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TRANSCRIPT

"LGBTI RIGHTS AND THE GLOBAL CULTURE WARS"

A Conversation With Mark Gevisser

Moderator: Michael Heflin

* * *TRANSCRIBER'S NOTE: BACKGROUND NOISES AND VOICES THROUGHOUT. ONLY NOTED IF PARTICULARLY INTRUSIVE.* * *

ANNOUNCER:

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MICHAEL HEFLIN:

I know many of you, but for those of you that don't know-- my name's Michael Heflin. And I work at OSF-- based in the Washington DC office. And I'm with the human rights initiative, which is a global, grant-making program. And I direct the equality work-- within the human rights initiative. Which includes our-- our global support for LGBTI rights activism. And I came to Open Society about five years ago to launch a global initiative on-- on LGBTI rights. So it's great to be here, and-- be able to talk a little bit about the work we're doing, and how that work relates to what Mark has been doing through his fellowship-- (NOISE) for the last year-and-a-half or so. And I guess, you know, what I wanna do first, of course, is introduce Mark Gevisser, who-- has been working as an OSF fellow for-- is it--

MARK GEVISSER:

Eighteen months.

MICHAEL HEFLIN:

Eighteen months. And (NOISE) I think for me-- I g-- anyhow, from a program perspective, his fellowship is ideally designed fellowsh-- (LAUGH) 'cause it's very much-- in line with-- (NOISE) with-- with our-- with our program, and with what we've been trying to-- to examine as a program, as we've developed, and developing OSF support for LGBTI rights work-- internationally.

But Mark has been looking very specifically at-- the LGBTI rights movement, as-- in-- in the context of globalization, and as a revolving, global, social movement. And how that's working in different parts of the world. How that-- how that-- how that kind of evolution of-- as a movement-- a social movement-- with forces in various places, with people working on the issues in various places, how that's playing out in different contexts.

And he's been traveling all around the world. And we've had a chance to have a dialogue-- for a good part of his fellowship. And I'm very anxious to hear where he's at now. And so we thought we'd start this out by him doing a little presentation on, sort of some of the key ideas that he's thinking about-- coming out of-- the travel, and the work that (NOISE) he's been doing the last year-and-a-half. And then-- go from there into a conversation. I have some questions to ask him. I know he has some questions to ask me. And-- and of course, we wanna open it up to all of you, so that we can make it-- a real discussion.

MARK GEVISSER:

Well, thank you very much. It's-- it's-- it's great to be doing this with Michael. We're told that-- one of the-- the great advantages of being an Open Society Fellow is that you get to plug into this extraordinary network of-- the social movement people, idea-entrepreneurs all over the world.

And-- and that network is-- is-- we're told, one of the greatest things about becoming an Open Society Fellow. And not withstanding that you were all restructuring for most of the (LAUGHTER) time with my fellowship, which made it-- sometimes very difficult to get a hold of you. And not withstanding that.

It really has been my experience-- in-- in-- in the work I've done with these-- thematic programs, and in the country offices, or-- or-- or the regional offices I've worked. And it's just been an extraordinary-- it's been one of the greatest blessing of-- of this fellowship to have connected with-- Michael and his team-- of Eastern Europeans, and Africans, in the LGBTI Rights Initiative.

And I-- I-- I feel like it's kind of grounded me, and grown me in ways-- I-- I really hadn't expected. So it's just-- a thrill to be doing this with Michael-- today. And to be checking in with each other. I-- I'm also conscious of the fact that-- that you are a group of people who want to-- who are here because you want to help make the world different, or better.

And-- and so I-- I-- I know I'm talking to funders and grantmakers. And-- and-- I-- so in m-- in my-- in my thinking aloud, I'm thinking aloud about the work you do, and how you might do it differently-- in-- particularly in this field. And-- and I-- and I'm open to, sort of, questions about that, too. I mean, that-- that-- that's one of my obligations as a fellow, is to-- to engage with you all about-- about the work you do, and to talk it through with you.

So my project, for want of a better word, is called the Global Sexuality Frontier. It should called the Global Sexuality and Gender Identity Frontier, and I will come up with a title that-- that holds both concepts properly. And the question I asked in this-- in this project, which is-- which is coming to a close now, is-- there's-- there's-- there's a global conversation happening around-- sexual orientation and gender identity.

Which-- which was unimaginable ten years ago. Unimaginable. And I want to try and-- and it's-- and it's a global conversation. It's-- it's-- it's happening in-- in a village in (UNINTEL PHRASE) where I'm working. It's happening in (UNINTEL) the Russian city I'm working in. It'some happening in Ann Arbor, where I've just been-- in-- in ways that are really unexpected. And what-- what I'm trying to understand is what's provoking this conversation-- and how is this conversation different to previous global movement conversations?

So for example, around women's rights, or civil rights, because of the err of globalization in which we live. And-- and-- and not only is-- not only what is provoking this conversation, but what effect is this conversation having in the different places where I'm working. How is this conversation-- changing the way people are thinking, reacting, understanding themselves-- understanding their society, in the places I'm working: (UNINTEL), Ann Arbor, Cape Town, (UNINTEL), et cetera.

And what I-- what I thought I would do, is to-- beginning this discussion with-- so-- with some sort of eavesdroppings I've had on this global conversation. Which I think really is the issues-- I-- I-- I'm interested in exploring in my work. So the first-- little snippet of dialogue I want to share with you, is a snippet that came out of-- an infamous meeting that-- the Open Society Foundation's actually funded.

And that was this-- I don't know how many of you are f-- familiar with this. This is this meeting that happened in Saint Petersburg-- before the Sochi Olympics-- that the Russian authorities bugged. It was a meeting of-- international activists and Russian LGBT activists around how the activists could use-- the-- the Sochi moment to-- to gain some traction in Russia, and globally.

I was at that meeting. Michael's colleague Max organized that meeting. And we all found out that it was bugged, when-- some audio from that meeting was used in-- in an absolutely scurrilous, Russian TV show called *Play Actors*. Which was a kind of, a hell-and-damnation to gay people, show on-- on Russia's major federal TV channel, at prime time.

And-- and one of the things that happened in-- so there was a studio audience. And

one of the people in the studio audiences, Vitaly Minanov (PH) who is the-- the leader of the anti-gay. He's a Saint Petersburg deputy. He's the leader of the anti-LGBT movement in-- in Russia. And he was one of the (THROAT CLEAR) studio audiences.

And-- and the host, Akani Mimotov (PH) played a little extract, in which-- one of the LGBT activists at this Open Society Foundation supported meeting said, "Well, you know, some of the-- some of the-- some of the LGBT activists, who are also members of the sports-- the national teams, are thinking of walking hand-in-hand, same-sex, hand-in-hand at the opening ceremony." And at this, Vitaly Minanov exploded. You know, we-- so we heard this. We heard this-- the audio of this. And this was-- a man named Constantine, who-- who runs the-- the Russian LGBT sports nek-- network. We heard him say this.

And then we went straight to Vitaly Minanov who exploded on camera, and said, "If this happens, I'm not gonna let my children watch the Olympics on television." And-- there was one sensible person on the panel, in the studio. A celebrated, feminist writer named Maria Albatova (PH). And she shouted back at him, "Throw your TV away. Let your (LAUGHTER) children remain completely ignorant about the world." And-- and-- and I thought that in that moment, were-- was encapsulated, the terms of this, sort of, global, culture wars that are currently being fought-- on the terrain of LGBT rights.

On one hand, you've got Albatova, the cos-- the cosmopolitan intellectual, who's-- embraced the inevitable process of globalization. Who understands that people watch television, you know, and that we-- because of the digital age, there are no boundaries. But on the other hand, and it-- it's very important to understand where he comes from. You have Minanov, who's the-- the fearful provincial, who's trying to protect his children from the consequences of this process of globalization.

And I-- I-- and I thought we-- we had that acted out in-- in that little moment. So that's my one little snippet that I want to throw out there. My next, little snippet happened immediately after Yoweri Museveni-- signed the Ugandan hom-- anti-homosexuality bill into law, in January. And I'm assuming you all know about that-- that-- that legislation. I don't need to tell you about it.

So he said something really interesting, Museveni, when he signed it. And-- and-- and I'm not sure if we heard him well enough. He said, "There's now an attempt at social imperialism, to impose social values. We're sorry to see that you," and by you, he meant the west, because he was speaking to western journalists. "We're sorry to see that you live the way you live. But we keep quiet about it."

