**Tuck:** Queer Candle Co. is a queer and trans owned business making small-batch, soy wax candles topped with a variety of botanicals. What kind of botanicals? We got aromatics, dried herbs, pressed flowers, all sorts of good stuff! Best of all Queer Candle Co. contributes 10% of monthly profits to the Sylvia Rivera Law Project, which you just might hear more about in a few weeks. Use code “Gender10” at checkout to get 10% off your first order, and learn more at Queercandleco.com, or on Instagram and TikTok at QueerCandleCo.

[Gender Reveal theme music starts]

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

[Gender Reveal theme music ends]

**Tuck:** Hey everyone, hope you’re all hanging in there. This week on the show I am thrilled to share my conversation with poet and drag performer, Wo Chan, you may also know as the Illustrious Pearl. I first saw Wo perform at a pride month comedy show back in 2021, and their performance just stuck in my brain for months, and months afterwards. So when I found out about their new poetry collection, I jumped at the chance to chat with them on the show. In this episode Wo and I talk about, togetherness, isolation, deportation, powerpoint drag, poop poetry, ostrich feathers, human sacrifice, and recontextualizing your own book after starting psychoanalysis.

**Wo:** The book came out and it has this narrative about family, and now I have a different narrative about my family.

**Tuck:** Before we get to that, just a reminder that you now have until December 5th to fill out the 2022 Trans Survey at ustranssurvey.org. Please do that if you are 16 or older, you live in the United States, and you are not cisgender. It is also a great day to subscribe to our Patreon where we release a behind the scenes newsletter every single week, and release a behind the scenes podcast every month. Plus you’ll be job creators for me and Ozzy which is fun! That’s at patreon.com/gender. And now, it’s time for This Week in Gender.

[Transition sound effect, with low metallic chimes and high-hats plays briefly]

**Tuck:** This week it felt appropriate to zip through some election results from earlier this month. Maybe add some, I don’t know if you would call it analysis but, talking? Anyway, according to the LGBT Victory Fund, at least 400 LGBT candidates won their elections this November. Which range from governorship and congress seats, to city council, school board positions, and whatever that soil and water job is? If our benchmark for success is “becoming the first trans person to do something,” then the most notable victory took place in New Hampshire. Where Democrat James Roesener became the first out trans man elected to any state legislature in US history. Meanwhile, Zooey Zephyr became the first out trans person ever elected to the state legislature in Montana. You can tell she’s trans because her name is Zooey Zephyr and we love that! We love trans name representation. Zooey had previously testified in front of the state legislature about Montana’s anti-trans sports bill, and she was apparently like “you know what, I can do this job better than y’all!” And now she will, and that rules. Meanwhile, SJ Howell became Montana’s first out nonbinary state legislator, so suddenly Montana has two trans state reps! Incredible work.

Over in Minnesota, Leigh Finke became the first out trans woman, and one of the first two out queer women, elected to state legislature. And of course once trans people get into office, they have to fight to stay in office. I’m very excited to say that friend of the show and former Gender Reveal guest Mauree Turner handily won re-election in Oklahoma. Also Sarah McBride was re-elected in Delaware, Brianna Titone was re-elected in Colorado, and Taylor Small was re-elected in Vermont. That’s it. Those eight people are, as far as I know, the only openly trans state officials in the country. And of course, there are no openly trans elected officials at the federal level, there are barely even any gay and bisexual ones. Last I checked there were about 13 out LGB’s in the 535 seat US Congress, and one of them is Kyrsten Sinema. That brings me to a key point, which is that we cannot rely on LGBT representation to save us. This is true for many reasons, but one is that LGBT people can also famously suck! No pun intended. If homosexual boy-mayor Pete Buttigieg had become the US President, it wouldn’t have made it any easier to be queer in this country. Although it might’ve made it funnier, and definitely more embarrassing. And speaking of embarrassing, Caitlyn Jenner ran for California governor recently and she literally campaigned against trans rights so, really representation doesn’t guarantee you anything. But let me give you a less nationally relevant but much more real example.

