it’s not about a doctor, a diagnosis, a label, an oppression. It’s about a becoming. And like, a curiosity and an excitement.

And I think trans and disabled people, and those of us who are both, are just like, “Yeah, there’s what society calls me, and there's what my embodied experience of who I am is, and they’re really different. And I’m always having to fight for my own understanding of my body-mind, versus the completely microwave bullshit that other people slap on us, or try and gatekeep us from.” You know, there’s just this rebellion. And like, I have this piece in progress that I’m working on that’s called “The Audacity of Autism,” and I’m just like, I just think that one thing I do think about autistic culture is we just look at society and we’re like, “What the fuck is that? I’m gonna go my own way. Like, I am gonna be my kind of fuckin’ weird!” And I think that there’s a huge corollary to, I mean there might be genetics or whatever, I don’t really care, but I’m just like, yeah, I think similarly, the reason there’s three million nonbinary, agender, trans autistic people is we’re like, “What the fuck is that, ‘cis’? Like, what? That just looks like a really bad time, and like, ridiculous.”

Tuck: Well, in your new book *The Future is Disabled*, I pulled a quote, you write, “Some people may read this book and be confused—where is the futurism, where is the shiny robot arms, the Aspy supremacy fueling the space race, the cure? This is another one of those few ways disabled futures get talked about—shiny, cool, super-crip ones. But I am writing a disability justice futurism, where the disability in the future is not about the $40k cybernetic arm that doesn’t work, and nobody who isn’t a one-percenter can afford anyway, but all the disabled survival strategies, communities, and tech we create by and for ourselves as disabled BIPOC people.” And I love this as an introduction to your book, but since, you know, when this is coming out people can’t yet read the book, can we get them excited by talking more about how you imagine a disability justice future?

Leah: Yeah, totally. Basically, I’m like, well, if we’re gonna survive, we need disabled people in leadership. And radical, disability justice, QTBIPOC people in leadership, because we’re the ones, we have the shit that’s keeping each other alive. I mean, I think you can, you know, I mean, look at the last three years of pandemic, and I’m just like, I think somewhere in the book too, I’m like, “Did you learn how to wear an N95? Did you learn how to wash your hands? Did you learn how to use immune-boosting herbs? Did you learn how to do mutual aid without burning out? Those are *all* disabled skills.” Like, you learned that, disabled people saved your life. Did you get the vaccine? And did you not get denied a respirator? That was done by disability activism, right? And like, looking at climate crisis, I’m just like, so who are the people...? I mean on the West Coast, we have been living in wildfires since 2016, that are fueled by climate change, and now there’s this mainstreaming of like, “Oh, do you know how to make an air purifier out of a box fan and a furnace filter?” And like, disabled people, disability justice people, created that hack. And we have all this disabled knowledge about how to keep your insulin cold when the power goes out, how to purify the air, how to not completely lose it when you’ve been inside for seven days and the sun is orange, like what are the herbs you use. So I guess for me it’s like, we’re facing, sorry to be cheerful, but like, climate catastrophe, rising fascism, rising waters, all the things, you know, imperialism, colonialism, war, etc. I really see the skills that disability justice, disabled, radical, BIPOC, QTBIPOC people come up with when we’re just like on the couch texting our friend, or being like, “You know what? This really pisses me off, I’m gonna innovate this thing.” Those are the really small fractal things that end up being life-saving.

