

# Crossing the 'Pink Line'

Mark Gevisser, interviewed by Matt Seaton

“Globally, the new battleground is over so-called gender ideology. This is defining the next human rights frontier.”

May 8, 2021

On May 3, 2021, we published “‘Moffie’ and Me,” Mark Gevisser’s essay about several recent South African films that address the militarist cult of homophobic masculinity in the late apartheid era. The main film under review, *Moffie*, takes its title from a derogatory term for a gay man used in South Africa.

This was no abstract concern for Gevisser, who came of age when military service was not only compulsory, but also entailed active duty in South Africa’s decades-long, bloody border wars against pro-independence insurgents in Angola, Zambia, and Namibia. As he relates in his essay, several deferments—which included undergraduate study at Yale—had run out and he was finally saved from serving only by the waning regime’s lost will to enforce conscription.

By then, Gevisser had returned to his homeland after a spell working in New York as a journalist for the *Village Voice* and *The Nation*. “I came back in 1990 with the draft of “The Great South African Novel” in my suitcase, and within months, I realized I needed to bin it,” he told me via email this week. “I knew nothing about the place of my birth! This, I think, is why I threw myself into journalism in those turbulent transitional years.”

His American education had involved not only literature, he said, but also feminism, gay rights, and AIDS activism—and these themes have continued to inform his work ever since. One of his earlier books was



Fiona McPherson  
Mark Gevisser

a political biography of Thabo Mbeki, South Africa's second post-apartheid president, who governed the country for thirteen years after succeeding Nelson Mandela.

“[Mbeki] was, famously, an AIDS denialist, and his racial politics were corrosive,” Gevisser said. “This was at the root of his AIDS denialism, too, and had the effect of unnecessarily gutting the public service of qualified people. We live with that legacy today, and with the corruption that came through party patronage on his watch.

“Still, he was a thoughtful intellectual, and not corrupt himself,” he added. “I missed that terribly, as did so many of us, in the dark and empty Zuma years.”

In that light, I wondered what he made of Jacob Zuma's successor, the former labor union leader Cyril Ramaphosa. “He is a good man, an honest man, a democrat, a technocrat,” Gevisser responded. “But he is politically weak and way too cautious. He has not managed to stop the rot in the ANC.”

Since Gevisser's essay centers on conditions for homosexuals during the apartheid era, I wanted his view about what had changed in South Africa since that time. “South Africa quickly became a global leader in LGBTQ+ rights after the fall of apartheid,” he explained. “But there is also endemic violence against gender-nonconforming people. This is both a subset of the gender-based violence that is a curse of this country and a backlash against the space that has been claimed.”

These are issues he has now pursued in a far more extensive way in his most recent book, *The Pink Line: Journeys Across the World's Queer Frontiers* (2020), which tells ten, deeply reported stories that illustrate the stark disjunctions of rights and justice that now abound in different parts of the world. The genesis of the project, he said, was a decade ago:

The idea came to me when I read about Tiwonge Chimbalanga and Stephen Monjeza, from the central African country Malawi, in early 2010. After they held a public engagement ceremony, they were charged with “carnal knowledge against the order of nature.” My partner and I had just married in South Africa, and I thought about what I got out of it—spousal benefits on his new job in Paris, where we moved—compared to them: a degrading public trial, a fourteen-year sentence, and then, after a pardon forced by international pressure, exile in South Africa for Tiwonge, a transgender woman.

It came to me that there was a new global “Pink Line” dividing my experiences from theirs, a new human rights frontier describing—and dividing—the world in a way unimaginable even a generation ago.

Given that perspective, of generational change, I was interested in what he made of the redirection of political energies—particularly in the US after the historic success of the same-sex marriage movement—away from “traditional” lesbian and gay rights and toward nonbinary and trans rights. This was precisely the object of study, he responded, of the US chapter of his book, which follows a group of “LGBTQQA” youth from Ann Arbor, Michigan:

[We've seen a] dramatic increase of visibility of trans folk due both to the growth of the movement and to increased access to affirming medicine, at the very time that right-wing culture warriors were looking for new battles to fight now that the majority of Americans were in favor of marriage equality. Enter the bathroom wars—and now the playing-field wars.

Globally, the new battleground is over “gender ideology”—even cuddly Pope Francis is fierce about this, railing against the concept of constructed “gender” (which leads to transgenderism and all manner of evil) rather than God-given “sex.” Watch this space: as in the days of Anita Bryant, it's going to be about the classroom and children again.

### **Mark Gevisser**

Mark Gevisser, a South African writer and journalist, is the author of *A Legacy of Liberation: Thabo Mbeki and the Future of the South African Dream* (2009), *Lost and Found in Johannesburg: A Memoir* (2014), and, most recently, *The Pink Line: Journeys Across the World's Queer Frontiers* (2020).

### **Matt Seaton**

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