**Episode 142: Lily Zheng**

Tuck: You know, it’s bad enough to have a bunch of your personal information floating around online, but it’s even worse when it’s, like, pre-transition info, if you know what I mean? Luckily, DeleteMe can help with that. DeleteMe deletes personal information like your address, phone number, and names from hundreds of data broker websites, and it can wipe all of your past names in addition to your current name, so you can make that deadname truly dead. I use DeleteMe, and you can join me at joindeleteme.com and use the promo code Tuck20 for 20% off your first year.

[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.

Hey everyone! Hope you’re all hanging in there. This week on the show, we are sharing my conversation with diversity, equity, and inclusion consultant Lily Zheng. Lily and I talk about navigating transphobic workplaces, what makes allyship considered performative, whether DEI work delays the proletariat revolution, and why so many DEI tactics can do more harm than good.

Lily: Buy people pizza! That’ll probably do more for your workforce than a 60-minute workshop.

Tuck: But before we get to that, two things! The first is that last week I had the distinct honor and pleasure of appearing on the NPR show It’s Been a Minute. I had such a fun time chatting with my friend Brittany Luse, who hosts the show, about the 5th anniversary of Gender Reveal. You can find that in all of the podcast places, and if you found this podcast from It’s Been A Minute, welcome! If you’d like to start somewhere that’s, like, a little bit less deep in the trans weeds on a single topic, I’d suggest backing up just a hair to our recent episodes with Margaret Killjoy, Alynda Segarra, Sabrina Imbler. I feel like those are all really representative of the show’s whole deal but, you know, do you. Also, I’m just letting you know, we are a little over one week away from our live show at the Bell House in Brooklyn. I am told that people love to wait until the last minute to buy tickets. If that’s you, the time is now! I mean, you can catch the show as a podcast in a few weeks, but that’s not the same. There’s gonna be visual elements to this one. You’re gonna wanna see it with your eyes and also experience the vibes! Tickets are at thebellhouseny.com, link in the show notes. That’s on February 1st, by the way. And now, it’s time for This Week in Gender.

[transition music plays]

Tuck: You may have heard, we have a second podcast called Gender Conceal. It’s a show that I put out every month for our Patreon supporters as a thank you for supporting our work. This month, I spoke with linguist Kirby Conrod for Gender Conceal. You may remember Kirby from Gender Reveal seasons 1 and 7. In this Gender Conceal episode, we spoke about an incredible achievement that Kirby was recently a part of. And, as a special treat, we are sharing a few minutes of this episode here for you now. Just a heads up, we are about to say “pussy” like, so much. But for a good reason.

[transition music plays]

Tuck: What are we doing here today? You summoned me! [Laughs]

Kirby: We are breaking the important news that linguists have figured out the best word of the year so far! It’s not a word, it’s a suffix. It’s -ussy. Have you heard of this?

Tuck: I mean I’ve heard of it in context, but like, what does it mean as a word? What did they define it as?

Kirby: So I’m one of the people who nominated it and spoke for it in the big linguist’s meeting, but the American Dialect Society runs the new words, sort of, thing, and the word of the year thing. A lot of dictionaries do their own word of the year, but the American Dialect Society is the oldest word of the year. And it’s also better because it’s like a fun vote thing instead of just one lexicographer deciding. So their definition is a blend from boy pussy is “bussy,” and then they do not really elaborate much further. Except to say it’s kind of, you know, analogous to a pussy, and then they got too embarrassed to keep going! And so, the way that I’ve been defining it is that it’s either physically or sort of metaphorically analogous to a pussy in some way, so if it’s some sort of cavity or hole that’s a physical analogy, like a donut can have a donut-ussy, and it’s something that’s more like putting all of your energy and zest and creativity into something, then that’s not really about a physical thing and more about, like, enthusiasm. And, so that’s when, like, the barista really put their whole baristussy into this latte art.

Tuck: [Laughs] Uh-huh.

Kirby: So that’s kind of how I’m defining it, and I think that the official, big air quotes, “official” ADS definition is a subset of that. Yeah.

Tuck: This feels gay to me.

Kirby: It is gay! [Laughs]

Tuck: Yeah, if you heard old fogey linguists or any just sort of random straight person on the street say, “this barista really put their whole baristussy into this,” do you feel like you had won something or like we were losing some sort of culture? How would you feel?

Kirby: I would feel really delighted of like ha, I’ve given you brainworms, and now you’re infected with the same brainworms as me, because there’s, it’s like, you know, once you start playing this kind of word game, it’s just kind of running as a like background programming in your mind all the time, and so the idea of like an old sort of fogey using it in this way is really delightful and satisfying to me, in part because they really still are a little bit embarrassed about the word. Like, the word pussy is still pretty taboo, it’s still something, I don’t think you can say it on general NPR or whatever. And so, you know, I think that’s something that pleases me that we have had such an impact on the culture that we get to make everyone have the same problem as us, which is that we’re thinking about whether Spongebob has a Spongebob-ussy or a Spongebussy. And I want everybody to be worried about those with me all the time!

Tuck: Okay, well that brings us to another conundrum, because I have had numerous conversations with people in the past about whether bussy is boy pussy, butt pussy, back pussy, because it’s either gender neutral or not. So do you think it’s canonically boy pussy?

