**Transcript–– Gender Reveal Season 11, Episode 155: Checking in with Soleil Ho**

**Tuck:** Queer Candle Co. is a queer and trans business that makes small-batch, soy wax candles topped with a variety of botanicals, including pressed flowers, dried herbs, and zested aromatics. If you're like, “I love candles, but I don't want another plain candle jar, I only want aesthetic candles,” I have great news. You can go to queercandleco.com and pick out a one-of-a-kind thrifted candle container and the folks at Queer Candle Co. will fill it with a candle in the scent of your choice. And when you're done with the candle, you have a very cute mug to keep. Best of all, 10% of profits are donated to the Sylvia Rivera Law project. Use code GENDER10 at checkout to get 10% off your first order at queercandleco.com.

[Gender Reveal theme music starts]

**Tuck:** Welcome to Gender Reveal, a podcast where we hopefully get a little bit closer to understanding what the hell gender is. I'm your host and resident gender detective, Tuck Woodstock.

[Gender Reveal theme music ends]

**Tuck:** Hey everyone, hope you’re all hanging in there. This week on the show, I am very excited to share my chat with Soleil Ho. If you are a true head, a very dedicated gender detective, you might remember Soleil from all the way back in season one, episode eight. In that one, Soleil was like “I'm a woman!” and I was like “Hmm. Are you?” And they were like, “Don't worry about it.” And now here we are six years later. These days, Soleil is a columnist for the San Francisco Chronicle, and in this episode we talk about which of their takes are too spicy for the Chronicle, whether we should abolish restaurants, and what Soleil learned from infiltrating an anti-trans dinner.

Soleil [voice clip]: What do you eat and what do you drink when you are talking about Marxism and anime turning your child to the devil?

Tuck: We also talk about their, like, super chill and totally attainable future goals such as…

Soleil [voice clip]: Worldwide socialist revolution.

Tuck: But before we get to that, a couple quick reminders. First, if you’re a patron, don't forget to check if you are in fact still a patron, because I've been told there was a weird glitch a few weeks ago that unsubscribed some people. I don't want you to miss out on our newsletter and bonus episodes and also like to be honest, I want Ozzy and I to have jobs. I know checking your billing info is not like the sexiest thing in the world, but don't worry because this next thing is the sexiest thing in the world: our Brooklyn live show is in one week! It's on Monday, August 28th and joining me on stage will be Mattie Lubchansky, Casey Plett, Fran Tirado, Kendra Wells. Ozzy will be in the back running the show. We'll have a bunch of other friends of the show in the audience; maybe I'll rope them onto the stage somehow; who can say. I would love to see you there. That is at 7:30 PM at the Bell House. We've still got some tickets available, so head to bit.ly/speedreading23 to grab yours. Link is in the show notes. And now it's time for this week in gender.

[gentle hi-hat tones play]

[shimmery background tones play]

This week in gender I want to touch on an academic paper published a couple weeks ago. You might have heard about it. On August 9th, the fancy peer-reviewed journal JAMA Surgery published a new paper called “Long Term Regret and Satisfaction with Decision Following Gender Affirming Mastectomy,” or in other words, do people regret getting top surgery? Once again, I'm not an expert in any of this, but from what I understand there is a set of standardized surveys that are used to determine regret and satisfaction rates among patients undergoing various procedures and treatments. They've used these in all sorts of studies before. The results from these surveys are called, appropriately, the satisfaction with decision scale score and the decision regret scale score. We will come back to those in a second.

In the study, a group of researchers identified 235 people who had gotten top surgery anywhere between 1990 and 2020 and asked them to fill out the surveys I just mentioned. And of those 235 people, about 60% actually filled in the survey. What the researchers found from those respondents, you will not be shocked to learn, is that virtually everybody was very satisfied with their decision and virtually nobody had regrets. Hashtag #noregrets. Specifically, the average satisfaction with decision scale score was 4.8 out of 5, 5 being completely satisfied, and the average decision regret scale score was 4 out of 100, with zero being zero regrets. In fact, the majority of respondents scored a perfect five out of five satisfaction and a perfect zero out of 100 regret.

Obviously, these results are overwhelmingly positive compared to both other medical decisions and non-medical decisions, and they are also consistent with other peer reviewed studies that have found that the regret rate of gender affirming surgeries is about 1% or less. And for reference, the average rate of regret among all types of surgeries, not just gender-y ones, is 14%.

