

Scene on Radio

Ain't No Amoeba (MEN, Part 2): Transcript

<http://www.sceneonradio.org/episode-48-aint-no-amoeba-men-part-2/>

[Music]

Celeste Headlee: The Lord God said, "It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him."

Now God had formed out of the ground all the wild animals and all the birds in the sky ... so on and so forth, skipping a few lines here....

But for Adam no suitable helper was found. So God caused the man to fall into a deep sleep; and while he was sleeping, he took one of the man's ribs and then closed up the place with flesh. Then God made a woman from the rib he had taken out of the man, and he brought her to the man.

The man said, "This is now bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called 'woman,' for she was taken out of man."

John Biewen: The Book of Genesis, Chapter Two. God the Father, definitely a guy himself, creates Man. Then, apparently as an afterthought, God makes Woman to give the man company and to serve the man.

Celeste Headlee: Obviously, that creation story was written long after patriarchy took hold among most humans.

John Biewen: Which happened about ten thousand years ago, as we learned in the last episode. European and American culture were built on stories like the one you just read, Celeste, and that says a lot, doesn't it.

Celeste Headlee: It does, especially since the non-biblical reality behind the existence of males and females is ... quite different from the Adam's rib story.

[Music]

Celeste Headlee: For several billion years after the earth formed, the only living things living on the planet were tiny organisms that reproduced asexually. They cloned themselves.

John Biewen: You could say they were female, actually. Then, about 1.2 billion years ago, along came sexual reproduction. Scientists aren't really sure why it happened, but there are advantages to sexual reproduction.

Celeste Headlee: One big one is that sex mixes up the gene pool. If everyone in town is a clone of everyone else, one disease can come through and wipe out everybody. Making new combinations of DNA, some from mom and some from dad, gives the local population, and the species, a better chance of surviving.

John Biewen: Personally, I'm glad nature invented males to pair with females.

Celeste Headlee: Me too.

John Biewen: (Laughs) I appreciate you saying that. But, from you-all's perspective as human women, having men around has come with a price, hasn't it.

[Music]

Celeste Headlee: From the Center for Documentary Studies at Duke University and PRX, this is Scene on Radio. Part Two of our series, MEN.

John Biewen: It's a season-long dive into patriarchy and male supremacy. How we got it, how to see it more clearly, and what to do about it. I'm John Biewen.

Celeste Headlee: And I'm Celeste Headlee.

[Street noise]

John Biewen: If you think about, what are traits that come to mind, what are characteristics that come to mind when you think about men? What are men like?

Man #1: More aggressive. I want to be the more dominant one. When it's time to cut grass, I don't want my lady out there trying to cut grass and

sweating. If she was out there trying to help, trying to do something, smaller, yeah. But um....

Woman #1: I guess you could say they're strong. (laughs) But me, kinda, like my boyfriend? He's a very emotional person half the time so....

Man #2/boyfriend: (laughs) Uhhh. Every man's different but most men are assholes. Generally speaking.

John Biewen: So if men are more aggressive, what is a trait, virtue, that women have? What are women good at?

Man #1: I think as far as the nurturing.

John Biewen: Nurturing?

Man: Nurturing, uh-huh.

Woman #2: I appreciate that they can rise to power without like stepping on everyone else or like demeaning or being, um, just deliberately pushing people down to get to power. I think there's a subtle way that they stand in leadership. I like the femininity of women, I think that's powerful.

[Music]

Celeste Headlee: That all sounds familiar. Most of us think girls and boys, men and women, are inherently different from one another. Granting all the disclaimers, of course.

John Biewen: Right, that these are big-picture generalizations. There are nurturing men and domineering women, for example. Think Mr. Rogers and Maggie Thatcher. Not to mention the many people who identify neither male nor female, or as both.

Celeste Headlee: So with all that said, our culture, and every other culture, takes for granted that women and men are different. We're told as much in a million different ways every day.

John Biewen: To take just one example. Is there any slice of Western culture that traffics in gender stereotypes with more gleeful abandon than the beer commercial?

Heineken ad: (Party noise, woman's voice) And now we're back in the living room...