Kirby: I think that the thing is, because, when you are -ussifying a single syllable word like boy or butt or back, you’re losing the rest of the phonological material, and so I think it’s impossible to say what the first use of that word would have been, or what was going on in the mind of that first person who’s like oh yeah, you know, I can’t actually put that in a sentence in this context, but I assume that it was a fun time that they were having. I think that the fact that it’s ambiguous between those various options is something that’s a cool thing about the way the word started spreading, and I think that also something like…Okay, somebody asked me about whether I’ve ever seen gussy, which is to say, girl pussy, and then I searched, and I absolutely found it within two seconds in Twitter search. And so, there’s something to be said about the way that I think a lot of queer and trans people sort of eroticize our gender in a way that layers onto whatever’s going on with our, you know, stuff, and so I would argue that boy pussy can still be gender neutral in the way that like, if you’re advanced enough, you can have a boy pussy and not be a boy, and I think that that’s an advantage of the word. It’s just about, like, being advanced at configuring your sex and sexuality and gender in a particular arrangement.

Tuck: I have to tell you, I was talking to a friend of the show that you and I were gonna do this, and she, a trans woman, was like, let me know if you need me to talk about gussy. And it’s not that she was trying to do a joke—she had forgotten what pussy was. [Laughs]

Kirby: Um, so this is what I mean about being advanced, and your friend is very advanced at her job. And, you know, we linguists are huge nerds, and so when stuff comes all the way back around, we’re very excited about it, even if we’re a little embarrassed about saying the word pussy so many times in an academic setting, and I’m a little bit flustered about it!

[transition music plays]

Tuck: The full version of this episode also includes such topics as why are there so many different words of the year, why are they all related to trans people this year somehow, how are the press visually representing-ussy in their articles, can we use -ussy to recruit queer linguists, and why is linguistics so queer anyway! Also, how do dictionaries work and what does Lil Nas X have to do with any of this? To hear the full episode, head to patreon.com/gender, where you’ll also get like ten other bonus episodes and all sorts of other behind-the-scenes content. This has been This Week in Gender.

[transition music plays]

Tuck: We’ve got a Theymail message for you this week. Theymail is a little message from a listener that we read on the show. You can sign up for Theymail via the link in the show notes. This week’s message is from Howard, and it says, “Shoutout to my dad! I recommended a few episodes to him when I first came out and now he listens every week, usually even before I do. Happy Birthday, Dad.” Happy birthday to Howard’s dad, the only true ally!

[theme music plays]

Tuck: Lily Zheng is a no-nonsense diversity, equity, and inclusion speaker, strategist, and consultant who specializes in creating diverse, equitable, and inclusive workplaces through hands-on systemic change. A dedicated changemaker and advocate, Lily’s work has been featured in the Harvard Business Review, New York Times, and NPR. Their most recent book, DEI Deconstructed, centers on accountable and effective processes to achieve DEI outcomes in organizations.

[theme music fades out]

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

Lily: Yeah! I would describe myself, and I’m choosing my words because I feel like the description has changed every six months, so I have to recheck and be like, how am I describing myself these days? Probably as a nonbinary transfem?

Tuck: Yeah! We were specifically talking about gender but, in non-gender world, you describe yourself often as a no-nonsense DEI strategist, and your book title also has no-nonsense in it. And not to do an overdone Twitter format, but no-nonsense DEI coach suggests the existence of a nonsense DEI coach. I was just wondering if you could talk about what makes your work different from some of the other practices out there, maybe some of the ones that you’re critiquing in your book?

Lily: Uh, it works. And that’s something that I know for a fact, because there’s evidence, there’s proof. I have a lot of empathy for other DEI practitioners, especially folks who are relatively new to the industry, given that, as I write in my book, there is such a lack of standardization, of, in some ways, professionalization of the field, and so, that makes it really difficult to know what effective DEI work is, right? Anyone can call themselves a DEI practitioner and, in fact, I’ve seen a couple people essentially say, I had a lifetime in sales, and then I read Robin DiAngelo’s *White Fragility* and now I’m a DEI practitioner. And I’m like, uh, what’s your skill set, right? What do you use to make sure that when you go into companies to make them better, you succeed? And they say well, you know, I just care a lot about making companies better, and I’m like, and do you? And they’re like, probably! [Tuck laughs] And I’m like, probably’s not good enough! Right? Like, you’re getting paid to fix shit, right? If you hired a plumber, and they showed up, and you said look, my toilet’s messed up, right? And then two hours later they’re like, they walk out, and they say, I’ll send you the bill. And you’re just like, did you fix it? And they’re like, well, I tried! And then they leave. That’s not good enough! Right, and in many ways, that’s the state of our industry. A lot of it is about the effort we put in as practitioners, but it’s not necessarily grounded in outcomes, it’s not grounded in whether or not our work actually succeeds. And so, when I describe my work as no-nonsense, it’s both a characterization of my style, which is I’ll tell it to you straight, I’ll tell you what you need to hear, and also it talks to what I’m able to achieve, which is what I say I’m going to achieve. Right? If I say I’m going to fix an issue, I’m not going to leave until the issue’s fixed, and we can know it’s fixed and we can prove it’s fixed and we have data to show it.

Tuck: Yeah, I’d love to hear more about that, because I think in the plumbing analogy, most of us know how to flush a toilet and if it works or not. But I think a lot of people wouldn't know how to tell if DEI is working. So when you’re looking at quantifiable outcomes, I’m sure every instance is different, but can you give us some examples of ways you can tell if it’s working, like what those quantifiable variables are?