And yet some people—guess who—are claiming that the results of this study that came out August 9th are not legit or useful for reasons including the following: a) they're not legit because the average respondent was only 3½ years out from top surgery, which might not be long enough to regret your irreversible damage; b) These results are not useful because the median age of participants was 27 and many, many anti-trans bills are ostensibly only about children or youth; and c) these results are not legit because only 60% of people actually filled out the survey. The critics making this argument seem to be hypothesizing that the other 40% of people all had a terrible time with top surgery, and that's why they didn't fill out the survey? And that's such a funny take because I have just never heard of a situation in which people who had a good time chose to fill out a survey while people who had a bad time skipped the entire thing. Like, I love to fill out a survey if I have a complaint that I can shoehorn into the survey. Otherwise, who cares? Have these people ever been on Yelp? Like, this is just not how feedback works.

Secondly, though, and much more importantly, I just looked at so much data comparing the people who chose to fill out the survey versus the people who didn't fill out the survey. There is absolutely no evidence that the two groups are meaningfully different in almost any way. Like if anything, the non-respondents have slightly lower complication and revision rates than the respondents, so I would think they would be even happier somehow. The one significant difference between the respondents and non-respondents in terms of demographics is that the respondents had much higher rates of clinical anxiety and depression diagnoses at the time of their surgeries. Like what does that…mean? Does that mean that anxious and depressed people just sit around filling out medical surveys while everyone else is out living their lives? I don't know. Not really important, but I'm just really stuck on that. Who can know. Who can know.

One last thing, I haven't really seen anyone talk about this yet, but the study was funded by a grant from the American Society of Plastic Surgeons Plastic Surgery Foundation, and I was like “Hmmm.” So I asked friends with relevant experience if that funding source makes the results sketchy in any way. I got really long, thoughtful answers; I'm going to boil them down for you. It's basically like, “Not really. But you know, grain of salt.”

So there you have it. When you see people doing discourse about the survey, you can simply scroll away and spare yourself because you have already suffered through way too much information about this here on this podcast when really you already knew everything you needed to know, which is that almost nobody regrets top surgery. So if you're thinking about getting top surgery, just get the damn top surgery already. This is been this week in gender.

[gentle hi-hat tones play]

We've got a Theyail message for you again this week. Theymails, of course, are tiny messages from listeners that we read on the show, and this message is from Kate. And it says, “Kate Willow from Chattanooga, Tennessee, has a little baby merch store with cute skater boi designs to raise money for their partner’s upcoming top surgery. Please visit www.laursurgery.bigcartel.com to purchase a tee, sweatshirt, mug, dad hat or sticker to support Laur’s gender journey. Shipping to U.S. and Canada, sizes up to 5X and no extra charge for larger sizes. That's laursurgery.bigcartel.com.”

[Gender Reveal theme music starts]

**Tuck:** Soleil Ho is a cultural critic and opinion columnist at the San Francisco Chronicle. Their work has appeared in Bitch, The New Yorker, Eater, and many more publications.

[Gender Reveal theme music ends]

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

Soleil: I mean, I think this is interesting and that it's interesting that you had me on again because last time I was like “Ohh, I'm probably a regular de-regular cis woman,” but now when I say that I'm just so grossed out. [laughs]

Tuck: [laughs] Okay, say more.

Soleil: Yeah, I mean, you know, like many people during the pandemic, I had a little bit of extra time to think about things that I didn't want to think about. So yeah, I guess I am nonbinary, a nonbinary person, and I use they/them pronouns because there's like nothing better for me at the moment and yeah. That's where I am here.

Tuck: We're still waiting for the better pronouns.

Soleil: I know. There's been strikes at the pronoun factory, so I don't want to cross the picket line. It's funny. So I was in therapy during much of the first, I guess, three years of the pandemic and now I don't have money, so I don't do that anymore.

Tuck: Classic.

Soleil: But I remember a conversation I had early on with my therapist where I was like nobody likes being a woman, right? [both laugh]

Tuck: Sorry.

Soleil: And she was like, well, let's unpack that! [laughs] I just thought that everyone just feels uneasy and horrible about being, you know, a gender that they have. I don't know, I just—I had this thought and I think a lot of people do, right, this feeling, this unease, this anxiety doesn't clear this imaginary bar of what you need to clear in order to be like yes, I'm nonbinary. Yes, I'm trans. And I think for me too the convenience part was and at that point when like when we talked, I was already, you know, getting on in my writing career, I had a byline that was pretty consistent and I think for a lot of people, right, the inconvenience of transitioning or changing anything about their name while they have a body of work in the public is really hard. And you know, you know this. And for me that was like, okay, is it worth it? Do people need to know, do they deserve to know? You know, I went through all these sort of stages of maybe just between me and myself. And then I realized that that would just mean being misgendered constantly. And it does start to feel—like once you realize that it doesn't have to be that way, every time it happens, it feels like a paper cut. Each time cemented further and further what I felt like my identity really was supposed to be, or was, you know, how it felt right to me.

