**Gender Reveal Transcript: Episode 169 – Liz Fong-Jones**

TUCK WOODSTOCK: 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 transmasc/FTM and transfem/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, gives you 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% off and bring more pleasure and affirmation into your life.

[Show theme music begins]

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

[Theme music ends]

TUCK: Hey, everyone, hope you've all been hanging in there. This week on the show, I am pleased to share our conversation with Liz Fong-Jones. You might know Liz from her organizing and advocacy work at Google or her past efforts to get Kiwi Farms taken down. Or maybe you know her as the creator of the Coworker Solidarity Fund, which has provided support for striking and unionizing workers at Netflix, Starbucks, Amazon, and more. In this episode, Liz and Ozzy and I talk about the solidarity fund, and Liz’s years at Google. We also talk about ways that tech people can use their tech person privilege to support trans people, and whether it's safe to plan your organizing efforts in Google Docs.

LIZ FONG-JONES [preview clip]: You should use the tools that are most effective to you rather than hampering your own efforts in order to kind of have this purity of, No, I'm not going to use Google or Amazon tooling.

TUCK: Once again, we recorded this interview while my radiator was yelling at me, so if you hear that in the background, sorry about that. Before we get to that, I just wanted to let you know we have two great new designs in our merch shop in honor of Trans Day of Staying In and Having a Nice Snack, which of course will be on March 31st. One design is basically a bunch of hot trans people eating snacks. The other is a giraffe with a popsicle. I assume the giraffe is also trans; why not? I also restocked some of our trans and Palestine solidarity items. So that's all at bit.ly/gendermerch, and proceeds either go to Palestinian aid or our mutual aid fund, depending on which designs you buy. If you go to the merch store and you don't see anything in there, or you only see a couple of listings, that is because Teespring is a terrible website that we absolutely need to stop using. In the meantime for this month, try clearing your cookies or using a different browser or refreshing the store tomorrow. I don't know, it's so annoying, I'm sorry. But if you want to give it a shot: bit.ly/gendermerch. And now, it's time for This Week In Gender.

[This Week In Gender theme]

TUCK: Okay, I'm going to be honest, I’m once again using the This Week In Gender segment to really just do sort of an extended housekeeping announcement. And why am I doing this? Because, say it with me, [slowly, with emphasis] All the news is bad. But this is fun, so we'll talk about this instead. You may have heard me dropping not-so-subtle hints that y'all should subscribe to the Hang Up podcast. If not, go subscribe to the Hang Up podcast! It's a podcast made by my friends Zakiya and Caitlin. It is a queer reality dating show podcast. And something I really appreciate about this show is not only is it a queer dating show, but it also acknowledges the reality of queer dating and dating in general, by which I mean, they are not trying to match you up with someone who you will then go on to marry monogamously until the end of time. They're really just trying to find someone who you will ask out on a date, maybe. And then what will happen? Who can say. And so I just really appreciate there being space for nonmonogamy, there being space for complicated relationship dynamics of various kinds.

The way the show works is that every season there is one “star,” that's their verbiage, not mine, and the star is matched with a handful of contestants. And the star goes on a series of phone dates with these contestants. And after every episode, they have to, quote, “hang up” on one of the contestants until they finally narrow it down to one person. And then there's a big twist that I will not spoil for you even though I think it's explained in like the very first episode immediately, but whatever, you can subscribe and find out what the twist is.

Anyway, season one is out now. You can listen to it in all the podcast places. Season two will be out very soon, and I've heard a bunch of behind-the-scenes info about that season; it sounds very good. Between those two seasons, however, they have released one special bonus episode that was recorded live in front of an audience of other podcasters in Brooklyn a few weeks ago. And the premise of this episode is that it's kind of the entire season but condensed into 40 minutes. So the way it was recorded is that there was a star on one side of a curtain, and then four contestants on the other side, and then the audience can see everyone, but the contestants can't see the star and vice versa. And there was a ton of work going into the show to make sure that the star and the contestants didn't see each other even just like, bumping around in the hallway before the show. I bring this up, because can you guess [humorously] who the star was? Totally, totally, totally, totally, totally. So. Maybe go subscribe to Hang Up, if you want to hear me be an absolute dumbass on a stage in Brooklyn. There is a fun twist at the end which is a real twist and I will not spoil.

