

AT: Welcome to the Infinite Women podcast. I'm your host, Allison Tyra. And today I'm joined by Dr. Jessica Scott, an associate professor of gender studies at West Virginia Wesleyan College, and author of the book, *Home is Where Your Politics Are: Queer Activism in the U.S. South and South Africa*. So that's an interestingly specific topic. How did you get there?

JS: I traveled to South Africa in 2009 to do an academic program in gender studies. And I went back and forth between West Virginia, where I was born and raised, and Cape Town, where the program was, multiple times in the following years. And I just kept feeling resonance with some of the spaces I would travel in South Africa. And also feeling that, I had been involved in activist or advocacy work sort of at the periphery in West Virginia. And I was really interested in that. How do queer and trans people try to shape the spaces that they live in? How do we exist in them? And what kind of work do we do to just, to be able to live more comfortably, to make the places where we live feel more like home? I saw that happening in South Africa as well. So many people working, even though South Africa's legal landscape, policy landscape for LGBTQ people is really progressive. One of the most progressive, if not the most progressive constitutions in the world, there's still a lot of work to do. There are a lot of challenges that queer and trans people were facing, Black lesbians especially, were facing really intense forms of violence. And that didn't deter them from working in the spaces where they lived. They didn't run away from it. They wanted to work in the places where they lived to make those places feel more like home.

And so let me just also say that the U.S. South and West Virginia is in kind of a liminal space between the Southeast and the Northeast. But the U.S. South is really dismissed by a lot of progressive rhetoric in the U.S. And in fact, in traveling in South Africa, the South Africans that I talked to, they had all heard about the Bible Belt and how awful it must be to live in the Bible Belt. And so there's this reputation that gets attached to the space. And that reputation that's attached to the U.S. South is also attached to the continent of Africa, even though, South Africa's policy landscape doesn't really resemble the rest of the continent's policies for queer and trans people. And those policies keep changing. They keep changing and evolving in other countries too. But just that idea of entire regions just being dismissed as kind of impossible places for queer people to live. And thinking about the queer and trans people who do live there and who struggle to bring home into existence for ourselves.

AT: You have a chapter titled *When Whiteness Gets in the Way*. And so I will admit that when I first saw, okay, the U.S. South and South Africa, my mind immediately went to, these are both places that have a reputation, shall we say, for difficult interracial relations. But one of the things I find interesting is that, at least coming from a U.S. perspective, people will point out that yes, the South had Jim Crow and they were maybe more overt about their racism. But it's not like, places like the Midwest where I'm from, everywhere in the U.S. had racism. And so it might not have been quite as blatant, quite as explicit. But I do wonder how those perceptions of these places as being particularly "racist," is intersecting with what you're seeing on the queerness activism.

JS: Yeah, there's a really great book called *Chocolate Cities: The Black Map of American Life* by Marcus Anthony Hunter and Zandria Robinson that talks a lot about, if you're thinking about the South in terms of North America, that's everywhere south of Canada. And that's their way of writing about racial politics in the U.S. Just that there's discrimination across the country and it might vary in form, but it exists across the country. And yes, South Africa's history, I think one of the similarities between the two spaces is that history of really intense struggles over racism. I was in Mississippi last week actually talking about the book and I was on the campus of the University of Mississippi. And one of the things that struck me is that there's this narrative of how racist these spaces are. But the other thing that's there that's not always highlighted is the really rich civil rights history that exists there as well, which happened across racial lines to some extent. And that happened in South Africa as well. White people who were interested in the liberation of Black South Africans cooperated to bring apartheid down. And so I was just thinking about the civil rights history that is the history of the U.S. that's

documented in some ways in the U.S. South in ways that it's not always in other places.

