To be honest, there are still occasions that I say I am transsexual; I am perhaps 70 percent lesbian and 30 percent trans.—Leila

There are always critical moments in archival diggings and ethnographic hearings that become earthquakes: suddenly you are hit by something that shakes the ground from under your project’s design, analytical structure, or expected emergences. At times, it may be so basic as to make you think you have been asking the wrong questions all along. Leila’s statement was one such moment. What did it mean to conceive of identification as quantifiably divisible?

As I have indicated already in several chapters, what I heard from and about trans persons and observed in their daily living practices at times seemed familiar, in the sense that their stories resonated with what I had learned about transsexual lives and practices in the United States. At other times, these narratives and practices were so unfamiliar that they made the familiarity of the other moments suspect, a case of “unwarranted familiarity.”¹ I do not propose to smooth out these unmatching moments.² Instead, I will conclude this book by asking, What concept of self-hood makes Leila’s statement understandable? In what contexts, and how, does the issue of identification and naming oneself (trans, lesbian, gay, straight, etc.) matter at all?

Over the past several decades, literature on the concept of self in several academic disciplines—including philosophy, intellectual and cultural history, anthropology and sociology, psychology and social psychology, and literature—has been growing.³ Differing strands from this literature have facili-
tated my thinking here, but what I have found most useable are concepts of a narrativizing self and narratives of the self as the stories that are available and are continuously generated for configuring one’s sense of being in the world. I am more interested, then, in historically contextualized accounts of the emergence of the modern concept of the self. Wahrman playfully names an earlier period “‘before the self’: indicating a time that lacked a sense of a stable inner core of selfhood like that which will emerge at the turn of the eighteenth century [in England]. This ‘pre-self,’ as it were, had not been contained or well represented by the spatial model of surface versus depth, which was later to become the main modern visual aid for understanding selfhood. ‘The world’s all face,’ it will turn out, was more than a metaphor.” In Wahrman’s historical narrative, what he calls “the ancien régime of identity” was characterized “by the relatively commonplace capacity of many to contemplate—without necessarily facing some inescapable existential crisis (and often the reverse)—that identity, or specific categories of identity, could prove to be mutable, malleable, unreliable, divisible, replaceable, transferable, manipulatable, escapable, or otherwise fuzzy around the edges. Conversely, it was a regime of identity not characterized by an axiomatic presupposition of a deep inner core of selfhood.”

Like Wahrman, I am not primarily focused on how concepts of self are articulated in the philosophical and other texts of a period. Rather, I want to understand how selves are professed and performed proficiently. For instance, when I discuss vernacular psychology’s concept of self, I am interested in it because of its vast resonance as it circulates in several sites relevant to my study of transsexuality in Iran, and most particularly how the concept does (or does not) make sense through the narratives and practices of trans, gay, and lesbian persons I came to know.

I also work with the possibility of many such stories being available at any given time and place, even though one of them may have acquired a dominant place, such as the interiorized deep self in contemporary Euro-American societies. My adoption of a narrativizing self is not meant as a descriptive definition. I propose to use it heuristically. While previous chapters have attempted to map out the contours of state regulations, religious requirements, and societal rules that enable and necessitate living selves that profess themselves variously at different nodes of sociality, now I want to turn to narrative details that may tell us how some people in Iran, in the contemporary period, make sense of their being in the world. These narratives, I suggest, articulate a sense of self contingently constituted within particular nodes of relations, through what one does at a given conjunction of networks of affection, work, play, and...
other spaces of social presence. In Riley’s words, “My self might be considered, tautly, as consisting of nothing more than what it does.”

This is not the same as “the relational self,” which has its own genealogy in psychology. The relational self in that discourse still references a deep self that acquires its depth through relations with other deep selves. I am attempting to grapple with a sense of self that is not necessarily and coherently perceived and experienced as anything to do with some deep inner truth about oneself, but ventures on “a profound superficiality.” From this viewpoint, I find de Certeau’s proposition that “each individual is a locus in which an incoherent (and often contradictory) plurality of such relational determinations interact” more productive: This is a concept of a networked self-in-conduct, where performances of self are situated in a space defined by numerous connections with other selves, within numerous institutional sites, the intersection of any number of which produce a contingency of located-ness, and thus a sense of self contingent to that knot—a “working conjunction,” “a bundle of results, a cluster of effects and outcomes.”

Erving Goffman’s concept of self is similarly helpful: “The self, then, as a performed character, is not an organic thing that has a specific location, whose fundamental fate is to be born, to mature, and to die; it is a dramatic effect arising diffusely from a scene that is presented, and the characteristic issue, the crucial concern, is whether it will be credited or discredited.” Goffman’s idea would emphasize that the produced self will not be one character because its self-ness at any particular time and place will depend on a contingent scene of performance. In Butler’s articulation, “it is an identity tenuously constituted in time” and “not predetermined by some manner of interior essence.” The place and context will differ from one performance to another, and the audience will differ from one performance to another; different selves are thus produced all the time and any requirement of coherence among all these selves would fail to take into its understanding this always-changing genesis.

Despite its central argument around the performative constitution of self, Goffman’s analysis of “whether it [the self as a performed character] will be credited or discredited” at times tends to reintroduce a distinction between a self and its performances. For instance, he speaks of “the dissonance created by a misspelled word, or by a slip that is not quite concealed by a skirt” (55), or that “the impression of reality fostered by a performance is a delicate, fragile thing that can be shattered by very minor mishaps. The expressive coherence that is required in performances points out a crucial discrepancy between our all-too-human selves and our socialized selves” (56). Goffman’s analysis of the many sites and possibilities of “misrepresentation,” while focused on its reception,
sees its risks as arising from deception—“to be duped and misled, for there are few signs that cannot be used to attest to the presence of something that is not really there” (58). While he critiques the “common-sense view,” which receives a performance as “a false front” (59), in other places he marks some performances as “concealing” certain matters (67) and distinguishes between “performances that are quite false” and “ones that are quite honest” (66), although at the same time he makes the criterion of the “coming off” of a performance its reception by an audience as sincere (71). Sincerity seems to refer to what an individual performer believes it to be. But surely this may be unknown and unknowable to the receiving audience who, according to Goffman, is the judge of sincerity. Agnes’s successful performance of a present womanhood with an intersex history over several years persuaded a team of psychologists, psychoanalysts, and sociologists at the University of California, Los Angeles, that she had been sincere. It is not accidental that Garfinkel’s engagement with Goffman is carried out through a discussion of Agnes. Under observance in several domains, including work, friends and family, and medical professionals, Agnes “passed” or, in Garfinkel’s words, “It would be less accurate to say of her that she has passed than that she was continually engaged in the work of passing.” “The deception,” which was reported later and has provided the central material for much subsequent contested debate, became so named as a result of information presumably provided by Agnes herself years later.

The “coming off” of any performance for the audience cannot thus reference the intentions and beliefs of the performer. Rather, it references previous performances that have produced the effect of the currently dominant script, as if it were some essential definition. Significantly, Garfinkel noted, from Agnes’s performances, the performative nature of all doing of gender:

*Agnes’ practices accord to the displays of normal sexuality in ordinary activities a “perspective by incongruity.” They do so by making observable that and how normal sexuality is accomplished through witnessable displays of talk and conduct, as standing processes of practical recognition, which are done in singular and particular occasions as a matter of course, with the use by members of “seen but unnoticed” backgrounds of commonplace events, and such that the situation question, “What kind of phenomenon is normal sexuality?” . . . accompanies that accomplishment as a reflexive feature of it, which reflexivity the member uses, depends upon, and glosses in order to assess and demonstrate the rational adequacy for all practical purposes of the indexical question and its indexical answers. . . . Agnes was self-consciously equipped to teach normals how normals make sexuality happen*
in commonplace settings as an obvious, familiar, recognizable, natural, and serious matter of fact. Her specialty consisted of treating the “natural facts of life” of socially recognized, socially managed sexuality as a managed production so as to be making these facts of life true, relevant, demonstrable, testable, countable, and available to inventory, cursory representation, anecdote, enumeration, or professional psychological assessment.19

Judith Butler, from a different direction and some three decades later, suggested the concept of “sedimented acts.”20 “[T]here is no preexisting identity by which an act or attribute might be measured; there would be no true or false, real or distorted acts of gender. . . . [G]ender is an ‘act,’ broadly construed, which constructs the social fiction of its own psychological interiority” (528). If there is an “original” script anywhere, it is performances already enacted.21 For instance, in the context of my observations, when one MtF says reproachfully of another MtF: even real women do not walk/talk/gesticulate/use makeup like this, “this” is what is considered way off the current dominant script of womanhood. Yet, for some MtFs, it is that very off-the-script performance of womanhood that is aspired to in order to emphasize one’s un-manhood and at the same time one’s womanhood as different from the dominant presentations of womanhood.

In this context, I receive claims of authenticity, excess, and so on as regulatory scripts for proficiency of sex/gender/sexuality performances. The question, then, is no longer, for instance, what is essentially distinct between gay and lesbian identifications and trans identifications as it is sometimes articulated (in terms of the desire for bodily modifications, for example, or the lack thereof). Rather it becomes: What performative differences enable one to pronounce that X is trans and Y is ivakhvahar. When Sheila, an MtF, after attending the meeting with film producer Motamedian, reported to a trans support group meeting that the persons he had invited were not trans but ivakhvahar, she had arrived at that judgment without any knowledge of the persons’ desire for bodily change one way or another. Yet based on their performative cues—what Garfinkel would call “indexical particulars”—she made a confident cognitive pronouncement. How do such pronouncements regulate the lines of demarcation, police certain presentations, and protect one community of identification that has acquired legal legibility against “intruders”? The larger society receives trans persons as a group; in Goffman’s concept, as a “team of performers” (79). This group reception makes the acceptance of individual performance of trans-hood dependent “on the good conduct” of the team (82). In an important sense, however, contra Goffman, there is no “one-man team”
because the meaning engendered by any performance depends on collaboration and communication with the audience for that performance, even if that audience may be oneself alone. The meaning of any performance is formed only at the moment of its doing and reception.

