[Theme music plays]

Tuck: Welcome to Gender Reveal, the 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.

[Theme music ends]

Tuck: Hey everyone. Hope you’re all hanging in there. When we arbitrarily decided that November 14th was the start of Labor Week here on the podcast, I did not expect for it to align so perfectly with union efforts across the country, but only a few days after we released our Starbucks Workers Union episode, more than 110 Starbucks workplaces went on strike for Red Cup Day. We are almost two weeks into strikes across ten University of California campuses, where bargaining units represent almost 48,000 academic workers. Part-time faculty are striking at the New School in New York, as are HarperCollins employees, also in New York, and I gotta say, those people on those picket lines, they’re tough as hell, because it was so goddamn cold here last week and they were just truly out there, braver than the troops. So, it is perfect that, in this episode, we also talk a little bit about unions, albeit in a little darker way than our other labor episodes, but it’s important nonetheless. And, speaking of unions, we also just released a new bonus episode of our Patreon-only bonus podcast, Gender Conceal, and we spoke with Soraya Shockley about union organizing in the radio and podcasting space, as well as about the gender politics in the new season of *Love is Blind*. That’s available exclusively for patrons at patreon.com/gender. Meanwhile, on today’s show, I am excited to share my chat with Joan Summers. Joan is a former writer at Jezebel and the longtime co-host of the podcast Eating for Free. In this episode, Joan and I talk about implicit versus explicit representation…

Joan: Oh, I wanna be Lara Croft, Tomb Raider because she’s strong and hot and gets to wear leather catsuits, not because she had a conversation with her butler about her estradiol prescription.

Tuck: And whether it’s possible for queer celebrities to not be annoying.

Joan: I personally don’t believe that Harry Styles is waking up every morning like, “how can I cause gender-related chaos on the Internet?”

Tuck: I also want to give a little heads up, this interview starts with a long story about church-based homophobia and ostracization. I know many of you can relate, and I just wanted to give you a little content warning on that.

But first, we have two Theymail messages for you today. Theymails are little messages from listeners, and this first message is from Rose and Drew, and it says: “Do you like queer, inclusive sex ed, Jewish mysticism, or D&D actual play podcasts? If so, you should check out Quest Ed. Created by trans Jewish nerds, Quest Ed guides listeners through a sex education curriculum while following four misfits as they discover magic and solve a 30-year-old mystery. Judaism, sex, ghosts! Find Quest Ed on Spotify.

Our second message is from Zera, and it says: “Zera Bloom is a sonic alchemist, composer, producer, healer, and educator. She makes music for award-winning films, live theater, dance, and podcasts. If you have a project that requires the magic only a trans audio witch can provide, reach out at [www.zera-bloom.com](http://www.zera-bloom.com), that is zera-bloom.com. She also offers empowering, inclusive music lessons and tarot sessions.”

And now, it’s time for This Week in Gender.

[Transition sound effect plays]

I’m recording this two days after Trans Day of Remembrance, which means it is two days after Kelly Loving, Derrick Rump, Daniel Aston, Ashley Paugh, and Raymond Green Vance were murdered at Club Q in Colorado. There’s probably a lot more information out now than there was when I was recording, and I don’t have anything to add that you don’t already know or that you aren’t already thinking. I’m not feeling anything that you haven’t already felt. Well, actually, I have one thought that you’re probably not thinking, and it’s soooo stupid, and I think 99.9% of you are going to be like, uh, Tuck, what the fuck? [Laughs] But here we go.

When Cory Monteith from Glee died in 2013, his last two tweets were, “what the crap is Sharknado” and “oh, it’s a shark tornado.” And I think about that ALL the time. What if the last thing you ever said was oh, it’s a shark tornado? What if people were posting elegies to you under oh, it’s a shark tornado? The last thing Daniel Aston posted was “everyone is posting nudes as a goodbye, so \*shrug emoticon\*, here’s the latest.” Not because he knew he was about to be murdered, but because Twitter, you know, is collapsing. And with that post he put a picture of him pulling his shirt up, top surgery scars visible, pants pulled down, and I just keep cry-laughing about it, because it’s just the most transsexual fucking way to go out that I’ve ever heard. You post a nude with your T-dick out and a Cum-41 hat on. And then you’re just fucking gone, way, way, way too young for absolutely no fucking reason. I just keep staring at that tweet and thinking, well, I hate it here, and I feel powerless, and I don’t know how to save us, but also I love trans people so fucking much with our stupid posts and our stupid hats and our bravery to show up in the world as our full, funny, hot transsexual selves, even when we know we could literally die about it. Daniel deserved better, Kelly deserved better. I don’t know who that trans woman is who keeps getting called a drag queen in the press, the one who stomped on the face of the gunman. She deserves better too, though, and actually everyone deserves better than the way that straight media is covering this, but you know all this, you’ve said this, you’ve thought this, and instead I wanted to read something that someone else wrote. Daniel has a friend who has posted a couple of tributes and I’ve read them over and over and over and they still hit me like a big truck every single time. So, I’m gonna read this post, I’ll link to this one and others in the show notes, and then we’ll do the show.

