NEW YORK CITY TRANS ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

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INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT

SUNEELA MUBAYI

Interviewer: Nadia Awad

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Transcribed by Jamie Magyar (volunteer)

NYC TOHP Interview Transcript #025

Nadia Awad: —press play, and then, you know... Okay. So, it is July 21st, 2017, we're in the Financial District, and I'm doing a recording with Suneela Mubayi for the New York Trans Oral History Project, which seeks to document the lives of trans folks living in New York, um, and, you know, their experiences. Um, so, I'm excited to do this—this oral history, and I'm grateful that you're—you are here and you made it down here.

Suneela Mubayi: Thank you for inviting me.

Awad: Yeah. Um, so, Suneela, can you—can you tell me where you were born, and a little bit about that place?

Mubayi: Like, my parents, or just...? I was born in New York, but it's just where I was born, like, literally, because I went—I was taken to India, to New Delhi, like, just a little while after I was born.

Awad: Okay, so your early years were in New Delhi.

Mubayi: Yeah, yeah. Until the age of eight.

Awad: Okay. Can you tell me a little bit about New Delhi?

Mubayi: Uh, well, I grew up with my grandma and my uncle from my dad's side, and his family, in a sort of big-ish house, and went to Catholic school until I was eight or so. Then I lived here for—in the suburbs—for three years, then I went back again.

Awad: Can you, um, tell me a story from, like, your elementary school years in New Delhi?

Mubayi: Uh, well, I have a photo—um, I have a photo of mine, I think from kindergarten or first grade, I'm not sure, um, where I'm in my school uniform, uh, with like—it's like a shirt with like, the school tie, and I'm looking very serious and it seems like I have like, uh, kohl on my eyes, but I don't remember that at all. I can show it to you, actually. It's kind of cute. Uh.

Awad: Can you explain for the folks who may not know what kohl is?

Mubayi: Uh, like black eyeliner. Um, give me a moment, this is definitely worth seeing.

Awad: Oh, no problem. No problem. Oh my god. That looks like a really old school kind of photo. You're not smiling, you're [laughter]... It's like, sepia-colored.

Mubayi: Yeah.

Awad: Now, was that for the school—

Mubayi: I think it was for the school, like, yearbook or something like that, or my like, school ID or something.

Awad: Can you tell me a little bit about this Catholic school?

Mubayi: Well—oh, so one funny thing is, um, I'm not—I don't really remember this, but my grandma—everyone entering the school had to do a—like, an interview—um, like an entrance interview because they love like, examining people in India, from like, age two or something. So in the entrance interview, the like, headmaster or whatever, um—it's claimed that he showed me—I was like three and a half, or four—and he showed me a purple toothbrush and said, "What color is this?" and I apparently said, "Mauve." Um, yeah.

Awad: Wow. So then you were admitted immediately for your precocity.

Mubayi: Apparently—apparently, it seems like that. I don't know if it's an apocryphal story or not.

Awad: Well, sounds like you had an early aptitude, or—for language.

Mubayi: For mauve.

Awad: For mauve, yeah. So—so in this Catholic school, was it—was it an English language school, or—?

Mubayi: Yeah, it was English language.

Awad: Okay.

Mubayi: Uh, and they taught Hindi as second language. Um, and—yeah it was—all the, like, males in my family since my dad—since my family came to New Delhi after partition, attended this school, so I was just also like, put into it.

Awad: So it—you have a family legacy there.

Mubayi: Yes, a little bit. At least like, four people in my like, extended family went there.

Awad: What—may I ask what's the name of the school?

Mubayi: Saint Columba's.

Awad: Saint—

Mubayi: Columba's. It's—it was founded by Irish Catholic brothers sometime in the 20th century, I don't know.

Awad: So it was Catholic, not Jesuit.

Mubayi: Uh, I believe it was Catholic, yeah.

Awad: Catholic, okay. And—and so where—can you tell me a little bit about where your family was from? You said they came after partition. Can you explain a little bit about that?

Mubayi: Um, yeah. Um—well, this is just talking about my dad's family—

Awad: About your father's family.

Mubayi: —to be clear. Um, my dad's family are Kashmiri Hindus, or Pandits, as you love to point out. Um, ethnic, like—I guess that's an ethnicity, um, but my—none of my immediate family lived in Kashmir. They—my grandma and my dad and uncle and his siblings were born in Lahore, which is now in Pakistan, and they came to Delhi in 1947 after the, um, sectarian violence of the partition, um, when they had to flee Lahore because it was now part of Pakistan, and so being non-Muslims, their lives were in danger. Um, and so, yeah, they—they had to pack their bags and leave, and eventually they ended up in Delhi.

Awad: So where—so, um, what—I mean, this may—

Mubayi: I know they lived as refugees for a few months or so.

Awad: Okay. When they arrived in what's now India?

Mubayi: Yeah, yeah. When—after they crossed the border.

Awad: Do you know at all what their lives were like when they were living in Lahore—

Mubayi: Um.

Awad: —what they did, things like that?

