

Conjuring Up Courage

#104

Featured this episode: Shohreh Davoodi, James Rose, Melody Li, & Ilya Parker

Shohreh Davoodi: You are listening to episode #104 of Conjuring Up Courage. Because this is the final Tuesday in June, that means this is also the final Pridepalooza episode. While I'm sad that Pridepalooza is coming to an end, we're going out with a bang with the second annual Pride Panel episode. I brought back three amazing guests for this panel discussion, including Ilya Parker, the founder of Decolonizing Fitness, Melody Li, the founder of Inclusive Therapists, and James Rose, actor and agent of chaos. The four of us answered some entertaining lightning round questions before chatting about labels, mental health in the queer community, the future of queerness, and so much more.

To access the show notes and a full transcript of this episode, head to shohrehdavoodi.com/104. That's shohrehdavoodi.com/104.

This episode is brought to you in part by Ample + Rooted, an inclusive therapy practice that provides an affirming and welcoming home for diverse individuals to reclaim their inherent worth. The folks at Ample + Rooted created a guided meditation on cultivating self-trust just for listeners and it's available in the show notes for this episode.

[Music plays]

This is Conjuring Up Courage, and I'm your host, Shohreh Davoodi. As a self-trust coach, I help people come home to themselves so they can be more of who they are, and less haunted by who they think they're supposed to be.

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I created this podcast to celebrate what's possible when you commit to being brave. You'll hear from diverse guests who are refusing to let fear and self-doubt stop them from building fulfilling lives and creating a better world for everyone. I'll also teach you my favorite tools, strategies, and mindset shifts so you can do the same.

Consider this your invitation to stop living according to "shoulds" and to step into your motherfucking magic instead. Stay open, get curious, and let's grow together.

[Music fades]

Well, listeners, today I have the most special possible treat for you, which is that the Pride Panel episode is back. We have all new panelists for 2021. You will be familiar with the faces of all three of these individuals who are on the panel with me this year. Get so excited. I'm going to let everyone introduce themselves for our final episode of Pridepalooza.

James Rose:

Oh my gosh, thank you so much for having me and for all of us, this is just the coolest group of people. So I'm James. My pronouns are they/them. I am a genderfluid actor in New York City. And when I'm not on stage or on set, I'm a Health At Every Size weight-neutral personal trainer and I work from an eating disorder recovery lens. And I think making space for people to explore and celebrate their bodies is about the coolest thing next to exploring our genders. And outside of that, I am a trauma-informed yoga teacher and I am a lover of life. And I yell at chaotic things on Instagram sometimes [laughs lightly], so I think that's

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where a lot of us are connected. And I'm so thrilled to be in incredible company today at this roundtable.

Melody Li: Thank you James! I am delighted to be here. Such an honor. My name is Melody Li. I use pronouns “佢” in Cantonese and “any” in English. I am a colony-born migrant and a settler of diaspora on Turtle Island. I'm a queer therapist of color, a mental health liberation activist, and speaker. I founded Inclusive Therapists, which is a social justice-oriented mental health directory and community that celebrates and centers the needs of people with marginalized identities and bodies. And on the side, I'm also a pug parent. I love my pups. And I also love good food. That's a little bit about me.

Ilya Parker: Thank you so much, James and Melody. Hello everyone. I am Ilya. My pronouns are he and they. I am currently occupying the ancestral and traditional territory of the Kiawah, Catawba, and Occaneechi tribes in an area more widely known as High Point, North Carolina. I am the owner of Decolonizing Fitness. My Sun is in Cancer, Moon in Gemini. And a fun fact, I played the trombone all through elementary and middle school. Thank you.

Shohreh: Okay, I'm really excited about this trombone fact that I didn't know before. As a former oboist, we're starting to get a very weird band put together [Ilya laughs lightly] with trombone and oboe, but...

Ilya: Yes, I love it. I'm here for it.

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Shohreh: [Laughs lightly] Okay, I think y'all know me by now, but just as a reminder in case there's new people here, I'm Shohreh Davoodi. I'm a self-trust coach and I'm also the host of the Conjuring Up Courage podcast, which is the podcast you're listening to right now [James cheers]. Hopefully you know that [laughs lightly]. My pronouns are she/her. And today I'm gonna be playing double duty as both the host of this panel and a panelist, so I'm really excited to kick this off with James, Melody, and Ilya.

So the first thing we're going to do, which you may remember from last year, is that we're going to do a lightning round with some fun questions just to kick things off. So first question that I have is: who would you choose to be in your all-queer music group and what role would you play in that group?

Ilya: So I would love to take this one first. I'm gonna say Meshell Ndegeocello 'cause I'm always here for dope Black butches. Serpentwithfeet. And people really need to get with this artist. Oh my god. They're like really queer, sensual, down south. Started, like, in a gospel-singing family. And they have the dopest music. And then I would finish off the group with Big Freedia just for some New Orleans bounce. And honestly, I would be such a fan girl I probably wouldn't even be able to have a business hat on in any kind of capacity [laughs lightly] with those three artists.

Shohreh: You can just be the stage mom from the side, just clapping and being like, [high-pitched voice] "Great job, everyone!"

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- Ilya:** There you go. The groupie following them around, every city [James and Shohreh laugh].
- James:** I'm totally coming to that concert [laughs], by the way. I absolutely want to see that live. And in mine, it would be me and my friend Kate Yeager who is a queer song writer who I went to college with and is just one of my favorite songwriting minds of our generation. And to spice things up, I would have all of my exes as backup dancers because I've had the [Shohreh laughs lightly] supreme misfortune of only dating musical theater dancer boys.
- So I just feel like that would be the right amount of, like, available storytelling [laughs lightly]. And it could just be, like, the songs that informed the breakups and the breakups that informed the songs. And we could just be a really healing collect—no one's coming to this concert [laughs]. Alright, that's my queer music group.
- Shohreh:** Can I just say that all the men I have dated have also been, like, dancer, musical theater boys, and is it any surprise I'm a lesbian now? Like, come on [laughs lightly].
- James:** [Laughs] I'm so sorry. Oh. I wanna give you a virtual hug with your consent. Oh my gosh.
- Shohreh:** [Laughs] Consent. I will take my virtual hug now.
- Melody:** That sounds like a riot. And I would love to watch from the backstage to see the drama unfold. So despite my name being Melody, I don't consider myself musically talented; however, I love listening to music.

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And so if I were to be in a music group, I am thinkin' Janelle Monáe on vocals.

Shohreh: Yeah.

Melody: And I love also poetry and soul in music. So I would invite Tracy Chapman to see if they're willing to play guitar and sing. And I would be hiding in the background, probably as a songwriter, maybe a back-up singer, being shy. That would be our group. How about you, Shohreh?

Shohreh: Oh my god, I love it. Also, the songwriters are in the background, but they make all the money when they get to put their name on that song, so you're gonna be rollin' in the dough.

James: True.

Shohreh: Okay, so for myself, queer artists I've been really enjoying over the last year-ish is Carlie Hanson. And classic other person would be Brandi Carlile. And I feel like the three of us together would make just a beautiful acoustic trio where you'd just have three-part harmonies all time, and it would be magical. So that's what I'm running with.

James: Ugh. We could just cry at your concert.

Shohreh: Exactly, just cathartic.

Ilya: That's a low-key vibe right there [Shohreh laughs].

James: If we could have that in the same festival with all of these, with Janelle Monáe—oh wait, this would be...I'm writing this down.

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Shohreh: Okay but we need Ilya's Big Freedia group to be, like, the final one to bring everyone back up after [laughs lightly] all the crying.