I think about something like Mask Oakland, which is a project that was started by a white, neurodivergent, genderqueer person, that started back in, I think, the early wildfires, like 2016, 2017. And they were like, “We’re gonna just get a whole shit-ton of N95’s and give them out to people, especially people who are houseless, who are living in encampments, because they don’t even have a fuckin’ door they can shut against the smoke, let alone a plug to plug in a purifier.” And, I mean, 5 years later, I’m like, the city of Oakland still does not give out N95s or air purifiers, and Mask Oakland was like, “Yeah, every wildfire for the past five years, we figured out ways to give out like hundreds of thousands of masks for free.” And that was disabled brilliance, that was—and it’s not like a strategy that would have been made up by somebody able-bodied, or even like, a really white, disability-rights person who would be like, “Oh, well, maybe we can get the Center for Independent Living to do something, but probably not, because it’s a lot of red tape,” and blah, blah, blah. It was just that kind of like, wild crip innovation. You know, the Allied Media Conference years ago, one of their organizing principles, and I’m paraphrasing it, but one of their principles was like, “We look to solutions that work in total scarcity, because solutions that people come up with on no resources, no money, will work when there is resources and money.” And I’m just like, yeah, there can be this thing even now, people go like, “Oh my god, look at that amazing $40,000 prosthesis,” and I’m like, most disabled people don’t have $40,000! And you know what’s not gonna pay for that? Medicaid. It’s not! Like, Medicaid will barely pay for a wheelchair, so, you know.... And I’m just like, there’s a way that this idea of transcending disability through tech is the most people can think of when they think of disability and the future, and I go like, “No, it’s the survival skills.”

And also, Dr. Sami Schalk—amazing Black, queer, disabled, fat femme, and academic and author of the forthcoming *Black Disabled History*, which everybody should pick up—earlier this year, she was just like, “Pretty soon the world is going to be majority disabled.” And people are like, “What do you mean? Oh, are you giving in? That’s so sad.” And she’s like, “No, it’s just a fucking fact. Like, we’re already probably mostly disabled, and because of COVID, like long COVID, and anxiety and PTSD and everything else,” she’s like, “we’re mostly gonna be disabled.” And one of my arguments was I was like, okay, I’m not trying like, to happy-wash this and be like, “It’s gonna be wonderful!” I mean especially, I gotta say right now, in like July 2022 recording this, I’m like man, everyone’s getting COVID for the 15th fuckin’ time; we’ve been abandoned by our government; the CDC is like, “Everything’s cool, go shopping!” It’s a really depressing time to be alive. I’m pretty fuckin’ depressed; I’m not saying it’s all like, “whoo-hoo!” But I still am like, if most of the world is disabled, and we are the masses, is that gonna be a tipping point where we are like, “No, we need to have care as a human right. No, we need to have access as a human right. No, we need fuckin’ guaranteed basic income. We need all these things, because we’re all sick, and we’re all sad. And we all have adaptive needs.” And also it’s, as we see with Monkeypox, I’m just like, it’s not gonna, six months ago I was like, “COVID’s not the last pandemic, y’all.” We’re gonna be dealing with this all of our lives. We’re gonna be dealing with climate change all of our life. So, is there a possibility in there to turn the tide and be like we finally get the good future? I mean, I don’t know. I’m feeling pretty cynical, but I’m gonna *fight* for it. Like, we’ve been in utter desperation before, and things have looked hopeless, and have been, and we’ve also fought and we’ve won shit. And I wonder about the power, the potential power of disabled masses. Especially as people are like, still got long COVID, it’s 2027. Like, yeah.

Tuck: I mean, I had a related thought about this, because thinking about both transformative and disability justice, which are two things that you’ve written or edited entire anthologies about, it seems like there was a moment for both of those around the same time in 2020, where it looked like we were maybe thinking about these things more, like as a country, and maybe things would improve, and then it just like all went away *so* incredibly hard. And we’ve talked to folks on the show multiple times who are like, “It almost feels harder now,” because it was so heartbreaking to see that moment and then have that moment be snatched away. So I was just wondering, since you have so much experience in both of those fields, like, how you’re feeling about what happened like from 2020 to now, and how that’s affecting like how you’re moving forward?

Leah: Totally. I also just want to say, it’s really important for me to say I co-edited anthologies in TJ with Ejeris Dixon and Ching-In Chen and Jai Dulani, respectively, because those were all collective efforts.

Tuck: Totally.