Mubayi: I know my—my great-grandfather was like—worked for the British government, um, I think in the postal service or something, and I—my grandfather, uh, was a—my dad's father was a railway engineer. Um, and yeah, I think they were from like, an upper middle-class family, and they spoke Urdu as their like, mother tongue even though they were not Muslims, but pretty much everyone who was educated, regardless of sect, Urdu was like, their—and English—were the, uh—their lingua francas.

Awad: Hmm. And so they—okay, so then they came to New Delhi eventually—

Mubayi: Mhm, yeah.

Awad: —sometime after 1947.

Mubayi: Yeah.

Awad: Did you—did you grow up with any stories about what that time was like for them?

Mubayi: Yeah, I mean, my grandmother would, uh, talk about how like, she left her lovely home behind in Lahore and everything was taken away and so on, but without like, any kind of sense of like, sectarian resentment against Muslims as a sort of blanket category, whereas apparently her brother was very bitter and, uh, like, blamed the Muslims for everything. Um, I know they kind of had to start like, all over again, although my grandfather was—retained his job on the railways, and so they were able to like, settle down and live and like, have a decent house, and so on and so forth. Um, and that's how, I think—I'm not sure how exactly my dad and uncle uh, ended up in this Catholic school but, um, I know it was really different back then. Like, there were hardly any cars on the street. That's what my dad always says. Like, he was able to bike to school comfortably every day. Um, so—I'm trying to think what else.

Awad: Did they—did your family ever have a chance to go back to Lahore, or no?

Mubayi: Um, the—a couple of my grandma's brother went back a few years later, I know, to see what was left of their home and so on. My grandmother herself didn't get to go back until just a few years ago—like, ten years ago, a few years before she died, um, when my dad was going for a wedding and he managed to get her a visa, uh, for Pakistan. Uh, and she went. She visited the house where she was born in the old city of Lahore, and the people living in it apparently still—they knew about—it was her—it was named after her father, and they still called it by his name, so they were like, really happy that she had come back, and were like—really wanted her to stay with them, and so on.

Awad: Wow. That must've been extremely emotional.

Mubayi: Yeah. Yeah. She was really old by that time, but she still remembered a lot, and—um, and it was like a great—uh, my dad said that it added like, five years to her life or something.

Awad: Wow.

Mubayi: Yeah.

Awad: To go back and to—

Mubayi: Yeah.

Awad: —connect.

Mubayi: To connect with her like—where she was born.

Awad: Wow.

Mubayi: It was like, uh, in the old city, so it was more like, you know, one of the—it was in like, similar to like, an Arab home or—you know, with like a courtyard.

Awad: The family house, and you have different floors for each generation.

Mubayi: Yeah, with a courtyard, but they—she was only born there, but then he—I think my great-grandfather moved out of there into like a bungalow-type house, uh, in the new city. Um, and that's where she mostly grew up, I think.

Awad: And—and besides your father, did your—did she have other children?

Mubayi: Yeah, I have an uncle and an aunt.

Awad: Oh yes, sorry.

Mubayi: My dad's the middle child. Yeah.

Awad: Yes. Okay. Got it. Yes, you mentioned your uncle, sorry.

Mubayi: They all—they went to like, kindergarten I think, or something, before—or first grade—until partition, um, so they got to learn how to sing "God Save the King" in Urdu.

Awad: Oh my god.

Mubayi: Yeah.

Awad: Wow. That's a useful skill, I'm sure. Um, so—okay, so they're in New Delhi. So then—and they were able to get a home, and attend this Catholic school that you were in, right? Um, so after you were eight years old, where did you go to school?

Mubayi: I was here for three years—

Awad: Here being New York?

Mubayi: —in Long Island for three years, and then, um, I went back—then when I went back, um, my old school wouldn't like, have me back.

Awad: How come?

Mubayi: Um, I don't know. I guess—I'm not really sure why, but I think school admissions are like, super competitive, and if you leave, you know, they don't really want to give you your place back. So I went to a different—I went to an international school that was run on the British curriculum.

Awad: So can you tell me a little bit about what that means, the British curriculum?

Mubayi: Uh, it's the same curriculum that they do in the UK, basically.

Awad: So like, A Levels—

Mubayi: A Levels—O Levels and A Levels, yeah.

Awad: Okay.

Mubayi: There's an extra year of high school.

Awad: And—and are—were you learning Hindi there as well?

Mubayi: No. I—it—so in this school, Hindi was optional, and like, in the Indian curriculum it's mandatory until tenth grade, until your first like, major exams and then it's—but here it's not optional—I mean, it's not mandatory, so I took French instead.

Awad: I see.

Mubayi: Yeah.

Awad: And, um, can you tell—

Mubayi: But I learned, like—because I was in primary school, um, I learned like, at least to read Hindi, but I don't know—I can't really like, read it very fluently or anything.

Awad: And so when you went back to New Delhi, were you living in the same house, and—?

Mubayi: Yeah, in the same house. Literally the same bed.

Awad: Can you tell me a little bit about, um, some things that you liked to do when you were growing up? Like for fun, or...?

Mubayi: It was mostly playing cricket in the park, as a—as in, that was like, the main, uh, daily activity even though I sucked at sports always, but that was like, pretty much the main—the main thing. Apparently—I don't know, I don't—I was too little to like, be able to remember, but I would demand to be taken to the rail museum every Sunday when I was like, really—younger.