Something that is so funny about this episode is because there's 40 minutes for me to make various rounds of eliminations, there is virtually no time for me to learn anything about anyone, like at no point do I know, like, how old these people are, where they live. I learned some of those answers later, and they were shocking. There's also absolutely no context for them to learn anything about me literally at all, not even a little bit, which I think really affects the twist at the end. But anyway, I just wanted to recommend you check out the show in general. And also if you're just dying for, yeah, more just really, really silly Tuck Woodstock content—I normally review every, like, podcast that I've been on, before I recommend that y'all listen to me on another show, I will listen to that show to see if I said something very stupid. But here I am just confident, [laughs] I absolutely said a lot of stuff that’s really stupid [laughing]. And I tried to listen to it in advance. And I just couldn't, I couldn't do it. I couldn't make myself do it. But I know it was great. I had a great time. And a sort of behind-the-scenes I'll tell you is that after the show, almost all of us hung out for like an hour or two, to sort of process what it was like to reject each other on a stage, and be like, By the way, none of this was real, this is all just for bits, you all seem incredibly great, let's all follow each other on Instagram. And I thought that was really nice, sort of, reality show aftercare. And I wish that for all people who are in this kind of very specific position.

So. Let me close by saying that there should be more queer reality dating shows. And I have enough insight into the behind-the-scenes of this, to say that one of the main reasons why there aren't more good queer reality shows, *a la* that one season of *Are You the One?* that everyone's always talking about, is because they still will mostly only let straight people make queer reality shows. And so straight people are tossing out ideas of what they think other straight people want to see queer people do, and we are just never going to have like, exceptional and delicious reality show content for queer people, unless it's being made by and for queer people as well as about queer people. It is not going to be a good show if it is made to be educational to a cishet audience. So subscribe to Hang Up, listen wherever you get your podcasts, and in the meantime, here's this episode of Gender Reveal. This has been: This Week In Gender.

[Segment theme music]

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 Wren Dove Lark and it says: Described as sounding like quote “wrapping trauma in sunlight,” Wren Dove Lark’s new album *boundarypush* is a collection of cathartic plunderphonic pop songs, which rework samples from contemporary Christian music, creating transcendent, affirming bops about surviving our present dystopia, written for fruity trans people who cry while dancing alone in their bedroom. Available now at wrendovelark.bandcamp.com, that is Wren with a W like the bird, and then Dove like the bird, and Lark like the bird.

Okay, one more quick ad, then we'll get to the interview. Here we go.

[Ad music begins]

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 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 join delete me dot com slash gender reveal.

[Ad music ends]

[Interview intro music starts]

TUCK: Liz Fong-Jones is a developer advocate, labor and ethics organizer, and site reliability engineer. At day she is currently the Field CTO at Honeycomb, and at night she works on trans justice through activism and impact investing. She lives in Vancouver, BC with her wife Elly, partners, and a Samoyed/golden retriever mix; and in Sydney, New South Wales.

[Interview intro music ends]

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

LIZ FONG-JONES: I use she/her pronouns, and I am a proud out trans woman. So I've been out since 2003, which is an eternity in trans years. And yeah, I am a binary—as far as I know, you know, obviously people's evolutions and understandings of gender change over time, but, you know, consistently I am a woman. That is who I am.

TUCK: Perfect. Yeah, I am interested, you coming out more than 20 years ago, I guess, do you remember the first times that you met other trans people, like in your real life?

LIZ: Oh, goodness. So I was born in 1987. So as you can imagine, in 2003, I was 16 years old. And you know, yes, right, like, I read a little bit about trans people online, and I was like, Hey, wait a second, like, I might be trans. I eventually came out to some people online, then I came out to people in my real life, my biological parents did not take it so well. And the interesting thing that saved my goddamn life is there was a group of mostly Asian trans women. But you know, we, of course, had some token white representation. But we had a group that was called the Joy Luck Club. And that group of Asian trans women took me in and mentored me when I was like, 17, 18. And I'd sneak away from my biological parents to go and meet up with them. And like, you know, to have community, to really like, feel like I was connected to people. So yeah, my first experience meeting other trans people in real life was hanging out with this group of, of other Asian trans woman, and they were a fucking lifesaver. Unfortunately, one of the founding members of that group passed away in the past five years or so. But she was a software engineer at Apple, Melody Bliss, I think. Melody was a phenomenon. She was, she was incredible. It was a bunch of software geeks, right, primarily, because we knew how to use the internet back then, right, like that's how we met up with each other. So, you know, I—this is why I unironically can say the internet saved my life.

TUCK: Yeah, absolutely. Well, you know, internet jobs, tech jobs, coding jobs is, you know, one of the five stereotypical trans girl jobs, right? And maybe the only one that gives you health insurance. Do you think that it's up there in the top five because so many trans people meet online? Or what do you think contributes to that?

