

Nasreen Mohamed  
Narrator

Andrea Jenkins  
Interviewer

The Transgender Oral History Project  
Tretter Collection in GLBT Studies  
University of Minnesota

July 23, 2015



The Transgender Oral History Project of the Upper Midwest will empower individuals to tell their story, while providing students, historians, and the public with a more rich foundation of primary source material about the transgender community. The project is part of the Tretter Collection at the University of Minnesota. The archive provides a record of GLBT thought, knowledge and culture for current and future generations and is available to students, researchers and members of the public.

The Transgender Oral History Project will collect up to 400 hours of oral histories involving 200 to 300 individuals over the next three years. Major efforts will be the recruitment of individuals of all ages and experiences, and documenting the work of The Program in Human Sexuality. This project will be led by

Andrea Jenkins, poet, writer, and trans-activist. Andrea brings years of experience working in government, non-profits and LGBT organizations. If you are interested in being involved in this exciting project, please contact Andrea.

Andrea Jenkins  
[jenki120@umn.edu](mailto:jenki120@umn.edu)  
(612) 625-4379

1     Andrea Jenkins             -AJ  
2     Nasreen Mohamed         -NM  
3  
4     AJ:        So, hello.  
5     NM:       Hello.  
6     AJ:       My name is Andrea Jenkins and I am the oral historian for the Transgender Oral History Project  
7               at the University of Minnesota Tretter Collection. Today is June 14, 2016, and I'm actually on  
8               campus at the University of Minnesota in Blegen Hall. I have the honor and pleasure today to  
9               speak with Nasreen Mohamed. Nasreen, how are you doing?  
10    NM:       I'm doing good, I'm doing good.  
11    AJ:       Yeah.  
12    NM:       Yeah.  
13    AJ:       Hey, listen. How about you spell your name for our transcriptionist and state your gender  
14               identity, your gender assigned at birth, and what pronouns do you use? Just so you know, this is  
15               the question that I ask everybody who participates in this project. And to even be more . . . we  
16               all have a gender identity, every person on the planet, we all have an assigned gender at birth,  
17               and so . . .  
18    NM:       All right, thank you, Andrea, for sort of inviting me to be part of the project. So, my name is  
19               Nasreen Mohamed, N-a-s-r-e-e-n, and last name, Mohamed, M-o-h-a-m-e-d. My gender  
20               assigned at birth is female. How I identify is really on a spectrum. What I think about myself is  
21               I'm gender non-conforming and really more towards male and I feel, in terms of gender  
22               pronouns, I have felt more comfortable sort of being referred by my name, first and foremost.  
23    AJ:       Nasreen.  
24    NM:       As much as possible and so lately, sometimes that's uncomfortable for folks, but I answer to  
25               both him and her. I kind of sort of feel uncomfortable with she and so, essentially, I really . . . I  
26               am really in-between. So, that's kind of my, sort of, story around always being sort of in-  
27               between – in-between worlds.  
28    AJ:       That's fascinating. So, uncomfortable with her but not quite comfortable with he and him  
29               either, right?  
30    NM:       Yeah, probably more comfortable with he and him more so. So, I think kind of leaning towards .  
31               ..  
32    AJ:       How do you feel about the pronoun they? That's been a thing I've been noticing lately.  
33    NM:       I know, and I've started using they. Again, it just kind of doesn't feel like it fits me.  
34    AJ:       All right, OK.  
35    NM:       It's sort of in-between, but leaning. So, I don't want to complicate things but that's how it's  
36               been and living in complexity has defined my life.

- 1 AJ: Wow, that's fascinating. I hope we can get at some of that this afternoon as we continue to  
2 chat. Nasreen, tell me what's the earliest memory you have? What's the first thing you  
3 remember in life? It doesn't have to have anything to do with gender at all.
- 4 NM: Wow, that's a really good question. Oh, my God. I don't have a really poignant earliest  
5 memory, I have a collage of memories.
- 6 AJ: OK, that's fine – yeah. You're an artist so having a collage of memories makes sense.
- 7 NM: Yeah, a collage of memories. The one thing that I most . . . so, I grew up in Tanzania, East Africa,  
8 and I'm South Asian descent. So, one of my most beautiful memories is swimming in the ocean  
9 early, early in the morning. And, it was when the tide was coming in and the ocean was  
10 relatively calm so there were no big waves, it was just . . . and you could see the bottom of the  
11 ocean, it was the Indian Ocean, because I grew up on the coast of Dar es Salaam. So, that's  
12 been my sort of . . . maybe I could say a grounding memory.
- 13 AJ: Really, wow. Some people never make it to an ocean in their entire lives and that's one of your  
14 earliest memories.
- 15 NM: Yes, yes. I find the ocean sort of this place of complete freedom. When I go to the ocean I  
16 spend most of my time in the water.
- 17 AJ: In the water – so you're not a beach . . . you don't lay on the beach.
- 18 NM: No. I really . . .
- 19 AJ: You're in the water.
- 20 NM: I am in the water.
- 21 AJ: Have you ever been back to the Indian Ocean?
- 22 NM: Yes, actually three . . . yeah, about three years ago.
- 23 AJ: Is that right?
- 24 NM: Yeah. Yeah, so I came sort of after . . . around 22 years of being in the U.S., I went back. It was a  
25 phenomenal trip in a lot of ways. Yeah, and it was really kind of sort of a homecoming for me  
26 after being gone.
- 27 AJ: So, did you grow up in Tanzania?
- 28 NM: Yes. So, I grew up in Tanzania until I was 19. I grew up in a community, a South Asian  
29 community. It was a very specific religious community called Ismaili Muslims.
- 30 AJ: Say that again, please.
- 31 NM: Ismaili Muslims.
- 32 AJ: Ismaili? Can you spell that? I know my transcriptionist is going to ask me how to spell it and I'm  
33 going to be like, "I don't know!"

