

History is Gay

Episode 7:

F is for Friend Who Did Not Have Gender

Introduction

Gretchen: Hello and welcome to *History is Gay*, a podcast that examines the underappreciated and overlooked queer ladies, gents, and gentle-enbies that have always been there in the unexplored corners of history. Because history has never been as straight as you think.

♪[Intro music plays]♪

Gretchen: Hi, I'm Gretchen.

Leigh: And I'm Leigh And in this episode, we're talking about Jemima Wilkinson, aka the "Publick Universal Friend." They were a post-revolution, early American religious leader who founded their own Christian sect after being reborn as a genderless spirit inhabiting the body of the former Quaker, quote unquote, "woman."

Gretchen: Yeah.

Leigh: We had to give that description because, as we've discovered, and we discovered ourselves, not a lot of people know about this person—

Gretchen: No.

Leigh: This was a delight for us to figure out.

Gretchen: Oh, my gosh, it was great. And like, the funny thing is, is we, this is our first episode that we're doing on a single person, and it was someone that we initially couldn't find a lot of information about. And so we both had this moment where we were like, are you gonna have enough to say, are we gonna?

Leigh: I don't know. I don't know

Gretchen: I don't know if we're gonna have enough. No, we have, what how long is our outline?

Leigh: I don't know, like something like 15 pages like it always is.

Gretchen: Like normal.

Leigh: Like normal.

Grethen: Like our outlines normally are. God, we're just a couple of Ravenclaws...

Leigh: Exactly! That was what I was about to say

Gretchen: Who, like, enjoy writing term paper every other week, for no credit.

Leigh: [laughter] For fun! I was talking to my friend Shelby is always like, how do you meet such new queer friends on the train all the time? And I'm like, I don't fucking know. But I guess I just attract them. God, I wish. All the queers, come to me.

Gretchen: I know, right?

Leigh: But no, I was talking to this person on the train who like is in grad school, and then they saw the giant, like stack of papers that I pulled out of my backpack to start reading and they were like, so you're basically in grad school? And I'm like, yeah, yeah. Except, [laughter] nobody gives me grades. And there's no scary pressure.

Gretchen: Right?

Leigh: I just do this shit for fun.

Gretchen: Right. And we can, you know, there's no, like, obligation to like, get it. I mean, we set our own deadlines, [laughter] and we try and stick to them, but it's not the same.

Leigh: No.

Gretchen: Plus, it's like make- we get to make our own courses.

Leigh: And we don't have to pay thousands of dollars.

Gretchen: Yes.

Leigh: Yay! [laughter]

Gretchen: Even better.

Leigh: That's always nice. [laughter]

Gretchen: So-

Leigh: But yeah.

Corrections Corner: On Egyptian Lettuce

Gretchen: To start this episode, we have our first ever corrections corner.

Leigh: Yeah.

Gretchen: We have to make a correction to our last episode on Egyptians. Apparently lettuce, lettuce does reproduce sexually.

Leigh: Yeah, thank you to, I can't remember your name. But somebody sent us-

Gretchen: An email.

Leigh: A lovely email. From our, from our website that was like um, I don't know if you've ever had a vegetable garden but...

Gretchen: Right. Right. So all that does all that means is that lettuce does produce like seeds and it does reproduce sexually. So the source we found this in- because we said that because one of the sources that we used made this claim. So when we were trying to figure out, like, that's kind of weird that they would say that when it's like factually incorrect and any like Google search will tell you that. So we were thinking that maybe this source may have meant that it is frequently self-pollinating, meaning that you don't need, like, multiple lettuce plants in order to reproduce the way you need like for, like, corn. Like corn is not self pollinating. Humans have to pollinate it, you know. So like lettuce can pollinate itself. And if it sounds like a euphemism, maybe it is!

Leigh: [at the same time] Maybe it is! [laughter] Yeah, I mean, it's- it's funny too, because in digging around in this stuff Gretchen found some really-

Gretchen: Oh my gosh.

Leigh: Funny things about like what Egyptians believed about lettuce. Like apparently it was considered an aphrodisiac because the variety- there was,

of lettuce that was common in Egypt was like tall and like rod or tube shaped, kind of like Romaine, like a phallus. So...

Gretchen: Right. Right. And it had a lot of latex in it. If you've ever cut lettuce and you see like the little white like it's not usually a lot of fluid but it's like white fluid that comes out, that's actually that's like latex. So apparently, like, the variety in ancient Egypt had a lot of latex in it. So if you like cut, like the stem or the leaves like this, like, you know, ejaculate, thick, you like, like it would ejaculate this thick, white fluid. And so it was very, like, phallic.

Leigh: So the perfect plant for semen salad.

Gretchen: Right, right. Yeah. Yeah.

Leigh: We're- we're really earning that explicit rating on iTunes.

Gretchen: Oh my gosh, yep. So like the conclusion we came to after I found all of this was like, even if the source that we used, that mentioned that it, you know, didn't really reproduce sexually was wrong. And it is. There's even more innuendo going on in this story than we thought. [laughter] Because he's eating salad, which is like phallic and, like, ejaculates like milky white fluid covered in like Horus's semen. [laughter]

Leigh: Oh, mythology! Whha whaa whan

Gretchen: Oh my gosh. Mythology is great. Like, it's the original in front of my salad only like the salad is actually the sex joke.

Leigh: The salad is the sex joke.

Gretchen: Right? Like the salad is. Like he's eating a salad covered. [laughter] Yep. Anyway.

Leigh: Anyway. So yeah, we wanted to just start off the episode with that little- our first little a corrections coroner.

Gretchen: Yep.

Leigh: But, yeah, no. But ya know, bringing it back around to this week. So content warnings for this episode, we really specifically want to make a note on pronouns. A lot of our sources may misgender this person that we're going to talk about. We're, whenever possible we will use the term "the Friend" for the most part, but when we use pronouns, we will try to use

they/them even though we get into kind of dicey territory with, you know, they/them probably was not used at that time, and they and communities were issuing gendered pronouns entirely.

But for the sake of brevity, we're going to, you know, incorporate those here. However, please note that when we're quoting from a source, be aware that she and her will be used frequently.

I also want to talk a little bit about like, as we'll discuss regarding this person, whether or not you know, we should use gendered pronouns for life before this rebirth as the Friend so we'll kind of get into that a little bit as well.

Gretchen: Right. Right. So today is a people focused episode. So we'll do our discussion of like the historical and in this case, like religious context, in which the Friend existed a third time, then we will talk about we'll do our, okay, 'We're they?' which is our functional ranking system.

And today, just to be clear, when we use gay, which is like our, you know, it's our slang umbrella term, we're going to be talking specifically about like, their existence as like genderless. Rather than like sexual attraction or orientation, it should become clear in our conversation, but we just want to say that upfront that today is one of those times when, like, you know, when we do are like, how gay were they? Like, we're not talking about attraction. And we will end with a little fun little anecdote.

Leigh: Yeah.

Gretchen: Towards the end, and a couple of, not necessarily pop culture but yeah, they're like, something along those lines, resources that you can find. And that'll be it. Once again, we don't have a word of the week.

Leigh: Yeah. We were struggling. We were struggling with this one. I mean, we could just talk about we're going to tell you a lot of context about like religious communities at the time, but we didn't have anything really like specifically fun to the queer experience to you know, enlighten y'all about.

Gretchen: Right [sarcastic laughter] That's a good joke. It was actually.

Leigh: I didn't even realize until after I did it. It was great. Ah, man, that's awesome.

Gretchen: So I don't think we have any other news...

Leigh: Nah, nah. You want to just jump, jump right in?

Socio-Historical and Religious Context

Gretchen: Right. Yeah.

Leigh: Before- before we talk a little bit about Jemima Wilkinson/the Friend Gretchen did like a whole buttload of research on our historical context. Do you want- to do you want to start off on some of that and talk a little bit about like some of the religious communities that were coming about in this...

Gretchen: Yeah.

Leigh: 18th century New England?

Gretchen: Yeah. So we're talking pretty much right around the time of the Revolutionary War. So Revolutionary War- so 1776, right around that period, up through the early 19th century. And it really is, I think, really important to understand the certain religious communities that the Friend would have interacted with or known about. The first is the Society of Friends, also known as the Quakers. And the Quakers- the roots of the Quakers are in England, they are one of the few groups who broke away from the Church of England. And the key point for George Fox, who was the founder of the Quakers was the direct experience of revelation without the need for ordained clergy, or like religious structures and institutions.

Leigh: So like, like anybody could go up and preach.

Gretchen: Right! Yeah, anybody could experience God personally, like it didn't have to be mediated by a priest. So they believe that God made his will known directly to and through the inner light, what they call the "inner light of the individual" And it was through such inner- Oh, though such inner light was still subject to group confirmation and kind of a general consensus mentality. Like someone could say, God told me this. And if everyone else was like, meh, well that doesn't sound right. [laughter]

Like it wasn't just like everyone can say whatever they want, there was still this idea of like God would lead, the inner light was kind of subject to the group's kind of confirmation of whether or not that was appropriate. And an important factor here is the stress on the immediate and personal relationship with God, and direct revelation to individual people. And what's interesting is that the Quakers, unlike many societies, at the time, believed that this could apply to both men and women.

So both men and women had this like inner light that the Holy Spirit could guide them by and they, you know, had kind of a spiritual equality, in theory, if maybe not always in practice. Cause I'm sure that most of the preachers were still men. [laughter] But in theory, women could also receive this like inner light by the Holy Spirit. They were known for the use of what they called plain language which means a rejection of titles, pagan names for days of the weeks and months.

So Sunday would be the first day, like February would be the second month, like they didn't use what we call- you know, the pagan names and they refuse to use you and your which at the time- many people may not know this- at the time you and your was plural was plural address And they refused to use "you" and "you're" in place of thee and thou, when addressing a single person. So they were apparently big sticklers on grammar. So funnily enough, the Friend probably wouldn't have liked singular they, I mean, even if the even if the society of the friend didn't issue gendered pronouns in general, based on their background in the Quakers, they probably wouldn't have liked a singular they.

Leigh: [laughs] Yeah.

Gretchen: So the Quakers were also known for their, you know, anti-war. They wore, like, plain clothing, they refused to swear oaths, they were opposed to slavery, and they were teetotallers. They were very concerned with abolition, prison reform, other social justice movements at the time. Jemima was a birthright Quaker, which means that their father was a Quaker, mother was not as far as we know.

