**Episode 138: Lehuauakea**

Tuck: Do you find yourself funding evil billionaires’ rocket ships every time you buy books? Check out Bluestockings Cooperative Bookstore in New York City or online at bluestockings.com to support a trans-owned, worker-owned, radical community space that’s bursting with great books, free Narcan trainings, free Plan B, free Covid tests, and delicious one-dollar coffee.

[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.

[Theme music fades out]

Tuck: Hey, everyone. Hope you’re all hanging in there. This week on the show, I am excited to share my conversation with Lehuauakea. Lehua is a native Hawaiian artist and kapa-maker. In this episode, we talk about Native Hawaiian gender concepts, how you and I can support Hawaiian sovereignty and prosperity…

Lehua: And you’re just saying, well, my vacation is more important than your survival.

Tuck: And the perils of being a queer, brown artist in a straight, white art world…

Lehua: A group of three white women backed me up into a corner with a bunch of La Croix.

Tuck: Lehuauakea is a visual artist and, after listening, I really encourage you to follow the links in the show notes and look at examples of their work so you know what we’re talking about. But first, two exciting announcements! First, we’ve got a live show coming up on February 1st at the Bell House in Brooklyn. It features Danny Lavery, Sabrina Imbler, Mattie Lubchansky, AC Dumlao…maybe more people, we’ll find out! There’s a link in the show notes to buy tickets for that show. There’s also a five-minute bonus episode from last week in the feed if you want more info. Equally as importantly, it has come to my attention that we were voted one of the five best podcasts of 2022 by a poll of 10,000 users of the gay hookup app Grindr. I had no idea that we were beloved by the people of Grindr, but it is unironically one of the proudest moments of my entire career, and I am declaring myself the podcast prince of the faggots! So, to any of you who voted for us, thank you so much for this, the highest honor that I have ever received. And now, it’s time for This Week in Gender.

[Music plays and stops]

Tuck: This week in gender, I do have a treat for y’all, but first you’ve gotta let me say, like, a boring statistics thing. So, in last week’s segment, we talked about changing gender markers on driver’s licenses, and specifically we got really into the weeds about whether it’s feasible that 16,000 Texans changed their gender marker from F to M or M to F in the last two years. As that episode was coming out, I learned about some interesting data out of California, which says that in the three years that California has offered X markers on their IDs, 16,000 people have received X gender markers. That’s out of a population of forty million people. That, to me, makes the Texas number plausible, although still, who knows, and also who cares? But a little fun fact while we’re here. Out of those 16,000 people who got an X marker in California, 10,000 were younger than 30, another 4,000 were in their 30s, and only 7 were over the age of 80. So, I gotta say, shout out to those 7 octogenarians with X gender markers. I don’t know if any of you listen to the podcast, but you are all invited onto the podcast if you hear this.

Anyway, I bring this all up to say that this week, we’ve got one story about the trials and tribulations of one person changing their license gender marker. This story comes from friend of the show Rosemary, who you might remember as the girl who got a sword as part of her name change process. If you haven’t heard that story yet, go back to our season opener with Cat Fitzpatrick, because today’s week in gender segment picks up right where that one left off. Here’s Rosemary.

Rosemary: Hi Tuck. It’s Rosemary again. I just wanted to give you an update on my name change saga. Um, I got my sword, and I was ready to go to the DMV. I turned in all my paperwork, all of the requisite name and gender marker change paperwork, an application for an ID, many, many notarized documents, I paid the nominal fee, and I waited a few weeks to receive my ID in the mail. And, when I did, it still had the wrong goddamn gender on it. For all the world, on this ID, I looked like a poorly-lit woman, and yet, my gender marker said M. So, I called the DMV, I navigated their phone tree, and, when someone finally picked up, oddly enough, it was a DHS agent, which is strange. I had to explain for this person working for the Department of Homeland Security what my situation was and she sighed deeply many times. That was fun and cool. There were a lot of hand over the mouthpiece conversations with various other people on her side. What she told me is you may have to go back into a DMV field office, you may have to go back to the DMV, and my grip tightened on the hilt of my sword, and I told her verbatim, I would rather die. And she said, let me see what I can do. So, in about ten minutes and some more hushed conversations, she managed to get my ID fixed. She made me promise to destroy my old ID as soon as I got the new one. So, I waited another few weeks. I finally got my new ID. The picture’s still bad, but it does say F under gender. And I destroyed my old ID with my sword. So, that’s nice to have. I guess the moral of the story is never give up, and don’t be afraid to threaten your own death to the DMV, or the DHS. I’m not sure that’s a very good lesson, but there it is.