John Biewen: In this one, a couple is showing off their upscale new home to a bunch of friends. The woman leads her woman friends into the master bedroom, where, excitedly, she gets ready to open the door of her huge walk-in closet....

Woman, in ad: Aaaand....

John Biewen: Voila: clothing, and *lots* of shoes.

[In ad: Women's screams]

Celeste Headlee: But the women's delight is interrupted ... **[men's shouts]** by the excited squeals of the men. The husband is showing off *his* favorite room: a giant walk-in refrigerator filled with bottles of ice cold brew.

[In ad: Men's screams]

[Music]

Celeste Headlee: So at least that ad insults everybody's intelligence. The point is, most of us assume, even subconsciously, that men and women are just different. We think differently, we care about different things.

John Biewen: The question for this episode is: Are those gender differences innate, built in biologically, at least to some extent, or are they entirely learned?

Celeste Headlee: A lot of us would probably say gender is some combination of nature and nurture ... but how much of each? Can we really tell the difference? And does the nature-nurture question really matter in the end? John, you talked to some experts about the state of these debates. Tell us what you found.

John Biewen: Will do, and then we'll talk.

John Biewen: Could it be, as Lisa Wade likes to say – could it be that we're all doing drag?

Lisa Wade: Sociologists like to talk about gender not as something that we are but as something that we do. Gender is something that we bring to life.

John Biewen: Wade is a sociology professor at Occidental College in Los Angeles.

Lisa Wade: I'm the author of a textbook on the sociology of gender. We titled it *Gender* just to kind of own the topic....

John Biewen: It's fair to say Lisa Wade, like a lot of scholars in her field, occupies the nurture end of the debate. Of course, sex difference is a thing. Some people's bodies make ovaries while others make sperm, and there are other physical differences between those two groups, including average size and strength. But the idea of a world made up of two "opposite" genders, manly men and womanly women? Wade says the closer you look, the less solid that notion becomes.

Narrator, *The Gender Puzzle* documentary: The scientific principle used for decades, that all girls had x-x chromosomes and all boys x-y, isn't reliable.

John Biewen: For starters, as this documentary film, *The Gender Puzzle*, explains, an estimated one-percent of us – that is, about seventy million humans alive today – are intersexed, identifying as trans or having hormonal or genetic variations that don't fit the binary.

Narrator, *The Gender Puzzle*: Christine North has always felt female, but when she was fifteen she found out she was born with male chromosomes and internal testes.

John Biewen: Then, says Lisa Wade, there's the arbitrary quality of so many of our gender notions.

Lisa Wade: All societies that we know have done gender in some fashion, but how they have done gender varies unbelievably. It's actually a beautiful kaleidoscope of ways in which we have distinguished different kinds of people based on something that we might call gender.

John Biewen: Even within American culture, some of our ideas have completely flipped over time. A few examples: the Puritans thought women were the hornier gender. Most people would not say that today. Cheerleading started out as a guy thing. And a hundred years ago, *Ladies Home Journal* recommended blue clothing for girls and pink for boys, saying blue was more dainty, and pink the stronger color. Maybe my daughter wanting all that pink stuff when she was five didn't just flow naturally from her two x chromosomes. But if gender is something we learn and perform, then, why? Why do we put so much energy into it?

Lisa Wade: The reason we care is because this distinction advantages some people over others. Specifically, it advantages people who are male bodied, who identify as men, who perform masculinity, and those people are more invested in – that’s why, you know, it is more often other sorts of people that are fighting the system. Because they're less invested, because they don't, they're not advantaged.

[Music]

John Biewen: So, Celeste, here’s one argument: Gender, as distinct from biological sex difference, is overwhelmingly a social construct. Men built a system of gender roles for the same reason European slave traders invented race: to justify an oppressive, exploitative hierarchy. In this view, women take part in the scheme, and do femininity, to whatever extent you do it, mainly because in a patriarchal system you’re rewarded for doing so and punished if you don’t. We’ve all been conditioned to want to do gender well.