There’s a Portland City Council member named Dan Ryan, he’s a 60 year old white guy who was first elected in 2020, which was like a million years ago, and he ran as a progressive. Part of his messaging was like, “Hey, here’s this gay guy, HIV positive, this is the queer representation that famously queer Portland deserves.” And then fast-forward to 2022 and Dan Ryan was a key figure in passing a city council resolution that bans camping in the streets of Portland and would instead move unhoused people to a few designated campsites. Each campsite is intended to serve 500 people, but I wouldn’t say this if I felt this was hyperbolic but I mean it! Dan Ryan literally voted to round up homeless Portlanders, many of whom are queer, trans, HIV positive, and put those people in camps! He is putting members of our community into camps? And yet, if you look up Dan Ryan on the LGBT Victory Fund website, which I mentioned earlier, it says “Winner! Dan will continue to bring important representation to Portland.” Representation of what, fascism?

Of course, not all LGBT politicians are outright fascist, some of them are probably even good, but when we consider how horrific the political landscape is for trans people right now, it's clear that sprinkling one or two trans people into each state legislature will not fix our political nightmare. What it does do is put some of the existing trans legislatures in really awful positions. Because electing one or two trans people does not magically make the rest of the legislature pro-trans. So these trans representatives in conservative states have to go to work and listen to people say terrible things about the community, and then testify on behalf of their own basic rights and dignities, and watch as their coworkers vote against those rights and dignities.

I love that Zooey Zephyr ran because she was upset about Montana's anti-trans laws, but the Montana state legislature remains two-thirds Republicans. Speaking of the intractability of state oppression, this Victory Fund website actually has a page that says “Queering Congress 2022”?! Which of course makes me scream because you absolutely cannot queer the US congress anymore than you can queer, like, apartheid? It’s giving Raytheon pride flag logo, it’s giving this business is anti-racist and LGBT safe space but also the bathrooms are only for customers. Even if we filled congress with dykes, fags, dolls, and asexuals named Tooth, you absolutely cannot queer the state.

Anyway, this is going really long but I did write down some state ballot measures that might actually help some trans people. None of them have the words trans in them, but here we go. Nebraska and Washington D.C raised the state minimum wages, Illinois added collective bargaining rights to their state constitution and banned right-to-work laws. South Dakota expanded Medicaid eligibility, Oregon amended the state constitution to require that every resident have access to affordable healthcare, although there are no details how that will happen. Speaking of Oregon, it was one of three states to ban slave labor in prisons and jails. Yes, in 2022. And yes the vote in Oregon was very close, I hate it here! I hate a close vote on slavery. Meanwhile Vermont, Michigan, and California added abortion protections to their state constitutions; Maryland and Missouri legalized weed, and Colorado decriminalized certain psychedelics. So now you know where to go for a good time! This has been, This Week in Gender.

[Transition sound effect, with low metallic chimes and high-hats plays briefly]

**Tuck**: We’ve got two Theymail messages for you today, Theymails are short messages from listeners. If you would like to sign up for a Theymail message there is a link in the show notes. Today’s first message is from Quail Hills Farm and it says: Queer and trans farmers, come work with us in Amagansett, New York. Paid apprenticeships for the 2023 season are available now. Learn from badass queer and trans farmers in a dreamy place by the Atlantic Ocean! Visit us on Instagram @QuailHillsFarm to learn more.

Our second message is from Levi and it says: Better Days is the fruition of sustainable fashion through playful silhouettes and charismatic patchwork patterns. Handmade by your fellow transmasc, these one-of-a-kind garments are as unique as you are. Made from repurposed textile waste in sizes XS to XXXXL, we can break the binary sustainably. Find them on Instagram and their website, @betterdays.lol .

[Gender Reveal theme music plays]

**Tuck:** Wo Chan, who performs as the Illustrious Pearl, is a poet and drag artist. They are a winner of the Nightboat Poetry Prize and the author of *Togetherness*.Wo has received fellowships from Macdowell, New York Foundation of the Arts, Lambda Literary, and many others. Their poems appears in Poetry, WUSSY, Mass Review, No Token, The Margins, and elsewhere. As a member of the Brooklyn based drag and burlesque collective Switch N’ Play, Wo has performed at venues including the Whitney Museum of American Art, National Sawdust, New York Live Arts, and the Architectural Digest expo. Find them @TheIllustriousPearl.