[Music plays]

“Daniel, wake your ass up. It’s morning. I slept on the floor. It feels unfair to sleep in a bed if you can’t. The president is tweeting about you, a few, really, and George Takei, can you believe this shit? I have these nightmares that are so vivid that when I wake up from them, the relief knocks the breath out of me. I was hoping that would be the case. It doesn’t seem to be. The sky is blue, not a cloud in sight, and warm in the sun. It’s comically insensitive. I wanted to text you so we could laugh about the weather being homophobic. You haven’t gotten enough wear out of that jacket, you haven’t done your series on fucking while trans, you haven’t learned how to mix music, you haven’t met my dog. I wanted a visitation dream, but your schedule’s probably pretty full. A lot of us are raising Kleenex’s profits today. Even so, I wanted to see you before you left. I don’t know what to daydream about. It’s insulting that I still have to eat, and that there are hundreds of other motherfuckers out on the road running errands and buying food for the holidays and getting coffee and going to the park and going to work and laughing and smiling and talking and arguing. The goddamn sun is still fucking shining. The wind is blowing and the stupid ass windchimes are dancing. It’s just unbelievable, it’s insulting, it’s unfathomable that everything didn’t just stop, that all the clocks didn’t freeze, that the sun had the nerve to show its face at all today, and that the world keeps spinning and the birds are singing and that it’s a beautiful goddamn day and all I can do is tell you about it because you aren’t looking at it too. You’re sleeping in too late. Seriously, at a time like this, I have so much I need to tell you. I just want you to listen.”

[Music ends]

[Theme music plays]

Tuck: Joan Summers is a local gossip and communist loudmouth reporting from the edges of the Internet on her podcast, Eating for Free. Her work there explores gossip as a means of power and social control in Hollywood and beyond. Most other days, she’s looking hot and organizing unions.

[Music ends]

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

Joan: Hello, everyone. Pronouns, she/her, and trans woman, but, you know, it’s a pretty vanilla gender, I know, pretty boring these days just to be a regular old she/her trans woman. [Laughs]

Tuck: No, it’s good, it’s good! Well, you’re young, like Gen Z adjacent? Are you Gen Z or are you just on the cusp?

Joan: You know, I’m 27, so it’s a weird age where I don’t remember the *Lion King* or basically any of the movies that millennials use to also describe their sexuality, because I wasn’t born yet, but I was around before the Internet became something that was part of our everyday lives, so I think the best way to describe it is like a Zoomer Boomer. [Tuck laughs] Like, I’m as old as you can get for a Zoomer or like a millennial cusper.

Tuck: Well, I was thinking about it, so you’re famously the world’s oldest Zoomer, but you also grew up Evangelical, so I was curious, like, at what point did you first learn about the concept of trans people, and was it from early aughts Tumblr?

Joan: No, it was even earlier than that, shockingly. So, the funny thing is Evangelical people were well aware of trans people before the rest of, I guess, mass society was, only because it was something people were terrified of their children becoming. But, also, when I started displaying signs of, at the time, you know, my parents just called it like homosexuality, but, at an early age, I was like, I wanna be Lara Croft, I wanna be Barbie, I wanna be like all these different girls, Sailor Moon, et cetera, et cetera, it was like, oh God, Joan wants to be a girl was something that a lot of teachers and pastors and just like people within the church complex noticed about me and tried to intervene on. Like, I remember in kindergarten, you know, the boys and the girls line up separately, and I lined up with the girls one day, and the teacher noticed, and I just was like, why do you want me to move lines, I don’t understand. I didn’t say it that eloquently. I was like, what, five? But, it became a big issue. I didn’t line up with the boys, I didn’t want to hang out with the boys, I didn’t have any friends that were boys, and so it was something that was constantly being intervened on. I think that just from a very young age, if I didn’t understand the word trans, I just knew that there were other people like me because it was such a big issue in my life that everyone didn’t want me to be that way, if that makes sense. So, I was aware by proxy of the danger I posed to all the adults around me.

Tuck: That’s so interesting. Yeah, I know we talked earlier about how you wanted to talk on this show about growing up Evangelical and eventually getting excommunicated, and I was like oh, I’ll simply refer back to this tweet thread that sparked this conversation, and you did delete it, which I support and love…

Joan: Oh, shit! [Laughs]

Tuck: That’s always a really good choice, but it does make it harder for me to write informed questions, so just like, what’s up?

Joan: We can just talk! So, I am an infamous tweet deleter, but in question that Twitter feed, I grew up in a very Evangelical town. You know, it’s the kind of town, and I live in California, and it’s in Central California and, so, I was born in the church. My parents weren’t raised necessarily very Christian, but when you live in an environment like that and especially, I’m speaking purely from a white Evangelical experience, are a white person living in a rural area, it’s very easy, even when you weren’t born into it, just get kind of sucked into it by proxy of the friends you make, the jobs you have, et cetera. So, we went every week, and then sometimes it was multiple times a week because then there’s Bible studies and youth groups, et cetera, so church was like a hyper-constant presence in my life, and just because my whole world was church for the first sixteen years of my life, all of my friends were church friends, all of the kids I went to school with were church friends. My church was my school, you know, that was where I went to school for elementary and middle school. It was very small, you know, like my elementary graduating class had twenty people in it, and so it was a very small life, and it was my whole world, and it was really hard to have any sort of frame of reference on the outside world outside of the Internet, and thank god I was a teenager with Internet access, because I really don’t think I would have been the person I am today.

