Tuck: Cis normative sex shops suck. Trans-owned Aphrodisia Boutique is different. They stock body safe sex toys and lingerie for all genders, as well as packers and binders, breast forms and gaff panties, and books on sex, gender, and relationships. Shop online at aphrodisia.boutique and use the offer code gender reveal for 15% off your order. Or visit their store in Port Orchard, Washington.

[Gender Reveal theme music plays]

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

[Gender Reveal theme music ends]

Tuck: Hey everyone, hope you've all been hanging in there. This week on the show I'm very excited to share my conversation with multimedia artist Shing Yin Khor. Shing has made books, web comics, games, tarot decks, t-shirts, marionettes, divination tools, large immersive installations, and Animal Crossing-based performance art, among other things. And in this episode, we talk about the themes that connect those disparate works, such as…

Shing: ...The long human tradition of grabbing some clay and just making a little guy.

Tuck: We also talk about American mythmaking, activist burnout, Burning Man hot takes, and a very fun, very specific competition that Shing took part in.

Shing: For the sake of this contest, we classified all giant lumberjack statues as Paul Bunyan.

Tuck: Two quick things about the interview. One is just that I encourage you to go look through some of Shing’s work as you're listening or before you listen, because I think this episode will just be more satisfying to you if you have even a vague concept of what we're talking about. You can see that at shingkhor.com or on Instagram @sawdustbear.

The other thing is that we recorded this episode like a month ago, just wanted to let you know. In case anything seems like at all tonally off, that's probably why. And one more thing before we get going, I know we've been doing a lot of segments about Cecilia Gentili lately. I just wanted you to know that we ended up doing a spontaneous one-day fundraising initiative where we matched all donations to the Cecilia Legacy Fund, and we ended up donating $9,000, which is so cool. So thank you very much if you donated to Cecilia's Legacy Fund or if you have donated to our mutual aid fund at some point in the past, we couldn't do it without each and every one of you. Just wanted to say thanks again. And now it's time for This Week in Gender.

[This Week in Gender chime plays]

Tuck: This week is the second episode in a row in which our guests and I get into a little bit of like memoir criticism during the interview. So I figured what better time to commission a review of an exceptionally critiquable trans memoir. As such, it is an honor to pass today's This Week in Gender segment over to Krys Malcolm Belc, who is not only a Gender Reveal alum, but also a published memoirist and a bit of a trans memoir expert. Here's Krys.

Krys: I read, teach, and write memoir because I believe in the power of telling stories about individual lived experience and in the power of reading those stories. It's a warm and fuzzy way of thinking, but I really do think it. Then unfortunately enter some of the life stories that make it to the market. I get frustrated with the way readers, writers, and publishers mutually reinforce a desire for human stories to center individual accomplishment in the face of circumstance. A successful memoir in this paradigm stresses overcoming a hero's journey. The problem with this is that stories of individual accomplishment don't do much to change structural oppression. They just make us feel nice for a few hours.

Caitlyn Jenner wasn't much on my radar when her memoir The Secrets of My Life came out in 2017, so I'm late to it. It was ghost written by Buzz Bissinger, best known for his book Friday Night Lights. Briefest summary of who Jenner is. In 1976, she won gold in the men's decathlon, an unhinged two-day Olympic mega event, and maintained minor celebrity in the 80s, 90s, and early aughts. She married Kris Jenner in 1991, appeared in Keeping Up With the Kardashians, and publicly came out as a trans woman in 2015. She ran for governor of California. Jenner's estimated net worth is $100 million.

She's a registered Republican, but said of her chaotic candidacy to replace Gavin Newsom, “I don't like labels, you know?” That quote captures why this memoir has weaseled its way into my consciousness and refused to leave. It's an example of how the language of identity can be weaponized by a celebrity, large air quotes, “fiscal conservative,” to excuse acting against trans interests. “I'm not a one-issue voter confined solely to LGBTQ issues,” she writes in her memoir. “I did not transition to become a liberal Democrat.”

While Jenner notes that trans people have it pretty bad in the U.S., she says she believes that she can teach fellow conservatives the quote, “Golden Rule,” that trans people should not be judged on moral or religious grounds, but rather treated as fellow human beings. But will that give people jobs or health insurance? On the sentence level, the book is quite engaging. In a lot of ways, it's what we expect. It follows her childhood to transition arc. There's therapists, hormones, surgeries, and awkward conversations about her gender.

Jenner's a weird kid, obsessed with figuring out how to be, quote, “cool,” which she weirdly thinks means learning to play the accordion. She realizes she has a knack for sports, especially football and track. From there, it's fast forward to becoming a storied athlete who represents, as she says, “the America of hard work and realizing your dreams in which we all believe.” Jenner's timeline is complicated, something I didn't know before I read the book. She starts taking transition steps in the 80s, beginning hormones and electrolysis. But then she detransitions, overwhelmed by tabloid speculation and rejection from people in her life. It's a common but under-published part of trans life, stepping out and then back. I felt a lot for us all then for this world we have to work with. But I also detested the connection I felt with her during these moments.