Awad: The rail museum as in a museum to the railway?

Mubayi: Yeah, like a museum of the—the like, railway—you know, of trains, and, you know, of like, the Indian rail—because the railways are a big thing in India.

Awad: And this is where your grandfather had—was rail—

Mubayi: Yeah, yeah. I didn't—my grandfather died before I was born, but, um, I think his—my uncle who I grew up with like, loved trains also, so I think that's why. Um, I don't remember this very well, but I don't doubt it, I guess.

Awad: And when you were growing up, can you tell me a little bit what kind of messages you got about gender or...?

Mubayi: I had a very Victorian upbringing, I think, when it came to gender and sexuality. Um, it wasn't very aggressive masculinity, I think, that I was raised with, but it was definitely—there was like, some masculinity. And also going to an all-boys school at an early age, um, there was like a certain—it was assumed at home that like, all my friends would be boys. Um, although we had like, neighbors that had daughters who I played with also. Um, but—yeah, at the same time though, I like—because I was like, raised by my grandmother and she was really overprotective, I think I got a lot of like, feminine energy, um, and I think I had a certain kind of—uh, that was always, like, a part of me. Um, and I remember one time in school we had to—there was some kind of pageant for one of the like, uh, religious festivals, like, the Hindu religious festivals, and I was chosen to like, dress up as one of the goddesses or something, I think, and apparently like, I looked so good in it, or I did it so well, that it was like—I got made fun of, and I remember that was like, kind of disturbing for me, or like—you know, sort of like I didn't want to do it, or—it was like, well why did it—why was it such a good fit? Or something like that.

Awad: Hmm. Do you remember how you felt playing this goddess, or what that experience was like for you?

Mubayi: Uh, I remember feeling super embarrassed during the performance. It wasn't very long or anything. Um, but—yeah, there was this kind of like, a sort of—you were like the unlucky one, who had to play like, the female figure or whatever.

Awad: Can you tell me a little bit about your grandmother, and like, describe her for me, and who she was?

Mubayi: Uh, well, she was a very—she was like, very strong woman. I think she basically kept our family together after the partition, and uh, prevented anything and kind of like, um, was—she was never like—had an official job, but at the same time she was very like, active in the community and—um, and kind of like, one of the more progressive voices, I think, amongst her relatives. Um, I think with me she was kind of a little different because, um, my mom being mentally ill and like, she felt I was kind of a special responsibility that she had to take care of. Um, I know that she wanted to be a singer. She was—apparently had a beautiful voice and could've been a professional, but it was still not like—it was still frowned upon with like—at like—at that time, because public performance was associated with like, being a courtesan or whatever. Um, but she—I think she—she continued to sing at like, family functions and things like that.

Awad: What kinds of things did she sing?

Mubayi: Uh, like Indian classical music, basically.

Awad: Um, like—

Mubayi: And she played the harmonium also.

Awad: Oh, okay. Like North Indian music.

Mubayi: Yeah, like North Indian classical music, yeah.

Awad: Um, I guess we can geek out about that after this oral history [laughter], so we don't take up that much time, but—

Mubayi: I don't know that much about it, but I know something. A little bit.

Awad: Yeah. I um—when I was walking to B&H [Photo VIdeo] a few weeks ago, I passed a restaurant called, uh, Patiala Restaurant [Patiala Indian Grill].

Mubayi: Oh, okay.

Awad: I was like, "Oh yeah, Qawwali music," you know? Um, the Patiala School, you know?

Mubayi: Yeah, of Qawwali, yeah.

Awad: Um, but that's a different—

Mubayi: Patiala is a town in Punjab.

Awad: Right, right. Yeah—no, but that's a different thing.

Mubayi: But that's apparently a stereotype of Muslims in Bollywood, that they just—they sing Qawwalis all the time.

Awad: Right, right. Well that—there was um, a guy I went to school with who actually wrote a paper comparing jazz musicians in, um, pre-code—well, not pre-code, but um, in Hollywood film at the turn of the century—to um, the representation of Muslim musicians in early Bollywood film, and there are a very striking number of parallels on lots of levels. It's interesting. But, yeah, that's... Wow. So she—okay, so she would sing at family functions. And so—

Mubayi: Mhm. And at like—at larger functions also.

Awad: Did you ever do singing or any kind of music or anything?

Mubayi: Um, I tried a little bit but I don't think I ever had an aptitude—much of an aptitude for it. Um, I mostly had an aptitude for memorization. Yeah.

Awad: Okay. And how did that manifest itself when you were growing up?

Mubayi: Um, not—I think, uh—yeah we had—in school we had like—there was like, some class where you had to memorize really cheesy poems, um, and like repeat them. I think I was—uh, I was good at that—or, um, I like learned the rules of chess when I was six or something. But I was never like, good at the game itself [laughter].

Awad: [laughter] Well—

Mubayi: Like, I wasn't a grandmaster by ten or something.

Awad: Right, right. I hear that. I hear that. Um, wow, okay. So—so okay, you're in New Delhi, you're in—so did you do high school in New Delhi as well?

Mubayi: Yeah, yeah.