But, I think I was about eleven or twelve when I came out formally as, at the time, just someone who liked boys, and, I was about seventeen, and I started seeing this guy who I met at a friend’s school’s dance. By that point, I had made some friends who weren’t church friends or were church friends who went to schools elsewhere, which expanded my world quite a bit. And we started seeing each other and we would mostly see each other, at that point I had a car, I would go outside of the town, right, because anywhere I went in town, it was the kind of town where, you’re at 7/11 getting a Slurpee after school, and I would get home and my mom would say, oh, so-and-so saw you getting a Slurpee at 7/11, and I’d be like, that was like 15 minutes ago. Like, already you know, you know? So, there was no way I could have gone anywhere in town with a guy. And so, we went to the movies and we’re in like a couple towns over at a mall complex and we were outside the mall, and I was being pretty bold at that point, I felt on top of the world. I was seventeen, I had this hot guy I was dating and we were kissing right outside the movie theater near the parking lot and I just hear, I won’t say my dead name, but I heard, “Joan!” And I looked behind me and my pastor’s wife and his two twin daughters were staring straight at me. And, at that point, I had gotten pretty involved in church stuff, as, I don’t want to say as like a cover, but it was just something that allowed me to keep having freedom, because if I was going to church all the time, if I was involved in the youth ministry, if I sang for the worship team, then your parents didn’t ask where you went on the weekends because you could just say, I went to church.

So, when I got to church the next day, my pastor was there with all of my friends. You know, he must have called them, or they had all been told on the side, and I hadn’t told any of them about this guy that I was seeing, because of course, it would have been an issue. So, they sit me down and, now I look back, I could have just left, I didn’t need to subject myself to this but, you know, you’re 17, these people are your whole world, and it’s all you’ve ever known. So, I sat there, and the first thing they do is tell me that they have been told that I have been influenced by the Devil and that it is now a threat to the wider church if I continue to participate in any sort of activity or leadership capacity, and they lay their hands on me and they pray the Devils out of me for a good 15 minutes, and then they tell me that I will not be allowed back at church. And, on the way out, everyone had since accumulated for our youth group, and my pastor tells everybody in the room, which must have been a good 40, 50 people, that I had fallen into homosexuality and that I would be stepping out of the church. I get home, my parents get home, they don’t speak to me for basically the rest of the day, and that night, my dad tells me that I have made a selfish choice because now they have also been told that they’re not allowed to come back to church as long as I am “in the grip” of homosexuality.

And, so now it’s not just me who can’t go to church, it’s my sister, my brother, and my parents, and basically anyone who associated with us, so overnight, we basically lost everyone in our lives. And, I was told after the fact by the few people who reached out to me, no one retained any sort of friendship with me, that, you know, the pastor in question had done a whole lecture series after my outing about homosexuality and how evil it was and had used me as an example. And so, overnight, I lost hundreds of people in my life. You know, all my lifetime friends stopped speaking to me, people that we had grown up at their houses stopped speaking to us, my mom who has clients at her job, clients wouldn’t go to her, you know, it was something where I couldn’t go anywhere in town without running into someone that you knew, and it became a huge issue in the community. You know, this boy and I, since I had gotten kicked out of the church, and I had decided that was the final straw, I was not a god fearing person anyways, I would just be around time with him then because I had nothing to hide. And one time we were in a McDonalds getting some food and a guy saw us holding hands and he walked five miles to my parents’ house to tell them that he had seen me holding hands with a boy in McDonalds and that he didn’t understand why they would allow me to act like that in public.

And so, it was really was like a, now in hindsight when I look back, a form of mass cancellation, you know, cancellation wasn’t a word that had been invented yet, but it’s just something that I look back on now and, I hear these stories about cancel culture and the people who are predominately affected by it are which are, you know, upper-middle-class white journalists who want to say slurs on the Internet, and I’m just like, all of these supposed consequences like jobs, security, friendships, et cetera, that they’re all so desperately afraid of losing and still have, by the way, there are people every day in this country, young, queer, trans people who are going through experiences, in some form or another, that I went through. That was, at this point, let me think, I was 17, so it’s been ten years now since it happened, right, and, in many ways, I would think it would even be worse now too. You know, I went through this at a time when trans was not a word that was in the greater cultural lexicon, that wasn’t for a few years. So yeah, I just, and that was a long-winded story, I hope that wasn’t too rambly, but I hadn’t thought about it since I tweeted that, however long ago that was, a couple months now. And I haven’t really explained it to anybody before so, thank you, you know, for giving me a little space to kind of talk through that.

Tuck: Oh yeah, of course! I am interested, because you were just referring there at the end to about how things are different now, and I was thinking about maybe two, three years ago, maybe like right before the pandemic, I would hear a lot of straight people be like, oh, it seems like it’s so good for queer and trans kids now.