James: Right, right, right.

Ilya: Yes.

James: Ilya, you're the fun of the group [James, Ilya, and Shohreh laugh].

Ilya: Yes.

Shohreh: Oh gosh, this is just, already, the queer juxtaposition between sad people [Ilya laughs lightly] and party people, so this is where we are.

James: We contain multitudes.

Shohreh: Multitudes! Okay, so this next question, which is one that was suggested by James, is what's something that isn't actually gay but feels like it is?

James: I would love to bring some examples that come to mind. For instance, the entire concept of gazelles to me feels extremely gay [Ilya laughs lightly]. This is light humor; I don't really believe these things. But, you know, like the dolphins are gay sharks thing that I have mixed feelings on, I feel like there is a parallel with like gazelles and antelopes. I feel [laughs] like anything that prances that well got its BFA in musical theater somewhere [Shohreh laughs] and that automatically qualifies you as, like, at least part queer.

Also, the whole concept of space.

Shohreh: Just gay.

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- James:** But, like, outer space, not the distance between, [laughs lightly] that's a whole other story. But just stars, astron—Jupiter? Saturn?
- Shohreh:** Gay.
- James:** There's one called Uranus. Like, really? That's gay [Ilya laughs lightly].
- Shohreh:** Well, Sailor Moon franchise would agree with you, so.
- James:** Thank you! An endorsement. Love hearing from the brands [laughs lightly].
- Ilya:** And you know Neil deGrasse is a whole vibe too. [James laughs] Neil deGrasse is a whole queer vibe.
- Melody:** I'm so glad you brought up Sailor Moon because my most prized possession, please nobody rob my home, is my Sailor Moon cards collection.
- Shohreh:** Amazing.
- Melody:** Yes.
- Ilya:** I love it [Shohreh laughs lightly].
- James:** Oh my gosh. You know, every queer space that I've ever been in somebody has brought up Sailor Moon as, like, their queer awakening. And I think that's just wonderful.
- Shohreh:** So I haven't actually seen the TV show or whatever, but I have a friend who's obsessed with it. And she was explaining to me how in the original version, there are two characters, two women who love each

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other. But the American dub, they make them cousins who are, like, really friendly towards each other, and that's how they get away without changing anything else. Which is kind of amazing.

Ilya: Mm, that is.

Melody: Yeah, I grew up reading the original manga before the cartoons came out, and it is so queer, and so beautiful, and also really sensual. And I look back and I'm like, wow, that is really sensual for an eight-year-old.

Shohreh: And thus, American TV was like, nope, none of that here.

Melody: Nope.

Ilya: That's not happening.

Shohreh: X that out.

James: Let's go sexualize Dora the Explorer instead [Ilya laughs lightly]. That's what American TV said.

Ilya: So you know what I think about? Something I feel is gay or queer, like queer in an erotic sense? Gym spotting. Especially bench press [laughter] and back squat because you have to be in sync to be able to know when they're ready for the lift. Particularly bench press your crotch is in someone's face. If you're squatting, you're either pressing your anatomy really close to someone or your junk is just right on top of them. So I've always thought that was like the gayest thing because it just moves beyond, like, gender roles or gender binary 'cause you could

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see two cishet dudes doin' it, and it's like this queer union and it's just cool. And then they continue working out. Metaphoric.

James: So right. Also, wrestling?

Ilya: Yes.

James: Wrestling.

Ilya: Yes.

James: I'm sorry, when cishet people do it it's a sport worthy of watching, and when I do it, it's a sin. I don't understand [laughter] the difference there. They objectively look the same.

Shohreh: Okay, so you know what I think is super gay? Ghosts [laughter]. I think ghosts are hella gay. Okay, look. They come, and they haunt you, and they like wanna be there, and they wanna be around you. Like, think of all gay people pining after their exes. [pointedly] James.

James: Wow. Wow [laughs].

Shohreh: [Laughs] James, to be fair, is known for writing about their exes on their Instagram.

Ilya: Shohreh took it there, oh my god.

James: I am totally a ghost of my exes, oh my gosh.

Shohreh: Ghosts are gay.

James: I'm so upset that I already had therapy and I have to wait a week to talk about this [laughter].

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Ilya: So is ghosting gay?

Shohreh: Is ghosting gay? Well, no, 'cause ghosting is like the opposite of being a ghost, though. 'Cause ghosting is like, I'm gonna disappear and not talk to this person. And I'm thinking of like, ghosts who haunt you. So that's like people who want to be in contact with you. So ghosting is anti-gay.

Ilya: Got it. Lurking, gay. Not lurking, anti-gay [laughs].

Shohreh: So next question is: what classic rom-com, or even movie in general, should be redone as a queer love story, in your opinion?

Melody: I love this one. My initial response would be Kill Bill because I think that would be really badass if everyone was queer, and it would make things a lot more complex and interesting.

However, when I think about this a little more, I have a natural kinda shiver when I think about rom-coms. Just because of how, you know, white-centered and cis-heteronormative it is. But in my family, we have a tradition that over the holiday seasons we all watch Love, Actually together, and it's every year. And there's no explanation of why, it's just something that we do and we can't stop 'cause it's tradition. So I was thinkin', what would Love, Actually be like if it was a queer and colorful love story?

Shohreh: Okay, so I wanna springboard off of that because another movie that is often watched at the same time as Love, Actually is The Holiday. Another rom-com. And I think that rather than having Kate Winslet fall

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in love with Jack Black, I would have liked to see Kate Winslet fall in love with a woman, which would have been super amazing in that movie.

James: Cameron Diaz [laughs].

Shohreh: Yes, Kate and Cameron could have fallen in love too. That's a good point [laughs lightly].

Melody: So here's to queering the holidays.

Shohreh: Yes, let's queer all of the holidays.

Ilya: You know what, I'm picking a thriller on this one.

Shohreh: Ooh.

Ilya: The Hand That Rocks the Cradle. Okay. Plot was Annabella Sciorra, I think was her name, she caused Rebecca De Mornay's character to commit suicide—'scuse me, trigger warning. And so what happened was Rebecca then became their nanny, all in an attempt to break up the family. And so she was attempting in the process, too, to seduce Annabella's husband.

So I set up that same plot, except Rebecca De Mornay falls for Annabella, and that very popular scene in the greenhouse happens between them two makin' love. And fun fact, the home that that movie was filmed in is a very, very, very popular tourist attraction in Tacoma, Washington.

Shohreh: I did not know that.

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Ilya: I love that movie.

James: I love a queer thriller. I have a friend who just did a horror film who is queer and was like, horror is actually a pretty queer genre. Horrors and thrillers tend to go together. So I think you're onto something there.

It's interesting, Melody, bringing this back to what you said about how cis-heteronormative the canon tends to be for rom-coms, I feel the same way. And I find it difficult to enjoy the rom-coms that I used to enjoy when I was younger the more that I learn about the world and the more that I unpack about my own biases, isms, phobias, etcetera. I find it really difficult to enjoy them in the same way, which to me, is a marker of growth, I think.

And I would not remake any of the classic ones. And I think this is the actor in me speaking. I know so many brilliant queer filmmakers, storytellers, writers, actors. There is so much out there that we don't need to retell many of the old stories because there are so many new beautiful ones that we can put our stamp on.

And I think that's one of the coolest things about being queer in this time, that even though there are a lot of hurdles that we have to get over, there's also so many opportunities to be the change. And I think that film is one of the culture makers. I mean, we compare our lives to films. We look at fairytales. We look at actor/celebrity culture. For better or for worse, it does infiltrate our daily lives unless you have incredible boundaries.