I was pretty surprised by the frank and extensive discussions of what I would describe as sexual awkwardness. “I'm a prude,” Jenner states plainly. She writes that she's had few partners and is overwhelmed trying to untangle what she calls her sexual preference for women in the context of her trans identity. Frankly, I think she needs a trans group chat. I snark posted on Instagram through much of the memoir, especially about her disconnect from people who are not wealthy white celebrities. When the woman giving her electrolysis moves, Jenner is able to use the airplane she owns to resume her sessions. “I've always loved flying,” she writes, “and have owned a plane of one kind or another since the Olympics.”

There are random trans cameos in this book, notably from other Boomers. She talks about Kate Bornstein's work for a hamfisted minute and later recalls Jennifer Finney Boylan cautioning her about airing controversial beliefs in public. But Jenner, painting herself after all as a renegade worthy of a memoir, is resolute. “We insist on tolerance, but only to an extent,” she says of the trans community, a nebulous force she reckons with as she fights to talk about what really matters to her: how good the movie The Danish Girl truly is.

My biggest take on this memoir is that so much of the first section of the book is about not being ostracized for being queer, but rather for being dyslexic. Jenner's difficulty reading was formative. It separated her from family and peers and it drove her towards sports. It continues to loom large as she moves into public speaking to cash in after the Olympics. This would offer her an opportunity to do something bigger with her memoir if she was another kind of writer. But Jenner, cleaving to the projects of celebrity and conservative politicians and much of trans memoir, isn't interested in the project of collective liberation.

Claiming disability solidarity or noting the huge overlap of trans and neurodivergent groups and interests, that would be way outside the scope of this sad little book. The book made me smile in a sick sort of way sometimes, and it's great joke fodder. But in the end, I despaired. Is this the genre we've created? Close to the end, Jenner, trying to make some kind of statement about how she's still learning, says, “When I became Caitlyn in March 2015, I didn't wake up and immediately have an urge to cook and clean or sew or do any of the tasks that women are still assumed to do in a society still dominated by men. Nor, for that matter, did I run to the bookstore and buy books by such landmark feminists as Betty Friedan and Gloria Steinem.”

I'm sorry, what? But actually, I think I know what. She just dunked in the net trans memoir made. It's all about the liberation of one, not all, since gender is in you and not a material reality. A rugged American trans individual can be anything: a cop, a soldier, a reality television star turned craven conservative politician. They can get 1.1% of the vote in the California gubernatorial election. Okay, that's all I have. If you need me, I'll be off trying to find my starry-eyed love of memoir again.

Tuck: Krys is the author of The Natural Mother of the Child. You can find him at krysmalcolmbelc.com. This has been This Week in Gender.

[This Week in Gender chime plays]

Tuck: We've got a Theymail message for you today. Theymails are little messages from listeners, there is a link in the show notes for you to submit your own. This week's message is from Alex Nolos and it says: Do you need gay FTM literature in your life? Find it at Cut and Save the Line, the debut novel by Alex Nolos. This book tells all, from bitter fag drama to drag to theater school intrigue and the FTM vlogging scene. Available on bookshop.org and as a pay what you want ebook via AlexNolos.com/castl. Okay, one more ad, and then we'll get to the interview. Here we go.

[Upbeat electronic music plays]

Tuck: Believe it or not, I'm a pretty private person. I don't like to share intimate details with people I just met. I certainly don't want strangers to be able to look up my home address or my family members names or any other personal info really. And that's why I continue to use Delete Me. Delete Me routinely scans hundreds of data broker websites to make sure that my personal information is not easily available online. Delete Me can also scrub info tied to dead names and other aliases. You can join today at joindeleteme.com/genderreveal and use the code TUCK20 to get 20% off your entire order. That is TUCK20 for 20% off at joindeleteme.com/genderreveal.

[Gender Reveal main intro plays]

Tuck: Shing Yin Khor is a cartoonist, game designer, woodworker, and chaos machine maker of things.

[Gender Reveal main intro ends]

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

Shing: You know, I knew this question was coming. Of course I knew it was coming. Non-binary on paper.

Tuck: Totally.

Shing: I mean, we all answer it this way, right? It's kind of the standard non-binary answer. It's non-binary but also sort of gender agnostic, kind of gender repellent. I took on non-binary, basically, the moment I heard the word, it was like finally a word to describe this, which is kind of more of a void, like a gender void, like gender miasma. But I am so grateful for the word non-binary. I mean, I started using they/them pronouns, basically, when my first book came out — when I was like, okay, I'm just going to use they/them pronouns going forward. But I didn't do it slowly. Like I didn't have the, you know, the she/her, to she/they, to they/them pipeline. So I was like, I'm not going to do that. I'm just going to go straight to they/them. But just didn't tell a lot of people. Just started using it professionally. And obviously my queer friends caught on. I made no announcements about it whatsoever. So in a sense, it's been a very lengthy transition to being, I guess, officially non-binary. But it's also been really lovely just kind of seeing who's picked up on it. Queer friends, of course. And who haven't, even though at this point, it's, you know, out there.

Tuck: Isn't it funny how sometimes we turn it into like a little test to see who's paying attention?

Shing: Oh, absolutely. And I feel like I could have made it easy, right? I could have made an announcement. I could have been like, it's national coming out day. Surprise! But I didn't want to. No, that's not as fun.