And by the time Jemima was a child, the Quakers would have become, you know, at the time fairly insular. And they were more interested in maintaining their distinction from society, and other denominations at the time, rather than like in proselytizing, and gaining new members. So all of that is like important context for, you know, how they understood themselves and their mission and all of that. The next big thing is the New Lights. Do you want me to talk about that, Leigh? Or do you want to?

Leigh: I can talk about it.

Gretchen: Cool.

Leigh: Yeah. So first you have- so it's the they were Congregationalist, and Baptist, Protestant communities. So you have the first Great Awakening, which was a series of revivals in Britain, and England during the 1730s and '40s. And they had a focus on individual piety, right, so like moral and

religious behavior and devotion, worship of God. prominent leaders include George Whitefield, John Wesley, and Jonathan Edwards. And the- the difference from Congregationalists and Baptist is like Congregationalists were like a rejection of infant baptism...

Gretchen: Other way around. Baptist did not believe in infant baptism. Congregationalists did.

Leigh: Thank you. Look, you're asking a Jew to talk about this stuff.

Gretchen: Oh my gosh. Like.

Leigh: I'm doing this all from the background.

Gretchen: I grew up Protestant. And I still read these things. And I'm like, why the fuck is this such a big deal.

Leigh: I don't understand any of this.

Gretchen: I don't care. Whatever

Leigh: The general consensus of both of them is that they embrace the revival mentality. So as opposed to the the, quote, "Old Lights", who were suspicious of them and the perceived threat to authority, they opposed. They stressed individual inspiration and enlightenment, as with the Quakers. And they rejected all spiritual authority other than the Bible and the Holy Spirit, rather than like group confirmation of individual revelation.

Gretchen: Right.

Leigh: And they stressed the importance of a conversion experience. And you'll see later when we get into into bio stuff, but Jemima, many sources let us know that they heard Whitefield preach and joined a nNw Light congregation in 1776.

Main Topic: Jemima Wilkinson, The Publick Universal Friend

Gretchen: Yep. Yeah, that was part of what led to their expulsion from the Society of Friends was this, you know, desire to be involved with the new lights. So the last one is, is much more relevant later in, you know, the life of the Friend and the Society of Universal Friends, which is the Ephrata cloister or the Ephrata community. And this is a community that was founded in 1732 by Johann Beissel, who is a German immigrant in what is

now Lancaster, Pennsylvania. I didn't realize this, this was like a long standing community like the last surviving member died in 2008.

Leigh: What?

Gretchen: Like at 98 years old, but still like this is like...

Leigh: That's great.

Gretchen: Went on for a really long time. So this was a self-sustaining semi-monastic community of celibate mostly celibate men and women who believed in the strict interpretation of the Bible and strict self discipline. During this time, there was a frustration among many at the state established or more formal religious institutions. And so communities like the Ephrata community wished to practice their religion primarily through like hard work, prayer, charity, helping others become more spiritual and kind of like a get back to nature mentality, rather than like religion being primarily about like going to church and you know, doing like religious rituals and things like that.

So the Ephrata community valued celibacy, though there was an order of married householders who helped sustain the community and engage in the same kind of work as the celibate members. All community members were expected to assist with the work of sustaining the community through farming, industrial work paper, making household chores, et cetera. They were famous for their hymn publications and had their own printing press and although Besseil died in 1768, so died prior to the ministry of the Friend and membership was declining. By the time you know, the Friend would have been in contact with this community, especially like the celibate nature of it. It still very likely influenced the Friends' vision for like a new Jerusalem community that was kind of apart from the world and its own like self sustaining, you know, self-perpetuating community that existed kind of on the frontier.

And then the final thing to point out is the existence of like other quote "female" prophets in England, the continent in North America, so again, during roughly the same time period in- that The Friend was active in the United States, there was this flurry of like female preachers and prophets in England women like Joanna Southcott another, Mother Buchan, Dorothy Gott, Sarah Flaxmer like these- these women all proclaim themselves the quote, "woman clothed with the sun," who is a character in the book of Revelation in context, it's a metaphor for Israel, but they were, you know, take it literally- who like was come to like redeem like a fallen world and a fallen nation. In France, you have someone like Catherine Théot, who declared herself the "new Eve," sent to save the

world from the sins of the first Eve and one of her compatriots, Suzette Labrouse declared the world would be saved when she was, you know, had this special elevation to Heaven.

You have people in North America, Ann Lee, who some people may have heard of, she's the founder of the Shakers, which is a charismatic movement. She declared herself depending on the source, either the second coming of Christ in a female form, or the woman from Revelation. And subsequent teachers of her sect, downplayed her charismatic gifts, which are things like speaking in tongues, communing with the dead, religious healings, and downplayed her to more of like a maternal role. And her self perception as a female godhead was demoted to her representing like the principle of "female divinity."

Leigh: I love though that you know, still all these years later, right, like what is this, you know, two centuries later than what we were talking about with medieval Christianity and this like eroticized...

Gretchen: Right.

Leigh: Feminized Christ. We're still seeing it and, and it that kind of led the way and opened doors for all of these kind of female godheads.

Gretchen: Right.

Leigh: Which is- I love that every single episode we ended up having stuff that ties back to...

Gretchen: I know. It's great.

Leigh: Various things, it's almost as if history is cyclical.

Gretchen: [sing-song] What?!

Leigh: What?!

Gretchen: And it's all very mystical to like a lot of these like female prophets had very like had like mystical or charismatic traditions associated with with them, which again, is what we saw in the Middle Ages, where like, the mystical was, was much more strongly associated with the feminine that kind of like ephemeral visions and it is really, really fascinating.

Leigh: Yeah.

Gretchen: So speaking of which many of- so this is right around the Enlightenment is also going on around the tail end of it. Many of the quote "rational" Enlightenment thinkers considered all forms of religious fanaticism to be feminine, meaning like weak and superstitious.

Leigh: Boo,

Gretchen: Boo patriarchy. But that meant like that there was a place for these powerful female orators to create and lead religious movements. Based on their own personal charm and charisma, because it's one of those where it's like, well, if they think we're all crazy anyway, like, [sarcastic] fine.

Leigh: [sarcastic] Might as well take it too 100%

Gretchen: Right. If you know the religious and the divine were, you know, strongly- the religious and the feminine were strongly associated that created more space for like female leaders, which is annoying because you know, nowadays, it's like [sarcastic] women can't be preachers. Women can't be [sounds] nah nah nah It's just...

Leigh: [sarcastic] Stop turning things on its head.

Gretchen: Right? Gee, it's almost like that's an overreaction to like the fear of like all of these women gaining power, they're like, oh, wait, no, no, [sarcastic] women can't be.

Leigh: [sarcastic gravely voice] That's not what we meant. Sorry. [laughter] This is my impression of the patriarchy. [growls]

Gretchen: [laughs] That's a good one. I think. That's what it sounds like to me.

Leigh: It's just like that Charlie, like Charlie Brown adults. [Peanuts noise] Wha wha... Like, that's what happens.

Gretchen: Totally.

Leigh: That's what happens to me inside my head when men are talking.

Gretchen: Yep. so yeah, [laughter] many of these Enlightenment thinkers thought that these, you know, populace preachers were using like verbal trickery to like seduce the credulous and gullible masses like the [sarcastic] poor, and women, and less educated people. Um, if you can't hear the

sarcasm in my voice, it's there. [laughter] It's dripping. Like I can't even say that with like a serious face.

Leigh: I can see it just dripping out of Gretchen's mouth.

Gretchen: Drooling out of my mouth.

Leigh: It looks like them that blue goo from that like episode of Are You Afraid of the Dark?

Gretchen: [growls] Yes...Sarcasm.

Leigh: Blue gushers that's what [laughter] sarcasm looks like. Anyway...

Gretchen: Sarcasm is blue gushers.

Leigh: I keep derailing you.

Gretchen: It's fine. So it is, in this context, as we'll see, it's intriguing that the Friend had many followers and you know, friends who maybe didn't follow their teachings, who were well educated and wealthy and you know, were more than just these poor gullible masses [sarcasm] who don't know any better, as the Enlightenment would have you think. According to one of our sources, Juster says that:

"Female prophets enacted a very different version of the 'visionary republic' in their sectarian movement, one that located spiritual and political authority, not in the [culturally constructed] masculine rule of reason. But in the [culturally constructed] feminine realm of mystical power. In so doing, they provide historians with an alternate model of democratic politics that may, in the long run have been more appealing to a certain sector of American women."

So again, though- though, the Friend did not identify as female, especially many historians who are awful.

Leigh: Yeah, oh boy.

Gretchen: [yelling over each other] They're good scholars- They're good information but many scholars will ignore 'the friends' own self perception of their gender, and assign the Friend to a female gender.

Leigh: Or even in one source that I read, utilized entirely masculine pronouns.

Gretchen: Right, which I thought was- was interesting.

Leigh: That was the only one that I saw, which I thought- I thought it was fascinating that they, they did something...

Gretchen: Right.

Leigh: That was the only one that I saw, which I thought, I thought it was fascinating that they, they did something and they went in the totally different direction, but they still at least, like went, Okay, well, this person clearly does not identify as a woman anymore. So let's, you know, it's- it's still stuck in that very binary thinking of like, well, if it's not one, it must be the other.

Gretchen: Right? Right, totally. But it is. This is the context in which someone like The Friend can exist, in a different way. Because you have, you know, this, a much broader movement to have women or people who formerly identified as women- space for them to have these kind of movements, sectarian movements, and like religious leadership. Broader society recognized that this was a thing. So we're going further. Do you- Do you want to talk a little bit about the- the American Revolution? I mean, there's not a whole lot.

Leigh: Yeah, let me I'll just set a little bit of context for y'all.

Gretchen: Right.

Leigh: So- so at the time that the Friend was growing up, and you know, gaining followers, it was during this portion of the American Revolution, like right after the large amounts of fighting were beginning to stop. So Rhode Island was swift to sever ties with Georgia III, a full two months before the Declaration of Independence and little fighting occurred there. But the British did occupy Newport from December 1776, to November 1779. And one of our sources Wisbey mentions

"In these disturbing, uncertain, exciting times, which involved members of [her] family as well as neighbors and friends. Jemima could hardly have avoided the family discussions on the merits of the colonial cause, as opposed to the British, the morality of bearing arms, the question of independence and its consequences. And even perhaps, cousin Steven Hopkins's is role in the Continental Congress."