Joan: Yeah. [Both laugh]

Tuck: And, maybe for some of them, but, you know, 40% of homeless youth are queer and trans, so it can’t be good for all of them. But now, I know all these laws are going on, and maybe the point of this story is I’m just a contrarian, because now it’s like “what a terrible time to be trans, there’s never been a worse time to be trans,” and like that’s true, but I don’t think transphobia was just invented 18 months ago, but…

Joan: I think what it is, when I went through all of that, I was a pretty controversial figure anyways. I wore girl jeans, wore makeup, wore eyeliner, I was not trying to hide anything about myself since at least middle school, and I think the feelings that people are now directing specifically at trans people were at one time or another misplaced or just lumped in with other things that we do have words for 10, 20, 30 years ago like homophobia and sexism. Like, back in the 2000s and in the early 2010s, something I remember so vividly was people telling me, specifically my parents, who were very afraid of me being gay, if you ever do be gay… which is such a funny thing to say now… just don’t be feminine. Don’t be one of the feminine gay people. You can be gay but just like, don’t be flamboyant. Oh my god, remember when we all used to say “flamboyant,” or that was like a thing that was lobbed at us? [Tuck laughs] What a different time. But yeah, the flamboyancy, the femininity, that was something that people were terrified of. And now I recognize that as a form of transmisogyny, specifically in that context when you’re directing it at people who were at the time perceived as cis gay men, that fear of the feminine, that fear of the flamboyancy that was so often depicted in cultural depictions of gay men specifically, was transmisogyny. It was a fear of, being gay is already bad enough, but taking it the step further and being a woman is like even worse. Right? Trying to imitate women, trying to look like women, dress like them, and I’m speaking from the perspective of the hateful person, you know what I mean, it’s just something that now I can recognize. Like, back in the day, we lived through the same shit, we just didn’t say the same things. They didn’t recognize or register why they were as mad as they were at us if that makes sense?

Tuck: Yeah. It’s been interesting because I’ve been working with a bunch of news outlets on reporting on trans kids and, yeah, the framing that they’re using is so ahistorical. But, it also is this really interesting thing where people are suddenly really interested in trans kids but also only this one really specific thing about them which is like, “what will they be doing to their bodies?” And I just can’t imagine how bad it would be to be a kid who is just trying to live and then all of a sudden all of society is like, what will your genitals look like in ten years? It’s like, oh my god! [Laughs]

Joan: Listen, no, I think about it all the time. I think, in many ways, I will say, it was very hard back 10, 15 years ago to recognize I was trans and live with that experience but, in many ways, I certainly relished in the anonymity of the experience, you know? I remember the day that the Caitlyn Jenner cover came out. I was going to a support group later that day, and it was like in a basement community center kind of support group for trans women, and a lot of them were, you know, trans women of all different kinds of experiences, people who self-IDed as cross-dressers or, you know, transsexual women. We had a few women who had lived through the Compton Cafeteria riots and the backlash of that, and who were kind of elders in the community anyways, one of them I think led the group, and it was later that day and the Caitlin Jenner story dropped. In the middle of our meeting, you know, someone’s phone went off and was like, “oh my god, Caitlyn Jenner just came out as trans,” and there was just like this silence in the group, and there was no cheering or no one was really happy. And I just remember this one girl says, she must have been in her 50s, she just says, “Ugh. I only think it’s gonna get worse now because they know who we are.” I remember so specifically the look on her face and the way that she said it, and I was looking at her as this person who lived through the 80s, lived through the 90s, and this thing that was framed in broader culture as a big, historical moment to her was almost like a loss because it was like, oh god, now we can’t close the door. Now the door is open to us, and now everyone is going to know who we are, and I think about that with trans kids. There’s no anonymity for them, especially on the Internet. We have parents doxxing these kids on the Internet that go to their kids’ schools, we have entire reports being written about minors’ genitals and whether they should compete in sports, like, you know, in many ways it was lucky to live in a time when that wasn’t something that people fixated on. At least on the news, maybe behind closed doors.

Tuck: Right, yeah, it wasn’t as widespread. I have also been thinking about this in terms of, like, representation, you know, there’s this constant conversation going on about is representation good or bad and like obviously it’s not binary in that way. But, you know, when you and I came out there wasn’t a ton in the way of hashtag representation and there seems to be this sentiment that millennials and older, when we’re thinking about queer and trans representation, we’re expecting sort of implicit representation where you’re sort of head-cannon-ing someone into being the transsexual or whatever, and then there’s like this new demand from the youth that everything is really explicit and, for me, it’s like very double-edged sword because, on the one hand, it can be really fun to see, you know, a trans character in a show, but it can also be really painful to see the way that trans people are depicted in shows. And similarly, even just in life it’s been really cool to see people, more actors, celebrities, musicians come out as trans. But, it also means celebrity gossip, which is your main focus as a journalist, that now includes gossiping about what someone’s pronouns are, which is like so strange and boring? So I’m just curious sort of what you make of all of that?

Joan: Yeah, no, it’s like, I literally moved to the city to escape Evangelical kitchen gossip about people’s gender and sexuality and I got thrust into a field where that is now the bread and butter of a lot of it. Who’s dating who? Are they gay? Do they have secret boyfriends/girlfriends? Oh, they’re bisexual, but have they ever dated a girl? You know, there’s like so much of it now, and I think that’s such an interesting question. I mean, I would say first, before we answer, we should retreat into a missile proof bunker because there’s no proper way to talk about this! Back in my day, there was definitely that vibe you talked about, where like, I remember playing Final Fantasy 10 and being like Yunalesca is so trans vibes, I love that for her. Or, like, Sephiroth? Trans, you can’t tell me otherwise. Sephiroth is like trans. Cloud is not trans, but Zack is trans. Again, the girls that know will know, and I just think that like part of the fun of the head-cannon-ing era was because we could take parts of ourselves that mattered to us outside of the gender of it all, and imprint that on to someone that we related to, and it was like, Yunalesca’s trans because she’s glamorous, you know, that’s why. It’s like, oh, I wanna be Lara Croft, Tomb Raider because she’s strong and hot and gets to wear leather catsuits, not because she had a conversation with her butler about her estradiol [pronounced ess-TRAY-dee-all] prescription! Like, I just, or estradiol [pronounced ess-truh-DYE-all], let’s not do the “jif”/“gif” thing with estradiol [pronounced ess-TRAY-dee-all].