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And I think that that would be such an opportunity to write a new story because quite frankly, none of the rom-coms—and I'm thinking You've Got Mail and Pretty Woman and When Harry Met Sally and the ones that are always on those lists—that's not how queer people meet each other. We don't have the same safety where we can just meet somebody at the top of the Empire State Building. There's not the kind of, um, ability to freely express your sexuality in all places.

And so I think creating a film where we were able to explore the reality, like what actually happens between queer people, would be so special. And I wanna be on the teams that do that instead.

Ilya: Yes, I love that, James. Thank you.

Shohreh: So this is a perfect segue because you mentioned how in, like, all the traditional rom-coms, they're meeting in ways that queer people wouldn't meet. So let me present to you my original thought for what would be a great movie that should be redone as a queer love story, and that movie is Bend It Like Beckham.

So for those who don't know, Bend It Like Beckham is the story of two, like, teenage girls who end up playing on a soccer team together. One is Indian and one is white. The white one is actually a very young Keira Knightley, and this is the movie that skyrocketed her career [laughs lightly]. But in this movie, like, there's even a plotline where the mother of Keira's character thinks that she's a lesbian, and she's like, no, but I'm not a lesbian, we're just really good friends.

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But this movie is, like, filmed in a queer lens. Like, the number of shots on, like, the soccer players' bodies in the locker room and stuff like that. And I'm just, like, watching it, and I'm like, how did you not make them in love? They had, like, the most perfect chemistry to fall in love, and instead they have the Indian character fall in love with, like, the Irish coach. And I'm like, we didn't even need this coach. This was, like, a forced love story. They don't have any chemistry. Why was this not a queer love story?

And Keira Knightley has since said that she would be down to do a remake where it was a lesbian love story, so there you go.

James: Put Keira Knightley on the list of things that aren't gay but could be.

Shohreh: Yes, 1000%. But my point with that is that, right, like, playing on a sports team, totally a way that queer people meet, especially women. So, you know, this is more realistic.

James: I was in a group once where we were with a youth group and they were asking, like, to some of the lesbians that were closer to my age—so, AKA, "established," major air quotes, no one is established—they were like, how do you meet other queer women? And they all simultaneously said "rugby." [Shohreh and Ilya laugh] Which is close enough to soccer to make it real. [Laughs]

Shohreh: So true. It's all those group sports. Okay, so let's go to our very last lightning round question. And this question is: what are some of your go-to ways to queer signal in public?

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And I will kick this question off. And it kind of made me laugh because I feel like my whole vibe is queer signaling because I have tattoos all over my body, and piercings, and my hair is usually brightly colored. So, like, if you're not already guessing from that, I think your head is probably hidden under a rock.

But beyond that, as everyone knows, I'm obsessed with rainbows, so I usually have incorporated them into my outfits in one way or another, which makes it really easy. I know it's harder for folks who aren't into the whole rainbow vibe.

But besides that, I would say I have some very cool jackets that are just, like, super queer. Another thing that isn't gay but should be gay is jackets. Like, there's just some jackets where you're like, that's a gay jacket. So I have a few of those. Also a big fan of wearing anything, like, button-up with cuffed sleeves I think is another one. So those are mine.

Ilya:

And I think that geography matters and situations matter and safety for sure matters because typically, I queer signal with logo tees, but I'm in a deeply racist, conservative, country, red state. So, you know, it's hard.

I will say this: I still identify as a butch although I'm transmasculine, so old school butch me would do the head nod when I see other butches out. So that's, like, my go-to.

But also, then you add the layer of cishet normativity and me moving in that realm and being assumed to be a cis man, and a cishet man at that, which really blows my mind. So it's just very hard for me to, like, signal,

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because then it looks like I'm just a creepy cis dude tryin' to get someone's attention.

Melody: Ilya, I'm really grateful you brought up the safety part too because sometimes I can't tell if folks are being friendly or if they have, like, Asian fetish, to be real. And so to have to decipher that, I often have my guard up. And so what I like to do is just to be myself, and when I'm laughing and I can feel people's vibe, are they laughing with me? Are they laughing at me? Does it feel friendly? And then see where conversations go from there. And I'm glad you brought up that safety part and also geography and kind of getting a sense of the climate too.

Ilya: Yes, it's real, especially in this current political moment, Melody. So I totally feel you.

Melody: Thank you.

James: Absolutely. I'm very grateful that you both brought up the safety feature because I've found that if I'm in a space where I would be queer coding, everybody already knows that I'm queer. So I'm safe to do whatever I would that would code, whether that's the classic, like, wrist-imp thing kind of many people talk with. Or whether that's speaking about sucking dick. You know, whatever [laughs] the deal is, it's gonna be something that's clearly very queer in that conversation. Sucking dick, even if you're straight, it's still a little bit gay I feel like [laughter].

I find that I queer code when I give feminine people compliments because depending on how I'm presenting that day, if I'm presenting relatively masculine, there is a safety of, if I'm going to give somebody a

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compliment that I don't know in public, I do not want them to feel uncomfortable by it. And I really love giving people on the train, like, oh, I love your shoes, or I love your eyeshadow, you know, whatever it is, I love your earrings. I think that that has the power to really make somebody's day, and I know what it's like to be on the receiving end of that. So those 12 seconds you can give somebody in passing on the street I think are really cool.

And I will definitely make my voice higher pitched. I will, like, do overtly stereotypical mannerisms, like I'll make sure my legs are crossed if I'm on the train or something. Or I'll be like, [enthusiastically] "Oh my god, I love your earrings." You know, something that seems very stereotypical queer to reduce the threat so that way the compliment comes across. Because in general, people tend to find that less threatening as opposed to, like, if I use my authoritative [deep voice], like, "Hey, I love your earrings" voice.

Like, the sentiment is the same, I loved them regardless, but there is an aggression with that that we have coded in our culture. So to me, sometimes queer coding is about being able to, like, make the other person feel safe as well.

Shohreh: Okay, James, but can I just say that straight men never compliment my eyeshadow or my earrings, so if you complimented those things [light laughter], I would immediately assume that you were gay.

James: Definitely the type of things that you compliment. Like, if someone's wearing a crop top, like, the implication there is, oh, I'm staring at your

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chest. And if I say, like, [deep voice] “Hey, I love your top,” it’s not going to go over as well. And I think the safety of other people, and like, the consent to that. Like, oh, I didn’t really consent to you staring at this, but, like, I made the choice to put on these earrings today. I can compliment that and that might make you feel really good.

And if you didn’t like it, the harm that that might cause is so much less than if I complimented something that you didn’t have control over that could be seen as unintentionally sexual or something like that. So, yeah, good point.

Ilya:

That reminds me, too, as I was transitioning—and I work in acute care, so I have very intimate connections with patients as they’re healing—and as I was starting to be read more as a Black cis man—and I’m normally very touchy with my patients, with consent of course, so I’ll give you a shoulder rub and I’ll brush your hair—and so I was doing my typical thing ,and I was rubbin’ this older Black gentleman’s shoulders and I wasn’t even thinkin’, I was literally just trying to get him in prep for gettin’ out of the bed and walkin’, And he gave me this look and he jerked so fast.

And I mean, I almost fell over ‘cause I was like, I had one knee on the bed behind him and I’m just, like, goin’ to town. And he actually was feeling really good until he realized, oh my god, this is another man touching me in this way and it’s automatically coded as sexual. I notice that with Black cis men. And it removes Black cishet men, in particular, from being able to share that type of intimacy that has nothing to do

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with sex but is something that you actually needed in that moment because they're so scared they're either gonna get turned on by it and then folks are gonna think they're gay.