- 1 NM: I-s-m-a-i-l-i. So, I usually define . . . it's part of the Shia sect. I usually define Ismaili Muslims as  
2 the Unitarians of the Muslim world.
- 3 AJ: Really? That's a great description.
- 4 NM: So, we are more westernized, we don't have any dress codes and sometimes we're not regarded  
5 as real Muslims.
- 6 AJ: Oh, boy. Oh, wow – OK.
- 7 NM: So, we have a leader called the Aga Khan, so people can do research on him. So, that's the . . .
- 8 AJ: The Aga Khan?
- 9 NM: Yeah, the Aga Khan.
- 10 AJ: A . . .
- 11 NM: A-g-a K-h-a-n.
- 12 AJ: Aga Khan, just like it sounds.
- 13 NM: Yeah, yeah.
- 14 AJ: Is that equivalent to an imam?
- 15 NM: Yes, equivalent to an imam. The doctrine is that he is the living descendent of the Prophet  
16 Muhammad.
- 17 AJ: Oh, OK.
- 18 NM: So, in a lot of ways that's why the tension with the other Muslim sects is – that no, that's not  
19 true. So, there is a lot of tensions. He also was instrumental in kind of influencing gender and  
20 education roles, the role of education for women. So, there are some things that were really  
21 good – he's a Capitalist.
- 22 AJ: Is that . . . so, is the religious culture supportive of women's education?
- 23 NM: Yes, yes. And, he has a foundation that is set up to give scholarships to people throughout the  
24 word. He has done some really amazing projects. The whole community kind of contributes,  
25 but yeah – there have been projects all over.
- 26 AJ: So, the Aga Khan is a real person?
- 27 NM: Yes, it is a real person.
- 28 AJ: He can't live forever.
- 29 NM: He has a next of kin who then . . .
- 30 AJ: Becomes the Aga Khan.
- 31 NM: Yeah, becomes the next imam. I think his oldest is a daughter, so we'll have to see what  
32 happens.

- 1 AJ: What happens when he passes on. So, I'm just curious, were you bullied at all for having being a  
2 part of sort of an off-shoot faith?
- 3 NM: No, I think . . . no, I don't remember being bullied. Growing up Tanzania, it's sort of a  
4 multicultural . . . in a lot of ways, there are Hindus, Muslims, and indigenous Africans, indigenous  
5 Tanzanians. And so, I'm not painting a rosy picture . . . there were tensions, of course, there  
6 were always tensions.
- 7 AJ: Were there Christians?
- 8 NM: And Christians. We were colonized by the British – you know, they messed us all up.
- 9 AJ: Colonization is real.
- 10 NM: Yes. So, there was not really . . . I did not experience bullying in school.
- 11 AJ: Around any issues at all?
- 12 NM: Actually around . . . maybe on a level around my South Asian identity, like people made fun of  
13 me. My family was very strong around making sure that we went to government schools where  
14 it was predominantly indigenous Tanzanian students – so Black students. So, I was essentially  
15 the . . .
- 16 AJ: You were the minority.
- 17 NM: I was the minority, right. So, there was a little bit of that but I don't think it was ever to the  
18 point where I couldn't function or where that was a daily banter.
- 19 AJ: You stood out but it was not . . .
- 20 NM: It was not a big deal. I mean, if there was any stressor it was around the competition – the  
21 intense academic competition.
- 22 AJ: Really? Wow.
- 23 NM: Yeah, there was a lot of pressure to perform academically. And so, that was hard.
- 24 AJ: From your parents or from the teachers?
- 25 NM: Everyone.
- 26 AJ: From everybody – high expectations on you guys.
- 27 NM: High. And we had a rank, so you were ranked. So, it didn't matter – it's not about just getting  
28 A's, it's by how much. And, it's pretty public what your rank is in school.
- 29 AJ: Really? Yikes.
- 30 NM: And it could be out of 120 students, it could be . . . and so, I remember sort of really struggling a  
31 lot of times because the rank really . . . it was a stressor.
- 32 AJ: I can imagine.