So just because the Friend didn't see much fighting in their hometown doesn't mean that the unstable, insecure environment wouldn't have disturbed them greatly, especially given their Quaker beliefs, which really emphasized non-violent- non violence. Post revolutionary America likewise, would have been an unstable social and political environment with tension between the U.S. and Britain, France, as well as the First Peoples pressure to stabilize like a new Union to prove its viability, make sure that they got things, you know, quote, unquote, "right," there was increased pressure and desire to expand territories. [sarcastic] Yeah, colonialism! [Peanuts noise] wha wha

You know but basically, in other words, they lived in a tumultuous time both you know, socio-political, economically. This was a tumultuous time in U.S. history. And even if they weren't directly involved in any of it, it was you know, kind of in the air and inescapable.

Gretchen: Right, right. And speaking of colonialism [sarcastic noises] like put \$1 in a jar every time like mentioned colonialism every- every episode, like the patriarchy, it is a running theme. Not a good one, but just one that comes up over and over again. So after the Revolutionary War, settlers are pouring into the lands west of the established colonies. And although the primary focus of like the political parties at this time was to distribute the land wisely, that didn't stop unscrupulous surveyors and other would-be interested parties from taking advantage of, of both like the First Peoples and the would-be settlers. There's, you know, an example even from the lifetime of the Friend where a conglomerate known as the Lessee company found a loophole in the law that prevented the sale of Native peoples lands in New York and obtained a 999 year lease. Lease of course, quote, unquote lease...

Leigh: quote unquote lease. Stealing of land with the right of money.

Gretchen: Right, yeah. And the British and the Tories, [together] sore losers. [laughter] So you know, James Parker, who was one of the leaders of the Society of Universal Friends purchased a deed that was subsequently and rightly declared to be fraudulent and he then had to negotiate for less land and in less than favorable conditions with an actual like legitimate company.

So you have like- there's so much going on in the air at this time, like the First Peoples are understandably like suspicious of all of these new settlers who are in there like, stealing their land. And the Friends' Quaker

background and the Society of Useful Friends- Universal Friends Quaker-like Society, like likely helped preserve their, you know, more like better relationship with the First Peoples they interacted with than some of the other settlers because the Quakers have a history of being much more friendly. Because they're, you know, pacifists- like quietists, and pacifists and don't believe in war.

Leigh: They interacted with the First Peoples without proselytizing to them.

Gretchen: Right.

Leigh: Which I mean, you know, say what you will about, like, a bunch of White people being like, [imitating] Oh, well, this land is great. Can we have it, please? You know, say what you will about that, but like, [sarcastic] at least they didn't try to convert them? Question mark?

Gretchen: Right...

Leigh: Like, alright, cool. You got a cookie? Whoo

Gretchen: Snaps for not also trying to force your religion on them.

Leigh: [sarcastic] Like, the tiniest crumbs of a cookie.

Gretchen: I know. Right? Yeah, you could get like...

Leigh: As you can tell, we are unsympathetic to this plight.

Gretchen: No, not at all. [laughter] But you have this like, romantic spirit of like settling the frontier- gave the impression of this, there's a big world out there! Where like, there's big empty world empty, quote, unquote, "empty", big empty world where there's like freedom from societal norms. And, you know, if you work hard, we can, you know, balance out a desire for spiritual distinction with like closeness to nature. And like the spiritual cocktail outline, you know, that we just talked about, small wonder that a non-conforming preacher and a leader in their congregation would seek to find a place where they can be free to be themselves. All of these things make a lot of sense.

The last thing to note here is that these, interestingly, these different contexts that you can kind of locate the Friend into have frequently been used as a means of, you know, making sense or locating the Friend in history. Feminist scholars, or those wishing to highlight, you know, women preachers, as we mentioned, in early America will locate you know, the

Friend, you know, belongs in this context, like they're like, a woman preacher. One of these powerful, like, charismatic woman preachers in early America. Contemporaries of the Friend themselves might talk about how their genderlessness was, you know, anti-Republican, and by Republican we mean, like, the founding of the American Republic.

Leigh: Early American

Gretchen: Not like Republican, right. Not like, not versus Democrat

Leigh: Not the elephant.

Gretchen: Yeah, not them. I like that, "not the elephant."

Leigh: Yeah, the country, not the elephant. [laughter]

Gretchen: Perfect!

Leigh: I like it.

Gretchen: And that you know, this, their genderlessness was also like a threat to social stability after the Revolutionary War, those wishing to avoid all of that, or, you know, any talk of like gender, will- and the celebration of celibacy, within the Society of Universal Friends will talk about the Friend as like a pioneer of early post revolutionary settlement. And it's the first, you know- biggest settlement in New York at this time period. And you have all of these competing different ways to interpret the Friend. So, so, who was the Friend? Leigh?

Who were they? Bio Time

Leigh: Who was the Friend indeed?

Gretchen: Tell us about- tell us about Jemima Wilkinson.

Leigh: I will so for this you know, just this very brief portion of Jemima Wilkinson's early life we're going to transition into using gendered pronouns. Because as you will see, later on in our discussion, this person, you know, has, there's a distinction and two distinct portions of their life. So in this portion of their life, we're going to refer to them with she/her pronouns. So they were born as Jemima Wilkinson in 1752, in Cumberland Rhode Island. She was the eighth of 12 children in a Quaker family.

Gretchen: Oh, god.

Leigh: Yeah, that's a lot of kids. Oh boy

Gretchen: In 25 years.

Leigh: Right in the middle.

Gretchen: Twelve kids in 25 years. Every other year you're popping out a baby.

Leigh: So I mean, and then mom died when Jemima was 10. So that's a lot.

Gretchen: Fair.

Leigh: That's fair. If you're basically like a birth workhorse. Can't be good for your health.

Gretchen: Yeah, that's gonna ruin your- your bits and your health and your everything.

Leigh: It's gonna ruin your everything. God, but yeah, so likely because of the death of her mother, Jemima Wilkinson did not receive much in terms of a formal education. But many sources say that she was an avid reader of the Bible, and Quaker beliefs and history and I think I even read somewhere that she was really into poetry. At about age 18, Jemima saw George Whitefield, the preacher who started the Great Awakening, like we said, speak in 1770 and developed a voracious and even more voracious interest in religion. And she joined the New Light Baptist group and dove into religious studies. And because of this, she was expelled from the Quaker meeting her family was a part of. Yep.

Gretchen: Her older sister was, I believe, expelled at the same time too, Patience, for having a child out of wedlock.

Leigh: Yes. yeah. Mhmm. And so now we're going to transition into this kind of new element of Jemima Wilkinson's life.

Gretchen: Right.

Leigh: So just, just two months after joining the New Light Baptist group in October 1776 At the age of 26- at the age of 24, Wilkinson fell ill with a fever, possibly typhus. Also there was like one source that said [imitating] 'maybe it was an emotional breakdown.' Who knows? But like typhoid.

Gretchen: That sounds defamatory. That sounds conveniently defamatory.

Leigh: Exactly [sarcastic noises] I don't know about that.

Gretchen: [sarcastic] This lady had an emotional breakdown and woke up believing she was someone else.

Leigh: Exactly

Gretchen: [sarcastic] Wah, hysteria!

Leigh: But yeah. So this, you know, this typhoid- this typhus fever, also called Columbus fever. But it had kind of come to Rhode Island. And so after several days on the brink of death, the person who was Jemima Wilkinson emerged from a fever and claimed to have been visited by angels. And said that- this person that had been Jemima Wilkison had died and in her place arose a genderless, quote, "Second descent of the spirit of life from God", neither male nor female who was inhabiting Jemima Wilkinson's body and was from heretofore, here on out, to be called "the Publick Universal Friend." And we have a direct- a direct quote that was actually written by the Friend themself, that was:

"A Memorandum of the introduction of that fatal fever, called in the year 1776 the Columbus fever: since call'd the typhus or malignant fever-... And on the 4th of the 10th month, it reached the house of Jerimiah Wilikinson, ten miles from Providence. She saw two Archangels descending from the east with golden crowns upon their heads, clothed in long white robes, down to the feet...putting their trumpets to their mouth, proclaimed, saying "Room, room, room, in the many mansions of eternal glory for thee."

And so apparently Jemima Wilkinson quote,

"droppt the dying flesh & yielded up the Ghost. And according to the declaration of the Angels, the Spirit took full possession of the Body it now animates."

So that's pretty heavy.

Gretchen: Yeah.

Leigh: So from that moment onward, this person refused to respond to any name other than 'Publick Universal Friend' or the Friend and eschewed gendered pronouns altogether. You'll also sometimes see the Friend referred

to as 'Universal Friend of Mankind' or 'Allfriend' lots of different variations on that.

Gretchen: Yep, yep. And what's interesting is that, in the Quaker community, public friends was actually a title for members of the community who felt a concern or call to preach. And were then authorized, by the community, to travel from place to place, and meeting house to meeting house, preaching. So when taking upon this name, 'Publick Friend' was a title that the religious community that the Friend was raised in would have recognized as a proclamation of- feel a call to speak and preach publicly. It was the addition of "universal" that then put them outside of the Quaker community.

And saying that this is a universal call to preach to everyone, and to travel everywhere. Even the idea of, like, a new name for a reborn spirit has its roots in the Quaker tradition. And their acceptance and interpretation of Isaiah 62 which says:

"You will be called by a new name that the mouth of the Lord shall name."

So, you know, the Friends' self identity has its root- like very much, like they were drawing upon the language and experience of the community they were involved in. And they presented themselves in a way that would have made sense to the community that they were involved in. [agreeing noises] As saying, like, I believe that I have a universal call to, like, preach and teach.

Leigh: Yep.

Gretchen: And, as a sign that Jemima Wilkinson has died, and I, you know, a divine spirit, have been resurrected in the body of the person who used to be Jemima Wilkinson, have a new name. Because there's a rebirth happening. And that new name, like, as a signal of their, like, new mission and that that death and resurrection has happened.

Leigh: One of my favorite things that I read in all of this is- there's a really great website that we've referenced a couple of other times. We referenced in our- in our Cloistered Queers episode. There's a really great, cool website called [Q spirit](#) which is a website that, like, highlights queerness and religion, and queerness- and like queer saints and everything like that. But there's a really great article on Jemima Wilkinson there that says. It's by Kittredge Cherry. And it says:

"In 1776, the same year that America issued the Declaration of Independence, Wilkinson [sic] declared independence from gender."

Gretchen: [drawn out] Nice!

