**Transcript –– Gender Reveal Season 12, Episode 167: Ariana Steele**

Tuck: Shopping for sex toys can sometimes feel overwhelming or dysphoric, but shopenby.com is a Black- and trans-owned sex toy shop that aims to create a better experience for the queer, trans, and gender nonconforming community. One thing I like about their website is they have separate little tabs for “trans masc / FTM,” and “trans femme / MTF.” And if you've ever been on testosterone (for example) you might have a dick growth experience and be like “hey, I actually need completely new toys for this,” and that's where that website comes in and gives great examples of something you might like to try. Visit ShopEnby.com. That's S-H-O-P-E-N-B-Y dot com. And use the code “GenderReveal” at checkout to get 10 percent off, and bring more pleasure and affirmation into your life.

[Gender Reveal theme music by Breakmaster Cylinder 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 am excited to share my conversation with linguist Ariana Steele. I was first introduced to Ariana's work via Gender Reveal’s resident linguist Kirby Conrod. I was very excited to learn more, though I will say I think this conversation actually left me with even more questions than I had at the beginning. But that can be really exciting sometimes, too. In this episode, Ariana and I talk a lot about the differences between two different categories of people, like how do Black nonbinary people and white nonbinary people use the “gay lisp” differently? Or how are the Chicago versus Seattle queer nightlife scenes organized differently? But we also talked about existing as people who don't play well with labels, and don't fit neatly into categories. And that includes, in Ariana's case, astrological categories.

Ariana: So my head’s Aquarius, and then my lower body is Pisces. It all makes sense.

Tuck: Before we get to that, I just wanna mention if you are new here – we've done a couple of little promos on other podcasts recently, maybe you've heard ‘em – if you're new here and you're trying to figure out how to tackle our previous 11 seasons of the show, I'd recommend going to genderpodcast.com/starterpacks, where we've got lists of some of our favorite episodes grouped by topic and theme. Good luck. And now, it's time for This Week in Gender.

[This Week in Gender segment chime theme music plays]

Tuck: So as of this week, it is March, which means that we are now only weeks away from Trans Day of Staying in and Having a Nice Snack. If you're not familiar, this is our Trans Day of Visibility rebrand, in which we collect donations from cisgender #allies, and send money to trans community members for snacks and also for immediate basic needs like shelter, food, medication, utilities – things like that.

[Ambient music plays]

You can learn more about the history of Trans Day of Snack on our Gender Conceal sister podcast on Patreon; we interviewed our friend Lilith K, who coined this phrase. You can also learn about it for free on Gender Spiral, another podcast where we recorded an episode on last year's Trans Day of Snack, kind of describing what our whole deal is. Because we at Gender Reveal are a tiny organization (and by organization, I actually mean people making a podcast) we unfortunately have to limit our scope somehow. We can't feed everybody, so some years we limit applications to trans people of color. Last year, we limited it to trans people living in states that were most affected by anti-trans legislation. I haven't made an official decision on what we're doing this year. If you feel strongly, I guess weigh in now. But we will certainly be doing some kind of mutual aid event on the 31st, as we typically do.

And I mention this now, because I would like to encourage *you* and folks in your community to start up some kind of local Trans Day of Snack chapter in your area. I say this both because – like I said – we have our limitations, we can't reach everyone. And also because I am still thinking about our conversation with Dean Spade from like 15 months ago, where Dean talked on the podcast about how the best and most effective mutual aid initiatives build real life community connection, instead of just doing rounds of anonymous Venmos. And you know what? He's right.

So, no rush, but maybe if you're up for it – you have a little extra organizing energy in you – start thinking about ideas for what you can do with the Trans Day of Snack mutual aid concept. Examples I've seen in the past include: Giving out free donuts, with what I believe was trans flag-covered frosting. Setting up a pay-it-forward system, where cis people could buy trans people free cider. I think also some kind of bake sale event. I think maybe a version of trans pizza. And of course, I've also seen just like individuals cis people buying their trans friends some food – which I also extremely support.