- 1 NM: After many, many years looking at my report cards . . . so, I always thought I was not that great  
2 of a student, I looked at my report card and I was like, "I was an OK student." So, that's kind of a  
3 fun thing of what you would think of how you performed.
- 4 AJ: So, what was your gender identity like in grade school?
- 5 NM: You know, so I can tell you my earliest memory of growing up in my family was I identified as a  
6 boy – and the great thing about my mom, in particular, never corrected my gender pronouns.
- 7 AJ: So, like a tomboy or . . .?
- 8 NM: Yeah, but I personally believed I was a boy.
- 9 AJ: Right, OK. So, more than a tomboy – not like you just ran around and climbed trees.
- 10 NM: Yes. And, I mean, even though I sort of knew, the only time they would make me wear a dress  
11 was to go to the mosque and I would throw a fit.
- 12 AJ: Really? You hated it.
- 13 NM: I hated it. They would try their best to . . . and actually that happened towards the later part  
14 when I started maturing, then I couldn't really pass, but actually even in the mosque, I would go  
15 and sit with my brother, with the male side.
- 16 AJ: Really? And that's not necessarily acceptable, is it?
- 17 NM: Yeah, but I think I passed and people didn't know. Yeah. And so, one of the things, when  
18 thinking about the interview, my earliest memory was when I realized like, "Oh, my God." I was  
19 probably six or seven, and we were on this big, huge, extended family picnic and it was kind of a  
20 hike in this area, region, of Tanzania where I actually was born. And my two aunts . . . so, there  
21 was a whole gob of people walking, my two aunts actually pulled me back and I remember that  
22 distinctly. They were trying to take off my clothes and I fought them off. They were actually  
23 trying to figure out what my gender was.
- 24 AJ: Your aunts?
- 25 NM: Ye, and it was bizarre. I had to really fight them off.
- 26 AJ: Your mother's sisters or your . . .?
- 27 NM: These were aunts, almost like my mom's cousins – so they were like second cousins.
- 28 AJ: Right.
- 29 NM: A little bit removed.
- 30 AJ: So, they hadn't grown up with you or hadn't seen you from changing your diapers or that kind of  
31 stuff.
- 32 NM: Yeah, so it was really bizarre. I have never talked about that, that was my most painful . . .
- 33 AJ: But, they were confused – your family members.

- 1 NM: They were confused and they pulled me back in the sense that other people didn't notice. So, it  
2 was still done in private, like on this hike and on this path, but I never told anybody.
- 3 AJ: Wow.
- 4 NM: It felt bizarre.
- 5 AJ: Yeah, I can imagine. A) the confusion of just being . . .
- 6 NM: And the violation.
- 7 AJ: Right, of being pulled backed and then the violation, but then also my aunts don't know my  
8 gender – what does that mean? I don't know.
- 9 NM: So, I actually didn't really . . . and there were occasions where I would wear dresses but really,  
10 my gender identity was male.
- 11 AJ: Wow.
- 12 NM: Yeah, and I was comfortable with it. I think . . . and because of how we didn't do any education  
13 around periods, right, I think that was when . . . when I got my period, I didn't know what the  
14 hell was going on. I mean, that was the other piece of it – I had no idea. I thought I was dying  
15 until I told my mom and then she gave me this really shortened version of what that meant. She  
16 was like, "Now you're a woman and you've got to be careful with boys." I think that . . . I think  
17 that point was my devastation around my gender – I think that was painful beyond . . . it was like  
18 the turning point of feeling empowered and being in my body as free as possible, and then being  
19 told this other piece around . . . that was counter to my reality and my frame. But, I persisted in  
20 defying. I continued wearing . . . the only time where I didn't wear shorts or male clothing was  
21 when I went to school because we were required to wear a skirt.
- 22 AJ: Uniforms, OK.
- 23 NM: Yes – yeah. So, that was . . . and that kind of persisted throughout until towards my teenage  
24 years. That's another very personal part around my family was there was domestic violence and  
25 I was, essentially, kicked out of my house and went to live with another family.
- 26 AJ: Really?
- 27 NM: Yeah, and then that's where the conforming happened, the forced confirmation of having to  
28 participate, you know, who I was and so then it was . . . you know, because of the stresses. So, I  
29 had long hair and . . .
- 30 AJ: I'm having a hard time imagining that vision, Nasreen, but I imagine it absolutely did exist.
- 31 NM: Yeah, and then it continued until I sort of . . . until I came to the U.S. As time went on, I sort of  
32 came out and . . .
- 33 AJ: You came out as . . .?
- 34 NM: As lesbian.
- 35 AJ: OK.



- 1 NM: And so, that was another shift for me.
- 2 AJ: So, when you came out as lesbian, was there sort of a . . . I mean, did you have any kind of labels  
3 around that or any sort of identity like a femme or a butch lesbian or a stone butch lesbian or  
4 diesel dyke?
- 5 NM: I had long hair when I came out. I didn't identify, I was just me.
- 6 AJ: Right, exactly.
- 7 NM: But I kind of sort of started beginning to feel like I was not feeling comfortable in my body, the  
8 way I was presenting myself.
- 9 AJ: Really?
- 10 NM: Yeah, so it started shifting again and I decided, after a while, to just cut off my hair. I was . . .  
11 actually, even though I had long hair, I was still predominantly dressed like how I am dressed.
- 12 AJ: Really?
- 13 NM: Yeah, I don't remember wearing a dress during that time. Yeah, the only time, I think, probably  
14 my Indian outfit was probably the closest feminine thing that I . . .
- 15 AJ: Like a sari or . . .
- 16 NM: Not even a sari. It was a salwar kameez, which is pants kind of and a long . . .
- 17 AJ: Long tunic.
- 18 NM: Yeah, tunic.
- 19 AJ: So, how do you say that phrase again?
- 20 NM: Salwar, s-a-l-w-a-r and kameez is k-a-m-e-e-z.
- 21 AJ: Salwar kameez. So, you came out as a lesbian. What made you come to the United States?
- 22 NM: I was on a student visa. My brother used to live here, he sponsored me. He kind of knew how  
23 bad the situation at home was. So, South Asians in East Africa are always in a politically  
24 precarious position, they were always the middle people. And so, there is a history of . . . with  
25 Idi Amin in Uganda, he kicked out all the South Asians in the 1970s. I think that fear of being  
26 kicked out of your own country always persisted. So, there is a migration of South Asians in the  
27 1970s, 1980s, and continuing in 1990s and continuing until today, there's always this thing  
28 where people want to go to the west. Right, they want to live in the west. During election time,  
29 South Asians are scapegoated – a lot.
- 30 AJ: Right.
- 31 NM: You know, some of it is set up because of British colonial times. They were pitted against  
32 Africans in this way that created these divisions that still persist.
- 33 AJ: So, you were anxious to get to the west?