Leah: A couple things. One, I just want to say first of all, that it’s important for me to say that TJ is still happening, and people have not stopped doing transformative justice work. And I think specifically, and it might just be who I’m in touch with, but I’m just like, one place I see the need is continuing to grow and build, is at the intersections of disability and transformative justice. There’s a lot of people who are increasingly operating alternative mental health warmlines and crisis lines and crisis intervention groups that are still building. And that’s everything from Trans Lifeline with their practice, their really groundbreaking, really amazing practice of being like, “We don’t ever call the cops on you.” You know, and how they’re actually, right now, in the early stages of pushing to get other suicide lines to make that commitment, which is really important. Or it’s like the peer respite networks, which existed before 2020 and are still building, which are networks of places that are like, “If you are in an altered state, or you’re in mental health crisis and you need a place to go that’s not your fuckin’ room with the dishes, but you don’t want to go to the psych ward, you can come here, and we won’t do bed checks, and we won’t be fucked up, and you can get your pills hooked up if you need it. And you can get acupuncture, and it’s okay to be nuts, and no one’s gonna call the cops on you.” Those are still happening. And something I felt in 2020 was, I was like, “This is both”—I mean, don’t get me wrong, I felt all the feelings about like, “The revolution’s here!” And then I was like, “This is also gonna kind of be a setup.” Because I was like, okay, we’re in a really particular moment that I never thought we’d see, where it’s like, there’s editorials about abolishing the police in the *New York Times*, and people are voting to defund. And I was like, the thing that’s tricky—I mean there’s a lot of things that’s tricky, but number one—transformative justice as a movement has actually, and this is complicated, but there’s reasons for it, has really resisted scaling up and institutionalizing, right? Partly because we don’t think that there’s institutional solutions, like that’s what we’re fighting against. So I think those efforts are still going on.

Jumping back to the way I felt 2020 was kind of a setup, I was like okay, so, there’s all these pushes to defund, which are great. But then, there’s kind of this like, “Uh.... Okay, put the money into community-based alternatives.” And then it’s like, okay, some places have community-based alternatives that are non-carceral and not about locking people up, or like radical anti-violence things, and some *don’t*. And some of those spaces, like having worked there, there’s times when we’re like, “Oh, he’s got a gun! I don’t know?!” Like that’s actually, I can talk to the partner who’s running from the person with the gun and be like, “Okay, the bus is right there, if you get over here someone will meet you. We’ll take you to a shelter. You want money to get on the bus to get your cousin? We can do that.” But I’m like, dealing with some of the high-level things that happen that are really hard are shit that we’re still building towards. And like, we’re doing better than the cops are, cause we’re not *killing* anybody, but neither do we have a magic solution. And the weight of not just 2020, but like our whole lives plus Trump, hit a lot of people. And it’s like people are exhausted, people are sad, people are grieving. Jumping back to some of those magical mutual aid projects, it’s like people will, the same person, Quinn Redwoods, who founded Mask Oakland, I quote them in the book cause they were like, at the end of their 2021 fundraising letter, they were like, “Yeah, every inspiring mutual aid group you’ve heard of is burnt out. We *don’t* got this. Like, we’re three people trying to run a sewage system! It’s really fuckin hard, and like, people are dying, and it’s getting worse.” I think the thing that’s tricky is the Right can just be like, “No one’s dead! Everything’s fine! There’s no pandemic. Just be Christian, just be straight, get married. Like if you’re fucking up, it’s because you failed. You don’t have to feel anything.” Whereas on the Left, we actually right now are in a position of having to tell people really bad news, where it’s like, the pandemic’s still here, the waters are rising, we’re still sad, you’re still sad about the eight people who you know who died, et cetera.