I assume most of you hearing this are trans, and so – you know – I've seen a lot of people post on social media and just be like “it's Trans Day of Snack, here's my Venmo.” But I also really encourage you to think about things you can do with your community, as a community. It could be very, very small. Maybe you can even figure out a way to pull it off in which you do something fun, but you also get to stay home and have a nice snack yourself. I just think it would be cute to have little snack events in the world, but you know what? Maybe not on the one day of the year that we’re visible to cis people. Maybe that should be another day. I don't know, just think about it. And if you end up putting something together, let me know – I’d *love* to hear about it.

Also, if you are an artistic-type person, and you would like to design some limited edition Trans Day of Snack merch for us, we’d really, really love to see your ideas. You can send them to us via email at gendereveal@gmail.com. As always, we are happy to split proceeds between you and our mutual aid program. So – in conclusion, if you're an organizer or an artist, start plotting. If not, just start thinking about what a nice little treat you're gonna enjoy at the end of the month.

[Ambient music ends]

Tuck: This has been This Week in Gender.

[This Week in Gender segment chime theme music plays]

Tuck: We’ve got a Theymail message for you today. Theymails are little messages from listeners; there's a link in the show notes for you to make your own. This week's message is from Sophie, and it says: Mapping Trans Joy is a joy-as-resistance project to showcase and share joy in the trans, gender diverse, gender nonconforming, nonbinary, two-spirit, non-cis communities. Visit the joy map at MappingTransJoy.org to share in the joy that others have posted, and to add your own. Together we’re reimagining our geography through a lens of trans joy. OK. One more quick ad, then we’ll get to the interview. Here we go.

[Ambient music plays]

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 DeleteMe. DeleteMe routinely scans hundreds of data broker websites to make sure that my personal information is not easily available online. DeleteMe can also scrub info tied to deadnames and other aliases. You can join today at joindeleteme.com/genderreveal, and use the code TUCK20 to get 20 percent off your entire order. That is TUCK20 for 20 percent off at joindeleteme.com/genderreveal.

[Ambient music ends]

[Gender Reveal theme music plays]

Tuck: Ariana Steele is a sociocultural linguist, who studies gender subversion at the margins through language. Their experiences as a community organizer for Black, queer, and trans liberation in prison abolition inform their approaches to studying language and society, such as in their publication, called “Enacting New Worlds of Gender: Nonbinary Speakers, Racialized Gender, and Anti-Colonialism.”

[Gender Reveal theme music ends]

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

Ariana: Hmm. It's changed so much throughout the last three to five years, that it's so – I don't know, it’s hard to answer. I feel like I have to talk about a journey, almost, or like a history.

Tuck: Great, take us on a journey.

Ariana: So back in 2015 or ‘16 I was like “nonbinary – that's a thing?” I've never wanted to be anything in particular gender-wise, so I was like “cool – that!” And then, you know, time has passed, I’ve known more people and an entire pandemic has happened, and I've just been like “truly I don't give a fuck anymore.” I am someone – like, “trans” fits, “nonbinary” fits. If I'm using other peoples’ terms, then “agender” is probably the best fit.

Tuck: Mhm.

Ariana: But the whole point of being trans and nonbinary to me has been that other peoples’ terms don't fit. And so, if I'm using another set of other peoples’ terms, like is that really doing it? No. Not really.

Tuck: Totally. I wanna learn more about what you study, because I was trying to learn more specifics, and everything I read was like “Ariana studies gender subversion at the margins through language.” And I’m like, “*totally*…what does that mean, though?” [Laughs]

Ariana: Yeah.

Tuck: Can you give us some examples of the specific things that you study in your work?

Ariana: Yeah. So the question I'm always asking is: so we have these really strong social categories of femininity and masculinity, that within sort-of-mainstream society, everything can be mapped into or binned into so easily. Like *everything* – not just what we might call “white feminism in clothing,” but like…things that people do. Ways that people act. Ways that people talk. And so if all of these different actions and ways of being, ways of dressing, ways of talking can so easily be binned into these two binary gender categories, my question is: how do we break free? How do we create meaning that isn't feminine or masculine? Or that fucks with those categories as a whole? And so that's what I mean by “subversion.” I’m like, “what room is there to create anew?”

A lot of these questions came up when I was doing abolitionist organizing, and we were constantly asking ourselves: how much weight do we place on breaking down the structures for a better future, later? Versus: how much do we place on creating the future we want right now? And so – same goes for gender. They're kind of both doing the same thing. If I'm creating the future that I want right now, if I am fucking with different ways of gendering myself and others, then it's sort of already breaking down those like big binary gender things. So getting at these questions of like: how do we break down these strong categories? And: how do we create anew today?