LIZ: Yeah, there's definitely a selection bias, right, like the set of trans people that make it, that survive, tend to be the ones that already were working in software or found their way towards software. Because right, like, that's instant community, connecting to people. That is instant, you know, having the ability to earn that income to get health insurance. You know, tech companies were some of the first to offer trans-inclusive health care coverage. So yeah, I don't think it's that, you know, Oh, my god, like, trans people are overrepresented in tech! or, you know, trans people are good at tech, right? Like, it's just, this is the industry in which you are most likely to survive as a trans person. And I would love for a future world in which, you know, you see plenty of out-there trans folks who are tradies, who are like, you know, plumbers and electricians, and you know, and baristas. But like, that's not the world that we exist in today. And the other phenomenon, I think also is, yes, there is discrimination in the tech world, but also, you don't have to interact with clients in person for the most part. And that was a *huge* advantage in the early 2000s, was that tech is less overtly transphobic I would say than, you know, people in the—in the 90s, 2000s, like, people would get fired the instant they came out at work, you know. There's obviously the famous story of Lynn Conway, right? But yeah, I think you know, in general, tech was more accepting of trans folks than other professions that were more customer-facing where employers were like, But what if the customers find out that you're trans?

TUCK: Right. No, totally. Do you have advice for other trans people who are thinking about going into tech or who are, you know, in the early stages of their career right now?

LIZ: Yeah. So, this is actually one of the reasons why I backed a company called Career Karma is that I was seeing this problem of a lot of people looking to get into tech who are from underrepresented backgrounds who are like, you know, Hey, this is something that I'm interested in trying, like, the barrier to entry seems like it might be lower than I thought, like, you know, I could potentially make some money here more than I'm currently making. And then they are getting fleeced by these unscrupulous bootcamps. And the thing that Career Karma was founded to do, it's founded by a couple of, I think, Black and Latino guys. And their ambition was to make transparent the system of bootcamps. Like to publish actual real reviews of bootcamps, so people could learn what they're getting into. So, I would suggest to people, like, go check out Career Karma, if you're interested in joining a bootcamp, like, don't get sucked into, you know, promises about, you know, Oh, we've got a 96 percent placement rate or whatever, right. Like it's, you know, three months, six months of your life; it's, like, a lot of money in tuition money that's either owed unconditionally or conditionally upon you finding employment. Like, make sure that you find something that is, is going to give you the right pathway. I do think that bootcamps have a place as this pathway that is much more affordable and much less expensive than college, but it is much less regulated than college, even for-profit college, which is its own world. So yeah, I think, you know, just make sure that you know what you're getting into. But there is a much more well-paved pathway than the days when I first got into into tech as a paying gig.

TUCK: Well, speaking of earlier in your career, you have been doing a lot of organizing work, in addition to your other work for a long time. So I didn't know if that was something that you felt like you had very intentionally created as a role for yourself, or whether you felt like it was something that you just fell into, or were like, pushed into, you know, like how intentional was that work?

LIZ: Oh, I completely fell into activism by chance. So here's the story. Two thousand eight, you know, I was a starry eyed person who was like, Oh my god, I got into Google despite not having a college degree and being a college dropout!, right. Like, Oh my god, this is awesome. Like, you know, We're gonna change the world! We're gonna, you know, make the world's information universally accessible and useful. And then the kind of cold hard reality hit that Google was actually doing some evil, wasn't “doing no evil.” So 2008, as you all remember, was the year of Prop 8 in California. And Google's founders said, you know, we're in favor of our gay families, like, you know, we're encouraging people to vote no on 8. And, you know, they even ran newspaper ads, saying, you know, the Google founders advise, you know, to vote no on 8. But Google took money from the Yes on 8 campaign, substantial sums, and they had a dedicated account rep to help the Yes on 8 campaign maximize their impact per revenue spent. Like there were millions of dollars being poured into the Yes on Prop 8 campaign, and saying things that, you know, we would regard as homophobic or transphobic today. You know, right, like, “protect California families” from the gays, right. So that was a moment of shock for me realizing that, you know, to Google, homophobes’ money is money, right? Like, they'll, they'll just take it and they'll help homophobes. So soon as we, the employees, found out about the sales rep allocated to the Prop 8 campaign, there was a like, furor, and it just went nowhere. It died out because there was no organization, there was no ability to have a sustained campaign. So a couple years pass, and then it's, you know, end of 2009, beginning of 2010. And Google is about to launch the Google+ project, which is Google's answer to Facebook. And they had made design decisions to try to replicate elements of what they viewed as making Facebook successful. And one of those elements was a real names policy. And, there I was, just ranting in a note to my mates in IRC, in the Cambridge office, being like, Hey, like, this policy sucks! And you know, Didn't they consider that this is going to hurt trans people, and this is going to hurt sex workers, and this is going to hurt teachers and therapists! and you know, blah, blah, blah. And other people were like, Yeah, you know, Sing it sister, right?