Shohreh: Ilya, that is such a great point. And I think in general kind of points to the sexualization of queer folks and the kinds of, like, comments and ideas that people have. You know, this is like the whole, like, oh, well we don't want queer men on sports teams and, like, sharing a locker room. Or queer women or whoever sharing this locker room because, like, they are constantly gonna be looking at you.

Or this idea of when friends will, like, find out someone is queer, a lot of times people will be like, "oh, well I hope you don't have a crush on me" and stuff like that. As if just by virtue of being queer, like, you look at everyone who is in the periphery that you might be attracted to as someone that, like, you are sexually attracted to and are gonna flirt with and are gonna be interested in. As if queer people are not, like, the most judgy and discerning [laughs] people out there.

Ilya: That part, oh my goodness [laughs lightly].

Shohreh: I'm like, do you really think that we of all people are gonna be the ones who are like, anyone is fine! Like, no, we are judgy, judgy people.

Melody: Yes, I'm glad you brought that up too because when talking about queerness, oftentimes we may implicitly, or explicitly, exclude, you know, aromantic, asexual, graysexual, demisexual people too. So this assumption of oversexualization is also not inclusive.

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And also, yeah, as we're talking about, it can be stigmatizing and even harmful, but how do we make space for the spectrum? All the ways that we love, romantically, sexually, or something in between.

James:

Yeah, Melody, I'm so glad that you brought that up, and Ilya I'm so grateful that you shared that story. Because that's very similar to, like, what I experience in the yoga world in terms of, like, being in a class where I will, with consent, be adjusting a lot of cis het straight men that, like, are hesitant, and then they realize, like, oh wait, no, this could be a good thing.

And Melody, what you were saying about the inclusivity and the oversexualization of queer people is that, like, somehow because queerness is, for many of us, defined by our sexuality, if not our gender as well, there becomes this hyper fixation on our sexuality, right, and the sexual nature that we or may not be participating in at all. Whereas we were joking earlier about things that seem queer but aren't, when in reality, to me, queerness is so much more than who I'm choosing to do an intimate act with.

And think about how many people have spoken about being asexual, aromantic, demi, just as you spoke about, and it doesn't make them any less queer. In fact, those are specifically queer experiences that have to do with a minimal, if not no amount of sexual contact or desire to have it whatsoever. And so I think that we kind of have this responsibility to each other to desexualize the idea of queerness, that for somebody like me who has really enjoyed hookup culture in the areas that I've lived in,

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and that's been something that's been really healthy for me to explore in terms of understanding who I am, that is one narrative. But that's the narrative that gets privileged in our communities, and unrightfully so.

Shohreh:

It's also a narrative that further others us as a community as well because I think a lot of it stems from this idea of queer folks as being sexually deviant, and that's what puts that spotlight on the sexuality aspect of it. And I agree, and we're going to talk more about queerness and how we feel about it as we're going on so we can expand some of our thoughts about how queerness is definitely more than just the sex part of it. And for some people, there's no sex part of it or romance part of it at all.

But we have to move on from our wonderful lightning round. Also, lightning I feel like is another thing that, like, isn't gay but is gay, so. Like, come on, lightning is gay.

Alright, so we're going to move into some of our main topics now. We've already kind of dug into it a little bit, even in our lightning round, because of course we did, 'cause this is the kinds of people that we have on this call. So first question is gonna be about labels.

So labels is something that's been on my mind a ton lately. And so I want to talk a little bit about how each of us identifies in terms of labels, if your labels have evolved over time, maybe a little bit about how that has happened for you and your journey with different labels. And just kind of the role that you feel that labels play for you, whether positive or negative and in the community at large.

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And I'm happy to kick this one off since this is something that has been on my mind lately. And I'm not going to delve into this too deeply because in episode 100 of the podcast, I already talk all about my, like, coming out journey and all of those things. So if you want more details, that is the episode to go to. But for those who haven't listened to that episode, I originally came out as bisexual and I also used the label queer, and this was a few years back now. And recently, publically I've nixed bisexual. I still use the word queer as, like, my main sort of public label. But then to myself, personally, and kind of in general, I claim gay, I claim lesbian.

I've had these labels really shift before my eyes. And honestly, I have been able to come around to it thanks to hearing from other people who have gone through this experience. Because at first it was really hard for a lot of different reasons. I think one because there's so much biphobia in the queer community, moving away from the bisexual label was tough because I had to be like, is this just internalized biphobia? Is this the reason that you want to be with women and, like, bisexual doesn't feel good for you? And turns out it's not, but that's always a good line of inquiry because we know that biphobia exists.

And I think so many people do treat bisexuality and people outside of the community and some inside the community of like oh, well no one's really bisexual, right? Like, you're either gay or straight. And that's not true, and I always want to point that out when I'm having this conversation about my own labels. And because we live in a heteronormative society a lot of people do find that they initially claim

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bisexuality and then as they start to really unpack their queerness, start understanding the effect that compulsory heterosexuality has had in their lives, it is possible that at that point they're like, oh, actually, I am not bisexual and I feel like I am gay or I'm queer or whatever other term that they may want.

And I, for one, will say that I'm all for this. I think it's so important for us to be able to choose what labels feel good for us, to be able to change those labels whenever the ones we first had don't feel good any longer. I think so many people in the community are aghast at this idea of, like, people being able to change. Or, like, this idea of sexual fluidity where maybe at one point in your life, one thing feels good, but then at another point in your life something else feels good.

And I personally feel like I am not upset by that. I think that it's really harmful when we tell people that, like, oh, you can't claim that label. Or, well I thought that you were this, so you can't say that you're this now. I'm like, I feel like labels are individual, and the way that I view labels is, like, this is a word that I wanna use to describe myself and so it should feel good for me. What other people think it is or whatever definition they want to give it doesn't matter so much as long as the label feels like a good descriptor for me and how I wanna use it.

So I'm curious to hear how other people's experiences have been with labels.

Ilya: I love that. I love what you shared, Shohreh, because—well, I'll say first, I identify as transmasculine. And back, way back in the day, we're talkin'

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about like early '90s, I considered myself a lady lover 'cause I wasn't movin' in the realm of lesbian and I didn't have the language, the depth of the gender binary, and I knew that my sexuality was more linked to dating women femmes. But I also knew that it was, like, this backdrop of my gender expansiveness early on. So it was like, this quick fix of, oh, you're just a lesbian. And I'm like no, that doesn't quite feel right.

So I tried to play around with language before I even had terminology. Now, would I use those terms now? Obviously not. So I identify now as transmasculine, non-binary, and still very much, like I lifted up earlier, very much butch. I think for me, as a Black transmasculine person who was designated someone assigned female at birth, and being in the role of Black womanhood and that realm and experienced the misogynoir, and then moving into transmasculinity.

And many folks who follow my work know I talk about transmasculine folks, especially Black transmasculine folks experience misogynoir. And it's so real because we bring this fusion of what our ancestors had, this fusion of expansiveness, of gender and sexuality, and then we meet the white settler colonialist project that wants to restrict and confine. And then we still bring that up in queer spaces and in queer community, and that's what you see. So you see this bringing forth of our ancestral practices, spirituality actually being linked to sexuality and it being a beautiful thing.