Awad: Okay, so you went all through the A Levels, or the O Levels or whatever levels. Um, and then you—where did you—what were your thoughts around your next step when you were finishing high school?

Mubayi: Um—well, it was assumed that I would go to college in the US, um, but I think I just naturally gravitated to New York, um, given that I was born—um, given that I had somewhat of a connection and some family in the area, um, and also like, it just seemed like the most natural thing. So, um, I applied to Columbia [University] and NYU [New York University], and I got into Columbia. Um, and I don't think it was probably the best fit for me as a college, but it was definitely good to be in New York.

Awad: And was that the, uh—let me just... [recording cuts out and restarts] So, I just had to change the card because the card was full, so we're just going to back up a little bit. So, okay—so you lived mostly in New Delhi, you came to New York, you had a connection here, and you were talking a little bit about how, um, things felt a little like, socially strange, I guess, when you studying in undergrad. Um, can you talk to me a little bit about that?

Mubayi: Um, it changed a lot, for sure, by the time I finished, um, and also around the time I was starting was also around the time I came out as—as trans and then later genderqueer, so it was—um, it was like a very difficult—it was an intense time for me. I mean, I think I had something I needed to do, for sure, um, but it wasn't—gender wasn't, like, as—I think it's definitely changed in the last few years, where it's become—being trans has become more like, a common thing, and it wasn't that common, uh, at that time.

Awad: Can you tell me what year that was?

Mubayi: Like, the early 2000's. 2003 or so. Um, the first—I was supposed to start college in 2002, but I just needed like, a year to get used to living here, and it was—yeah, it wasn't as—the transition wasn't as smooth as I thought. Um, and Columbia also wasn't like, the queerest place. Um, it still isn't, but it wasn't at that time, also. Like, they kind of had reached "gay" but they hadn't—um, they hadn't really reached, uh, "trans" at that time. Um, and I guess like, coming from a very like, achievement-driven, uh, sort of educational background, I kind of was hoping that it would be a little different, but at Columbia it was still like—most people were extremely achievement-driven and uh, it was like a pressurizing sort of atmosphere, although not to the same, um, extent. And I guess just also like, the way that people socialized and related to each other was not kind of the way that I was used to, and I hadn't—I had never really had a very easy time socially, either, so at some point like, I realized like, I wasn't comfortable living in the dorms, so I decided to like, move out and um, sublet a room instead because I felt more comfortable. Um, stuff like that, I guess. And um—yeah, and I like—I had—I was kind of young and very like, eager to prove my like, intellectual ability to argue, and so I ended up having a lot of like, run-ins with—um, with TAs [teaching assistants] and professors, and so on. And I guess I had had this like, impression that in the—in America that every—you know, the academic atmosphere was not strict and rigid like it was in India where you have to like, bow down to teachers' feet all the time and call them "sir" and "ma'am," but I discovered that there's still like, a lot of hierarchy and, uh, deference and that, you know, you kind of were expected to know your place but in a more sort of subtle way where you had to pretend to be equal but you're not really equal. So that was like, a very difficult thing to adjust to me—for me to adjust to.

Awad: And um, when you—when you came out as trans, did you have other trans people or gender nonconforming people you were connecting with at that time? Did you have, um—like, some circle of support or any of that?

Mubayi: Um, a little bit. Um, not—I had a few queer friends. Then, uh, in sophomore year I did manage to get in touch with the Sylvia Rivera Law Project, and they were super helpful and nice, and they helped me like, change my name and gender on my documents, and I did an internship with them, um, for a semester, so that was nice. Um...

Awad: How did you hear about them?

Mubayi: I'm trying to think. Uh, I think I met someone—maybe I met Dean Spade at an event or something, and uh, he asked me to contact someone to help out with my—um, and they were super—super helpful, basically.

Awad: That's cool.

Mubayi: Um, and—I'm trying to—um, and like I kind of got involved with like, anarchist politics and at that time, I think that's how I met them, too. But I never kind of felt comfortable, completely, in the activist community. Uh, there's kind of always this weird like, similarity I notice between the activist and the academic where the—there's kind of this pressure to like,

push yourself as hard as you can until you burn out, which, uh, always like, made me uncomfortable. Um, and I'm still like, trying to find where I exactly fit in or belong.

Awad: Now, you know—you, you know—you started studying Arabic in undergrad?

Mubayi: Yeah, yeah.

Awad: So, tell me a little bit about that.

Mubayi: Um, well it was kind of an acc—I don't know if, looking back, it was an accident, but um, I was just interested in a bunch of—I wanted to be a creative writing major and a gender studies major, obviously [laughter], but I never like—um, I kind of felt like the women's studies classes were, um—for one thing, they gave—assigned way too much work. Um, like, they had to sort of prove that they're, you know, a serious class or something. Um, and it was kind of like—I just—I guess I wasn't like, comfortable with the way that, um, gender was this very like, cold sort of academic thing that—um, yeah, and just the requirements were like, ridiculous—to major, um, in it. And similarly, with creative writing I was—I was kind of like—I never really felt comfortable, um, with the sort of workshop format of creative writing where you kind of share your work with all these people that you don't know what their like, belief systems are, and so on, and—you know, open—and I remember like, opening myself up to criticism in a way that was really like, difficult for me to—to take. Like, I remember coming out crying several times after a workshop, and um—and like, feeling really like crap. Um, and so I—and I happened to like, find out that the Middle East and South Asian Studies major was like—had a lot less requirements, and you know, was like, much more open—open-ended. The only thing was that you had to take a language. Um, and I was just kind of like, "Well, I don't want to study Hindi. That would be so stereotypical." Um, so I was like, "Why not Arabic?" and that's kind of how it started.