The located, contextual, and contingent character of our daily practices of the self makes any demand for coherence of the self problematic. Such coherency demands perform disciplinary and regularity work. Some subject positions are under continuous disbelief concerning their coherence; for others, coherence is taken for granted and one’s proficiency in performance is assumed, thus producing what proficiency in performance of that identification means. Others’ proficiency is always under the sign of deceit, passing, pretending, and inauthenticity.

With these reflections, I return to some of the narratives that I have partially presented already in this book. What are the contingent elements that make the narratives and practices I heard and observed understandable? How can we move beyond thinking of narrativization as an act of making sense of lives already lived to what makes living lives possible? Telling stories about our lives, in other words, is not significant because in hindsight it allows us to make sense of a life already lived. It is significant because through telling these stories, we live meaningfully the present moment of our lives.

IT IS OCTOBER 17, 2006, at the weekly support meeting of the Navvab Safavi Emergency Center of the Office for the Socially Harmed of the Welfare Organization. The meeting is led by Mr. Asadbaygi, the resident clinical psychologist. The previous week, he had talked about the importance of “knowing oneself” (khaudshinasi—literally “selfology”), and had asked everyone to contemplate that topic for the following week’s conversation. He opens the day by asking if the group members had engaged in “knowing oneself.” He is dismayed to see that his proposition had not been taken seriously. Shahla, an MtF, blurts out that she had no time for it. What was she doing then? “I was busy with my boyfriend, cooking, making sure I make myself up in the style he likes.” Asadbaygi is clearly annoyed, “Are you that dependent on him?” Shahla is not fazed, “Of course, I am really in love with him.” The group takes the conversation away from Asadbaygi’s agenda. Yasaman, also an MtF, who was there the previous week in a black chador but on this day has shown up in his/her army uniform, is expected by the group to explain. “Yes, I do consider myself MtF, I do want to go for srs, but I am also prepared to take my time. Once I change sex, I won’t be able to pursue some of my ambitions. In any case, when I am in
masculine clothes, I enjoy doing manly things; when I am in feminine clothes, I like to do womanly things.” Maryam, another MtF, asks, “You mean you live for society, and for social sake you are willing to compromise what you want? When we ask you by what name you want to be called, your male name or your female name, you say it depends; for society’s sake you are willing to shift your name and clothes?” At this point, Yasaman becomes upset, “I feel the group is challenging my trans-ness; how are you going to invent a trans barometer and measure everyone’s degree of trans-ness? I think I am more of a trans than many other transes; perhaps my appearance doesn’t show it; but one has to be smart and think that five years this way, five years that way, won’t make much of a difference for my desire. One has to be flexible for important desires in one’s life.” Houri, an MtF, supports Yasaman’s statement: “We all have to do that. I had to work as a construction worker for a while; I had to make sure my voice was as coarse as I could make it; I had to shout at some workers and order them around; I had to act manly. I hope people don’t take up hostile positions against Yasaman as happened with Ghazal last week.”

The conversation continues to be centered on how each person felt about being in what “gender habit.” Houri explains that now she could not imagine acting like a man and being in male clothes (at the time she was preop). Parvin, a recent postoperative MtF, explains that she still lives as a man at home; it is very critical for her to remain with her family and in the neighborhood everyone knew her as a man; there was no way she could switch to being female at home. That was the compromise she had to make with her family and she would live up to it no matter what others thought of it. When she is at her boyfriend’s house, she explains, she goes into female clothes. Shahla, currently in female habit, concurs, “Yeah, if my current relationship doesn’t work out and I have to go back to work, I’d switch clothes to be able to get better jobs.”

Knowing Oneself

“Not having the time for ‘knowing oneself’” was a remarkable statement. For Asadbaygi, this may have meant a lack of seriousness on the part of a trans subject. Did the transes find his proposed exercise in defining their self irrelevant to their lives? I wondered. Or was the shift in the conversation an assertion of their own agenda and a defiance of the disliked Asadbaygi? In other contexts, in conversations among themselves, some transes often had talked about the importance of “knowing oneself” as a critically important process. Many would emphasize that people with non-normative gender/sex identifications should not rush into trans self-cognition under pressure from family, peers, lovers,
or the media hype. The older and more experienced *transes* consistently encouraged more reluctant *transes* to use the state-demanded (and usually cost-covered) four to six months of therapy as an opportunity for self-reflection and cognition. How can we, then, understand that in this meeting Asadbaygi’s calling for self-knowledge immediately had produced a long conversation about clothes and names?

On first hearing, Shahla’s response and the direction of the conversation among *transes* after Asadbaygi’s initial opening gesture may sound like willful resistance designed to ignore and go around his Alcoholics Anonymous–type exercise. Yet on another level, Shahla was performing precisely her sense of self, her enactment of “knowing oneself”: to cook, to make herself beautiful, to please her boyfriend—all these constituted her sense of being/doing woman.

The following week, in the unsupervised *trans* meeting at the offices of *Psychology and Society*, Houri advised other MtFs about how to improve their doing woman. “Instead of socializing among yourselves, you should go to where *straight* [pronounced as in English] women go. Go to women’s places such as hair salons and women’s sections of buses; learn woman-talk, what their style of speech is, see what topics women chat about, see how they walk, how they carry themselves in public, learn what women do, like cooking, sewing, makeup skills; you are going to need these skills in life—that is how you become a woman.”

These doings were also the kind of doing (wo)man that so many MtFs and FtMs narrativized and recited as cognitive moments of their growing up into (wo)manhood. Houri’s recollections of her childhood centered on time spent with and around her mother, doing whatever she did. Spaces and activities that MtFs had shared with mothers, sisters, sisters’ friends, brothers’ wives, and neighbors’ daughters were the sites and senses of developing a sense of oneself as a woman. Similarly, FtMs’ sense of being men was narrativized through what they shared with fathers and other men.

As we saw in chapter 2, Munirah’s narrative of sex/gender dis-identification worked around switching clothes, getting a haircut, changing manners and name, and working and living as a man. Marziah, who became Bihruz, described her/his childhood as fully gender-cross-identified: s/he liked military uniforms and wished s/he could join the army like her/his brother and father, and she/he played boys’ games. Doing (wo)man also implies undoing it. Once Marziah/Bihruz dropped out of school and stayed home, learning “womanly work, such as weaving cloth, spinning yarn, cooking and laundry,” women’s “habits and temperament affected me and I was left with no masculine inclinations.”24
When Sina had noted, for a day’s activity in the journal he was keeping for Dr. Mohammadi, that he had cooked the family’s lunch, he made sure he mentioned that he did this with his father—that was the men’s day to do the meal preparation and he was emphatically not doing something womanly with his mother. His relationship with his mother was defined in terms of his looking after her needs, driving her to a doctor’s appointment, moving heavy loads around the house for her—in general being the supportive son for his mother. His negative reactions to catcalls on the streets, his sense of a female relative’s “inappropriate” dress or gestures, his entitlement to tell them how to behave decently—these were all cognitive signs of his manhood.25

As we saw in Marziah/Biruz’s case, desire for military service is narrated as a proof of manhood; enjoying housework a sign of womanhood. Delara’s dislike of house-cleaning jobs and taking to work extracting copper wire from appliances were integral to his account of being not-woman-but-man. For many trans persons, feeling that one is man of the house or woman of the house (mard-i khanah, khanum-i khanah) was what it was all about: The sense of being a (wo)man was not precisely focused as much on one’s physiological body (and even less on one’s genitalia) as it was on “clothes, makeup, cooking, doing what women do”—being a woman in the world meant belonging to spaces of womanhood and acting as women did.26 These included, in early childhood, the others with whom one played and what games were preferred, but also looking like a woman and dancing like one, putting on makeup like mother, dressing up like mother—professing a woman-self through playful displays and performative presentations of womanhood. In that context, desiring men and being desired by men become performances of womanhood, given the dominant, modern, heteronormalized binary of the two opposite sexes. Alternatively, for FtMs, pursuing higher education, getting a good job, supporting one’s parents, getting married, and forming a family were what being a man in the world was about.

The numerous contested conversations about “going into and staying in habit” point to the centrality of clothes to one’s sense of being in the world. Mahnaz’s style of outerwear and her hanging out on streets with other young men—which outraged her husband—was tied up with her sense of masculinity. Likewise, Yasaman articulated her/his related sense of doing a gender and being in its expected habit: When s/he was in masculine clothes, s/he enjoyed doing manly things; in women’s clothes s/he did womanly things. Parvin lived as man, in man’s clothes, using a man’s name at home to remain with her/his family; at her/his boyfriend’s home, s/he switched to a female habit and did womanly things. Shahla emphasized that if her/his current relation
did not work, s/he would switch back to male clothes so that s/he could get better jobs.