But that's generally speaking. So in terms of queer and trans activism, those tensions are present as well, whose organizations are most likely to be funded, who has access to what spaces. The organization called Free Gender that I spent a lot of time volunteering with in South Africa, they had been part of a movement of several different organizations that set up an alternative pride to the Cape Town Pride celebration. So Cape Town has this reputation of being the gay capital of Africa. And the advocacy and activist organizations had said, look, Cape Town Pride is too white, it's too in the center of the city, it's too far away from the reality of most South Africans' lives. It's too detached from reality. And so they set up a different Pride, which happened in neighborhoods that were Black neighborhoods, ones that are outside of the city because of the apartheid infrastructure that still dominates the city of Cape Town and South Africa as a country.

And so the tensions there would be with just the existence of that pride that was planned and executed by white gay men. And yeah, it was a multiracial crowd of people that showed up, but in terms of the planning and in terms of who's conceptualizing it, that was white gay men. And when the Black lesbians pointed out, "we live an hour away by public transport, we can't even get to the space where pride is happening and get home safely because public transport is not so safe at night. We can't even participate, let alone be part of the planning of this event." The white organizers of Pride called them racist. So yeah, there are a lot of ways that class is still structured along racial lines. And so there are a lot of things that are not accessible to Black lesbians who are living in poverty that might make Cape Town feel safer to white LGBT people who have more financial security. In the US South, it tended to be the directors of organizations were often white and cis. If you wanted to have a leadership structure that was more Black-centric, then you have to create it yourself. So there tends to be some segregation in those organizations.

AT: And it's also worth noting that when we're getting into queer history and who is maintaining the archives, who is collecting materials for the archives, those also tend to skew towards privilege. So more male, more cis, more white. And if you want to know more about that, I have a previous episode with Lauren Jae Gutterman, who wrote a book called *Her Neighbor's Wife: A History of Lesbian Desire Within Marriage*. That is one of the things that we got into is as she was doing her research and trying to bring these histories into the public eye, we discussed that she had a difficult time finding women of color's records, even in the lesbian dedicated archives.

[Listen to Dr Lauren Jae Gutterman on lesbian desire in US marriages](#) or [read the transcript](#).

JS: Yeah, when I was in South Africa in 2016, it was the 10th anniversary of same-sex marriage being legalized in South Africa. And so the Black lesbian organization Free Gender that I was working with, they were actually working on a campaign to try to abolish a part of that legislation that allowed for discrimination. So if you went to Home Affairs, which is the place where you could do a public marriage registry, rather than seeking out someone at a church or whatever to solemnize the marriage. If you went to Home Affairs, you could be turned away because there was a conscientious objecting clause. If the staff's beliefs did not allow them to conduct the marriage, then they didn't have to. And what was happening was, the spirit of the law was to try to allow people to not have to participate if they didn't want to. But the reality is, if someone's going to step away and say I'm not doing this, you have to provide an alternative. You still have to let the marriage be conducted. So what ended up happening is that if you went to town, you were more likely to be able to find somebody to officiate the marriage. But if you were in the township or neighborhood, like where Free Gender is based, Khayelitsha, lesbians were going, setting a date, going to get married, and then there'd be nobody there to perform the marriage. And so for Free Gender, and I think this is really, really important, it wasn't really as much about marriage as it was about, this is a service that's supposed to be provided. And when people see discrimination happening, then other people who live there also think it's fine to discriminate. If you can be discriminated against at a public office, like Home Affairs, why could they also not discriminate against you? And so it was really important for Free Gender to remove that part of the law that allowed the officials to

abstain from performing the marriage so that they could have equal access to marriage. And they successfully got that clause removed.

But what happened, and this goes back to what you were saying about the archives, what happened is that in all of the reporting about this, and I know that Free Gender started this because I was there in some of those initial meetings. They had talked about their research that they'd done about this. I was there with some of their meetings with the Center for Gender Equality, who helped them bring this forward. But what happened in the reporting was that an organization that's older and is based in town, they got credit for having taken this forward. And Free Gender wasn't even mentioned in any of the reporting about this. So here these Black lesbians had said, "this is disproportionately affecting us, so it needs to be changed." And they had made change happen at a national level. And then they had gotten no credit for having done that. And so when the director of Free Gender, Funeka Soldaat, and I spent a lot of time with her. So we've had lots of conversations about different things. But when she read my book, she said, "this is great. Here's the true story of what happened." That story is now documented in this book, if nowhere else.