And why I think that's significant is because it's-- okay-- no. Before I tell you why I think that's significant-- so the BBC went to the U.S. Ambassador, Scott DeLisi, to get his comment from this. And-- and Scott DeLisi responded. And here's what Scott DeLisi said, "Keeping mothers alive, helping people with AIDS, dealing with food security, that's all about our values as Americans. And if that's cultural imperialism, or social imperialism, then I'm a social imperialist."

And-- and I think that-- there-- there're two things in that dialogue that-- that I want to bring out. The first is the-- what Museveni is saying, which is very different from what Robert Mugabe said, when he first introduced this idea of homosexuality as something un-African, in response to the LGBT movement, or the gay movement, as it was then, in Zimbabwe over a decade ago.

He said, "Homosexuality is un-African." And in fact, that's what the Nigerians are saying, too. That's what Senator David Mark, in Nigeria says. But Museveni is-- is not saying homosexuality is un-African. He's saying talking about it is un-African, saying, "We do this differently here. We have it, we've always had it." And Museveni actually is-- has-- has often said, "I know there's homosexuality in our cultures."

But what's different is this nos-- notion of publicity. What's different is this notion of turning it into an identity, rather than something you do on the side. And we may (UNINTEL) for it, if you wanna do it on the side. But what's different is this idea that we're gonna-- that you turn it into an identity, and you can paint f-- rights around it. Making a noise about it is what's different. And you know what, he's right. He's absolutely right, Musevni.

You-- you can't fault him on that argument. But then let's listen to what-- what-- Scott-- how Scott DeLisi responds. You know, claiming that he's a social imperialist because he's putting out (?) values that are American values, which we would all agree are good values, right? You know, food security, helping people with AIDS, et cetera. But there's-- there-- if-- if-- in-- in the tone, I mean, it's a kind of-- he speaks with a tin ear, Scott DeLisi.

Because there's something in his tone, which is so paternalistic. And-- and which-- is only gonna inflame a counter-reaction. Because precisely of the way it leaves African leaders feeling dis-empowered. And I think this is really important to understand, when one understands the kind of homophobia that-- that-- that's-- that's sparking-- on the African continent, at the moment.

Which is as if-- in-- in many ways, as with Meninov (PH), it's-- it's-- it's a fearful reaction to globalization. But it's also the reaction of leaders of failed states, who have nothing to offer their people. Because of globalization, and because of their own kleptocratic history, (NOISE) except for values. You know, there's one index on which an African leader can lead, and that's the-- the index of values.

And-- and the more dis-empowered the African-- African elites feel, by Americans who come in to help people, you know, with-- who have AIDS, to keep mothers alive, with food security, the more these leaders are going to counter-react by saying, you know, "We're guys, too. We have values." You know, they're gonna need to puff up their chest. And-- and therefore, a closed circle, kind of becomes a snowball that rolls down the hill. And that's extremely dis-empowering for queer people, themselves on the continent, because of the way this dialogue (COUGH) perpetuates itself.

So that's my second snippet. My third sip-- snippet, is-- is-- when it's not a dialogue, it-- it-- it's-- but two things that were said by the Senegalese president, Macky Sall--

one was said by the pres-- Senegalese president, Macky Sall. And the other was said by-- a really brilliant, Ukrainian LGBT activist, one of the leaders of the Ukrainian movement-- a lawyer named Olga Shevchenko.

And-- they're talking in different places, I think, about the same thing, but from different perspectives. So Macky Sall, who is one of Africa's most-- well, I don't know. It's changing. He came into power as one of Africa's more progressive leaders, and one of Africa's more democratic states, Senegal. And-- but was very clear, as you remember, when he was, you know, up against Barack Obama, and asked about decriminalization of homosexuality, that he was not going there.

And he was asked recently by *Die Zeit*, the German newspaper, about his position on homosexuality. And this is what he said. He said, "In Africa, we have our way of life. Some you may see as bad, some good. We have polygamy, for example, in some areas. A man may have several wives. This is a lifestyle. This is a social phenomenon. Can Africans demand Europeans that they also allow polygamy? This is our culture, not yours."

That's (UNINTEL PHRASE) we've heard that a million times. Right? That's not new. What he says next is integrity. "Maybe that will change. It takes time." So *Die Zeit* asked for clarification, and says, "You mean it's a matter of time before the same-sex partnerships in Africa will be allowed?" And Macky Sall responds, "That's possible. You have the same-sex partnerships in Europe-- also, only since yesterday. And you ask it today, from Africans? This is all happening too fast. We live in a world that is slowly changing."

Le-- so forgive that-- this is-- this was in French, translated into German, and then translated into English. (LAUGHTER) Which is why it sounds like my Yiddish grandmother. But-- (LAUGHTER) but you hear what he's saying. Okay. Now listen to Olga Shevchenko. This is what Olga said to me, when I met her at an ILGA conference in 2012.

And-- and also remember that Olga's working in an environment where the-- where the global culture was really odd being instrumentalized around LGBT stuff. Where there's signs that say, "Euro equals homo." And where there was a billboard campaign sponsored-- by Russian proxy, that showed two stick figures of boys together, holding hand, and two stick figures of girls together, holding hands, with a slogan that said, "If you join the European Union, you will have same-sex marriage." Right? This is-- that's the Ukraine.

But this is what Olga said to me. Olga said-- okay-- so bear in-- remember what Macky Sall said to *Die Zeit*. "Things change, but we need to slowly," right? Slowly, slowly. Give us time. "What you want us to do today has taken you a century." Listen to what Olga said. Olga said, "The problem we face is that Ukrainian society is not ready for LGBT rights."

Now this is the lead, Ukrainian activist saying this. "But Ukrainian LGBT--" then-- this is now-- I'm back in Olga's words. "But Ukrainian LGBT's themselves-- they cannot be restrained anymore. They go online. They watch TV. They travel. They

see how things can be. Why should they not have similar freedoms? Why should they be forced to live in hiding? The world is moving so fast, and events are overtaking us in Ukraine. We have no choice, as activists, but to try to catch up."

So Macky Sall, and Olga Shevchenko are describing the same phenomenon, but from different perspectives. Macky Sall is saying, "Hey you westerners. Hey, you (THROAT CLEAR) Open Society Foundation. Hey, you Barack Obama, you're making us go too fast.

And Olga said, "Well, you know, actually the people that are making us go fast are the people themselves." And-- and that's really what my work is about. My work is about-- looking at groups of young people, in six different countries now. Even though, I've traveled in a lot more, as-- thanks to-- thanks to you guys. And young people, in six different countries, and how they are trying to negotiate their way in this global dialogue.

And how they're trying-- how they're shuttling between-- a kind of global sense of citizenship they have, sexual citizenship, gender-identity citizenship, that they're getting online. Or they're getting from international movement, that they're getting from the AIDS m-- from the AIDS movement, in many ways, in-- in-- in south Asia, and in-- and in Africa. And how they're trying to reconcile that with this, kind of, offline, analogue reality on the ground.

You know, where things have changed. And-- and-- and they're fascinating, as a generation, in that way. And-- and-- and-- and I'm seeing that-- all over, the way they're driving the change. And-- and-- and so-- the way I want to conclude, is because I mentioned to you that I'm just back from Ann Arbor, where I've been studying the natives, as well. (LAUGHTER) And-- and-- and what I'm looking at in the United States is the trans explosion.

And the way suddenly, there's a generation of young people who are stepping across the binary, or stepping off the change of binary as never before. And what I'm hearing, and what I'm understanding-- after having spoken to young people, themselves, but also to professionals who work in this field, and-- and lay mental health, and medical professionals. Because I'm-- I'm looking at-- at the phenomenon that early transition to.

And you all might have some-- some ideas for this as well. I know that-- that there's s-- some people in this room who identity as trans. Is that this is led, this ha-- in a way, it's kind of weirdly, it seems to me, and I'm thinking this aloud. It really feel like the AIDS movement, in some ways. And that it's being led by people themselves, because of the information they're getting online.

So in other words, this-- this-- this-- this-- this hormone-blocking medication, Lupron, which-- which pre-pubescent kids can go onto to delay puberty, before they start taking cross-hormone medication, has been available, and been around for ages. And was used-- to treat other conditions. And then was sort of studies-- and-- and-- and-- and pioneered in-- in the (THROAT CLEAR) Netherlands.