The sense of self in habit has been intensified by governmental sartorial policies since 1979 (and in a different modality since the 1920s), which has become a thread of the effect of “clothes make a person”—at least in the field of public visibility. For FtMs, in particular, one’s feeling in clothes, a matter of habit, frequently was emphasized as demarcating gender/sex. Mehran’s female friend’s going to school in trousers (not in skirts) was proof that s/he was a trans. If a female person could tolerate wearing manteau-rusari (overcoat and scarf), she must be a woman.27 This public effect of identifying a (wo)man with a particular style of clothing also has contributed to the failure of governmental attempts to solidly police the trans/homosexual border and has in turn incited, as Jackson has noted, in a different context, “its own fetishisation of surface effect” and provided ample space for sartorial resisting desires—by men, women, as well as by non-normative genders/sexes/sexualities.28

Linked to the issue of one’s “gender habit,” for MtFs, was the use and style of facial makeup—a repeatedly narrated sign not only indicating not-manhood, but also proposed as a demarcation of trans (as distinct from gay) subjectivity. Recall Taraneh’s contention on the Yad-i yaran program: “The easiest criterion I can offer you for recognizing which male is a same-sex-player and which transsexual is to look at a person’s appearance. A same-sex-player male goes for same-sex-playing with a full male appearance. But the male who uses makeup, puts on lipstick, this person is not a man. S/he is a woman.”

In numerous narratives (both in earlier accounts of the 1940s through the 1970s and those of the persons I interviewed in 2006–7), several sex/gender performance proficiencies emerged as signs of (wo)manhood. Desiring to have a husband and being desired (and asked for in marriage) by a man was a sign of womanhood; more generally, success (or failure) in heterosexual marriage (especially among female-born persons) was a sign of gender-normative correspondence (or the lack thereof). Several trans subjects, as we saw in chapter 7, turned to marriage to test themselves.

For Delara, Mahnaz, and several other born-females, falling in love with women meant they must be not-woman. Similarly, Sina’s perceived gay teacher’s falling in love with him proved that Sina was not a girl. Arezu’s love of belly dancing and cooking from her early years configured her own self-perception as a girl. Not only desires for, and enacting, sex/gender marked practices of daily life defined man/womanhood, but imagining dying in a particularly sexed body (“I want to be seen as [fe]male when my body is washed for burial”) was also a critical mark and a reason given for srs.
While some persons referenced their bodily sensations as indicating their gender/sexual identification (“I can’t take a shower with my clothes off”; “I can’t look into a mirror naked”), others defined their bodily gender in connection to partners: “S/he wants to see a body of the opposite sex next to her/him.” Not only was doing (wo)manhood most often presented as being a (wo)man, but doing also was frequently articulated in situated terms that were dependent on others. Sina articulated his own manliness in term of a relation-location: when he was with a girl, “I want her to feel she has a man in her life.” As Boellstorff has noted for warias, “. . . the process of occupying it involves from the outset the reactions and commentary of others. Unlike gay men, waria never speak of ‘opening themselves’ . . . in terms of revealing who they are; indeed they often discover who they are because others point it out to them.”

Transition decisions were as frequently articulated in terms of their social effects. For some this required flexibility. Yasaman, as we saw, was willing to postpone srs—what did five years this way or that way matter?—to pursue her/his career options. Even if one could be happy to live a trans-identified life with little bodily modification, one would transition because not doing so would be unacceptable to others, as Zahra elaborated in response to the questions, “If you could live in a man’s clothes, would that not be enough? If you could live like a man from all points of view, would you be willing not to go for sex change?” Zahra’s response: “I have lived in Lahijan for the past twenty years; my father is a well-known figure; my family will not accept it; I will have problems with my partner; our society will not accept it; I myself cannot accept it.”

“The world” in various ways and through innumerable emotional, sociocultural, and institutional points of power tended to withhold its acceptance of such self-cognitions and insisted on reorganizing one’s sense of being in these spaces and doing these activities around a focus on the body and, for some, on the genitalia. When Arezu’s father and brothers could not hear her statement “I am a woman” and responded by “doing everything it takes to make you a man,” she eventually risked her life and attempted to cut off her own genitalia to close off that possibility. Many of the emotional, sociocultural, and institutional locations of one’s being—one’s located habitus—are organized around correspondence between one’s being a (wo)man and a set of bodily marks. But as Warnke asks, “Why does wrongness manifest itself as an issue of genitalia?” As we have seen, for many trans persons in Iran the reorganization of this sense of “wrongness” around genitalia emerged in adolescence; more often than not, they articulated their desire for “someone of their own sex” in abject terms of same-sex-playing—as sinful or as disgustingly horrible—and
thus something about that “sameness” was questioned. As Kamran put it, “Be-
cause we don’t know; we all go through that stage”—that stage of being tor-
mented by the question of, “Am I a same-sex-player? How do I know?” and
“What am I then?”

Figuring out the answers to these questions does not necessarily or usually
(at least in the case of gender/sexual non-normative persons with whom
I worked) take shape through therapeutic self-talk. People figure out these
questions, as we have seen, through living in various arrangements and re-
lationships and by working at particularly gender-defined jobs—for MtFs, for
instance, going to the army to see if they really are not manly or being the
homemaker for one’s boyfriend; for FtMs, pursuing careers and goals of educa-
tion that are associated with men. The shift from the “selfology” of Asadbaygi’s
understanding to professing one’s activities, choice of clothes and names, and
daily doings indeed signified a sense of self that, in numerous trans narra-
tives and practices, was reiteratively and persistently configured within located
contingencies of innumerable details of daily lives. Proficient performance in
these nodes was what being/doing (wo)man was about. What seemed to mat-
ter for trans subject-hood was articulated in terms of figuring out how to live
livable lives—with families, with partners, in terms of employment, of getting
medical and legal changes they wanted, and of what made them comfortable
in different spaces of life. The meaning of claiming or being hailed as trans
or gay or lesbian thus was produced in conversations in which many partici-
pated; it was not simply an inner feeling that found a name. Moreover, living
livable lives, for some, called for flexibility and the ability to switch back and
forth when necessary: living a (fe)male life, in (fe)male clothes with a (fe)male
name, in some spaces and times, but doing the other gender/sex in other times
and places.

As we have seen, the very process of naming is itself a social cognition,
sometimes in private homes, sometimes in a doctor’s office, sometimes in a
TS support group, and even on a TV documentary. How others recognize and
name one becomes an element of one’s own self-constitution. As Sina (FtM)
one once put it,

In high school, we had a male literature teacher whom everyone thought
was ivakhvahar. He fell in love with me. A gay man never falls in love with a
girl. Sometimes, my friends in school would joke and tell me [the teacher]
was my future wife. When I was paid attention to by guys, instead of being
pleased, I would become irritated. There was this guy I met in university
entrance exam preparation classes. One day, he said, “Every time I talk
with you, it's not like talking with a girl, it's more like talking with my other male friends." Eventually, I had to tell him I wasn't interested in having boyfriends. It was in those years that I realized I can be and must become a man. I told my mother. I told her I wanted to become a man. My mother first thought this was because I was very ambitious, and said, “But there are a lot of successful women in the world, you can be a successful woman.” So I told her, “No, you don’t understand, I must become a successful man.”

Unlike many trans persons, Mohsen did not trace any cognition of difference from his peers to a cross-gender-identified childhood: “I didn’t feel differently in childhood, but in high school, I was the center of attention of my classmates. One of my classmates, a close friend, told me one day jokingly, go and change your sex and we will get married. In high school I was very well liked, though some would tell me to stay away from them, otherwise they’d get into trouble. I guess I must have been acting in a way that I was oblivious to. That is when I started feeling I must be different, but I was totally comfortable with myself.”

Self-cognition navigated its emergence in relation with others, including those others who may have been identified by other social actors as the same. As we saw in chapter 7, Zia and Houri’s close friendship over many years enabled both of them to decide who was gay and who was trans. Houri narrated this at some length:

Twelve or thirteen years ago, I met Zia. At the time, I was working in an educational institute as secretary at the front desk. He was a very young teenager and had registered in a class. I am about ten years older than him. When I saw him, it was as if I saw my own persona, ten years younger. At that time, I still didn’t know anything about sex change, I thought I was homosexual, and that bothered me a lot. Ever since my years of puberty I’d noticed I had no desire for girls. This was step number one in realizing I was different from others, different from my age cohorts. I also began to realize I had a special feeling for men. In family gatherings, in school, I looked at men with a special feeling. In eighth grade, I fell in love with my math teacher—as a result, I always did very well in math! This was my first romance.

I interrupted here, resisting: “High school crushes are very common. Everyone has them. They don’t mean much about long-term tendencies. Not everyone ends up identifying as transsexual or even homosexual. Just two days ago, I heard very similar accounts from a gay man, now in his early fifties.” “Ha!” Houri retorted triumphantly. “The difference is this: That feeling of mine then
brought me to who I am in life today. So the meaning of my first love in high school is not the same as your crush or your gay friend’s first love.” It was impossible to argue with her retrospective reading—my narrative about my high school crushes not meaning transsexuality was, after all, as retrospectively defined as hers. Houri continued:

Look, I feel a sense of peace and comfort when I am with other women; this comes from feeling the same. It works the other way around as well; my sister-in-law always said she felt totally relaxed [pronounced as in English] in my company but not with my other brothers. She’d even ask me to help her get dressed, fix her bra, whatever. After middle school and a couple of years of high school, I couldn’t tolerate hiding my feelings from my family, but couldn’t let anything out either. So I quit school and moved to Tehran, and got myself a job. At this time, I still thought I was homosexual. I started socializing in homosexual circles, but I was not happy, I didn’t feel comfortable there either. For a while I tried living like a straight man. I took a job in a very masculine environment, thinking if I circulate only among masculine men I will change. At work, I was really good in performing my role, but at night, I would rush home to be myself, to look as I wanted, do as it pleased me. This was a torment. I even went and introduced myself to the army to do my service, thinking that would help me become a man, even though I knew from others that I could get an exemption as homosexual. It was also in these years that my information circle widened, through the Internet, here and there, and when I met other kids/peers [bachchah-ha] like myself. I met a wonderful older woman, Anahita, who had undergone srs twenty-four years earlier. She has two kids. Her husband had a first marriage; when one of his kids was a year and a half old and the other only two months, his wife died; soon after they met and got married; both kids think Anahita is their mother. I envied her life. She helped me a great deal; I realized that is the life I wanted; not just having sex with another man; my life differs a great deal from Zia’s life.