Leigh: I love that! I just, like, I forgot to write it in our outline and I had to find it. And it's so good. It's so good.

Gretchen: I feel like every person who identifies, you know, outside of a gender binary needs to, like, use that.

Leigh: Right.

Gretchen and Leigh: [together] Like, I am declaring my independence [takes a long breath] from gender.

Leigh: [laughs] Yes! I will use that from now on.

Gretchen: Yep. Perfect.

Leigh: Oh man. So good. Ah. But yeah, do you wanna, kind of talk a little bit about, you know, now we have our 'Publick Universal Friend'

Gretchen: Yeah.

Leigh: And, what did this person do the second that they shot up and declared that they were now here.

Gretchen: Well, the Friend immediately upon being, you know, resurrected began to preach to anyone who would listen. I believe even a couple of days after [agreeing noises] they were resurrected, they went to the meeting house that they had attended as a child and after, you know, the regular service, like stood outside, like under a tree and was like [imitating] 'Here is my message. People come listen to me.'

Leigh: [laughter] I love- I love it!

[talking over each other]

Gretchen: Right! It's great!

Leigh: Just like undeterred. At all

Gretchen: Right!

Leigh: Be like, you were almost dead three days ago. What are you doing?

Gretchen: I have a mission. Right. Right. Cause that's what I- that's what happens to me when I get really, really sick is that I get up like a couple of days later and I'm like, you know what? I need to give a speech. [giggles] I am ready to, like, go and like, preach.

Leigh: Speak some truths.

Gretchen: I mean, speak some truth. So at this time they traveled throughout Rhode Island, Massachusetts, Connecticut, Pennsylvania. Many of the Friend's own family members left the Quaker faith to follow their teachings. And according to many of our sources, the Friend's preaching was incredibly charismatic, drew several followers across class lines attracting both intellectual and economic elites as well as the poor and the oppressed. One of the more influential followers was Judge William Porter, who apparently, upon hearing the Friend preach and becoming a convert in 1779, freed his slaves and abandoned his political career. And actually built a fourteen room annex onto his mansion for the Friend's followers to use and live in. Which is pretty awesome.

Leigh: Yeah.

Gretchen: One of my favorite things about that is the way it classes- the way the friends teaching like crosses these you know boundary lines because, especially in a lot of these more like charismatic movements of the time, typically did attract people who were more marginalized by society. Which isn't a bad thing but it is really intriguing to see that even those who, you know, were like quote unquote "elites" were, you know, listening to and following someone who I think most- even most historical scholars would want to relegate to kind of this, like fringe,

Leigh: Yeah.

Gretchen: You know, it this is someone who only appeals to the poor masses because you know, only they would care about.

Leigh: Well it lends...

Gretchen: Someone like that.

Leigh: It lends, it lends, I mean, in kind of a fucked-up way it lends legitimacy, you know.

Gretchen: Right. Right, Yep, Yeah, yeah. In a fucked-up way.

Leigh: Yeah, in a fucked-up way though. [imitating] All of these poor people are listening to them. Oh, what that rich dude likes this person. Okay, cool. It must be cool.

Gretchen: Right?

Leigh: Must be good.

Gretchen: Right? Right. And the friend was willing to cross the war lines during the, during the war, like they would go and they would preach to, you know, British soldiers in Newport and, you know, to prisons. And it wasn't just you know, they they would go out of their way to go to executions for people condemned. So they really did cross so many different lines in just like such a fascinating way.

Now their preaching, blended, you know, traditional Christian warnings about, you know, sin and redemption with elements of Quaker pacifism, abolitionism. You know, like Judge Porter, freeing his slaves, focused a lot about the coming apocalypse. And what at the time would be called millennialism which has to do with Revelation, because Revelation talks about like the new millennium and there's like the millennium before Christ returns.

Leigh: And the end of the world kind of stuff.

Gretchen: Yeah, end of the world, apocalyptic, you know, repent or you know, repent, because the kingdom of heaven is near kind of, kind of stuff. One listener said "*She do preach up terror alarmingly.*"

Leigh: I just like that quote. I just like the way...

Gretchen: It is pretty great.

Leigh: You know just like- just some person be like, "*She do preach up terror alarmingly.*"

Gretchen: Yep.

Leigh: It just sounds like a- like an interesting reflection.

Leigh: Yep.

Leigh: I don't know.

Gretchen: Right. Right. like I don't, yeah, it just, Oh, interesting. Yeah, she, she do preach up terror alarmingly. [both laughing] All right, as you said, the Friend preached against slavery, gave medical care to both sides in the Revolutionary War, advocated for equality between men and women, stressed the importance of celibacy. That was a, that was a big one. And the Friend's followers began to make claims that the Friend was, quote, "the Messiah returned", or, you know, Christ in female form, which, of course, drew ire and upset from outsiders. Though the Friend never made these claims themself.

Like the Friend never claimed divine status. A lot of the followers claimed divine status. Or that the- you know, made it- implied that they believed that the Friend was not just a genderless spirit sent from God, but the masculine Spirit of Christ embodying them. Though the Friend never made those claims, other people made those claims about the Friend. And there was even an incident in Pennsylvania...

Leigh: That's where it was.

Gretchen: After they, after they preached where, you know, they were inside the meeting house and people gathered outside and like threw stones at the house. They were not personally attacked but like the meeting house was

Leigh: That's right.

Gretchen: Where they were in was. They, you know, throw stones at it, because people got mad. By 1783, the Friend had gathered enough converts that a declaration of faith was composed and the group was officially known as the Society of Universal Friends. Once again, like drawing on that Quaker heritage, which is called the Society of Friends. This is the Society of Universal Friends. Now, the claim of like nothing new in their theology, that, like this came up a multiple times in our sources, where the sources would talk about like, well, there's nothing like new or innovative or special about the Friend's theology.

And what it overlooks is the ways that the Friend's public performance or like inhabiting of their genderlessness, like manifested their view of what a new society looked like. And what, you know, what the, what life after death looked like. As someone who preached that Christ would, you know, was

coming again and preaching for repentance, the Friend was like a prefiguration of what they believe the New World Order would look like after Christ's return. This is what life after death looks like. Like I have died and been resurrected. And the body like my presence now as the Friend symbolically and, like, physically manifests what life after death looks like. And to me, that's- that's pretty damn innovative. That's like no one else was saying this.

Leigh: Yeah. Yeah, there were a lot of sources that you know, we'll get into a little bit in our like, next big section that talks about how Oh, well, you know, a lot of people weren't really going to to see Jemima Wilkinson preach for, for what they were saying it was more to like get a gander at this weird person who with all these new conventions. And it's like, but that itself is greatly upsetting the status quo and- and interweaving a theology into it. And we'll really get into that conversation...

Gretchen: Right. Right.

Leigh: especially as it, you know, relates to one of our sources, which I've decided that my wife for the week is Scott Larson. [laughter]

Gretchen: I love that.

Leigh: is a historian named Scott Larson who I want to marry their article. [whispering] Is so good.

Gretchen: Right. Right. Scott Larson, if you ever find a way to listen to this, we love you.

Leigh: We love you. Thank you.

Gretchen: Your article is the best thing that we ever found about the Friend.

Leigh: Yeah, so anyway, like the content right? Not we knew, what frustrates me the most is this like arbitrary distinction between like, the content of what they were preaching, and their like, behavior and embodiment. That like somehow it's like the content has to be new. Otherwise, it's just same old, same old. And that's bullshit. [laughter] The content of what they were saying might not have been, like, particularly new.

But the Friend themselves was part of the message and the mission. Their person was part of the message and mission of the Friend. And to only look at what they were saying is to miss what made the Friend and the society

that they were, you know, trying to create so unique and different. So like their presentation as being a supernatural being who existed like beyond a gender, one like it lends credence to their self conceptualization,

We'll get- we'll get into later about like how they presented themselves in terms of like dress and like hairstyle. All of those things like lent credence to the way they talked about themselves, as like I am a being who we who is neither male nor female. And they presented themselves as such. And it also lent authority to their preaching, which again, we'll get into.

This idea of like being a being beyond male and female was, was a sign of their being divinely sent. And it just, that's just as much a theological statement as like Bible quotations, or like saying, like moral axioms. That is equally a theological statement. It's just that so many of the people that we're reading, like don't take it that way. And it's frustrating. Like as someone who has a degree in church history, like it is frustrating as heck to see all of these people like missing, like, they're missing the entire point.

Gretchen: Right? Like the point is that...

Leigh: Right over their head. Yeah, anyway, well,

Gretchen: We can come back to that. I'll soapbox for a while later, we'll come back to that.

Leigh: So yeah, so like, moving- moving onward in our biography. So by 1788, after 14 years of preaching and gathering a whole bunch more followers, the Friend was convinced that the group needed to create, like, a place away from the persecution of the so called wicked world, and begin a community of their own. The Friend dreamt of a quote

"Township where none but friends hold any title or possession there upon any other terms than that of being true friends."

And, you know, like friends and kind of both sense of the world- sense of the word,

Gretchen: Right?

Leigh: Like, like a nice utopian community, where women have a sense of community and there's a cooperative existence and nobody owns land or property. Isn't that great?

Gretchen: Right?

Leigh: And so one of, one of the followers, James Parker, led 25 people to a place west of Seneca Lake and started a community there on a parcel of land quote, unquote, as we said before, "purchased" from the Iroquois Confederacy. You know, I will say like, despite the super, super shininess of colonialism, you know, they were some of the first settlers in the region and the first white people to meet and trade with the native peoples there. Apparently, according to some of our sources, relations with the First Peoples were relatively, quote, "friendly and fair," and the Indigenous people quote, "treated her kindly, and her colony was never disturbed by them." But again, this is all coming from White people, so take it with a huge grain of salt.

Gretchen: Right.

Leigh: Apparently, the Friend was known among the First Peoples as the great women preacher or I'm not gonna be able to pronounce this Shinneevanagis-taw-ge? I think? I'm very sorry, I'm not good at pronouncing things. So they- they were there for a little while. And then in 1790, they moved west to Lake Keuka and established the quote "New Jerusalem," later, they, you know, dropped the new and it was just Jerusalem, Township, which is, you know, Jerusalem is still there. It was six square miles and the community at its height had grown to 260 followers.

Gretchen: Yep. Yep.

Leigh: The township of Jerusalem was, was, you know, going about all of its business for quite some time, until things started to falter. It developed fault lines when some of the followers, including this James Parker, and, it's actually I think you've been pronouncing it William Porter, but I've read William Potter, turned on the Friend and began disputing the ownership of the land.