So yeah, now everything is so much more explicit and, I mean, if I’m being a bitch, which is sort of my thing, I would say that it’s because a lot of young people have been failed by the American education system, but also just generally did not grow up in a world with a lot of importance placed on critical reading skills or critical contextual analysis, skills so, like, things now I think are so literal, and it is almost like a feedback loop where nuanced anything is almost reviled, right? Well like, I don’t want my character to just walk around as like a walking stereotype of gay men, like they have an interesting interlay, is like out the window. They want them walking around as characters of gay men because that’s the only thing that they can understand as what a gay man is like but also the only thing they can relate to because it’s so literal, they don’t have to do the extra work.

And I don’t want to place all the onus on young viewers, because it’s a problem that you have people making film and TV being like, as a queer person, this is what I want to see in the world. But, I think what happens is these people see that that is a form of paying your bills. Not so much now, I think the like I am like a queer, trans person from small-town California, therefore I need a thousand dollars for this, like, panel at this conference, that kind of market is drying up a little bit, especially with our political climate, but for like a good five years, it was something that people made their money doing, and I don’t want to be cynical about it, but I am more cynical when it comes to celebrities. You know, I know a lot of people immediately are thinking of very specific celebrities when I mention like a Fireside Chat about Mental Health and Gender sponsored by Tampax Pearl and like Raytheon. Like, we all had like five celebrities that just sprung to mind, and they’re all names that start with “j.” So interesting how we all thought of the same person! [Tuck laughs] It’s so interesting how we all thought of the same person at the same moment! I just think that that’s like the power of trans people, that we are all connected up there.

So, I do think that those kinds of people spring up, and I’m being cynical, because there’s a market for it, but I also think that a lot of people are forced into it as well, because you’re showing up to casting calls and, I’m not gonna tell anyone’s business, but I have been told this by enough people just because of my line of work that, you know, a lot of people are asked to play up on that too by their agents, casting directors. They believe that is what the market, specifically young people, are wanting, and so you need to be that because then we can sell you. And that’s this very interesting dichotomy we live in where celebrity culture has never been more removed from our everyday lives, because it is not the same for your everyday queer person in American right now, right? My advice is not to show up to your job interview and be like, here’s my pronouns, here’s my gender, I’m trans, and I’m queer, to the everyday person it’s just not as safe to do. I think that’s where I’m most fascinated, in my own podcast we talk about that a lot, that dichotomy and just like the flow of power in this country amongst queer and trans people and where that power comes from and how it gets generated, in Hollywood specifically. It’s like something I think about so much. There’s no, I think, right answer to any of it, because we could say all of this and then tomorrow the government could put out a law saying you’re not allowed to act in movies if you’re gay, and it would be the least surprising thing to happen that day, right? [Tuck laughs] I’ve never wanted to be less definitive in my life.

Tuck: No, totally. I mean, it’s so interesting what you’re saying about how there’s such a huge disconnect between celebrities and everyone else, because I do think that it does seem like they exist in a very different world than everyone else, even just in terms of language that is used, and I’m gonna say this and then everyone’s gonna be like that isn’t true, but I did do Twitter surveys about it, and so I feel 50% confident in it. When I’m looking at celebrities who are not straight, like 98% of them use the word pansexual, and when I’m looking at just day-to-day people who are not straight, like 5% of them use the word pansexual, and I did just make those numbers up, but it stands anyway, I believe in me. And I’m just like where, how is this happening? Like you literally are just like, somehow you’re in this little bubble where everyone’s like, this is the word that we’re using, like my rep said you can’t say queer because it’s a slur, and so I’m just gonna say this. I’m just like, who are you talking to? Like, it’s not bad, it’s not wrong, but it’s just clearly different.

Joan: No, you bring up such a good point though. I think I have maybe devoted like six hours of recorded podcast time to this very thing. [Tuck laughs] Because, listen, this is my favorite thing to say to people. Just because somebody has a microphone does not mean that they are intelligent or smart or know what they are talking about, and, specifically, if someone is in the movies, the chances of them being smart or intelligent does plummet, and I’m not trying to be broad. I’m saying from experience, the chances of a triple-A-list blockbuster star having a nuanced take about trans and queer as both descriptors, ways of living, and political stances decreases significantly. So, like, I think what also happens with the feedback loop is we do live in a society that more than ever places the greatest importance in the cultural voice and in a scope of morality on famous people. Like, people have always paid attention to what the rich, famous, and well-paid-attention-to are doing. We have all of human documented history to prove that very point to us. Gossip has been around as long as humans have been able to speak and form written languages.

But beyond that, I think, more than ever, because of just the nature of the Internet, the nature of mass media, and how congealed information has become into these different sources, people place a lot of importance on what celebrities say because it is literally all that they see all day long. And so, we also have, I think, a generation who was raised by celebrities parroting very manufactured PR and marketing strategies in the media about queerness and transness to their audiences to be palatable but also niche enough to get hired by a studio casting its next Gen-Z blockbuster. [Laughs] So, they’re also political stances that are being informed by mostly white cis men and women in board rooms trying to workshop what the next trans celebrity should have to say at their press conference. That is also now a form of politic that gets disseminated throughout society and the Internet. Like if you scratch at it enough, it’s because all that they listen to are what people on TikTok are telling them or what celebrities that they are obsessed with have said about gender. Like, the amount of people that Harry Styles has led astray just this year, the amount of interpersonal drama in trans peoples’ lives that Harry Styles has caused just this year alone should be tried for crimes. Like, we should put him on trial!