Houri had had a long-term romantic relationship for seven years, but her partner had died in a car accident. Around the same time, Zia moved to Tehran and they have been roommates for several years now. Living together gave them both a chance of seeing each other’s daily practices, desires, and needs. Once Zia got his own job and life separate from his parents, he decided it was time to figure it out if he was MtF or gay. He went to several therapists; one told him he was trans, but he was not sure. He said that he and Houri had a lot in common; he would have been happy if he were a woman, but he didn’t want it enough
to go through all the surgeries; he enjoyed dressing up as a woman, and they often borrowed clothes from each other. But for him, this was a hobby to be enjoyed at home or in parties; otherwise he went to work as a man.31

The category of “undecided,” in a conundrum, bilataklif in this context pointed not to confusion over “identity” that could be clarified in some way, perhaps through therapy—including Islam-therapy. Rather it referenced the challenge of deciding what overall identification would make for an optimally livable life. Most transes invoked the category bilataklif to refer to the long, at times indefinite transition (or nontransition for that matter)—namely, the period in which the person had opted to live in between. For instance, many MtFs take hormones and live in habit, removing their testes only if it becomes necessary because of severe atrophy and possible infection. These styles of living also pose situational bilataklif, such as which entrance to a shrine one ought to go through, or Zia’s “I don’t know what I am” pronouncement in a Bihzisti meeting. The insistent reiteration of being in an in-between position gives some gays the safety of semi-openness and offers more flexible (at times playful) options for social maneuvering to transes.32 Contrary to Taraneh’s categorical statement that, from their appearance, one can tell who is gay and who is trans, these appearances themselves have a range of displayed (numudan) femininity, from fully woman-dressed and made up to milder makeup (long fingernails, but not polished, plucked eyebrows, maybe a shade of mascara), with a range of gestures and walking styles, and including more occasional displays such as Zia’s dressing up in women’s clothes on occasions and for parties. It is people like Kia (see chapter 1) and Zia who indeed do go through pressure of “clarifying” what they are. What “complicates” their self-cognition (and others’ cognition of them) is, as Taraneh also articulated, the common socializing sites of MtFs and gay men. A somewhat similar pressure is at work on FtMs, but many more FtMs seem to live more private lives and to get married and melt into heteronormalized life, whereas more often MtFs, even postoperatively, remain isolated from their families, their previous boyfriends breaking up with them and going for “real” women for marriage, and new suitors turning away when they learn of their previous status.

The issue of gender/sexual performance proficiency was articulated frequently around the notion of “suzhah shudan.” Literally meaning “becoming a subject,” this concept has to do with how others talk about a person in approbation, in gossip—it is the notion of something about you that is generated by the circulation of what is said about you and by how you are seen by others. It signals willed self-scarabalization, a much disapproved of state of social self-presentation; it signifies failure, incompetence, and lack of proficiency in gen-
der/sex performance. The referentiality in becoming a suzhouh is not to some inner truth, but to how one is positioned in the circulation of social conversations, how one is deciphered, sometimes scandalously, sometimes because they are seen to perform in excess, the excess defined by how in reception by other people—peers, naja, the press, a social worker, family—one is seen to be excessively womanly.33

Zia’s judgment of others’ daily troubles was formulated in terms of their competence (or lack thereof) in sexual/gender performance. What Zia termed gender/sexual incompetence cannot be seen as effects of individual failings. As discussed in several chapters, state regulation of public gender presentation in the decades after 1979 made living as a feminine male-bodied person not only extremely hazardous but also nearly impossible, and may have contributed to the desire for sex change on the part of some woman-presenting males. Correspondingly, the relative ease of passing as male possibly had worked against the need for FtM operations. MtFs insist over and over that if they wanted to live gay, they could. What gives them trouble is their style of clothes and makeup. Indeed, men interested in woman-presenting males often are said to lose interest in the postoperative MtF. Despite such differentiations, MtF-trans and gay lives continue to gain their meanings under each other’s shadow.34 A person is one largely in terms of not being the other.35

When Zia, for instance, referred to himself as gay, this self-assignation indexed certain “repudiations”—not ivakhvahar, not kuni, not MtF. It did not simply index desiring male-bodied persons. He did not desire male-bodied MtFs nor postoperative FtMs. Naming himself gay indexed a complicated set of demarcations: body presentations and movements, styles of makeup and dress—all were calibrated in ways that distinguished him from both “average men” and “MtFs.” His boyfriend ‘Ali, with whom he now lives since Houri parted after her srs and marriage, did not emphasize gayness as self-identification and was indistinguishable visually from other young men in Tehran. Indeed, as he explained, his coworkers take him as straight. When questioned by them—“Are you married?” “Do you have a girl friend?” “Do you want us to find you one?”—he changes the subject to avoid being seen as “not normal.” Behzad and Cyrus indexed yet different styles of living gay. Behzad has continued to live with his family, to whom he explained his reasons for his refusal to get married and with whom he has lived a life of “don’t ask, don’t tell” ever since. Outwardly, his gayness is invisible except to “those in the know.”

Zia, Behzad, and Cyrus, unlike ‘Ali, are known and want to be known as gay within a safe social network, which in Cyrus’s case includes his work envi-
Naming oneself differently also indexes one’s spaces of sociality. Zia no longer goes to Bihzisti or other spaces of socialization dominated by MtFs. Once he decided that what he really wanted was to have a steady relationship with another man, his “habitat” shifted to circles of male-male couples/close friends. These varied gay (and lesbian) styles of living indicate that, unlike what at times has been assumed, especially among diasporic Iranian conversations, there is no evidence that thinking trans is a result of “lack of imagination,” indexing an inner identity that does not know its name. Boellstorff’s suggestion that individuals’ options for responding to the hailings of the dominant system are not limited to identification or dis-identification, that “the influence of power systems is neither [necessarily] direct nor oppositional, but more contingent and contextual” is very pertinent, especially in a context where much of the current political analysis about Iran has been centered for the past three decades on a notion of hegemonic theocratic authoritarianism and for an even longer period on “the state.” As Boellstorff emphasizes, “Bahasa gay may therefore help us see how a system of power can result in subject positions that speak neither with nor against that system, yet articulate their unexpected logics in terms of that system’s grammar—literally and figuratively.” In the case of self-identification as trans in Iran, this means that in various contingent contexts, one may respond by “Yes Sir, I am a gid patient”; at others, “We are superior creatures of God”; and perhaps, even more often, “We simply ignore your hailings and live our lives and navigate through and around the social and political labyrinths like everybody else”—almost. Once we consider other concepts of self, a sense of self that appears “devious” to the Cartesian self because “it is dispersed” and does not manifest itself through referentiality to a deep sense of being, but rather through its ways of using the many microspaces available by interstices of dominant sociocultural politico-economic structures, “subversion” need not occur either through rejection or alteration but by using “rituals, representations, and laws imposed on them [that are] something quite different from what their” doctors, psychologists, legal authorities, and Islamic jurisprudents had in mind. Such “use of the dominant social order deflect[s] its power, . . . they escape it without leaving it. The strength of their difference lay in procedures of ‘consumption.’”

The cognition of oneself as trans—and the degrees to which one transitioned—was configured in terms of a calculus of life’s options. Mahnaz, whom I had first met when she had come to the Mirdamad Clinic to make an appointment for srs, was still living as a married woman and refused to consider going to Europe through the refugee route—an option that was much
discussed in *trans, gay, lesbian* circles—because she did not want to cut off the possibility of returning to her family in Iran.41

Often, this process sounded like a cost-benefit matrix, virtually quantifiable. Recall how Leila and Minu talked about frustrations of being denied the small pleasures of life—not being able to be together like a family at Nowruz and starting every New Year apart, or the desire to go to places “like a couple,” to imagine a day they could adopt a child, and so on. It was these impossibilities that at times made Leila think if only she’d change sex. . . . But then other considerations would enter: “If I changed sex, my current acceptance in Minu’s family might be jeopardized; my professional status and social capital would be ruined,” and so on. The balance of this complicated calculus for Leila so far was 70 percent in favor of not changing sex, but she felt conflicted and could see herself being tempted to the contrary.

Like Leila, Yunes’s self-cognition as *trans* (he has since transitioned) was a complex contingent emergence. Before s/he had ever heard the word *trans*, s/he had assumed s/he was a same-sex-player. It was his/her former girlfriend’s father who had first told her/him s/he was *trans*. S/he had all but forgotten it until a friend brought her/him some published articles. The renewed interest prompted him/her to go to Dr. Mehrabi and other therapists and finally arrive at a self-cognition as *trans*. Despite being sure now that s/he was a *trans*, in the fall of 2007 s/he was still quite concerned about “going all the way.” Her/his doubts were located within a similar complex matrix of costs and benefits—both in terms of social capital s/he had built up in her/his profession and its loss afterwards as well as the costs to her/his emotional network. Part of that complication was the impact of the change on Ozra and her family, the status of their relationship among their current friends, and indeed the worry about how her/his former girlfriend would react to the news.42

Once a *trans* self-cognition has been arrived at, previously impossible acts become imaginable: Having sex with one’s partner no longer constitutes same-sex-playing, and thus little guilt, sin, or disgust is associated with it. Mahnaz’s moments of cognition as *trans* similarly were related to what that would enable her: She wanted to love women, and if acquiring (self-)cognition as *trans* would enable that desire, why not?43

**A Genealogy of Self**

But what did selfology (*khaudshinasi*) mean to Asadbaygi? The concept has a multisedimented genealogy and current location. A quick search in the online catalog of The National Archives and Library of the Islamic Republic of Iran
brings up 748 items with *khaudshinas* in their title alone. The overwhelming majority of titles divide into two categories: Islamic concepts of self-knowledge and modern psychological theories. A third input into this complex comes from astrology and related knowledge.