Tuck: Yeah, I mean, it does seem like it would be challenging because you were already at your place of work, the Chronicle, when this was happening, I believe. And that means that you had to at some point get the message across to not only your coworkers, but also sort of implicitly your readers. Like, even if you weren't, you know, turning directly to the newspaper and writing in a big column, “Hello. These are my pronouns,” the information is being relayed and like, I don't know how many people realize, like how conservative most newspapers are in terms of like their staff and their readership. Even if you're in a really liberal area like every single conservative person will be reading the newspaper for some reason. [laughs] We could unpack why, you know, in a different podcast. But yeah, I was just wondering, like, how you ended up approaching that and how that shook out.

Soleil: Yeah. The first person I came out to at work was my boss, my direct boss at the time, and I said, you know, I'm sorry. Like this is not a big deal just, big, you know. Like whatever. And I said—

Tuck: No worries if not on my gender, totally.

Soleil: Yeah. Lots of exclamation points. And she immediately just leapt into action, which I thought was like, really admirable and amazing. And she said okay, like I'm going to go ahead and change your bio. I'm going to alert the masthead. I'm going to alert everybody that has anything to do with, like, writing about you in, like, tweets oe whatever. And it was easy. It was so easy. And I felt amazing when that happened, and even our really crotchety editor-in-chief, who is very much a traditionalist in journalism ways, you know, you came from the Washington Post and all that, and he, I think, a few months ago came over to my desk and, like, made a really corny dad joke and like, used the right pronouns, and I was like, wow. Cool, I love it.

What's funny is that I guess my formal or official or whatever, coming out via writing was when I wrote about anti-trans stuff and parental rights stuff in San Francisco and it was funny to craft that sentence like, “As a nonbinary person,” and just felt like so…I definitely questioned myself a lot. Like do they need to know, does it matter? And it did. It really did matter to the story, but I was just, I was scared.

Tuck: Yeah, it's scary. And speaking of, let's just talk about the scariest thing first and then we'll go back from that. But one thing you did recently for your job was go to like an anti-trans dinner event. So I have some questions, and the first one is why did you do this to yourself, Soleil?

Soleil: For content, right?

Tuck: Totally! Love to suffer for content!

Soleil: Yeah, someone sent it to me randomly and he was like, hey, can you figure out what restaurant this is? Like, what do you think? Like, what do you think it is? Because, you know, I was a restaurant critic and some people were speculating on Twitter—trans activists, like local local folks trying to figure out, like, okay, we know the neighborhood, but like, where is it? ‘Cause it was anonymous on the invite. It was a San Francisco Republican-funded dinner to discuss parental rights, right? Like which we now know is sort of a dog whistle for transphobia.

Tuck: Yeah, parental rights. The right to control the body and mind of your child under all circumstances. Totally.

Soleil: Exactly, yes. And I think it was the fact that this dinner was like the location wasn't disclosed. And so you have to pay to get in. So I was like, okay, it's $55 for the buffet and part of it was okay, what do you eat while you discuss gender-affirming surgery in a gross way, right? Like what do you eat and what do you drink when you are talking about Marxism and anime turning your child to the devil? It's like I just wanted to know that also intellectually and just personally. We talk a lot in food media about how food brings people together, right? And like food has this really potent cultural value for a lot of people who want to think very sentimentally about food. And this was a dinner, right? This brought people together. And I wanted to see what the food looked like.

Tuck: Totally. So you obviously, you learned what the food looked like. Other than that, do you feel like you learned anything surprising, valuable, by doing this sort of investigative, what do you call it like, undercover mission?

Soleil: Yeah. Gosh. It wasn't anything that I didn't know already, but it was a confirmation. I guess. Like it, you know, I think a lot of this activism, this sort of rhetoric happens in places that we consider to be far from the coasts or at least far from the sort of blue dots in places. But the fact that this was in near downtown San Francisco was interesting to me and really was about how do they justify this legislation that they're working on, these actions, and I don't know. I just feel like I am surrounded by people who, you know, to use my workplace as an example, right, take it as a given that you can at least be nice to people who are not cis. I wanted to know just how do people talk when we're not in the room? And it was very much, you know, learning about how people, especially women, it was all women who were presenting, right—how white women use sentimentality, use the family, use these ideas that are supposedly sort of universal goods in order to justify things that are just straight-up evil. Being face to face with that was new for me and it was super interesting.