I get at that by working with Black nonbinary folks, because we're already at this – not just at the margins of gender, in a sense – but at the margins of race. And in the U.S. and the West, the ways that we think of gender are often in terms of this very prescriptive, normative, white version of gender. And so already Black people are outside of that. Black people who aren't trans or nonbinary are, like, put outside of that. And so, for me at the margins – I'm just like, how do I get even further away from what is socially accepted or thought of as how things are supposed to be? And then, what are the tactics that people are using to degender themselves, to break away from these really hard lines of normative gender? And that's what I do with my research.

Tuck: Yeah! And that's a great question that I can ask you: what tactics are people using?

Ariana: [Laughs] A lot of my work looks at how people pronounce “s.” So this is what people talk about as the “gay lisp,” you know?

Tuck: Mhm.

Ariana: There's this thought that you can tell if someone's gay because of how they say their S’s, or something. I look at how nonbinary people pronounce “s,” given that we're not necessarily trying to put ourselves into this feminine or masculine sort of bin. Well, how do we use this thing that people think of as so easily mapping onto femininity and masculinity? More of my stuff is moving into: what do people do when they feel that they can be true to themselves? Rather than: what are people doing when they feel like they need to put up a guard and overcompensate (or compensate) for the ways that people who don't understand nonbinariness and transness are gonna read them? What do people do when they’re just hanging out with friends?

Tuck: Yeah. So, when we're thinking about the “gay lisp” or, in this case, a sort of “nonbinary lisp,” is this an intentional affect that people are developing as part of community?

Ariana: Hmm..

Tuck: Because I feel like we think of lips a lot as something that comes naturally to you from birth, or something like that, you know?

Ariana: Right. So I meant to say that the "gay lisp” is something that is not actually a lisp – it's not actually a mispronunciation of “S” – it's basically just an “S” pronounced with your tongue further close to your teeth. Whereas a lisp is, I think, often thought of as with your tongue between your teeth, or something?

Tuck: OK.

Ariana: So for example…(OK, let’s see if I can do it.)... so, “this” is me pronouncing my
S’s normally – whatever that is – in *my* nonbinary way. [Laughs] And so if I were to do a more fronted “S” with my tongue closer to my teeth, it might sound like “thisss.” Thisss is how it sounds like my tongue closer to my teeth, something like “thisss” versus something like “this.”

So, is it a thing people are intentionally doing? I don't know! I feel like it's similar to when you hang out with friends and we use – we get their mannerisms. I think it's really similar. Like, we hang out with people that we’re similar to, and that we wanna have a – that we vibe with, you know? And so we speak similar to them, and that's sort of how some aspects of community are built: just from being around each other.

Tuck: *Yeah*. So to that end, have you found specific patterns that you find to be considered sort of a “classic” nonbinary voice? [Ariana laughs] The way that there's a classic gay voice, you know?

Ariana: So there are some patterns. Just getting at what I found in particular – so there's this common idea that the more sort of “lispy” of an “S” that people pronounce, the more feminine they're being, or the more gay. People associate gayness with femininity. And so in a study I did some years ago, I was like “OK – so what happens for nonbinary people with this?” And I asked folks – so I had them read a reading passage, and I measured their S’s from it. And then I asked them to rate themselves on how feminine and masculine they were feeling that day – each separate scales. And then I did a bunch of statistical analysis (which is very fun). So in this study I had both Black and white nonbinary speakers.

And I found that for the white speakers in the study, they were using “S” in the same sort of normative way. So the more masculine they rated themselves, the less of the lispy “S” they used. But it was the opposite for the Black nonbinary speakers, the more masculine they rated themselves, the more of a “feminine” lispy “S” they used. So that was the opposite of what general people in society might think, and the opposite of what a lot of linguistics research has shown. I mean, most of the linguistics research was just with white and cis speakers, so that was already limited.