Lily: Yeah, that’s such a good question. So, it varies, and there’s so many of them depending on the kind of DEI issue. There’s a billion different kinds of DEI issues. Let’s take a very common one, let’s say microaggressions. Let’s say there’s a team of people, let’s say there’s a trans person on the team and they’re getting misgendered repeatedly, trans person’s miserable, people on the team don’t really care. So, let’s pick a few metrics to gauge, you know, what the problem is that we’re trying to fix. Let’s say the trans person’s individual satisfaction, the number of microaggressions happening on a monthly or weekly basis, the overall psychological safety of the team, so, you know, that’s people’s willingness to speak up when they have something to share or hear critical feedback. Let’s say, also, the comfort of speaking up as a bystander when they see behavior that isn’t appropriate. Right? So, that’s four metrics now, right? Measure them pre and post. Let’s say you go in and you’re just like let’s just see how messed up this team is, and let’s say you measure that a) trans person’s miserable, b) number of microaggressions, c) no one speaks up, and d) no one feels comfortable being a bystander or being an upstander, rather, when they see behavior that’s not appropriate. You don’t know it’s fixed until all these things are better. So, the trans person’s happy, microaggressions either don’t happen or, when they happen, they’re resolved very quickly, people feel confident in speaking up and they do speak up, they share feedback with each other, and, when there’s behavior that is not okay, people speak up and say, that’s not okay. With any sort of DEI issue, essentially the idea is that you can break it down into these ways to show how bad the problem is and, importantly, when it’s fixed.

Tuck: Mm-hm. I get a ton of questions from one individual trans person and, when you boil it down, their question is like, hello, I’m a junior-level employee at this company, I am getting misgendered all the time, what can I do to not experience so much transphobia? And it’s always really hard for me to handle those questions because it's absolutely not their responsibility to fix the transphobia of their workplace, but also it is their problem.

Lily: Right. There’s very little they can actually do by themselves.

Tuck: Yeah, so, if you’re encountering that kind of question, how do you respond to those sort of issues where the issue is that, like, one or two people are being treated very poorly and the person who is seeking the resolution to the problem is the person who is being treated poorly, because I think you need buy-in from the rest of the company, right?

Lily: Yeah. So, as a consultant, I don’t typically go in and help individuals going through hard times, so I’m gonna slightly dodge the question by saying it’s not actually the type of challenge that I solve. But, oftentimes, I do see that situation, just from the other side of things. Usually, the manager will bring me in. They’ll say, hey, our team is having some problems, we have one employee, let’s use this as an example, they’re trans, our team isn’t very good at treating this trans person with respect, the trans person’s pissed off. What can we do to help? And so, I’m usually offering advice to someone with a leadership position, which is a little easier, right, because that is the person who has the power to effect change. Now, as part of those conversations, I might talk to the trans person, and they might say, what do I do to fix it? And the hard answer to this is you yourself as an individual can’t fix everything by yourself. This requires that the organization get its act together. And, to be fully transparent, if I’m ever in a situation where it seems like the org or the company or the nonprofit isn’t going to change on a timeline that’s going to support the trans person, and I am talking to that trans person, I’ve given advice on the clock that’s essentially, you need to get out, right? You need to take care of yourself, you need to protect yourself. Because, sometimes, there are those situations, right? And when I’m talking to individuals, my focus is on how I can help them thrive and get their needs met in the situation, controlling what they can control. When I’m talking to senior leaders, the advice is a little different, because there’s more that they can control because of their additional power and authority. So the advice sort of varies depending on who I’m talking to.

Tuck: Yeah, absolutely. Well, thinking of this advice where sometimes your advice to this trans person would be “get out,” I have this line, I don’t know that I’ve said it on the podcast, but I say it a lot to friends about how if someone is in a toxic relationship, it feels relatively easier to say look, you don’t deserve to be treated this way, there’s all of these people who would treat you better with respect and care, or even not being in a relationship could be better than this situation. With jobs, I have a lot harder time, because when people are in a toxic workplace, it’s hard to say, oh, you’ll find a better one, because often they don’t, they just find a different toxic workplace. So, I am curious, this is an unhinged way to ask this question, but do you think that healthy workplaces exist? And if so, what advice would you have for people who are job-hunting to look for in a job that won’t make them completely miserable?

Lily: That’s a very good question. So, first of all, I’ll preface this by saying that capitalism itself is an abusive relationship, and the reality is not everyone working in a toxic workplace has the freedom to go elsewhere, right? Or rather, everyone “has the freedom” but sometimes the trade-offs are just not reasonable. For job-hunters, especially job-hunters who have marginalized identities, you are weighing the pros and cons of staying in a toxic workplace against the pros and cons of being a job-seeker in a tumultuous market that discriminates against marginalized folks and multiply marginalized folks, and I would never fault somebody for staying in a workplace that treats them horribly because the costs of job-hunting feel too high for them. And, recognizing that, those people that do choose to look for better prospects, there’s a lot you can do to protect yourself, from individual-focused things like have good boundaries, take care of yourself, take breaks, surround yourself with loving community that can affirm your inherent worth as a person, that’s definitely something that you can forget when you go through the endless slaughter mill that is applying to jobs, right? It’s miserable, it’s awful. And then, if you have the capacity to do so, using resources like community groups, professional groups, finding networks of people who affirm your worth as a person and as a professional can be really powerful, and I totally encourage folks listening to try that.

Tuck: You do talk in your book about how in 2016 you read this one paper that sort of radically changed the way you approach your thinking. Yeah, can you talk about that and the path it kind of set you on?