Tuck: No, I relate to that a lot. And I think it is both a reasonable thing to reject the concept of having to come out and also something that maybe I need to go to therapy about, about not directly asking for things. So we'll just set that aside and talk about something else.

Shing: It’s there, I mean, I will also add that there is, I think, a bit of a racial element to that, where the Western coming out story, at least when I was growing up, was very much rooted in a ‘I am now going to sit down with my family and I need to let them know the true me, the true person I have inside.’ And this, of course, goes back to, you know what, I think... a lot of Asian families really need to go to therapy. But, I do not feel comfortable revealing many parts of my true self to my family. And queerness, gender, honestly, isn't even that high on that scale of things I would prefer not to reveal. So I think culturally, it actually does not matter to me whether certain people in my life, certain people in my family are ever going to perceive me as queer or not a woman. There's lots of other things I'm not going to tell them.

Tuck: Totally. Like, if they don't know me already, why start now? With like this hard semantic language thing.

Shing: Yeah. Yeah. And it's a lot of stuff like, don't you want them to know who you are before they die? And I’m like, they've had like 40 years.

Tuck: Exactly. You could look if you wanted. That’s my attitude. You can look it up if you want to. Okay. But speaking, though, of how you grew up, where you grew up, you grew up in Malaysia and in the Philippines, and then you moved to the US as a teen. I was wondering, growing up in those three different places, what messages did you get about gender and gender roles? Like, how did they vary from place to place?

Shing: I think in Malaysia, the concept of queerness wasn't really present for me at all. Looking back at it now, there were certainly people in my life that were, you know, gal pals.

Tuck: Totally.

Shing: There were people in my life who were like, you know, older women who had never dated men who preferred to live alone, and they were just kind of thought of as strange, eccentric. And some of them, you know, still may not be queer. They may not be out, but there definitely were lanes to be in, in terms of gender. When I got to the Philippines, weirdly enough, that actually felt culturally, maybe not a place where queerness was accepted, but it was acknowledged. I don't recall gay slurs in Malaysia. They may have been around, but maybe I was just too young at the time to experience it. In the Philippines, there were gay slurs. It was gay slurs, but it was also just commentary. Like, some words were not considered slurs. They were just statements. It's ‘you’re gay’ versus like, ‘haha, you're gay.’ Just ‘you’re gay. All right.’ So, gender in the Philippines, while there was obviously a lot of repression to it, felt definitely acknowledged. And also, you know, my closest friends at the time, there was like a group of three of us, we worked on comics together. We all kind of made our first comics together. We were like, you know, 13,14. Both of them have come out as queer. So even though we were not all out to each other at that point at time, you know, you have queer community without necessarily knowing it, because you're all just little youthful queers fumbling around in life. So I actually felt very comfortable in the Philippines with my particular group of friends.

And then in the United States, I landed straight into private Christian school, actually. And the attitudes to those two words, queerness and gender were entirely what you might expect. So definitely somewhat repressive, not enthusiastic about acknowledging queerness, or really any deviant gender roles or any alternative paths actually to a certain extent. I remember so, so clearly, I think he was the class president or definitely someone in a homecoming king type role. And I remember in senior year, he got a tongue ring. And the reason he got a tongue ring was because he said he didn't want people to think of Christians as being like, you know, staid and boring. He wanted people to know that Christians could be kind of cool and punk. And that was a sort of rebellious attitude that I experienced at the time. So you know, bless his heart.

Tuck: It seems pretty edgy, honestly. I feel like tongue rings are like one of the most hardcore things you could do as a teen in the 2000s.

Shing: Definitely. But it was definitely, you know, showmanship over philosophy.

Tuck: Totally. Totally. Okay, so you moved to the US as a teen. And I think this gives you a sort of common immigrant lens of like, hey, so I got here and I'm able to see some of the stuff that y'all raised here from birth haven't seen. And you know, this is wild, right? And so a lot of your work, I feel like is really exploring elements of America that I just don't think about really in any meaningful way. And one of the ways that shows up is your work and your thoughts around American myth building. So what is so compelling to you about American mythbuilding? And what do you even mean when you say that?

Shing: Here's the thing is when you grow up outside of America, America in and of itself has a certain mythos to it. And you're not invulnerable to the kind of depression era messaging of the West as a promised place. So I was a weird kid, like, growing up. I really like John Steinbeck, probably, you know, one of those kids who was like, no, Grapes of Wrath is my favorite book. It's like, what are you talking about? You're 12. It's a good book, but.... So sort of the myth of the American dream was something that I was exposed to at a very young age. And when I moved to America, obviously this I moved to America in ‘99. And you know, you are exposed to American media, which I actually didn't consume that much of. Everyone knows what America looks like. And part of it was a bit of that bubble breaking, you know, watching so much media about American schools and American high schools, and then getting there and realizing, oh, the American educational system is actually not very good. Absolutely not. But at the same time, I've always been into myths like, you know, into Greek myths, into Norse myths. And I think it was a natural curiosity to get to America and be like, well, what are the American myths? And that ultimately led me to Paul Bunyan, who I am slightly obsessed over as an American myth, because the myth of Paul Bunyan, like kind of follows this vein of very commercial American marketing, in a way that feels so holy and purely American to me. And as I kept on digging, it ended up being a really interesting vein of research, because I ended up learning more about logging camps, which really tied in into my interest in learning more about, you know, early Chinese labor, really early immigrant labor in logging camps. So that was all super interesting and fascinating to me.