But I was basically like “whoa – this is a completely opposite pattern happening here; like, what's going on?” And my guess was – so I did these really long interviews with folks, and I talked with them about: what does nonbinary mean to you? What different types of nonbinary people are there? All sorts of things, including asking about: how do race and nonbinary intersect with you? A lot of the Black nonbinary folks talked about “part of my being nonbinary is I'm trying not to be in line with these sorts of stereotypes – I'm trying to mitigate racism and anti-Blackness through being nonbinary.” And so I was like “OK – so maybe this using a “feminine” “S” as part of their masculine performances is actually trying to mitigate these stereotypes, these anti-Black stereotypes of hypermasculinity, being seen as hypermasculine. So, that's one pattern I found. But you know, the thing about nonbinary people is that we’re – it’s not like one thing, sort of like I was saying earlier.

Tuck: Right, of course.

Ariana: It's not like one gender, it's not like everyone – I think people tend to see themselves as a community of sorts, but it's not like everyone within that really see their gender the same. There's so many different ways that people might use language to do their gender, and it's not necessarily doing the opposite of what cis people might do.

Tuck: Yeah. So you were talking about Black nonbinary and trans people trying to mitigate anti-Blackness in a way. So, can you say more about that? Because I'm trying to reconcile the concepts of what sounds like trying to be safer…

Ariana: Right.

Tuck: …and then also transitioning, which is inherently unsafe.

Ariana: Mmm, mmm.

Tuck: And I just think what I’m interested in is that sort of tension there.

Ariana: Yeah – I think that with any sort of social transition, people have a set of choices to make. To what extent do I be true to myself? Versus: try to deal with how people are gonna treat me when I’m true to myself. If I were trying to distance myself from these gender norms, the ways – some of the ways – I might do that might make life a little bit more unsafe for me. So that actually speaks to some of the stuff I've been doing more recently, about clothes. Clothes are super interesting [Tuck laughs] Within sociolinguistics – which is an area that I work in – there’s this idea that where you see people being different from each other (such as dressing differently from each other) you'll also see people using language differently.

Tuck: OK.

Ariana: That's why I look at clothes, because if there are different archetypes of people, then there's probably different ways those people speak. So I was like, “OK – what are the nonbinary styles?” Like, what are different types of nonbinary people. And I asked folks this in some interviews I did, and most people were like “umm…the whole thing is that nonbinary can look like anything, it's really hard to answer.” And I was like, “if you just see a random person on the street, and you think they might read nonbinary, what clues you off? How’s your nonbinarydar?” [Laughs] And with a little bit of more questioning, folks were like “there's the nonbinary people who are ‘chill’ and then there's the nonbinary people who are ‘loud.’” [Laughs]

Tuck: Mhm!

Ariana: And so the “chill” people wear dark and muted colors, and sweatpants, and “comfortable” clothes, to not be seen as much, and to get this sort of sense of safety, right? Whereas there's the “loud” or flamboyant people, who wear lots of bright colors, maybe mix-and-match masculine and feminine clothing, and those people are more “visible.” I used to think of these as being on a range of queer visibility. The “chill” people are less visible than the “louder” people. But nowadays, it's sort of like a choice that people are making at any given moment. This “chill” sort of style that's about, like “I'm comfortable, I'm wearing loose-fitting clothing, I'm wearing all black, no one's really noticing me” is different for Black nonbinary people than for white nonbinary people. Many of the white nonbinary folks who described this style were like “yeah – it's a way to hide in plain sight, it's a way to not be seen and to be a little safe.” Whereas Black nonbinary folks were like “when I go outside, I have to think about how are people gonna read me – how are people gonna read dangerousness onto me.” And so, is wearing a black hoodie equally safe on Black people as it is for white people? And I’d say the answer is *no.*

Tuck: Famously no.

Ariana: I know, exactly.

Tuck: Totally.

Ariana: So – this safety thing. And, who am I truly? Who am I today? You can't be in a vacuum outside of race.

Tuck: Right. So obviously you just said that we can't actually neatly fit people into those two groups, because people are kind of choosing based on the day. But broadly within the two cohorts of “chill” and “loud,” did you find the linguistic differences or ways that they were speaking differently?

Ariana: That's actually something I'm looking at right now – like, literally this week. So I don't have answers yet, but I have some guesses. A lot of people describe these different people as different sorts of tone. So “chill” people tend to speak more monotone, whereas “loud” people tend to be a little bit more like – their tone has a lot of changing. So that might be part of it? Because if you think about it too, maybe there's a sense of safety in not being super expressive. And not being able to be read as easily, or seen as emotional.