But then as you said, Shohreh, we're being demonized, pathologized, and viewed as just this abhorrent part of society that people have to do

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away with, which is why you see legislation and all of these things attempting to dictate the way our bodies show up. And so what's happening now is we're pushin' against that. We're attempting to dismantle these projects because the gender binary is another white supremacist project. It's no different than the construct of race. It's no different than all of these institutions that enact power and literally kill people in the name of something.

And it's a disruption of that and it's a birth of something new and I'm so here for it. And anybody showin' up in queer spaces tellin' people they don't have a right to move how they wanna move, and if they flip and they're floppin' every other day, shame on you. Because you're no different than someone pushin' this very, very rigid system on another person and it's horrible. Don't do it. Stop doin' that, y'all.

Melody:

Thank you, Ilya. Thank you for that fire, and ugh, that boldness in how you speak from such a loving, but also what I experience as a protective, from a protective space. And that resonates with me so much because when it comes to labels for me, it depends. And to have language to express, to describe one's lived experience can be empowering. And I'm also in the process of deconstruction, of decolonizing, of unlearning.

And for me, queering is really returning back to my body, my soul and spirit, that, you know, cisheteronormative, binary models have attempted to sever me from. And so, how do I reclaim, return back to? And I love that, Ilya, you brought in the ancestral piece too. And so I

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can see how queerness as a label is empowering in the sense that it helps people who are seeking community find a space of belonging. It can be a collective resistance. But it's important to also recognize that queerness and these labels are still under colonial structures, colonial constructs. And can we also have space to critique the structural violence of cishetero gender binary?

And in my work right now in healing and unlearning, I had to go back to my roots and examine, especially in conversations about gender pronouns, how that is becoming the norm and I understand the necessity from a safety perspective. But what is my relationship with gender pronouns? I had to go back to my roots, to my native language and my culture, which actually has been attempted to be erased by the British.

I grew up in a British colony, and I learned that gendered pronouns was actually a relatively new thing in my language. It was only in the 1920s—I'm gonna say this in a soft way, but to accommodate for Western ideology. Really it's when we have been oppressed and we have experienced violence, part of that is to say we also get to define and take over even your native language. So our language evolved from gender neutral, which is “佢” which is how I identify in this current moment.

It compartmentalized into pronouns of male/female binary, also animal and, um, the divine or spiritual. So putting all of these interconnected beings into separate containers as part of the structural violence. So I

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needed to learn that and go, oh, so that is what happened inside me too. I got split up. And how do I reintegrate? And how do I also create space to invite in interconnectedness so that we can heal as human beings, but also in interconnection with other than humans and more than humans?

So, this is an ever-fluid, ever-moving, ever-evolving process, and I'm so grateful to be in community with others where we can talk about this.

James:

Oh, thank you so much for sharing that, Melody. That's so important to not only in our own unlearning, but to recognize the roots of, like, why we're learning things the way that they are. And to build off of that with my own experience, transness to me is where most of the labeling lands. Like, that's what I've spent most of my time trying to define. And to me, transness is a rebirth. It is to be reborn as your truest self, which I think is a lifelong process.

And as you were talking about the learning and the unlearning and this kind of personal excavation of your own experience because we know that gender is built off of so many things, I mean, not only is it this colonial construct, but it comes from our relationship to each other, to the idea of what these genders are, to the norms, to peers, to the media, to our perception of ourselves, the way other people see us. There's a myriad of experiences that can inform our own gender depending on who you are and how you conceptualize yourself.

And when I'm going back to labels, the first experience I have with labels is my birth assignment. And I believe that birth assignments are

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really doing no one any good because they certainly aren't doing the intersex community any good. They certainly aren't doing the trans community any good. And quite frankly, how limiting for cis people to have to go into a binary. I have a theory that, like, could be tested another time, that the majority of people are a little bit less cisgender than they think. Everybody is a little bit more closer to the gray area within the binary spectrum than they are squarely into a binary. Because I think that the beauty of the human experience is to be multifaceted and to be fluid.

And so when I'm defining my own gender, I use genderfluid because there is this expansiveness. I think about it like water. Like the wind. There's something constantly moving because I am moving through the world learning new things about myself. And with that new information comes new reflection and opportunity for realization. And how cool is it to have a label that works?

That's also not a universal experience, and so the four of us have talked about finding labels that really land. And I also wanna acknowledge that labels are just a tool for acceptance and they are certainly not *the* tool. And online I've connected with many people who find labels limiting. And they find them to be constricting and they don't want to be confined by a label. And I think that's awesome. You know, labels are for soup cans, kind of [light laughter], when we boil it down to something.

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And they can be so wonderful and freeing to those of us who are really seeking something to define us. I really love to define what things are and codify and color code and organize. And that gives me joy. It gives me a sense of euphoria to label my experience. But that's not universal.

And so just like Ilya was saying earlier, we have this incredible responsibility to make sure that we're not gatekeeping the hell out of other people's gendered experiences. Any gender can use any pronouns. There is no one right way to be your specific gender. And I think that labels are a wonderful tool if they feel like they set you free. And then you don't need a lick more worth of discussion if you feel like they don't.

Shohreh: I often think about labels as, like, they're a response to, and a reaction to, the fact that we all grew up in cis-heteronormativity. If various gender expressions, gender identities, sexual orientations were just, like, accepted variations of the human experience, then the labels might become far less necessary in terms of how we view each other and communicate with each other.

Because that's not the world that we grew up in, sometimes labels can be a very helpful thing to have, especially in terms of queer folks being able to find community and finding other people who have similar experiences to them. Because that's really what we're trying to do. We're trying to say, okay, we grew up in this cisheteronormative world where these were the acceptable things. I know I don't fit into that, so what does that mean for me, and how can I describe my experience,

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which is different? But if that wasn't the norm and we weren't automatically othered, then it changes the whole experience of labels.

So I think it's positive, and it's also fraught, and there's, like, so much that's wrapped up in there. And Melody, I loved what you were saying about going back to your ancestral language because interestingly, Farsi is a gender-neutral language. So I took a lot of Farsi classes growing up and in college, and there is no she/her, he/him—everyone is technically an "it" in terms of humans.

And, you know, at the time I was like, this is great, less conjugations. But also, thinking of it from the lens of queerness, it's like oh, there are actually languages that weren't split into this gender binary. And languages that go back centuries. That's fascinating and just really shows you kind of, again, that white, colonial lens that has come in and changed a lot of the ways that we view gender and we view sexuality. And it's so important to bring those in when we're talking about this stuff.

Melody:

Thank you, Shohreh. As I'm listening to our stories, that's what I'm interested in. So when I see people or hear people use certain labels or descriptions, I don't wanna stop there. I wanna know your story if you're willing to share. And that is when we make connections. And sometimes labels, unfortunately, has the opposite effect that when we put labels on people, there's an assumption of what that means to that person.

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But can we also slow down and go, yeah, may I share my story with you? What's your story? How did you decide that this feels good or right in your body right now?

Shohreh: Mm, yes, that's such an important point that we really have to go beyond the assumptions that we put with labels and let people tell their own stories and share their own experiences.

[Music plays]

[Ad break]

Hey y'all. Let me take a moment to tell you a little bit more about Ample + Rooted, an inclusive therapy practice that is directed by my dear friend and colleague, Neathery Falchuk. The awesome practitioners at Ample + Rooted not only serve folks locally here in Austin, they also serve folks online all over the globe. Through therapy, mindfulness practices, courses, trainings, and events, they support, guide, and hold space for folks to feel valued and nourished.

