INTRODUCTION

Something happened in 2003–4: Transsexuals and transsexuality in Iran became a hot media topic, both in Iran and internationally.

The biomedical practice of sex change by means of surgery and hormonal treatment in Iran dates at least to the early 1970s; for nearly four decades the topic received occasional coverage in the Iranian press. But Iranian press coverage of the “trans” phenomenon increased sharply in early 2003, and it continued to be intense over the next five years. Concurrently, articles began to appear in the world press; television and video documentary productions followed.¹ My no-doubt-incomplete tabulation generates the following summary chart (table intro.1):

Based as I was in the United States, my first entry into this topic was as a reader of English-language reports and a viewer of early documentaries. The celebratory tone of some of these reports—welcoming the recognition of transsexuality and the permissibility of sex-change operations—was sometimes mixed with an element of surprise: How could this be happening in an Islamic state? In other, and especially later, accounts, the sanctioning of sex change became tightly linked with the illegality of same-sex practices (often equated with sodomy, an offense that carries a capital punishment), thus echoing some of the official thinking in Iran. For legal and medical authorities in Iran, sex change is framed explicitly as the cure for a diseased abnormality (gender identity disorder), and on occasion it is proposed as a religio-legally sanctioned option for heteronormalizing people with same-sex desires and practices.
Even though this possible option has not become state policy—because, as we will see, official discourse is also invested in making an essential distinction between the trans and the homosexual—international media coverage of transsexuality in Iran increasingly has emphasized that sex reassignment surgery (srs) was being performed coercively on Iranian homosexuals by a fundamentalist Islamic government. This narrative framing (along with those concerning the suppression of women’s rights and other political and labor struggles) circulates within larger reductive and totalizing transnational discourses on Iran and Islam that equate them both with the most conservative factions of the Iranian government and with the views of the most regressive Islamists. Conservative transnational forces seem to have a common stake in ignoring the lively discourse about reform, as well as the history of progressive activism in contemporary Iran and the larger Islamicate world, which offer alternative notions of rights within an Islamic society and alternative modes of living a Muslim life.

At their best, the readings of transsexuality in Iran as legal and on the rise because of the impossibility of homosexuality, or—even more severely—as a government-sanctioned project with the aim of eliminating homosexuality, work with a reductive Foucauldian concept of “the techniques of domination” in which subjectivity is constituted by governmental designs and hegemonic power. In this book, while I hope to remain cognizant of, and indeed map out, some of these techniques in contemporary Iran, I will lean toward highlighting how such techniques become at once productive of and transported into “the art of existence.” Indeed, their work of domination depends on their productivity for the art of existence.

I was lucky to be in Iran for this research in a period when much about

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of coverage</th>
<th>1999–2002</th>
<th>2003–8</th>
<th>2009–10</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Press reports in Iran</td>
<td>1 + coverage in a bimonthly magazine over 12 months</td>
<td>35 + coverage in a bimonthly magazine over 25 months</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Press reports outside Iran</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Visual productions (Iranian and foreign documentaries are grouped together because many are joint productions)</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>0</td>
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trans lives and laws was being shaped almost daily. As de Certeau has observed, the coherence of the practices that Foucault selected and examined was “the result of a particular success. . . . Beneath what one might call the ‘monotheistic’ privilege that panoptic apparatuses have won for themselves, a ‘polytheism’ of scattered practices survives, dominated but not erased by the triumphal success of one of their numbers.” This book hopes to capture the polytheistic scattered practices that were a critical element in shaping trans lives and subjectivities in this period.

Back in 2005, when I first began to read the press coverage extensively, I was as much puzzled by what was going on in Iran as I was irritated by its international coverage. The discourse on sex/gender/sexuality that informed the contemporary Iranian conversations regarding transsexuality was radically different from what it had been a century earlier. How did this fundamental shift take place in such a relatively short time? Pursuing this query took me to unfamiliar domains and unexpected pleasures—beyond the fever of the archives, into practices of ethnography and oral history.

This book attempts to map out a situated “cartography of desire” in Iran that locates the contemporary discourses and practices of transsexuality in a longer historical trajectory and intersecting discursive sites, including medicine, religious doctrine, psychology, criminology, the family, trans activism, and practices of everyday life. Bringing together historical archives, ethnographic fieldwork, and open-ended interviews with a wide spectrum of actors, including Iranian trans persons, gays and lesbians, psychologists, surgeons, health professionals, social workers, journalists, documentary filmmakers, theologians, and state officials, the book offers a historical and ethnographic account of the particular formation of genders and sexualities that cluster around trans- and homosexuality in contemporary Iran and provides some clues for what goes into enabling certain articulations of desire and disabling others.

What trans as a category of “human kind” means today in Iran is specific to a nexus formed not simply by transnational diffusion of concepts and practices from a Western heartland to the Rest. What it means to live a trans life in today’s Iran is also the product of the country’s sociocultural and political circumstances over the previous half century. Today, a trans identity in Iran carries a particular set of affiliations and disaffiliations, identifications and disidentifications, that are specific to this national-transnational nexus.