Awad: And so you were studying Arabic pretty much immediately after post—after 9/11.

Mubayi: I almost—yeah, like I guess I started in 2004, so just... I knew the alphabet as a kid because my grandma like—um, one, she just wanted to make some attempt to make sure the heritage of Urdu was not like, lost on her grandchildren so she like, taught me the alphabet. Um, but I didn't know—so I had like, some idea and not—and the like—whatever common vocabulary there is. But yeah, so it was—yeah, three years after 9/11, basically, or a little less than three years after 9/11.

Awad: Did you—did you—um, looking back on that time, what effect or impact did 9/11 like, have, if any, on the teaching or learning of Arabic at Columbia for you? Or did it?

Mubayi: Well, I remember that—I remember um, that when I started it was just around when the demand for Arabic had become like—was starting to like, really get big, and getting into like, a class was a big, uh, problem in and of itself—or like a big—uh, a big thing, um, for those who were interested. Um, and—yeah, I remember talking to people later—later on who were a bit older, and them saying that like—you know, when they studied Arabic pre-9/11 it was—um,

it was a lot different. It was kind of like studying some other—some—anything else that's kind of obscure and not like, French or Spanish or whatever, and it was kind of like, cute and nerdy and whatever in a different—there wasn't like, this um, you know, sort of huge political, uh, weight attached to it. Um, I don't remember there being that many like, wannabe spies or anything in my—in my class—or in the Arabic classes. A lot of like, people who sort of, I don't know, wanted—I guess because Columbia had like, a policy school and so on, with a lot of like, do-gooders who want to like, save the hungry children or whatever. Um, so I think there were quite a few of those, and then like, the academic types also, um, who often like, don't have any sense of politics—um, although like, I think it's good to some extent to not try to over-politicize the classroom because then things can get like, extremely petty. I remember in my advanced class, our teacher—um, who was really, really good—like, tried, uh—you know, would kind of steer the—every time someone like, criticized Zionism he would try to sort of keep the discussion onto like, whatever story we were talking about and not like, go into polemic, just to like, not waste the time, which I think was good.

Awad: Had you, uh, traveled to the Middle East before taking Arabic?

Mubayi: Uh, no, I hadn't, no. Um, I think that's good, probably. Palestine was actually the first Middle Eastern country I went to, unless you count transiting in Dubai.

Awad: Well, I don't [laughter].

Mubayi: And I was actually denied entry into Dubai recently—like, last year—

Awad: Oh, wow.

Mubayi: —which was really ironic. On the basis of my gender, basically.

Awad: Can you tell me a little bit more about that experience?

Mubayi: Uh, it was really strange and bizarre, and kind of like, weird. Uh, I was just supposed to spend a night there between like, transiting planes, and uh, in order to go to the hotel I had to like, enter the country officially, and immediately as like, the passport person saw me, they were like, "uh-uh," and I went into this whole thing where like, these—and they never like, gave me the chance to like, show them that I knew Arabic, so I didn't—um, and I like, heard them—like, they like body-scanned me the way that they do with drug smugglers and I heard them like, discussing my genitalia, and then like, asking me like, "What really are you?" and...

Awad: In English?

Mubayi: Yeah, but then discussing my genitalia in Arabic. Uh, and like—uh, and my dad and stepmom were traveling with me, and I heard—yeah, I heard them like, making fun of them for like, not being ashamed of their kid. Um, it was all like—it was all like—it was just to like, spend ten hours there, basically. Um, I didn't have to get—thankfully I didn't have to get deported, because they were just like, "You can—you can't enter. You can go back to the transit lounge."

Awad: So you stayed in the airport for ten hours because of your—you know, their perception.

Mubayi: Yeah, their perception, because they said I'm a liar. Uh, and that like—even though like, I showed them my other IDs which say I'm female, they were like, "You can't enter the country like this, and once you are fully a woman you can enter the country."

Awad: They said this to you?

Mubayi: Yeah. Um, which was like—

Awad: Wow. That's kind of interesting.

Mubayi: [drinking water] Mhm. And the funny thing was that the—on the flight—the short flight from India to Dubai, I was like, watching a movie made by a Marathi poet about—um, like, the traditional fishing trade in the [United Arab] Emirates, and kind of being like, "Oh, it's—you know, they're not just all like, oil sheikhs. They have culture and history," and, you know, blah blah blah, and then that happened.

Awad: That sounds awful. I'm really sorry.

Mubayi: I mean, it was like—

Awad: I'm glad you were with your father and your stepmom at least, to just—

Mubayi: Well, it wasn't like—it didn't like, make much of a difference, really. Um, they didn't like, threaten me or hurt me, they were just kind of like—treated me like this bizarre alien that, you know, couldn't be trusted or something.