Self-knowledge is deeply embedded in Islamic philosophical thought. It carries a particular weight in Sufism, and more recently in the writings of modernist Islamic intellectuals, such as ‘Ali Shari‘ati, as well. Informed by and referencing a narrative attributed to Prophet Muhammad—“Who knows himself, knows his God”—whether in mainstream Islam or more especially in Sufi Islam, cognition of God is articulated as passing through self-knowledge.

A second root and route to the idea of self is through modern psychology in its Iranian variants. While in more recent decades, a whole range of concepts—from the dominant behavioral self all the way to the less-popular Freudian self-analysis (*khaudkavi*)—circulate in this domain, its earlier entry, as already discussed, was mediated, in the late 1920s, through the marital advice literature that set the stage for the flourishing of vernacular psychology of the 1940s to the present day. Today knowing oneself is considered not only critical to a good marriage, but an essential element of success and happiness in every domain of life. A vast literature, ranging from more academic writings and translations to short, popular, pocket-sized pamphlets, advises people (especially the young) on various aspects of managing the self. To facilitate such behavioral self-management, there are online tests that one can use to know one’s psychological self.

Important for the subject of this book, this thread of self’s genealogy, from the start, was deeply enmeshed and formed in conjunction with changing concepts of sex/gender (jins). Recall that one of the earliest texts of the new genre of advice books, published in 1929, was part of a series titled *Sex and Self* in English. When I first came across Suhrab’s translation of Sylvanus Stall’s 1897 text—*What a Young Husband Ought to Know*—I was amused by his choice of words for the series title. In this translation, sex made its transplantational entry as *jinsiyat*, and self in the series title (*Sex and Self*) was translated as “personal directives” (*dasturat-i shakhsi*). What can one make of the difficulty of a simple translation of self in this context? Why the particular combination of “personal” and “directives” for self?

The mere linked entry of self and sex into Iranian discourse of marital conduct through translational transplantations is of course not surprising. Co-emergent with sex as “a unique signifier and as a universal signified” in nineteenth-century Europe was a sense of an interiorized self with psychic depth, a notion that has since become a dominant narrative. It is this interi-
orized deep self that formed the subject of the emerging science of psychology and was formed by it. As Foucault suggested, and as Davidson’s *The Emergence of Sexuality: Historical Epistemology and the Formation of Concepts* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001), along with the larger field of studies of sexuality over the past several decades, have more fully articulated, knowledge about this self (whether by the self or by others) centered around issues of sexuality—the truth of the self—with psychology and pedagogy as important domains for its production.

Yet, as I have already argued, what Seigel’s intellectual history and Goldstein’s and Wahrman’s cultural histories, among other works, also make abundantly evident is this: Why should we expect “ideas of the self” to be similar from one time and context to another? Wahrman and Goldstein masterly map the radical transformation of one’s sense of self for the late eighteenth through the early nineteenth centuries that occurred in Britain and France, respectively. A genealogy of the self in Iran cannot be grounded only in Iran, of course, not even in its larger immediate cultural universe. For the period of my concern—since the mid-nineteenth century—like the idea of sex, the idea of self was refashioned as part of a transnational conversation. What we need is to figure out the shaping of local emergences within the global networks and flows. Part of this story is how “the idea of the self” in one place and time (western Europe, by the nineteenth century) became a thread of the concept of self in other places—a refashioning that included the European concept read through local lenses, enunciated for vastly different effects, or ignored altogether. What transplantations were adopted, what discard and disregard were chosen, what namings and not namings occurred—these are all issues that need specific historicization.

In Iran, psychology, especially vernacular psychology, was critical to transforming jins as genus into jins as sex. One could expect that the introduction of “the new science of psychology”—as its advocates named it since the early twentieth century—would have concurrently changed the concept of self. But such a conjunction of transplantation cannot be assumed. The concept of an interiorized self, although in partial circulation, has not become a dominant narrative. As I have argued, a notion of self narrativized through “horizontal” situational conduct rather than through deep “vertical” self-referentiality tends to make better sense of many of the life stories I heard. On issues where in psychology the concept of a unified self has become a presumption of the field, the useable concept of self in everyday practice remains “horizontally segmented.” Even seeming similarities—the co-emergence of psychology and pedagogy, for instance—cannot be assumed to have similar meaning and
cultural effects. In the same way that Davidson has argued for lexical continuity that “hides radical conceptual discontinuity,”49 when considering trans-plantation of concepts, if we simply look at translations we may miss radical conceptual refashionings. The notion of self-reliant personality, for instance, that Schayegh has persuasively argued was critical to emergence of modern self in Iran in the early twentieth century,50 had one foot in Cousin and Janet and another in Ibn Sina, as indicated by ‘Ali Akbar Siasi’s attempt to read Ibn Sina through “the new science of psychology.” Even the seemingly simple concept of psyche, translated into Persian as ravan, turns out to have a combined genealogy that has made different possibilities available in today’s figurations of gender and sexuality. Siasi, as we saw, translated psyche into nafs (an Arabic word, allowing him to claim the older notion of ‘ilm al-nafs [science of nafs] as the equivalent of the new psychology), and Persianized nafs as ravan, coining ravanshinasi as the science of ravan.

In Siasi’s body of writings we also see a concept of personality that departs from Ibn Sina’s and earlier philosophers’ concepts—a concept of layered personality begins to shape in the psychological discourse through a re-articulation of zahir (apparent) and batin (interior). In exegetical and in Sufi writings, zahir and batin referred to different levels of meaning of a concept that were available to ordinary believers and to the spiritual elite.51 Siasi adapted these concepts while transforming them into layers of a single personality, which, according to “the new science of psychology,” constituted levels of a unified character. “Ruh or nafs manifests itself in a particular shape under the influence of body’s management and satisfying the bodily needs and natural, familial, and social circumstances.” This manifestation Siasi called human’s apparent personality—“shakhsiyyat-i zahiri-i adami, which would be appropriate to call a theatrical personality.”52 Most importantly, he explained that the apparent manifestation and the real constituted a unified whole. “From a psychological point of view real personality and the apparent or theatrical personality . . . are the double aspects of a unified entity.”53 The unified aspect of these two levels of personality, if sustained over time, generates, he argued, what is called huviyat (identity).54

The reference to the theatrical is not accidental. In his earlier work, ‘Ilm al-nafs ya ravanshinasi, Siasi had similarly invoked the language of performance to explain the psyche, saying “psyche is like someone who is both a singer and an audience, an actor and a spectator”55—a notion that informs and incites a concept of self centered around conduct. Nonetheless, Siasi’s move did introduce a concept of a layered self into the Iranian discourse of psychology, which navigated between a deep psyche and a notion of authenticity and sincerity. As
Siasi put it, nafs constituted the high spiritual core of one’s personality; what presented itself as the presentational personality was merely its manifestation under bodily and social circumstances and necessities.\(^\text{56}\)

In his early writings, Siasi only briefly, occasionally, and tangentially made reference to Freud and psychoanalysis and was generally dismissive of place of sexual matters in discussion of personality and psyche. When in his later work (1970) he turned to the topic of “abnormal personalities” (shakhsiyat-ha-\(\text{y}i\) nabihan\(\text{y}i\) njar), such personalities became focused on what had by then entered into Iranian discourse through psycho-sexological literature.\(^\text{57}\) This shift in one thinker’s concept of personality/self between the late 1920s and the 1970s is indicative of the dominating emergence of behavioral psycho-sexology in these decades.

Asadbaygi’s project, then, is largely informed by behavioral psychology—the dominant training in Iranian universities and medical establishments.\(^\text{58}\) From his published articles, he seems to specialize in a whole host of social problems that go under the umbrella of “social harm”—problems such as addiction, domestic violence, obsession, suicide, and prostitution.\(^\text{59}\) His method of running the Bihzisti weekly meetings was indeed reminiscent of twelve-step Alcoh\(\text{olo}\)ics Anonymous meetings, a style of practice that has been adopted in Iran for treating drug addiction.