Tuck: This has been This Week in Gender.

[Music plays and fades out]

Tuck: New Year’s is right around the corner, and if you are still looking for a New Year’s resolution, may I suggest resolving to make yourself less doxxable by removing your personal information from data broker sites? Do you know about data broker sites? There are like hundreds of sites that just have everyone’s names, phone numbers, addresses, lists of family members, all the stuff that you do not want floating around on the Internet. Okay, that wasn’t an ad, but this part is an ad. DeleteMe makes it super easy to get all of that information taken down from hundreds of sites at once. All you have to do is sign up at joindeleteme.com, and you can even use the promo code Tuck20 for 20% off your annual membership. I use DeleteMe, I’ve been using it for more than a year, way before this sponsorship started, and I was really excited when they reached out to offer me this promo code, so I do encourage you to take them up on it. Just go to joindeleteme.com and use promo code Tuck20.

[Theme music plays]

Tuck: Lehuauakea is a māhū native Hawaiian artist and cultural practitioner, originally from Pāpa‘ikou on the Big Island of Hawaii and now based in New Mexico, their work addresses themes of mixed Indigenous identity, diasporic communities, and cultural reclamation.

[Theme music ends]

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

Lehua: Yeah, in terms of gender, I describe myself as māhū or mahuwahine. For us, in Native Hawaiian, māhū is a, it can kind of be translated to a third gender identity or something outside the binary. It can also be translated as someone in the middle, and so in our culture we have kane and wahine, masculine and feminine energies and roles that fill our society and kind of govern what responsibilities we have to offer to the whole. And there’s some fluidity within that depending on who you are and what it is but, generally speaking, kane and wahine are kind of the two. You know, it’s a little bit binary in that way, but we have also honored individuals that were fluid within that and we called them māhū. Today, that can be defined as anything kind of under the LGBTQ+ umbrella. In a lot of other Indigenous cultures on Turtle Island, you’ll hear the word two-spirit, and they define that in a really similar way to how we define māhū. Mahuwahine is someone who defines themself as non-binary or māhū but with the form or the energy of more feminine characteristics, and that is, again, very specific to the individual. We’re very fluid in those definitions. I think there’s a little bit lost in translation if I were to just define myself as nonbinary, and so I definitely resonate more with māhū, just because there’s so many more nuances to that. It also speaks to the kuleana, or the responsibilities that I have to myself, to my community, and to my family.

Tuck: Yeah, can you actually talk more about those responsibilities?

Lehua: Yeah, of course. Traditionally speaking, before we were colonized, māhū held very specific and special roles within our communities because they were able to walk between gendered worlds. The boundaries that were usually placed on cisgender people were not necessarily the same for māhū individuals. And this is kind of similar to what you see throughout a lot of different parts of Polynesia where our cousins adopt similar roles, so, for us, māhū had very important roles as spiritual leaders and teachers, priests, healers, medicine people, as cultural practitioners, people who dance hula, and all of these things were very very spiritually bound. We see māhū individuals as people who are very in tune with not only one side of binary energy, but all energies within that spectrum. And so, as a contemporary kapa-maker living in a post-colonial world, I embrace both sides of the process of making kapa. So, you have one side that is typically kept for wahine or women. Oh yeah, I should also say, for those who might not be familiar, kapa is a traditional bark cloth that is specific to Hawaii, that term specifically, but different bark clothes are seen all around the world, especially within the Pacific Rim and parts of Africa and South America, what is now considered those areas. And so, that’s what I do, and as a kapa-maker, it would typically be reserved for women, the beading part. However, the tool-making and the carving was seen as a task that the men were able to do within the scope of their other responsibilities. And so, those lines were kept pretty divided so that the community could keep functioning as a whole, and māhū, it’s, I haven’t come across anything that documents their fluidity moving within those two spheres of this practice, but I believe that they would have been able to take on both. So, for myself and my practice, I embrace not only the beading part of the cloth, but also the tool making, the decorative pattern work that you put on at the very end, and kind of everything in between. Because I am in between, so being who I am and how I identify, I think that pushed me to not only make kapa but also want to make the tools and kind of intentionally look at all the different roles that I’m kind of playing out while I’m doing that.