I have seen a lot of ups and downs in the movement for 25 years, and yeah, I think we’re in a moment of low morale, and I guess the thing I want to lift up is the work is still happening. And in some ways, it’s complicated, but I take some hope in the fact that I think a lot of people are doing something under the big umbrella of transformative justice that’s not particularly super public, or with the media looking at it, or like, “Ooh, let me be a TJ influencer,” to use a friend’s phrase. So TL;DR, I take heart. And I would encourage people who are feeling depressed, being like, “Where’d it all go?”, to be like, look around for the work that’s happening that you can tap into. And that can be a study group, that could be finding the alternative mental health crisis line in your area and volunteering. I know Trans Lifeline really needs fuckin’ volunteers, cause they’re just like, “We know that some people can’t get through. We’re heavy-need,” right? That could be like, so many things, but it’s like start where you are and do something that you can do. And I think one thing that I want to encourage people to do is be like, it doesn’t mean you have to go be like the multi-year transformative justice process facilitator, and burn out. You could be involved a different way, you could study mediation, you could study de-escalation, so if somebody’s getting into it with somebody at the bus stop, you go up, you go, “Hey, what’s up, how are you doing, haven’t seen you for a while,” all those things. You could learn how to listen to somebody and just be like, “I don’t have to be your therapist to hold your pain,” you know. Like all those things are TJ. Learning how to give naloxone is TJ, cause you don’t have to call the cops.

Tuck: I, of course, have many friends who love your work, and I asked a few of them if they had questions for you. And I had questions from my friend Kaïa, who was asking how we could make sure that disabled people who aren’t like, charismatic and popular also have robust care networks so that they don’t have to rely on our failing state? And that’s, I know, something that you talk about in *Care Work* and in a lot of your work, is making sure that we can look out for people and build care networks for people who aren’t, you know, the people who are automatically getting all the love and attention and community.

Leah: Mm-hm. Oh yeah, no, it’s a great question, and I’m really glad that Kaïa asked it. Because I was gonna say that especially, going back to 2020, there was a lot of people being like, “Oh my god, mutual aid’s so beautiful, and interdependence is so great,” and I was like, “It’s a pain in the ass!” It’s—and like also, there’s times where everybody’s spooned out, and it’s like, “I just don’t got it,” and it doesn’t mean the need isn’t real. So, I have a number of thoughts about this. One is, and thinking about Loree Erikson, who’s like a white, cis, queer, femme, disabled, physically disabled activist and academic in Toronto, and she, for years, like a lot of the way people tapped into her work was that she needs help toileting and transferring from her bed to her chair and things like that, and she couldn’t get state care. And so she organized a care collective that for years was like, people just volunteering and doing care shifts, and hanging out with her, and it was like really fun. And then as she got older, she was like, “That was free for a long time,” but she’s like, “I’m older; I don’t go out as much. I’m not the one cute, blonde, wheelchair-using, cis femme that everybody knows.” And she’s like, “My friends are starting to have bad backs, and their own shit.” So she was like, “I started doing fundraising being like, I’m gonna recruit people from the community to do my care, but I’m gonna pay you.”

It might surprise people to be like, I love community-based webs of care and stuff, but I also am actually a big fan of like, yes, the state is failing, and yes, the state will kill us, but I also believe in pushing the state and making demands of the state. The fact that disabled people busted ass to save Medicaid and the ACA is really fuckin’ important. And there’s plenty of people I know who are all kinds of disabled who are like, “Yeah, I’m in California, I’m in a state that did Medicaid expansion, so it pays for my attendants.” Cause they’re like, “I can’t rely on the community to wipe my ass, and to be there and do all these things.” So I’m just like, find out what the local lobbying efforts are to, you know, if you’re in a state that didn’t do Medicaid expansion, if there’s organizing around that, join that. Push for that. Figure out where you can get in. And also, I always shout out Hand in Hand, which grew out of the National Domestic Workers Alliance, and was and is this really important organizing initiative that’s bringing together care workers and care providers and disabled people. And for one thing it’s like, a lot of care workers who’re like, paid PCAs, personal care attendants, are also disabled! And they’re mostly people of color. And there’s a lot of people who’re disabled who’re like, “Yeah, I had my auntie or my friend or my boyfriend do the training so he could get paid by the Department of Health and Human Services to do my care.” And what’s true so much of the time is that it’s hard to qualify for those programs, and then what the state pays caregivers is pathetic. Like, Seattle is a Fight for $15 state, we have a 15-dollar-an-hour minimum wage. Do you know who’s exempt from that? Personal care attendants—they make 12. Do you know how much you make scooping ice cream in Seattle? 18 dollars! So, clearly during the pandemic, so many PCAs quit, because they’re like, “This is a physically, and COVID-risky, and physically intensive job, and I could just scoop ice cream or work retail, or whatever.” So Hand in Hand is like, “Yeah, we’re really pushing to be like, we need to increase this so that people can be paid at minimum wage.” But also, they’re really pushing for like, care work is skilled labor. And yes, there are ways that we do it for free, but also people who give care should be getting *$50* an hour. It should be seen as like, the beautiful and stressful and skilled profession it is. So I think pushing for that.