Tuck: Yeah, and you wrote a whole book about it.

Shing: I wrote a whole book!

Tuck: But I'm not gonna ask you about that. I'm gonna ask you about Paul Bunyan more, because you said that you felt like Paul Bunyan felt ripe for a queering. What, how are we gonna queer Paul Bunyan?

Shing: Okay, so I, well, I've sort of queered Paul Bunyan. There's like a little 25 cent like pornographic zine that I've made about Paul Bunyan that's floating around in some places. So here's the deal with how the Paul Bunyan myth took form. So first it was in the oral history. It was a story that was passed around in logging camps that were filled with mostly men. And these oral histories, you know, they were not long stories. They were more like little jokes passed between campmates like at dinner time at bunks. However, when these myths started being collected and they started being put on paper, the people who collected these myths were largely scholars. And at best, they were, you know, city folk. One of the very first academic papers written about Paul Bunyan myths was done by a recent college graduate, a woman, her name was Bernice Stewart. And she goes out into these logging camps to collect these stories. And even she acknowledges in the paper itself, she's like, look, I am, you know, an early 20s woman walking into logging camps and asking me to tell them stories, to tell me stories. So everyone's of course censoring themselves. Like everyone is telling stories that's going to be suitable for a woman in her early 20s. Everyone's, you know, talking to a city scholar coming in to collect these stories. So they are all self censoring themselves. But it just feels so, so incredibly obvious to me. A bunch of lonely men in logging camps, like telling stories about a 20 foot tall, brilliant lumberjack. Surely there's been jokes about Paul Bunyan's dick, but we do not have these stories. So I mostly feel that Paul Bunyan is ripe for a queering based on a mission where we know the jokes that happen on construction sites, and people have not changed.

Tuck: Wow. Well, I mean, this puts a new twist on, I know that you had a competition with your friend, wants to see who could see the most Paul Bunyan statues in a period of time. So I was going to be like, Hey, what was that like? What's your favorite? But I'm like, does any of them feature like his huge dick or?

Shing: I feel like I can very confidently say that there are no Paul Bunyan statues in North America that feature Paul Bunyan's giant dick.

Tuck: Well, we got to fix that.

Shing: But the Babe the Blue Ox at the trees of mystery in Klamath, California, I believe does have giant nuts. And that's as close as we're going to get.

Tuck: Yeah. How many Paul Bunyan's did you see on your quest to see the Paul Bunyan's?

Shing: I think I've been to about 20. And my friend Jesse got to about 30. So he technically won.

Tuck: I really had no idea there were that many Paul Bunyans running around.

Shing: There were so many. There's a map I can send you. I've made a map. I mean, the reason why there are so many. And for the sake of this contest, we classified all giant lumberjack statues as Paul Bunyan. So the reason why there are so many of them is because of muffler men, which were a commercial fiberglass statue you could purchase as a business and put in front of your, I don't know, your muffler shop, your restaurant, whatever. And the first model of that was the Paul Bunyan model. So, quite a few of those ended up around America. There are different models. The regular one has no beard. The Paul Bunyan one has a beard. Another distinctive element of the Paul Bunyan muffler man is that he has his pants tucked into his boots, which is a very lumberjack-y kind of thing. And then there are some other somewhat less politically correct ones these days. So we won't, like, delve too much into those. But there's actually been a bit of a muffler man renaissance in recent years. There's a group of people, they're called American Giants, who have been, they do the most work, into both researching the history of muffler men and also building new ones. So they have new muffler men molds. And there's actually several new muffler men popping up around Route 66.

Tuck: So that's all very, very exciting. Yeah, thrilled for you. Well, you made this book, The American Dream? about your journey on Route 66, which was almost a decade ago now, I think. So if you're going to do it again, see the new muffler men, what do you think would be different about it? There's, like, obviously new muffler men and maybe like political differences. But I'm sure like you're the way that you would experience and think about things might be different now too.

Shing: Yeah, I mean, a lot has happened in a decade, right? It's like when I said when that book came out was when I began identifying publicly as non-binary. And it was also, you can see in the book, it's the pre-Trump era. There's an image in it of my dog peeing on a Trump sign, although he hadn't even won the Republican primary at that point in time. He was still sort of in joke mode. And first of all, I don't know if I would drive all of Route 66 in the same way as I used to, because I do know that some of these towns now very openly fly Confederate flags. And I think I would be more worried for my personal safety than I did at the time, both obviously at that time being younger, being more like literally nothing so we're gonna happen to me. And even though I do still feel that way about myself as a person, I still have a little bit of like, I'm fine. It is just so much clearer to me that, you know, things suck for queer people that I know, for people of color that I know, all these things are happening so much closer to home than I would expect. You know, my partner's trans. It's like, well, if we did this road trip together, which bathroom would they use in order to not get beaten at a gas station? So there are things that I have to think about now when doing trips like this. And at the same time, I've really just spent a lot more time thinking about the failures of America, the failures of America to live up to the promises. And I don't just mean like, you know, what's carved on the Statue of Liberty, but in a sense, I do. I do mean that. I do mean that. America has failed us in so many ways.