And, I was thinking to myself, This is just going to sit there and go nowhere, this is going to be like the Prop 8 thing, that just died, because like, there was no structure around it. Like, you know, no one's gonna hear about a conversation that employees are having in a random IRC channel. What if we wrote an open letter to the leadership of this team saying, like, Hey, like, you know, we're going to assume good faith, but have you considered the impacts that your policy is going to have on these specific groups of people? I offered to open up the document and share it in an IRC channel that I was ranting in. And Google Docs crashed because we immediately hit 50 people who were all opening a document and wanting to edit it and add things. So we solved some of those issues, and then a couple days later, right before I was about to hit the Send button to the leadership team of Google+, people came to me and were like, I don't have anything to add, I just want to sign my name to it. And I was like, There's no place to sign names to this. This is literally just a like, list of grievances, like, you know, and ways that we can make it better. But I was like, Okay, fine. So the petition and kind of group organizing aspect was an afterthought almost, right. So as you can see, right, like, I just fell into this. That end of day, something like 2,000 people out of, at the time, you know, Google is a 50,000 person company—2,000 people within Google sign their names to this letter, and said, like, We don't want Google to have a real names policy.

And what was interesting was that leadership listened, but they said, We cannot communicate with 2000 people. Like, you need to, like, elect or choose by fiat, like, a group of, you know, six to 12 people that we can actually interact with, right, that can kind of mediate the torches and pitchforks. So that's the story of how I became almost a union rep, right? Like, was, was this idea of working with people, right. Like, it also helped that I had a counterpart in management, who was similarly like, I see this problem, I recognize that you have legitimate grievances, but I don't want to deal with 2,000 angry people who are ranting at me and my team, was like, Can you like, help me resolve this dispute? So I was doing that, but primarily oriented around, How do I make people’s products better, right, like, in a way that's going to make the company more money. [Tuck laughs] And the company did not retaliate against me at that time. Asterisk: there were other people who were organizing at the same time, but around things that would cost the company money. In particular, Erica Joy Baker, who is a, you know, really awesome person. She, at the time, was a fellow site reliability engineer, and she published a spreadsheet of like, people's salaries. A kind of “share my salary” internally. And she was retaliated against, and she was eventually pushed out of the company, because the management did not approve of her doing that quite as much. So I think that it is not fair to say that at the time, Google was wholly welcoming to organizing activity, only welcoming to certain kinds of organizing activity. And I have to recognize that privilege.

TUCK: So there are some trans people who work at Google, who have invited me to talk with their coworkers. And I always get a lot of questions from both cis and trans people that are like, What can we do for trans people from our positions of relative privilege? And you know, I have my little answers, but I assume you also get this question a lot. And I'm just curious, like how you answer it?

LIZ: Oh, do I have answers to that question! I think the primary things that we can do is just not make life worse for trans people. These large technology conglomerates hold a lot of power over the world. And when that power is used to abuse trans people, it is deeply, deeply troubling to me. Whether it be, you know, transphobic ads being run, that kind of shift that overton window towards killing trans people being accepted, right. Whether we see instances of social media being used to bully and threaten trans people. That really unfortunate case, several days ago, a nonbinary trans schoolchild was beaten to death after their school was targeted by Libs of TikTok. Right, I think that's the primary way, is stop your company from harming or being complicit in the harm of trans people. That is the number one thing that I can ask you to do. Organize internally, get these policies changed, get there to be actual, like, responsibility and content moderation. And then I think finally, “earn to give” is a powerful and useful thing, if applied appropriately, like, you know, Can I earn money in a way that doesn't directly harm trans people? Well, obviously, you know, you shouldn't be, like, going out and earning blood money, and then trying to repair the damage that you've caused, but like, you know, assuming that you've earned money through the tech sector, right, like, putting that to work to help trans people in ways that are directed by trans people, for trans people. Just, you know, thinking about what's the most effective way that I can utilize those funds. And in some cases, that might be a 501(c)(3) that you get a tax write off for. In other cases, it might be political activism, or organizing or political donations, right. There's kind of this vast spectrum of ways to economically help disadvantaged trans people.

TUCK: We had Shuli Branson on the show earlier this season, and she was talking about how an anarchist view of money is to give away as much as you possibly can right now. And I think that so many people have a hard time with that because we are all fed this like, capitalist scarcity message. And you're one of the only people I see who is really actively doing the work to give large portions of your money away. And I was wondering if you know what it is about you that has been able to counteract these messages and like, allowed you to give so much of this money away.