- 1 NM: Yes, anxious – and I was on an adventure. I mean, part of it was . . .
- 2 AJ: Did you come directly to Minnesota?
- 3 NM: Yes. I was . . . partly because I knew I wouldn't survive back home. I knew I was queer and I  
4 knew I wouldn't survive. If I wouldn't have been able to come here, I don't know what would  
5 have happened to me – in a lot of ways. I would have . . . I'm not sure.
- 6 AJ: Wow, well it's good you made it.
- 7 NM: Yes, yes.
- 8 AJ: So, you got here in Minnesota – sort of the liberal bastion of clearness.
- 9 NM: Yeah, the land of where are you from questions.
- 10 AJ: Right, exactly. Say more about that – do you get that question a lot?
- 11 NM: Yeah. I mean . . . yes, I think I still do. As much as I resisted, I still do. It's a question of not ever  
12 belonging fully in a place. So, you know, I think about home as being in-between worlds, even  
13 with my gender – my identity. I'm South Asian, but sort of never been to India. I'm Tanzanian,  
14 but never quite fully Tanzanian.
- 15 AJ: Right.
- 16 NM: So, it's always this in-between world of negotiating the space – which is both a gift and also  
17 sometimes a point of sort of figuring out community and belonging, this tension always exists  
18 for me.
- 19 AJ: Yeah, I'm fascinated right now.
- 20 NM: It's a point of grief and also a point . . . like a gift, being able to see things in complexity, in  
21 multiple frames, in different colors that you would not . . . and I don't mean color in terms of  
22 race, but it is really taking into the world . . .
- 23 AJ: A kaleidoscope or . . .
- 24 NM: Yes, kaleidoscope is probably the thing that I would say, but also a gift of empathy – a gift of  
25 being able to see . . . being able to really see myself and others more easily and less rooted in  
26 dogmatic ways of, "This is the right thing." So . . .
- 27 AJ: Wow. So, sort of geographically there is this sense of in-between-ness, but also related to your  
28 gender identity. And, even the geographic piece is at home, at "home" (I'm doing air quotes  
29 now), and here in the States, so it is . . . you've always had this sort of in-between existence,  
30 throughout your entire life. How do you process that, Nasreen? Does it make it hard for you to  
31 be in relationship with people?
- 32 NM: No, I mean, I think . . . I sometimes see myself as being able to, in a way, be part of community,  
33 but also be grounded. So, in terms of . . . like I really believe that it's important to be grounded  
34 in my identity and even if that identity is as complex as mine, right – even religion-wise, as  
35 Muslim . . .

- 1 AJ: Right, that's the other thing I was thinking about.
- 2 NM: So, it's like all over the place. It's like this borderline place and I am the borderlines of many  
3 things. You know, I think as I sort of grow older in age, I think it's becoming more and more  
4 apparent around how to build connection and community. So, people of color are my  
5 community, that's where I'm rooted politically. But also, I'm sort of kind of going back to my  
6 really core pieces of all of my communities – my African side, my South Asian side, and my  
7 Muslim side. Those are all three pieces and in terms of gender, I am who I am in all those  
8 spaces, maybe that's probably the consistent thing. Even if it doesn't make sense for people, it  
9 makes sense to me. So, I think in relation to community, and in relation to building connections,  
10 that's where I'm at. And being transparent. I can't claim blackness, but I am Tanzanian to the  
11 core.
- 12 AJ: Absolutely, you're an African.
- 13 NM: Yes, yes. But, I have to be cognizant of that too, and conscious. I claim all of it. So, I think it is  
14 about . . .
- 15 AJ: In many ways, you could be called an African American.
- 16 NM: Yeah, that's right . . . that's right, that's right. Yeah.
- 17 AJ: I'm just stating the obvious, but it's true.
- 18 NM: Yeah.
- 19 AJ: So, your gender appearance could be perceived by some folks as . . . I don't know, confusing.  
20 Has that created any challenges for you? Not only is your appearance, but your gender  
21 expression, your gender emotions that you emote out to people . . . it's very masculine. You  
22 give off a very masculine image. Has that created any challenges for you?
- 23 NM: I think . . . I mean . . .
- 24 AJ: Have you ever been kicked out of a bathroom?
- 25 NM: Mmmm, I've been given looks. I think I have . . . I've been given looks but I've never  
26 experienced, and maybe I'm oblivious – that could be. I mean, I think I've been given looks and I  
27 think it hasn't served me well professionally. I think there has been . . . you know, transphobia  
28 directed towards me in terms of moving up.
- 29 AJ: Really?
- 30 NM: I believe so. I think it's not just necessarily homophobia, I think it's particularly the way I appear  
31 and present. I think in that way. What's been, actually, really important is my extended family  
32 has actually been very accepting of me. So, I have extended family in Toronto because, as I  
33 talked about, this migration.
- 34 AJ: Right.
- 35 NM: And, I have extended family in Tanzania. I'm out to them and the same family I lived with as a  
36 teenager, there was a lot of conforming happening many years back, but also, they totally