Tuck: So, one of my very best friends is an absolutely unapologetic Harry Styles stan, and so you do need to be very specific in what crimes are we hanging Harry Styles for so that I can defend that I didn’t ask you about it. [Both laugh]

Joan: Yeah, totally valid. I do think that when we do make the grave decision to send someone to the gender gulag, we do have to be sensitive about, you know, explaining our reasons. I think, it’s not necessarily Harry Styles, it’s that the marketing machine around Harry Styles is irksome to me. Right, like, I personally don’t believe that Harry Styles is waking up every morning like, “how can I create gender-related chaos on the Internet?” Like, I think he’s too busy dealing with the very real chaos that Olivia Wilde has brought into his life and that they have created together. Like, I don’t think he wakes up and is like, hm, let me workshop the top five most annoying sexuality-related talking points I can bring out today, but Harry Styles is a person but is also an entire economy, and the economy around Harry Styles, the press, the people, the managers, the tour specialists, and agents, and consultants that get brought on to do his brands, and this swirling, massive capital generation I think is most responsible for the most annoying things that we are seeing come out of the Harry Styles camp. So, I don’t wanna like place it all on him, your friend is valid. I don’t need to cause any more fights than I already have on this podcast, but I just think that sometimes don’t know how to look beyond necessarily the person to the machine around Harry Styles. Even the people asking him, like journalists, asking him and goading him into these questions are all doing so because it is a form of capital generation to know someone’s gender, like we talked about earlier, like it is a way to bring the attention economy to your doorstep. So, I think we also have to interrogate maybe why this is such a frequent topic of conversation around Harry, which I think I just did, but I think rather than just like maybe is Harry Styles an inherently annoying person, and that I think is a longer trial that, you know, we cannot solve here on this specific podcast alone.

Tuck: I mean, I think that actually brings up an interesting question though. So, imagine that you in fact PR for some celebrity, I don’t know why you would get this position, but you have, congratulations. And say this person is like oh, I am trans or I am queer in some way. Do you think there is a way to not make it a cringe-fest to manifest that? I feel like any sort of coming out is strange, any sort of not coming out is strange. Do you think there is just a normal way to be normal about it, or do you think that maybe it’s just impossible for overly perceived people to be normal? [Laughs]

Joan: Oh, no, it is impossible for overly perceived people to be normal. It’s why I have a podcast, because at least there is a very real visual barrier between me and everyone else! [Both laugh] No, okay, this is what I would do though. We are just talking fantasy-realm, this is what I would do, and this would just be it, right? My thing, my bread and butter, is paparazzi photos, because they are so archaic and just dusty-musty as a form of visual communication, but they are so rich with intention, and so what I would do is I would send, let’s see, the name I used to call myself before I settled on Joan was Selene, because of Sailor Moon, ugh, boo, dork, tomato, tomato, um, so we’re just gonna call her Selene who is our new, trans icon, right? She’s starring in a new movie, her love interest is, let’s spin the wheel, oh, Lee Pace. I just saw *Bodies, Bodies, Bodies* so that was the first one that came to mind. Co-Star Lee Pace, they’re in a buddy comedy, I don’t know, they’re stealing a jewel or something. So, she’s on the press tour, and it gets the word out that Selene is trans, someone finds high school photos or, I don’t know, something she wrote in college, and so now the Internet is buzzing. And, as her primary PR consultant, I would tell the studio and Selene, listen, saying anything right now is only going to embolden freaks.

So, this is what we’re going to do. We’re going to let the girls know we see them, we’re going to let them know that we love them and that we care about them and that you’re not just being silent, but, in this political climate, we’re not trying to get you death threats either. Like, we’re not trying to get anyone to mail a bomb to the studio. So, we’re gonna send you to CVS, and you just need to wear some regular clothes, right? And we need you to go into CVS and refill your estradiol prescription. [Tuck laughs] And, we’re gonna say that she’s in California, so the chances that she is on spiro rather than progesterone are very high, so we’re also gonna say we’re gonna refill spiro. Specifically, we want the 180-day refill of spiro. Huge bottle, they give you an extremely large CVS bag when they fill it for you. And so we’re gonna have you walk in and we’re gonna have you walk out, and there’s gonna be a video from TMZ, we’re gonna call TMZ and say you’re showing up to refill some prescriptions, and we want you to just like walk silently out of CVS, but we need you to hold the bag in a way so that the pills are like, rattling so that everyone in your vicinity knows that you’re carrying a bunch of pills. And that’s all. That’s gonna be our statement about it, right, because trans people are gonna watch it and they’re gonna be like, that’s the bag with the 180-day refill of spiro in it. But also, like, we’re not gonna put you in any form of danger right now where we’re gonna get you on a podium, right, because that I think is both emboldening and cringe, and you’re our new hot movie star, right, we want people to be paying attention to your sex scene with Lee Pace, we don’t want people to be paying attention to the fact that you’ve said something corny about being trans. That was what I would do! If that sounds wild or like, maybe someone should hire me! Maybe I’ll just go to marketing next.