LIZ: So the catalyst for me was the 2016 presidential election, right? Like I was like, Holy shit, trans people are in danger. And I was like, Holy shit, I cannot feel comfortable like, making this amount of money and not give, you know, $1,000, $2,000, $10,000 to helping trans people like, get passports or get documentation before like the door slams shut on that, potentially, if the Trump administration revokes the ability to get changed gender markers, right. So that was kind of the first foray that my spouse and I had into this form of activism and philanthropy. Some of this work led us towards working with the National Center for Transgender Equality, right, like some of this work led us to working with Trans Lifeline. And you know, over the course of time, that organization has become a much more effective organization than the organization that grew too quickly and embezzled their money.

TUCK: Totally.

LIZ: Basically, for us, it was, you know, seeing the impact that our dollars had, right, like being really, really involved in this, right. Like, it's not just dollars to us, right? Like, it's the stories of how the work that we did, whether the NCT’s policy work, whether it be the money that, that Trans Lifeline has given people to change their ID documents, right? Like, that makes a huge difference in people's lives. And, my spouse and I are big fans of this idea of, you know, can we find ways to give someone $100 so that they don't wind up, you know, being evicted from their apartment and having $1,000 be due, right? Like, that's kind of a thing that we're thinking about: How do you scale this out? Right? Like, how do we do this effectively with organizations that are funded by more than just us?, right. Like, this cannot be a dependence upon a singular individual, right, like this, this has to be a community funded effort, right. I think that's kind of the main thing that we're working towards. I think the other angle that you're asking about is, you know, how did we feel comfortable giving away large sums of money? I think, I think the answer is, you have to know when is enough. Like, what is enough for you to comfortably live on? And then are, you know, can you give away anything beyond that? Right. Like, that, I think, is the key thing. But I recognize this is a thing that a lot of trans people do not reach. And that is really, really unfortunate. I wish for a world in which trans people had just as much wealth, and it were just as, you know, the same distribution of economic status as opposed to trans people being socioeconomically disadvantaged.

TUCK: Yeah, I’ve found that when I'm talking to most cis people, and/or most tech people, they don't really have an awareness of how little money the average trans person has. And the fact that like, the average trans worker only makes like 60 percent of the average cis worker. And that's only people that actually can find work, and the unemployment rate’s also higher. Do you feel like there's that disconnect for you with coworkers where they just like, really don't understand the level of the need? I mean, like, any coworkers over any time. I'm not trying to like, make you call out a person right now.

LIZ: Oh, god, I am so, so, so fortunate that the startup that I work at now, we're something like 20 or 30 percent queer, it's fucking awesome. I love it. But yes, you're right. It can be a challenge. And at the end of the day, right, like, you know, you and your colleagues are there to do work, right, like not necessarily to talk about trans rights. I think that can be a really tricky balance, balance to strike. I think, in general, I don't think it's on trans people who are vulnerable in their workplaces to, to educate their cis colleagues. I just don't think it's, that's a reasonable ask.

TUCK: Right. I'm interested—you, you said that you work at this company that's like, very queer, also very trans, run by women, lots of folks of color. Obviously, that is just an objective good. Do you feel like there's any ways that that has noticeably affected anything about the way the company operates? I don't know if—that could be, like, accommodations, structural, linguistic…?

LIZ: Hiring is a heck of a lot easier. Like, we have so many qualified candidates, right? It turns out that people who are members of disadvantaged minorities, we talk to each other about our workplaces. So it turns out that, you know, you can get in an instant some very, very qualified people who really, really want to work in your workplace and are very selective about what workplaces that they're willing to consider, right. In fact, I would argue, there isn't a lowering the bar, there is a raising of the bar with regards to the caliber of employee talent that we attract, right. Like, I think that's a huge advantage. But I think beyond that, you know, we've got a— So, my company Honeycomb, we're fundamentally a big data company, right? We analyze data from software developer systems and give software developers better tooling to interact with that data and make better systems. So, I think that any design practice is really, really enhanced by having a diverse and representative set of backgrounds, of the people working behind it, of the set of people they reach out to and interview. I do think that you get better outcomes with regards to a more usable product that is more inclusive. I think at the end of the day, though, we have to prove that we succeed as a business, right. Like that, you know, our mission is not diversity, our mission is building a successful business. And if we do that, you know, along the way, we will prove that this diversity has been helpful to us.