Lily: Yeah, yeah, it’s not every day I mark passages of my life in HBR articles, I feel like that’s kind of a lot, but the article in question was “Why DEI programs Fail” by Frank Dobbin and Alexandra Kalev, two sociologists, and, essentially, what they found is that tracking the long-term impact of the most popular DEI initiatives like anonymizing resumes, DEI training, and some other things, they had a net negative effect on the overall representation of marginalized communities in the companies they were deployed in. Oh yeah, and the last one was using job tests, so using, sort of, standardizing job applications to require a skills test. Now all of these things are “best practices” in the DEI space, right, like you hear all the time, take identifying information off of resumes, use a DEI training to educate your workforce, and this research essentially found that in the years following these sorts of trainings, overall representation of marginalized groups ranging from white women to black men to I think they also tracked other men of color, I think it was just race and gender for that analysis, everything dropped pretty severely. And their finding was that preventions deployed in a vacuum essentially were utilized wrong. So, for job tests for example, companies that implemented job tests looked like they had made the process fair, but then hiring managers who resented the job tests would just hire their friends, have the friends skip the job tests, and then just have folks from marginalized communities take the tests, which then gave them cause to fire or not hire, rather, these folks from marginalized communities. And every example had something like this, like this well-intentioned policy that the people in the organization just sort of leveraged to worsen discrimination instead of making it better.

Now, the big takeaway from that research wasn’t to stop doing all of these DEI mainstays, it’s just that we shouldn’t expect any silver bullets to magically fix our world, right? We need to build it deeper beyond like, here are the 10 most effective interventions, use them and you’ll fix all of your problems. And the DEI field has been plagued by a lot of interventions, you know, a lot of folks who talk up their pet initiatives and sort of favorite policy, saying, essentially, if you do this one thing, if you take my one workshop, if you pay for four installments of $19.95, you know, go through my coaching program, you, too, will fully be able to solve equity in your company. And the research time and time again says no, that's actually not how this stuff works, right? There are no silver bullets, there are no panaceas. The work requires that we track our initiatives from day one to day done, and to hold everyone accountable to acting in the way we want them. We need to make sure that we don’t have unintended consequences from the DEI work that we do. And this isn’t a knock on DEI practitioners, I think this is the fault of everybody in this industry and those adjacent to it, nobody tracks their impact over time, right, like it’s a fire and forget sort of situation where you get your workshop, deploy it, delete. You’re done. Did it work? I sure hope so, but I have no way to check. And that’s standard practice, that’s how everyone does their work. That’s how I did my work until I read that article and was like oh shit, right, like, I think I’m part of the problem. And it took years and years and years to totally revamp my practice to change that. And it’s still really, really hard to track your impact over time.

Tuck: Yeah, I’m interested in whether it’s ever difficult for you to get buy-in for this kind of long-term, holistic work because, for me, I have one very specific training that I do that is specifically for journalists. It’s a minimum three to four hour curriculum, and I all of the time get messages from newsrooms that say, well, we can only take an hour of everyone’s time. Like, it’s a budget issue, but it’s not even a budget issue, it’s like we won’t pull everyone off of work for more than an hour. So, facing things like that, is that something where you just say no and walk away, or do you have….

Lily: I say no and walk away. So, and I give a reason why. So, the really important thing is you don’t just say oh, I’m not willing to provide that, goodbye. What happens when you say that? They’ll find someone who will. Right? So, when I walk away from those initiatives, at the very least, when I push back, I say that the research that I have on why I do things the way I do, this is the research I have on why also doing these shorter initiatives don’t actually help. Frankly, if you only have a budget for a 60-minute workshop, do something else with that money. You are literally burning your money if you bring in a one-time 60-person workshop. Buy people pizza! That’ll probably do more for your workshop than a 60-minute workshop. And I’m not even joking! That’s probably correct in terms of the overall impact it’s going to have on your workplace. Or hell, let’s say you only have 2,000 bucks for a 60-minute workshop. Give everybody $5 gift cards for their birthdays. No, like actually, there’s research to support that. That will definitively do more for your workforce than a 60-minute workshop and, you know, every time I object, I say this is the actual impact of what you’ll be getting from a 60-minute, 90-minute workshop, and this is what I can promise from doing things the way that I do things. Not just I’m trying to sell you a product, but I’ve been really intentional in designing my services to be effective based on what I know about the research. You make your own decision. At the end of the day, even if they don’t work with me, I want to make them more conscious of the true worth of DEI services, because everyone loses if they go with that 60-minute workshop, right? Well, I guess the only person who doesn’t lose is the person who they pay for it. But, fundamentally, the marginalized communities who you’re trying to help don’t benefit from this sort of thing.

Tuck: Well, something else you address in your book is this question of performative allyship, and we know that a lot of the reason that these people are booking those 60-minute trainings are not because they’re trying to solve a problem, but because they want to say that they did a training and get everyone off their back, right? And so, I was thinking about performative allyship not necessarily from the perspective of corporations, but I think from individuals I also hear from a lot and I think that your advice can also translate. So, I was wondering if you could just talk about the concept of performative allyship and if you’re talking to a corporation versus a person who's worried that they want to do something but they don’t want to be seen as performative, like what thoughts do you have for them?

Lily: Yeah. It’s a really common question. I have a slightly different take than the typical one in terms of performative. A lot of folks will essentially say “performative xyz” is “xyz that’s not sincere,” it’s done for optics. I actually don’t agree with that. I think a lot of folks who I see accused of performative allyship believe in some part of their heart that they are actually fixing a problem. They’re just woefully misinformed, drastically underestimating how difficult things are, and just really overly optimistic in the ability of something small to fix a large problem. I think, I see this idea of performative more as this, like a socially constructed thing, right? So, essentially, if I trust you as a person, very little that you do or say I’m going to perceive as performative. Even if you mess something up, if I trust you a lot and you mess something up, I’ll be like well, you know, I’m sure that was done with the best of intentions, I’m sure you’re gonna figure it out, I’m sure it’s gonna be great, they just stumbled a bit. But if I don’t trust you, everything changes, right? If you do something right, but not right enough, then you just did it for optics. And if you mess up, heaven forbid you mess up, then you’re like see, evidence. This person is terrible. And so I see this label of performative less as a sort of objective measure by which behavior is gauged and more of a reflection of the critic, right? To what extent do they trust or don’t trust the person that they’re criticizing.