And-- and it be-- and-- and doctors became interested in the idea because they had

more and more patients who were presented. And were saying, you know, "I-- my-- my child is trans, and has the right to be trans. And-- and I'm not going to stand for reparative therapy, the way previous generations did." And-- and so the movement seems to be coming from parents, and young people themselves. And-- and certainly in the kind of-- the throwing away the gender binary that-- that's happening. And-- and-- and it's-- it's fascinating to me.

And I-- and I don't mean in any way to-- belittle the-- the queer movement, or the-- or the-- or the anti-binarist movement by saying (THROAT CLEAR) "they is the new gay." (LAUGHTER) What I mean by that is-- is that-- (THROAT CLEAR) one of the young people I went to meet-- I-- I-- I've been interviewing in Ann Arbor, their name was Sean. They're 17. They come-- they're-- they're-- they're a faculty brat. The kids are, you know, a philosopher, and a medic at U of M.

They came home, and they said, "Mum, dad, I'm gay." And their parents said, "Wonderful, honey. This is what we fought for. (LAUGHTER) We're so happy. Like, we're, like, we-- we're having h-- even higher status in-- in our Unitarian church congregations. (LAUGHTER) It's perfect. It's perfect." Like, where's Sean's room for self-expression. And-- and the cut-- the way that self-expression, and-- and movement, you know, whether it's, like, the '60s, with-- whether it was the '60s, you know, generation, or rebellion, or-- or-- or the generation or rebellion of my era-- how do you do that, in that sort of environment?

And-- and so people like Sean have pushed the boundaries, and come back and said, "My partner is a trans-woman, and I-- and we are both to be identified as they." And their parents are freaking out. And-- and-- I'm-- I'm not saying this is empty rebellion. I'm saying this is-- this is fascinating progress. It's the way movements begin.

And sure they c-- there are-- so-- side note, this expression in Ann Arbor that I've never heard before, which is trans-trender. Which trans-trender means you're kinda trans because it's trendy, (LAUGHTER) as a kid. And it's similar to-- w-- in my-- in my (THROAT CLEAR) day, it was LBG, lesbian before graduation. (LAUGHTER) Or-- or-- or SMUG-- smith undergrad-- s-- smith undergraduate lesbian. I forget how it went.

But-- but this idea that y-- that you kind of-- for political, or social reasons, you join a movement, and then you step off once you need to, kind of become an adult, and get a job, and blah, blah, blah. (THROAT CLEAR) And, I mean, it's great. B-- that-- that-- even there's that experience transgender is really in-- trans-trender is really interesting to me.

Because it creates the space for people who actually are trans, or where do need to step off the binary, or who weren't-- wouldn't have been able-- in-- in another era, to step off the binary. And-- and for-- so anyway, I-- just-- it-- this is all fresh in my head, and you're the first people I'm talking to about it. (LAUGHTER) So forgive me for rambling. I should probably stop there, and-- and we should talk.

MICHAEL HEFLIN:

Thanks, Mark. And I think you made a lot of-- of really interesting points. I mean, on-- I just wanna reflect on a couple, and then maybe to open it up (MIC NOISE) for conversation. But, you know, I think one of the things that you've identified (NOISE) is, you know and again, I think it's both a strength, and-- and also one of the challenges-- with globalization, and access to the internet, is-- it's very hard to contain the conversation.

So, you know, our support for LGBTI rights work globally-- you know, for the most part, focuses on supporting LGBTI organizations that are emerging to advocate for the rights of their constituencies in their-- in their different countries, and-- and cultural contexts. And one of the-- it-- you know, one of the things that they tell us is that they often will have conversations among themselves about how they stage the conversation in their particular country context, or cultural context.

So-- I'm thinking back about activists that we worked with in Kenya, and saying, you know, "We are very clear that we don't wanna talk about same-sex marriage," for example. We know that that's the issue that will draw out the opposition in the strongest way. And so what we wanna focus on is violence, and talk about state and non-state actor violence.

I mean, that's something people in getting experience, and so we can relate to the broader human rights movement. You know, it's something that-- connects us to-- to the Barder Society, and-- and concerns that people generally have. We wanna talk about access to essential services. You know, the things like that. But, you know, the next day, there could be an internet article about a Kenyan immigrant in the U.K. who gets married to, you know, someone in the-- a same-sex couple, in the U.K. One of them's a Kenyan immigrant. And it's all over the press in Kenya. So how do they-- how do they stage the conversation, you know, in that kind of global context.

You know, and again, I think it-- it is a real dilemma, because on the one hand, I mean, I think activists-- in the global south, and sub-Saharan Africa benefit-- and they would argue that they argue from being connected to this global network. That there's-- they're able to leverage, you know, access resources-- when something terrible happens, they're able to mobilize international campaigning, sometimes helpful, sometimes not helpful.

But they're able to access that in-- and-- and, you know, the fact that we're all connected in the way that are, enables that to happen. But it also makes it very hard for them to-- (BACKGROUND VOICE) to s-- to-- to-- to do anything to-- to kind of stage their conversation. And I think it's-- and it could be a good thing on many levels.

I mean, I think about the struggles-- in the western context, the European context, and U.S. context, the way the set of letters continued to evolve. (LAUGHTER) And yeah. And maybe, you know, in other places, the fact that you're not-- that they're-- their needs to merely begin to have a conversation around gender identity, and not

just sexual orientation is a benefit.

In the sense that they're not-- you know-- but it also makes it more complicated. And-- and creates a situation where beginning to engage with the Barder Society, especially when the Barder Society really, you know, isn't even at, kind of point A-- in understanding the issues. It becomes very, very complicated very quickly. And I think that-- yeah. And that's-- that's a challenge for the organizations that we work with.

MARK GEVISSER:

Yeah. I mean, listen-- to-- (COUGH) riffs off that, rather than direct answer to that. Firstly, let's just-- let's just not take either Macky Sall, or Yoweri Mus-- Museveni at their words, right? I mean-- so Museveni we keep quiet about it. And that's the difference between us and you.

But really-- the-- the one case that's been prosecuted now are-- are people who we-- who's privacy was invaded in their own homes. (BACKGROUND VOICE) So that's bullshit. I mean, he's-- he's playing that game. But nonetheless, clamping down on people's privacy anyway.

And-- and-- and in terms of Macky Sall saying, you know, "You-- you-- you want us to do today, what you've taken a century to (THROAT CLEAR) do." No one in Senegal's asking for marriage, for LGBT marriage. I mean, the-- the-- the-- the act in-- I mean, they are setting up this boogeyman. Right?

The act in Nigeria is called the Same-Sex Prohibition Marriage Act. You won't find anybody even on s-- you know, even-- even in-- in-- in Nigeria-- even-- it's different-- a little bit different in Kenya, and-- and in Malawi, which I'll talk about in a minute. But no one in Nigeria has even provoked things by holding a public, same-sex marriage.

I mean, that-- that happened in Malawi, and caused huge social crisis there. And-- and-- (THROAT CLEAR) in-- in a smaller scale, it happened in-- in-- in Kenya. But it-- that hasn't happened in Nigeria. And yet, this act is called the Anti-Same-Sex Marriage Act. So it's very easy for-- for these-- these cultural essentialists who are looking for scapegoats, or-- or ways to show that-- ways to get supports, and to show that they have power, or in-- in a Nigerian context, that, you know, they're as tough as the Muslims are, or whatever, to-- to kind of use same-sex marriage as a boogeyman.

When it's not on the agenda at all. What's on the agenda is, as Michael said, security. So-- that's my one-- that's my one-- observation. My second observation is-- is that-- (NOISE) that it's-- what's just happened in India, shows the power of, let's say SOGI rather than Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity, rather than the kind of LGBT alphabet, and rather than leading with sexuality.

Because in India, the-- the Supreme Court-- throughout legislation, and-- well, no--

sorry, throughout a ru-- a ruling-- that decriminalized homosexuality. But-- but has just given an extraordinarily progressive ruling on the rights of transgender people. And-- there's really interesting, troubling research-- from West Africa. And I'm seeing a little bit of it in south Asia, too. But south Asia's different in that I don't know it as well.