We talk a lot about systems of oppression on the show and how they can disconnect you from your inner knowing. And the Ample + Rooted group believes it is your birthright to both inhabit and trust your physical and emotional self without shame. Luckily for y'all, the kind folks at Ample + Rooted created an exclusive guided meditation on cultivating self-trust for listeners of Conjuring Up Courage.

You can access the free guided meditation and learn more about Ample + Rooted in the show notes for this episode.

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[Music fades]

Alright, let's move on from labels to our next topic, which is a very important topic for our community. So queer and trans folks are at a much greater risk for mental health conditions than the general population. And that risk, of course, only increases when you add in other intersections, like race.

So I'd love to talk a little bit about what do we think queer folks need to be able to take care of our mental health, both from within the community as well as the conditions outside of it.

Melody:

This is probably my favorite topic to talk about, around how do we take care of our mental health but also be in community with one another to take care of one another's collective mental well-being? And if I were to lead with what I believe is the most important, it is finding a celebratory, affirming community.

And I learn a lot from young people. The ways that they just find community, and if they can't find community, they're creating community and coming together to share resources with one another, to celebrate, affirm one another. Sure, there are other issues like bullying and that's important to address as well, but I do get inspired by the ways that I see young folks are using, you know, even virtual spaces and advocacy spaces to find others and to lift one another up.

And when we talk about cisheteronormativity as a way to put people into confined labels causing ruptures within the self, ruptures within

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relationships and communities, the healing is, how do we come back together? How do we co-heal?

And from a mental healthcare perspective, maybe from a more professional lens, I see the toll that these constructs take on the individual relationships and community. And understanding the roots and healing these historical and intergenerational traumas can be something that is not only restorative to the self, but we can see that in the family as well. And sometimes that work can be daunting, right? Especially with intersections of gender, sexuality, and in communities of color when our ways of being, our ways of knowing, and our ways of healing have been stigmatized by the mental health industrial complex, have been stigmatized by so-called Western psychology.

How do we look at our wellness away from white gaze? How do we redefine our wellness while re-rooting into our ancestral practices? And when it comes to healing, sometimes, yeah, we're going to have to talk about the traumas too. And it can be helpful to have communities, healing circles, even therapeutic spaces of folks that are doing their own dismantling and unlearning and healing work and re-learning work to hold space for some of these difficult conversations.

I feel like I'm talkin' a lot, but I feel like I can talk about this all day. I'll just speak for myself. As a mental health professional, I feel a duty to dismantle oppressive practices within our field first. And so if I consider myself a therapist and I am actually participating in these practices that's rooted, you know, in violence, such as diagnosis, and

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gatekeeping, and individualizing trauma. So what that means is if a person shows up, say a queer person of color shows up and they talk about anxiety, and I only look at the symptom of anxiety and I diagnose that, that's individualizing. That's actually perpetuating harm and violence rather than looking at, structurally, perpetually, historically, intergenerationally, what is happening? And can we tend to these different layers together in a collaborative way? In a trauma-informed way, but also in a consensual way. That I am not doing this to you. That I am simply another human that had the privilege to be invited on this journey alongside you.

And so I feel a duty to hold a mirror up to our own field that there's this assumption that therapists are healers. We can be. But we can also perpetuate violence if we do not keep one another accountable, if we don't stay in community and continue to have these important conversations and continue to resist and dismantle oppressive laws, and policing, gatekeeping, that we as professionals are oftentimes complicit in as well.

Ilya: Melody, I had to sit with that for a second. I shed a tear. Thank you. Everything that you lifted up, I'm in complete alignment with. I just wanted to say thank you for sharing that.

Melody: I have no words; I'm just putting my hands to my heart right now.

James: I completely agree, thank you for sharing all of that. There is an element of healing that means we have to look at the way mental health intersects with queerness. And then we also have to look at how mental

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health and queerness are not synonyms. Like, they are not the same thing the way that, like, culturally we have tied them together. Not that queerness *is* a mental health "issue" or "disorder" or "disease," but that not all queerness is rooted in trauma and pain.

Because so much of it is. And I also think that queer folks, we need joy. We need radical acceptance of who we are. We need spaces in which we get to celebrate the beauty of queerness and we get to revel in what it means to just simply be yourself and how special that is.

That is not the most accessible idea for everyone in every step of their journey of queer acceptance. I do think that it can pop up at the most random moments. And I think one of the things that we need besides, like, access to care, gender-affirming care, comprehensive care in terms of all marginalized identities, we need representation in terms of, like, I need to be able to walk into any sort of providers' office and either see myself as a trans person represented or at least understand they have a competency towards this. And then you add in any other layer of identity on top of that and I think the same applies.

So we need those things on a basic level. And I think then we start to take that apart a little bit more and go, okay, well then we need a systemic dismantle. We need to start taking out the things that make queerness wrong. Oh, okay, so we've gotta dismantle white supremacy here because that seems to be the root of where a lot of these ideas came from. Oh no, we're back at abolition again. We're back at

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Mariame Kaba, we're back at Ruth Wilson Gilmore. We have to invest in abolition.

And so then we go all the way back to our interpersonal relationships and how am I treating this person? How am I holding myself accountable for the harm that I cause as a queer person, as a trans person? How am I engaging in restorative justice? In transformative justice? How am I committing to be a better version of myself the next day?

And then all of the sudden I think that this radical joy and acceptance—and it's funny 'cause I use the word radical because I think that I have a mixed relationship with that word, and I'll leave it at that, but I do think we get to find joy in the progress of queerness as something beautiful. And I think that that directly ties into our politics. And I think that directly ties into the ways that we treat each other.

So yes, we need different things from a systemic level, and then I think that becomes a big circle. And it can be daunting to think about it that way and we can feel powerless, or we can look at that cycle and go, wait a minute, I have the opportunity to be the change. I have agency in this. I have power. It doesn't matter how limited your power is, you still have power and influence in your circles.

And so I think that we, as queer people, can be the hands that hold each other to get each other through the tunnel to the light.

Shohreh:

Thank you both for mentioning that there are levels to this in terms of individual, community and systemic. And that all of these pieces come

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together to determine the mental health of the community, right? It's not as simple as, like, oh, well if I just go to therapy, like, that fixes everything. That's like, one part, and it may be helpful if you do have an affirming therapist, of which I'm very grateful to have one. But that may not be your experience of going to a therapist or a doctor.

I was thinking when y'all were talking about that about how it's even just the small stuff from, like, James, I think you were mentioning how if you go into a doctor's office, right, hoping that there's going to be competence there. And I think folks who are not in the community don't realize how many things that involves, right? It involves the paperwork that you're filling out. What does it say in terms of gender, sexual orientation? It involves how are the staff trained to talk about these things?

I'm thinking about, like, sometimes when I go to the OB/GYN they'll have a question that's like, are you sexually active? And that's their stand-in for, like, could you be pregnant? And I'm like, you can be sexually active and that doesn't necessarily mean that there's a chance that you could be pregnant depending on a lot of different factors and who you're sleeping with.

And it's these little slights, you know, these microaggressions that they build up and they build up, and those have a huge outsized effect on mental health as well. It's constantly trying to fight to be like, please see me. Please understand, you know, who I am and respect who I am as a person.

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And when you're getting that in your actual health spaces, as well, and then you go to again, the systemic level of, like, oh, well people are trying to legislate so that we will never have competent care, we'll never have affirming care. It just won't be available to us. That is a huge problem.

And this is another area where it's like, there's no perfect answer or great answers. And thinking about, like, James you were saying, like, what can we do, each of us individually? What can we do in community? And I think community is so key, like you said, Melody. That is how I've been able to survive and keep moving forward on my own queer journey is from being around other queer people. Like, I cannot say enough how important that is.