[Gender Reveal theme music plays]

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

**Wo:** Yeah! I identify as non-binary, I use they/them pronouns, and I’ve been moving about the world with those pronouns and that identity since 2014. I was working at Sephora at the time, I had just moved up to New York. I just slowly made this realization, and part of it was due tio meeting other queer non-binary people, that I just had actual no genuine affinity or love towards masculinity. Wearing make-up everyday at work, and seeing the way that people smiled and reacted towards me because I was smiling, sort of loosened and softened a lot of masculinities hold on me. Which was largely I think, I only cooperated with because of fear of violence honestly. Once I made that connection I was like, “Oh if violence is the only thing holding me to masculinity then there is nothing genuine about my masculine expression as it stands right now.” That was like, the cascade of what happened, where I was like let me just be a they/them. Let me see if I can be a they/them and see what happens, and it was a lot more comfortable. That’s kind of been where I’m sitting, my home for the last seven or eight years, may change. It’s fascinating because it’s not so much a moving away from masculinity, it’s like a space gets opened up. It’s like turning on a light and there’s a lot of room here actually. I don’t have to claim this one candle that was given to me at birth or whatever. Assigned candle at birth!

[Tuck laughs]

**Tuck**: The new ACAB.

[Both laugh]

**Tuck:** Perfect. You know you’re a drag performer and we’ve talked to drag performers on the show before, but I always think it’s interesting to hear how trans people relate to drag. I know you’ve talked before about how drag for you is sometimes not even about you, it’s about other people. I was wondering if you could talk about that and what role drag plays in your life?

**Wo:** Drag for me is another form of artistic expression. I often do it with poetry, I didn’t start drag necessarily to, well I know a lot of people when they do drag it’s a direct confrontation of gender and their own expression; and finding another image, or person, or embodiment on the other side of that. Maybe that was part of it when I started, but the type of drag that I really like doing now, it feels like I’m directly tapping into a source of emotion and thinking. It feels free in the way that children are free. So that’s kind of the feeling I go for, and when I can access it on stage and when it translates, I can see a certain look of magic in the audience.

[Tuck hums in agreement]

**Wo:** That’s where I really love going for, always think about drag like a dessert right? Like a dessert is sweet, but it’s not about the sugar, and gender can be the sugar but that’s not why we necessarily eat desserts. The best desserts are very complicated, and they happen to be sweet but adding more sugar to it doesn’t necessarily make it a better cupcake everytime. Gender expression is just one element of it, it is a really poignant element of it especially for viewers who may not have seen someone embody it in that way. I recently did a drag show for the Fuzhou Opera Eastern Opera Company at Forsyth Plaza in Chinatown in public. With these uncles and grandpas and grandpas who have never seen a drag queen like me, an Asain drag queen like me; and I did Cantopop, I did a song in Chinese. I recreated this, Anita Mui’s final performance moment in a wedding gown. I could see that there was a recognition in the audience, but it was really loaded because while there was that face of magic in the front row, there were people also and men generally recording me. With a certain anger in their eyes, the way that people record cops. As if I was about to do something very abhorrent and violent and they needed to capture it on TV or on camera? I could hear them saying, “oh that’s a man,” you know? It was very triggering for me. I’m still processing that feeling. Doing very Asian drag as an Asian person, in an Asian space that is not mine.

**Tuck:** Yeah, as you’re saying right now your drag can be really vulnerable, your poetry can be really vulnerable, even your Instagram posts can be very vulnerable, and I was just curious if that vulnerability is something that comes natural to you? Or if there is ever a challenge to opening yourself up like that?

**Wo:** I think it was my natural mode for a very long time, and honestly it was what helped me stay alive. It was this open door, I used to be one of those like Facebook oversharers, you know? I would post like 20 times a day. There would be long 60 comment conversations amongst community members about important subjects, but also dumb things. It was definitely a problem, you know? I could’ve just stopped and actually kept that thought to myself and developed them, but I think, there were pluses and minuses to it right? When you’re vulnerable people can see your life and choose to participate in it, choose to empathize, but sometimes you don’t realize you’re choosing to be vulnerable you just end up doing it? And you end up oversharing in this way that can feel like a let down, especially when people aren’t reacting like you want to, and you really have to question who am I crying out for? So I think, as I’ve been in psychoanalysis now, I turned 30 during the pandemic and it was like the loneliest birthday ever. I’m really working towards understanding how to share in a way that isn’t manic and frantic, and grabby? But also not to judge myself for doing that either, because I think that’s just part of being a person is that we are grabby you know. It’s okay to want, but I don't want that to be my default.

**Tuck:** Yeah, I mean just speaking of the grabbiness even, your new collection is called *Togetherness*, and I know that a lot of your work is about loneliness and reaching. I was wondering if *Togetherness* as a title is aspirational or, how did you choose that?