TUCK: I wanted to hop around a little bit. Can you just tell us what the Coworker Solidarity Fund is and how it works? I want to make sure we get to this today.

LIZ: Oh, yeah, absolutely. So in 2018, a couple of giant fiascos rocked Google. First, there was Project Maven, in which it was revealed that Google was working with the U.S. Department of Defense to build AI surveillance technology and black site data centers for the U.S. Department of Defense to aid in what they claimed was only going to be aerial surveillance, and you know, there would be a human in the loop to pull the trigger. But it's like, that is really uncomfortable. And also, how do I know, you know, if I don't have access to inspect your classified data center that we're building for you, that you're not using AI to automate pulling the trigger. So Project Maven happened. Then Project Dragonfly happened, in which the U.S. was collaborating with the People's Republic of China to build a not only censored version of the search engine that would lie to you about air quality results in Beijing, but also, they would turn over the results of searching for a person's mobile phone number to any search that they conducted without due process or a warrant. Right? Honestly, that latter part was what scared me more, right. Like, people in China are smart. They understand that the results are censored. That's not the issue. The issue is turning over people's data without their consent. That’s scary and not ethically okay. So the fact that Google pulled these, you know, two secret projects in a row, Project Maven and Project Dragonfly, there was a huge uproar. And employees revolted, and leadership did not listen to them. And, you know, really, really fought us on these demands. That was number one. Number two was the Google women's walkout, right? That happened also in 2018, where it was revealed that Google paid Andy Rubin something like $80, $90 million to quietly leave after he was found, by the board, to have sexually harassed subordinates. That was a real wake up call for employees that the board protects their own. That like, employees, like, we're on our own, we need to organize, like this is—existing structures weren't working for things that we didn't know about, and that we needed more formal mechanisms to ensure that Google was going to be accountable.

So in the wake of all of that, I proposed a strike fund for Google employees, because I heard from a lot of my colleagues that, you know, they're comfortable, of course, you know, turning up to the office and you know, showing up to a protest for an hour at lunch, but that if it came to a sustained industrial action, or if it came to the company further retaliating against people, as the company eventually did against the Google women's walkout organizers, we’re not prepared to resist that kind of union busting. That, you know, previously, the approach of you know, Hey, like, you know, our representatives will hash it out—that was not working anymore. We weren't being heard. So we needed to build more worker power. So that sparked me proposing a strike fund for Alphabet workers. And I got pledges for something like $100,000 in the span of like two weeks. And then I said, I'll match that one for one, right. Then I wound up saying, You know, enough is enough, I'm burnt out, like I'm tired, I don't think what I'm doing is working for me anymore, and there are other people who can carry on this fight at Google. So I resigned in January of 2019. And, Google paid me a severance of $90,000, roughly. They paid out in advance some of my stock grants. Which again, like, right, privilege—the fact that paying up some of my stock grants early was $90,000, right. I think that speaks to the extent to which Google employees, especially those who are previously rewarded for their organizing efforts, right. That is not typical of most Google employees, by the way, but. Right, so $90,000, and I was like, Okay, great, I will take this money that I've gotten from Google, I'm going to put it to immediate work, creating some kind of solidarity or strike fund.

And then we ran into a couple of issues. We had to think about what the appropriate legal vehicle was for delivering these funds, how they would actually be used, setting up good governance, because after the Trans Lifeline fiasco, you know, you can understand why I care about good governance and being involved in the management of where my money is going. So we ran into a couple of hurdles, right. Like we looked at, can we use the vehicles that unions traditionally use to distribute strike funds, a 501(c)(5) labor organization. It turns out, you cannot do that, because we wanted to be inclusive of Google subcontractors, and a 501(c)(5), because of lobbying by the auto industry, it can cover employees have multiple different companies in a three state continuous area, or it can be nationwide for one single employer of record. It cannot be both things. So you couldn't have, you know, Google employees and subcontractors in all 50 states. And I believe deeply in class solidarity. I know that Google subcontractors are some of the worst treated workers in the Google conglomerate, right. So that's how we wind up saying, Okay, we know that this work of, you know, actively doing labor organizing, of actively distributing money for the mutual benefit of workers, like this is not 501(c)(3) material, it's not 501(c)(5) material. So we wound up creating the 501(c)(4) Coworker Solidarity Fund.