Celeste Headlee: All right, I understand the importance of emphasizing the culturally, or socially constructed aspects of gender as a corrective. Because obviously, for centuries people grossly exaggerated gender differences, saying that women are this way, men are that way, and it’s all deeply wired in our natures. So, a lot of what Lisa Wade is saying rings true to me. But I doubt that it’s that simple.

John Biewen: Yeah?

Celeste Headlee: I just don't think you can dismiss the whole testosterone thing that easily.

John Biewen: Well, Lisa Wade and I talked about testosterone, and she pointed out some of the nuances around it. Women have testosterone too, first of all, just not as much as men, usually. And the way we respond to the presence of hormones in our system is affected by social factors – for example, a surge in testosterone may lead a guy to throw a punch at the scrawny dude who annoys him in the bar, but it won't make him take a swing at his boss.

Celeste Headlee: Fair enough, I understand these things are complex. Testosterone isn't just a switch that gets thrown and makes men helpless to control their behavior. But I do think there are differences between males and females, on average, that are biologically based and can't be denied. You and I are both parents.

John Biewen: Yes.

Celeste Headlee: Before my son was born, I decided to do “gender neutral” parenting. Winnie the Pooh décor in his room because that was not gender specific. When Grant was little, though, two of his good friends were girls. The girls would play with dolls, and my son would arrive at their house, and tear the doll's head off and whack the dolls on the table.

John Biewen: I have a daughter and a son. When they were little my daughter had tea parties with her beanie babies. My son was more likely to

be playing with the Legos. But really, overall they didn't conform to the stereotypes all that much. Lucas was not noticeably more aggressive than Harper, for example.

Celeste Headlee: But let me guess, the two of them are very different people.

John Biewen: Oh, yes.

Celeste Headlee: I assume most parents will agree on this. Humans are not blank slates, waiting to be shaped by their environment. We come out of the womb with some strong tendencies – personality, temperament, interests, aptitudes.

John Biewen: I agree. Obviously, the environment, nurture is crucial, to making us who we are. But whatever creates those predispositions, genes and hormones and whatever, people do sure seem to come pre-wired in a significant way.

Celeste Headlee: So, if that's the case, do we have predispositions that tend to correlate with being female or male? Leaving aside the debate over gender fluidity, we know that there are *biological* differences between a cis-gendered male and cis-gendered female, so why wouldn't those differences have an effect on personality and behavior?

John Biewen: Okay, so that's where we're going next ... the evidence *for* innate gender differences. And, if they exist, do those differences favor men or women?

[BREAK]

[Music]

[Ambient outdoor noise]

John Biewen: To the extent that males and females are different, do you think it's kind of baked in to who we are in terms of our genes and our hormones and our wiring, or do you think it's pretty much all culturally taught?

Man #1: I think it is a lot culturally taught, but there's probably something in your DNA, that – there's a difference there in your DNA.

Woman #1: 'Cause I think too that kind of like women have that mother instinct type thing. Whereas men, you know, until they become a father they don't really have the instinct to be nurturing. So I think women, I think girls and women are born with that nurturing instinct.

Man #2: Pretty much probably culture.

John Biewen: Yeah?

Man #2: Yeah. People are raised up different. Some people say that ‘these are the things you’re supposed to do as a man.’

John Biewen: Yeah, you think it’s mostly...

Man #2: Somewhat, too, I don’t know, like you say, the hormones and stuff like that, it ... I don’t know.

Celeste Headlee: John, in your previous series, *Seeing White*, you found that *race* is man-made. The scientific consensus says there’s just no *there* there, biologically, when it comes to race. With gender, though, it’s more complicated, given our sex differences. Does biology influence gender – our differing interests, talents, and behaviors? And if so, how? Let’s hear more of your reporting.

John Biewen: OK.

Steven Pinker: OK, there are many similarities between the sexes. There are no differences in general intelligence, they are exactly the same, on the money....

John Biewen: The scene is a packed lecture hall at Harvard, in 2005. It’s a debate between the sometimes-controversial scholar Steven Pinker, and his colleague at Harvard, Elizabeth Spelke. Pinker is talking about the results of many, many studies on how males and females compare at certain skills.