Around how-- gender, non-conforming identities, which have always been part of West African societies. And I'm thinking specifically about the Godegan (PH) in Senegal. And-- but there-- there are equivalents-- in Toga (PH), that I had some research about, in Ghana. How those identities have totally gone underground since the gay rights thing has come up in society.

Because the space that was made for gender non-conforming people, or people who we might call trans, has kind of become scary now that they've been identified with the sexuality rights, in those (UNINTEL). And I-- I saw that in a really interesting way-- beginning in a really interesting way, in the Philippines, too. And I spoke about this. How many here were at my last talk. Only two. So-- so forgive me for those-- (LAUGHTER) if I repeat myself. But I spoke about Bakla in-- in the Philippines, and how-- th-- this really interesting thing is happening in Philippines.

That-- that I found fascinating. It's happening a little bit in India, as well. Where you've got this category called Bakla. And-- and Bakla basically means, like, a sexual bottom, as opposed to a top. And-- but it's come to mean any-- non-conforming on sexuality, or gender man. So I am Bakla, even though I can present-- what you-- you might disagree. But I think I can present as male pretty effectively. I'm Bakla.

But a person who-- has had top surgery, and presents as a woman, is also Bakla. We're all Bakla. It's the gender continuum. It's precisely the gender continuum where the-- the gender web, or the gender spectrum that-- that Americans are fighting for here, like, how great you think. Problem is that if you are on the more female side of the Bakla spectrum, there's very little you can do. You can be a beauty queen or a hairdresser. And, you know, you'll be loved as hairdresser.

And, you know, you'll have a good life as a hairdresser. But you-- you're not gonna become a doctor, or a university professor, or-- or-- or run for Congress. So there's now a transgender movement-- a western transgender movement. They are "Ts" in the LGBTI who are part of the global transgender movement, mainly transwomen, but some transmen, too. And the-- one of them actually led an-- led-- an LGBT party in the last election campaign. Her name is Bems Benedito.

And her point is, "I'm gonna show you I can go to Congress, even though I'm trans. But in doing that, I need to tell all you Bakla that you have false consciousness. You really need to embrace that you are women. And stop thinking of yourselves in this, kind of third gender swamp. Right? Own your womanhood, and go for it, girl." And there's this really interesting tension between the transmovement and Bakla people.

And-- I'm not gonna weigh-- weigh-- weigh down on one side or the other. But-- but I-- this is a very roundabout way of saying to you, (THROAT CLEAR) Michael, that-- we need to take on hard-gender identity plays in other parts of the world, and

incorporate it into the way we think about these struggles.

MICHAEL HEFLIN:

So I wanna open it up. I mean, I have many other questions (LAUGH) I can ask. But-- (LAUGHTER) we-- we can open it up for-- (BACKGROUND VOICE) why don't you start.

KITO:

Hi. I'm Kito (PH). I've been working here, on and off, for the last 13 years, and am currently consulting as the curator the permanent collection of photography in the building. And I'm trans identified, and, like, holding it down for the in-between. I u-- I use "they" pronouns outside of here, for the most part-- and am sort of part of, I guess, this wave of gender non-conformity.

And I'm-- there's-- there's a lot, like, I have a whole list of things that we can talk about here, or elsewhere. But I guess starting with that. Something that I've been trying to work out in my head, is as we break down the gender binary, all of the ways that it plays out, like, language movements. You know, it's not just about-- the-- you know, there's passport rights, and sort of, state recognition of-- of alternate gender identities, or third gender identity, or, (THROAT CLEAR) you know, that-- that in-between.

When you start thinking about it as a spectrum, and you stop thinking about male and female, and really, like, open up to that, it-- it's-- the Bakla thing is really-- it's interesting. But-- so things, like, legal recognition, and then language rights. But then am also interested in, like, that cultural shift also. Which I-- you know, and I'm curious how you've seen it playing out in different places.

I think that your story about the Ukraine was really interesting. Because I think that the development of online identity, which is where transpeople find the most community, especially outside of limited, urban hubs. Like, what we have here in Brooklyn, is-- is very different from the Ukraine. And that-- that gap between how people are able to understand themselves, and find community online. Versus what it's actually like out in the world.

You know, and the language shift, and the cultural shift, to me, are-- are, you know, the legal rights is-- is really important, because it's that state recognition piece. But, like, how do we as a movement, or how do we as funders of a movement, (NOISE) or-- you-- I-- you know, just-- how do we start addressing that-- the other shifts that need to happen in order to make it acceptable?

MARK GEVISSER:

So I'm so glad you asked that question, because in fact, in my long riff through the Bakla, I didn't get to the sec-- my second response to Michael's observation about the-- the difficulties of-- of-- of-- of-- of doing this work in environments where-- where you cannot contain the debate.

The-- I think as funders (THROAT CLEAR) and grantmakers, there needs to be so much more attention-- so media, and to social media. And to empowering-- act-- your-- your-- your grantees, or the beneficiaries of grantees to-- your-- your grants to engage in this.

And in-- so-- in-- in-- in-- in working and understanding the media sphere, and in working with and understanding the media sphere, and in working with-- media practitioners, as well-- which is more challenging now, than it was when I did media trainings for gay organizations in South Africa 20 years ago.

Because, you know, everyone is a journalist now. Everyone blogs now. (BACKGROUND VOICE) But still, it's really interesting to see the way, in Malawi, for example, which is-- okay-- let-- a very, very quick, little case-study of Malawi. A country of four million people. Nothing's really-- nothing happens there, at all, except for tobacco-- (LAUGHTER) growing.

And-- and-- and-- a young transwoman-- who's one of my primary subjects, and who is now a refugee in Cape Town-- watching satellite TV what-- from South Africa, which is all over the continent, sees that men can marry in South Africa. Black men can marry-- doesn't actually think of herself as a man. But thinks, "Hey," you know, "They did it there. Let's do it here." So holds a public engagement ceremony. The shit hits the fan. She and her partner get sentenced to 14 years in jail. She goes-- and she has to go-- she-- she's eventually pardoned.

For a lot of reasons, you know, Madonna gets on the band wagon. Ban Ki-moon gets on the band wagon. But the main reason is is that the Americans say, "You've got a," through some congressional fund, "You've got a huge infrastructure grant from us-- there's some governance issues we're holding back on giving this to you." So the president is forced into-- is forced into pardoning these two people.

The guy gets arrested shortly afterwards for stealing a cell phone, and is back in jail. But Tiwanga (PH) herself, who is the person who started the-- who started this-- gets-- gets asylum in South Africa, and has a very tough life there in Cape Town, very, very, tough life. At the same time, a movement is sparked. There-- a social crisis in-- in Malawi, and the movement is sparked. And-- and a really smart group of human rights activists (UNINTEL PHRASE).

Supported by you guys, and beginning changing things. And one of them now has a column in the newspaper that caused all the shit to begin with. And progressive imams hold press conferences about tolerance. And, I mean, it's a co-- it's an important narrative. Because a couple of lives got wrecked. But it is a counter-narrative to the narrative that I've been spinning, about how, you know, you know,

you've got-- the-- the-- the-- the-- the-- if-- if you don't tread gently, there's gonna be-- the some sort of social crisis that's gonna make life more difficult for people.

It's a counter-narrative to the narrative that Africans, themselves take to-- the United Nations, where they say, "We don't want a special (UNINTEL). Because this is going to make life more difficult for us." No Malawi is-- you know, there's one newspaper. There's four million people. It's not Nigeria. It's a lot easier to control public discourse in-- in Malawi than in Nigeria, or than in Uganda, or Kenya. But it-- but it's an-- it's an interesting story.

MICHAEL HEFLIN:

So just maybe one more bit of information, or background on the case. It's-- it's also for me, a very interesting case-- Tiwanga, (NOISE) the-- the transwoman who is in-- South Africa-- who-- she and her partner, Stephen. They had been together for a very long time, in their community, and had been acc-- you know, there was a certain level of acceptance.

I mean, d-- people didn't talk about it. But it also-- is-- it's a clear case of-- sort of that-- that gray line. And-- and, you know, this access to-- international, or global communication. And so Tiwanga decides that both, because of the experience that they've had within their own community of generally being--

BOTH:

Accepted.