And over the course of this, in talking to people who had pledged $100,000, in the course of talking to the other donors, we realized that we were really hamstringing ourselves if we said this is only for Google workers and Google subcontractors, so we wanted to make a broader tech sector fund. So we launched a pilot tech worker solidarity fund, I believe in 2020. It took us a year to get it off the ground. And yeah, we basically are now working towards you know, we've made grants to workers organizing at Netflix, workers organizing at Apple, and also non-tech sector. So folks organizing at Starbucks approached us about creating a similar organizing fund for them. Folks at Amazon, we were very crucial towards helping some of the people who started the Amazon Labor Union. So ALU got helped get off the ground because we backstopped and prevented the retaliation that they experienced from Amazon from being as damaging as it would have otherwise been. That's the story behind the Coworker Solidarity Fund 501(c)(4). We’re a mutual aid organization, where the aim is to have workers who are making a little bit more money and are a little bit more comfortable, giving money to backstop workers who are struggling a little bit more and really could use a $2,500 stipend to cover their rent or to cover buying cab rides home after late night protests, right. Like, all these things are permissible uses because we validate that people are actually doing the organizing work. And we trust that they know the best way to use those funds.

TUCK: Totally. Oh, what a cool thing. Well, hopping around a little bit again, you've experienced a really horrendous amount of targeted harassment and doxxing online. I would love to hear what privacy tips you have for other trans people or people at high doxxing risk.

LIZ: As is the answer with a lot of these things, I have a portfolio company for that. One of my portfolio companies is called Tall Poppy. And Tall Poppy’s business model is to treat anti-harassment as a form of employee insurance, right. That the same way that you would buy health insurance coverage for your employees, that anyone who is in the line of their job placed at heightened risk, that they should receive coverage to cover that risk and mitigate against that risk. So Tall Poppy is led by the very wonderful Erica and Leigh. And Erica and Leigh are phenomenal founders, and they've kind of created this idea that employers should be responsible for—employers and also individuals who are privately willing to pay, right—can receive these kinds of benefits of hardening their profiles in advance, of having crisis response available to them in the event that an employee experiences severe harassment, either connected to their job or not because of their job, right. You know, we've covered employees who have faced domestic violence or stalking situations, right.

Like, it's similar to an EAP program, right. And in an EAP program, you might have access to therapy, you might have access to financial counseling, you might have access to, you know, basic legal consults. These are things that well-heeled companies should be funding for their employees. And that kind of collectivizes it so it's not, The person who gets harassed has to bear 100% of the cost, and instead is, This is broader and spread across more employees. Knowing that statistically at least one employee is going to get a huge amount of value out of this, and you know, the employer is going to benefit by not having that employee's life disrupted, right. So Tall Poppy is a paid enterprise service, but also Tall Poppy puts out a lot of really fantastic guides as to how to defend yourself against harassment. You know, Help, I need to give my manager a fact sheet about, you know, what's going on. These are all resources that Tall Poppy can help with. And for the people who are not Commonwealth among us, Tall Poppy is a Commonwealth phrase referring to, you know, someone who is exceptional in their field or otherwise is, you know, someone who is a cut above the rest and who everyone else is trying to cut down because, you know, because they're like, I'm jealous of that person, right. And, you know, trans people, we are fabulous, I will say, right, and I think, you know, that's why we attract a lot of hatred. I'll say that. So.

TUCK: Yeah. Okay, so in addition to doxxing, targeted harassment, that genre of things to worry about on the internet, are there other internet-related or tech-related concerns that you think trans people should have on their radar that maybe we're not talking about or thinking about enough, generally?

LIZ: I think broadly, every trans person knows a trans person sex worker in the same way as, you know, there's a stereotype of every trans person knows a trans person tech worker, right?

TUCK: Mm-hmm, mm-hmm.

LIZ: I think we need to think about how we address this issue of sex work being deemed criminal, because it's impacting the livelihoods of so many members of our community. So I think that's kind of the main lobbying thing, but I recognize that it's going to be really challenging with a Republican-controlled Congress with the prospect of a Republican president in 2024, right. Like, so, yes, I do think there are kind of tech-related legislation things that we should be aware of, that we need to reverse the damage of, as soon as we can. And I think that we need to make sure that we are protecting and uplifting sex workers. And that means that as soon as we can undo the damage that FOSTA and SESTA have done to those communities, the better, right. That when we're criminalizing sex work, when we are criminalizing platforms that help sex workers, right, that makes it very, very difficult to, for those people to earn their living, or at least it forces them into more precarious situations in terms of like, finding clients that they otherwise might not. So I think that's kind of the number one kind of tech- and legislation- related piece of activism that we can be doing, when the political conditions are right. Because now is not the time, knowing that, you know, we're facing this huge backlash against trans people being able to use the fucking loo. And if we can't use the loo, like, you know, and Republicans are legislating against that, and legislating against trans people being able to exist in schools, right, like. Yeah, it's going to be an uphill battle, but we need to fight that battle. And we need to eventually win that battle, when it becomes possible to win. We can't just say, Oh, we've forgotten about FOSTA and SESTA.