Tuck: Yeah, well, even just on the level of infiltrating and performing in order to be in this space, you were writing a little bit about how you had to think really hard about what to wear. And then there's this line at the very end of your piece that's like “I took off my pearls and wig” and I was like, “Hey. What?” So I gotta ask, what were you wearing to this thing?

Soleil: Yeah, that was the thing my editor wanted me to like, really describe was the whole process of gearing up for this. And yeah, I, you know, at the time my hair was pretty short. And I generally don't wear makeup. Not to say, right, that these are things that are inherently non-feminine, but more just the combination of all of these things, all the aspects of my presentation were—are—generally like not super binary. And in this event where it felt like potentially dangerous, to be honest, I wanted to really—I overcompensated. And I was scared. I was actually super scared. And so I spent the day going to thrift shops and picking out like church lady clothes and I borrowed pearls from a friend who grew up in Appalachia and I grabbed a wig from a friend who has these beautiful—I mean, she has amazing wigs. And I don't know. I looked kind of like, unfashionable and a little bit ridiculous, but not in a way that was not—that didn't fit within the Republican kind of aesthetic. So I just really, I used a lot of like, I looked at TikTok videos of people doing sort of Republican cosplay, which was sort of a thing for a minute and yeah. I guess, in a sense, in the story, it functioned as a way to talk about really performance without having to, you know, because I have to write to a broad audience. So I can't just drop Butler all the time, but to really just pay—show people like, this is gender.

Tuck: Right. I mean, it is kind of delicious in a way that not only did you infiltrate the gathering, but you did do drag at the function. Like if they knew there was a trans person doing drag at the function, what would they have done? Speaking of which, what was the reception to this piece like? I know that you did obviously figure out where the restaurant was because you went there and there was sort of like repercussions on that front.

Soleil: Gosh, yeah, they got a lot of reception on Yelp as places do, and you know, I dropped the name, of course, because it was relevant. But you know, I don't endorse that. Don't do that. But there were a lot of different camps, right? Because like for seasoned trans activists, none of this was new. But there are a lot of people, sadly, for whom this is—all of this rhetoric and all of this stuff was new. They just, for them, the transphobia, just like, is this culture war thing that's happening that's super abstract. And so I got a lot of feedback from people who you know were older, maybe were involved in second wave feminism and activism in the 60s and 70s and they were just shocked that this was happening. And you know, I think that was important actually.

Sometimes I feel really dissatisfied with having to go back to basics with politics a lot in my writing. And that was the thing that frustrated me a lot with doing restaurant criticism is that I just had to explain certain things like cultural appropriation over and over and over again. But it did feel meaningful, even though it's not sexy. It's not super hyper-intelligent or whatever, right, to just remind people that this is transphobia. It's horrible. It's ugly. It is basic and just not very smart. That did mean something, and I'm glad about that.

Tuck: Yeah, I was looking at what you've been writing recently and it's all great, but unfortunately editors do this thing which they have to do where they make every op-ed sound really stupid via the headline, because they like that's how they get you. And so I was like looking through those and then reading your articles, and I was just like, “Oh, you do have to do a lot of, like really hand hold-y 101 stuff,” which I understand why they're asking you to do that and I've hit that a zillion times when I've tried to work with other media where they're like, “No, you have to bring it down way more basic than that. We need to talk to truly like a reader who just awoke on Earth and has never spoken to another human being before.” But yeah, I was wondering, like, are there things that you want to be writing about or have tried to write about or thought about writing about for your column where you're just like, “This is too nuanced, or people will read this in bad faith”?

Soleil: Oh yeah, for sure. I'm sort of in this automation kick right now. I just recently published a story about autonomous vehicles like the driverless cars that got legalized in San Francisco this week, and I'm hoping to do more about it, but people still have a hard time with understanding that this isn't about being against progress, and it is about a grander vision of taking care of society and people and the game at work. But there's another story idea that I have had kicking around in my notion database for a long time, which is about like, what if gender was just optional? What's wrong with that? Like, what's wrong if kids decide to identify as cats? Hypothetically, right? And I don't think—

Tuck: Don’t say that in the Chronicle! [laughs]

Soleil: I know! That's the thing is like, you know, like what if being trans was opt-in? What if people did it because they wanted to?

Tuck: Totally!

Soleil: And like that is because we are like, like with abortion, right. We're speaking on the terms of people who want to read everything in bad faith that we can't have that conversation, which I think is unfortunate because it could be helpful in reimagining society. But. You know. Too spicy!