AT: It reminds me of when referring to suffrage. A lot of people will say that, like in the case of the US, the 19th Amendment "gave" women the right to vote. And then actual historians are like, "no, no, no, no, no, nobody gave them anything. They had to fight to win that." You brought up marriage. And I find this to be a really interesting example, because something that comes up when we're talking about any struggle for rights, whether that's racial, whether that's queerness, whether that's gender-based, there's always, different people have different priorities. And South Africa legalized same-sex marriage in 2006. But it's still the only country in Africa, as far as I'm aware, where that is the case. And so people who look at same-sex marriage as, "this is the end goal," and then other people are saying, "well, no, that's not the end goal. There's still issues around things like safety, for example." So in what ways do you think that this perception of South Africa as a sort of queer utopia within the context of Africa as a whole, how does that align with or not match the actual reality?

JS: There's an excellent book by B Camminga called *Transgender Refugees and the Imagined South Africa*. And they speak to this question because across the continent, and they're speaking specifically about transgender refugees, but I think it could also be applied to other letters from the acronym as well. But there's this perception that, "if I go to South Africa from Zimbabwe, if I go to South Africa from Uganda, that life will be better. And it will be better, I'll be able to express myself freely. I'll be able to have access to all these rights that aren't available in my home country." But then once people arrive in South Africa, it's a whole other set of problems. And that reminds me a lot of what happens when people come into the U.S. as well. There's this expectation that, I don't know that it exists anymore, but there used to be this expectation that you could come into the U.S. and you could make this life for yourself. And lots of people have been disappointed by that advertisement of the American Dream, but it's really similar. B writes about the imagined South Africa as this place where you can go and I just remember a story from that book where someone's packed up all the clothes that they wanted to wear at home and didn't feel like they were ever able to. Put them in a suitcase expecting to go to South Africa and be able to be the person that they are. But then they get there and there's xenophobia. And so because you're from another country, then you're facing this really intense threat of violence, of xenophobia. Then there's also the other people that you might gravitate toward when you're facing xenophobia and when you're in South Africa without maybe a support network is other people who are from your home country. And so their attitudes haven't necessarily changed from leaving that country. And so they might also have homophobic or transphobic attitudes. And so it's all of these difficulties once you arrive are there to meet you. And then are you documented? Can you work? How do you make that life for yourself? Because it's not the friendliest country to refugees, especially with the outbreaks of xenophobia that have been happening over the past couple of decades. And that's similar to how people imagine the U.S. And even in European countries, when people immigrate there, you might have to sit and prove that you were gay to the person who's interviewing you to be able to seek asylum in that country. And if you were operating

under a lot of fear or anxiety in your home country, you're not exactly probably going to be holding yourself as if you're part of a pride parade when you go to the office to seek asylum. So yeah, it's really complicated, the narrative of what South Africa is and how that interacts with the rest of the continent.