MICHAEL HEFLIN:

You know, or-- or-- allowed to-- to live together as a couple-- you know, gave-- she felt that they had-- they were at a place where they could do this engagement ceremony, and there wouldn't be any kind of significant consequences. But they crossed this gray line that they didn't know that they were crossing. And once they crossed it, then, you know, the whole society really, you know, clamped down on them (UNINTEL PHRASE)--

MARK GEVISSER:

Yeah. That's very helpful to remember the-- that it's even-- I mean, for my-- from my recent interview with Tiwanga, it's even more-- interesting. Because Tiwanga told me, and I-- I don't know whether-- I know that-- that-- that Ian (UNINTEL) has spent a lot of time with Tiwanga. (BACKGROUND VOICE) So I'm not sure whether Tiwanga has shared this with-- with-- with any of you guys.

But what she told me was-- is that she wasn't-- she-- she didn't set out to tell me that she was accepted in her-- (THROAT CLEAR) in her village. She comes from a very rural village-- near Blantyre (PH). But in just talking about her childhood, she told me about how three tim-- how three times, a village court was convened because she had been insulted for being gender non-conforming. And it-- as-- as-- as-- as a young woman, or as a girl.

And at each of these times, the-- the-- she was-- she-- the-- the person who had insulted her was fined, like, two chickens. And then-- but then the first time-- so that-- so even though-- and I don't know whether she's creating a mythology-- because, you know, people tell their stories. But she says the first time she really thought of her identity as problematic was when she moved to town, and started being insulted on the street.

You-- you know, long before this engagement thing happened. But then she kind of made her space. And she had these two relationships. One before Stephen, and-- and-- and then she crossed the line. So there's-- there's an interesting progression from the-- from the village to global, (LAUGHTER) kind of-- to the global village, which was, you know, not so good for Tiwanga.

JONATHAN BIRCHALL:

So I'm-- I'm Jonathan Birchall. I work with communications in the justice initiative. So-- there was a fall-off question about Malawi. What do you think-- enabled them to-- to achieve that change in Malawi, with the narrative. I mean, what were the points that-- that-- that had that affect?

MARK GEVISSER:

Do you-- do you have some thoughts?

JONATHAN BIRCHALL:

I do--

(OVERTALK)

MARK GEVISSER:

I think-- several things. I think-- smart activists who already had roots in these-- in civil society, and in-- in-- in the legal reform-- in the general reform movement, who-- who now came out. I mean, they did-- they've-- they've never actually come out as gay, themselves. But-- but-- but came to embrace this issue, and-- and fight for this issue.

I think that had a lot to do with it. And I think-- I think their engagement with-- with the global movement, you know, a lot-- a lot through OSF and through Amnesty. And-- gay-- helped them with strategies. And-- random stuff, like, the president died, and in-- and in-- and-- and his deputy came in. And-- she was more pragmatic. So those are three reasons I would give. I don't know what you would add to that.

MICHAEL HEFLIN:

And I would agree with those reasons. I guess-- I would say a couple of things. I mean, I think in terms of dealing with the immediate crisis of Stephen and Tiwanga's arrest, certainly international leverage was-- was really important. But I think, you know, the decision by activists on the ground to invest in some, I think, in very important strategies.

I mean, one was to engage with the Malawi Council of Churches. And-- which, you know, had (BACKGROUND VOICE) earlier, you know, done very homophobic things. And made, you know, very terrible statements. But to do directly engage with Council of Churches to-- to-- you know, to create-- a bit of a counter-narrative around religion (MIC NOISE) and LGBT right-- in Malawi was-- was really important.

You know, it was with the recognition that, you know, without judging it one way or another that in Malawi, most people are religious, and-- and-- what religious leaders say has profound impact on public attitudes, on what policy makers feel that they can do.

So getting some religious voices to talk about tolerance, to talk about-- and I think also framing the issue as not just an LGBT rights issue, but-- (MIC NOISE) you know, one of the ways that they've been discussing. And-- and I don't wanna take this too far. 'Cause I'm not convinced Malawi's, yet, a success. (LAUGHTER)

(OVERTALK)

MICHAEL HEFLIN:

Relative. It's all relative--

MARK GEVISSER:

Yeah. You're right. Of course, you're right--

MICHAEL HEFLIN:

You know, talking about the issues being one of the ways that-- Joyce Banda, president, and her administration have talked about the issue is, you know, that

there's a set of human-- of laws that violate the human rights of-- of Malawians. And so the statute that criminalizes homosexual conduct between consenting adults is packaged within this set of laws that are seen as violating the human rights of-- of the people of Malawi.

So it's-- you know, (THROAT CLEAR) so I think that's also been helpful, in terms of connecting the issue to a broader set of issues that people are concerned about. But I also think it's-- it is not a success story yet. (MIC NOISE) I mean, when Joyce Banda talked about this issue, specifically-- you know, in one of her early speeches, after inauguration, she got a lot of push-back in the country.

And when the justice minister said he wasn't gonna enforce the criminal statue any longer, he also got a lot of push-back. So I think-- and if you-- you know, again, and I don't know that there's been a recent poll in public attitudes in Malawi. There's been a discussion in Malawi. And-- and that's been different than maybe other-- (UNINTEL PHRASE)--

MARK GEVISSER:

That-- there's progress rather than success. There's public-- there's rational discussion. Yeah. I mean, listen. The two-- sort of point number one, I-- I think, and-- and-- and-- Michael is on this, I know. And in terms of-- of-- of-- of playing a role, and changing this, particularly in-- in a hostile, African environment is-- (THROAT CLEAR) is work with media, and-- and-- and-- and-- and enable Africans to tell their own stories in media, so that it's clear that it's their stories and not the western story.

But secondly, activate allies around inter-sexual issues. Which was the success in South Africa. You know? And-- and-- and-- which has been-- a signaled failure-- elsewhere in Africa, with the possible exception of Malawi. Certainly in Nigeria, it's been a dismal failure. And in Uganda, it's patchy. But-- but-- Michael used this metaphor, which-- which I use and-- a lot when I'm talking to people now, so thank you for it, Michael--

MICHAEL HEFLIN:

So I'm gonna see it in your book. (LAUGHTER)

(OFF-MIC CONVERSATION)

MARK GEVISSER:

But it's a metaphor about how-- there's a bunch of people (NOISE) on the front line-- front-line defenders, who are working to bash down the wall. And-- (THROAT CLEAR) they're not necessarily the best place to bash down the wall. Because what

often happens is-- is that they-- they-- they bash themselves against that wall.

And in reaction, the wall just gets built higher, and higher, and higher. And eventually, they reel, and collapse, and burnout. And what you've got left is a high wall. I mean, I don't know if that's exactly your metaphor, or whether I'm-- I'm kind of modifying it.

But it's, like, who else can be involved in bringing down that wall? And-- I mean, it's very, very tricky for funders. Because those front-line activists really need your support. And if you start-- I mean, I know every-- when I was in Nigeria, every time I spoke to LGBT people about allies, I saw, like, terror.

You know? (LAUGH) There's-- and-- and it's partly because it's-- it's become something of an industry, particularly through the AIDS epidemic. But it's also because a lot of the people who have put their heads above the parapet don't really have other way-- other ways now of earning an income, in their home countries.

They're out there. So if-- if-- if funding for them kind of, in any way, recedes, they're lost. And I mean, this is the-- well, not quite, but it's a little bit of the Tiwanga story. So-- it's-- it's-- it's a difficult environment. But I'm really, really struck by-- in both Uganda, where I have not yet visited. But I've spoken to a lot people there. I'm on my way there. And in Nigeria, how the allies feel estranged by the way it becomes an LGBT thing.

And they don't feel there's room for them. And they don't-- and they-- they don't feel like they are-- they feel like it's a co-- they-- they're involved in a competition for resources. And there was that explicitly to it by allies in both contexts. (BACKGROUND VOICE)

FEMALE VOICE #2:

I know you spoke about this at your last talk, (MIC NOISE) but I'm wondering if you could expand a little bit on your time in the middle east. And also, these imams that are promoting tolerance, do you see that happening in the Arab states, or this only South Africa that we're talking about?

MARK GEVISSER:

(UNINTEL) That was-- that was in Malawi, the imams promoted tolerance. And-- there's-- there's some really interesting new initiatives. Like, there's-- there's a new-- brand new initiative that-- that-- that you guys are-- are funding called the Global Interfaith Network.