Tuck: Okay, I want to keep talking about this but it's the gender podcast. I can't let this slide. The way you said my partner's trans - so you don't describe yourself as trans? Or is that just a loose inflection? Because you're like, my *partner's* trans.

Shing: Yeah, no. I think I am still in that phase where I do feel somewhat awkward describing myself as trans. And part of that is like, yes, I feel trans inside. And I'm also still so very well aware of my passing privilege. And especially in the context I was talking about, I am trans in a way that if I were willing to just swallow being misgendered, which look at a gas station, yes, I am.

Tuck: Of course.

Shing: I'd be fine.

Tuck: So visibly, where I think visibly trans is maybe what we're talking about here.

Shing: Visibly trans. Yeah. Like, yes, I am trans, but I acknowledge that I'm not visibly trans. And I will admit that identifying as trans was something that took a real long time, man, like I think I identified as non-binary for like what six, seven years. It's like only I think in the last year that I've been like, trans is an okay descriptor for me and my gender experience. Because I guess in my brain, it always sounded like transitioning to something. Yeah. And I was like, well, I would prefer to transition to nothing.

Tuck: Yeah, transition out of it?

Shing: I'm trying to transition to gender void! So like, is that a transition? In the sense that like death is a transition. So yeah, like transition in terms of death, not transition in terms of like a binary.

Tuck: Grounding your gender in terms of death is so hardcore. Having a great time here. This is so good. [Both laugh] Okay, before I lose this entirely, I wanted to ask one question about the American Dream book. Because you write in the book, “Like most travel writers, the center of my writing is the overwrought trip of finding myself. I stand at the center of my own narrative. I'm supposed to find joy and roadside attractions to exuberantly proclaim my love of adventure, but I'll always be narcissistically writing about myself.” And I love to ask people about memoir. And in this case, I get to ask you about travel writing too. So were there are certain tropes of this type of literature, this type of writing that you are trying to avoid or subvert when you're putting that book together?

Shing: Yeah, I think the thing that I definitely noticed that I was doing with this, something that I really hate with travel memoir is the way travel writers often just decide to become a tourist in other people's lives. And I think this is true of all memoir. It's the treatment of other people as content. And weirdly, I do feel that a way around that is to be very narcissistic about your writing, because it's like ethically speaking, the way I do not mind other people's lives for contents is to turn that lens in, very acutely, on myself. So if I do end up spending a lot of time in my own brain, it's like, well, you know what, I own perfect copyright to my own brain. So I feel comfortable in that space. And that said, I have been writing a lot less memoir.

Tuck: Yeah, well, I was going to ask you, so you've written a lot about identity and about food also. You won an Ignatz for that. But then in this 2021 comic, I think on catapult that I really liked, you wrote, “I don't want to write about the diaspora. I don't want to write about the sacrifices of my parents. I don't want to write another food story. I don't want to draw another pair of chopsticks. I have drawn so many.” And I was wondering, is that a feeling that you were having when you were writing those celebrated, very popular food and identity stories in the past? Or was that a weariness that's set in after those were published and being widely read?

Shing: Yeah. And I think the widely read part was really the thing that shifted it. I was writing a very personal memoir, and I was putting it online. And yes, of course, I expected people to read it. But at some point, there was this transition between I’m writing little comics and putting them up on the internet and kind of becoming known as someone who wrote memoir and someone whose feelings, whose brains, like my brain was now out there for consumption. It was out there for critique, which actually - critique I'm fine with. But I felt like as a human being, I was being consumed on a level that I had not anticipated. And that actually just really burnt me out on writing memoir. And part of it is kind of the monetization of the personal essay industrial complex that I felt that I was being absorbed into. And like every bone in my body just wanted to reject that. I think ‘I do not want to write’ was one of the last memoir pieces I've written. I wrote a couple more after that for Catapult, but that was one of the very last. And it's kind of one of those like, well, you know, I kind of said what I had to say in it, where it's just like, I'm sort of done like excavating my culture and excavating me.

Tuck: Wait, was that a piece that you pitched to them? Or did they say like, will you write something? And you turned in a piece called ‘I don't want to write.’

Shing: So my relationship with Catapult, RIP, is I've been working with Nicole Chung, who was my editor with Catapult throughout my entire time with them. And we worked together prior to this at The Toast as well.... Also RIP, can any media like actually.

Tuck: No.

Shing: Yeah. So Nicole has always given me so much room to explore. And I had, I think I had like a regular deadline for a column with her. And I just kind of dropped this in her lap. I was like, I know I have a normal column to put up, but this is what I got instead. And she was like, great, I need you to add a comma, we'll run it. She was like, I've got two copy edits. Let's go. My relationship with that editor has always been just absolutely wonderful. So sadly, I was not responding like a little child.