Awad: Now—so, okay—so, dialing it back a little bit, when did you go to Palestine, and can you tell me a little bit about that trip?

Mubayi: Um—well, I've been to Palestine three times. The first time was for a short visit, and the second time and third time were for like, a longer, um, trip. I got very interested, while I was studying Arabic, in Palestine solidarity activism, and kind of thought it would be like—because they didn't—in school they didn't really teach us colloquial Arabic, um, and they only taught like, Fusha, which is book—you know, formal or classical Arabic [Modern Standard Arabic]. And I always—like, I wanted to like, watch movies and speak with people, and so on, so I thought maybe that would be like, a good way to um—yeah, that—I thought that would be a good way to like—although I kind of found out later that it—well, it was kind of a good way, but it wasn't like, really my scene, completely. Actually, most of the people that I interacted with had like—they kind of taught that learning to read and write Arabic was a waste of time, because "I want to like, speak to the street," and whatever. So it was kind of this like, anti-intellectual attitude. Um.

Awad: Did you have trouble getting into Palestine with your gender?

Mubayi: Uh, not with my gender, but—um, I did get interrogated because my name doesn't really—doesn't really sound—it doesn't really sound Muslim, exactly, but it doesn't really sound like, Western either, and so there was just like, a lot of questions of like, "Are you a Muslim? Are you—why are—are you sure you're not a Muslim? Like, is anyone in your family Muslim? Um, and like how...?" And in fact, my mom's family are Jewish, but it doesn't reflect in my name. Um, and yeah. So in the end I was—I was able to get in, um, although it's not something I really look forward to, and I would definitely not want to go in through the airport again, for sure. I'd rather, uh, try one of the land borders.

Awad: And—so, you've traveled quite a bit throughout the Middle East?

Mubayi: Uh, yeah. More in the Levant than...

Awad: Gotcha.

Mubayi: And I've been to Morocco, as well, briefly.

Awad: And—and, um, did you encounter these, you know—because a lot of people haven't had quite that ability to travel as much who are gender nonconforming or trans—have you, you know—what have been some of your experiences traveling? Besides—I know that Dubai was not—was terrible—

Mubayi: That was like, the worst.

Awad: Well, that was an—yeah.

Mubayi: That was pretty much—um, in other places, like, I get asked—uh, I got asked in Egypt about my gender, but they kind of left it at just questions, um, and the fact that I had a US passport, like, I guess made them respect me more. Um.

Awad: Did you have any issues like, being—like, going through your day-to-day?

Mubayi: Yeah, absolutely. Um—I mean, mostly I guess I was perceived as like, an effeminate man, and I had to deal with what that engendered. Um, I often would—it would occur to me like—it's actually kind of cool that like, the large majority of people aren't like, harassing me in the street. It's—"There's a lot of people, but look at all these other people that just walk by, and isn't that cool?" But, um—I liked it when I caused confusion about my perceived gender. Um, I didn't like it when I was read as like, an effeminate man or drag queen, because that would bring out more hatred. Um, and I often wonder like, what is it that propelled me? But I just really had like, a dedication to language that I was willing to put up with a lot of things for. And, yeah. I mean, I think I was read mostly as—as masculine, but not a traditional masculinity.

Awad: What—can you tell me, um, a story of one of your favorite teachers that you've had? Because you have been studying Arabic for a long time.

Mubayi: Yeah.

Awad: Can you tell me about it?

Mubayi: I haven't been studying in a class for quite a long time now, but, uh, I think my third year of Arabic—my senior year at Columbia—was when it—I had two really, really good teachers, um, who really pushed me a lot and like, helped me sort of take a big leap. One was Tunisian and the other is Lebanese, um, and both I think like, encouraged me to like, make this a major part of my life. Although probably, um, I would've liked to do something other than a PhD, I don't think it's been bad to do a PhD, necessarily.

Awad: And, uh—so, did you ever go to Syria? Were you able to—?

Mubayi: Mhm.

Awad: Oh, wow, you went to Syria, too?

Mubayi: Before—I was in Syria in 2008.

Awad: Can you talk to me a little bit about that experience?

Mubayi: Um, it was a little bit different in terms of like—you know, Egypt and Palestine are more globalized, I guess, in terms of like, internet and phone.

Awad: Like the cities.

Mubayi: Um, in terms of like, infrastructure and so on. Uh, Syria there was a little bit more closed, and some things were a little more difficult, and there was more bureaucracy, um, also for US citizens, because there were like extra, uh, security measures, or I don't know what. But, uh—so like, it was easier for like, Europeans to get residency or whatever, or to come in and out of the country, than it was for Americans. But I was there about six or seven months.

Awad: Oh, wow.

Mubayi: Yeah.

Awad: In which city?

Mubayi: In Damascus.

Awad: Studying Arabic?

Mubayi: Yeah, and just like, private lessons. Um, I took a Persian class there, too, because it was, uh, at the Iranian cultural center.

Awad: And how was that?

Mubayi: It wasn't—the teacher was nice. He like—he praised [Mahmoud] Ahmadinejad a bit—but he was a sort of nice guy. And the—the textbook had examples like, "Muslims of the world defend Palestine" or something.