**Wo:** Yeah, it is aspirational. I am really self-conscious about the title of my book. I knew this going into it, but it feels vague and has this like children's book quality to it. It’s not precise poetic concrete language like they teach you in school. It is aspirational and it’s the major theme of the book, is togetherness, separation and estrangement. There’s separation from the family, there’s deportation of the state, even struggle within friendship and dating. It’s reflected in that. My name, Wo, is actually a character for peace or harmony. When you take it by itself it means “and,” or “with,” it’s often a word that’s used in concepts of union or togetherness. It’s wild to have a name that’s this loaded, and then to also feel this isolated all the time you know? So it is aspirational but it’s also a way of stamping a name I was given onto this book. To really live there and challenge that life within language.

**Tuck:** Yeah I mean I, I really love your work in general, but I really love this collection and there are parts of it that were really acute for me because I actually also grew up in the back of restaurants that my family ran so those parts were really present for me. But then there obviously are also parts that are not my experience and one of those is this series braided through of these letters that people wrote about your family when you were at risk of being deported. They're testifying that your family are great people doing work for the community and I was just curious if like, if those were the real letters that were submitted and if so what did it feel like to read those outsider accounts of your families value and values?

**Wo:** Yeah, so those are found documents. They’re the real letters and I cut out some parts of it, there’s one letter that’s in full which I kept; which is the last letter. It ranged, a whole range of feelings reading them. I think the one from the city manager who was talking about the taxes and getting home late, being hard workers, I guess when I read it I was grossed out but also just fascinated? Which I think is also a great site for poetry being grossed out but fascinated. I was grossed out by being fascinated by the language performance of it all. The city manager, my friend's dad, is not an evil person, but he knew what to say to this judge and he knew what was important or he had an idea of what would’ve been important to a person that works for the U.S. State Department. So he talked about taxes, he talked about being a small business owner, and working really hard and contributing. So I was like, oh, I’ve been to this man's house, I’ve had dinner with him, so fascinating that he would do this.

But I think the last letter that really moved me is the letter from someone who was a delivery driver who worked for us. The delivery drivers at our restaurant were my lifeline to culture, to conversation, to learning about a world beyond the restaurant and the family. She eventually became an immigration lawyer, so by the time that we were being deported it was like seven years later. She was training, she was barred, so she was taking on cases and I would ask her for advice. So, she wrote this letter and everything about it is so beautiful and true. You know, like she did her wedding reception at my family's restaurant, I remember that night very clearly. I remember going to her wedding with my mom. That part always just rips my heart out because she talks about something, really core to the book, that moment where she is witnessing my parents' love towards the children. It’s such a pure image and there is something about it that because it’s real it feels more pure? Because it’s a found document, yeah. It’s fascinating because is that a language performance? Or is she really saying I saw this family's mother and she really loves her kids. I don’t know, it makes me really emotional but now I’m like, how much of that was a performance? It’s insane! It makes my mind melt when I think about it.

**Tuck:** Right yeah, in a conversation with the Poetry Foundation a couple years ago you said in class someone once said that a poet has three or four flood subjects, the subjects that writers return to for all their life. So then I was like, mm what are the subjects that you’re returning to in *Togetherness*?

**Wo:** Oh my gosh. [Both laugh]

**Tuck:** But yeah, I’m curious if you want to just tell people who haven’t read it yet more about sort of the themes that you’re exploring, maybe that you explore more generally in your work?

**Wo:** Yeah, I’m just gonna rapidly list off things. In *Togetherness*, the central theme is being together and then being separated right, all the forces that are associated with that. So intimacy, estrangement, exile, deportation, naturalization, belonging, not belonging, love and not love, but then other themes I'm interested in are like the abject? Right, so shit, farts, bad smells, pus. Things that are grotesque but then on the other side of that is this deep love of beauty. Which was not always obvious to me but someone pointed it out once, and I was a little embarrassed but like, oh yeah, I guess that’s true, I love beauty. I guess that’s an easy thing to miss because of course, poets love beautiful things, right? They love writing about, whatever they write they imbue with some sense of beauty or craft, or something.