Tuck: For sure. So I read that your research includes how the perspective of the listener influences the perception of speech. Is that what we're talking about when we're talking about safety? Or is there something else that that is alluding to, that you could tell us more about?

Ariana: Yeah, safety’s relevant for that. Like, I can go out into the world and dress a certain way, talk a certain way, hold my body a certain way. But if other people are reading me through their own lens of the world – sort of through this normative gender binary – is it working, you know? What does it matter if I see myself a certain way if it's not working for other people, and if I don't get treated differently based on that? Or even if I do get treated differently, if it's actually treated much worse, you know?

So yeah, the safety part’s really part of that. Because I'd say probably most people have this really rigid view of what it means to be a man or a woman or whatever, and they’ll just map anyone into that. When they see folks who are doing different, and fucking with these sort of gender categories – what do they do? How do they read that? So, I go out into the world, and most anyone is just going to be like “yes, hello ma'am,” “yes, she's over here,” you know? Just being like “OK, this is woman – I see woman.”

But then other nonbinary people and other queer people might more easily read me as nonbinary, because they have the sort of same lens of the world — or a similar lens – as me. And so that's what I'm – when I’m thinking about the listener, and stuff like that, that's: what are the ways of looking at the world that we each have? And how do they differ? Based on maybe shared identities, or upbringings, or something like that. And then how does that change not just how we gender people, but the degree of safety that people have when going out and being themselves in public.

Tuck: Yeah. Have you put any thought or research into how those tip-offs differ? Because I am always fascinated by what random cis straight people are using to decide what gender people are. Especially as you're describing when there's sort of a mish-mash of what we would think about as particularly masculine or feminine presentations. I'm always interested and confused by how they make the decisions…[Ariana laughs]... that they make.

Ariana: Mhm.

Tuck: But then, also – if you were like “Tuck, write down the ways that you can immediately tell that someone's trans…” [Ariana laughs], I don’t know that I could do it off the top of my head, but it doesn’t mean I don't *know*, you know?

Ariana: Right. It's hard, because with the ways that I look at the world and my research, I try to not think through the lens of cis people at all.

Tuck: Totally.

Ariana: So, who knows what they do? [Both laugh]

Tuck: I feel like nonbinariness has become this really whitewashed concept in the mainstream imagination. Which is so wild, since the binary is…[laughs]

Ariana: Right.

Tuck: …white people's fault, mostly. Did that come up in your research when you were interviewing Black nonbinary and trans people about how they approach gender?

Ariana: Yeah. A lot of folks, when I would ask them, like, “what does your race have to do with your gender?” or “how do you see yourself; like, who's your community?” – a lot of the Black nonbinary folks were like, “I relate more to other Black people (whether they’re cis or trans or nonbinary) like leagues more than white nonbinary people – just because we're interrogating the gender binary doesn't mean that we’re interrogating other things of oppression like anti-Blackness, racism, white supremacy, classism.” And it's definitely relevant.

I think this is why – so interesting. So I spend time in the Midwest a lot, and I’ll spend time on the West Coast (maybe other places, but those are what’s on my mind right now). [Laughs] And a lot of the subcultures I'm into are nightlife, and queer and trans music culture. I see so many differences in who people hang out with in these different places. So most of my nightlife experience has been in Ohio and Chicago, and I noticed when I've been in these places that a lot of folks hang out with people who are *very* similar to them. And so Black queer folks are with other Black queer folks a lot of the time. Then when I was in Seattle last summer, I went to this 60-person queer campout festival at someone's ranch in the mountains, and I noticed that of the few Black people who were there – I mean, West Coast things (or Pacific Northwest, really) – it wasn't just Black people hanging out with other Black people. People had more diverse friend groups.

Who we hang out with is different in different places, because of histories of who lives where. I mean, segregation is *heavy* in Chicago, and it's kind of obvious. I had a friend that I was hanging out with in Seattle like a week ago, and she used to live here. She was like “I miss Chicago, because I miss being able to drive to the Puerto Rican neighborhood and get this food, and then drive to this neighborhood and get this food.” And I was like – “so you missed segregation?” [Both laugh]

Tuck: *Totally*…yike. Do you notice big differences in the ways that queer and trans people in Seattle, versus queer and trans people in the Midwest are talking? Or gendering?