AT: And of course, we have to talk about colonialism (sigh). So generally speaking, around the world, we find that typically when the white people showed up, they often did whatever they could to erase any queerness in gender and sexuality that was part of indigenous cultures. We see this all over the globe. And one of the things I find really interesting as a correlation is, in a previous conversation with Sarah Bellows-Blakeley, who has written about essentially attitudes around girls education and the ways that that topic is weaponized and aid for girls education in other countries is weaponized. In that conversation, Sarah was talking about how this report from UNICEF, which I hadn't known UNICEF was shady, but there you go. Go listen to that episode after you listen to this one. But essentially, this UNICEF report that sort of started what we now have in terms of this international mindset and everything, they basically took the report that actual African, mostly women-run NGOs had put together about the state of girls education and what was needed. And they just completely rewrote it, essentially. And one of the things that they did was that the NGOs pointed out, here's how the history of colonialism and the continued Western economic control over the continent is impacting these things. So they pointed to things like patriarchy being concepts that were brought by colonialists. And yet the rewritten report, the version that actually got published, completely, I would say, lied and tried to frame it as "patriarchy and misogyny is inherently baked into Africa. It has always been there. That is the source of these issues." I mean, they lied about a bunch of stuff. But in particular, where I'm going with this in this context is that in your book, you mention a story from a Kenyan researcher, because they reference this attitude that queerness, so same-sex attraction specifically, was a Western concept. So we know from a historical standpoint, that pretty much always colonialism has had the opposite effect, of erasing queerness. So I find it really interesting that certain Africans are flipping that script and presenting the exact opposite of what was likely true in order to justify their own homophobia, transphobia, etc. So what's going on there?

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JS: Yeah, they often also do that with the assistance of American evangelicals. There's a lot of evangelical money that's been funneled into the African continent to stoke these homophobic sentiments. I think it's mostly political. That narrative becomes a tool of presidents who want to stay in power and who choose this group of people to point to and say all of the problems are because of them. So the existence of queer people and trans people becomes this political rhetoric to shore up political capital and to silence dissent. What happens is that Christianity has played a role in this as well. The laws criminalizing same-sex sexual acts were part of a colonial apparatus. That's a colonial penal code that's been exported from primarily Britain around the world. Different countries have had to struggle to overturn those laws and to make their laws more democratic. But the laws from that time and also the Christian missionary work of, I'll call it Christianizing, evangelizing the continent left this perception that it's un-African to be queer and trans. What you were saying earlier about the way that history is documented or the way that anthropologists who came upon these practices documented them, they weren't documented to just say, "this is how people live." They were documented to say, "look how uncivilized these people are." I think that for Black people around the world, their sexuality has been weaponized against them as well. Deviance is attached to queerness. Deviance is attached to Blackness. And so there's a desire to distance yourself as well from something that's been characterized as deviant. But yeah, the un-Africanness of same-sex sexuality has really taken hold as a way to stigmatize queer and trans Africans. And one of the people that I interviewed talked about, that's the importance of these more localized prides or more localized efforts is that if the Pride that I had mentioned earlier, for instance, is associated with the whitest part of town or the whitest area, then people who live far away from there, because apartheid removed them from their homes, look at that and think, "oh gosh, this really is a white thing. These

gay people going up and down the street wearing very little clothes, that's a white thing. That's not something that's part of who we are." And so part of the argument for having what they called Kumbulani Pride and Kumbulani Pride is called that because in isiXhosa kumbulani means to remember. And the Kumbulani Pride is very much not a celebratory pride as much as it is a remembrance of people who have died to homophobic and transphobic violence. And so the importance of those prides is that it indigenizes queerness in the neighborhoods where Black queer and trans people are likely to live and where they face most danger. It's an effort to say "we're here, we're part of you, we're also queer. This is our home. Being queer or trans is part of who we are."

And I also love that in South Africa, there's a way that trans identities have a little bit more of a traditional currency because for healers or sangomas in South Africa, the spirit that guides you is that of an ancestor. There is no requirement that that ancestor shares your gender. There's a very famous book Nkunzi Zandile Nkabinde wrote, *Black Bull Ancestors and Me: My Life as a Lesbian Sangoma* and talks about how the ancestor that guides their work was a grandfather. And so even though Nkunzi was assigned female at birth and transitioned later in life, it was that pathway. It wasn't a Western or a gay pride type of thing that allowed Nkunzi a pathway into queerness that was acceptable to their family and friends. It was this traditional pathway that allowed them to say, I'm guided by this ancestor who is a different gender than me, but that's part of why I express myself the way I do. And other sangomas, traditional healers, have written about that as well, just as that's an indigenous way to inhabit queerness that goes so far in translating queer and trans people's realities to their own communities.