But I am obsessed with beauty, not necessarily in a way that I have to be beautiful all the time, but I love learning how garments are made. I’m talking about drag now, like the process of drag. I remember this summer I was buying ostrich feathers for a costume, and ostrich feathers this year are three times more expensive because of droughts in South Africa. Because of those droughts ostriches didn’t produce as many feathers, and the person was talking about how white feathers are more expensive because they have to be bleached multiple times. The whole time I’m thinking, these are like nine foot tall birds? You know, and we just kill and then collect their feathers. There are entire industries like *RuPaul's Drag Race*, Mardi Gras, Carnival, and they come to these stores and every year spend so much money on feathers. So yeah, beauty, the abject, something about memory and childhood for sure, and I think that has to do with me unpacking the traumas of growing up in a restaurant; and growing up in a family that had to work in a restaurant at a young age. And then, the absurd I think, I don't know if that's a theme, but it’s something I love to employ. It feels like one of the only ways to make the pain of memory bearable, especially when you put it on stage.

**Tuck:** Yeah, mmhm. I have so many questions in a bunch of different directions, but before I sort of wander away from the book, is there anything from the book you would like to read?

**Wo:** I’ll read the poop poem.

**Tuck**: [laughs] Perfect.

**Wo:** Yesterday you took a shit so big at the office that it refused to flush. It was a Monday you remember that your roommate once said that food is like paying rent to your body. So, how can you afford this? And, for how long? When you yank to deliver and draw another surge of water, the turd stayed dense and stayed. Once, twice, three, four, five times unimpressed by the plumbing. The clear and swirling water around the single object, so terrified of your own feces it’s patriotic. You stare into the bowel with great reverential anxiety. It is like history, private, that only the parts of you have seen its creation. What in this world is so defiant, so honest and immune to eviction, that it dares you to destroy it with your own bare hands.

**Tuck:** I remember reading that last line and being like, how dare you make this so profound?! [Both laugh]

**Wo:** It’s terrifying, yeah.

**Tuck:** It is, yeah it really stayed with me, but you know I was thinking about this one thing I really like in your book that the poems are in sort of all different forms and styles. I know you went to school for poetry and I was just curious if there was a particular, I don’t know if there's a technical term, but form or style of poetry that you particularly gravitate to? Or if you enjoy getting to work with all of these different sorts of forms equally.

**Wo:** Yeah, I love form. I’m just a form nerd, I was a form nerd when I was in undergrad. I took a bunch of classes on forms, I don’t know it’s like either you love it or you don't. A lot of my classmates were free-versed all the way now to forever, or maybe not to forever maybe they right sonnets now too. I just loved taking seminars on sonnets, learning about, my free reading was just a book about different received forms and I would just read through that. It’s like a little game or a little puzzle, which gamifies it a little bit for me. Honestly it’s also easier I feel because there is some kind of path or guideway, but you have to know how to move with the spirit or whatever is coming through. So that feels like another conversation that you’re in. One if the things that I feel a little self-conscious about with this book is that it looks and feels chaotic because of the different forms, but I also like that about it because each form feels like a different character or posture that comes on right? I think about drag in form too because I have this joke where I’ll say sonnet is the gown, you put on this gown or this form that so many people have worn you know. Gender, you know, is a form and there’s so many different forms, shapes, I’m talking about literal silhouettes of gender. You see them, the little cut out or whatever, like the bathroom is a form.

**Tuck**: Yeah!

**Wo:** Those little shapes, but like when you go on stage you think about your silhouette, you think about what that shape is tapping into, what class is that shape tapping into, what era? So, putting on different received forms both on stage and on the page is just very fun for me because it really is just like little characters; and then you can push the very edge of those characters and make them say silly things or things you wouldn't expect. Or just revel in the beauty that that form allows you to for whatever brief time. So I think more books in metered verse, that’s so queer! Isn’t that so queer?

**Tuck:** Yes! Oh yeah and I think you talked about this too but there’s something so funny reading a sonnet adjacent work about, but stuff you know like it’s incredible. It’s so good! [laughs]

**Wo:** And that was so much of my first impulse in poetry school, but you know I’ve gotten some distance from my undergraduate years studying poetry. But I did notice as much as I loved being a form nerd and studying canonically, cause that’s what UVA offered, meaning like old and white. Every time I got to put a pen to page I would write about butt stuff, or ass hair, I don't know. Some of it was pretty romantic and stuff but a lot of it was, what was the rudest thing I could say right now? [Both laugh] Because I had all this resentment, honestly, of being there and feeling alone, pretending to be a cisgender man.