The vernacular psychological concepts of self and self-knowledge also have informed the media coverage of transsexuality, as, for instance, in the series that was published in Rah-\(\text{i}\) zind\(\text{i}\)gi under the column title “man kah hastam?” (Who am I?). This popular bimonthly magazine (see chapter 6) had covered the topic of transsexuality subsequent to its similarly framed serialized coverage of addicts and mental health patients. All such clinical practices and popular magazine reports informed by behavioral psychology share, and contribute to the recirculation of, a concept of self-in-conduct. While in that meeting on October 17, 2006, the \(\text{TSS}\) seemed resistant to following Asadbaygi’s lead and reflecting on their “selves” in the way that he was demanding of them, their response was an enactment of their sense of self-in-conduct through a series of recitations of what they had done and how they did things. To the extent that a concept of “layered-ness” occasionally entered the conversation—for instance, when Kamran was addressing the social worker he had been sent to see (see chapter 7)—it is not the self but society that is described as layered. “Our society has so many different layers,” as Kamran put it. One’s self’s layers are his/her self-presentation, selves-in-conduct, in different social sites/layers.
Self as Contingent Conduct

To summarize, the sense of self that informs modern subjectivities in today’s Iran, in many registers, is defined largely, though not hegemonically, by notions of conduct.60 To understand the complex scene of how individuals define their sex/gender in Iran and, in particular, how some come to embrace the notion of trans as appropriate self-assignment, and how they decide whether, and how far, to transition is linked not only with in-distinction between gender and sex, but also with a sense of being in the world that is centered on conduct—the situated, contingent, daily performances that depend not on any sense of some essence about one’s body and psyche. Rather, it is defined in terms of its specific location and temporal node at the intersection of numerous relations that define the scene of conduct of the self in that node.

What I heard on that day, when Leila made her pronouncement of percentages of identification, and what I heard from many others, were stories that spoke to a sense of being in the world that was not dominantly shaped through indexing an inner psychic self. These were narratives of a manner of being in the world that was not simply relational, but situationally enacted. The stories were not shaped by some underlying notion of “who I am”; rather there were contingent statements as if “this is me with my parents,” “here at work this other way of being feels right,” “there in a party, this is how I am,” and so on. In other words, while one could say these narratives of a sense of being in the world was, of course, situational, relational, fractured—but what is significant is that all these operations of fracturing, relationality, and contingency worked differently than when they are presumed to work on something named identity. They did not index that presumed deep psychic sense of self that is the ground of the concept of identity.61 A life narrative is told as one in the context of a connected and located series of moments within the sites that give meaning to one’s life. This would offer us a different way of understanding trans identification, not as something necessarily arising from within one person but as something whose meaning is shaped by one’s location in many (in principle, innumerable) sites. Once rethought this way, new ways of “de-medicalization” could be imagined, since the whole process no longer remains hostage to an individual’s recitations in diagnostic settings.

Moreover, one’s sense of self at a given junction is not only specific to the temporal-local moment; it may, or may not, carry with it some effect for one’s self-in-performance in another network knot.62 So when you are son-to-your-father, that moment of your self-in-conduct does not necessarily carry within it your sense of being gay in relation to your lover, which means you may
not have the urge to “come out” to your father.63 “Why would you want to
tell your parents about your sex life?” Zia asked when the subject of “coming
out” was once raised.64 He added, “Every utterance has a context; every point
has a site”—so goes a Persian adage. What may strike some Iranians (or non-
Iranians) as hypocrisy of a “traditional” culture that encourages a split between
private lives and public appearance, or a denial of one’s true inner self to those
who think with and live within a paradigm of deep self, for others may be a
“common sense” of the adage. It makes no sense, in this paradigm, to be, look,
and perform the same self in different sites and on different occasions. Here,
one does not need the unconscious to have contingent selves. The source of
contingency does not lie in some inner deep, inaccessible place within one’s
psyche; it comes instead from the contingency of self-in-conduct at these dif-
ferent nodes, each node (at different moments) inciting a contingent self.

Giving up the deep self as the evident cultural narrative puts under pres-
sure the link between self and sex in the Foucauldian register, in which sexual-
ity is proposed to have become constituted as the core of self’s truth. How
does one refigure the relation between sex and self, then? I suggest that one’s
sexual conduct, in specific relationships, is one of the many threads of located
conduct that constitutes one’s sense of being in the world. In this meaning, the
ambiguous (in)distinction of transsexuality from homosexuality in Iran is not
produced by some simple desire and the design of the medical establishment
or forces of religion and the state; it is generated in part because the spaces of
daily living and sexual conduct of trans persons and gays and lesbians overlap,
and performances of self in these connected and overlapping spaces at times
produce a sense of indeterminacy: “Am I trans? Am I homosexual?” becomes
a question of not some inner truth but of figuring out and navigating one’s
relationship-in-conduct vis-à-vis others.

Similarly, the relation between modern power and modern selves in Iran
has been dominantly in the shape of power through and over conduct, includ-
ing sexual conduct. Thus the growth of state power in the twentieth century
took shape through competition and collaboration between state institutions
and other sources of power over conduct. In this scene, psychology, psychiatry,
and related institutions and practices are far less important than institutions
such as family, courts, religious leaders, and related discourses that compete
and collaborate over shaping conduct and thus over a sense of being in the
world. To the extent that psychology became part of this scene, it has been
dominated by behavioral/conduct psychology, and it is in that domain that
psychology and Islamic jurisprudential conduct literature after the 1970s have
found a new merging, as we have seen.
Normative gender/sex expectations have become formed around conduct rather than identities. At times, cultural practices and codes of conduct may not be as tightly sex/gender-inflexible as they may appear at first sight. True, shared biology is assumed to somehow have something to do with a whole bundle of commonalities-in-conduct. Thus, beginning at birth, female newborns usually are given distinctively female names. But when a growing female child behaves in ways that are ordinarily considered boyish, she begins to be called by a male name in intimate circles, tongue in cheek. Over and over again, this was part of the childhood narratives of gender/sex non-normative, female-born persons. Parents, siblings, grandparents, aunts and uncles, and neighborhood playmates used a male name for a non-normatively gendered female. The renaming gives recognition that her way of being in the world, her “behavior,” has, at least for the moment, overridden the cultural expectations incited by her female body and name assigned at birth; she needs to be renamed to reflect a correction of that early “mis-naming.” Importantly, among the born-male persons with whom I talked and who had reported behaving like girls during childhood, and even though many reported acceptance and even encouragement (up to a certain age and within a range of generally presumed nonsexual behavior), none reported being renamed with a female name. Is this simply a reflection of a gender order of things: the superiority of the male and the shame of a superior kind lowering himself to the level of an inferior? Yet the acceptance of female behavior in a male child up to the proximity of adolescence may indicate that the fear of renaming him with a female name may have something to do with the fear that being called by a female name could contribute to his later growth into the abject sexuality of male same-sex-playing. This is not the case for girls who exhibit boyish behavior, possibly because non-normative sex for an adolescent male is received so much more badly than non-normative sex for an adolescent female.

As I emphasized in previous chapters, from the late 1970s and definitely critically so in the aftermath of establishment of the Islamic Republic in the decade of the 1980s, we have witnessed the differentiated twin birth of gay and MtF trans (and to a lesser degree of differentiation of lesbian and FtM trans). What I also want to emphasize is that the differentiation has not focused as much on bodily distinctions (definitely not a bodily distinction zeroed in on one’s genitalia) as on living styles, that is, whether or not one opts generally to live as a woman-presenting born male or a masculine-presenting born female.

Boellstorff, in A Coincidence of Desires, writes, “Desire may feel like a product of the individual self, but it is shaped by the fields of culture, history, and power that Foucault referred to as discourses” (35). This articulation locates the
contingency of the self (the desiring self) at a level beyond the person and the moment of self-presentation. Yet there is something incomplete here: the relationship between “the fields” and the contingency of an individual’s sense of being in the world. To come out of the determinative tendency of certain Foucauldian analyses, to be able to think beyond being “called into being through a discourse” (36)—positively or negatively—Boellstorff proposes the notion of “coincidence of discourses.” This is a powerful move that “raises the possibility of coincidental merging of discourses, wherein homosexual desire may appear as an unexpected effect” (36, my emphasis). In this sense, gayness has become shaped in part as an unexpected effect of not-MtF-ness in contemporary Iran. While in the 1970s, as Behzad had said, gay seemed to be a foreign word for kuni, it has become transformed through its distinction from trans. Gay has come to mean “I don’t desire sex change.” But even this reading needs to be attentive to the fact that the same person, in different contexts, may self-conceive the same characteristics differently. Recall Mehran’s articulations—“before I had heard trans, before I had heard lesbian”—about herself, and thus the choices she made (to get married, not to pursue sex change in 1987, not even in 1997, but eventually to pursue it in 2008–9).

Indeed, as far as gay and lesbian identifications are concerned, the naming of these relationships as “same sex” remains contested. In part, the ability of naming them with non-Persian words is a move that distinguishes them from the culturally abject category of same-sex-playing and its affiliated assignments, such as kuni and baruni. Moreover, the very distinct roles within these relationships bring any notion of sameness between partners under pressure. As Johnson observed in a different context, “... the very notion of ‘same-sex’ sexuality seems highly problematic in a situation where having the same genitals apparently does not imply same sex or same gender, and where the genitals of the person one is having sex with are apparently much less important in defining gender, both theirs and one’s own, than what those (same) genitals do.” It is this same dynamic that works against the dominant use of generalized terms (such as homosexual) and a strong tendency to reach for its contingent locale and time. In Iran, generalized terms have taken root in scientific taxonomies and religious-legal policy considerations, but not in anything close to their ubiquitous use in Euro-American identity politics. One does not just reach for a generalizable and generalized term everywhere and at all times as if it is a universal innate sign of humanity. Yet the reach of these general categories clearly has spread beyond their initial time and locale, but not evenly, nor imperially, as it is sometimes assumed. Some may appear in medical/psychology texts, others in the legal domain, and still others in journalism. Some
may overlap. And non-normative persons may use them for particular ends in specific sites to craft spaces of habitation. What one calls oneself generates possibilities for particular living arrangements. Sinnott, in the Thai context, has argued persuasively that becoming “a recognized social category—toms” rather than “females who are like men,” a process that she dates to the past twenty-five years, has made the formation of “communities and subcultures around them possible” (63). Becoming known as tarajinsiyati—the newest official neologism for transsexual—has become a similar organizing category for Iranian trans persons.