Gretchen: [sing-song] All about greed.

Leigh: [sighs] Yep. So how about since they were saying that since they had put in the most amount of money into the, like, community pool [imitating] like everybody pulled their money together to buy quote, unquote, "buy" this land. Since they said that they had put the most amount of money, they argued that the land should be distributed accordingly. So these two rich motherfuckers decided that they weren't content with living in a happy, peaceful community, free of accumulation of wealth and property. So it created a gap quote

"between these wealthy men and the poor friends, celibate women, orphans and sick who along with those faithful few wealthy folks remained true."

Gretchen: Is anyone surprised? Anyone? Anyone?

Leigh: That two White dudes went [imitating] 'I want more!'

Gretchen: Right. Right. [imitating] Oh, God

Leigh: And it sucks that like those are- like two of the friends earliest and most close converts and then they were like [imitating] Ah, Well... So sucks. So basically saying fuck this to those dudes and insisting that quote, "redeeming love was free." The Friend took the remaining faithful and made a final move westward, just a few miles and ended up, you know, the community lived there until the Friend's death in 1819.

Outside the settlement, there were numerous tales of like trying to slander the Friend and their community, telling stories about, like, sexual misconduct and harsh punishments and weird practices. And we'll get, you know, a little bit into that in our next section, but the Friend was actually put on trial for blasphemy in 1800. But fun fact, the new courts at the time ruled that they could not try blasphemy cases because of the brand new separation of church and state.

Gretchen: Whee!

Leigh: So yay, America! Which I think is really interesting that like this case of Jemima Wilkinson, the public friend, actually helped to solidify a cornerstone of our democratic process.

Gretchen: Right.

Leigh: Which, yay! So yeah, so the Friend died or left time, as you know, the universal friends put it, on July 1st, 1819. So we're almost at 200 years from, from their death at age 61. And the Friend's body was quietly buried in a secret location, known only to the two who buried them and their descendants. And the Society of Universal Friends disintegrated a few years after the Friend's death And like the land was, you know, divvied up and there were a bunch of disputes and a whole bunch of stuff. And I think- I think the last surviving member died in 1784. So that's...

Gretchen: 1884?

Leigh: Or was it? Yeah, 1884. No, they went back in time. [laughter]

Gretchen: They were dead.

Leigh: They went back in time. Yeah, 1884. So, yeah. So that's that's kind of where we leave off with, with the Friend and their their biography, their story. So, so Gretchen, why do we think they're gay? And, you know, for this episode by gay we mean, like, gender non-conforming, non-binary, genderless, outside of a binary gender experience?

Why do we think they're gay?

Gretchen: Yes. Yes. Well, the first thing is pronouns. They did not use female pronouns after their illness. Most followers did not refer to them in the third person at all, using any kind of gendered pronoun, but simply referred to them as the Friend. Detractors would frequently use female pronouns. [sarcastic] Surprise, surprise, hey. Some, like we said, one of our sources used masculine pronouns, because this idea of, like, having a, like, masculine spirit.

And even- even in modern scholarship, the confusion of pronouns, for those who, people who write about the Friend shows a distinct lack of awareness or unwilling or unwillingness, [sarcastic] I mean, probably a little bit about to engage with the Friend's own self conceptualization as a genderless spirit. Those who use female pronouns imply that the Friend was deluded, even if they don't believe that themselves. Like they're implying that the Friend, in speaking of themselves as a genderless spirit, that that was deluded and they weren't, you know, quote, really just a woman.

Leigh: [sarcastic] Having an emotional breakdown. Wah...

Gretchen: [sarcastic] Right. Nnmm. Oh, man. Like one of the earliest biographies, or the earliest biography, or quote memoir of the Friend was horribly like slanderous...

Leigh: Oh, boy!

Gretchen: Defamatory. Like it claimed to be a biography but it like that's where the idea of, like, they pretty much just Like the Friend was like deluded and trying to delude their followers and...

Leigh: Yeah, and it was it was only a couple of, it was only, it was published only a couple of years after after the Friend's death.

Gretchen: Yep. 1821.

Leigh: Yeah.

Gretchen: And then had a reprint in 1844.

Leigh: So, you know, great.

Gretchen: Yep, yep. Those who use a masculine pronoun reinforce the gender binary. And like human- the human- the very like human institutions that the Friend was, you know, trying to like. reject and live outside of what you know, like on the one hand you like, at least you're doing something but also...not.

Leigh: You know, you missed the point.

Gretchen: Right again, one scholar even refers to the Friend is a spiritual transvestite at one point.

Leigh: Yeah. Yuck.

Gretchen: And uses, you know, who used masculine dress and performance and presentation, not to undermine, but actually to uphold patriarchal religious structures. And this is a feminist writer and I believe in their- in their, this was in their early work and I believe that in their later work they have, you know, since changed some of the ways that they talk about the Friend but that is something you might run into. And. you know, once again this, like, denies the Friends own conceptual- self conceptualization and presentation. which is of being beyond an outside of male and female. It's not a transition from one gender to another, but rather like the existence outside of... male and female. And as such, the Friend purposefully mixed their presentation in order to outwardly represent existing outside of, you know, as being genderless. So, Leigh Do you want to talk a little bit more about like, their dress?

Leigh: Yeah, yeah. So like everything that, that the Friend did to... perform this- this expansive gender experience and its connection to divinity was very, very precise and deliberate.

Gretchen: Yep.

Leigh: They acted and dressed and presented themselves in ways that reinforced the image of neither male nor female. An important aspect of their self-understanding is an otherworldly visitor within the body of Jemima. The Friend was unafraid of riding in public unaccompanied, though rarely did so because, you know, their followers are usually with them. But they still

rode sidesaddle as per a female custom, likely due to their clothing choices. And speaking of clothing choices...

Gretchen: Yeah! Yep.

Leigh: Yeah, so, they like, I love this because it's, you see it's you see this in a lot of really amazing gender non-conforming and trans activists right now who are really being really deliberate in their- in their gender presentation to mix different elements and I feel like this is- this is such a beautiful precursor to that. So they had a flowing smock tied under the chin that looked like both like a dressing gown, a dressing gown and revealed only tips of fingers and feet and did not emphasize body or shape at all. It also looked like a clergy robe. There were long pretty ringlets of hair, but left uncovered as for a masculine custom, and like a wide, felt hat like, a like a beaver hat that was styled much like a man's. And there's even a quoted description from contemporary Ezra Stiles in 1782:

"She is aet. 30, strait, well made, light Complexion, black Eyes, round face, chestnut dark Hair. Wears light cloth Cloke with a Cape like a Man's--Purple Gown, long sleeves to Wristbands--Mans shirt down to the Hands with Neckband--purple handkerchief or Neckcloth tied around the neck like a man's--No Cap--Hair combed turned over & not long --wears a Watch-Man's Hat."

Every single thing that this person says goes in, like, was styled in a masculine way, was styled in a masculine way. Also, all the purple.

Gretchen: Also, [laughter] all the purple. It's like a friend after my own heart. I love purple. Purple's great!

Leigh: The original lavender menace!

Gretchen: Yeah!

Leigh: [drawn out] Ahhhhhhhhhh, I love it.

Grethen: Oh my gosh. It's amazing.

Leigh: Oh, man. But, But what I love about this is that, like, the masculine clothing choices are only a part of it. The Friend deliberately mixed combinations of male and gender- male and female gender signifiers, combined with clerical clothing in the way dress, And like historians have commented that observers noted the way this mixture of clothing indicated

the Friend's genderless state as an element of their performative divinity, like we've mentioned.

Gretchen: Yep.

Leigh: Yeah.

Gretchen: Mhmm

Leigh: A Quaker missionary William Savery noted, quote:

"She was attired in a loose gown or rather a surplus of Calico and some parts of her dress were quite masculine. As she is not supposed to have either sex, so this neutrality is manifest in her personal appearance."

Or from our not friend, David Hudson, which was, the first, the first biographer but at least, you know, he put in there that, you know, the Friend:

"Dressed[ed] in a fashion entirely her own, which resembled neither that of men or women"

Gretchen: Right. And of course, like, of course, there are people who, you know, used their ambiguous dress and linked it to, like, being a religious imposter, or you know, to sexual deviancy. You have people speculating about their undergarments.

Leigh: Oi, yep. I mean, like, every trans persons, every trans person's favorite question, what's in your pants, like really we're going to go there that early on, right?

Gretchen: Right, yep. They would spread rumors that the Friend wore loose robes to hide a pregnancy, at one point, That like apparently they believed that the friend and James Parker had you know...

Leigh: We're doing it.

Gretchen: had sex and and got, they got pregnant and you know eventually murdered the baby because you know. Why leave it at just a pregnancy. Why not add infanticide?

Leigh: Right well they were, like, [sarcastic] it specifically was like and they're because they're because she was pregnant you know they were committing sin and having sex and the baby was smushed like...

Gretchen: Right. Right.

Leigh: [laughter] No, that's not how it works.

Gretchen: Right. No. But like- but like, but like, the rumors are, like, clearly meant to defame the Friend, James Parker. To denounce the Society's followers for being deluded and voyeuristic. Like, it's the same old, same old that we already see, of like, non-traditional religious orders of the time. I mean, even the Quakers and Catholics and even preachers like Whitefield, like, were accused of like, you know, sexual obscenity and, you know, voyeurism and like porn- pornographic, whatever. Like, it's very normal, just be like, well, they're non traditional, therefore they must be perverts.

As awful as it sounds to say that was normal, like it kind of was. Like it was, and has been throughout, I think a lot of, at least from what I know, Christian religious history is like, [imitating] Oh, you guys don't do things the way we do like, y'all must be like, you must be perverted and gross.

Leigh: You must be freaky.

Gretchen: You must be freaky and like, the Friend has to be wearing that robe because [sarcastic] they're secretly pregnant. Like, whatever. You know., Another rumor links the Friend with a companion who likewise was ambiguously gendered, people proposing either that it was a man dressed as a woman, to hide that they're sexual intimacy in the guise of, like, good Christian friendship.

You know, these ladies are so intimate with each other. They must be good friends, [sarcastic] but like what if it's secretly a man and they're having sex? Or, you know, or you have the other people who are like, [imitating sarcastically] or maybe they're, they're not just friends and it's two ladies who are- who are, like, having sex together. Eww, oh my God. Gal pals.

Leigh: Gal pals.