**Tuck:** Well, I think that shows up in your drag as well, the performance I’ve seen from you. I can’t remember what it’s called, but it's like, the one about coming into your vers top-dom, it’s like a PowerPoint drag situation. Actually do you just want to talk about what you mean by PowerPoint drag, and what you sort of like about that.

**Wo:** Yeah, I mean it’s exactly what it sounds like, I do drag in front of a PowerPoint that I write and pair to music. I had this idea I think in 2018 where it was like, I want to combine poetry and drag. I want to make it the thing I do because it is two things I love doing and I know I can meld there strengths together. I was also coming up to the limitations of my body, which is like I’m not one who has gymnastics skills, I’m not incredibly flexible. But I thought about with drag being the kind of punk operatic form that it is with one bringing in their one thing, what can I bring? I thought about it all these years in school learning poetry, maybe I can bring my words and my ability to communicate a feeling but there is a formal restraint in drag. Which is, you’re lip syncing, often time it’s not your own words, you’re in a costume. So it’s like, what if I just do all that but then behind me is this inside out thing happening you know? It’s entertaining to watch the drag and see how the words interact with the body, but the real show is happening above where there is this like opening of the monologue. I’ve only done it a few times, I’ve made a few PowerPoint drag pieces but it’s always electric debuting them or performing them. I think people are fascinated by the juxtaposition and the moments that things match up and the moments where they don’t match up, and I sometimes think that they don’t even know where to look at right. Which is part of, I don’t know, queer art? [laughs] It’s like everything thrown at the wall, kind of approach. I’m very happy to have started doing this, because I think benign able to write poetry and combine it with drag fills in a lot of the gaps that I want to address when I do drag.

**Tuck**: Wait when you say, fill in the gaps when you do drag what do you mean?

**Wo:** Well I guess part of it is my physical limitations where I wish I could do a cartwheel but maybe if I just project the word cartwheel behind me…. [Both laugh] No but it’s also like, that vers top-dom poem drag act, there really would’ve been no way for me to communicate that. All of those ideas and those personnel experiences through a ballad, through a memory which is like a song from cats, you know? But the music of it, the performance by Heather Headley that I’m singing to really just creates this architecture that allows the words to sit on top. People are in the feeling space of empathizing with beauty and someone singing their soul very bare, and then they can read the context where it's like, “oh this literal person in front of me went through this.” Alexandra Tatarsky, she's this clown and she was talking about the stage being the first sacrificial altar, you know? And originally they would kill goats, or whatever, and eventually it was like we just had a person playing a goat, and eventually we just had a person. It’s a raised platform, so I feel like sometimes when I do drag or I think about offering oneself as the sacrifice for the audience.

**Tuck**: Wow.

**Wo:** To go through a process, or see some type of meaning diffracted. I think in an act that personal, where I’m also stripping or doing a certain type of burlesque, it’s very much that feeling. Yeah.

**Tuck:** Yeah, I mean it’s so much of what we’ve been talking about. It’s beauty and almost the abject in that particular performance. It’s also so much vulnerability, I just remember seeing that performance in between a bunch of different comedy sets and it is funny, the other thing is it’s very vulnerable it’s also very funny, I just remember being like we’re so lucky, we’re so lucky to see this, all of this happening at once. But I was thinking this combining of your poetry and your drag stands out also in that, when you’re submitting an author photo for your poetry I’ve seen you use a photo of you as the Illustrious Pearl and I was curious about your intentions behind that and if you feel if there is any separation between Wo Chan the person and Pearl the person?

**Wo:** [laughs] I just don’t have photos out of drag that are taken professionally of me, and my drag photos are just so good I’m like I should just send this right? And no one has yelled at me yet you know! [laughs] The last photo I have of me out of drag that’s professional is from 2014, and I don’t even think I was a they/them at that point? I had spiked hair, you know? It just feels very outdated, and then I have one photo that a friend took where I’m weaning like basketball shorts because I was helping them paint a mural, but I look cute in it.

**Tuck:** [laughs] Sure.

**Wo:** I like sending the drag photo just because it is like a little token of beauty. And I feel like, oh this is effort, this is beauty, I come in peace you know, I’m a dove. [Both laugh] This is who I want to be represented on stage, I guess. Even if I’m not in full drag.