Awad: Wow. Can you—you know—now Syria, obviously, is in a very different place, and it's interesting to hear your perspective because you have such a unique subject position as someone who's studying the language, et cetera, and—

Mubayi: I remember—I remember that one unique thing was like, interacting with all the Kurdish people.

Awad: In Damascus?

Mubayi: Yeah, in Damascus. A lot of the poorer Kurdish people worked in restaurants and cafes and stuff, and—uh, when they found out I was Indian, uh, that—they were really happy because they felt like I was their Aryan brother or something, against the Arabs who were oppressing them—um, but in—all conducted through Arabic, of course. And they would like, ask me random words in Kurdish and be like, "Is this the same word in your language?"

Awad: Wow.

Mubayi: Yeah. Because there's a lot of—I guess there's a bunch of common vocabulary through Persian, because Kurdish has a lot of Persian words.

Awad: Can you talk to me a little bit about what like, your day-to-day life was during that seven month period in Damascus? Like, what was—just like, get me a sense of what it was like living in that city in 2008.

Mubayi: Um—I mean also, it was a little closed-off in the sense of like, a lot of broader swathes of people were not used to interacting with—with foreigners, and that was kind of one of the attractions of going there, was that you'd have to do everything in Arabic. Um, but—you know, I would like, go to—I would have my lessons, I would like, do my reading, I would—um, I think I volunteered for a little while at the UN Palestinian Refugee Agency, and then stopped—uh, teaching English conversation. Um, yeah, and I mean, a lot of time went by just trying to like, settle down and find a place to live, and that sort of thing, and then by the time it did happen it was kind of time to go.

Awad: So what was your living situation when you were there?

Mubayi: Uh, I was living with some other—I was living with another American who I probably shouldn't have lived with. It would've been easier. A lot of—I know a lot of foreigners wanted—lived in the old city, in like—in houses—traditional houses whose rooms were rented out, but I never really wanted to—I didn't feel comfortable living in a walled city. Um, and...

Awad: Did you have any sense of like, the political climate at that time?

Mubayi: Oh. I mean, it was funny that like, you kind of just internalized the repression very easily. Like—you know, I hardly ever found myself talking about like, the government or [Bashar al-]Assad in public. Like, you know, it was just like, normal, you know? Uh, what else? Although there was—I mean, there was criticism of like, the government constantly, or of corruption, or nepotism, or whatever, but never of the president or of the party. And—

Awad: Of the Ba'ath Party.

Mubayi: Yeah. The Party. [laughter]

Awad: [laughter] Uh-oh.

Mubayi: What other party?

Awad: Well, I mean, for the—

Mubayi: Well actually—

Awad: —for the listeners.

Mubayi: —for—technically there—it's a—the Ba'ath Party is part of the national like, coalition or something [National Progressive Front], but the other parties are there just in name. Um, and—yeah, so it was—but I did like—I did, uh, study—one of the people I studied with was a Palestinian, um, who had been—who knew like, some dissidents and who had contact with other dissidents and so, you know, we would talk about politics and stuff like, in the home. And also, uh, some of the lessons I was taking were at the French Institute for the Near East and some of the teachers there would show like, banned films, uh, inside, to the classes—like, inside the institute.

Awad: Now—um, a couple years ago I got an email from an Arabic professor. She's American. She's, um, not Middle Eastern, but she—she said, "You know, do you have any advice on how to help my student who's genderqueer," or trans, I don't recall what it—which—how they identified, but, basically this person, after a semester or maybe a year of doing Arabic said, "I can't deal with how gendered this language is," and stopped. And so this professor was reaching out to me and said, "Is there a way—are there other words, you know, that will maybe be of interest to them about gender and sexuality, or, you know, have—do you know people who have this issue?"

Mubayi: Well, if she's the Arabic professor, shouldn't she...?

Awad: Well not—not all of them are up to speed if they're, you know—if they're straight or not exposed to different things.

Mubayi: I mean, it is a super gendered language. There's no way getting—like, no way to get around that. Um, I don't think the issue is in the language so much. I mean, Persian is a completely gender-neutral language. Like, you don't know if you're saying "he" or "she," you're talking about "he" or "she," when you're talking about someone in the third person, but obviously Iran isn't the greatest place for a transgender person to be. So I don't—it doesn't quite—you know, it's not that—uh, I don't know how to say—like, it's not that automatic. Or like, Hebrew for example is even more gendered than Arabic because in the—uh, when you speak Hebrew and you're like, saying—you know, speaking in the first person as a present tense, as a verb, that's gendered, whereas in Arabic that's not gendered. But, you know, whether as a—like, in some parts of Israel, yeah, I guess it's like, easier to be, uh, gender nonconforming at least—you know, not to be pinkwashing or anything, but, you know, that's a, like, basic reality, sure. Um, so I—I mean it's not that like—you know, I don't think the relationship is that like, linear. Then of course there's like the whole discus—rich, like, literature on gender and sexuality that there is from medieval Arabic that really like, gave me an—I think an extra boost towards continuing, uh, in the language. Although that didn't end up being my thesis topic. I think I wish it had, but, you know, there's all this like—so many different—I think like dozens or hundreds of books on sex and gender, and all different in the fields of like, literature and like, you know, anecdotes, and even in religion, of—you know, of like detailing everything, basically. And like—and even like, compend—like, linguistic compendiums of like, all the different words for genitalia starting from the beginning of the Arabic alphabet to the end of the Arabic alphabet, and it's like hundreds and hundreds of words.