AT: I think it does also help this "queerness as Western" narrative that the US does have such a cultural imperial dominance. And so if you're not familiar with that phrase, essentially that means that our movies, our TV shows, our books are very dominant internationally. We get so much American media and also the news. US news is so much more present in international media than the other way around. But all of that to say there is very much this idea that the US is more important, I would say, than it actually is in the daily lives of people in other countries. But particularly in this context, so much of that cultural imperialism really frames the US as queer-friendly, particularly compared to most countries in Africa. So, as we mentioned earlier, South Africa is the only country on the continent that has legalized same-sex marriage. Only 22 of the 54 countries have even decriminalized homosexuality. Nearly half the countries worldwide where homosexuality is outlawed are in Africa, according to a 2020 global review by the International Lesbian Gay Bisexual Trans and Intersex Association. So in that context, there is very much this juxtaposition between what you're seeing in the US, which is similar to what you were saying about people from other African countries seeing South Africa, is there is this idea that the US is this queer-friendly utopia, which of course we know it's not, particularly as of happenings in recent years, shall we say. And I want to come back to the southern US because I feel like we have been focusing more so far on South Africa. And so just to bring it home in a very literal sense, I want to come back to these perceptions. So we've been talking about how the perception of South Africa, the perception of the US as a whole, are very queer-friendly. And I would say the prevailing perception of Southern US states is that they are fundamentally conservative. And I would say that coded within that, bigoted. So we've talked about race, I'd say this certainly extends to queerness and gender queerness in various ways. But I'm also very mindful that as someone who is from Indiana, which is also, if you look at who runs the state politically, it is a very conservative state. But I am very personally aware that there are many people that look at what their state government is doing, and they don't approve of that. And states like Indiana, there are a lot of activists who are trying to push back against not just the reality, but also the perception.

JS: Yeah, absolutely. The perception of the South is conservative. It has merit in that many of the state legislatures are very conservative. One person that I talked to in Georgia said that he would like to trade some of the Georgia Republicans for California Republicans, just because the difference between their perspectives is that dramatic. But I think that glossing the entire region as conservative ends up distorting some of the things

that have helped facilitate that. So there's a lot of gerrymandering, other kinds of tactics affect the way that political representation can happen. I participated in a commemorative march from Selma to Montgomery with genderbenders who are based in South Carolina. And a couple of years before that, the Voting Rights Act had been dismantled. And so one thing that was happening was that, if you want to call it queer rights, but the movement towards marriage equality was happening. And then there was this rolling back of racial equality measures that had been put in during the Civil Rights era. And one of them was about the kinds of policies that Southern states could create around voting. And so those protections were being rolled back or whittled away. There's a lot of extractivist dynamics when it comes to progressive national politics in the South as a region. I spoke to one organizer. In fact, she's a co-founder of Southerners on New Ground, and she talked about how when she was part of NOW, the National Organization for Women, at the national level, these organizations are basically like, "nothing can happen in the South. So we just have to make it happen in Washington." So these national organizations want to put all of their focus into Washington, DC. So for instance, an organization like the Human Rights Campaign will come into a state. I don't know that they do this as much anymore because now each of these states will have its own equality organization, but they will still come to Pride and take up three to four to five times the amount of space that the state organization takes up. So what their model used to be was they would come into these states, North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia, all of them. They would have these huge dinners, galas, raise all kinds of money and then say, "well, the work that really needs to happen is at the federal level." So they would take all of that money. And so you've built this network of donors. You've built this network of volunteers and all of that contact information and all of that donor loyalty is going to the HRC, is putting all their money into federal policy changes in Washington. And so that really disadvantaged organizations in the South, especially when what you were hoping would change would be your municipal policies or your county policies or whatever's happening at the state level. National organizations would just kind of say, "it's hopeless to try to change anything in the state of (name the state)." And instead they would just take all that money and go. And then when I was in the South in 2015, what was happening was the HRC was starting to open its own offices in these states. And so instead of supporting whatever was being built in the state itself or in whatever local region, they would be trying to poach activists and create their own presence instead of contributing to what was already there. And so West Virginia is very familiar with this idea that somebody comes, takes resources and leaves. And I feel like in terms of progressive politics and definitely in what I saw in my research, that has happened across the South as well. That type of extracting resources, definitely financial ones, but sometimes of capacity or volunteers or energy and then taking it somewhere else.