- 1 accept me as who I am fully. And, in terms of kind of my queerness, my sexuality, I have not  
2 faced judgment or alienation from my family, which is a very different experience than a lot of  
3 people have had. So, I feel really lucky in a lot of ways. However, I can also say with a caveat, is  
4 that I don't exist on a day-to-day basis with my extended family and back home. I think if I were,  
5 right now, to go on an extended six-month visit back home, I think I would be experiencing . . . I  
6 would be exposed to it a little different experience.
- 7 AJ: Nasreen, as you know, we're sitting here today and it's a very painful day in American history.  
8 Over the weekend, in Orlando, Florida, 49 people were murdered, shot down; 53 more people  
9 injured by what some people are calling a Muslim extremist. Some people are suggesting that it  
10 may have been some sort of blatant homo . . .
- 11 NM: Internalized homophobia.
- 12 AJ: Yeah. Whatever the case is though, many, many of the people who were murdered were Black  
13 and brown, queer, LGBT-identified people. How are you processing that as a queer-identified  
14 sort of gender non-conforming Muslim person? What are some of your thoughts?
- 15 NM: Yeah, I mean, I think I was talking to you before the interview . . .
- 16 AJ: And, I know it's really hard to . . .
- 17 NM: Yeah, I think it's hard to encapsulate, the pain that I feel is deep. I think sometimes in a lot of  
18 ways we build a certain amount of self-protection in our minds, psychically, in order to really  
19 survive the world. So, you have to really create psychological head space in order to be able to  
20 not feel that you are a target continually, right.
- 21 AJ: Right.
- 22 NM: Even your previous question, when I said I was oblivious – I feel that I have to. It's not like I  
23 don't . . . I see injustices all around, but how do I take that in and how do I . . .
- 24 AJ: Personalize it or internalize it.
- 25 NM: Yeah, and sometimes it's harder to see for myself and realize that I am the target. I can be in  
26 protection of others, but when it comes down to it, I have to really face the fact that I am the  
27 target on multiple levels – and have been the target. You know, post-9/11 . . . the other thing  
28 that . . . I mean, this is pre-9/11 because of violence in my family and my dad cut off my tuition  
29 so I couldn't go to school anymore. And so, I had to violate my student visa and was  
30 undocumented for four years.
- 31 AJ: Oh, wow.
- 32 NM: So, for a portion of those four years, and I was lucky enough to be with someone who supported  
33 me, I cleaned houses for a living. And then 9/11 happened, and that just completely changed  
34 everything. There was a lot of anti-immigrant stuff happening during that period of time – prior  
35 to 9/11, so this is looking prior to 9/11. There was still a lot of hatred and actually, on a regular  
36 basis, I would be catching the bus and I would be told, continually, "Go back to where you came

- 1 from, you're taking our jobs." That was the predominant sort of narrative, as a person who was  
2 using public transportation at that time.
- 3 AJ: And this was pre-9/11.
- 4 NM: This was pre-9/11. So, I was always a target, an identifiable immigrant, right. And then 9/11  
5 happened, and I remember . . . I wrote this piece on Islamophobia, kind of sort of post-9/11 . . .  
6 my experience at 9/11 and now – they are similar, to a T, at times.
- 7 AJ: When you say the T, you mean the transgender community or what are you . . . ?
- 8 NM: I mean, like really very similar in terms of the experience.
- 9 AJ: OK, so to the T.
- 10 NM: To the T, sorry.
- 11 AJ: Yes.
- 12 NM: So, what was the question, I forgot. Sorry. Oh, about the intensity of Orlando.
- 13 AJ: Yeah, this moment. The fact that it was a Muslim man who did the shootings.
- 14 NM: I think part of this was . . . as I said, this kind of being in-between and figuring out, but my  
15 Muslim identity is both political and cultural. I think, for me – and my queerness, both of my  
16 identities are a source of my freedom.
- 17 AJ: Wow, that's a powerful statement.
- 18 NM: Yeah, and those fuel who I am and so I think with Orlando, I feel intense grief. I feel intense  
19 grief for the lives lost and there were brown people who were really experiencing this moment  
20 of freedom that we take for granted in that particular space. So, I think it's complex and I still  
21 haven't fully really got myself to a point of really absorbing the depth of what this means.
- 22 AJ: Yeah, completely understandable. You talk about being in all of these sort of in-between states  
23 and it sounds, in many ways, like you have come to a place of reconciliation, but I'm only  
24 speculating. Have you ever had any thoughts or do you think about in the future, potentially,  
25 transitioning to male?
- 26 NM: I mean, I've thought about it. I've thought about it. I've begun to kind of ask questions, because  
27 what I didn't want to do . . . for me, it was really important, there was a period of time when I  
28 remember distinctively when Leslie Feinburg visited the campus and . . .
- 29 AJ: Yeah, I introduced Leslie when they were here.
- 30 NM: That's right. It was a moment of affirmation and it was a moment of affirmation for me, as well.  
31 So, from that time until now, sort of on and off I have thought about it but I've never kind of  
32 quite figured out whether that's the right thing for me.
- 33 AJ: Sure.