Gretchen: Gal pals. In other words like people are awful, and will always find ways to defame that which is, which they consider to be abnormal [agreeing noises from Leigh] and outside of their experience and belief of what things ought to be. Blugh.

Leigh: [sarcastic] Yeah! Not only in the Friends clothing choices did they defy gender categories, but even some of our sources talk about, specifically the Friends voice confounding people as to you know, their gender

presentation. Ruth Prichard, a follower and friend described it as, quote, “the voice that spake as never man spake”, implying a divine presence. Abner Brownwell said “it was very grum and shrill for a woman.” Noting that it was at once low and high pitched and grum was specifically a word that had been historically used to describe demonic voices, especially if it was like a perceived woman having that kind of vocal tone.

Gretchen: She has a deep voice, [sarcastic] must be a demon! Wah [imitating in high pitch] Ladies only have soft voices. Ladies can't have deep voices. I just- I have never heard the word grum before.

Leigh: Yeah!

Gretchen: And I kind of dig it.

Leigh: Can I reflect on my voices grumness?

Gretchen: [talking over each other] Like, not the connotations. Yeah!

Leigh: I don't know, I kind of dig being a demon.

Gretchen: Kind of a new word for... Yeah, I mean demons are

Leigh: Demons have fun.

Gretchen: They do have fun. Ezra Stiles, again, who was president of Yale. So one of those, like, educated, you know, elite followers, described it as “decent and graceful and grave.” Which interestingly implies that not all Americans were ready to either deify or vilify this kind of otherworldly, gender ambiguous vocal tone, or vocal performance. Perhaps even like grave as a way to describe preaching, just like the clerical garments that the Friend wore implied a very- a specific gender register. As kind of a, like, presentation of the divine and the divine kind of being genderless.

Possibility, from Larson, from Scott Larson, our favorite, so I mean, and one thing to remember is that vocal performance was the only kind of entertainment really available at the time other than like music, everything was auditory. So many of, you know, of the snobby enlightenment figures would talk about like, you know, as we said earlier, like the gullible masses for being persuaded by like unique or moving or charismatic preachers. So this like unique vocal tone and vocal performance could cut like, would work both ways. Like it could be very convincing for people who believed the Friend to be divine and otherworldly. And for those who believe them to be a fraud, it was evidence that they were demonic or a fraud or just, you know,

trying to use these like fancy trickery to, like, convince people to [sarcastic] listen to them.

Leigh: Which is so interesting because like, you know, even now you have a tradition of like unique vocal inflection and vocal performance in a lot of religious communities, like you know, Just at any and and I mean, you know, I've never been inside of a Baptist Church so I don't know this firsthand, but like every representation that you see of like Baptist preaching is so very much, like, [loudly] the Bible up in the hand and like talking, you know, in a yelling voice and doing all of this. And it's it is all very like you get swept up in it. It's meant to, it's meant to, like, call, and call you to stand up and to come into this and be a part of this experience. And so it's, it's interesting to see that you know, birthed here and how- mean not necessarily birthed here because people beforehand, but having that specific vocal performance being such a intricately tied to the message that the Friend was...

Gretchen: Right, right, right. That kind of genderless like utilizing what we might consider to be like gendered speech patterns or vocal tones and like mixing those two as a way to, again, like reinforce, that they, you know, perceive themselves as being a genderless spirit.

Leigh: Yeah.

Gretchen: You have other things like they bathed daily, which sounds [laughter] like a weird thing to include. but at the time, it was

Leigh: But, like. People weren't doing it.

Gretchen: No! and at the time, like that represented like purity and like cleanliness. Which was again, like a very, like divine, you know...

Leigh: This was this was what, like powdered wigs for for and oil.

Gretchen: Right.

Leigh: You know, it was like, Well, I'm kind of grungy so...

Gretchen: Right, right. Speaking of- their hairstyle, followers of the Friend imagined Jesus, you know, Christ as, you know, having like black hair that, like, curled to his neck or upon his shoulders and was parted at the top. Which you will see in photos that we have on our show notes of the Friend, strikingly similar to how the Friend wore their hair in, like, in a very like evocative, specifically evoking this image of being like a divine messenger.

Leigh: And as we said earlier, like having uncovered hair was something that women didn't do at the time.

Gretchen: But men didn't typically have really long hair either. So, like, even in, like, their hair was a symbol, you know, and men, especially wealthy men would wear powdered wigs so you have someone having, like, uncovered, natural hair- like, their natural hair in a long style is both masculine and feminine at the same time. And, apparently...

Leigh: Yeah. Women in the community even like washed the Friend's feet and dried, and, like, dried tThe Friend's feet with their hair, like the scene in Luke you know when- when a sinful woman does so to Christ .

Gretchen: Right. Right.

Leigh: [laughter] I love, I love this next part. It's- like somebody tried to discredit the Friend and their divinely the beautiful hair by claiming to have peeped and seen the Friend [shocked noise] washing their hair. That's how it's so shiny and beautiful. It's because they just wash it. They must not be from God. It's like friends, what are you doing?

Gretchen: [laughter] Which is like, it just, like, sounds ridiculous.

Leigh: Yeah. Like, to us, like you're going to try to defame someone because they bathe. Okay

Gretchen: Who doesn't... Because they wash their hair! Like, okay.

Leigh: Yep.

Gretchen: Whatever. It's pretty great. In terms of like their eating customs, like, the Friend chose to eat alone or with a select group of, you know, followers in their inner circle, which was an imitation of Christ's last supper with his disciples. Which of course was then used against the Friend either to call the Friend like a pretentious, like, aloof elitist to only had, you know...

Leigh: It was a select few or whatever.

Gretchen: Or you know, people would argue that, you know, they were hiding, like, a secret like excess and indulgence and lard- or like the secret larder of all of these fancy foods that they only shared with their select followers. And, you know, they weren't actually austere and like living a plain lifestyle or whatever. Because again, people are assholes. The

confidence and ease with which the Friend navigated society and the kind of like, fearlessness in preaching were, you know, more typical of what you would see of male preachers at the time.

Yet according to many stories about them, people still perceive them as being a, you know, you know, quote, a woman preacher at some level. Which, you know, likely says as much about their rigid gender definitions as anything. But it still speaks to, you know, society as a whole, not trying to live, you know, or speaks to the Friend it wasn't trying to, like, live as a man. [agreeing noises] You know, like, it's as some people have tried to argue they weren't trying to live as a man, but as something that is again, neither male nor female, and society has misunderstood that, in, you know, on both sides of the equation.

Analysis from Queer Historians

And, you know, we would be- seems as good a places any- we'd be remiss not to know how the claim to like the divine like this being like this otherworldly divine being did, like, reinforce and, like, was used for kind of the westward expansion and colonialist, like, impulses. It's part and parcel of, you know, as we mentioned before, society's larger belief that America was empty and ordained for their use. But, like, their- their perception as being like this genderless like divine being did play a role in the belief that they had a right to use the land for their purposes, even if they didn't purchase it. And even if they did have, you know, pleasant relationships with with the native peoples. So, like, we just want to make that clear..

Leigh: Yeah. [laughter]

Gretchen: Like, we don't, like, far as interest. There are some really interesting and compelling things about their story, but we're not going to ignore the fact that, like, even within those interesting and compelling things, like, were- are some really uncomfortable things. Like the way that being someone who you know, considered themselves to be like a divine messenger would reinforce kind of their relationship with, like, colonizing...

Leigh: Yeah.

Gretchen: You know...

Leigh: Yeah.

Gretchen: The world.

Leigh: So, so we've talked a lot about, you know, the Friend themselves, and their own, you know, expression of gender and divinity. But what we've really found super, super fascinating, especially from Larson, was talking about how this extended out to the community of the Society of Friends. [agreeing noises] So we're going to dive a little bit into that in going into sort of our wrap up.

But, one of the things that Scott Larson noted was that there was a creation of a new linguistic community with the Friend. The followers of the Friend not only refers to- refuse to refer to the Friend by Jemima Wilkinson, or gendered pronouns, but they eschewed them in the community, as well. They quote:

"scrupulously avoided using any gendered pronouns to describe her--a decision that often led to torturous syntax...the convoluted, pronoun-free language that passed for standard English among the Universal Friends"

Which you know if you can hear the sarcasm in my voice about like, [sarcastic] the convoluted blah blah blah.

Gretchen: Yeah, you got the Gushers now.

Leigh: Yeah, I've got the Gushers. [laughter] But yeah, like, it- it highlights how genderlessness and gender- in a genderless nature, performed ecclesiastical work. Right? It created a theological language and separated the community from outsiders. So like the language that somebody chose to describe the Friend indicated whether someone was part of the community of the saved, or a part of that, like, wider, wicked world. Even- even people who were like in the community, you could- you could tell their entries and their exits from the community by the way that they refer to the Friend. Right? Like in diary entries, while in the community that Abner Brownwell refers to the Friend as "the Friend" and then, once he published a denunciation of the Friends, starts using her and Jemima.

Gretchen: Hmm. that's like code switching...

Leigh: Yes!

Gretchen: in-group, out-group language.

Leigh: It's so interesting. Yeah, like one traveler, even quote, "met a woman and inquired civilly about where, where about Jemima Wilkinson's house was:

"met a woman and inquired civilly where about Jemima Wilkinson's house was. She replied that she knew no such person; 'the friend' lived a little piece below."

[laughter] Yeah.

Gretchen: Right. Right. I love this quote from Larson.

Leigh: Yes! It's my favorite!

Gretchen:

"The failure of gendered language broke the grammar of human categories, performing the theological claim that the Friend was an 'indescribable being'....This convoluted syntax actually provided a way for a whole group of people to practice gender differently ...speaking the future state of "no longer male or female" into time through the Publick Universal Friend. Genderless language acted as prophetic language, a sign of the world to come"

Leigh: Yeah, so it's like what you were talking about before about how it, like, signals this- this new understanding of life beyond gender. And when I was reading this, it super duper reminded me of this spoken word poet, Andrea Gibson, they have, they have a lyric in one of their poems, that says:

"Your pronouns have haven't even been invented yet."

And, like, that's just

Gretchen: Mmmhm.

Leigh: And it's funny because, like, the person that I was talking to on the train a little, you know, a couple of days ago about this episode and about the podcasts and about, you know, being a voluntary grad student, was wearing the shirt that said, "my pronouns haven't even been invented yet," from Andrea Gibson website, and I just like and then to read this quote, that same day, it blew my frickin mind. Like, I love it.