And this isn’t a bad thing, right? In fact, it’s very useful. If everyone is calling a leader performative, that means that no one trusts them. And this is likely because of their past behavior. They’ve done something, they’ve asked for goodwill, people have extended it, and then they’ve betrayed it. Or they made a promise they couldn’t keep multiple times. And so, when I hear such and such is performative allyship, I hear a couple things. One, I want them to fix something that they’ve done in the past. I want them to regain my trust. And two, I don’t believe that this thing that they’ve done is going to work, and nobody trusts leaders anywhere because most leaders, they’re not great at doing this work effectively. It’s a low trust environment. And in a low trust environment, everything is performative. Allyship was the 2021 word of the year, which sounds good until you realize that the runner-up was performative, those words are used together, right? [Tuck laughs] So the funny thing here, right, is we’re in a situation where no one trusts leaders, leaders don’t know what the hell they’re doing, they’ve messed up a lot. I want to get as far away as possible from making lists like “the ten things you can say that are not performative,” “the 10 things you can say that are performative,” as a way of thinking about it. Instead, we need to be saying, leaders, if you’ve lost the trust of your workforce, how do you get it back, right? Like, that is the core question at the heart of all of this.

Tuck: Right? Well then what you say in your book is that if you’ve lost the trust of your workforce, then what you need to do is cede power, and I was reading that being like how have you ever convinced anyone ever to do that? [Laughs]

Lily: I have! And it’s really difficult. Essentially, so, a lot of leaders say, well, I’m not gonna do that, because if I do that they’re gonna destroy me, so I’m gonna keep doubling down. And I’ll say, well, how is doubling down working for you? The answer is always well, it’s not. Right? So, usually, leaders will flail for a little bit, and be like why is my tough guy approach not working and making things worse? And I’m like, I don’t know, maybe you could cede some power. And they’re like well, no, I’m gonna keep doubling down. And then I go back a month later and I’m like, how are you doing buddy, and they’re like, awful, things are awful. And I’m like, how do you feel about maybe giving up just a little bit of power? Like, you can’t get worse than how it is right now! And the thing that I write is essentially, to build trust and goodwill, you need to act for the benefit of marginalized groups while expecting nothing in return. Nothing. Essentially, if you give people something, and they don’t trust you, they’re gonna be so wary, right? They’re gonna get the resource, they’re gonna look at you like, are there strings attached? Am I going to get in trouble? Am I going to get retaliated against? And if you’re a good leader or you’re trying to turn over a new leaf, nothing bad will happen. They’ll use the resource, they’ll do something to benefit themselves, they’ll look at you expecting retribution, and then hopefully nothing happens! And then you say hey, here’s another thing, no strings attached. And they’ll be like okay, last time, last time it seemed okay, so maybe we’ll consider it again. Maybe they take it. Nothing happens. Right? And, by the way, this isn’t just a job-related thing, this is relationship repair, right? Like this is how you rebuild any relationship where trust has been broken. You act really intentionally to benefit the other person to rebuild trust through acts of goodwill. And, you know, it goes without saying don’t be cynical about it, don’t rebuild trust just to pull one over them because they’ll never trust you ever again. These strategies are how you fix broken workforces, right? Not by saying all the things in the past were water under the bridge, but by saying we’re gonna make things right, we’re gonna turn over a new leaf, I’m gonna do things to benefit you, and you have to do nothing for me for a long period of time, until there is trust built.

Tuck: Yeah. I feel that a lot of people who get into DEI, especially people from marginalized backgrounds, are doing it kind of as a reaction to what they’ve experienced in the workplace, trying to ensure that other people don’t experience the things that they’ve experienced. But my understanding is that you got into this when you were still in college, pretty young. So I was just curious what got you interested in this specific work in the first place?

Lily: Yeah, yeah, okay. A bunch of thoughts here. One, I believe very strongly that people’s healing from trauma needs to be separate from their DEI work. I think bad things happen when you try to heal from your own trauma through being a professional DEI practitioner. I’ve seen really bad things happen. I understand where the impulse comes from, right, but healing comes from therapy and community and relationships, not going into companies so that you can shit talk white men, which is very satisfying sometimes, but don’t do that, it’s not great for anyone. [Tuck laughs] Answering your actual question, so I originally was doing trans inclusion trainings, that was my thing in college, right, and like a lot of trans folks who had a really tough time in the world, I was like, I want to make sure this doesn’t happen to anyone ever again. I just want people to be not awful towards trans people so that people aren’t awful to me, and so I taught a bunch of those trainings. Now, something that happened in college was that I got involved in a lot of direct action protest movement stuff, and that was really an incredible time in my life, so closely connected to a lot of grassroots communities, and at the time I had a very rudimentary, basic, let’s say theory of change about how it is you change an institution like Stanford where I went to school. I thought administrators: bad, evil, agents of the system. Destroy them. Bad. I thought, we’re on the side of justice, you know, fighting for liberation, blah, blah, blah. Administrators are stopping us, they are preventing us from exposing the truth about the institution. If we just raise visibility about all these issues, then we expose our institution for what it is. The walls will come crumbling down and we’ll change the system. So, it’s a very sort of romanticized, hero’s journey sort of picture of activism.