- 1 NM: I think I live in complexity and I think I challenge people at times. I cause confusion and I think . .  
2 . I have never conformed to anything so even though, I think, in a lot of ways people on  
3 Facebook, because I still . . . you know, when my profile changes and it says, "He has changed,"  
4 people are like, "What gender pronouns . . .?" So, there is a cause of panic, but I want to do  
5 things that feel right to me. And, I also want to resist . . . I want to continue to wait, not wait  
6 before to ask but thinking about there is something coming up in terms of gender that we still  
7 don't know about.
- 8 AJ: Andrea is in the background fist pumping and going, "Yeah, yeah."
- 9 NM: Right, because this binary piece also kind of holds us back and we've just started talking about  
10 how there is multiplicity of genders.
- 11 AJ: Absolutely.
- 12 NM: And, so I am looking to see for myself what discoveries I make and what other people and what  
13 community makes in order to feel like, "OK," like not having to . . . one thing in the U.S., we are  
14 so tied to definitions and we relate to people via these definitions and that is incredibly limiting  
15 at times because we are always thinking about efficiency and short cuts, but relationships are  
16 not about efficiency and short cuts, they are about . . . they are about struggle, they are about  
17 the murkiness of being in connection with each other. And to persist through that murkiness,  
18 we have to understand each other, we have to be in conversation, we have to be in conflict. To  
19 deepen our relationships, you have to disagree otherwise you will never really truly love each  
20 other fully.
- 21 AJ: Oh, my goodness – wow, that was incredible. Listen, I mean, you asked me earlier should I -  
22 quote, meaning yourself, " . . . be a part of this project?" And, my response was, "Absolutely,  
23 because we are challenging, exploding, this concept of gender and binary." And this project has  
24 never been about trying to perpetuate a binary system. So, I'm thrilled that you're here, I'm  
25 thrilled that you're sharing. Talk to me about your love life – you identify as queer. Who do you  
26 date? Who are you pursuing? Are you in a relationship?
- 27 NM: I am single at the moment. I have dated some beautiful women.
- 28 AJ: OK.
- 29 NM: But single at the moment – yes, yes.
- 30 AJ: You have children in your life.
- 31 NM: Yes, I do – yes. I have two children, two adopted children, Black kids.
- 32 AJ: OK.
- 33 NM: And, so that's another place of . . .
- 34 AJ: That's a whole other state of in-between-ness.
- 35 NM: A state of in-between-ness, my parenthood. I have two kids, Larry and Lorraine.
- 36 AJ: Are they twins?

- 1 NM: No, they're a sibling group. I, and my co-parenting partner, adopted them through Ramsey  
2 County. We always wanted to adopt older kids and so when we adopted them they were five  
3 and nine, and now one is 18 and one is 15.
- 4 AJ: Wow.
- 5 NM: So, we are going through the teenage . . .
- 6 AJ: Did you guys just have a high school graduation or is there one coming up pretty soon?
- 7 NM: Yes, yes.
- 8 AJ: Good – good, good, good. So, they're on the path.
- 9 NM: They're on the path, they're on the path. They are both a joy and a lot of work.
- 10 AJ: Have you ever dated men?
- 11 NM: No, never. I mean, yeah . . . no, never.
- 12 AJ: Not even in grade school or high school?
- 13 NM: No.
- 14 AJ: Wow. OK. All right, so you're definitely pretty clear about who you want to sleep with then.
- 15 NM: Yes, but who knows.
- 16 AJ: No in-between-ness going on there.
- 17 NM: Yeah, who knows though.
- 18 AJ: You're open.
- 19 NM: Yeah, who knows. You never know, love happens, right?
- 20 AJ: Love happens, it is true. I've experienced love happening.
- 21 NM: Yeah, so you never know.
- 22 AJ: In places that I never thought it would. Oh, man, wow. What do you think the relationship is . . .  
23 I know that you don't necessarily identify as transgender, but I feel like, Nasreen . . . and you've  
24 alluded to this, and even stated it, that sometimes people put that label on you and you can  
25 control how you see yourself and how you present yourself, but you really can't control how  
26 other people see you. And so, with people putting that label on you, I would imagine that it has  
27 given you some sense of awareness and maybe, even potentially, some solidarity with the  
28 transgender community. And, even in our conversations, you have indicated as much.
- 29 NM: Yeah.
- 30 AJ: And so, I'm wondering what do you think the relationship is between the broader LGB  
31 community and the transgender community?
- 32 NM: What is the relationship?