Tuck: Do you remember Andrea Long Chu’s “My Vagina Won't Make Me Happy” New York Times op-ed? So like that was a lot of the conversation. It was not “Is Andrea right or not?” The conversation was “Should we be saying this out loud in the New York Times or not?” And we absolutely will not be litigating it here, but that’s, you know, that's a lot of the conversations that we're having is not like is this ultimately true? It's like, is this something that, like, we can politically afford to say?

Soleil: Right. Yeah. I think a lot about Isabel Fall, too. Her story was just not—people weren't ready for it, and for listeners, the story, it was called, I think, “I sexually identify as an attack helicopter,” and it was a, it was jokey, but it was also about gender. And there was so much litigation of it because she was a new and sort of anonymous author. People were so defensive about it because they felt like they were being attacked and which, you know, like we are also in a context where that is very likely, but it ended up just pushing her out of the world in general, unfortunately. And I think that is very much part and parcel with this idea that I'm not going to write about where I have a lot of thoughts about this and a lot of concerns and a lot of feelings, but I don't think we're ready for this. I have a lot of leeway right now, but I just worry even if I wrote it with the full support of my editors, I don't think the readership would be able to receive it in the spirit that I intended it with. And not even that, but just like right wing publications and pundits, they have no qualms about cherry picking quotes and turning it into something else. So. I don't want to give it to them.

Tuck: No, absolutely. You're just giving people ammunition to hurt you with, even if you're right. Okay, not to ask a loaded question, but you're writing in the opinion section now, what's your opinion on opinion sections in general?

Soleil: Yeah, I never thought of myself as a journalist, so it made sense to me, to go to the opinion section because I have never made it a secret what I thought about things and what my politics were. And so having to do that, entering the newspaper world, was really hard for me. And so with opinion, you don't have to do that. And I love that. I can just be me.

So traditionally right at newspapers, we think of editorial versus opinion being separate. There’s a separation of church and state. They don't have anything to do with each other. But as we know, readers, including us, don't really see it that way. You know, you're subscribing, let's say, to a paper and you're still pay—you can't decide not to pay for the opinion section and just pay for the news. That's not how it works. You're also, with your subscription, feeling the pockets of people like Pamela Paul or Brett Stevens and that has to give you pause. Right? And it's not so abstract like, you know, maybe someone is anti-trans in the leadership at Nestle, right? And so you're not going to buy like, whatever. Nesquik. It's much more direct than that, right? They're also selling anti-trans Nesquik. So you're like, “Uhhh.” Or like 30% of the Nesquik in the container is anti-trans. So what does that mean? Right? It's all mixed up. It's all jumbled in. It's all going to be in your milk.

So what do you do with that as a journalist? And you know, I don't know, because opinion, I certainly benefit from it existing because I enjoy writing opinion pieces, but. I think there has to be a bigger sort of soul searching within the field of journalism in general to really think about the underlying sort of binary thinking that gave birth to opinion sections, right, that enables us to think that there's even a separation possible, because there's not. There's ideology everywhere, seeping through the pores of every story that we write, regardless of what section it is.

I think the idea of an opinion section is so based on false notions of what journalism is that I think it's not helpful to think about them as discrete entities. I think they're very much a part of a newspaper’s soul, and it's just the part that you admit, you being the newspaper, that you admit being opinionated. I think that's a really important distinction to draw because the rest of it is opinionated. What you cover versus what you don't, right, like what experts you talk to versus which experts you don't. All of that has a lot to do with the reporter's bias or editorial bias. And it's interesting too, because it's based in this idea, this both sides-ism, that is largely falling out of fashion among journalists. We realize that we're always looking for equivalencies, side A and side B, but sometimes there's not. Sometimes something is just right and sometimes something is just wrong. And you're allowed to say that. We really should be allowed to say that.

Tuck: I mean, I gotta say, I have found in my research on this—which is not quantitative, it's very much qualitative of just like, “here are some things I saw”—but I really have found that people write one-sided articles all the time. It's just that the one side is like the status quo and the people in power, you know?

Soleil: The police!

Tuck: Yes, exactly. Exactly. People write an article that's just like, “Here's what the police said. No other sources,” all the time. But you could never do one where it's like our only source on this crime is the guy who did the crime. Like obviously that's fucked up. I would read it, but yeah, I mean, yeah, it's very obvious. And then the other thing that makes it obvious is when people such as yourself, but many, many, many others will move between the opinion section and the like, quote-unquote “editorial” section. But the whole time they were in the editorial section, unlike you, they were pretending that they didn't have any opinions. And it's like, oh, it's so wild that you woke up one day at the age of 56 and had your first opinion and now you're in the opinion section like obviously like, shocker, you had them the whole time.