And so, a whole bunch of direct action. We protested, marched, we did a bunch of stuff, and then one day, we caravan-ed to a major bridge spanning the Bay Area and got out of our cars and 68 of us blocked the bridge for about forty minutes. Big action, got a lot of news. Then, all of us got arrested. We weren’t expecting that part. Somehow we expected that we would have three rings of people and the outer ring of people would be interested in getting arrested or okay with it, and the inner ring wouldn’t. That didn’t work. The cops surrounded us, there were hundreds of them, we all got arrested. We all got traumatized, put through the “justice system,” everyone needed therapy, it was really bad. And we went back to campus and were like well, at least we showed them, right? Nothing happened. Nothing happened. People were just confused and were like well, we’re not really sure why you got yourself arrested but we’re sorry, can we help you with your legal costs? And in all the time I had reflecting, I was thinking I don’t think that’s how we do it. Like, I don’t actually think this is how you change institutions. We traumatized everyone and didn’t move anything, and it was a failure. And so, I started thinking like, there’s something I don’t know. There’s something about this institution I don’t know, there’s something about making change I don't know, there’s something about creating movements that are effective that I don’t know, and I need to know how to do this stuff, because that’s the thing I never want anyone to go through, right? To sort of have this naive idea about how to make change, throw yourself against a brick wall, to hurt yourself, and to get processed through this really traumatizing system. We were thrown in police cars and folks spent time in jail. It was bad, and for nothing, right? So, I was like, I gotta figure this out. And I changed the degree I was studying, I got a graduate degree in sociology and, you know, also spent a lot of time focusing on the history of activism and successful movements, and that’s sort of where I am today.

Tuck: Mmm, yeah, thank you for sharing all of that! I was thinking when you were talking about at the beginning about not coming to DEI work to work through your trauma, I think that even if you have done all of that work and you’re able to come at it from a neutral place, it can still be activating as a multiply marginalized person to work with people who are saying things that are, at best, very ignorant and they don’t realize that they’re very ignorant and so I find that, often when I’m having conversations, I can hold it together in the conversation but then immediately afterward I have to dump feelings into the void somewhere to just get out everything that I was holding back. I was wondering how you deal with any feelings that come up when you’re working with people professionally and you’re listening to them say things that, like you said, it’s not productive to yell at white men in your training, but you’re holding it in your body somewhere for that amount of time, right?

Lily: Yeah! So, personally, I have a lot of support outside my job, outside of my work. I care a lot about DEI work, like obviously, I’m super passionate about it. I spend most of my waking hours doing DEI work, and I have a life outside of work, right? So, realistically, if I go through something awful, I’ll hold it together, end the call, turn to my spouse in the other room and go like love, I gotta talk about some shit. [Tuck laughs] And of course, I have a therapist every week. I’ve been in therapy for like five or six years. I spend a lot of time healing and a lot of time processing grief and trauma and all that, so that, or at least partially so that I can go into my work and be able to be effective as a practitioner and hold space. Now, I also think not every practitioner is cut out for that kind of work. That’s also totally okay. I actually don’t do as much of that work as I used to. I used to do workshop facilitation, which is brutal, right, because you get people with all sorts of knowledge levels and all sorts of places in their DEI journey, and you get some really ignorant stuff, right? I don’t do it anymore. I teach strategy. And so if someone’s like isn’t sex and gender the same, I’m just like, that’s not actually what we’re talking about today, right? We are talking about how to design an effective program, we’re talking about how to find an effective DEI survey, right? Save your questions for Google or hire another practitioner who is here to teach you about issues, that’s not me. And I chose that intentionally because a) that’s not work I want to be doing, and b) it was stressing me out, a lot.

Tuck: Ah, yeah, it can be a lot, gotta say…

Lily: It is a lot! [Tuck laughs]

Tuck: Well, I wanted to talk about your earlier work if you want to talk about it, because you wrote these two other books, or co-wrote these two other books. So one of them is called The Ethical Sellout, and I was wondering if you just wanted to tell us what you mean by ethical sellout, what you explored in that book?

Lily: So, The Ethical Sellout came about from a collaboration I had with a colleague at Stanford who spent a lot of time working as a sort of therapist and a coach, and this was also around the time when I was really thinking hard about activist communities and how marginalized communities can sometimes be really hard on ourselves and each other, especially on the Internet. I’m looking at you, Twitter, right? [Tuck laughs] And, you know, just thinking, in the service of creating healthy communities and helping individual people navigate this abusive capitalist hellscape, right, is there a better way that we can approach community building and personal meaning building in all this? And so The Ethical Sellout is really a book that acknowledges this idea of purity culture, of purity politics. This idea that you can only be a good person if you engage in these sorts of behaviors, if you always act according to the beliefs that you should have given your marginalized identity, and so on and so forth, right? This idea that your employer, every decision you make, every piece of media you consume, that is somehow a moral reflection of your goodness or badness. And the thesis of The Ethical Selloutis, it’s not, right? Every single person all the time every day has to navigate, like I said, our capitalistic hellscape and make compromises, all the time, right? Like everyone makes compromises, even the most pure, socially-just person makes compromises. The idea here is not that it’s impossible to avoid being a sellout but more how instead can we become better to ourselves and still try to live up to our values, hold ourselves accountable, and be honest, but navigate this ambiguity and complexity of the world as marginalized people.