- 1 AJ: Do you see the issues as being the same or . . . ?
- 2 NM: OK, so, I think, for me, I have never, in terms of being queer, I've never identified myself as  
3 fighting for marriage equality, which has been the predominant issue.
- 4 AJ: Right, the rallying cry.
- 5 NM: Because I don't believe in marriage, this notion of marriage.
- 6 AJ: OK.
- 7 NM: It's a patriarchal institution.
- 8 AJ: Absolutely.
- 9 NM: And, if people want to live together and have kids and have no sexual relationship, then they  
10 should be able to marry or commit to each other or whatever.
- 11 AJ: Right, exactly.
- 12 NM: And so, for me, I don't . . . and also, it's really . . . it's always this conforming to be mainstream,  
13 to be accepted. That's the piece I've always been . . . I've resisted, right. But, I think trans  
14 movement is really living in that intersectionality in a true and pure sense, right. The trans  
15 politics that I'm exposed to, I'm sure there's conservative elements . . .
- 16 AJ: There are.
- 17 NM: But, the trans politics I'm exposed to really require you to think and dig deeper around really  
18 looking at our agenda as being a human rights agenda. So, we are talking about . . . not like  
19 Obama's speech that you mentioned earlier, it's really talking about what is it . . . how can we  
20 envision a just society. And so, it's important to talk about Black Lives Matter, it's important to  
21 talk about the Dreamers, it's important to talk about all of these things, and it's important, also,  
22 to resist the institution of marriage – period.
- 23 AJ: Wow.
- 24 NM: Right?
- 25 AJ: Yes.
- 26 NM: And all of this . . . so, we can't really . . . for me, when I think about myself as being part of the  
27 queer community, I am really part of the queer people of color community that is grounded in  
28 social justice. That's the community I feel like I belong to and I don't want to be adopted into  
29 the larger community because that's the politic that really defines me and has influenced me.
- 30 AJ: Wow. You're exploding, you're just exploding this whole concept of gender and gender  
31 conformity and gender identity. Where do you see gender in the next 50 years?
- 32 NM: That's a deep question. I think I see it essentially, hopefully . . . I can't say it, but hopefully a  
33 non-issue. Hopefully, a non-issue, but 50 years feels kind of a short time for change.
- 34 AJ: Yeah, well lots of change in the queer community in the last 50 years.



- 1 NM: Yeah, yeah – that’s true. So, I think as . . . now, do I think that there . . . gender is a non-issue, no  
2 – I’ll take that back. No, we have to address issues around . . . I don’t know. I’m not sure about  
3 that. I just said hopeful, but I was thinking in a very narrow context for the queer community.
- 4 AJ: Yeah.
- 5 NM: I mean, in terms of gender equality, in terms of sexism . . .
- 6 AJ: Yes.
- 7 NM: That, I’m not sure about, but in terms of identity and acceptance, social acceptance, there might  
8 be more social acceptance but I don’t know whether we both have . . . and I’m thinking in the  
9 U.S. context, and when you broaden it to the world, I’m not sure about that in a global sense.  
10 But, I think anything is possible. I think in times when there is a spike of violence, which is  
11 happening – an intense spike of violence targeted at trans people, I think there is also sort of an  
12 awakening, unfortunately that it takes that to wake us up.
- 13 AJ: Open our eyes, yeah.
- 14 NM: Open up our eyes to these inequities, but I think we’re beginning to talk about that there are  
15 many places around the world where there is a history of trans people being part of the  
16 community equally. So, in Native communities that has been true.
- 17 AJ: Absolutely, yes.
- 18 NM: And so, there are other places around the world as well, but they were interrupted by  
19 colonialism and imperialism. Right? And so, there could be, if we are to be hopeful, there could  
20 be a return of that.
- 21 AJ: Yeah. Nasreen, have you ever worked for or volunteered in any LGBT organizations?
- 22 NM: Let’s see, I was part of PFund, I was on the board of directors there for three years during a time  
23 where it was entirely white.
- 24 AJ: Yes.
- 25 NM: And, I think it was me, Roderic Southall, Donald Whipple Fox, I think the three people of color on  
26 that board.
- 27 AJ: Oh, wow.
- 28 NM: And Kit Briem was the Executive Director and there was somebody else who was a big . . . a very  
29 big ally. We started the Communities of Color Endowment Fund and so . . . yeah.
- 30 AJ: That was after I left.
- 31 NM: Yeah, so it was very exciting at that time to galvanize. It was not the most pretty in terms of  
32 pushing, but we figured out if you put money, I think, somehow or another it changes the  
33 conversation if you bring in money, and I did bring in money. So, that changed and shifted the  
34 conversation.
- 35 AJ: That was cool.

- 1 NM: And then I was on the Funding Exchange Board and I think that's also where we kind of  
2 connected, right?
- 3 AJ: Yes, exactly.
- 4 NM: I was on the People of Color Panel and you were on the Out Fund Panel, but we, of course . . .
- 5 AJ: Colluded.
- 6 NM: We colluded and I was, particularly, interested in the People of Color Panel because I wanted to  
7 give it a queer flair.
- 8 AJ: Absolutely.
- 9 NM: But, we colluded.
- 10 AJ: And I wanted to be on the Out Fund Panel so I could give it a person of color, trans woman of  
11 color flair.
- 12 NM: Yes. So, those have been the two places – and Vulva Riot, I was part of Vulva Riot with Eleanor  
13 Savage. So, you know, did . . . I sort of was part of the folks who put together and worked the  
14 shows. That was a really good space and it evolved with time. And, Asian-Pacific – oh, my God,  
15 how could I forget this. In the 1990s, I was part of the Asian-Pacific Lesbian and Bisexual  
16 organization in the Twin Cities.
- 17 AJ: Really?
- 18 NM: And then we also had a South Asian group.
- 19 AJ: What was it called? I'm not even sure if I knew that existed.
- 20 NM: Yeah, APLBs existed and it was actually a really special time where all these groups started  
21 coming up, POC groups, right.
- 22 AJ: Exactly.
- 23 NM: There was the Latino group, Voces de Ambiente, Bad Black African American Dykes, and let's see  
24 . . . APLBs, Asian-Pacific Islander Lesbian Bisexual Network, was the South Asian group that I was a  
25 part of.
- 26 AJ: All right, you know you've got to spell that one.
- 27 NM: And Two Spirits.
- 28 AJ: And Two Spirit Society – yeah.
- 29 NM: And I talk about this fondly because I think it was a special time because even though those  
30 groups and spaces existed separately, they did come together to support one another. I  
31 remember doing fund raisers for the Two Spirit group to go to the Two Spirit national gathering.  
32 So, there was a lot of back and forth and . . .
- 33 AJ: Co-organizing.