Soleil: Right. I truly don't believe that objectivity is possible. Just like straight up. I'm really good at compartmentalizing, but I know that my subjectivity leaks through every decision I make. It's funny that you say that too, because I'm working on a story that will maybe be published by the time this goes up about the tenets of journalism and how they've kind of paved the way for a transphobia takeover in the U.S., so that'll be fun.

Tuck: Well, throughout your career, as you mentioned you have had to talk about cultural appropriation 1000 times, and I've heard you talk a few times now in other interviews about how all of the work you did talking about cultural appropriation and racist food media and really like bringing that into the consciousness of many people. Now, you're maybe looking at it like maybe I didn't get to the heart of why that was important; maybe that was a distraction from the real issues; maybe that shouldn’t have been my whole thing. And I feel like it was really an important step to get people thinking, even if it like, in retrospect we look back and we're like, “Maybe that was overly simplistic, this thing I was doing,” and this thing that I was thinking about I have been thinking about a lot, which is much worse, so don't get offended when I compare that you to this—is you remember in like 2014 when everyone was wearing those like hats from Wildfang that said like “Feminist” on the brim?

Soleil: Oh no. Yes?

Tuck: And like the Wildfang, like “Wild feminist” shirt? It's like, unfortunately, that was like a step that I guess I mean not Wildfang specific, like they didn't need the profits from that, but like the thing where in 2014 all of a sudden Beyoncé et al were like “I am a feminist and I'm gonna talk about it”? We look back like 10 years later and we're like, that is so ridiculous. Why would you need to do that? But like, and unfortunately, it seems like you kind of did. Like, you had to get to the point as a society where we were like willing to wear these stupid hats so that we could get past that and be like, wow, it was so cringe that we ever wore the stupid hats??? And so I think similarly, it's like we could all be like, wow, it's so funny how much time we talked about, like cultural appropriation in noodles. But I think actually it was like a really important step. And my question is, what do you think like the steps after that are once you have accomplished understanding that the New York Times has been weird about boba tea, but maybe that's not the real issue? Like what are the steps after that?

Soleil: Worldwide socialist revolution.

Tuck: [laughs] I love that. Yeah. One to two. There's nothing in the middle. Perfect.

Soleil: I mean, real talk. That's what it all should lead to. I mean, that's the root for me. That's been the root this whole time. I was constantly saying cultural appropriation isn't bad in itself, but it's about money. It's about whose labor is valued and whose intellectual work is valued. And when you really get into that, for me, it's just about, okay, let's rethink the financialization of everything because cultural appropriation only matters if precarity is the way that society is like organize, right, as far as like economic precarity. And if we didn't have that, no big deal, make all the curry or whatever the fuck you want. But if like everyone's taken care of, great.

Tuck: Totally. I don't know if this is related or not, but there is this anarchist book called Abolish Restaurants that argues that—

Soleil: I have that one, yeah.

Tuck: Totally. Okay, for the for the listener, there's this anarchist book called Abolish Restaurants that argues that we should abolish restaurants because basically there's no, like, ethical way to do restaurants. Like one of the last lines is like “The struggle of restaurant workers is ultimately for a world without restaurants or workers.” And I agree with the workers part. But then I'm like…but restaurants. So I was wondering, what do you think about abolishing restaurants?

Soleil: I think the concept that the restaurant is it's a solution to urges that we have in society, right? You want a place to meet people, you want to share food, you want to eat something new, you want to potentially rub up against strangers, to paraphrase Regina Spektor. You know, there are things that we crave. We crave beauty and elegance and also fun and chaos. And restaurants give us those things, but they don't have to be the only things that give us those things. So within capitalism, yeah, restaurants are a solution to those urges, and I think we can think more expansively. So I don't think we need restaurants inherently as they are. You know what I mean? Like, I think that we can find other ways to satisfy those wants and needs.

Tuck: All right, I'm going to need something in there that doesn't involve me cooking, but I'll accept any sort of solution beyond that. [laughs]

Soleil: Well, people want to provide food for other people, I think. Like I love cooking for friends. I love cooking for people, new friends, strangers. If I could do that and not have to worry about money, I would still do it. You know? If I had no reason to charge, of course I would do it. I do that all the time. So I think, Tuck, in that world, you will find the people like me who just love to watch people eat the food they make. I think that's not going away.