And I know a lot of people talk about, well, I don't have anyone locally. And tons of my queer friends are people online who I've literally never met in person. James is one of them [laughs]. All of you are my queer friends who I haven't actually gotten to meet in person. And Pam. Sorry. Yes, Pam too. Pam waves hi to everybody [laughs]. I just think, like, where would I be without that? Like without having other people who reflected back to me that what I was experiencing was "normal"? Or that other people had been through this?

Because I think when we look at the othering of the queer community, we look at the centering of cisheteronormativity, the problem is so often we think that something is wrong with ourselves. And that's a *huge* mental health issue is when you're constantly thinking, like, oh,

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something must be wrong with *me*. I wish that I could change this. I wish that I could be “normal” or whatever words you may be using.

And it takes being in community with other people to see that, like, no, there is nothing wrong with you. This is just who you are. And just because there are people in the world who refuse to accept that and have a problem with it doesn't mean that there's something wrong with it. And community is something that allows us to have that realization for ourselves and to really believe it in our bones. And that alone is a huge help in terms of mental health, along with all of these other things that we've talked about.

Alright, so moving then to our next question. This question was proposed by James and I think it's a fascinating one. And this question is: do you think it's possible to live in a society where queerness is no longer a marginalized identity?

Ilya:

Yes, wholeheartedly. I feel like it has already existed. And I feel like when we create these small bubbles and pockets of safe community for us, that's what we're doing. Because I don't even feel, in, when I think about mainstream queerness or what—when the movement gets pushed by a certain elite group of queer folks, or representations of certain types of queer folks? When I'm reminded by that, now I'm watching the docuseries, *PRIDE*, and the first episode is how like wealthy, cis, queer folks who are in politics, and who have really, really high, well-paying jobs, and it's highlighting their struggle.

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And I'm like, there's so many levels to queerness, why is this the tipping point, the starting point, of where we are in queer community? But that's mainstream queerness for you. That's exactly what it looks like.

So when we create, like those of us who have multiple marginalized identities, when we create these safe pockets and embodiments of queerness outside of mainstream queer society, outside of queer academic society, that's what it is. That's what queerness looks like.

And it's not queerness at all because we don't name it that. But to me, that's what it feels like.

James:

Yeah, I absolutely agree. I mean, queerness, like, comes from the root word that means "to go against the grain" or "to be non-normative," right? And then we create a space in which we are the norm, and that is cool, and then it's not queer anymore. It's just normal. It's just regular. It's just awesome.

And I agree. I am the eternal optimist. I absolutely think that it's possible to live in a society where queerness is not a marginalized identity.

I think about it like a car a little bit: we're going to have to overcorrect in order to get back into a line that's going in the direction we want to. We're veering off the road, you know, in terms of like, queer is bad. And so then when you're driving the car, you have to overcorrect to then get you back on the track you want to go on. So I think it's gonna require heavy celebration of queerness that is constant, and a lot of that labor is going to be on people that aren't queer.

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And you know, we do the work ourselves. We really do. I mean, just like Ilya was saying, we create these spaces as much as we can. Um, just like Melody was talking about in their practice. Like, this is something that we're workin' on all the time. It's gonna require help. Even though it can feel helpless to think, oh, we're at the mercy of, like, everyone else deciding that we deserve rights.

Do y'all know @ihartericka on Instagram, Ericka Hart? Something that they've talked about is, like, posing the question: what is the end goal of whiteness? What is the end goal of white supremacy? And the implication, at least what I, you know, from my amount of studying and my lived years, which are young, is that the end goal of whiteness seems to be the eradication of anybody that doesn't fit those norms. That's never going to happen. There's way too many of us. We are way too fuckin' cool. And we're way too resilient. And we simply will not go down without a massive fight. And there are now so many of us that that's not gonna happen.

It doesn't mean that there are not still massive issues, but it gives me hope reading articles about how the next generation, like when Gen Z is the queerest generation that we've had, right? That's cool. I will forgive you for the middle parts if you're gonna go with, like, being the queer—I'm just kidding, middle parts are great. But, like [laughs lightly], I think that that is special.

And so when we look at, oh, well the end goal of white supremacy is this, and then we've got the youngest and most tenacious and

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ambitious group of people that has all of their middle fingers in the air at that, I think we really do have a shot at this. Will I see it in my lifetime? No. Am I still committed to leaving a legacy and as much of a breadcrumb trail as I can towards the paths of liberation that I can find with my unique identities and experiences? Yes. And I think as long as queer people commit to that, I think we have a shot at it.

Melody:

Mm. I'm breathing this all in. I love what you said about hope, James. My name is Ying Hae, which means "abundant in hope," so I always hold onto hope. And I love the inquiry about what is the end goal? And I'm also thinkin' about what is the goal of marginalizing queerness? And it's about power hoarding. It's about holding onto these rigid power hierarchies so that people with more structural power will continue to hoard that.

And so in order to dismantle that, I turn to nature as my teacher. God, nature is so queer. Plants are so queer. Animals are so queer.

James:

Gazelles.

Melody:

Gazelles are so queer [light laughter]. I think we're talking about all these animals, they're so queer. But when I turn to nature as my teacher is we also have to start looking at it from an anti-capitalistic lens. We have to learn to say if the power hierarchy, if the power hoarding is really, literally killing us, where do we turn to as inspiration? Where do we return to? And if nature is so queer, then certainly so are we.

And with that is also the reintegration of spirituality and spiritual practices, to reconnecting with our spiritual ways of being, being in

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community and seasonality and rituals and togetherness and interconnectedness. All of these ways of being that we have been severed from because it's not so-called "productive."

But actually, those are the places that we need to be in order to fully embrace our diverse beings, the richness of our beings. And so those are places that I look to for hope as well. Yes, so much is in the power of community and we as people, and also when we return to be with nature. There's a lot that I, personally, learn from it, I believe we can learn from it too as teachers, guides, and inspiration.

Ilya: Oh my goodness, Melody. If you want a virtual hug, I'm givin' it to you right now.

Melody: I would love one. Receiving, receiving, and I'm just feeling the fuzzies all around.

Ilya: Yes. Thank you so much.

Shohreh: I so appreciate the constant consent in this conversation, even for virtual hugs. It makes me happy.

That was really beautiful, Melody. I love how you took hope and explained the different places where you find and look for that and where we can all find and look for that. I think that's really beautiful.

And I am in agreement with everyone in terms of the optimism of yes, this is possible. I think, along with James, probably not in my lifetime. But that being said, I am definitely excited by the fact that—of what we're seeing with Gen Z, you know, of like, oh, again, the queerest

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generation, the most gender expression. When I think about the fact that our generation is raising children with what we didn't have, not everybody, but a lot of them, of saying, like, you can be any gender you want. And you can play with whatever toys you want. And you can wear whatever you want. And you can love whoever you want.

Like, I just try to think about how different my life would have been if that was the messaging that I got growing up. And there's a grief to that, certainly. But that's where my hope is. Is I'm thinking about over time, as that becomes the norm of how we parent, of course we're going to have more queer people because it's going to be a more acceptable thing. It's not going to be something that people feel like they have to hide. And I think so many of us, there's way more queer people than we realize. There's way more people who want to bust out of the gender binary than we realize, and they just haven't been given the right tools to do that.

And speaking from my own experience, some of the work that I've done with my own therapist is about the fact that I'm 31 and I have essentially just come out as gay. And I was dealing with a lot of insecurity around that, of, like, how could I not know this about myself, right? That just makes me feel like an unintelligent person who doesn't know themselves really well. Not great when you're a self-trust coach [laughs lightly].