- 1 NM: Yeah, coalition building that was different than . . . I have yet to kind of see it as much because I  
2 think we've evolved in terms of how we identify. But, I think those cultural . . .
- 3 AJ: And, so many of those people of color have been sort of subsumed into predominantly white  
4 spaces.
- 5 NM: Yes. But, the artistic space sort of . . . I mean, we exist in art spaces as well.
- 6 AJ: Wow. Man, you've been pretty politically active as a queer-identified brown person. I mean,  
7 that's . . . sometimes that's a very difficult place to be. You alluded to it a little bit when you  
8 were talking about the work that you were doing at PFund, but how do you navigate those  
9 spaces?
- 10 NM: It's interesting, the navigation . . . and I do it at work as well.
- 11 AJ: OK – yes.
- 12 NM: I worked at the GLBT Programs office that I totally forgot about.
- 13 AJ: Duh. Here at the U, right?
- 14 NM: Yeah, yeah. I worked with Beth Zemsky.
- 15 AJ: Oh, wow.
- 16 NM: So, I think I have always been sort of a person who navigates and figures out how to build  
17 bridges and sometimes doing a lot of education. So, in terms of right now in my work place,  
18 really bringing equity and diversity issues to the forefront. On campus, being part of campus  
19 climate work that is . . . I mean, really pushing around international students' visibility as well  
20 because their experience with campus climate in the past three years have been declining –  
21 their satisfaction has been declining and, on some measures, even worse than students of color  
22 who normally get the brunt. And so, I'm not trying to say both of those experiences are the  
23 same because they're different, however, there is an invisibility to the issues that are faced by  
24 international students.
- 25 AJ: Right.
- 26 NM: Because there is an assumption that all of them are rich and they're coming here, but there is  
27 diversity. Yes, there are the rich, there are some rich kids.
- 28 AJ: Yes, but even within that, an 18-year-old going to a whole other country, I mean there's a level  
29 of anxiety and just vulnerability that comes along with that as well.
- 30 NM: Yes. So, I've been really vocal in pushing some of the issues in our campus climate larger group  
31 conversation, but always talking about other issues as well around disability, or always pushing  
32 around looking at what is absent in the room and what is absent in policies so that we are not  
33 creating these blind spots. My work really has been to really kind of articulate and push. So,  
34 really that's been part of my role.
- 35 AJ: Wow, well this has just been a fascinating discussion, Nasreen. I'm so glad that you decided to  
36 participate. Again, I just want to re-emphasize that this project is to really explore the entire

- 1 spectrum of the gender and so we do not want to limit ourselves to this binary of just male-  
2 identified transgender people or female-identified. We want to explore this entire sort of  
3 gender spectrum. So, thank you so much for being a part of this. Is there anything that I didn't  
4 say – and first of all, I should acknowledge that we are in Ramadan, and I know as a Muslim you  
5 are celebrating as well as fasting, so I want to acknowledge that and wish you peace and  
6 blessings during this time.
- 7 NM: Yes, thank you.
- 8 AJ: But, is there anything that I didn't ask you that you wanted to . . . that you feel like is important  
9 to this conversation?
- 10 NM: Yeah, I'm trying to think what you didn't ask me and I think . . . yeah, it has given me a lot to  
11 think about in terms . . . that I don't really take a lot of time to reflect on my gender identity and  
12 this has been an opportunity to do that. So, I want to thank you for that. But, I also kind of . . .  
13 as I think about Orlando, I'm also thinking about Bangladesh where GLBT journalists and activists  
14 have been targeted and killed.
- 15 AJ: Wow, thank you for bringing that up.
- 16 NM: And, as we think about Orlando, we need to think about . . . we need to think about what's  
17 happening globally to GLBT folks and that that's . . . Bangladesh, the issues in Bangladesh have  
18 been happening for quite some time and there is very little that we have talked about that's not  
19 taking away the focus and the pain of what happened in Orlando.
- 20 AJ: It's connecting.
- 21 NM: It's connecting – the targeting is connecting. And also, the absence, just the absence of Latino  
22 voices around talking about Orlando. I feel like, and I'll just say this – and this is from just a  
23 purely social media point of view of what I've scanned through Facebook of even queer Muslims  
24 have had an emergence of voice, but still I have not seen queer Latinos – like it's coming out a  
25 little bit, but it has taken a couple of days, but those stories need to be held at the center as  
26 well.
- 27 AJ: Absolutely.
- 28 NM: I think it's really easy for the broader GLBT community to erase the identity of people who  
29 occupied that dance floor.
- 30 AJ: Right.
- 31 NM: So, I think that's probably one of the things that I thought that I should mention.
- 32 AJ: Yeah, wow.
- 33 NM: Well, thank you, Andrea. It was really great.
- 34 AJ: Thank you, Nasreen. You sound like the interviewer now.
- 35 NM: No, no.

- 1 AJ: Well, thank you, Andrea – bye. No, I’m totally teasing you, totally teasing you. But, thank you,  
2 Nasreen. Your thoughts are very deep and very meaningful. I really appreciate your openness  
3 and your honesty and your heartfelt sharing. So, until we meet again.
- 4 NM: All right, and we will.
- 5 AJ: We will.