Ariana: Hmm…oh my God, yeah! I’ve actually noticed really interesting things. Because this summer was the first time I've really been out to queer events in Seattle, and wow! I was amazed at how many people had had gender-affirming care and surgery. I was just like “whoa! I did not know this was possible for so many trans people to be able to get their bodies to how they want.” Whereas I feel like a majority of people that I know here, there's just not the same amount of access to gender-affirming surgeries. And yeah, that blew my mind. I was like – I probably shouldn't say this out loud – but when I was at the event I was like “wow…so many designer titties.” Loved it. [Both laugh] I was like “this is *amazing*!” [Laughs]

Tuck: Yeah, I mean it's a big reason why a lot of trans people move there though, right? Including from the Midwest, so…

Ariana: Yeah, and Chicago's even thought of – like, people come here from other places because there's much more access to gender-affirming care. But still, I think that employers and a lot of insurances still don't cover it in the same way that they do in Seattle.

Tuck: Yeah, yeah. Well, I was looking into you what little I could, and it seems like you have been interested in linguistics for a really long time. And I was just wondering how you first learned about it as a field, and like what drew you to it initially?

Ariana: It's such a weird question, because I don't remember – it's really strange. Growing up, my grandpa was Norwegian, and his first language was Norwegian, but he spoke English fluently. And I would ask him, like “what language do you think in?” [Laughs] “Do you think in English when you speak English, and in Norwegian when you’re speaking Norwegian?” And I was just really puzzled by that as a child. And then when I got to college, my very first quarter I took a class on phonetics – just like, sound. And I just loved it, I fuckin’ loved it, it was just my life. I think it was like literally that year that I got a linguistics IPA tattoo of the pronunciation of “ethereal.” [Laughs] And yeah, it's just been history from there. It's just, sound – sound is super cool, love sound. [Laughs]

Tuck: Is that your only linguistics-themed tattoo, or did you get more later? [Laughs]

Ariana: That's my only one *so far…*

Tuck: Ok, totally. [Both laugh] I am always asking people who come on the show who have PhDs or have spent time in the academy, just about their experiences in the academy. And I'm interested in your specifically navigating the Academy as someone who is Black and nonbinary and autistic – just sounds like *so much to do*. What has your experience been in that sphere? I know that it’s a big question.

Ariana: Yeah. I feel like because of all of these things, every time I'm in a new realm or level or something within professional spaces, I'm just like “what am I supposed to do!? Can I be myself here?” So when I first started grad school in 2016 – oh, the year after that, 2017 – I taught for a year. Very fun course: “Language, Gender, and Sexuality.” And at that time in my life I was like “who am I allowed to be, and what limits can I push in this professional space?” And I was just pushing boundaries to push them, which is a little bit different. I mean, I was 22 or 23 at the time, it’s a little bit different than how I think of things now.

Being in professional spaces, I always have to think really heavily about like “who am I gonna be today, and how is that gonna affect how people are going to treat me, and how much they're going to believe the things I'm saying, especially as someone who is teaching many students who are my age or even older?” [Laughs] I have many selfies from this time, and I look back to them and I’m like “oh yeah, that's the day I was teaching, I remember that outfit.” And I would wear…which of the – was I “chill” or was I “loud?” It was a mix between these styles, really. Like, I have this one deep V dress thing that I could wear a shirt underneath, plus my undercut fire-colored hair in a weird little ponytail at the top of my head.

And at that time I had – I think I had more piercings than I do now, so I was very much just like “no matter what I do, I'm not gonna be seen as normal, or what most people look like, so let me just give other students permission to be themselves, and give them a view of what it can be like to be queer in the Academy.” I think people appreciated it, so it was nice. But you know, I’ve had similar experiences when I was on leave from grad school and I worked at some nonprofits. I got to those, and I was like “*what is this*?” [Tuck laughs] “There's so many unsaid rules happening here, and I can tell – I can see that there’s – like, the other people aren't being themselves fully, and that they're sort of talking and doing things in ways that is how you're supposed to be in those spaces.” And it freaked me out *so* much. I was just like “I think I'm doing everything wrong, I don't know what the rules are, but I see that they're there.” And my whole approach to life is: it's all a game. We figure out what the rules are, and then work it to our advantage. So I did a similar thing there – well, there I was like “OK, I'm not gonna be as intentionally subversive.” Turns out: even when I'm not trying to be, I am. [Both laugh]

Tuck: Totally. Mhm.