And-- and it's got-- a small Muslim component. But it's-- with-- with-- one exception, one or two exceptions. The-- the-- the Muslim leaders of this-- of this movement don't live in the middle east. But one of the initiatives that they're involved in-- and I don't know whether you're involved in it, is-- is-- is the

establishment of-- of-- of a kind of shelter for-- for people from-- from the Muslim who've had to flee, in South Africa.

And it's being led by-- a South African imam named Muhsin Hendricks. And-- and it's really interesting to see the-- the possibilities of, kind of, dia-- Diaspark (PH) Global South Centers. Rather than, kind of, Amsterdam. You know, where-- there-- there-- there's several imams, gay imams. As-- as-- as-- as sort of new homes for this movement. I think that's really interesting.

I mean, obviously the middle east is-- is-- is-- is challenging in-- in-- in-- in different ways. And-- the place I've been working in the middle-- I-- I-- I visited Palestine, and Egypt. And-- and-- the place I'm-- I'm working in a ongoing way is Egypt. And-- yeah. I mean, a couple of things to say, which is-- is that-- that-- that the Muslim brotherhood-- you know, instrumentalized homophobia by claiming that any vote for the secular parties, or for the liberal parties would be a vote for gay marriage.

And that-- that-- that certainly helped Morsi come to power. And-- there have been-- in-- I don't know if you've read about this. There've been several, kind of crackdowns on-- I mean, nothing-- nothing approaching what happened around the queen boats (PH) in-- you know-- over a decade ago. But there've been crapd-- crackdowns on groups of gay men-- (THROAT CLEAR) or alleged gay men in Cairo, in the last few months since-- the military seized power again.

And using-- using the-- using fujur, which is the-- the Egyptian-- debauchery-- debauchery law. And-- it's not clear what's going on there. But it's-- it-- it's-- it's not clear whether this is-- whether this is-- to what extent this is coordinated. That-- but it-- it does seem to be something along the lines of the military government saying to devout Muslims, you know, "We-- we're with you. You need to be with us."

I mean, there's-- there's-- there's that kind of dynamic. Yeah. I mean, I'm-- I'm not sure-- oh, the-- the other thing I would say is about gender identity-- so-- this is just-- and again, forgive me for riffing rather than answering questions directly. (LAUGHTER) It's not-- I'm not a direct-- (BACKGROUND VOICE) (UNINTEL) my style. So let me introduce you to Akram (PH). Akram is one of my main characters. Akram is a 21-year-old Cairian (PH) who I met in-- one of the street-side cafes, which is-- there're two of them in the downtown Borsa (PH) district, run by older lesbians.

And these are-- this is the kind of queer space in Cairo. After the coup-- the space evaporated a bit. But-- but it's coming back in little ways, too. So Akram is trans. Identifies as trans, but presents on the street as-- male. And Akram worked, for a while, as-- as-- as a sex worker. But is actually, now training to be a croupier. And works in one of the casinos. And this is for, hopefully a ticket out.

So Akram-- comes from-- a relatively middle-class family. And-- and has ac-- private access online. And online, started-- experimenting with her transidentity. And found a lot of information online. And found an online network. But also discovered that she could be-- Akram is a male name. Akram-- but she could be Culsum (PH) online, instead of playing with being Culsum. And her roommate started playing with being her transcharacter.

And developed this whole, online persona, and became liberated by this online persona. And kind of lost a sense of boundary between online and offline. And started taking street hormones. You know, and the network that got her to the street hormones was a network that she got online. And online, she met a Saudi transperson who was passing through Cairo, who connected her to a place where she could get street hormones. And she started taking street hormones.

And hadn't really planned for the fact that she started looking trans on the street. I mean, she hadn't thought about that. And that is in-- certainly in Egyptian society-- and I-- I don't know too much about other middle eastern societies. Absolutely a no, no. There's no space for that. There's no public space for that. And I met a couple of transpeople-- transwomen in Egypt, who do not leave their homes.

Because they transitioned late, so they're not-- they-- they-- they-- they won't pass on the street. Yeah. So-- so Akram got into travel. And had to retreat. And luckily, Akram has people in her life who-- who helped her figure it out. And so she went back into the closet, and is now waiting until she can get a job somewhere else to a transition. But of course, what this means is the transition is gonna be later, and-- you know, (LAUGH) less-successful-- and all that stuff. But what's she gonna do?

MICHAEL HEFLIN:

I guess, (NOISE) (UNINTEL) just one quick point on Islam. And-- and it's-- you know, I think it's-- it's-- it's still-- you know, at a very early stage of trying to figure out how to identify allies. And-- and it's-- it's, you know, it is very challenging. I mean, the group that-- Mark referenced in South Africa is an OSF grantee that-- has been pulling together, and international convening-- every year for the past several years.

And I would say it's really at a stage where primarily the participants in that, convening themselves, identify as gay, lesbian-- a few as trans-- and they're-- they're having a dialogue within them-- among themselves. And it's really sort of reconciling their spirituality with their sexuality. And that's, you know, it's a very important, kind of foundation. And then they're beginning to, in quiet ways, engage-- their religious traditions in the places where they are.

But they have to do it in very, very careful ways. 'Cause there's a lot at risk. And so that-- it-- it is, you know, we-- we are involved in trying to seed that conversation, but it is a very difficult conversation. I mean, there's a great organization, PENLA (PH) one of the organizations, again that we support in-- in-- eastern Kenya.

It's working in Mombassa, and they've done some incredible work working with imams there, who again, won't speak out publicly in support of, you know, anything like LGBT rights. But they recognize that there is, within their midst, people who-- have same-sex relationships.

And they're-- you know, they're engaging in a constructive way around how to-- to provide services and support to those communities. Often with a public, kind of

framework. But they're-- so there-- there are-- there are things that are happening, you know, but it's-- but it is a very, kind of (THROAT CLEAR) early stage, I think (UNINTEL PHRASE)--

MARK GEVISSER:

Thanks. You've reminded me a really interesting, under the radar, initiative in northern Nigeria, which has kind of being spared by-- by Zaraben Gumbo (PH) in the Heartland Alliance, which is-- (MAKES NOISE) working with the-- the imams in Northern Nigeria.

They-- they don't-- they're not called imams there. They're called shakes (PH). And-- in-- in northern Nigeria, there's-- there's-- there's a trans-- traditions trans category called yondowda (PH). And-- which is very much part of northern Nigerian society.

And-- and yondowda is kind of connected with-- spirituality in some ways. And there's-- there's very interesting, under the radar work happening with imams in northern Nigeria to-- to think about pre-colonial transidenities, trans-- and-- and gender non-conforming. And-- and alternative sex-- sexuality identities, and how space could be made for this. That's worth following up with. I was interested in what I heard there.

CHRIS THOMAS:

Yeah. Sorry. Just to transfer the question. I'm Chris Thomas from legal. And I was just wondering if you could elaborate more on this transtrender. I haven't-- (LAUGHTER) haven't heard of that. And I'm-- and I'm really curious if it has caused similar backlash, to kind of, like, the bi-phobia that has arisen-- due to some people claiming it to be trendy, or at some point or another--

MARK GEVISSER:

I just don't know. I'm so at the beginning of this research that I just don't know. I was just struck by it. And I was struck by-- I mean, I was struck by-- I was struck by how in some communities-- queer is becoming gloriously a place for social misfits, or in this community, let me say-- in this particular community.

How queer is becoming a place for social m-- misfits. And who knows why a 14-year-old. Like, some 14-year-olds know why (UNINTEL PHRASE)-- okay so there's Sean and there's Leo. Like, so Sean arrived one of these social misfits. Looked like a girl, acted like a girl. But just didn't fit in. And found her queer, gender, non-conforming identity through the group.

Leo-- is a trans-guy who has been trans since he had his first thoughts. And who told his parents he was-- he was a guy from the moment he could talk. And who also

found his way in this group, which is called Riot Youth. And-- also found his way in this group-- but-- and has his own story, which I won't go into-- too much detail. But who left the group because he's a guy. And he's a straight guy.

And all this kind of touchy-feely, lovey-dovey, parensexual, polysexual-- (LAUGH) where everything under the spectrum just wasn't working for him. He's a guy and he wants a girl. And-- he's, I mean, he's happy for-- people who are not that way. And-- but-- but it just wasn't his scene anymore. And it's sort of interesting to sort of see their two subjectivities.