**Tuck**: Yeah, I’m gonna circle back to something that you said fully like 30 to 40 minutes ago, but you mentioned being in psychoanalysis. And, this is maybe going to sound ignorant of me, psychoanalysis is such a New York thing to me. I’ve never heard anyone outside of New York ever talk about psychoanalysis and I don’t fully understand what it is so, I’m interested in your experiences but also just like what is it? [Laughs]

**Wo:** Yeah! Thank you for asking me because it’s truly been the next big chapter of my life. It’s not just a New York thing but I know a lot of people in New York do it. Psychoanalysis is basically, you meet with your analyst who is somewhat different from a regular therapist. You meet with them like three times a week, that's the minimum for psychoanalytic treatment. It is kind of based on Freud but it has grown beyond, far beyond. It is a type of therapy essentially, it’s what you would imagine with the person on the couch and the person talking; it’s that. But the requirement is you work with one analyst, the idea is that you work with them for multiple years. The thing about psychoanalysis is it’s famously inaccessible because you meet so often and it’s so expensive. I managed to apply and get in as a low-fee patient for a training analyst, so that’s how I’m getting my treatment right now. I committed to meeting with him three times a week for two years.

**Tuck:** Oh wow, okay.

**Wo:** So, you know when you take that time it’s almost as if you had a full-time job for eight months and you just walk in a room and talk with one person for eight months. I added up the time, that’s what it is. So, it’s interesting, if I try tying it into the book it’s like, shortly after my book was released, I was maybe like three or four months into my psychoanalysis, and at that point I had just been unloading all of the memories in my head, kind of just putting them on the floor. And it arrived to the point where I realized, oh these memories don’t fit the narrative, the hero’s narrative I have of my parents. These memories suggest that my parents made some selfish decisions and made my brothers and I for child labor at a restaurant and took away a lot of our childhoods. My brothers especially and it fucked up our family dynamic very intensely. So that’s been a struggle because it’s a fundamental shift in my self-narrative, and it complicates the narrative in the book, right.

But at the same time when I go back to the book I realize maybe this is the power of poetry. I realize the book has its little hints of deep range and it doesn’t just flatly glorify the parents; and it has a lot of empathy towards my brothers. It’s almost like the book was tilted in the right direction that it hadn’t moved into what I’m moving into now. It’s like, I definitely went through some childhood trauma or abuse based on how my parents treated us. They’re not as heroic as I believed, but they’re probably not as evil either. It’s a wild moment for me because the book came out and it has this narrative about family, and now I have a different narrative about my family. I’m trying to figure out how to read from this book, how do I talk from this book, without just lying through my teeth.

**Tuck:** Yeah! I mean that's really interesting, because I did notice a little bit that there was this story happening about your family and then the feelings towards your family, towards your parents specifically, that I don’t want to say it didn’t line up, but that there was, like, a little bit missing there, so it’s really interesting that it’s because you were just figuring it out as you were writing. Do you think when you’re writing about your family and presenting it publicly, do you think about how you being the narrator of your family's story maybe impacts your family? Is that something that you're conscious of, or do you have to sort of shove that away in order to do art that is truthful and, you know authentic to yourself and your experience?

**Wo:** Yeah, I shove that away the best that I can, but I always check in with that impulse. I would rather err on the side not saying something if it has any hints of cruelty in it. Maybe that’s what the emptiness is, that unaddressed-ness is, because it’s like, “oh I don’t want to write that; I can't.” I know that’s going to affect people if I do, maybe that’s me just being really careful. It occurs to me that a lot of poetry writing, especially the time that I wrote these poems where I was a 23 to 24, young poet of color applying for these fellowships and opportunities. There is a varied type of language performance in that as well, navigating the poetry world. Knowing myself as a queer immigrant person of color I was like, okay I know if I write certain types of poems that end triumphantly those are going to resonant more and I don’t want to write the other poem. I feel like maybe there’s one or two of those poems in the book, but I don't read them as much. [Both laugh] Speaking of language performance.

**Tuck:** That’s so interesting, well I realize you said some of these poems in the book you’ve been working on for many years. I’ve been curious what it’s like to have this finally out in the world after working on it so much and how you’re thinking how you want to move forward with whatever else you’re working on now that this is out?