Tuck: No, I think you're right. I guess I have one more question for you kind of in this category and then we'll go to just pure chaos from there. But you know, you've talked about cultural preparation a lot over the years and I was listening to this interview you did a while back when you were still doing food writing and this host clearly thought that they were picking up on your vibe but kept being like totally, isn't it so important that food be authentic? And finally you were like, well, authenticity is like kind of fascism. And I really love that. Can you talk more about sort of authenticity as fascism in this sort of food space?

Soleil: Oh my god. Yeah. So to me it has a lot to do with nationalism, too, and fascistic ideas of home and authenticity to me feels very binaristic. It's a way of sorting out objects, people, whatever, in these terms that are very situated in ethnicity and borders and everyone's own memory and sentimentality. And sentimentality is very selfish. It's very much centered on yourself. And to me that's very fascistic. As an idea of, like, something that you have to enforce as being authentic or not. It awakens a little cop inside of you, right, of like, “This is authentic. My grandma made it this way. Not like the way this guy's making it.” Right? Like that is enforcement that is making rules that in the end, like, do they bring anyone in? Is it inclusive? Is it expansive? Is it generous? No! I don't think authenticity is a generous idea at all. And that, to me, makes it very suspect, I guess.

I acknowledge, too, that it matters to people, right? It matters to have your culture represented. It matters like, you know, if you think about authentic details in like Moana by Disney, right? If you think about like Polynesian culture being represented in that way, like it's nice to to be seen. But you know, I think it is—especially with food, I think it can be really indulgent, too, of our worst sort of impulses regarding policing the behavior of other people.

Tuck: Totally. When I asked you what you might want to talk about, you said that there was a queer Japanese visual novel that completely changed your life, and I want to hear about that!

Soleil: Oh! Okay, it's called Umineko no Naku Koro ni, and it translates roughly to “When the Seagulls Cry” and it has eight chapters and it's a murder mystery game and—you know like Let's

Plays? You know what those are?

Tuck: No. [laughs]

Soleil: Okay, so there's this whole genre of content on the Internet where people play through games and you watch them, maybe in videos or otherwise it's text, and then you just read along with them. So I encountered a Let's Play of this game on the Something Awful forums, which is a very nerdy forum…

Tuck: Recently?

Soleil: Uh…no, in 2016!

Tukc: Okay. All right.

Soleil: I've been a member of something Awful since 2003. Also. Side note. So.

Tuck: It feel like it's been coming up a lot lately and I don't know if it's because a lot of social media has died, but I feel like all of a sudden people are really talking about Something Awful forums again.

Soleil: There's a lot of people that came out of that, including me, including—I'm trying to think of other Something Awful people, but there's a lot of us out there in positions of power—but— unfortunately—but there was this Let's Play of this and I picked it up. I just started reading it randomly because I was living in Mexico and depressed and you know, it was 2016 and, you know, things were bad. And I was just so confused and inspired by it.

It's about this rich family in Japan, and it's sort of modeled after And Then They Were One by Agatha Christie where they're on this island, they're cut off from civilization and everyone dies. And you're like, okay, what happened? And each episode is another sort of instance of this, the same family, same setting, but they died in different ways. Right? So it's like just a different sort of roll of the dice. And this whole time you're trying to figure out who's the culprit? Like, why is this happening, what's going on? And there's a witch in the game who says it's just magic and one of the characters, the sort of character that you follow, one of the sons in the family, is trying to prove that it wasn't magic, but in order to prove that, he would have to admit that someone in his family murdered everyone, which he's resistant to, so it's just like constant sort of back and forth between like fantasy and mystery and reality. There's so much like subtext, but also like, just blatant text about gender and about identity, and just like what patriarchy does to people and how it just ruins lives. Which I love. It's so hard to talk about without spoiling everything, but it is probably one of the best works of postmodern fiction I've ever read. It's better than Infinite Jest. It really does fuck with your brain, and there's so many people that I have met or talked to who read it and came out trans on the other side. So there's something to it.

Tuck: Wow. That's incredible. Great news for everyone. Um, you said once in an interview that you never felt like the name Soleil fit you and you don't feel like a Soleil. Have you ever thought about being called something else?

Soleil: So like a lot of people whose families aren't from the U.S., I have another name that I use with people that really intimately know me. So I do use that name for people that are like, super, super, super close with me, which does feel better because, which is—it's funny. As someone who was born in the United States, I don't have an association with the meaning of my name, necessarily. My Vietnamese name is Vy and ironically, I like it more, right? It feels just better. It feels more comfortable, but in Vietnamese it also means feminine [laughs], ironically, but, you know, it's, I like it. I like it. It's like, my family calls me that. Soleil just feels, one, very, like colonize-y, but also just really, I don't know. I just, it's strange. I'm stuck in it right now because it's my professional name, I guess. But in real life, a lot of my, all my family and my like super, super close friends call me Vy.