At issue is not to deny that the increasing self-referential circulation of terms such as gay, lesbian, and so on among Iranians today may indicate a different and emergent conceptual mapping of sexual practices and desires; what is problematic is the privileging of this emergent naming and configuring as intrinsically superior to other modes of living nonheteronormative sex/gender lives. The current gay discourse on the Internet is saturated with such moralizing progressivist narratives, defining its own homo-normalizing contours against the foil of these “past” and/or oppressive behaviors, in particular against same-sex-playing as frivolous and necessarily exploitative.67

In this context, the shaping of an ambiguous nebula of overlapping and shifting assignations and (self-)cognitions—enabled by trans/same-sex/gender practices of everyday life and the legal legibility of trans as a category defined by the state, religion, or science—has had the paradoxical effect of re-inscribing the abjectness of the homosexual and at the same time providing a space of living a homosexual life within the legal shadow of transsexuality. This paradoxically productive and enabling double work does not have to acquire its resolution through disambiguation and pulling apart identity categories, separating and delineating trans from homo. While that is surely a possibility, other future configurations—in particular, living livable and loving lives within terms of ambiguity and contingent performances of selves-in-situational conduct—remains a powerfully attractive alternative.
As Boellstorff notes, in a different context and with different effects, “The prior existence of recognized male transvestites has had a profound impact upon gay subject positions, and it is a prime reason for some differences between gay and lesbian subject positions in Southeast Asia, since nowhere in Southeast Asia did there exist any female transgendered subject position with anything like the visibility of waria, kathoey, bakla, or other male transvestite subject positions” (A Coincidence of Desires, 196). And further, “because the predominant female transgender and female homosexual subject positions in contemporary Southeast Asia came into being around the same time, they are far more intertwined, conceptually and practically, than are male transvestite and gay subject positions” (202).

Chapter 8: Professing Selves

I am borrowing this expression, and much analytical work related to it, from Denise Riley, The Words of Selves: Identification, Solidarity, Irony (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000); the quote is from page 9.

Nor do I propose to draw on the very rich anthropological literature about non-U.S., nonheteronormative gender/sexual identifications and practices (from which I have learned a great deal and on which I draw at times) to produce comparable transnational patterns. I find comparative analysis beyond my comfort zone.

These works include Suad Joseph’s Intimate Selving in Arab Families: Gender, Self, and Identity (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1999), in which she provides a broad review and critical engagement with largely psychodynamic theories of self and articulates, in that context, her concept of “intimate selving.” Joseph has developed this concept further in much of her subsequent body of scholarship. While I have learned a great deal from Joseph’s insightful work, my focus is more on when/if/how selving matters at all. Michael Jackson and Ivan Karp, eds., Personhood and Agency: The Experience of Self and Other in African Cultures (Uppsala: Uppsala University Press, 1990), similarly offers important insights. Further afield both temporally and culturally is Jerrold Seigel’s The Idea of the Self: Thought and Experience in Western Europe since the Seventeenth Century (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005); this is an exhaustive intellectual history that emphasizes a concept of self that has three dimensions: the bodily or material, the relational, and the reflective.

Seigel explicitly resists “recent writings about the self by philosophers and humanistically inclined psychologists [who have] favored the notion that the self is a ‘narrative’ entity, rooted in human propensity to remember and project, in our readiness to make sense of things in terms of continuity and change, in our nature as what Alastair MacIntyre calls ‘a story-telling animal’” and warns against jumping on the “narrative bandwagon too quickly” (The Idea of the Self, 653). Given that my pursuit is to understand when/if/how selving matters at all, contra Seigel, I find it productive to work with the concept of a narrativizing self and narratives of self.

Two works that I have found particularly helpful are Jan Goldstein, The Post-Revolutionary Self: Politics and Psyche in France, 1750–1850 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005); and Dror Wahrman, The Making of the Modern Self: Identity
6 Wahrman, *The Making of the Modern Self*, 168. He continues: “Instead, we can visualize this eighteenth-century configuration as a set of positions within which one identified oneself—a set of coordinates, or a matrix. One’s position in this matrix, which could be prescribed or adopted (thus allowing for both subordination and agency), was relational” (168).

7 Wahrman, *The Making of the Modern Self*, 198. Wahrman’s book offers a historical account of “those enabling conditions and circumstances of the eighteenth century that made this particular identity regime not only possible, and plausible, but also widely resonant” (198). It would perhaps be accurate to say that Wahrman’s account is not only historical but also historicist, in the sense that there is an almost inevitable “before and after,” with the after virtually wiping out the before completely. As I will discuss shortly, I am skeptical of accounts in which the past narratives of the self “in the West” are taken to have been totally erased by the deep self, with no continued life or a trace within the present.


9 Dorrin Kondo (Crafting Selves: Power, Gender and Discourses of Identity in a Japanese Workplace [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990]) makes a similar point when she argues, “the relationally defined self of American women [references Carol Gilligan, *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women’s Development* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982); and Nancy Chodorow, *The Reproduction of Mothering: Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978)] still remains solidly within a linguistic and historical legacy of individualism. Relationally defined selves in Japan—selves inextricable from context—thus mount a radical challenge to our own assumptions about fixed essentialist identities and provide possibilities for a consideration of cultural difference and a radical critique of ‘the whole subject’ in contemporary Western culture” (33). But I am cautious about making this distinction a “civilizational” one. I suspect that even in the most individualist corners and communities of “the West,” the autonomous individual is not the sole narrative for living.

10 Riley, *The Words of Selves*, 17. Kondo similarly argues “that the bounded, interiorized self is a narrative convention” (Crafting Selves, 25), but considers that “selves which are coherent, seamless, bounded, and whole are indeed illusions” (14). I part from Kondo’s approach on this latter point. The concept of “coherent, seamless, bounded, and whole” selves has provided generations of people in many communities and cultures with a powerful narrative for living their lives. At stake is not the realness of one and the illusionary nature of the other, but recognizing that different individuals and communities have worked out numerous, and changing, creative narratives for living.


of Gender” (2–19) through Agnes’s story. Curiously, Agnes’s story has not informed theories of gender performativity and performance studies that have emerged since the early 1990s, a genealogical lacunae possibly reflecting the disciplinary shape of academic production of knowledge and bridges that are—or in this case are not—crossed. I am grateful to conversations with Robin Bernstein and Susan Stryker on this point.

22 As Judith Butler points out, “one does not ‘do’ one’s gender alone. One is always ‘doing’ with or for another, even if the other is only imaginary” (Undoing Gender [New York: Routledge, 2004], 1; my emphasis). One frequently underemphasized effect of this point is that one “does” gender differently depending on who one is doing it with, for, and against.

23 The importance of Goffman’s work, however, is that, contra Wahrman, performative self—Wahrman’s “before the self”—is not a stage (a developmental civilizational stage?) restricted, for instance, to a particular window of time in England. Despite the dominance of deep interiorized self for over a century on many levels and in many domains, the performative self continues to be analytically powerful for understanding numerous phenomena, as, for instance, articulated in Goffman’s use of contemporary (mid-twentieth century) sociological studies of communities and individuals upon which he constructs his main arguments.

24 Charlotte Furth, in a different context, notes that “identifying a wife as an ‘inner person’ (nei ren) constructed her femininity via bodily location rather than biology, a spatial habitus that taught female gender in the idiom of a socially complex domain of family life” (A Flourishing Yin: Gender in China’s Medical History, 960–1665 [Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999], 6). In Barlow’s articulation, “gender is accomplished . . . through the behavior of persons in specific subject positions of kin relation.” She further traces a shift away from this kin-located concept of womanhood, concluding, “The career of nüxing firmly established a foundational womanhood beyond kin categories.” See Barlow, “Theorizing Woman: Funü, Guojia, Jiating,” in Body, Subject & Power in China, edited by Angela Zito and Tani E. Barlow, 253–89 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994). The quotes are from pages 280n12 and 266, respectively.

25 I hope it is clear that I am not reciting these points approvingly. I do not think, however, that it makes sense to address a feminist critique of dominant notions of gender and sexuality to trans persons any more than to the general culture. One cannot demand trans persons to be necessarily more contestive of gender/sex normativity than other people.

26 As de Certeau notes, the characteristics of speech act: “speaking operates with the field of a linguistic system; it effects an appropriation, or reappropriation, of language by its speakers; it establishes a present relative to a time and place; and it posits a contract with the other (the interlocutor) in a network of places and relations . . . [that] can be found in many other practices (walking, cooking, etc.)” (The Practice of Everyday Life, xiii; emphasis in original).

27 Drawing on Tom Boellstorff, “when I began learning of these two understandings of what makes someone waria—soul and clothing—I suspected that the sense of having a woman’s soul was more central. This reflects the dominant Western conceit
that both gender and sexuality originate as internal essences that must be confessed to ever greater spheres of life to be authentic and valid” (“Playing Back the Nation: Waria, Indonesian Transvestites,” Cultural Anthropology 19, no. 2 [2004]: 167).

Jackson, “Performative Genders, Perverse Desires: A Bio-History of Thailand’s Same-Sex and Transgender Cultures,” Intersections: Gender, History and Culture in the Asian Context, 9 (August 2003), online edition, http://intersections.anu.edu.au /issue9/jackson.html; the quote is from point 92. This also recalls Wahrman’s observation about clothes as “an anchor of personal identity” (The Making of the Modern Self, 177) and that “dress was taken literally to ‘transnature’ the wearer . . . masqueraders ‘almost chang[ing] their Nature with their Habit’” (178).