Tuck: I mean, Nicole has always seemed great, so I'm glad to hear that she is. Yeah. So, you know, you've been shifting away from memoir, also, I feel shifting away from comics and into all of this work that I, if they get so cool and also like don't really know how to neatly sum up for listeners, and also I wish I could show them things and it's a podcast. And that's really tough because they do really need to see it. So I'll have to put some good pictures on Instagram. But you know, working in all these different mediums that you work on, which you know, you can tell us more about what they are. Do you feel like there are common themes or commonalities that run between your work that sort of connects it as yours? Do you know what I mean?

Shing: Oh, totally. Yeah. I mean, I'll try to explain a little bit about what I do, which is I was trained as a theater designer. And I often say that I am fundamentally an experience designer. And that takes many forms. A recent form has been games, games and kind of weird, weirdly delivered narratives through mail and other things like that. But experience design, game design, I think that fundamentally explains that kind of work. I think myth making and breaking is a continuing theme. But another one that has been really present throughout my entire life is just, you know, little guys. The long human tradition of grabbing some wood or grabbing some clay and just making a little guy. And that is extremely present and has been in my work for, you know, over 15, maybe 20 years, right? Like it's in my comics, it's in my games, it's in my large scale installation art, like whatever work you look at, I've got kind of this fascination for little beast and little creatures. And and also, you know, their relationship to humans and how they treat these little guys. So yeah, I think I'm just really fascinated with aspects of the natural world once removed.

Tuck: Yeah, I mean, another theme through your work is divination and fortune telling.

Shing: Oh, yes.

Tuck: And you have a full section on your website that's called Games and Divinations, which is so cool. What attracts you to making divination and fortune telling materials?

Shing: You know what that actually, I'm sorry, I talk in through all this, I'm like, wait, you have just made it really clear what the most obvious theme in my work in, which is, I am fascinated with the human desire to create order in the broken world that we have to live in. And that's in everything, like, you know, humans use ritual, they use divination, and it's just our attempt to make sense of the world. Humans tell myths in order to explain the world. So that process of humans creating things to help them organize a very fractured universe, I think is probably the most dominant thing.

Tuck: Yeah, and also just for the listener, I feel like a lot of your little guys is like told through humans, like studying and trying to make taxonomies of little guys, so that makes total sense to me. But anyway, yes. Okay, so divination, do you believe in divination or is that just like a fun mood setting thing that you do?

Shing: Oh boy, it depends, right? Like, I believe in divination as a helpful organizing principle. I don't believe in straight up fortune telling. Totally. But I do believe that fortune tellers have a very useful purpose that's truly, I think, very parallel to therapy.

Tuck: Well, I feel like that's what a lot of people say about tarot, which reminds me you drew a whole tarot deck. Yeah, I did. So bananas. Anytime anyone makes a tarot deck, I'm like, this is the biggest project anyone could ever do. Like, it's so wild.

Shing: I thought that too. And then I got through it and I was like, Oh, that was fun. Let's do it again.

Tuck: Wow, that's great. Well, to give people more of a sense of both the different projects you've worked on and also the different mediums you worked on in the way that you can thread the same story or the same concept through a bunch of different formats, can you walk us through the different iterations that Oracle Bird has appeared in?

Shing: So the Oracle Bird, it's one of my longest projects. And I first came up with this character for an installation in Columbus. And for context, I'm a scenic designer. But when I quit theater, I continued wanting to build environments that you could walk into and interact with. So I still wanted to build theater, just not necessarily with the actors in it. So I built this divination installation that audience members could walk into and participate in. And they would draw a divination card. And that's actually being rebuilt in Los Angeles right now. So it is up at the Fisher Museum of Art. And then the Oracle bird has, you know, I've done a play by mail, not play, but you know, I've mailed out fortune cards by mail. During the pandemic, I did online, like, divination appearances as the Oracle bird. We were raising money for, I genuinely do not remember what we were raising money for at this point in time. Something good. And then I also have a mobile kind of more guerrilla art performance as the Oracle Bird. And that's my first time adding a direct performance element into my work. So I wear a mask and I roll this card around. And I, I just spend fortunes and readings from the card itself. And that was really great. Because I've wanted to perform more, but I do not enjoy being perceived. So performances where I wear a mask, and I'm now getting to puppetry, which is also great because it's a performance, but literally no one's looking at you if you're doing it right. So this has all been really working out great for me.

And I, you know, after five years or so, I do feel like I'm ready to hang up the mantle of the Oracle Bird. Like this game has been with me through like moves, it has been with me through a divorce, it has been with me through like falling in love again. Like it's, it's been through a lot. I've changed careers in the middle of all this. So the game is essentially about passing on the mantle. It is about creating hopefully hundreds of just other Oracle Birds who will now take the story onwards in directions that I may not anticipate, which is great. And yeah, I was writing a lot of the game during my divorce. And at the time it was a very kind of weird heartbroken thing. It was about longing and being in a life that didn't really fit you. And then I did get divorced and moved out with my partner. And everything in my life just really lightened up a lot. So now the game is also about multi-level marketing schemes and we’re happy. So it's a much funnier game now. So I'm very excited about it.

Tuck: Yeah. So you coined the term keepsake game. Can you explain what a keepsake game is?