And Sean's-- and I don't think Sean is a transtrender. I mean, I think Sean is beyond transtrending. I-- you know, I don't know who in that group is transtrenders, but-- but the organizers, kind of-- without using the word transtrender highlighted the phenomenon to me. Of these kids who might move on. But nonetheless, are finding-- are-- are having much easier-- oh, let me tell you another-- (NOISE) transtrender story.

So-- so the great-- the-- really-- and read her book, everybody. Her name's Diane Ehrensaft. And she wrote a book. She's the leading-- therapist who deals with trans-kids. She's, of course, from the Bay Area. (LAUGHTER) And-- she's got a book called-- she's called a book called *Gender Born, Gender Made*. And I interviewed her a few days ago. And I left the interview thinking, like, maybe I'm trans. Or if I'm not trans, like, I've got to become a trans therapist. (LAUGHTER)

It's like-- but-- but she said-- we were talking. I mean, cause-- cause I said to her, like, "I'm," you know, "If I were now would I have become trans, or-- or-- gender," you know, because I was a bit of a lady bo-- lady boy-girl, girly-boy boy. And-- and-- I said-- and I said, "I'm little bit uncomfortable with that." Like, "I'm-- I'm worried that I-- my parents would've brought me to you," And you would've said, "Oh," like, "Step off the binary."

You know, or o-- "Oh you like to play with dolls. So you're a girl. Let's make you a girl." And she said, "The fact that you think that means that you're a guy and you've always been a guy." (LAUGHTER) Right? So they-- but-- but-- because I meet so many adults who say, "Oh my God, I wish you'd been around." Yeah. But-- so just to finish this thought-- about-- about the transtrending.

So I said, "What about you?" And she said, "You know, I was a late bloomer. So I didn't really have an adolescence as a girl. And grew up in the '50s, and it was Marilyn Monroe. And boy was it difficult. I was miserable. I thought-- I thought-- I-- there was something wrong with me. Plus, I like math, and I liked sports. I thought I'm a split personality. I must be schizophrenic. And I only really came into myself when I went to University of Michigan, in the '60s and discovered the women's movement.:

And I said, "So what-- do you ever think about what if you were a kid now, as a late bloomer?" She said, "You know, I would've probably taken on the identity of gender, queer, or trans." And I said, "What do you think about that?" Like-- (LAUGHTER) you know, look at you. You're a woman. You've got kids. You have a very happy-- I,

like, I got nervous.

And she was, like, "It would have been a lifesaver. It would have been a lifesaver. And who knows what have happened-- what would've happened at the other end of it. I probably would have been a transtrender, who knows. But I would've thought differently about gender when I came out the other side with my boobs, and, you know, but-- oh my God, if only that category was around when I was a kid." And I was-- I just-- how amazing. Yeah.

(OFF-MIC CONVERSATION)

FEMALE VOICE #2:

I kind of want to speak to that stuff. 'Cause I think it's really interesting. And as a person who came into my transience, as in my early thirties, like, and it being a real revelations. Sort of, like, "Oh. I didn't even know this was possible. This is really cool. Like, this is-- it's something that's happening." And I think, like, you probably wouldn't have gotten your boobs on because making physical changes g-- is, like, a real-- it, you know, it's-- it's-- it's a heady process. And you go through a lot of thought before you actually make those kinds of changes--

MARK GEVISSER:

Sure. Sure. It's very intentional--

FEMALE VOICE #2:

It's very intentional. But it is interesting. And-- it-- there-- it's interesting to have watched, like, this-- to be watching this trans explosion that's happening right now, because it-- it's turning into a thing. I think that, like, I don't know.

I've been thinking a lot in trying to have conversations with people who lived through that first wave of gay coming out in the '70s, and-- and the early '80s, and then, like, particularly the living of that identity-- what-- through the AIDS crisis of the '80s. And-- and what was that like for people who were always gay behind closed doors, to suddenly be able to be public with that identity.

And was there talk at that time of, like, "Oh. Now everyone's gonna be gay." Because it's sort of-- beca-- but-- you know, I'm curious to see, like, how long the explosion lasts. Like, I predict it's, like, f-- maybe for the next decade or so. And then it'll sort of, like, shake down into the culture. And we'll sort of see how it all rests.

But right now, I think that, like, presenting it as option for people as such a liberate-- liberational-- liberatory move. And-- I don't know-- and I think that the people who are-- who are, you know, kind of becoming the face of it as a movement, there's almost an intentional strategy. At least, I know are-- amongst my friends, who are

culture makers, and who-- who tore the country, kind of doing this kind of stuff, or make films. To make it look really fabulous. So that it is sort of, you know, towards-- towards liberation.

Towards-- you know, not like, "We need to fight for our rights," but also, like, "Dude. (LAUGH) This is available. This is awesome. Like, this exists." But then it gets back into that shift in, like, online identity versus-- versus where the cul-- the greater culture is at. But also to speak to the-- the online piece that your were saying, like, it's--

MARK GEVISSER:

Akram.

FEMALE VOICE #2:

It-- Akram-- big thing. You know, a lot of the trans women I know have alternate identities, and second life, and are living out their trans-- you know, can-- in fictional universes where they can be whoever they wanna be. And that shift is also-- it's-- it's--

MARK GEVISSER:

In such interesting ways, I mean, l-- you know, Charlotte's a trans-- Sean's partner, who is an 18-year-old trans woman. And presents as a woman. Ha-- has had top surgery. So she's got her boobs. And like long before she came out, she was involved in these-- in these-- oh, God. It's another world.

These games online where you develop an avatar, but you also-- you're-- you're with-- you become a team against werewolves, I mean, God knows what. (LAUGHTER) But, like, you know, she was a woman in this team, and she made really, really close friends as a woman. And her avatar was female. And then she remained in touch with some of the people in this team, and came out to them as-- as trans later.

And-- and-- and she just-- she modeled so much of it coming out, through these online communities. It's just breathtaking. And-- and-- and Leo do-- did it through fan fiction, in really interesting ways. I-- it's-- wow. I mean, the possibilities with these kids.

MICHAEL HEFLIN:

It's also interesting from a kind of movement-building perspective because-- I mean, it makes-- again-- it-- it creates-- I-- I mean, it's always been complicated. And so it's just-- you know, reconciling that, or living up to the-- the complexities. But, you

know, when we think about supporting movements, and emerging movements, in sub-Saharan Africa.

And there was a huge-- rift within the coalition of African lesbians, you know, a few years ago when some of the leadership began to identify as trans mit (PH). And it was a huge battle internally. And-- it-- as to whether they belonged in the organization, what their role should be in the organization.

And-- again, this is not unique. It's happened in other spaces, as well. But we're seeing a similar-- we're-- we've been one of the initial funders to fund-- in something in China called the La-La Alliance, which is a national network of lesbian leadership.

And now some of those leaders are identifying as trans. And so it's created this huge kind of complex debate within the organization about, you know, should they form their own organization? Are they really part of our (LAUGH) organization anymore? Can they hold a leadership role? It's very-- you know, it's very interesting, from them-- that perspective (UNINTEL)--

MARK GEVISSER:

Yeah. I-- listen-- I mean, there's-- there's-- well, I mean, there's battles at Smith and Barnett (PH) at the moment, (BACKGROUND VOICE) around this issue-- around these issues. You know, what is a women's college? (THROAT CLEAR) And in South Africa, I mean, I watched-- I've watched this in three friends of mine who are-- who I've known for ages who are-- who are black les-- who were black lesbians-- black, working class lesbians, leaders of the movement. And-- but who lived through this ph-- phenomenon of (NOISE) (UNINTEL PHRASE).

With gender, non-conforming lesbians were, and are-- at huge risk-- because of backlash. Because of-- because of-- because they'd claimed space that a previous generation hadn't claimed. And-- and these three have transitioned-- the-- the three I'm thinking of, and then are men. And one is, in fact-- (NOISE) the recently appointed executive director of the South African Trans Organization, (NOISE) Gender Dynamics, which is I think also one of your grantees.

And-- and-- and-- and the one who I'm closest to is a traditional Yelan (PH) named Nkunzi Nkabinde, who wrote an extraordinary book about being-- *My Life As a Lesbian Sangoma*. And in fact, she's in-- I've wrote a book that's just started-- and there's a lot of her in the book. So buy the book. It's called *Lost and Found in Johannesburg*.