Boellstorff, “Playing Back the Nation,” 165.


Since my last visit, Houri and Zia no longer share house. Houri completed her transition, reconciled with her family, and got married in the fall of 2009. Zia lives with his male partner.

As Valentine notes in a different context, for many of his “subjects,” living as a woman did not “preclude being ‘gay’ when ‘gay’ indexes erotic desire for someone who is male-bodied” (Imagining Transgender: An Ethnography of a Category [Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007], 117).

The problem of “excess” visibility is usually an MtF problem. Excess for FtMs (pre-operative) tends to be marriage refusal.


See Gayle Salamon, Assuming a Body: Transgender and Rhetorics of Materiality (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), 23–24, for discussion of identification always already being marked by nonidentification.

Boellstorff, A Coincidence of Desires, 117.


Boellstorff, A Coincidence of Desires, 117.

In the Thursday meetings of rrs held at the offices of Psychology and Society, the discussion would frequently begin with everyone complaining about everything they had suffered the week before. Sina and Houri, who were the de facto leaders of these discussions, often were frustrated by the unconstructive tone of self-pity that these narratives would generate. On the first day that Dr. Arash Alaei visited the group (see chapter 6), given his experience in running self-help support groups, he immediately noticed the problematic dynamic and suggested that he would write on the board a list of all the problems voiced. The list included such topics as street harassment by naja “morality squads,” unemployment, parental supervision and demands, relationship break ups, and so on. He then went through each problem and asked if they thought the given problem was faced only by rrs. To everyone’s sur-
prise, all problems seemed to be shared by many other groups in society. There was an uncomfortable silence until one MtF objected, “But it is different with us.” The discussion then became focused on what those differences were and how such differences could be addressed.

40 de Certeau, The Practice of Everyday Life, xii–xiii.

41 Such cost-benefit considerations are of course not limited to trans persons. While Zia had come to name himself as gay with certainty and now lives with his boyfriend, he continues to contemplate the possibility of marrying a lesbian woman, even having a child with her, to consolidate his relationship with his parents who have been coldly distant because of his refusal to get married.

42 Quantification works also within other identity categories. Zia often referred to his gay friends in terms of their percentages of gayness. At first confused, I finally realized this was the way sexual practice preferences had become codified; the percentages referred to how much preference a man had for acting bott. When Zia was talking about the period in which there was so much talk of transing that many gays began to think of themselves as trans, he said, “Even those who are full-top [pronounced as in English] started thinking maybe they should go for surgery.”

43 As I already pointed out in the previous chapter, asking “Why not?” may sound as though it is turning a very complicated and serious consideration into some frivolous game. But I find Laurie Shrage’s question quite pertinent: “Do some changes to the self (sex, religion, job, or age) create discontinuities with earlier selves that are profound enough to be described as the emergence of a new self?” (“Introduction” in “You’ve Changed”: Sex Reassignment and Personal Identity, edited by Laurie J. Shrage [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009], 3). How is it that our general societal reaction to changing gender/sex is often a lot more “severe” than changing other identifications, including nationality or religion? Or, as Georgia Warnke puts it, “Identities . . . are interpretations of who we are, and as such they are intelligible only as parts of particular contexts . . . transsexuality is no different from other changes of identity such as changes in nationality or sports team affiliation. Transsexuality is no more radical because sex and gender are no less context-bound” (“Transsexuality and Contextual Identities,” 33). Putting it another way, our vastly different reactions to “change of religion,” for instance, compared to our reactions to “sex change” indicate our continued investment in considering sex/gender as something more profound and foundational in terms of the constitution of self than religion. Asking this question also forces us to reflect that changes that would strike one’s reception/cognition by oneself and by others as “profound enough” possibly are not the same across different sociocultural contexts. Why should changing sex be always expected to signal such a profound change? Related to this, Shrage asks, “So one interesting issue is why so many of us passively accept our assigned sex identity or cannot conceive of changing this identity?” (9). David Valentine pursues a similar line of argument in his essay, “Sue E. Generous: Toward a Theory of Non-Transexuality,” Feminist Studies 38, no. 1 (spring 2012): 185–211.

44 A Google search on March 15, 2010, in Persian (which is more inclusive than title alone and covers weblogs devoted to the topic as well) resulted in 171,000 entries in 0.20 seconds.


46 For a discussion of transformation of jins from genus into sex/gender, see my article, “Genus of Sex or the Sexing of Jins,” International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies 45 (2013), 211–31. Similar to jins-as-sex, khaud-as-self is rarely used as a stand-alone noun. It usually appears in combined words, such as in khaudkavi or khaudshinasi, or in adjectival form, as in khaudi.


48 I am borrowing the concepts of horizontal segmentation and vertical fragmentation from Goldstein, The Post-Revolutionary Self, but do not use it in exactly the same sense.

49 Davidson, The Emergence of Sexuality, 139.


53 Siasi, Ravanshinasi-i shakhsiyat, 23.

54 Siasi, Ravanshinasi-i shakhsiyat, 43.


56 Siasi, Ravanshinasi-i shakhsiyat, 22–23.

57 The main psychological deviations under the chapter on “abnormal personalities,” for instance, are cataloged as sadism, masochism, exhibitionism, voyeurism, and homosexuality. Siasi, Ravanshinasi-i shakhsiyat, 198–200. Uncharacteristic of Siasi, no English or French word is noted as equivalent to inhiraft, which I have translated

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as “deviation” here. He seems to use *inharif* and *ikhtilal* (at times translated as “disorder”) interchangeably.

There is little historical study of development of psychology in Iran, so my observations remain partial and anecdotal. One thing that is worth noting is that there is a fitting correspondence between notions of self-in-conduct, the dominance of behavioral psychology, and the emergence of the idea of the unnaturalness of same-sex desire as not linked with any inner psychic-sexual truth but with a social institution. In the modernist narrative, it is understood as an effect of living within a set of life practices, namely, gender/sex homosociality, that produce desires and practices of same-sex-playing.

Asadbaygi’s writings largely have appeared as articles in magazines and dailies: *Javan* (Youth), October 13, 1999, 6 (about tobacco addiction); *Tus* (the name of an ancient city), September 8, 1998, 5 (about obsession); *Javan*, October 8, 2000, 4 (about violence against children); *Tausi’ah* (Development), August 3, 2004, 3 (about suicide); and *Mardum-salari* (Democracy), July 16, 2004, 5 (about domestic violence). I did not have the opportunity to interview Asadbaygi. Shortly after my work began, he was replaced by a social worker and ceased to cooperate with trans persons. My entry into these weekly meetings had been facilitated by Houri and Sina; I became included in that break down of relationships.

Given the larger context of decades of circulation of the notion of self with psychic depth through introduction of several schools of psychology to Iran, I do not wish to counterpose the self-in-conduct to the interiorized self as if they are uninformed by each other.

Lawrence Cohen, in “The Pleasures of Castration: The Post-operative Status of Hijras, Jankhas, and Academics” (in *Sexual Nature, Sexual Culture*, edited by Paul R. Abramson and Steven D. Pinkerton, 276–304 [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995]), writes, “In Hindi-speaking places . . . many strolling men who like to have sex with men identify friends and prospective friends through the language of similitude—*aise* and *jaise*, like this, like these, this way—and shared play (being *khel main*, in the game). The language of *aise* and *khel* is not a label or a fixing of essential identity in the different but parallel ways the utterance of *khush* or *hijra* often demand. The ‘these’ of *aise*’s ‘like these’ is contingent, reflexive, and dialogic, pointing not to some category or class out there but to what is being enacted by the very encounter of speaker and listener together in the park at night. Thus language . . . is momentary” (280).


In the context of contemporary Indonesia, Boellstorff writes, “What is more often the case is that it is the invisibility of gay men that allows them to find spaces of
community free from direct oppression. . . . [F]or most gay Indonesians the notion of ‘opening oneself to the gay world’ does not imply that it is necessary or inevitable [or even desirable?] to open oneself in all domains of one’s life (such as one’s family or workplace). Peter Jackson’s observation that ‘there is comparatively little pressure for integrating one’s public and private lives in Thailand’ (1997: 176) is quite accurate for Southeast Asia more generally” (A Coincidence of Desires, 199–200). I would say that in Iran it is in fact considered inappropriate (and at times incomprehensible) that one would integrate one’s self-presentation in all domains—possibly, for that matter, the same observation would apply for anywhere—including many parts of “the West” in which identity politics and sex/gender psycho-sexology have not become the dominant and determining grid of living one’s life.

64 In the context of contemporary China, Rofel writes, “that gay men shy away from telling their parents that they are gay not because of an underlying antinomy of secrecy versus truth but because they fear that they will take away their family’s mianzi [face/status], and with it their own humanity. In this regard, sexual identity is not about the existence within the self of a separate sexual domain that is a constitutive principle of the self” (Desiring China, 102).


66 Sinnott similarly notes, “Thais often use specific terms for homosexual or transgendered individuals, such as ‘gay,’ ‘tom,’ ‘dee,’ ‘tut,’ or ‘kathoey’ rather than trying to reach for an overarching term that could encompass all these categories, such as ‘homosexual,’ ‘third sex/gender’” (Toms and Dees: Transgender Identity and Female Same-Sex Relationships in Thailand [Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 2004], 8).

67 See the early Homan article defining the “musts” of homosexual relationships (referred to in chapter 4), but this is now common discourse in many sites. For a critique, see Shakhsari, “From Hamjensbaaz to Hamjensgaraa: Diasporic Queer Reterritorializations and Limits of Transgression,” unpublished paper.