Steven Pinker: In cases where there are differences, there's pretty much as many instances in which men do slightly better than women as in which women do slightly better than men. Just to give you a few examples, men are better at throwing, women are more dexterous. Men are better at mentally rotating shapes, women are better at visual memory. Men are better at problem solving, women are better at mathematical calculation, and on and on and on.

John Biewen: Most of those differences are slight, as Pinker said. Although in the case of mathematical talent, the main subject of this debate at Harvard, he points out the difference gets more pronounced at both ends of the bell curve – at least, according to the data available at the time. So, overall, girls get better grades in math than boys, but most of the worst math performers are male, and almost all of the world's top mathematicians are men.

Movie audio, Professor: You. Are you following this?

Dev Patel as Ramanujan: Yes, sir. Most excitedly.

Professor: Well, you don't appear to be taking any notes. Is there something you'd like to contribute?

John Biewen: In the movie *The Man Who Knew Infinity*, Dev Patel plays the Indian mathematician Srinivasa Ramanujan, an early 20th century genius. He got little formal training, but his brain just seemed to be wired to understand numbers like almost no one else.

[Movie audio, chalk scratches on board]

Professor: But I, I hadn't completed that proof. How do you know?

Patel: I don't know. I just do.

John Biewen: We're used to hearing about male math and science geniuses. And about men who are lousy at expressing their feelings, like Ramanujan's colleague, the Cambridge University scholar G.H. Hardy, played in the movie by Jeremy Irons.

Movie audio, Jeremy Irons: Sorry I've not been able to be a better friend to you in the traditional sense. I know you've needed one but I'm not very good at all of that. I never have been. Life for me is, it's always been mathematics.

Steven Pinker: ...People versus things, and abstract rule systems. There is a staggering amount of data on this....

John Biewen: Steven Pinker, in that Harvard debate, talking about research that shows males tend to prefer working with things and ideas, while women more often want to work with people.

Steven Pinker: Uh, and indeed this will tend to cause people to gravitate in slightly different directions. The occupation that's strongest at the people end of this continuum is director of a community services organization. The

occupations that are strongest at the things end are physicist, chemist, mathematician, computer programmer and biologist.

John Biewen: In the debate, Pinker took the side of nature, arguing for a number of innate gender differences. And, on the topic at hand that day, math and science, he said men have a slight biological advantage that makes them more likely to rise to the top in those fields. His debating opponent, Elizabeth Spelke, a psychology professor at Harvard, said, wait a minute. We live in a society that stereotypes boys and girls, and that *perceives* males as being better than females at things like math, even when they're not.

Elizabeth Spelke: I think that when we see that professionals, in professional contexts, are showing the same patterns of evaluation that parents are showing in home contexts, and when we think that children are going to be facing those patterns of evaluation not just when they're young and at home but continuing through high school and into college, and finally with their colleagues on academic faculties, that we're dealing with a very, much more pervasive effect....

John Biewen: Girls and women have to contend with those biases, Spelke says; with a long history of exclusion; and with a lack of representation in math and science that makes those fields less inviting to this day. Given all that, she says, there's just no need to bring in biological difference to explain men's dominance at the top of such fields. And in fact, since this debate in 2005, new research has dealt more blows to the claim of a natural male advantage in math and science ... showing, for instance, that

in societies that have more gender equality, girls do just as well as boys. Still, Elizabeth Spelke does not stake out a pure nurture-over-nature position.

Elizabeth Spelke: I think it's a really interesting possibility that the forces that were active in our evolutionary past have led men and women to evolve somewhat differing concerns. I think that that's a real possibility.

John Biewen: She's referring to a central thesis of evolutionary psychology. The theory says some gender differences were formed in response to women's and men's diverging strategies for passing on our genes. For example, for a man, it made evolutionary sense to spread his seed among lots of women, so natural selection made men more likely to be promiscuous, more competitive towards other men, and less concerned with nurturing. Meanwhile, the theory goes, women make the bigger investment in carrying babies to term and protecting them, so women evolved to prize security, care giving, and a mate who'd be a good protector and provider.

Even if there's something to that theory, Elizabeth Spelke argues, it's too big a stretch to take differences that may have evolved in the Ice Age and tie them to a young person's choice today to become a social worker instead of a chemist.