And I do think, in terms of future-building and prefigurative politics, let’s build little experiments in the world we want in the future, now. There’s the book *The Dispossessed* by Ursula K. Le Guin. It’s like, all these radicals go to the moon; there’s no capitalism. There’s these giant storehouses where you just walk in and you take whatever you need, and you go to the commons, and you get fed. And I was like, “What would that be like for care?” What would a care commons be like? Is there a way that we can start building alternative economies where people are like, “Hey, I have this many hours of care work to give this month.” And somebody who maybe doesn’t know them personally can be like, “I will take you up on those four hours of care labor. I could really use help with like, can you take my garbage out, can you help me prepare some food, like all that kind of stuff.” My friend Elliot was talking it about it as like, a lot of times in mutual aid it’s like, everyone just gives everything they have until they die! And he's like, “What if you could go, I’ve got 10 hours to give this month. And then it’s in a spreadsheet. And then people who click into your project can be like, ‘Okay great, I’m gonna sign up for that.’” Because I think that the other thing is, I mean it goes back to so often, people who do have relationships are able to pull on those to get care. And that’s not perfect either, because people stay in relationships that are abusive, or become abusive or unhealthy, because they’re like I need my ass wiped, I need my care. And then you’ve got people who don’t have those relationships who are unpopular. And I do think that creating alternative care institutions, alternative care collectives, where maybe there’s like, people are getting paid somehow or compensated, alternative care banks, could be ways to tap in.

And I also, my friend Lenny, who’s a really sweet, elder trans disabled person in Toronto, and he just had this thing where he was just like, “I’m a white, poor, trans person; I will make dinner on Friday nights, and anybody can come.” And he’s like, “But I’m especially gonna invite people who a lot of people don’t like, cause they *really* need some fuckin’ chicken and some time to hang out with people.” And he’s like, “That’s really important.” He’s like, “That gets lost when you institutionalize things, cause then it is just the people who are polite who get it.” And he’s like, “I’m gonna feed people who like, a lot of people don’t really like, who still really need that food.” And he’s like, “I’m gonna have my limit, where I can do”—I don’t remember if he was doing it every week, or once a month—but he’s like, “This is what I can do. And it’s not everything, but it's not nothing. It’s *something*.” So, those are some things. And honor your boundaries, be really clear. I know it’s complicated, cause some abled people have boundaries, and what their boundaries are is, “I don’t think—I think disability’s gross, I never want to do any care.” [Tuck laughs] But I’ve also seen a lot of disabled people, myself included, push our boundaries because we’re like, “I don’t know, you could die!” And then it gets bad, and then you do the cutoff. And I think we have to be in a practice of checking in and being like, “This is what I got right now. And this is where I stop. And if you honor that, I can do it for longer.” As opposed to like, I did more than I could for a while, and then I’m just like, I actually can’t do it anymore because the shit’s gotten bad.

Tuck: Yeah, well, I know that you already touched on this, but I have to ask this at the end or the podcast will explode, so—

Leah: I don’t want that.