Shing: Yeah. I mean, the specific person who actually coined it to give him credit is actually my ex-husband, who coined it based on the games that I was making at the time. And we came up with these terms when Jeeyon Shim and I were working on Field Guide to Memory. So I define a keepsake game as a game where the process of playing the game produces a beautiful artifact. So in my game A Mending, you sew a path on an actual piece of cloth from your house to your friend's house. And as you go along, you pull different prompt cards and ask you to do different things. So it can be like, “You have found a dog, a dog now follows you. Sew a second path.” And at the end of it, you have this embroidered physical object that theoretically is also beautiful because I think all embroidery is beautiful. And people have done such amazing things with this game. Like someone gave it to their grandmother as an introduction of like, this is what games are if you are curious. And here it is rooted in a form you already understand, which is embroidery. And I saw a picture of this and his grandma made a whole quilt. Like she embroidered this piece of cloth and then quilted it. And it's the most stunning thing I've ever seen. And it's just been really wonderful just kind of seeing how people take these ideas and develop them. Fundamentally, I think all these games are collaborative games because all I have done as a game designer is build the structures, the scaffolding of this universe. And then the player builds the rest. The player runs around in this playground and all the little mud castles they build are their own.

Tuck: So cool. Something you said in a medium post from a medium that I liked was if I ask a player to learn something new, it won't be something that will only ever exist in the context of the game. So when you're talking about things people might learn in the game, are you talking about like, he's like physical like embroidery journaling or is it something more abstract than that even?

Shing: No, I mean that I mean that exactly. Part of how I make games and we're going to go loop a little bit back to ritual here. Part of how I make games is that I want games that fit into the rituals and cadences of everyday life. Like I've done mail games where you know you experience a game when you go and get your mail, which is something you have to do anyway. And you're going to stand there in your doorway and open the envelope and read it. And I like it when my games fit into slots like that. I like it when they're just kind of little delightful interruptions in your day. I don't really make games that are like a sit down for four hours and do this. Although I love those games and I play them all the time. But I think my games are probably best experienced in like five to 30 minute chunks.

Tuck: And that's great because we're all busy and we all have ADHD. So...

Shing: We're all busy. We all have things to do.

Tuck: So you listed two New Year's resolutions online and they both really resonated with me. One was actually really similar to something that we had posted on the Gender Reveal account. I was going to read them out loud, but I'm like, why don't you just, can you tell us about your resolutions if you remember them?

Shing: Yeah, no, I do remember them. The first one was to be a lot better with integrating activism into my everyday life. And I think over the years, I've done some pretty like high profile fundraisers. And that has been my mode of activism, my mode of fundraising. You know, obviously, like I talk about things with some frequency, but it's kind of like go hard, raise a ton of money for people who are doing amazing things, because they know what they're doing. I respect the work that other people are doing. And I feel that the part that I do best is in that amplification, is in getting them the resources they need to do their work. And that has been my methods in the past. It wasn't always sustainable, because again, a lot of the attention, a lot of the work would lead to burnout. And especially with the current Palestinian genocide, it's just one of those things where pushing more money is not something that helps right now, because the money is not getting to Palestine. Like the problem is, you know, our administration is helping to bomb Palestine. But I'm also seeing so much activist burnout in my circles. And things like, you know, how can you still talk about your life? How can you still talk about yourself when such horrible things are happening in the world?

And I think I had this very just naive approach, not like recently, but you know, when I was younger, that if you tried hard enough, if you were loud enough, if you just did enough work, things would get better. And I think I'm now just kind of settling into that solid recognition that there's a solid chance it doesn't, that it will always be like this, we are always going to have to be working and fighting for a more just world. If we can't integrate that into our regular life, in a way that it just fits into the cadence of ordinary life, as easily as making a cup of tea does, then we're going to have very short lives as activists. I don't just mean like because the government is going to kill us. I mean, like, because we can't sustain that level of pressure. So my big resolution for this year is to kind of integrate that practice on such an everyday level that I don't like doom scroll Instagram and feel the world is ending. Like I look at Instagram, I acknowledge the brutality of what's happening in our world, and then like I continue doing things. I continue amplifying, I continue like, you know, working with the community around me on things that I can fix with my work and my hands and my cooking, because you know, there are always things to do and we need to do them. And we need to do them while maintaining that consistent mental fortitude that you're going to need. If you plan on doing this for the rest of your life.

Tuck: Wait, before the second one, I have to say, everything you're saying makes total sense, resonates with me and is correct. And also, I'm like, okay, but we also both, you and I, both organize annual high concept food themed fundraising events. And I just want to acknowledge that we have that in common. I'm not saying it's sustainable or good for us, but we do do it. And I love that commonality. It's very specific.

Shing: I know. And I'm still going to do that. You know, that's part of the tradition.

Tuck: You want to talk about what it is?

Shing: Oh, yeah, it's a project called Project Pizza. And we've been running it for, I think, five years now. It's very straightforward. Get a bunch of artists together. We make art, we sell the art, and we send that money to food insecurity organizations in that area. And one of the things I am most excited about is in the last couple years, we've started donating to just smaller grassroots organizations, like people who actually do not have a nonprofit. And we were able to donate to my friend who just runs a homeless and unhoused people outreach in the park. And yeah, I feel really good about shuttling more of this money just into more grassroots work in my community.