Tuck: Yeah, I was reading a conversation that you were having with another Hawaiian artist in a magazine, and the other artist, whose name I did not write down unfortunately, said you can look at a finished kapa and marvel at how wonderful it is but, if you haven’t seen the hard labor that went into making it, then you might not fully understand how special it is. And, you responded in part, it’s like looking at the tip of the iceberg without seeing the huge mass that lies underneath the surface.

Lehua: Mmm-hmm.

Tuck: This is a podcast so we can’t show visuals, but I will link in the show notes and people can look at the art, but clearly that is just the tip of the iceberg. Can you say more about the rest of that iceberg that we miss?

Lehua: Oh, it’s like a huge iceberg. [Both laugh] It’s like so much, so much, but it doesn’t feel insurmountable with the work of the community that is coming together to make sure that this practice is alive and well and is perpetuated for the next seven generations and beyond. But, you know, going back to first contact in the late 1700s, you know, these colonizers came upon our shores and saw what they deemed as primitives or savages, my ancestors, wearing these garments made out of bark cloth and you know covered in tattoos and walking barefoot, walking around topless, walking around with, you know, their kids at their feet and just thinking like, oh, we need to help them, they’re so savage, like look at their garments, they’re so primitive. And, you know, that couldn’t be further from the truth. And, you know, this information made its way back to Europe and they sent more ships and more expeditions our way and eventually the missionaries came in the 1820s. By that point, Hawaiians were eager in a lot of ways to embrace the new things like new kinds of cloth, new tools, new weapons, guns, and they couldn’t have necessarily had the foresight that we have now in hindsight to see how that would lead to the destruction and erasure of a lot of our cultural practices.

That was really when a lot of the indoctrination and erasure started, and by the mid 1800s, roughly 25, 30 years later, you see almost a complete eradication of kapa-making. You still see the tools, but for the most part, Hawaiian communities had moved on to wearing Western imported cloth like cotton and linen and things like that, and so it was largely assumed that kapa-making wasn’t necessary anymore. And it wasn’t just the clothing that we would use this for. We would use it for our ancestors who had passed on, we would use it for our newborns who just made it into this world and that’s the first cloth that they ever touched. We’d use it for bedding and also for ceremonial purposes and for wrapping and so it was really a huge part of everyday life, and, all of a sudden, after generations and generations, hundreds of generations of doing this, it was suddenly gone. And so, being able to bring that back is not easy, and that’s kind of a large part of the iceberg, you know, recognizing that this practice was nearly lost, at least in Hawaii, and if it weren’t for a few dedicated practitioners back in the 60s, 70s, and 80s, one of whom is my primary teacher now, we wouldn’t be able to do the work that we’re doing today. I wouldn’t be able to sit here and talk about these things.

Tuck: Yeah. I want to talk a lot more about your art, but this actually sort of brings us back to this last question I had about gender and everything you talked about at the beginning which is, a lot of folks that we’ve talked about on this show who talk about different Indigenous concepts of gender, they had to seek that knowledge out personally once they started having what we might describe as queer or trans feelings in their lives. It wasn’t something that was taught to them as a kid because those concepts had been lost in colonization or sort of repressed actively by colonizers. I was wondering if everything you shared at the beginning, if that’s something that you’ve known since you were a kid growing up in Hawaii or if that was something that you had to seek out later in life?

Lehua: Yeah, it was definitely something that I sought out later in life. You know, growing up back home, I had the privilege of going to Kamehameha Schools, which is a school founded by Bernice Pauahi Bishop, who believed in the perpetuation of the Hawaiian people as a race, and, to this day, this school gives preference of admission to Native Hawaiian youth, and so I was, while I was there I learned a lot about our language, our culture, who we are as Kamehameha but there was kind of like a weird, ironic tension because it was very hardcore Protestant…

Tuck: Oh!