Tuck: I love that! It’s also funny that you picked Lee Pace because Lee Pace came out as being a fully married homosexual via the Instagram grid. Right?

Joan: Exactly! Exactly, like we’re really crossing gender boundaries here. [Both laugh]

Tuck: I love that. Well, we were talking a lot about how like this thing in media is wrong, this is not getting it right, but I’m curious if making what is in many ways a media criticism podcast, does that influence the way that you make media or you communicate in the world. Are you seeing trends and being like “oh, I certainly don’t want to do that”?

Joan: Yeah, oh boy! No, you know, we have a rule on the podcast. So, I’ve been doing a podcast for, like you said, Eating for Free been around for a few years now, but before we used to do the thing, and I think it was because we were so angry about the world around us, and we were reporting a lot on the Me Too crisis and just a lot of things that we were so just like rage-inducing, especially for queer and trans people in the beginning, and so I would fall in the trap of being so immediately angry and mad and, like, we have to talk about this today. Like, I need to shoot my opinion off the second we get home and record this episode. But now I think something that I have really fallen back on has been really actually taking time to be really measured about things. We just did an episode about *Don’t Worry Darling* and the press tour and what we really believe was happening, contrary to what the public narrative was, and we waited like two weeks after everything happened to do that episode and, you know, you’re missing out on the viralness of that immediate click but we also just wanted to take our time with it. Because watching other people in the media make I think far worse mistakes, especially celebrities. You know, we see a lot with celebrities like, something that we used to talk about a lot, was like the celebrities defending friends accused of Me Too crimes, and someone would get accused of something, sexual impropriety or harassment or violence, and suddenly all their friends are like, I’ve never known him to be a bad person ever ever ever. And then, like, three hours later, the story drops with the evidence or the photos or the video or whatever and then you look like a fool because you just rushed to give your two cents before actually taking a beat break.

But on a more personal level, I also think that I have learned to accept things at face value and stop looking for the hidden meaning in everything that people say. You know, rather than trying to find any hidden meaning like, oh, they’re saying they’re not queer but they were seen with this guy and they follow this person, you know, that’s an easy trap to fall into and I think it is a form of true crime brain that we haven’t yet invented medicine for. But I have stopped trying to decode things, and if you’re telling me something, I’m much more interested in why you’re telling me rather than what you’re actually trying to say, right? Like, the people behind you, who they are, what their capital interests are, what the studio’s trying to do with the movie that just flopped that you were in, you know? I think that that is just something I’ve learned a lot through having a media criticism podcast because, you know, if I’m falling into the traps I’m criticizing, then no one would be listening to me, and how would I pay my bills? [Both laugh]

Tuck: You mentioned union organizing in your bio. We had union organizing week earlier in this season, but I think we should keep it going. And so, I wanted to ask you about the organizing you’ve done. I read some tweets you were writing about how your company at one point held everyone’s healthcare hostage until trans people said, like, I guess we won’t have healthcare anymore?

Joan: Oh, yes.

Tuck: That was something that I was really interested in, because it actually sounded even worse than the Starbucks thing of “we’ll take trans healthcare away because too many trans people are organizing.” [Laughs] So, yeah, anyway, I’m just interested in that specifically and your experience in general.

Joan: Yeah! I have broadly organized digital media for the last couple years. Actually, my very first job I got out of college was in a warehouse at a company I can’t legally name, but I did try to organize a union there. And we basically lost the union drive and then I was told that basically everyone would get fired if I kept pressing the issue, and so I got a job in media, and I was so passionate about what we were doing. I worked at Jezebel, which was this supposedly feminist website. So, I was very lucky to become one of the reps for Jezebel, and then later the chair of the GMG union, which was basically a ceremonial title. It wasn’t a position of power purely outside of the ceremony of being the one to lead the meetings and whatnot. But, in that, something that came up frequently was, there was a few trans people at the company who had healthcare but it wasn’t very expansive healthcare. We didn’t have voice training covered, we didn’t have FFS or hormones were also expensive, I mean my prescriptions were like $50 each and, at that point, they were a 30-day prescription, so I was spending a lot of money on hormones and whatnot. So, I had worked at companies where there was no trans healthcare and then I had had one very brief job that I never had healthcare for where they had everything covered including breast augmentation, voice training, hair removal, the works, FFS, and so I thought, well there has to be more that we could do. Like, we were the first digital shop to organize and this should be a talking point because I know that other companies have gone through similar shake-ups, like Vice had gone through this as well. And so I was like this is probably something that is probably like an issue beyond just us, but if we can get this to happen, we can be the start of it, we can show other people how to do it.

We started organizing during Pride Month of 2020, so it was the pandemic at that point, and at first we just kind of framed an open letter that I drafted and had the majority of the union sign and we presented it to the company and it was like, hey, this is what our demands are and our demands were just like basic W-Path guidelines, which we didn’t even meet at that point. And, they ignored us for like three months, and so we escalated. I commissioned different trans journalists to write testimonials about the way that healthcare affects them and their ability to do their jobs. I drafted one of these as well, and then we had ally testimonials. We published this huge, comprehensive letter, both on the Internet and we sent it to every single equity partner in our broader parent company, Great Hill, and that was ignored. And, our healthcare open enrollment was coming in November, and it came and went, and we didn’t hear anything about healthcare at all, not just the trans stuff. And the union started to have backdoor meetings with management about what it was that we wanted. They gave us the run-around, right, it was like, oh, well we asked, and our healthcare provider said that they cover these things, and it was like, no they don’t, tell them this specific code, right, and we got codes, like individual medical codes, for all of this that I had done all this research spending months and months compiling.