AT: And I do feel like this comes back as well to that whole question of priorities because I'm seeing another parallel here with the suffrage movement where there was a big division between suffragists who said, "no, we need to focus on the states" versus "no, we need to focus on national suffrage" because the argument being that, "okay, well we can at least get women in this state suffrage. And that is a step forward." Whereas the national, I don't want to call them nationalist because that is its own word. That means something very different, but the national-focused activists were saying, "well, no, that's piecemeal. That's not accomplishing it. We need to focus on the big picture. And the big picture is a constitutional amendment." So I certainly think that both sides are valid in their own ways, but I do think in this case, the extractivist nature of what the national organizations are doing does make it much more problematic.

And one of the things that you ask in your book is, "what does it mean to operate within a space that has itself become emblematic of a kind of politics that is meant to curtail your work and your very being?" And coming back to that question of trying to apply what you call a metronormative mindset, which I'm going to have you explain because I didn't know what that meant. And I think even the way you use it is different from the way that it is typically used. But you talk about how applying this basically city slicker mindset, shall we say, and assuming that someone who lives in New York City as an example, that that person's priorities are the same as other people's priorities. So you get into this question of rurality versus urbanity. And when we have

metronormative mindsets, what does that mean in the context that you're using it? And what impact does that have on the activism we're seeing?

JS: Yeah. And I think when you're talking about suffragettes as well, I just would add that for queer and trans people who are living in these spaces, they're concerned about their safety as well. It's safety in your everyday life. It's not, dare I say "just" a vote, but it's not a vote that you would exercise once every several years or whatever. But it's their very livelihoods and safety and can I exist as who I am, where I am. And that's the kind of work that I think locally based organizers do in a way that's different from the national picture organizers. But yeah, I think about these narratives around space as something that alienates queer people from their homes. And I think about that as someone who's from West Virginia. And don't know that we're told this explicitly, but we're definitely told it implicitly that we should, to prove ourselves or make something ourselves or be successful, we should go somewhere else. We should leave West Virginia, there's not a lot of opportunity here. But instead of trying to stay and make opportunity, we really should go somewhere else. And I feel like queer people are told that, especially in rural settings, you can't have a worthwhile life here. If you want to find people who are like you, or people who will accept you or a place where you could be more comfortable, you should go to the city. And so I think about that because queer people haven't been displaced from land the same way that indigenous people have, or that Black people have, or that even thinking in Appalachia, several generations in, that poor white people sometimes are as a group. But I think that there is this element of, if not displacement, alienation between where we live and grow up and our queer or trans identities. And so I learned the term metronormative from Jack Halberstam when reading *A Queer Time and Place*, and he wrote about it as being really city-based in this mentality of the metropolis having this dominance discursively, I think, and also in terms of the imagination, especially for queer and trans people, that the city is the place you want to go. And that the norms that are operating there are the norms that are associated with progressive and good politics and good queer politics. And so there's some distance between that and rural life. I use metronormativity around thinking about queer life, but also I was using Halberstam's concept of metronormativity in conjunction with the work of Anna Tsing, who's a really interesting anthropologist who writes about some of the permeability of boundaries. And there's a phrase she uses called "out of the way places." And I thought about that phrase a lot in structuring my research because South Africa is not an out of the way place in terms of progressive policy, but its location on the African continent makes it in some ways located in an out of the way place. And I definitely think of rural U.S. as out of the way places, even though they are encapsulated in this global north, hegemonically, metronormatively dominated global north.