Lehua: ...and so were a lot of our ali’i, our monarchs, and so it gives you this weird feeling, even though I couldn’t articulate it as a kid, I was like, why are we paying respect to these religious ideals that literally took our strength away from us as a Hawaiian nation, that was used as a tool to colonize our people? And my family was and still very much is very Christian and very patriotic to America, and meanwhile they sent me to this Hawaiian school. So, very confused growing up. [Tuck laughs] There was a lot of stigma spoken about in my family regarding kind of, like, everything, but religious expectations, political expectations, cultural expectations. I love my family and they’re very loving people, but they’re also very opinionated, and I grew up around that, and with that came very strongly held opinions about sexuality and gender identity and even the term māhū.

When I was growing up in school, us kids we just thought it was a funny word to call a trans person, you know, similar to how a lot of slang growing up is just thrown around without much thought or care or even scoldings from adults because those stigmas were rooted so generations-deep after basically the coming of the missionaries. You know, they saw our māhū individuals amongst everyone else, but they saw the māhū as something that needed to be stopped. And that’s really when you see the sudden ceasing of traditional māhū roles within our culture, and so a lot of us are trying to bring that back today. But again, with that iceberg, there’s that whole multi-generation deep thoughts and judgements and stigma about who we are.

Tuck: Mmm-hmm. I was just in a coffee shop right before we started recording this interview, and there was a white barista working and they were talking loud enough that just everyone could hear them in the otherwise quiet coffee shop, and I was thinking about this interview and then this barista says, yeah, my mom just moved to Hawaii. She went on vacation there and then she was like….

Lehua: Noooooo.

Tuck: ...maybe I’ll move there, and it’s so funny because, no, I was already going to ask you, I just feel like I, as someone who’s completely outside this, I’m a very black-and-white thinker and I’m like, I thought we weren’t going to Hawaii. Why are people still going to Hawaii? So I was wondering as someone who actually has a lot of personal insight to this, can we talk about people continuing to travel to Hawaii, people continuing to move to Hawaii, what your feelings are on all of that?

Lehua: Oh my gosh. How do I even begin? It’s such a huge topic! In regards to people moving there, I mean, there’s so many of our own people who are homeless on their own ancestral homelands. And, for myself and so many others, we’re just like, no more people moving here until our own people are housed and taken care of and can support themselves on our own lands. You know, if our lands hadn’t been taken from us, we wouldn’t be in this situation today where over half the population of houseless folks are Native Hawaiians. Why is that? There’s a very calculated and systemic reason as to why, whether it’s people moving there or even just vacationing, there’s a lot that goes along with that.

I mean, just on a very basic level, Hawaii is an island. We’re not a continent where things can be easily trucked in, flown in, shipped, you know, it’s a mission to get the resources, the food, the gasoline that is required for a certain standard of living on an island and when you have things like Maui County prohibiting water usage to their own residents while hotels and golf courses and waterparks are allowed to use as much water as they want, it really puts an emphasis on who the state prioritizes, and clearly they’re putting a lot of value on the visitors, the tourists, over their own people, and a lot of that being Hawaiians or people of Native Hawaiian ancestry. On Oahu, we still have jet fuel in our water, and that was because of the whole military industrial complex not taking care of their own messes. And they continue to do so. Just the other day, they were absent at a remediation meeting to discuss the problem of the aquifer that they polluted. And this was the largest aquifer, if not the largest, one of the largest aquifers on the island of Oahu, serving so much of the population. And that’s the most populated island, and our people, especially young kids and infants, are getting sick because there’s jet fuel in their water.