Awad: Oh man. I can only cover like, three or four letters. I don't know all 26 letters. I need to read that.

Mubayi: I mean, the letters of the Arabic alphabet.

Awad: Yeah, yeah, no. Well, I'm thinking like *kāf* [ق] which is the, you know—

Mubayi: Yeah. So—and these were all like—I mean, I think the issue—I mean, they're mostly—most of what we have was written by men, um, and like—but they were like, the paradoxes—like they were like, men of religion and many of them were deeply like, pious—but they still had this attitude to knowledge that was, you know, where it's like everything had to be talked about and dealt with—and, um, there's even like, a great quote by one of them, al-Jahiz, where he's like, you know, people who complain about words like "dick" and "pussy" and whatever, that they're—you know, that they're like immoral, and they're like, offensive, you know—should shut up because if—they wouldn't have been—these words wouldn't exist if they weren't meant to be used. Um, but, you know, I think like, social attitudes can change a lot. I also think like, the intense gendering of the language like, makes it possible to play more with gender. Like,

the word for "vagina" or for "pussy" that's used in current colloquial Arabic is masculine-gendered.

Awad: Same thing in French. "Vagina" is masculine.

Mubayi: Yeah. *Le vagin.*

Awad: So is "queen." Was—in medieval French, "queen" was, uh, masculine.

Mubayi: See, you know something about language that I don't.

Awad: I know those two facts [laughter].

Mubayi: Yeah. What was it in medieval French?

Awad: Um, it was still—it was still the same noun, but it was just masculine. *Le reine.*

Mubayi: Oh. *Reine*? *Le reine*? Interesting. I know that in German, the word for "girl" is neutral, is neuter-gendered. *Das Mädchen*.

Awad: Well, are we surprised? [laughter]

Mubayi: Yeah. [laughter]

Awad: Um—

Mubayi: Or for child, also. *Das Kind.*

Awad: So let's just—I just have to pause for one sec. [recording stops and resumes] So—so I guess my final question as we wrap up is—

Mubayi: I guess I just want to say to the student that like, don't despair. Like, there's a lot of uh, gold pots at the end of the dark tunnel that are awaiting if you like—if you persevere right now.

Awad: That's—I wish I had—I wish I had said that. I responded and I just said, "Well, they should keep studying it," but I didn't—I wasn't—I didn't have an eloquent, informed response, sadly. But um, I guess my last question is—you know, you've lived in a lot of different places. You've studied, you know, different languages, et cetera. How—um, how do you feel—has your study of other languages and, you know, living in different places, et cetera—how has that impacted your understanding of your own gender? I guess—I know that's a big question but that's just—or has it, or...?

Mubayi: I think that's a good question. Um, I mean it's definitely shown me that gender is a performance, and also, um, helped me see that like, sometimes passing or like, how my gender

is perceived has—may have, you know—I may have no intention of, you know, being perceived as more feminine one day, and yet I would be, which was interesting to me. And so I guess it just shows how much it's about perception to a large extent for me. Or it's shown me that—um, where like some random, uh, aspect of my appearance or, you know, my gait—you know, will like completely alter the perception, or the same perception, uh, would be perceived differently—the same like, appearance or whatever would be perceived differently depending on where. And, um, I guess the one thing I didn't dare to do in the Middle East was use the women's bathrooms. I was too scared. Except—well, maybe in Palestine, once, I did, but it was like a single, and even then like—all the like, the people at the restaurant like, "Why'd you go to the women's bathroom? That's like—it's," they said it's "اكتير صعب إشي" ['ishy saeb aktir], like it's really—you know.

Awad: It's really tough.

Mubayi: No, but by "صعب" [saeb] they mean like, that's really—like, you crossed a boundary.

Awad: Right, right, right.

Mubayi: I was just like, "Oh, it was open. Like, I didn't pay attention."

Awad: Right, right. Like, "It's tough for us to deal with.

Mubayi: Yeah, like it's, "I can't imagine doing that." Um, so yeah, it's like... Um, but I feel like there's kind of a playfulness in the language that uh, has the potential to be exploited a lot, and the like, rich sexual heritage of the—in the language itself is what motivates—motivates me. And um, yeah, I guess the—the poetry um, in a sense is like, very gender—you know, crosses all boundaries of gender for me. The poetry that I like, that is.

Awad: I think that's a good note to end on. Thank you so much for talking and being willing to go in so many different directions with me.

Mubayi: Sure.

Awad: Um, I really appreciate it and I'm glad that you're—this conversation is part of this project. Yeah. Thank you.

Mubayi: Oh, you're most welcome. I want to—I have to listen to the others now.

Awad: Oh, yeah. Well, please do. They're really good.

Mubayi: Did you—? [recording cuts out]