AT: But even within a city like Cape Town, there is that focus on what, at least here in Australia, is referred to as the central business district, the usually richer, usually more tourist-friendly area. So like you were talking about with Cape Town Pride, the Black lesbians who were still in an urban setting, but they were further from the city center and thus disadvantaged.

JS: Yeah, and so they're really at the periphery. They're really at the periphery of the city. And so that made, for me, Khayelitsha, which even though is part of Cape Town, an out of the way place. And so sometimes the places that are out of the way in my book, at least, are rural, but they're not always. And there's really interesting work too by Myrl Beam, who wrote a book called *Gay, Inc.*, about the way that even in American cities, not everybody has access to the same spaces. So whereas if you have a queer community center, the people who are volunteering are a different set of people than the people who are being served or provided a service. And the people who are funding it are a different set of people. And so there's all this class stratification, even when you're in the same city. And there are also a lot of folks who have, I've experienced this myself, going to a city and then thinking, what am I doing here? This is not really how I want to live life. What am I doing here? I thought, "oh, I can go to Cape Town," the first time I went there in 2009, "I could go to Cape Town. I can hold hands with my partner. It's going to be great. I'll come back. I'll move to Washington,

DC. We can hold hands all the time. It's going to be great. We'll be safe and whatever." But it's not like that. It's similar to that narrative of South Africa as an imagined place for living who you are. The city is this kind of imagined place that, when you get there, can really be uncomfortable. You don't wear the right kind of clothes or you don't speak the right way or whatever it is somehow ends up othering you. Even though you're a queer person, you don't fit in with queer life in the city. Eli Clare also writes really beautifully about that, finding themselves pining for home, even though that wasn't really a place they felt like they could live anymore because the city also felt uncomfortable.

AT: And if anybody wants to know more about queer women's placemaking, I have another episode with June Thomas, who wrote a great book called *A Place of Our Own: Six Spaces That Shaped Queer Women's Culture*. If you want to listen to that after you finish this one and after you go listen to the other episodes that I've already referenced in this conversation. But one of the other things that I think is important when you're talking about this metronormativity that prioritizes urban spaces and urban residents' needs and mindsets over everyone else's, is that you talk about some of these ideas that are sort of presented as, "yes, obviously this is the default." And so things like, as we mentioned earlier, marriage versus other priorities. You also talk about visibility and how the default assumption is that you should be quite literally out and proud. But for many people, that is not something that is actually a universal good for everyone. And the idea that it is really reflects privilege, right? That you are going to be safe, you're not going to lose your job, you're not going to lose your home, whether that's because you are dependent on other people who may reject you or because a landlord might legally be able to choose to not rent to you or even to evict you for that. Then the third element that you mention is urgency. And you talk about how essentially, yes, we obviously want all of these things as quickly as possible, but you have to be very mindful that this is a marathon, not a sprint. So would you like to elaborate on any of those points?

[Listen to June Thomas on queer women's spaces](#) or [read the transcript.](#)

JS: Sure. Yeah. The only thing I'll add about marriage is that there's some really interesting work Nancy Polikoff has written about in a book called *Beyond (Gay and Straight) Marriage*. One of the things that she argues is that we were making family structures queerer before the national gay and lesbian movement in the US decided to focus on marriage as a priority. And so it was kind of loosening up what relationship structures could look like. And she does this in a really systematic way in the book. It's really excellent. You should take a look at it. But she talks about relationship structures getting queerer until that point. And then that focusing on marriage actually re-galvanized a focus, a national focus on marriage, and that marriage became the conversation all the time, when really there are all kinds of different relationship structures. And marriage is kind of more like a rhetorical norm than an actual one, that nuclear family structure. But with visibility, I love the way that Rae Garringer started a website called Country Queers and started doing this oral history project. And they've since turned it into a book and they're a fellow West Virginian, but they went around and interviewed people all over the country, queer people, trans people, two-spirit people, and talked with them just about what's rural life like for you. And so it wasn't even that visibility was good or bad, although there might be those elements to these interviews too. But when Ray talked to me, they were basically saying, it's just a part of people's identity. Their queerness was just a part of their identity. It wasn't the whole thing. They were just like, "yeah, I'm here. I got my partner here. And come look at my horses." Or "I go to the Presbyterian church. I work here. I do this." And it was just one piece of their identity instead of the thing that they needed to claim or assert most visibly.