And The Ethical Sellout, I think, had a number of frameworks to help people navigate those sorts of challenges. I think we called it the change framework, approaching ourselves with compassion, honesty, accountability, nuance, growth, and exploration. And so these are all the sorts of traits that we saw from interviewing dozens of people, right? Frankly, we interviewed some people who were obviously better adjusted and more able to sort of reconcile their place in the world and live as principled people without hating themselves, and we interviewed some folks that were really, really having a tough time with that, right? This idea that like, well, I think I’m a good person but because I consumed this one thing this one time, I hate myself forever and I’ve lost my self-worth, and I think that my community will hate me and destroy me, right, and all these things. And we just heard all this fear and this worry that we wouldn’t find belonging because, I don’t know, we watched the Avatar movie and liked it, I don’t know, right? [Tuck laughs] All sorts of things. And the book is really a love letter to community and a love letter to ourselves, essentially saying there’s something that matters here which is surviving, thriving, supporting ourselves, supporting community. I think what’s going on right now a lot on the Internet and oftentimes in in-person communities isn’t the best we can do. We can do better for ourselves, we can do better for each other.

Tuck: I mean, I’m hearing a lot of examples about cultural consumption, which I think is a really good way to frame this, but I was curious, do you feel like you’re doing ethical selling out in your work in some way?

Lily: Sure, I mean absolutely, right? Everything I do is a compromise. I had a friend say this to me once, Lily, by helping make companies more inclusive, you are delaying the revolution. [Tuck laughs] I was like, sure, yeah, you’re not wrong! I guess, you know, the worse companies are, the more people will feel inspired to rise up and the proletariat will destroy the bourgeoisie and take power, you know, communist revolution. But also, that’s fine. I’m doing work that matters to me, I’m having an impact I can see that matters to me. It’s aligned with my principles. I do this work in large part because it’s harm reduction for the people that are embedded within systems. Do I think my DEI work is revolutionary? No, I don’t think it is. And I don’t need it to be, I don’t want it to be. There are so many other folks on the ground doing grassroots activism, doing liberation work, building community, building stuff with determination. A lot of my friends are doing that work. I support them. And it’s not my work. It’s not for me. Is that a tension? Sure. But I’ve spent a lot of time thinking about it and I think I’m where I need to be. And look, I’ve given a talk for Amazon before. I had some feelings. I had to process it. I had to think really hard, like, what am I willing to do for, let’s say Amazon for example? And to what extent do I feel like my impact needs to have to make up for me lending my voice for what I view as the paradigm of evil? Whatever. And these are decisions that everyone, not just DEI consultants, have to make every day. These experiences are very common. Everyone has them, and rather than judging folks who don’t live up to our arbitrary purity standards, we need to make space for more people in the revolution, right? We need to be expanding our idea of what it means to be building a better world together.

Tuck: So, you wrote this piece four years ago about Trans Day of Remembrance events, and I don’t do TDOR events because I don’t think it’s appropriate for me personally to do them, but I have to admit that I think that the idea that corporations are reaching out to me about TDOR events is unhinged and I can’t imagine it going well. So, as someone who has worked in a lot more workplaces and thought about this at least once four years ago, I was just wondering, do you think it’s possible to do a good corporate TDOR event?

Lily: Yes asterisk, and the asterisk is like in size 64 font. [Tuck laughs] Any sort of corporate trans event should be led by and for trans people. Hard stop, right. The only time a corporation should ever do a TDOR event is if there are trans people in that corporation who want to host that event, are already hosting that event, and have specifically requested that their corporation provide support in specific ways. That is the only acceptable context in which any company should be doing TDOR. And, if it’s happening under those conditions, I can’t fault it, right. It’s trans people organizing and leveraging their workforce to provide support and visibility for something that they want to do. I think that’s fine. In fact, I think that’s good praxis, right? Now if we’re talking about some HR practitioner who has no trans experience or no connection to trans folks going like, I think we should do a TDOR. Let’s go rustle up some trans people to cry in front of us. I think that is exploitative, I think that’s harmful. There’s no net positive, in fact any positive from that, and they should immediately drop the idea. And the difference between these two things is power, right, and who we are centering. If we are centering trans folks and trans folks want to do it, then we should empower trans folks to do it. If there are no trans folks meeting, then we should absolutely not do this thing. And that’s where all of it comes down to.

Tuck: Yeah, I think that’s a really, really good answer and I do want to clarify that when I’m like, I don’t personally attend all of these events regardless, it’s also an issue of power of why are you coming to like a white-adjacent trans masc for Trans Day of Remembrance, like, that’s not, again still not who we should be centering, even within trans people.

Lily: So, I sort of agree with you. I’m gonna quibble a little bit, because I’ve also been in this scenario where we’ve had a room full of trans people, right, with maybe one Black trans woman, and then someone says TDOR, who does everyone look at? Right? And so, there’s this idea that even among trans people, there’s tokenism that happens a lot of the time. And there’s a problem sometimes when we look for multiply marginalized trans folks, especially Black transfems, to be the voice for TDOR, and if there are Black transfems that are there that want to be in that space, there’s zero problem at all. I’ve also been in a hard situation where none of the Black trans femmes in a room or in a local community have the capacity or desire to represent for TDOR. And I’ve seen them get pushed into this position by guilty white trans liberals going like, well, we can’t take up space, it’s gotta be you. And so, I want us to push a little deeper and think about power as something that’s not just synonymous with identity, right? We need to be finding ways to be elevating our community and making space for folks without playing a very simple like, well, this person checks all the right boxes, whether or not they consent, we need to make them do this event. I don’t know, right, there is no one right way to do TDOR correctly, AND I want to say that it’s not a perfect approach just to find the nearest Black trans femme or Latina trans femme and say like, this is your event, whether or not you want to be there.