**Wo:** Yeah! I think my main thing right now is being in psychoanalysis; it’s like a job. My time is mostly taken up with that and fulfilling book obligations and performance obligations. But, my brain, I think I’m in a lot of pain right now processing my childhood in psychoanalysis. It's pretty tough. I noticed that my brain is often fantasizing about the next thing that I could make, you know? Which to me is a sign that I’m not ready to make this next thing. My brain just needs this to think about and fantasize about as I walk through the day. I don’t want to say any of the details of what I’m fantasizing about, because I think it’s really important to let that stew in the soy sauce or the steam or whatever; but a lot of what I'm thinking about are poems that are based on voices that partially aren’t me. I think with psychoanalysis I’ve lost this fundamental idea of myself, I think I lost a part of my core narrative and now I’m just fantasizing about different characters or different avatars that aren't full people but are aspects of a person. Something ensemble like, something that is in a space rather than this book that kind of comes through as a series of voices.

**Tuck:** Wow. I feel like I just did the very selfish thing of listening to what you're saying and being like, oh no that applies to me? Oh now I'm rethinking, now I’m thinking about my…. All right well we’ll move past that, I’ll circle back.

**Wo:** I can give you a literal, like I’m reading *Incognito Lounge*, I’ve just been reading and telling myself you’re not ready to make right now but you’re clearly so hungry to make, why don’t you read? Why don’t you read [laughs], why don’t you watch cinema, why don’t you just absorb, you just put out a book. Take your time and recharge.

**Tuck**: Yeah, that’s so smart. This is the part of the show where I ask is there anything else that we haven’t talked about yet that you want to talk about?

**Wo:** Oh yeah, I guess I want to say review my book on Goodreads! [Tuck laughs] I think part of not knowing who I am anymore has also just made me really face-glued to my Goodreads screen, you know? Or like, looking for reviews? And there can be moments when I read it and I’m like oh, is that who I am? It feels strange, I feel this loss of identity, loss of self, while my book is going out to the world. It’s a very strange feeling, it also coincided with pride month so I have this big hole in my identity. I would be crying in psychoanalysis on a Friday at noon, and then seven hours later I would be in a hotel lobby in full drag screaming, “Pride!! I feel no shame at all!!” [Both laugh] Which is a total lie, you know? I’m like, what psychic wounds am I incurring right now by doing my job, when I really just need to be home?

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

**Wo:** I think in my ideal world there would be a lot more gender autonomy. I think that young people would get the chance to slowly discover their gender and their gender expression. And then, to just have that be supported and not criticized and not really be anyone else's business; unless it’s something that the person wants to entrust to another person. I guess as complicated as gender is, there’s definitely layers and levels to it of how closely someone knows your gender. I’ve had a few beautiful gender moments, but the most recent one I remember this summer I went to the beach with my friend who is queer and has known me for a while. I pulled out this big, white linen towel or like a sheet you know? My friend was like wow! That’s the perfect gender, that’s the perfect gender sheet for you. It’s just like, oh my god you’re right! [Both laugh] And it wasn’t like a gendered color, it was just something that felt like it fit my expression, you know. I was just very touched by that, because you really see me on a level that isn't really even expressed in culture. It’s just a seeing of one's affinities and attachments.

[Gender Reveal theme music starts]

**Tuck:** That’s gonna do it for this week's show. If you had a good time or learned something please share this episode with folks in your community. You can find Wo on Instagram @TheIllustriousPearl. Their new poetry collection *Togetherness* is available now, and of course I highly recommend it. We are on Twitter and Instagram @gendereveal or at genderpodcast.com, where we have starter packs for new listeners and transcripts of every episode. You can also find us on Patreon at patreon.com/gender, that’s where we keep our bonus episodes and our weekly newsletter. You can find our limited time only merch collection at bit.ly/gendermerch. 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 Blue Dot Sessions. We’ll be back next week with more feelings about gender.

[Gender Reveal theme music ends]

**Tuck:** I do this thing where I record a bunch of the episodes for the season before they come out, which means I make like eight episodes in a row without having ever listened back to any of them; and we put them out one week after another. I always accidentally do this thing where I talk about the same thing like three or four times in different interviews because I’m processing this thought.

**Wo:** Right.

**Tuck:** And by the time that I’ve put the episode out, I’ve processed that thought and I’ve come to a new conclusion, and I’m like well shit now I have to think about whether I want to cut out this conversation I’ve had like four times because I actually don’t know if I believe it any more. [Laughs] It’s really interesting, it’s like, I guess I was really going through it three months ago!