TUCK: Absolutely. Ozzy, do you have anything that you wanted to ask for our last question?

OZZY: I do have one question. And I don't know if you'll have an answer to this. But I was thinking about it when you were talking about like, organizing at Google crashing Google Docs. I guess I'm just curious, like, as someone who has worked at Google, and has criticisms of the company, but then also, obviously, so many organizers use a lot of these tools. Just like, if you have any thoughts about how to think about, like, the tech tools that we're using to organize, knowing that so many of them are controlled by companies that might be doing awful things or trying to use them against us in some cases.

LIZ: So, I think fundamentally, it would destroy Google's business model, if they ever used their technology to spy on people who are working against Google. Like, it would damage all their enterprise trust, right. Like, you would suddenly be worried about if you were competing with Google, of having, you know, your Google Docs used against you, right. Like, you know, for a long time, at least, my understanding is that Facebook used Google Docs, right, like while simultaneously competing with Google in the social networking space. So if you have a Google.com email, obviously, don't use your Google.com email for things you don't want Google.com to read, right. But like, if you're some other kind of activist who is not employed by Google, and is organizing against Google, I really don't think you should have to worry about using Google Docs to organize right. Like, obviously use Signal for like, anything that's genuinely, genuinely sensitive. But like, yeah, Google has far more to lose by prying around in user data. And Google—my experience, and like the experience of the folks I know at Google who are still working there on the privacy engineering teams and the other engineering, and the security engineering teams, like, there are very robust safeguards to prevent an executive at Google from deciding that they want to read your Google Docs. Like that is not a realistic threat model.

If the government is in your threat model, right, like, then no provider, whether it's Google, whether it be Notion, like, that's not safe, right? Like, you need to be using fully decentralized mechanisms of organizing. It boils down to, Are you going to be more likely compromised by a mole within your organizing group? Right. Like, it's much more reasonable to think about HUMINT threat models than it is to think about, you know, Google esoterically deciding to override every single one of their privacy controls, and you being the target of that, right. Like, maybe there'll be egg on my face, and five years or 10 years if Google turns truly evil. But like, at the moment, there are a lot of people at Google who are working to prevent insider risk and to prevent tampering, and like, the European Commission would have a field day with Google, if they ever did this, right. If they used, you know, their, access to people's documents to then steal from them, right? So, be realistic about your threat model, right? Like, you are more likely to get compromised if you don't have second factor set up, by someone guessing your password and logging in as you, right, or keylogging even, than you are, you know, someone reaching into Google servers. Again, if you are working at a company, do not use company resources for organizing against that company, right? Like that is a cardinal and very clear rule. But like, beyond that, like, I haven't seen any of the Google workers call for a boycott of Google. And I don't know practically how easy that would be to do. So, I think that you should use the tools that are most effective to you rather than hampering your own efforts in order to kind of have this purity of No, I'm not going to use Google or Amazon tooling. Right?

OZZY: Yeah.

LIZ: Hopefully, I answered your question, Ozzy. It was very long winded. There's no yes or no, because in the field of security and privacy engineering, the answer is always “it depends.”

OZZY: Yeah, no, I think that's very reassuring, actually. So thank you for sharing that.

LIZ: Yeah. Bottom line, you actually care about it, put it in Signal and disappearing messages. If you're allowed to do that and not subject to litigation, grumble grumble.

TUCK: The way we always end the show is by asking, in your ideal world, what would the future of gender look like?

LIZ: Oh, boy, the future of gender. I aspire to a future where people can express their gender without fear of retribution. And in which there is the fully representative set of, you know, professions and careers and incomes, like, among trans people, just the same way that there are among cis people. That is the thing that I wish for. I am profoundly anchored in this idea of not pulling the ladder up after me. And therefore I aspire to a more prosperous future for everyone, but especially to equalize a lot of the disadvantages that have held trans people and especially trans people with multiple intersectionalities, that have held us back.

[End credits theme begins]

TUCK: That's gonna do it for this week's show. You can find Liz at lizthegrey.com, L-I-Z, T-H-E, G-R-E-Y dot com. You can find us on Patreon at patreon.com/gender. That's where you can get access to our weekly newsletter and all of our bonus podcast. We are also on Instagram and at genderpodcast.com, where we've got transcripts for every episode and a bunch more. Our merch shop is at bit.ly/gendermerch. All merch is available only through the end of March. Proceeds go to our mutual aid fund and Palestinian relief efforts. 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.

[Theme music ends]