Tuck: No, absolutely not. But if you’re paying a speaker to show up on Zoom, and you have…

Lily: Oh, if you’re paying a speaker, right, yeah…

Tuck: Oh, yeah, that’s what I was talking about. Sorry, I was exclusively talking about the specific instance of people reaching out and saying can I pay you money to talk via Zoom to our company. And it’s like, well, you can hire literally anyone because it’s on Zoom, why are you giving money to me?

Lily: Yeah. Okay, that’s a different situation.

Tuck: But yes, if you’re talking about like a grassroots, local event that’s so important, and I’ve seen that happen, so I think everything you said is really valuable. I just want to clarify, if you’re paying someone money and it could be anyone, that’s when it’s like, you’re not just looking around and roping in one person, it’s like…

Lily: Right, support Black and Indigenous and Latina transfems. That’s who you should be having run your TDORs.

Tuck: So thank you for complicating that. I’m now going to ask you, is there anything else that we haven’t talked about that you want to talk about?

Lily: I guess, throughout this conversation, I’ve just been thinking, as a multiply marginalized trans person doing DEI, right, like I think something that I’ve been grappling with the past few years is that people are much more comfortable with teaching trans inclusion workshops than they are with teaching DEI strategy workshops. And I’ve had this really interesting relationship with my identity story over the past few years, because everyone wants me to tell my trans story, right? And like I’ve got a good one, it’s pretty sad, it does make people cry. Sometimes it makes me cry. And as I’ve sort of repositioned myself in the space, you know, not just like hey, Lily’s a trans person who talks about trans people and sometimes cries in front of an audience, to, you know, Lily is a DEI strategist that’s also leading this field in a very different way. It’s been tough navigating how people want to put me into a box because of my identities, right? It’s been really, really difficult. For Trans Day of Remembrance, suddenly I get a whole bunch of people that don’t care at all about DEI strategy stuff, they’re like Lily, cry for us. For Asian-American Heritage Month, I get a bunch of people who are like Lily, cry for us, for Pride Month, cry for us. And, it’s tough, right, it’s really challenging.

I think at one point in my career I would have done it and I would have felt like it was really healing and, sometimes, you know, the biggest challenge for me is being like well, if I’m not talking about queer trans Asian people all the time, am I betraying my community? Right, this idea that I somehow have to be doing everything all at once. And I think a lot of that is the sort of expectation that marginalized people put on ourselves, especially when there are very few of us in a space, that we somehow need to be the perfect representative of all communities that we’re part of. And something I’ve been personally working on is letting go of that, and saying like, am I a perfect person, perfect non-binary person, Asian person, queer person? Absolutely not! But like I can be your problematic fave all day, I’m not perfect, and I never will be. And I’m trying to be more okay with that, because we don’t like take this random white dude and go like, your entire race and gender is being judged with you. We don’t do that. And I want us to be better at being kinder to ourselves, like holding more compassion for ourselves in all of our imperfections and whatnot.

Tuck: Yeah, I mean that’s great because it also brings up the concept of boundaries and you don’t owe everyone your story all the time, and it touches on something that I think about constantly, which is how hard it is for trans people and other marginalized people to be seen as experts in our field even when we are experts. Like, I get questions all the time when I’m trying to do my job in a professional capacity where I’m like, does anyone have any questions, and then they’ll literally be like, what did your parents say when you came out? And I'm like, this is not what we’re here to talk about today.

Lily: Yeah, I’ve definitely gotten that.

Tuck: It’s so wild! So anyway, I just, yeah, appreciate all of that. It’s a big, thorny issue for people to grapple with, but the way we always end the show is by asking, in your ideal world, what would the future of gender look like?

Lily: Messy and free. I think it would be incredible if everybody could present any way, if gender expression was unbounded, if, you know, we still have gender, because gender is important to people, but, right now, if gender is a box, right, it’s a coffin. And I want gender to be like football fields, like I want there to be so many ways to be a man that every man feels empowered, so many ways to be non-binary, so many ways to be a woman, so many ways to be any gender, right, that people feel liberated. I want people to look, to speak, to act in any way that feels, you know, empowering for them, and I want to break out of this, you know, gosh, horrible, colonial, awful idea that like, gender is this tight, constricting little thing that you have to squeeze yourself into or you’re not worthy as a human. I think gender should be liberating for everybody, right? I think people are scared of trans folks sometimes because we represent a new way of thinking about gender that terrifies people that have squeezed themselves into these boxes their entire lives, and I want everyone to feel that same sort of, you know, freedom and sort of joy.

[theme music plays]

Tuck: That’s gonna do it for this week’s show. You can find Lily at lilyzheng.co and on LinkedIn if you’re fancy. Their latest book, DEI Deconstructed, as well as all the other books they’ve written, are available now wherever you get books. We are of course on Twitter and Instagram at @gendereveal and at genderpodcast.com. You can also find us on Patreon where, of course, we’ve got a new bonus episode about the -ussification of it all, and many, many, many other fun perks. That is at patreon.com/gender. And you can also find us at The Bell House in Brooklyn on February 1st. It’s going to be very fun. Don’t miss it.

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 ends]

Tuck: We don’t make the podcast for people who aren’t trans, so we don’t care if they’re bored.

Lily: [Laughs] I don’t know, like, what are you thinking about? What do you think is juicy?

Tuck: Well, what do you think is juicy, you’re the one…

Lily: There’s too much that’s juicy!! [Tuck laughs]