But my therapist is wonderful, and she was like, well, how could you have known this about yourself? You didn't grow up in a household

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where you were given the tools or the opportunity to talk about these things or for this to be acceptable. You didn't grow up in a religious tradition where, like, that would have been acceptable. And you didn't grow up in a location—grew up in North Texas, which is very southern conservative—where that would have been acceptable. So she was like, I protected myself by burying my queerness, essentially, and now as an adult, I've had to unearth it and going through that process.

So really just thinking about, like, what opportunity is available out in the world for people who don't have to bury it, and how queerness can really start to expand as people are given those opportunities. Because my experience is not uncommon. A lot of people my age, which is 31, or 41, or 51, or 61, are coming into their queerness because the culture is changing. And it's on TV. It's in the news. It's on Instagram.

You're seeing people all around and you're like, oh, this is a possibility model, as my friend Alex Locust likes to say. This is—being able to see it makes you think, huh, is that an okay thing for me? Do I have these feelings as well? And it opens up that door to explore. And I think the more of that that we have, the less marginalized being queer becomes.

Alright, well, we will go to our wrap-up question now. This is a question we've kind of danced around a bit in our conversation today, and I've been asking this of all of my guests during Pridepalooza. So the Pridepalooza theme is: Queerness is _____, and I would just like each of you to fill in that blank for yourself in this moment.

Ilya:

Queerness is liberation by way of resistance, for me.

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- Melody:** I love that and feel that, Ilya. I have two responses. Queerness is defined by you. And, going back to Love, Actually, queerness is all around [Shohreh laughs].
- Shohreh:** Thanks for bringing it back.
- James:** Those were beautiful. Queerness is a superpower. How fucking cool to be queer.
- Shohreh:** It is fuckin' cool to be queer. We are the coolest people I know, so, everyone wants to get in on this crew.
- James:** Yeah. I mean, we literally take the shit that life throws us and we go, I'm gonna make something beautiful out of it.
- I'm gonna get really gay for a second. When you think about the rainbow being associated with queerness, I think it's so appropriate. Because, like, what is more beautiful to see in nature than a rainbow?
- Shohreh:** That's what I'm sayin'.
- James:** Like, it is just magical. And like, when I connect with other queer people, I mean, like, talking to you all, it just feels like a rainbow. It does. It feels like a magical piece of nature.
- Melody, you were talking about nature earlier and going back to that. In my own experience, I understand what you're saying, to a degree, because there is—the queerness of nature is represented in ourselves. And I think that that is our superpower, to walk through the world, we

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have our own unique lens that only we can see. And it is unique 'cause it's just us.

Ilya: Yes, and it stops you in your tracks. You know, James, I love that you lifted up the rainbow and seeing it in nature. And I'm with you and there's so many parts of nature where I'm in awe, and I think a lot of times people, when they bump up against us and all our queer glory, they're literally in awe, but they don't know what to do with those feelings. Often they've never felt those things before all at the same time [James laughs lightly].

James: Yes.

Shohreh: Yes. Awe can quickly turn to angst if you don't know what you're dealing with. And I think that is such a good point.

Y'all are wonderful. Well, thank you, all three of you, for being here, for having this conversation with me. This was so beautiful and wonderful. I'm gonna be thinking about it for long after it. I can't wait to share with everybody.

For those listening, if each of y'all could just share how they can find you if they want to keep up with you, as well as how my listeners can best support you, including if you want to tell them where they can give tips if they enjoyed this conversation and they want to throw a tip your way, that would be wonderful.

Ilya: I just want to lift up a support group that I'm co-facilitating with Alishia McCullough from Black and Embodied. Sage and Spoon is a free online

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peer support group for Black folks who are lookin' for support through their relationship with food and body image. And it's happening at the end of every month on Tuesdays. We have one actually comin' up tomorrow. So if you go to my website, DecolonizingFitness.com, you'll see the flyer, and then I have the little button to the link. Click on the link to register and you'll be in the house.

If you are on Instagram, my Instagram handle is [@decolonizing_fitness](https://www.instagram.com/decolonizing_fitness), and in my profile, you'll see my Linktree, and that'll take you to all the ways you can support me, including sending me some tips.

Melody: You can stay connected with me. My Insta is [@MelodyHopeLi](https://www.instagram.com/MelodyHopeLi). If you're seeking a therapist that gets you, that is centered on liberation and social justice oriented practice, please visit us: InclusiveTherapists.com. Also [@InclusiveTherapists](https://www.instagram.com/InclusiveTherapists). And in terms of tips, I would love to move people towards Decolonizing Fitness, which I'm a big fan of myself as a person that loves moving my body, so big support that way.

Ilya: Thank you so much, Melody, I really appreciate you.

James: I cannot wait to find both of you on Instagram after this.

And you can stay connected with me through Instagram and TikTok. I'm [@JamesIsSmiling](https://www.instagram.com/JamesIsSmiling). And that's the only places you can find me. Anybody else is fake and lying to you—there are no people that are pretending to be me [Ilya laughs].

And in terms of tips, my Venmo is also [@JamesIsSmiling](https://www.instagram.com/JamesIsSmiling) and so is my PayPal, and anything that gets sent to me will be redistributed on Fund

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Fridays, which I do every week where I post mutual aid calls centering BIPOC and trans folks. So anything that you send to me gets redistributed into the community, and I hope that you'll join me in that practice because we have a lot of power. A little bit of tips go such a long way for people who are simply trying to exist.

So that's where you can find me and connect with me. We're always doing wild, fun things on my corner of the internet. You never know what's gonna happen. You'll definitely see Pam.

Shohreh: Fantastic, as always. I will put links for everything that y'all have mentioned here at the end as well as throughout this whole conversation in the show notes so everyone can have very easy access to it.

I think by now, y'all all know where to find me. I'm @ShohrehDavoodi pretty much everywhere on the internet, including in CashApp, Venmo, all those things. So find me there.

Thanks again, everyone, for this beautiful conversation. This is gonna be such a wonderful way for everyone to wrap up Pride. Everyone go follow all three of these amazing folks, and please, please, share this episode. And if you liked it, leave a rating and review as well 'cause that helps more people find the show.

James: Five stars only.

Shohreh: Five stars only. Anything less will be unacceptable [laughter].

Ilya: That's right. I'm givin' it back.

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Shohreh: That's right [laughter]. I will file an official complaint if you put less than five stars. Okay, but for the record, as of this episode, I have 95 five star ratings and no ratings of any other kind. So.

Ilya: Boom!

Shohreh: Crushin' it.

James: I don't think that I've rated you, so maybe you'll get, umm, I'm gonna do it.

Shohreh: Okay. Please do it. Everyone get in there. Ratings and reviews on Apple Podcasts. Super helpful. But yes, thank you everyone. This was so great.

[Music plays]

And that's our show for today. If you're enjoying Conjuring Up Courage, don't forget to subscribe through your podcast provider of choice so you never miss an episode. Additionally, if you haven't left a rating and review in the Apple Podcasts app yet, you can do so from any Apple device to help more people find and benefit from the show. I also love hearing from listeners, so feel free to take a screenshot from your podcast player, post on social media, and tag me. My username is @ShohrehDavoodi on all platforms. Finally, you can sign up for my email newsletter, The Sunday Share, and get more details about how to work with me by going to ShohrehDavoodi.com. Thank you so much for listening, and I hope you'll join me for the next episode.

[Music fades]