(OFF-MIC CONVERSATION)

MARK GEVISSER:

Oh no-- there's a really interesting talk later that I wanna tell you about. Because I think it's gonna be fascinating. But-- anyway, Nkunzi transitioned. And Nkunzi's

very frank about his transition, you know. A lot of it has to do with-- and Nkunzi has a wife, and a kid. And they live in a house in Soweto.

And-- Nkunzi always been very male-identified, but, you know, with big breasts, and-- but-- but in-- in the-- in their church-- they were married in their church, which is a pretty traditional church. And Nkunzi was-- before Nkunzi transitioned physically, Nkunzi would-- Nkunzi was understand by her community-- understood by her community anywhere as a man.

Even though he looked like a man, and like a woman. And he-- the cohering that he did was about affirming his true self. But also, he's very clear about it-- about making life easier for him and his family, in the context in which they lived. And he doesn't shy away from saying that.

I mean-- he-- he would-- he would-- he would be very angry if you suggested that that was the primary reason for his transition-- the primary reason for his transition is that the technology is available. And-- (LAUGH) you know, the movement-- there's a movement about this. And he found out about it. And he wished he would've found out about it earlier.

It wouldn't have been possible earlier, but he's very clear about the kind of social context, which enables this. You know, and-- and-- at-- that creates, you know, like for people who remain in the trenches as-- as gender, non-conforming. I mean, this happens in the United States as well, when you look at-- (BACKGROUND VOICE)-- so-- so Leo has two moms.

Who went to adopt him from China. And intentionally went and found a girl-child in China. As an active-- partly an act of lesbian solidarity. Because girl children are-- discarded in China. And one of the moms cannot handle it, his transition. And has blocked-- (NOISE) his transition. The moms have separated. And, you know, she's a professor of LGBT studies. And down with the gender stuff.

But-- well, maybe not down with the gender stuff. (LAUGHTER) Down-- down with the-- down with the sexuality stuff, let's say. That she's got very clear-- she's older. Old-fashioned ideas about woman. She was very excited when-- when Leo, who was then Lily, came back and said, I'm a lesbian. We're losing people so should we-- (LAUGHTER) wrap up?

MICHAEL HEFLIN:

Well, what about Washington? Did-- do you guys have any comments, or thoughts? (LAUGHTER)

FEMALE VOICE #2:

What's this event that you wanted to tell us about--

MARK GEVISSER:

Oh, right. So Anthony Appia (PH), who is-- a Ghan-- oh I didn't bring my bag down with me-- a Ghanaian-- half-Ghanaian philosopher-- gay man-- married gay man, professor of philosophy at NYU. I wrote a really, really, important book called *Cosmopolitanism*. About how-- which is really about-- all the stuff we've been talking about.

Universal-- universal value-- how-- how-- how-- universal values while respecting, you know, the local, and the regional, and the whatever. And he and I are gonna be in conversation tonight, at Clag's (PH). Sort of a lesbian and gay studies-- (NOISE) (UNINTEL) Graduate Center at 6:30. And-- I think it's gonna be-- it's meant to be around my book *Lost and Found in Johannesburg*, which is a memoiry book, which deals with race, and sexuality, and my hometown.

But it-- because we're gonna talk-- we're gonna have this conversation. But with somebody who is just fascinating. Because he's not a gay activist at all. But he's a theorist around identity in such an interesting way. And I've never heard him publicly speak about, or write about this stuff. So I actually think it's newsworthy that he's gonna talk about it. And I'm-- I'm really happy he's agreed to do it.

(OFF-MIC CONVERSATION)

MICHAEL HEFLIN:

So I guess I'll just say one thing to kind of conclude from-- from my perspective. And I think the work that m-- Mark has been doing is-- incredibly useful for us, in thinking about our-- our grant-making strategies globally, around this set of issues.

And-- I-- I think-- you know, one of the things that it reinforces for me, is-- you know, our investment in supporting people to create a local narrative, and-- and the need for that. I mean, there is a lot of other important work that we've supported, and others have supported that-- you-- on-- un-- both, complicates things, and also, I think is important.

I mean, the-- the work to support governments like the-- or to get governments like the U.S. to-- integrate concern for LGBT rights issues into their foreign policy, and other governments. But that, you know, there-- there are complications with that. But it-- I-- I think it's important.

The work at the UN level-- in terms of having a discussion around these issues at the UN. But I think, you know, what we're seeing is increasingly, the limitations of-- of-- of those strategies. Again, not to say that they're-- they're not important, to continue to support on some level. It's important to figure out how to make those strategies more sophisticated, so they're actually really complimenting what local activists are doing on the ground.

And I think us as a funder, who funds at those different levels has a particularly important role to play-- in-- in making sure the right kinds of discussions are

happening at-- at all the different levels of the-- international level, regional, and national level. But I think fundamentally, you know, the-- the connection of the-- the focus of our resources on supporting people to have a local narrative.

And-- and I think-- engaging with activists so that they understand-- and-- and I think-- in many cases they do understand. But they-- theirs also can be a tendency, especially when you're working in a very hostile, social, and political context, to wanna think the answer is outside that context. So (LAUGH) whether it's going to the UN Human Rights Council, and complaining as part of the UPR (PH) process about the way you're being treated domestic-- I mean, I joke now.

Sometimes we could send 500 Africans to the-- to Geneva (LAUGH) in the-- in the next year, and it wouldn't be a damn bit of good-- of difference on the ground. But the-- you know, really investing in people to have the conversation locally. And also their understanding that they have to-- and it's maybe-- it's, you know, it's a kind of an evolution.

I mean, I do think what Mark said is also true, that-- (THROAT CLEAR) when we engage with LGBT groups, or LGBTI groups, they often complain about the lack of support from the broader civil society. But when you talk to other human rights organizations, they often say that they don't know-- that those groups don't-- they don't know how to talk to them. They don't know-- they don't approach them. And so I think-- there's also kind of pushing groups to come, you know, in each other's direction. But the need to create a local narrative that's not an exclusive.

And sometimes this is need. I mean, sometimes people get into a s-- a place, where it's the first time they've been in a safe space, where they can be with other people who-- also identify as gay, lesbian, trans-- queer, you know, however-- however they de-- define themselves. And-- and so there's-- there's a danger for that space, also, to become very insular.

And-- and especially, again, if you're working (LAUGH) in-- in a very difficult, and hostile climate. But ultimately, nothing will replace their having that narrative with their-- the-- the rest of the-- the people in their country, with their-- with their-- with their-- with-- with the other parts of their society. And-- so anyhow. It-- it kind of reinforces for us, the-- the idea of this, kind of, local narrative, is really essential to the work.

And we do see it play out in so many different places. I mean, I think of-- your reflections on eastern Europe. I mean, I think one of the-- again, things are-- are-- are both a strength, and-- then-- then a kind of weakness. But when I think about-- the-- the progress that has been made in some eastern European countries through the EU Essetion (PH) Process. I mean, that was an important moment to take advantage of.

So when a country's becoming part of the EU, to leverage that. To make changes in the human rights, legal framework, to-- at least in-- a small way, include recognition of sexual orientation and gender identity. But it doesn't-- but-- in-- in places where there has been some progress like that, they still have to go back and do the hard

work, which is to actually convince-- their fellow country people that this is something-- that is part of their society, in the same way that it is part of-- of every society.

I think even South Africa. I mean, I think-- when I think about South Africa-- and, you know, I'm cautious about saying this, as someone from outside the country, but I still think even in South Africa, when-- again, relatively speaking, there has been a huge amount of progress, and the legal framework is among the most progressive in the world on this issue. But there's almost a need for a public relations, or public campaign around making rights real, you know-- (UNINTEL PHRASE)--

MARK GEVISSER:

So you know the government has just launched that.

MICHAEL HEFLIN:

Did they? Yeah--

MARK GEVISSER:

Yeah. Like, (LAUGH) three days ago.

(OVERTALK)

MARK GEVISSER:

With-- with a PSA-- with a really good PSA. And kind of amazing they did it just before the elections. They-- they've decided that this isn't gonna--

MICHAEL HEFLIN:

Go away--

MARK GEVISSER:

Well, no-- well-- that it's not gonna damage them--

MICHAEL HEFLIN:

Damage them. Yeah, yeah.

MARK GEVISSER:

In-- in-- in, you know, yeah.

(OFF-MIC CONVERSATION)

* * *END OF TRANSCRIPT* * *