Elizabeth Spelke: I think it's anything but clear how motives from our past are going to translate into modern contexts. And we would need to do

these experiments of getting rid of discrimination and social pressures in order to find out.

Moderator: OK, great, thank you.

[Audience applause]

[Music]

John Biewen: Among many feminist scholars, in particular, there's strong resistance to claims of innate differences that supposedly shape the talents and behaviors of women and men today. And there's good reason for that wariness, says Mel Konner of Emory University.

Mel Konner: It can and does lead to some people saying, oh you see, we were right all along, women are inferior.

John Biewen: Konner is an anthropologist and a medical doctor. What he calls essentialist arguments about gender have almost always been used to prop up male supremacy. And, of course, those claims are much like other insidious uses of science.

Mel Konner: I am very aware of the dark history of essentialism, the way science was used to support slavery, and I happen to be Jewish and I was raised steeped in the consequences of essentialism in the service of anti-Semitism and extermination, mass murder.

John Biewen: And yet, having studied gender difference for half a century, Konner calls himself an essentialist. It's just that his argument is different from most.

Mel Konner: I've always thought that if anything women are superior because I consider violence and exploitative sexuality to not be good things. (Laughs.) So we have this one group of people that that seems to me to naturally have less of those two things. In fact, a lot less.

John Biewen: That's Konner's claim, in a nutshell, laid out in his book, *Women After All: Sex, Evolution, and the End of Male Supremacy*. After poring over the evidence from history and anthropology; studies of our animal relatives; and brain, hormone, and gene science, Konner became convinced there are just two important differences between male and female humans. The first is the tendency toward violence.

Mel Konner: There is no culture where the great majority of homicides is not due to men. No culture, with all the tremendous variations, you know? And there's no culture where girls do more physical aggression, even playfully, than boys.

John Biewen: Konner adds he's not talking about all kinds of aggression.

Mel Konner: We know a lot about verbal aggression in women and girls. We know about mean girl syndrome.

John Biewen: And he says women can be just as assertive, ambitious, and competitive as men.

Mel Konner: I'm talking about one thing, which is the tendency to hurt other people physically, which in all cultures is much more male than female.

John Biewen: The second trait that he calls innately male, to a strikingly disproportionate extent, is what he calls exploitative sexuality ... or driven sexuality.

Mel Konner: [I'm] not naive enough to think that women are not sexually manipulative. But you don't have the kind of pattern that you consistently have in all cultures, with men accounting for ninety nine percent of rapes.

John Biewen: Rape, sexual abuse, sexual harassment. Overwhelmingly, worldwide and through all known history, the behaviors of men.

Mel Konner: And I don't think it's just because of culture and media and upbringing. I think it's more fundamental.

[Music]

John Biewen: Celeste, you told me about Mel Konner and his work. You had interviewed him on the radio and you suggested that I call him up. So, I take it you're persuaded by his argument that women are superior.

Celeste Headlee: Well, I appreciate his argument, let's say that, and I think he makes a strong case, but I don't usually use the word superior. I think we have some innate advantages. How about you? Do you take offense to his argument?

John Biewen: No. I'm not mad at Mel Konner. I'm with you in that I'm not sure it's helpful to use the word "superior," but I take his point. Women do vastly less harm in the world than men do, it seems to me. And that seems like as good a standard as any if you're going to say one gender is better than the other.

Celeste Headlee: Mel also predicts that The Future is Female, as the hashtag goes. That women will soon have a lot more power and influence in the world than we do now.

John Biewen: Yes. As I mentioned, part of his book's subtitle is *The End of Male Supremacy*. Some feminist scholars like this idea just fine but think he may be too optimistic. We'll come back to Mel Konner's thoughts about that later in the series, when we get into some of the possible futures of gender politics.

Celeste Headlee: But before we leave this episode, let's sum up just a little. It seems like the experts are still trying to work out the nuances of gender differences, still trying to nail down the nature vs. nurture question.

John Biewen: Yes. But a few things we can say, I think, about the scientific consensus. First, the *big* claims that our patriarchal societies used

to make about male superiority are just dead. Debunked. The notion that men are smarter and morally superior to women. No serious expert believes that anymore.