Tuck: Another thing on your list of things to talk about was San Francisco's interesting subculture of law and order gay men. We've all seen pics, but what were you thinking when you wrote that?

Soleil: Yeah, it's a column that I've been mowing over a lot. I've talked to folks in groups like Gay Shame—love them—about this and you know, as a counterpoint to gay Pride and the commercialization of Pride. And so we have a lot of leadership who are white, cis, gay men here. Which is, you know, great! Love that, sort of. And you know, there's a lot of history that springs from Harvey Milk, our first openly gay supervisor. And yet, right, there's this really fascinating divide between younger generations of maybe more diverse queer people politically, and the cis gay men that largely have power in San Francisco. Not to say, right, that their queer identity doesn't matter or that, you know—just the basic sort of idea that like we maybe we shouldn't have a homophobic government policy. Great. Love that.

But to me, it really came to a head during the—what was it? 2022 Pride? When there was a big debate in San Francisco about letting cops march in uniform, right? We were coming out of the 2020 uprisings and people were having conversations about policing in all of its sort of manifestations. And the mayor was very much like if the police don't march, I don't march—that sort of thing. And there was a huge divide between the younger generation of people who were like, you know, politically activated by the uprisings and then, like, the older white gay men who said, like, this is ridiculous. Right? Like, they were very much in favor of the cops marching in uniform. Because they saw that as like, you know, the state recognizing their legitimacy and having power in, like in the state’s like, violent arm.

And it's kind of come out, right, that like there are a few really prominent white gay male politicians here that are very pro-policing, very anti-unhoused people, and there's not a lot of discussion about the fact that there are many queer people who are unhoused here as well who will be possibly at the brunt of crackdowns on homelessness. And it's just, there's a lot of questioning, right, of like who is—like who's included when we talk about the LGBT community, right? Like is it only housed people? Is it only rich people, only white people, or is it everyone, right? Like what do we do when Banko Brown, a young Black trans man, is murdered in broad daylight for allegedly shoplifting $14 of candy, and then we turn around and say that we are the best city for trans youth in the country like the next week, right? Like, what do we do with that? Like, there's so much there that is, like, fascinating to me and also tragic when we think about who belongs with community and how we define the community. I mean, to me that's a constant question with every sort of demographic: how we redefine this sort of authentic self with regard to identity.

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

Soleil: Oh, god, yeah. So in my ideal world, gender would be opt-in or it would be like those character creators in like, Baldur’s Gate. [laughs]

Tuck: Totally.

Soleil: Like Skyrim. I feel like maybe everyone just starts off nonbinary and then if you feel strongly in one direction or the other or in another direction, you can opt in to that. I think that's just great. I would love an end to transmedicalism. I would love an end to feeling any sort of pressure to look any sort of way, period. And I will do anything I can to get us there, because that does really matter to me that we just accept that and and really like, do meaningful things to end sexual violence and like, end the necessity of single gender anything. Because to me, that's just—it's so reactive and I recognize the need for, you know, safe spaces, but like, what if the world was safe? How do we make the world safe?

[Gender Reveal theme music starts]

**Tuck:** That's going to do it for this week’s show. You can find Soleil at soleilho.com and read their work at SFChronicle.com. You might need to wiggle around a paywall a little bit to read it, but you can do it. I trust you. Soleil also has hosted a number of their own podcasts over the years, including Extra Spicy and Racist Sandwich. So if you're looking to spelunk into the archives for more conversations like this one, that's a good place to start.

You can of course find us at genderpodcast.com, where we have transcripts of every episode, and if you want even more Gender Reveal in your life, you can join us at patreon.com/gender, where we share our weekly newsletter and monthly bonus episodes. We also, of course, have a live show coming up in one week at the Bell House in Brooklyn featuring Mattie Lubchansky, Casey Plett, Fran Tirado, Kendra Wells. Get your tickets now: bit.ly/speedreading23.

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 will be back next week with more feelings about gender.

[Gender Reveal theme music ends]

Soleil: And I was like, wow, this is good. This is good. I don't hate myself.

Tuck: Huge.

Soleil: Weird! Yeah, it's sort of like in Dragon Ball Z, where these characters are training in super, super high gravity chambers in order to maximize their strength, and then when you leave the chamber into regular gravity, you're like, “Ah, that's great.” I mean, that's a very long-winded way of saying that a weight was lifted, right? But. Uh. [laughs]