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

Leah: It would be like, choose your own adventure. It would just be like, everybody gets everything. There’s no white, capitalist, colonialist, cis, ableist patriarchy, and what there is, is like an expansive gender universe where we’re excited about all the different body-minds that show up. And where, I think also, I like to think about lineages of gender, because like, I know sometimes people will be like, “Oh yeah, this gender-free future where everyone wears the same gray outfit!” And I’m like, “No, no, no, no. Not that.” I want there to be lots of iterations of femme in the future, and I want baby femmes to come up and be able to like, hang out with people who are their femme olders and ill-ders. And I also want to be able, as a femme older, to be able to like, learn from younger femmes who’re coming up to be like, “Oh my god, you’re doing this thing, that’s amazing! I didn’t know that. That’s so cool, I love that.” I want the growth to go both ways, and I just, you know, no gender police, no able police. We all get to live to grow up. We all get to thrive. We all get to be happy, we all get to be weird. Someone I knew years ago, like a really long time ago, had this you know, very indie, I think there were puppets in it, but it was just like, what if you could just be like, “Yeah, I want chest surgery today,” and you just *get* it? And that feels really connected to disability, where I’m like, what if I could just get an MRI whenever I needed one, without having to get pre-approval? What if I could just be like, I want this drug, or I want to try this, and I wouldn’t have to lie about it?

I mean, I talked about like the giant storehouse of things, like what if there was every kind of gendered clothing, makeup, object, every kind of beautiful adaptive device, and a beautiful free library that you could check out? And I guess I just think about curiosity, I mean, I think the ways that the prison-industrial complex is in our heads and hearts and like locks us up is like, we have to fight so hard to access the genders and bodies that are ours, right? And there’s so much violence, there’s so much fear—what would it be like if the whole society was just like, so filled with excitement and curiosity and possibility when it was meeting different genders? And just like, oh my god, fuck yes! I don’t know, it might be a fantasy, but I also was gonna end by, Stacey has this quote where she’s like, “Wild disability justice dreams got me this far, and I’m gonna keep banking on ’em.” And I do get a lot of hope when I think about all the fuckin’ wild and crazy disabled shit that people I know, including myself, have done, that nobody believed we could pull off. And I’m just like, despite the end of the world, I still believe that we can keep pulling off fuckin’ magical, trans, nonbinary, non-cis, disabled shit. Why not, you know, why not?

[Gender Reveal theme music plays]

Tuck: That’s gonna do it for this week’s show. If you learned something or had a good time, please share this episode with folks in your community. You can find Leah on Twitter @thellpsx, on Instagram @leahlakshmiwrites, and at brownstargirl.com. Don’t forget to pre-order their new book *The Future is Disabled* from Arsenal Pulp. You can find us @gendereveal and at genderpodcast.com, where we have transcripts of every episode among all kinds of other resources. If you like what we do here at Gender Reveal, please consider supporting the show at patreon.com/gender. By signing up, not only will you be helping us continue to be able to make the show, but you will automatically get access to our weekly newsletter and our monthly bonus podcasts, which feature chats with past guests like Niko Stratis, Hil Malatino, and Eden Rohatensky. We are about to go on season break, but the newsletter and bonus podcast will keep going, so joining the Patreon is a great way to sort of skip the break part of the break. If you’re looking to join our online community for Gender Reveal listeners, that is at bit.ly/gender-slack.

This episode was produced and edited by Ozzy Llinas Goodman and by me, Tuck Woodstock. Special thanks this week to Ariana Martinez and Kaïa and anyone else who helped me brainstorm questions for this episode. 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 our Season 9 finale, and more feelings about gender.

[Gender Reveal theme music ends]

Tuck: I want to remember, just to note for our listeners, that when you say DJ you are talking about disability justice.

Leah: Yes.

Tuck: Because it does, out of context, sound like you are DJing, which is so funny to me.

Leah: I know. I’ve gotten this before. People are like, you’re a DJ?! And I’m like, “In another life, yes, but that’s not what I mean.” [Both laugh]