Gretchen: Yep. Yep. Right. And there are so many interesting things to say about like, the connection between like gender ambiguity and the supernatural in the 18th century England. That's something we've like kind of talked around earlier, but just like gender ambiguity and dress and behavior. I mean, it could be seen in multiple ways. It was either a marker

and proof of a level of divinity or as evidence of terrible evil and the workings of the devil. And that's where we get all of these, like, various reactions that we mentioned earlier of like, you know, the person saying, like, Ruth saying, you know,

"they spoke as no man had spoke."

Followed by the other person who you know, who makes it sound like they're you know evil because they have this you know grum tone to their voice, which is you know demonic. You know, like, there are, like, there were many who believed that that the Friend was more than human. The messenger of truth, the divinely sent. There's a quote that says, it's in Larson, but it's an editorialist from the time period saying:

"There are some among us who appear to believe that she was something more than human—the messenger of truth, divinely sent! Others paint her as a downright devil in petticoats—artful, abandoned, libidinous, and wicked"

Leigh: I just, I love- I love devil in petticoats. Also, like, the fact that they assumed that the Friend was wearing petticoats, because they were, you know, obsessed with whatever they were wearing under their robe.
[laughter]

Gretchen: Oh my gosh.

Leigh: Yeah.

Gretchen: Right. Right. So like, audiences were looking for theological truth in the Friend's genderless presentation. Was this- was their genderlessness a sign that they were divine or diabolical? Ambiguous gender, or the lack of gender, was otherworldly. In the signs of, in the minds of 18th and 19th century Western European and American society. But that like otherworldliness could be monstrous as well as it could be like beautiful and divine. And- and the Friends lack of gender conformity.

I mean, also, this is another- another point, that like- their lack of gender conformity could be viewed as a threat. To not just, like, divine- like not just evil, but like a threat to the stability of the country. Because it was a manifestation of their lack of adherence to traditional authority structures. Yet another you know, anti ,you know, anti-republican, the state, not the elephant. Sentiment that sought to destabilize the country. And like gee, where have you heard these kinds of arguments before? Like, oh, this person, this person who is you know, not cis, straight, White, and male is a,

you know, [sing-song] they're a threat because they don't do things the way that we want them to. They must be a threat to the country.

Leigh: [sarcastic] Oh, no, they must want to completely upset the balance and do everything that we've been doing. That doesn't feel good. Yeah.

Gretchen: Right. Right. Like to call the Friend Jemima Wilkinson, or "she," was to deny the story of the Friend's death and miraculous resurrection. Like this wasn't, like as we, as we talked about earlier, this was a theological statement. Like, these words that the people were using, that the community used, referring to the Friend as the Friend, issuing gender pronouns, was a statement of belief.

Because the Friend was not simply a person stating a deeply felt personal identity. The Friend was a divine presence in the world. A spirit that entered the world at Jemima's departure and death, To refer to the Friend was to engage with that spirit, to speak with the radical- of a radical encounter with divinity. Like the use of this language represented one's belief. Which is so fascinating! Like linguistic markers of, like, community and belief and faith. And, you know, like, it's all wrapped up together. It wasn't- it's not just a statement of their identity. It's a statement. It's a statement of a faith community. It's a- it's a religious and theological claim.

Leigh: Yeah. I thought- I thought it was really interesting, because Scott Larson mentioned that, you know, mentioned a caveat that like, you have to have the distinction that the experience of the friend specifically had a genderlessness being a religious state. You know, like...

Gretchen: Right.

Leigh: We can say that, you know, this was super revolutionary, but also, like, that there's- there wasn't really a lot of room or claim for different gender possibilities outside of a religious context. It was a state after death. [agreeing noises] It was unique because it happened after their death and resurrection, and a giving up of self rather than an assertion or an expression of like an identity.

Gretchen: Right, right.

Leigh: And I thought it was really interesting because it connects with so many other cultures where there's like, third gender, or expansive gender expressions that are, are linked with some sort of spiritual context. We talked about the priests in ancient Egypt and when we talk about, you know, Two Spirit traditions among Native American and First Peoples communities,

we'll get into it and other like gender variant like shamans and many Pacific Islander cultures. There's this perception of like gender non-conforming, conformity being related to like mysticism and spirituality in some capacity, you know, in in many various ways

Gretchen: Right. Right. Even if they all don't like conceive of that space being the same. Like it's it all kind of does seem to be- or a lot of it does seem to be related to this like spiritual or like mystical state. Another I mean another interesting thing to point out is just how much the Friends like conception of genderless- like it draws on these like Christian gnostic traditions, that argued that, like, there was like the fall of Adam, that the most people will talk about, is you know, the eating of the fruit and then the expulsion from the garden. But in, according to these gnostic traditions, the first fall, Adam had a fall before then, and that was the splitting into being male and female. And that the redemption of humanity must be sought in a return to a, like genderless and sexless, sexless meaning like lack of sexual desire.

Leigh: Hey, ace, whoo!

Gretchen: Yeah. Yeah. So like a genderless and like asexual, like, state. So, like, the Friend specifically, like while we can talk about the Friend as like challenging sexual and gender dimorphism, it does so in the context of like labeling both of them as a sign of fallen humanity.

Leigh: [laughter] [sarcastic] Yeah.

Gretchen: [laughter] Like [laughter]

Leigh: Well, I mean, it goes, like that reminds me so much of, like, Plato. And ...

Gretchen: Right.

Leigh: The concept of, you know, like that people were, you know, two, two people put together a male and a female and then and you know, even male and male, and female and female, and then, like, when the gods were mad at them, they split them down the middle.

Gretchen: Mhmm. Right. Right. So yeah, we can, like see this, you know, understanding of like gender is, like, a sign of, like, fallen human beings. Like in the emphasis, like it's related to the emphasis that the Friend had on celibacy, as well as this desire to form a community outside of like the wicked world. Now, like, and it doesn't mean that the Friend didn't at the

same time like it doesn't mean The Friend didn't inadvertently create space for other people to find a voice. What we're trying to say is, like, The Friend wasn't specifically setting out to, like, challenge gender norms.

Leigh: [laughter] But they did they did

Gretchen: Like, or even specifically... But they did, they did and in their own unique way. You know, so for example of, you know, inadvertently creating space, at the negotiation of the Treaty of [Leigh sounding out word] Canandaigua. And I am even a linguist... Canandaigua was, yeah, so the Friend spoke in assembly they prayed like they did like a public prayer. The next day, The Friend had, you know, wasn't in the assembly anymore. Wasn't in the council. Three Seneca women, so women from the Seneca tribe, appealed to speak to the council and their appeal was granted partially on the basis because they said this white woman was in here yesterday, and she prayed, therefore, we ought to be able to speak to the assembly.

Leigh: Which I think it was pretty funny because, like, they were specifically were like, this white woman went up and prayed about how we all need to repent. So like, you gotta let us fucking talk. [laughter]

Gretchen: Right. Right.

Leigh: Like, you let White woman come up there and talk shit about us. [laughter]

Gretchen: Right. And then they specifically turn those words around, and were, like, white lady talked about how the Native people need to repent. We're here to say that y'all White people need to repent of the horrible ways that you have treated us.

Leigh: Mhmm. It's an interesting way to like, yeah.

Gretchen: Right. So it's just like this fascinating, like, someone can not intentionally set out to challenge things. And we can acknowledge that, while also acknowledging that, like, the choice, like, the things they did do, did create space for that challenge, from other people, even if that wasn't what they meant. And that's something that, like, the Friend does. Like just by their existence, and you know, even if their self conceptualization is like different than what we would talk about, you know, and they believed that like gender was a sign of, like, sinfulness, just like all gender, doesn't mean that like, the Friend existing in this, like genderless space can't be validating and empowering in other ways for people who might not agree with their perception of gender being evil.

You know, we can find identity and validation and that even if you know, the Friend wouldn't have seen it that way. They didn't set out to be like society-like gender is a social construct. But like, we can look at them and be, like, 'hey look, like, there was space even within a society like early America for someone to, you know, understand themselves as having, you know genderlessness. And even if it's different than what we think of, like, yeah, interesting.'

Leigh: Yeah. So, yeah.

Gretchen: So we may not have, we may not have a word of the week but..

Leigh: We got a super fun factoid.

Fun Fact: One of our Hosts is Related!

Gretchen: Yeah, I am related to the Friend. It's like, actually, like blood related to the Friend.

Leigh: And this is not something that we were like, 'oh, man, you know.' It wasn't like Gretchen was like, hey, so I'm related to this really awesome person and we should do an episode on them. No! It was a discovery.

Gretchen: It was a discovery. So, on my mom's side. We have like- I have a lot of like family history and genealogy on my mom's side. Like before, you know, the advent of, like, ancestry.com and stuff. Like there's a book, which I plan on getting from my parents house. My mom is a member of the DAR, which is the Daughters of the American Revolution. I never joined, maybe someday I will. I don't know. But like I grew up knowing that I was related to two signers of the Declaration of Independence; Robert Morris and Stephen Hopkins. And Meriwether Lewis, who didn't sign the Declaration of Independence. But... Stephen Hopkins, you may recognize we mentioned that name earlier in the podcast. Steven Hopkins was the Friend's father's first cousin. So The Friend was related to Stephen Hopkins. I am related to Stephen Hopkins, that means I am related to the Publick Universal Friend.

Leigh: Yeah.

Gretchen: So, like, I don't actually know how, I don't remember how I'm related to Stephen Hopkins.

Leigh: I can't wait to see, like, when you go visit home and get to that genealogy,

Gretchen: Yes. Yes. I'm gonna dig up that genealogy and see what I find. It's just, like- what are the chances, like, that we pick someone for queer history podcast, and it's like, oh, they're my relative. [laughter]

Leigh: Yeah, well, I mean, like, not nearly as as like- Whoa, crazy, you know, coincidence, but like, it reminds me of like when I was going through my storage unit, and randomly found that same poem...

Gretchen: Right!

Leigh: that we had been talking about when we did *Cloistered Queers* about like, medieval women's sexuality that I had zero memory of ever reading. And it's like, what the hell? I've read this before. Wait a minute, we just talked about this on the podcast. [high pitch] What the fuck? I love it. What!?

Gretchen: It's just so awesome when we have those moments like, as part of this process of like, reclaiming and bringing attention to, like, queer folks in history that we find out that, like, not only is it, like, conceptually, our history, it's like literally our history,

Leigh: Yeah.