And it's really interesting in Khayelitsha, the question of visibility, because people will act like the story around Khayelitsha is that it's so dangerous to be a queer trans person there. And that is the case. There are Black lesbians who have died, who have been killed by men in their communities because of their identity or because of homophobia. But one of the things that you will also see is, you'll see women walking around wearing a shirt that says "Black lesbian" on it. There's a way that people are out in some cases, I think, without insisting on visibility as a goal. I'm not always sure that when people say, when the people who comment on this say that

people can't be out or can't be seen, I know that that is the case for some people, but I'm not sure that it is as true as we sometimes think that it is just because of the narrative that we have about a space.

AT: I do wonder how much of that is the small town mentality of kind of everybody knows everybody, especially if you grew up here. And if people who live in rural communities, particularly if that's their hometown, don't feel the need to be as explicit about their sexuality because it's like, "well, no, everybody in town knows I date women. Why would I need to wear a t-shirt or dye my hair rainbow colors?" I wonder how much of it is the idea that those signifiers are more necessary in urban environments where there are so many more strangers.

JS: Yeah, I think that that is definitely a huge piece of it, absolutely. I wonder, too, if that's part of what happens when you go to an urban environment, that anonymity seems great, but then it also could maybe result in loneliness. I don't know. One thing that brought this theme of urgency up for me was an interview that I did with a person whose organization documents the lives and tries to do documentation around preserving the stories of trans people who have been killed. And so this person, when I interviewed them, they said to me, and I think they were directly calling me out, and that's part of the reason I like to talk about this because there is a really uncomfortable dynamic around being a white person from the U.S. with that American passport, going to South Africa as a researcher. South Africa is just inundated with researchers. And so I appreciated the person saying this, and then I was able to write about it, but saying, "don't you have any problems in your own country? People are always coming here to research and acting like we need to solve this stuff yesterday, when this is not a problem that was created overnight, and it's not going to be a problem that is solved overnight. And we have to have the stamina to endure. We can't just demand a solution, use up all of our energy demanding this solution when our energy will then be gone and the solution will still not have happened." And so this activist was saying, "we could demand an end to the killing, but that won't make it happen. But the way that people's lives are preserved is something that we can work on. That is something we can do, and we can make sure that it's done with dignity. If people are killed in brutal ways, we can make sure that that's not sensationalized. We can make sure that we tell the story of who the person actually was. We can make sure that the details are accurate and that the life that they live is honored, not turned into a sensationalized story that just further dehumanizes them." And so I think that the urgency piece was about understanding that these are enduring problems and that we have got to find a way to commit to solving them in the long term.

AT: So what do you hope that readers will take away from your book? What do you hope they'll gain?

JS: I definitely want readers to take the book as a call to engage with their own contexts. We started this conversation with how was this research structured around the U.S. South and South Africa. And I arrived in those places because of my relationship with those places. And so I hope that people will take a look at wherever they are and think about, what are the stories that are told about those places and what other ways are there to engage? I really think it's important to work locally, but also to think about how we're connected to each other globally. And so I hope that the book really reflects that. And I think that finding resonance with other places in the world is really important, even as we're working in our own contexts on the things that matter to us.

AT: Join us next time on the Infinite Women podcast. And remember, well-behaved women rarely make history.