Tuck: Okay, second New Year's resolution.

Shing: Oh, that's just to be bad at more things. Yeah. I burned out so hard after finishing my second book, The Legend of Auntie Po. It came out, it did okay. And I haven't really drawn comics since then. My third book is very late. But I've been really trying to find indulgence in making art. You know, I've taken up a ceramics practice. I'm terrible at it. But it feels great. And I think I would just like to try more things I'm bad at. And that's just not about like unlocking, you know, the little perfectionist in my brain. It's fun. It's fun being an amateur. It's fun doing work outside capitalist spaces. I just as an artist, as a full time artist, I think it's really important for me to make work I could not conceivably sell.

Tuck: I was going to ask about that because a lot of the way that you operate in the world, like in some ways reminds me of the ways that I aspire to operate where it's like, well, I just do a little project over here and I do a little project over here. And it's not really clear how this is making me a living, but I am doing cool shit. And I was just thinking about like so much projects that you do. I'm like, wait, it's like, is this all job? Like, you're making puppets right now. Like, is that job? Is that fun? Is that fun job? Like, do you always know?

Shing: I don't always know. I've had a weird ability to make things that are not my job, my job. And I think part of that is pretty early in my career when I was still married, I did have the support structure to experiment a lot. And now I do not have that same support structure, I am now much more solidly a starving artist. I mean, I do okay, but like, there's health insurance and there's, yeah. So I think I fairly early established my work as something that would be a journey. And like we talked about earlier, kind of keeping these fairly consistent themes through my work, I think I've developed, you know, a small following of people who are interested in my themes, in my vibe, and the specific output that happens to be in, they're open to it. And I feel so, so lucky to be able to have that as a working artist, which feels so increasingly rare nowadays. Because the puppets, you know, they were a pandemic obsession, this I think is the first time I am making money making puppets on this residency that I'm on. But I hope I'll be more of my life.

Tuck: Yeah. Yeah. You've been to Burning Man a number of times, what's your hot take on Burning Man?

Shing: I think Burning Man is an absolute blast that 10 days before the event starts. Because that's when all the people who build big art and who love building, they love working, they love building cities. So about two weeks before Burning Man opens is when the city feels the most alive for me. It's when it just feels like, yeah, these are my people. And then I would say the last few years I've gone, which again, I haven't been since I think 2017 or 2016, I spent pretty exhausted and kind of burnt out because I've just built a large project. And I'm only speaking for myself. I know a lot of people love Burning Man, but for me, an important thing as an artist was to ask, who am I building my art for? And increasingly, I think I got somewhat disillusioned with a lot of attendees at Burning Man, where it feels like, who am I working for? And it was just really clear to me that what I wanted to do was build more work in my own community. And while there are so many people I love that go to Burning Man, I do feel like the structure of the event as a whole is not my people.

Tuck: Yeah, I mean, you don't want to be making cool art for Mark Zuckerberg, you know?

Shing: I mean, I don't even want to post on his website.

Tuck: Right, totally. Amazing. All right, well, the way we always end the show is by asking, in your ideal world, what would the future of gender look like?

Shing: I mean, I think it's everyone gets to pick. Personally, for me, the most comfortable place for it is that if we literally didn't talk about it at all, like I said, just kind of, I'm so gender - like, ugh, ugh, I'm so gender-ugh. But yeah, I think it would be complete freedom to choose, like complete freedom to be whatever gender you want and to change it as many times as you want, like, and to just, yeah, I would like gender to be as easy as like dying your hair.

[Gender Reveal outro music plays]

Tuck: That's gonna do it for this week's show. One quick note, like Shing said, it's hard to get aid into Palestine right now, which is true, but there are still ways that your money can be helpful. One is to go to linktr.ee/fundsforgaza, that's linktr.ee /fundsforgaza, and donate to the vetted, rotating list of fundraisers listed there. The other is to donate to the Middle Eastern Children's Alliance, which is tax deductible in the US, if that helps you at all. Anyway, you can find Shing at shingkhor.com or on Instagram at sawdustbear. Please go look through some of their work if you haven't. It is so cool and beautiful. You can also get more access to their work, including physical prints and other little treats in the mail by supporting them at patreon.com/shing.

We are, of course, also on patreon at patreon.com/gender. That's where you can get access to our weekly newsletter and bonus podcasts. We are also on Instagram and at genderpodcast.com where we have transcripts available for every episode. This episode was produced and edited by Ozzy Llinas Goodman and by me, Tuck Woodstock. Our logo is by Ira M. Leigh. Our theme song is by Breakmaster Cylinder. Additional music by our friends at Blue Dot Sessions. We'll be back next week with more feelings about gender. Free Palestine.

[Gender Reveal outro music ends]

Krys: There's other silly scenes and cell phones throughout the book. Jenner always refers to bottom surgery as the final surgery, capital T, capital F, capital S, which makes it sound both ominous and futuristic. She writes that Kendall is the most down-to-earth Kardashian because she is, quote, as at home at a riding stable as she is walking down the catwalk for Chanel. She describes staring at herself wearing nothing but her Olympic gold medal right after she won. I mean, wouldn't you?