Celeste Headlee: And that means we're down to arguing mostly about very minor differences like the ones we heard about earlier, and how to explain those.

John Biewen: Yeah, like women being a little better at visual memory, men at spacial reasoning, that kind of thing. On average.

Celeste Headlee: Then again, the gender differences Mel Konner is talking about, violence and rape, those are not small matters or narrow differences.

John Biewen: Absolutely. And we will be having a lot more to say about violence and rape culture in later episodes. Another point these experts would want to make is that, really, "nature vs. nurture" is a false choice. Here's Lisa Wade again, the sociologist.

Lisa Wade: What we now know is that our biologies and our cultures are intricately related in a circular relationship. It's not half and half, or 20-80, we can't separate the things we are into things that are biological and things that are cultural. And in some ways that's really obvious once you think about it. Because you know, we're sitting here and I'm talking with my body about things that are cultural in a way that is culturally driven. Right? I mean, I can't exist as a human without being simultaneously biological and

cultural at the same time. And in fact, that's exactly what we've been evolved to be. We have evolved as a species to be cultural.

Celeste Headlee: Now, that rings really true to me. It sounds like she's saying that no matter what wiring we may have, through our genes and hormones and so on, humans are not *hard-wired*. We're malleable. We can't help but be influenced by other humans and our environment.

John Biewen: And Mel Konner agrees, even though he calls himself an essentialist. Remember, he thinks that, along with a *culture* that promotes and rewards these things, it's also part of men's biological makeup to be more prone to sexual assault and harassment, as well as other kinds of violence. But that doesn't mean those things can't be stopped, or at least dramatically reduced. In fact he's hopeful the #MeToo Movement could help lead to that result.

Mel Konner: Maybe the next Harvey Weinstein coming up through the Hollywood hierarchy will, a) be more scared of the consequences of doing what Harvey Weinstein did, but also may just have a sense of how unfair it is. And that isn't the same as his not having the impulse to do it. You see what I'm saying? It's making socialization and the structure of society and the consequences of behavior different...

John Biewen: Right.

Mel Konner: ...without necessarily abolishing the impulses.

John Biewen: So an essentialist argument is not an argument that there's nothing we can do and that this is all just inevitable.

Mel Konner: Absolutely not.

John Biewen: As the Bonnie Raitt song says: "We can choose, you know, we ain't no amoeba."

Mel Konner: (Laughs) Right. We are the first species that has the potential to direct its own evolution.

[Music]

Celeste Headlee: And that really leads us to a much broader truth here. Which is: we may never know how much of our gender identity comes from biology and how much is due to culture. But we all have the power to become what we choose, and that means no one should impose gender specific expectations on anyone else.

John Biewen: Exactly.

Celeste Headlee: Every young woman who wants to be a physicist, or president of the country, should have the same chance to achieve that dream as any young man. It's not up to me to decide what your gender is and what that means. And we need to stop limiting people, through outright discrimination but also with these skewed expectations about who can be good at this or that.

John Biewen: If we can get there as a culture, that would be a big change from where we've been for hundreds and hundreds of years.

Celeste Headlee: I mean, really. How has sexism lasted this long? People should have known better – some DID know better – a long time ago.

John Biewen: Yes, and that's a very nice setup for the segue: next time, more history. And we'll look at that. How did we get from ancient patriarchal superstitions about the sexes, and manage to go through the Enlightenment, the age of reason, the scientific revolution, still holding tight to sexist ideas, laws, and practices? And why?

Celeste Headlee: Just gonna take a guess and assume that it has something to do with power and control.

John Biewen: No way!

[Music]

John Biewen: Music in this episode by Evgueni and Sacha Galperine. Music and production help from Joe Augustine at Narrative Music.

Celeste Headlee: Follow *Scene on Radio* on Facebook. And on Twitter, John's @SceneonRadio. I'm @CelesteHeadlee – H-E-A-D-L-E-E. The website, where you can find transcripts and other goodies, is sceneonradio.org.

John Biewen: The show comes to you from the Center for Documentary Studies at Duke University, and PRX.