We would not be in this position if Hawaiians were still in charge of managing our own lands. And it’s just such a complicated issue, you know? When we have people coming to visit, at this point, I really don’t think it’s just ignorance for the sake of ignorance, not knowing anything, I think it’s willful at this point, because people, there’s so much going on about our water rights, pollution, issues with even just access to our own lands, that you can’t see these things and just turn a blind eye. If you’re turning a blind eye, it’s willful ignorance and you’re still choosing to come to a place where our own Native people are struggling, and you’re just saying well, my vacation is more important than your survival. And I have so much to say about it, but yeah, that’s the basic about it. [Tuck laughs]

Tuck: I mean I’m happy to hear anything you want to say. I think it’s really important, and I don’t mean to make you the spokesperson for all of Hawaii, but I do want to ask you, besides not moving to Hawaii, not going on vacation to some resort in Hawaii, what are ways that the rest of us can support Hawaiian sovereignty and just the livability of Hawaii for Native Hawaiians from here, from not Hawaii?

Lehua: I mean there’s so many different ways, but just about you not wanting to put me in a position of the spokesperson, the one person who can speak of, I totally respect and appreciate that. At the same time, I have an opportunity and a platform to be able to talk about these things, a lot of which are painful or difficult to articulate for a lot of Hawaiian people, and any way that I can represent and share our stories in a truthful, real way is part of my responsibility as an artist with this kind of platform, who is able to speak in a way that’s palatable and understandable to a wider audience, as unfortunate as that may be.

And so, what we can do to support Native Hawaiian sovereignty, which is on multiple different levels, multiple different definitions of what it means to be sovereign. For one, don’t do your vacation here! [Tuck laughs] Ask yourself why, why do you think Hawaii is the place for your destination wedding? Why do you think we are in this position where Hawaii is the postcard image of paradise? Why do you think that is? Why do you think that has been advertised since the early 1900s? Why do you think we have been exoticized as Native people across the Pacific as warm, loving, beautiful, exotic young Natives? And really think about that before you buy your ticket. On the other hand, support Native organizations. If you do come, say you have to come for a work meeting, if you don’t go, you’re going to get fired or something, we don’t want that!

Tuck: This common situation in which we simply must go to Hawaii, but yeah, go ahead!

Lehua: Oh dang, we must go!

Tuck: You’re being very generous! [Laughs]

Lehua: If we have to be in that position, give back to our people. You know, most of the tourist dollars, things spent at fancy restaurants or hotels and resorts, all that money is not going back into our communities. Our people often have to work two, three, sometimes even more jobs to make ends meet with the rising cost of living. The average cost of a home in Hawaii in the last year or two finally rose above a million dollars.

Tuck: Wow.

Lehua: How attainable is that, not just for the average person, but for the average Hawaiian who makes much less than that a year? That’s just crazy to me, and that’s one of the reasons that our people are so highly represented in the houseless population. So, do something to serve the land back home. Do a beach cleanup. Learn about our fish ponds and what we’re doing to restore those ancestral ways of food gathering and food cultivation. Volunteer your time at a tarot patch, the staple crop of our people. Learn about the people and give your, if you’re gonna come, give your dollars where it counts, to the people who are actually making Hawaii, Hawaii. Without aloha, you know, the true meaning of aloha, not the postcard, tourist, commodified version, without aloha you wouldn’t have Hawaii. I think, just think critically about the implications and the long term impact of your actions, you know, perpetuating this idea that you can come to Hawaii, enjoy, take a few pictures for Instagram and then go back home. There’s people that live there that are dealing with the impacts and aren’t able to leave.

So, you know, other ways. Tell your friends, teach them. You know, there’s a really great account on Instagram called Āina Momona, I believe they’re an actual organization that puts a lot of really simple but straight-to-the-point infographics about our issues. Not only the jet fuel poisoning at Red Hill, but why it’s not helpful to come to Hawaii during this time or ever, you know. [Tuck laughs] And, you know, they’re really great, and we can link that in the show notes, or you know, just support Native Hawaiian artists, musicians, cultural workers. There’s so many different ways.

Tuck: Mmm-hmm. At the very beginning of your last answer, you said something about being palatable, for better or for worse, and I was actually thinking about this interview that you did with Street Roots, shout out, we love Street Roots, and you were asked the most challenging part of your work and you said probably keeping up with or trying to balance what I want to do personally as an artist versus what other people perceive me to be and want from me. And obviously I can guess what that means, but I was wondering if you wanted to speak more about the challenges of being a Native Hawaiian artist, and I assume that gets you pigeon-holed or exoticized in some way, and how you’re able to keep your art and your work like what you actually want to do?