Ariana: Yeah, I ended up running into some issues with my bosses, who didn't like how direct I was, and didn't like how – I tend to ask a ton of questions, it’s like a thing about me – and they didn't like that. And then nowadays, I am at another sort of potential big professional change in my life, where I am gonna get the PhD and hopefully a professor job in the next year or two, maybe even this year. And I'm like “oh shit…I'm about to enter this whole other realm of prescriptions of how people are supposed to be, and ways that you’re supposed to interact with people.” And knowing that not only do I not want to have to do these sorts of things, but even if I do them all exactly, people are gonna see me as offensive. It's like: damned if you do, damned if you don't. What do I choose to do? I guess we'll figure out the game again, figure out the rules, work my avatar…[laughs]...and see what feels OK the next time.

Tuck: Yeah. I think that's a really incisive way to think about it. It’s not like “I am figuring out the rules, and then I'm gonna follow all the rules exactly.” But like, “I'm figuring out the rules, and then I will decide what rules to follow once I have figured them out” is huge autism energy to me. [Ariana laughs] So I wanted to ask, because – backstory for you is that sometimes people ask us to talk to more autistic people on the podcast, and I’m like “everyone's autistic, we just don’t ask…”

Ariana: Ohh. [Laughs]

Tuck: “…a lot of the time.” Like directly, you know?

Ariana: Yeah, yeah.

Tuck: But sometimes I think about it, and I'll ask directly: so how do your gender and your autism like interact or connect to you?

Ariana: Mmm. When I was growing up, I really identified with that Britney Spears song that was like [Sings] “I'm not a girl not yet a woman.” [Laughs] And I thought that was an age thing; I was like “OK – I am not a girl, and I'm not a woman, I'm some secret other thing.” [Laughs]

Tuck: Right.

Ariana: Little did I know, I'm not any of those genders. But I think that for me, my whole life I've been dealing with categories, and not liking any of them, *ever*. For a long time, I was like “I think I'm nonbinary because I'm mixed.” [Both laugh]

Tuck: Totally! Uh huh! Uh huh!

Ariana: Because I was like “OK – well, I've never fit into any racial categories, so I'm not gonna fit into these other categories too.” If other people will sometimes be at odds with me identifying with any of my races, then let me question these other things too.

Tuck: Yeah.

Ariana: As a side note, I'm also – it goes very deep – I'm also *deeply,* *deeply* a cusp. [Laughs] I thought I was Aquarius – my sun was in Aquarius my entire life, until five or six years ago when I put my birth time into something because my birthday is February 18th.

Tuck: OK! Yeah!

Ariana: And you know, things that say the dates of Aquarius – it ends on February 18th. And so I was like “cool, I’m Aquarius.” Very much identified with that; it was a big part of my identity for a long time.

Tuck: I can see that, yeah.

Ariana: And then I put my birth *time* into something, and I find out that I'm actually ten minutes into Pisces. I had an identity crisis that I can't say is completely over, but that's also…[Laughs]

Tuck: I mean, I feel like I would just be like “maybe they got my birth time ten minutes wrong,” you know? [Both laugh]

Ariana: You know, I’ve never thought that. But actually I’ve thought like maybe my mom had just not quite enough contractions as…[Laughs]

Tuck: Totally! Yeah.

Ariana: Something’s a bit off. But you know, as someone who has assigned Aquarius at birth…

Tuck: Totally! [Both laugh]

Ariana: And now, I'm like “well, you know, maybe I do need to identify as what I am *truly* – Pisces.” Especially for friends of mine who are like “cusps don’t exist.” I have a couple friends who are really heavy into astrology, and they're like…“no.”

Tuck: People say cusps don't exist, and I'm like “it’s *ten* minutes…[Laughs]...what are you talking about?!”

Ariana: Right.