Gretchen: Like literally. I mean, the chances are that, like, all of us are related to so many other queer people in history. We just don't know. [agreeing noises] Because you know, genealogical records. It's just, you know, cool that I happen to know.

Leigh: Yeah!

Gretchen: A couple other fun things to check out. Before we wrap up with our How Gay were They? rating. There is a *History Detectives* episode which you will link in our show notes with - about a document related to the Society of Universal Friends. I haven't watched it yet but I have it.

Leigh: I'm gonna.

Gretchen: opened as a tab in my browser, and [excited] I'm totally gonna watch it! [laughs] If you live near Yates County, New York or find yourself there, which is like south of Rochester on the western shore of Seneca Lake, you can visit the Scherer Carriage House Museum at the Yates County Historical Center. Which is entirely dedicated to Jemima Wilkinson. It even

has like the Friends carriage that they used when they got older and later in life and couldn't actually ride around on horseback.

Leigh: Yeah and it has a- I think it also has like their saddle and the beaver hat and a whole bunch of like other like...

Gretchen: Yeah.

Leigh: paintings it's- it's pretty cool I want to go check it out.

Gretchen: Yeah. Yeah. Next at like I want- I want you to I mean, I don't know what I'm going to be in that part in in New York, [laughter] but if I do end up there...

Leigh: We'll a- we'll a make a pilgrimage [agreeing noises]

Gretchen: Perfect.

How Gay were They?

Leigh: Alright, so finally, Gretchen, how gay were they?

Gretchen: How gay were they? And again, gender- we by gay we mean gender non-conforming, genderless, non binary all of that. This is like a solid like, like obvious, like, 10 out of 10. Though, like I will say part of what's- you know, part of what is intriguing to me is that this does seem to exist outside of even you know, like, what we would think of as, like, trans identity. So like it- it isn't as if this was like a resolution of a long term struggle with gender identity. It really does seem to be like a you know a spiritual experience. So it's very unique that like the Friend blurred the distinction between male and female but in a completely, like, unique, spiritual way. That like neither denied nor erased, their like identity prior to their illness while simultaneously affirming like a new person post-illness like it's- it's like hard to situate that in the modern language that we have. And I find that fascinating.

Leigh: Yeah, I thought...

Gretchen: Like, being that, like, the idea of genderlessness being like a religious state. Or like one of, like, my big takeaways from this is you know, what Larson- Larson mentioned, like

"gender is produced and challenged differently in different times and places."

Just...

Leigh: It was, it was something like, explicitly unique to that time period and the influence...

Gretchen: Right.

Leigh: of belief systems that were going around and made space for being able to, you know, be a spirit in the body of somebody and not instantly be, you know, relegated to, you know, to an institution.

Gretchen: Right.

Leigh: It created space to say, Oh, hey, this, you know, obviously there were detractors, but it had validity, and it created that open space. Yeah.

Gretchen: Yep.

Leigh: Yeah. I mean, I, you know...

Gretchen: How 'bout you?

Leigh: I went- I went 10 out of 10, as well. You know, somewhere in some sort of non-binary gender experience. And I think- I think it's interesting too, because, like, you know, you say that, like, there's no evidence of like a long term struggle, though the one- the one thing that I thought about is like that one stupid source who like, you know, said it was like an emotional breakdown, not like typhoid fever. I mean, as much as I like, you know, immediately am dismissing that like, I wonder if, you know, if there are other sources that are like talking about it, like an emotional breakdown, like maybe this was like a way to make sense of something like that, if it had had [agreeing noises] any sort of...

Gretchen: Right.

Leigh: You know, if there had been any sort of internal struggle and this is the way to conceptualize it and this is the way to, like, legitimize it.

Gretchen: Right. Yeah. Mhmm.

Leigh: You know, there's no way to know that. There- this is, you know...

Gretchen: Right.

Leigh: Modern speculation of you know, how does somebody who experiences life outside of the binary experience make sense of this, make sense of this when there's no language for it. Make sense of this when there's no space for it? But I also am like super, super fascinated in the idea of this being distinctly religious experience and that making room for other things.

Gretchen: Right.

Leigh: And I was I was particularly just struck by what you had said in, you know, in our outline during your rating portion about how that- that it, like it never denied or erased to their identity before their illness, and, like, created a new identity which, you know, we'll get into this person but, like, Lily Elbe [agreeing noises] who was, like one of, you know, was like one of the first people to get like a, like, to get an attempt at sexual reassignment surgery. Was, like, she was a trans woman who was- who was supposedly like, reborn like a born as a completely different person, inhabiting Einar Wegener's body. And that they like [agreeing noises] essentially shared one body and mind and were completely different people. And- and it came out of, like, Einar are dressing up in like women's clothing to be a photo model for his, like, wife, or his partner and then it developed into this like Lily personality. And then Einar and Lily, like both decided, okay, only one of us can continue to go forward, and let Lily, like totally free and be born after, like, an attempted surgery.

So I thought [agreeing noises] it was really interesting that like this- this, not only this experience of this outside of this gender binary experience, but like a multiplicity of identities within gender, that like you know, [agreeing noises] you saw how we use she and her pronouns for Jemima, before this reawakening. Because, you know, they continually talk about, like, it, this spirit embodying or inhabiting the body that was formerly Jemima Wilkinson. It never, you know, it's, it's, I don't know. It's just I don't know where to go with it. But it's really fascinating.

Gretchen: Right? Right that like this Jemima Wilkinson existed as a person.

Leigh: Yeah.

Gretchen: Like it's never, like, you know, oh I've realized that like Jemima Wilkinson should never have existed or just like it's just that fascinating like- I like I am no longer Jemima Wilkinson. Jemima Wilkinson has died, and I, the Friend now exist in the body of what once was Jemima Wilkinson. Yeah, it's just such an interesting like...Yeah.

Leigh: And then I also like that, you know, like, to deny the Friend's existence as a genderless being was deny- to deny the spiritual element. And like, when you can't legally accuse somebody of blasphemy. Where do you go from there? You know?

Gretchen: Right. Right. Right. Yep. And just like the absolute like, there was no ambiguity when the Friend like...

Leigh: Arrived.

Gretchen: Arrived. [laughter]

Leigh: Boom! Hello!

Gretchen: Like, it was the, it was just like Jemima Wilkinson had a fever. And then The Friend woke up almost like...

Leigh: S'up guys?

Gretchen: Okay, so I'm the Friend now. Jemima Wilkinson has died and I am now the Publick Universal Friend. Just like...

Leigh: God. I wish that, like, I just- I just wish that everybody's like gender transition could be that, right?

Gretchen: Right.

Leigh: To just like just just have a moment of clarity and decision and be able to go out in the world and say 'hey, this is who I am, refer to me by this' and have everybody be like a'right I mean, you know.

Gretchen: Right like that's what's so, like, beautiful about the story is like yeah, like, though there were the detractors like yeah, of course there were the detractors...

Leigh: But you can still get a huge following of people to like...

Gretchen: Right.

Leigh: Go and live in a fun, happy utopia community until some rich white cis fuckers

Gretchen: And it started with their family!

Leigh: Yeah!

Gretchen: Like how beautiful is that? That like their family was a significant part of, you know, the process. Like the first followers, the first people to be like, right? Yep, yep, you are the friend. We will not use gendered pronouns. This is who you are. Like entirely...

Leigh: We will leave our entire faith and everything we know behind, because we support you. Anyway...

Gretchen: God! If only the queer experience could be like that! Oh my gosh.

Leigh: I love it! Oh man...

Gretchen: Yep.

Closing and Where to Find us Online

Leigh: All right. Well, I mean, we have thoroughly exhausted this topic, I think. [laughter] I mean, there's always more to say. And we will have a long list of sources. Unfortunately, several of them are behind the paywall of JSTOR but we will link them to you. And if, you know, there are those of you who are lucky enough to be involved with some sort of institution that you can get behind the paywall. Get them, share them with your friends, you know. More knowledge for everybody.

Gretchen: Yep.

Leigh: And so with that, yep, that's it for today's episode. You can find your lovely hosts online individually. Where can they find you Gretchen?

Gretchen: Well, when I am not talking about non binary religious leaders from history I'm related to, I am writing nerdy media analysis and fangirling over queer young adult novels, Star Wars and Steven Universe or the Fandomentals.com My personal website is gnellis.com, or you can find me on [Tumblr](#) and [Twitter](#) as @gnelliswriter. How 'bout you?

Leigh: And I'm Leigh. When I'm not nerding out about really awesome queer theory and queer history articles by people that I want to marry, I'm usually talking about comics, queer TV over at [@aparadoxinflux](#) on Twitter,

usually crying about some sort of Xena episode. I'm going to the Xenite retreat next month. I'm really excited.

Gretchen: Nice!

Leigh: If any of you happen to be going to the Xenite retreat. I'll see you there. Woot!

Gretchen: Speaking of events coming up...

Leigh: Oh, yeah.

Gretchen: I am going to be at ClexaCon. I am going to be doing a couple of panels there. I'm doing one called *The Responsibility of Media Makers*. One called *Korrasami is Still A Breath of Fresh Air*. And I will be moderating the *Neurodiversity in Writing* panel. And if you, I mean, if you are at ClexaCon you can come to my panels or just find me hanging around. I will have...

Leigh: Gretchen's going to have some swag.

Gretchen: Right. Yes. I will have buttons and magnets. At least one of the days that I am there I will be wearing my, you know, purple *History is Gay* shirt. And if I'm not wearing that, I will- I will have a big button on my my bag with me that says *History is Gay*. I'll be hanging around the Fundamentals booths or Glorious Weirdo's booths who is, you know, the lovely Beth, who made our swag. Or the TGI booth so I'll be around hanging out, come say hi.

Leigh: Yeah!

Gretchen: I'll be great.

Leigh: Yeah! *History is Gay* Podcast can be found on Tumblr at [@historyisgaypodcast](#), Twitter at [HistoryisGayPod](#) And you can always drop us a line with questions, suggestions, or just to say hi at HistoryisGayPodcast@gmail.com. You can also send us an email straight through our website as well. And if you're enjoying the show, remember to rate, review, and subscribe wherever you get your podcasts. It helps more people find the show and it keeps getting us this awesome, wonderful community. We get to tell all of these cool queer stories too. I know. Yeah!

Gretchen: So that's it for history is gay until next time,

Leigh: stay queer

Getchen: and stay curious.

♪ [Outre music plays]♪