Lehua: Yeah. Definitely pigeon-holed. I mean, what comes to mind first is, you know, earlier this year, I was at the closing reception for a show I was in with three other artists, Indigenous artists, at the Portland Art Museum in Portland, Oregon. It was an amazing exhibition, and as many of you probably know, Portland is demographically the whitest city in the so-called US, and that is not an accident when you look at Oregon history. And today, you know, the people that are large museum patrons and donors and members are, for the most part, white, and pretty much the only brown people who were at this reception were the people I invited and the people that the three other artists in the show invited and, after the fact, I was bombarded by a group of three white women, elder white women, who just had to ask me a bunch of questions. You know, their words, we just have to ask, um…

Tuck: [Laughs] They always simply have to ask!

Lehua: Right? Do you really? But do you really? Not to mention that before they even started asking me their questions, they kind of surrounded me, backed me up into a corner with a bunch of La Croix, and I’m just standing there, trying to get a cookie or something…

Tuck: Not the La Croix!

Lehua: ...not the La Croix! And they’re just like hi, are you Lehuauakea, and I’m like oh, god, uh, yes, I am! And they are just going on and on about how they appreciate my work and just have to ask me like, so, what is the terminology around kapas, like is it tapa, is it kapas? Like what is it?

Tuck: [Laughs] What?

Lehua: And I’m just like, mmmm. Meanwhile, they’re just so close, like two feet away from me, and I’m like Covid, social distancing. And one of them actually got so close that they spat on my black clothes that I was wearing. They had spat on the black and it wouldn’t come off after! I couldn’t wash it off! [Tuck laughs] And so this is what it means to be an artist, especially if you’re queer and brown out there, beware. Beware the white donors. It was an experience and, you know, just people like that just fully exoticizing you and putting you on this pedestal as, like, this paradise Native who’s here and we’re here to learn all about them, and that was one of the more stark examples of that kind of thing. I mean, a lot of the time it’s great and wonderful and I’m able to do so much for my community and represent us in a very positive way that hasn’t yet been done. But yeah, you do encounter things like that a lot.

Tuck: Yeah. God. I mean, having lived in Portland for almost ten years, it truly does not surprise me one bit, but it’s still horrific. But I think, speaking of all of this, I have seen you talk in other places about boundaries you have around your work and how you don’t necessarily always share the meaning behind your patterns, because not everyone needs to know, not everyone has the right to know. I was curious if those boundaries are something that came naturally to you or something that you needed to learn through the process of being an artist and having people literally spit on you, which I cannot get over! [Laughs]

Lehua: You know, when I was younger, going to a Hawaiian Christian school where I’m one of three daughters, I’m the eldest, and we were all told to be good, be sweet, just behave. I grew up in a culture of people-pleasing and I think, as a lot of older siblings probably resonate with, I felt like I was kept to much higher standards of meeting and exceeding expectations and getting the best grades, answering to people, people-pleasing, all that kind of stuff. And so, once I started being an independent artist and finally doing art full-time over the last few years, I realized that was not gonna help me at all. Not only will it not help me as an artist in general in this industry, but also as a brown, queer, femme-embodied person, that is not gonna be helpful. And so I really had to look at the way I was raised and see how that was making me give more of myself than I actually could or should. Like at the same Portland Art Museum closing reception thing, I got questions about can you talk about the spirituality or mysticism behind your work? I’m like, what?

Tuck: [Laughs] Oh no, yeah.

Lehua: Like in a crowd of like a couple hundred people, like this is definitely not the time and you’re definitely not the person, like we need to have boundaries about who can ask us certain questions and what answers we can provide to which audiences. And as Native people, so much has been taken from us and continues to be taken from us, exploited, and once I became aware of articulating this, I didn’t want to be a part of the perpetuation of that and that exploitation. And so, you know, I think it’s easy to romanticize what I do. People view me as the brown Native who is bringing back this “lost art,” without really knowledge about who I am or where I come from or the history of kapa. So yeah, it’s a lot. But I’m trying, and I think I’m learning along the way, it’s something that you just kind of get better and better at over time. It’s never gonna be perfect, there’s always gonna be things that you can draw your boundaries better with.