And, so, we still didn’t hear anything about anybody’s insurance, including our non-trans colleagues, and, by the end of December, we were presented with what the company called its solution. The solution was, we could either raise everyone’s prices about 300% or we could stay on the same plan and not get trans healthcare and raise everyone’s prices by about 100%. The company was, these are your only two options, you basically screw everybody, and they framed it this way too, you can screw everybody and give this couple of people who need this stuff what they need, or we can screw everybody and the very few people that need these procedures just don’t get them, which was like the shittiest feeling in the world, right? Part of me at that moment felt like, oh my god, what have I done? Now I am playing with everybody’s healthcare, not just the 5 of us, 6 of us, 7 of us, however many it was, and so I had to go to the union and I had to have a community-wide union meeting with you know over 100 people in which I had to ask, like, as the trans person who had started all of this, as the person who was currently working through a GoFundMe to even get my own shit covered, you know, begging for money on the Internet again to get everything I needed, and I’m trying to get this thing and I had to ask people like, which option are we going to choose?

You know, and I knew what the answer was before I even ever had meetings with both my individual newsroom or the greater union. I knew what the answer was. But, you know, to have to be one of the trans people in that meeting, and not everyone knew who the trans people were in those meetings, because not everyone was out at work. I was just one of the people where I was like, my beat is being the only trans writer at Jezebel, like everyone already knows so I can take this on as the face. It was kind of the worst experience of my professional life to have to listen to people be like, well, do we really need to get these covered, like is it really that important to get what you need? That was basically the gist of that conversation. And there were certainly allies, people who felt very strongly about if we have to take this raise, we’re in this as a union together, like I don’t want to say that it was an overwhelmingly bad experience, but the very nature of debating my, like, right to hormones or my right to have my medical procedures covered that were both gender-affirming and life-saving, for myself and for my coworkers who were also going through this, to have to debate that with our coworkers, whether or not we were allowed to have it was the worst, and the company knew that they were doing a form of union-busting in this, right? Like, the real tactic was to divide us, to make us mistrust each other, to make people mistrustful of trans peoples’ ambitions. You know, there were certainly people who felt very strongly that we were rocking the boat, like, how dare you make this an issue, look at us now, we’re gonna lose our healthcare because trans people tried to make a fuss about this. I never wanted to do this anyways.

So, we ended up taking the less expensive but still more expensive than what we had option and, you know, in a meeting after the fact, I was told by the then-head of HR, in no uncertain terms, that all of it was my fault and that I should have, you know, sat with what I had done by raising everyone’s health insurance prices because I had caused the company to delay so much that, you know, they had no choice but to raise prices. I lost it on them in a meeting that I thankfully got a recording of, because it was a sense of satisfaction for me, and I basically, in no uncertain terms, told them to fuck themselves, that they would have to live with what they had done for the rest of their lives, you know, putting all of us through this, and that I hoped they all suffered and choked. [Laughs] And, you know, I’m saying all this through like rage tears in a union meeting. I was really going through it, but I really do like that everyone on the committee was happy that at least I had gone there with them because, at that point, I knew I was quitting, this was months later, and after the whole experience I was like I can’t fucking do this anymore. I need to go, this is too much. And so, I took my little GoFundMe money and I got my boobs and my body done and I fucked off after telling the leaders of that company to go fuck themselves. So, it had a slightly happy ending if not a fulfilling ending. [Tuck laughs] I do just also want to append all of that by saying, that was all a paraphrase, right? If anyone’s lawyers ever get mad at me for talking about this, I have the transcripts of what they really said. But I think we could just let it lie as it is!

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

Joan: I could tell people that I identify as Lara Croft Tomb Raider and that is the future of gender for me. No, in a more literal sense, the future of gender is a world where I can tweet that I’m a transsexual woman without some 18 year old getting mad at me because I’m describing myself with a slur. [Laughs]

[Theme music plays]

Tuck: That’s gonna do it for this week’s show. If you had a good time or learned something, please share this episode with a friend or leave us a review on Apple Podcasts or Spotify or Lex, you know, wherever. You can find Joan @laracroftbarbie. You can find her show, Eating for Free, wherever you’re listening to this podcast right now. You can also support her work on Patreon which is at patreon.com/eatingforfree. We are of course on Twitter and Instagram @gendereveal, I am on Twitter @tuckwoodstock and on Instagram @tuckwoodstockjr. We’re also at genderpodcast.com where the transcripts of our show live. We’ve got merch available for just a few more days at bit.ly/gendermerch. Order by Wednesday if you want it delivered by Christmas. And, speaking of delivery times, is the transition I wrote, sure, we’re on Patreon at patreon.com/gender where you can get a newsletter every week, a bonus podcast every month, and a bunch of Gender Reveal stickers someday. This episode was 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.

[Music ends]

Tuck: And then I heard on DeuxMoi… [Laughs]

Joan: Oh god, yeah, that’s our other rule, no DeuxMoi. DeuxMoi is not a source. We have a firm no DeuxMoi standpoint. I know the publicists that are sending client information to DeuxMoi, so I would never, I would never trust anything they say.