Tuck: “Surely you had part of your head out by then, in Aquarius season.” [Both laugh]

Ariana: Right, exactly! Right – so do they count once the last toe’s out?

Tuck: Exactly, exactly. I don't know – that's what I'm saying.

Ariana: Exactly. So my head’s Aquarius [Tuck laughs] and then my lower body is Pisces, it all makes sense. Yeah – it all makes sense.

Tuck: A little mermaid action…fun.

Ariana: Exactly. You know, if my head is air, it’s in the clouds, My legs…like some water.

Tuck: Perfect. [Ariana laughs] I love that.

Ariana: Yeah. That’s all to say, I’ve always been in-between or not fitting these categories, and questioning categories. And questioning why things are as they are has always been my approach. So since I came to understand like “oh…I think that’s an autistic thing, I think that's like part of the whole neurodivergent thing that's been happening my whole life.” I started learning about autigender, and really a lot of other autistic people have this idea of “don't have an idea of gender,” or don't really ascribe to social categories. And so I’ve just been like “ah! So the reason I'm in-between all these things, and the reason I'm both like ‘fuck categories I don't need to think about them’ but I'm also afraid of them, like deeply. Just feeling confined by any sort of category. Also by language – I mean, language is limiting. Language gives us the ability to describe things, and to share understanding of each other, but when I say the word – the color called “purple” – other people think of different shades than I am. So similarly language is limiting. That's another reason I'm so interested in it, because it's like “well, what are we all doing here?” [Both laugh]

Tuck: Totally! Uh huh.

Ariana: What are we…if everyone's sort of like an alien [Laughs]...if we're all just sort of these weird little creatures trying to figure out what's going on, and through that creating empires [Laughs], and wars, and imperialism, and oppression, [Laughs] and at the same time trying to be like “some people are trying to do away with those things.” Where does language fit? How we talk about things has some sort of influence on these. And the categories themselves are questionable.

Tuck: Yeah. Is there anything that we haven't talked about yet today that you want to make sure that we talk about?

Ariana: OK. I have this vague thought about gender and queer partying. So, May of last year, I went to this techno party in Detroit, called Club Toilet (which is kind of funny of a name). And I met someone there who is now my partner, so that's pretty cool!

Tuck: Cute!

Ariana: So I was wearing a bikini top that was mesh and see-through, with this leather, strappy harness over it, and a tie-dye acid wash brown mini skirt, and thick fishnet tights. And I told them “I don't normally dress like this.” [Laughs] It was weird because in describing that, it only became clear to me that I was like “oh – I only dress this way because I feel that I can do that here.”

Tuck: Hmm, mhm.

Ariana: I feel somewhat safe or allowed to just express myself that way, in these sorts of queer nightlife spaces. It just kind of blew my mind that I hadn't really had the words for that until that moment. And yeah, the queer club is this site for somewhat safety, somewhat trueness – true expression – and resistance in some ways. I was just like “I think that I gotta do an ethnography in the club…[Laughs]...I think I gotta study the club.” Because when I go out to raves and stuff, I see people – trans people specifically – who wear things that we would never be able to wear on a regular basis, and feel freer and realer because of it. What’s being created there that's not being created elsewhere? Yeah. That's why I gotta study the club. [Laughs]

Tuck: Great! Exciting – can't wait to hear about your study at the club. OK, great. Well, the way we always end the show is by asking: in your ideal world, what would the future of gender look like?

Ariana: Oh my God, I love this question. Because I'm literally making an installation about this right now. [Laughs] What if – [Laughs] I don't know if this is what my true answer is, but like – what if the whole world was…the club, you know? [Laughs]

Tuck: Yeah, totally.

Ariana: Just like, what if we could dress how we wanted, not be accosted for it, not face violence, and have other people see us how we see ourselves. What if we didn’t have to agree with each other, to see each other. And to be safe.

[Gender Reveal Theme music plays]

Tuck: OK, that's gonna do it for this week’s show. You can find Ariana at arianasteele.com. You can find us on Patreon at patreon.com/gender, that’s where you can get access to our weekly newsletter and bonus podcast. We are also on Instagram, and at genderpodcast.com, where we’ve got transcripts of every episode, and those starter packs I mentioned. 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 Theme music plays out and ends]