And, over the last couple years, as my work as basically exploded, I would have never imagined the opportunities that I’m getting, now just a couple years out of college, it’s quite literally insane to me. As someone who has chronically played myself small, I’m realizing that’s not gonna work anymore. That’s not what I have to be, not that I ever had to be anything, but for myself, defining what that means for me, I’m finally able to do that and have a vision of what I need and what I can offer. And I think as Indigenous practitioners and artists, that’s something that we, it’s very tenuous. It’s not easy to do.

Tuck: Well, as your work has exploded, you have been traveling around quite a bit, which I imagine is difficult given how your work is so deeply connected to the Earth and your environment and requires a lot of tools and resources, and I was just curious how much the composition of your work reflects the place it’s physically made in? Like, if you’re using the same materials regardless of where you are or if you’re taking materials from the places that you’re in physically when you’re making your work?

Lehua: That’s a good question. Most of the wauke that I work with, the tree bark that I need to make the bark cloth, is sustainably grown and harvested back home in Hawaii.

Tuck: Right.

Lehua: And so, I get that when I’m back home with my teacher, Uncle Wesley Sen. He’s one of the practitioners I mentioned earlier who brought this back during the Hawaiian Renaissance. And, in terms of the pigments and paints that I use, I don’t think it necessarily speaks to where a specific work was made necessarily, but more so where I’ve been as an Indigenous person in transit. You know, like you mentioned before, I’ve traveled around so much in the last few years, and next year’s gonna be even more with a couple shows in Australia, which is a first for me. And so, you know, the pigments speak to different lands that I’ve spent time in, I’ve built relationships in, not only with people but also with the land itself. A lot of my pigments do come from what is now called Oregon, and that’s also where I was born, and so there’s a lot of my personal history that is reflected within the colors that I use. But, you know, larger than just myself, the movement of Native Hawaiian people in the Pacific Northwest throughout history, and I think that’s really beautiful because I’m just a small piece of that puzzle. And, you know, we’re historically and today still an ocean, navigating, way-finding people, and our people made it all the way up into Alaska, even down in what’s considered South America. There’s DNA research about that as well. And so, the work that I do, it speaks to place but in a broader sense, because we are talking about a contemporary diaspora.

Tuck: So many of the things you’re talking about in this podcast and things you talk about generally I feel ties back to the past and also the future, talking about generations before you and generations to come, and I was curious just how you think about the future world that your grandchildren might inhabit? Because, I think a lot of people right now are having a hard time having faith that our world will still be here in several generations, but I also think that Native people, Indigenous people specifically, are much better at not thinking the world will end in a generation. My friend Tish, who's been on the show a couple times, was like, yes, the world is always ending for us, so I don’t feel like it’s different now then it has been before. So, I was just curious how you think about the future and the world that future generations will be in.

Lehua: Yeah, I definitely resonate with that idea that there’s always some kind of end happening within our world, especially where we’re at right now, there’s so many things going on. But, as Native people, we have been here since time immemorial and we will continue to be here because our cultures are not necessarily rooted in one thing, it’s more so rooted in community and resilience and that shared resilience, right? And that’s really what we need going forward and, in terms of how that relates to my practice as a Native Hawaiian kapa-maker, I always say that my ultimate career goal is to be a grandparent teaching their kids and their grandkids how to make kapa.

And that might sound so trivial or so small to some people, especially those in the arts who are getting hundreds of thousands of dollars’ worth of commissions and installations and multi-million dollar deals with galleries and things like that, and that’s cool like, you know, you do you, but you know, ultimately I’m not in it for those same goals. For me, it’s about the perpetuation of this art form and the paradigms that go along with it, you know, the ideas that we need to take care of our lands and our waters and how those things feed back into our communities, the health of our communities is reflected by the health of our environment and vice versa. And I would love to move back home as soon as I can and grow my own grove of wauke, the trees that I need to do the work that I do. Because that’s really what sustainability is, taking care of the land so that you are also cared for and your future ancestors are taken care of as well. And so it’s this much larger scope of view I think that a lot of Native practitioners maybe don’t necessarily choose to embody, we just kind of fall into. A lot of this was stemming off of values that I was raised with going to school as a kid, you know, the Hawaiian school, but a lot of it is choice.

And then, on the other side of that, a lot of it is kind of by default. You know, as a kapa-maker, I gotta be aware of these things and acknowledge these things, so, you know, moving forward for our people, I envision a day where kapa is used in an everyday household kind of sense, and that means so much more than that, it means that our people are reclaiming our language and customs. It means that we are perpetuating sustainable ways of living and sustainable ways of relating to each other and our lands. It means that our waters are no longer polluted by jet fuel and our coral reefs aren’t dying and it’s just so so so much. Being a kapa-maker, you kind of pay attention to all the things that ebb and flow around you. You work with all the different natural cycles that are within and around yourself, and so, yeah, it’s definitely a way of working that isn’t attuned to the capitalist, commodified sort of very fast-paced, instant gratification world that is the dominant paradigm, right? What I do is radically slow, and I love it.

Tuck: How long do you work on a single piece? Like, I’m sure it varies so much, but can you give people a sense of scope and time in the work that you do?

Lehua: Yeah, it definitely does vary in terms of the size and what I’m making it for, if it’s gonna be worn or hung on a wall or even the kinds of patterns that I’m using, but from the very literal root of the work, you know, I’m working with trees, we have to wait about 18-ish, sometimes a little bit more, months for the trees to even mature. And then, from there on out, it’s a very labor-intensive process of stripping the bark and paper mulberry tree, soaking the rest, fermenting, beating again, fermenting , beading again, and so that process can, depending on which method you're using, can take anywhere from a day or two to a couple months. And then, from there on out, depending on the size of the piece that I’m making, maybe like a week or two at a minimum to like a couple months of painting. So, yeah, but, you know, it forces you to slow down, because you’re not working on your own time schedule, you’re working with the fibers of another being, a plant, and so you have to listen to that schedule. It’s very humbling and it’s very, it’s very good for my mind!

Tuck: Well, this is the part of the show where I just ask if there’s anything else you want to talk about today that we haven’t talked about yet?

Lehua: This question always gets me, but I think, in the past, what always comes to mind is what I’ve always told myself in my little head about the work I do and how I identify who I am, who I come from, where I come from, and where I see myself going, and what that always ends up being is just this voice in my head telling me to keep going. So I just tell myself keep going, keep going, kind of like in Finding Nemo where Dory is like just keep swimming! [Tuck laughs]

Lehua: But on a very corny, but like not so corny, but actually corny level, just keep going. Because we need people to keep going and to keep being who they are, to keep defining what that looks like as the world changes and we change with it. And I wouldn’t be here, I literally would not be here today if I didn’t have kapa and if I didn’t just keep going with it. So, yeah!

Tuck: I love that. Well, I think this feeds so well into our last question. The way we always end the show is by asking, in your ideal world, what would the future of gender look like?

Lehua: Oh man, that’s a good one! I think, like, fluid, as fluid as it can be, where things aren’t so rigidly defined and squeezed into boxes that don’t fit. You know, as Hawaiians, we are water people by definition. So much of our culture is surrounded by water and we literally are surrounded by water, so I think that just makes sense for how I not only view my own gender identity but envision a more beautiful and free world where we’re allowed to be who we need to be, who we see ourselves as, and that’s very fluid and allowed to change and flow and move as we move through the different phases of life.

[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 folks in your community, especially the ones who keep going to Hawaii. You can find Lehuauakea at lehuauakea.com and on Instagram @\_lehuauakea\_. As always, you can find us on Twitter and Instagram at @gendereveal and at genderpodcast.com, where you can find transcripts of every episode and all sorts of other fun perks. You can also find us at our live show at the Bell House on February 1. A link to buy tickets is in the show notes. Please do buy tickets. You can also find us on Grindr.com apparently! And you can also find us at patreon.com/gender, where we release a newsletter every week and a bonus episode at least once a month, sometimes twice. Today’s 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.

[Theme music plays and ends]