In the opening chapter, I begin with the present: a moment in which the transition process works around a notion of “filtering” to determine whether an applicant is “really trans,” “really homosexual,” intersex, or perhaps suffers from a series of other classified psychological disorders. The complex nexus that
filtering represents constitutes and authorizes a category of non-normativity as a legitimate, acceptable category, a process of subject-formation/subjection that is based partly on trans persons’ own actions and narratives, and therefore also on self-cognition and self-production.

One conclusion this book proposes is that the very process of psychological filtering and jurisprudential demarcating, far from eliminating gays and lesbians (if that is indeed what the Iranian authorities had hoped), has paradoxically created new social spaces. Instead of constructing an impassable border, the process has generated a porous, nebulous, and spacious domain populated by a variety of “not-normal” people. To persuade some gays and lesbians (“symptomatic homosexuals”) to consider transitioning bodily, and to filter out the true (“morally deviant”) homosexuals, this process needs to offer a safe passage between categories. Because the filtering and sorting processes depend above all on individual self-narratives, the potential uses of this nebula are limited only by each person’s creativity—a decidedly abundant resource.

As a wise friend urged me back in 2005, “Don’t worry, people are very creative and make their own uses.” And this is what I learned: not to underestimate the real problems and challenges, and at times dangers, that trans persons, gays, and lesbians face in Iran, but also to see the productivity of the power of legal-medical-religious regulations, as well as the creativity with which trans persons, gays, and lesbians use the spaces such regulative power enables and the ways in which their active participation and struggles change things.

The distinction between the (acceptable) trans and the (deviant) homosexual has been enabled by biomedical, psychological, legal, and jurisprudential discourses that emerged between the 1940s and the 1970s in Iran. Chapter 2 traces this history, mapping out how surgical transformations of trans bodies initially emerged as a variant of a larger category of “sex-change” scientific marvels, first reported in the 1930s and 1940s, which referred to intersex bodily transformations. In the discourse of national scientific progress, trans bodies emerged as affiliated with, yet distinct from, congenital intersex bodies, and sex-change medical interventions were discussed as examples of advancements in medicine and surgery.

The discourse of the marvelous within vernacular science worked with the emerging discourse of sexuality in psychobehavioral science that was not concerned with marvels. Rather, the vernacular science incorporated all bodies into its concern with the health of the nation, the progress of its educational system, and the reform of family norms.

A growing academization of the vernacular psychology and sexology of these earlier decades resulted in the dominance of “physio-psycho-sexology” within
the medical and health scientific community by the late 1960s. This dominance proved critical in disaffiliating the trans from the intersex category and affiliating it with the homosexual and the transvestite. Physio-psycho-sexology also informed the emergent criminological discourse, such that sexual deviance was diagnosed as potentially criminal. Treatises on criminal sexualities described male homosexuality as almost always violent, akin to rape, prone to turn to murder, and almost always aimed at the “underage.” Of particular significance was the 1934 case of Asghar Qatil (Asghar the Murderer). Asghar Qatil’s reported confessions were taken to indicate that in almost all cases murder followed sex with young male adolescents, many of them “street kids.” The question of whether he was insane or criminal, which ran through the public debate of this case in 1934—along with the judicial decision that he was a criminal (he subsequently was executed in public)—contributed to the emerging association of sexual practices existing at the time between older men and male adolescents with deviancy/criminality. This association continues to inform dominant perceptions of male homosexuality in Iran and haunts transwomen’s lives even after srs.

The history of the modern stigmatization of homosexuality is thus a crucial part of my analysis, particularly with regard to differences between male-to-female (MtF) transitions compared with female-to-male (FtM) ones. As in many other places, in Iran conceptions of female-female sexual desire and relationships have a different historical trajectory, which only very recently and very partially have come into categorical affinity with male-male sexual desires and practices (under the rubric of homosexuality). Chapter 3 traces this recent history through a 1973 widely publicized “crime of passion,” alleged to be Iran’s first murder that had occurred “as a result of female homosexuality.” The intense and sustained coverage of the story in a popular women’s weekly, which included detailed reports, letters, photographs, interviews, and experts’ roundtables, in addition to blaring headlines and news articles in the national dailies, contributed to the disarticulation of the trans from the intersex and its re-articulation with the homosexual. The coverage of the case was at the same time distinct from the story of Asghar Qatil. Framed in psychobehavioral terms, the dominant discourse in this “lesbian crime of passion” was centered on the failures of parents and educators. It was cast as a preventable murder, not inherent in the nature of the sexual desire. Moreover, the accused woman’s expressed desire for sex change was projected as a missed possibility that might have averted the deadly tragedy. Drawing on this double history and on my interviews, I analyze how the “problem” of homosexuality differently configures MtF transitions from FtM ones in the Iranian context.
The 1979 revolution and the consolidation of an Islamic Republic produced a paradoxical situation for transsexuality: On the one hand, it immediately made what we would name and recognize as transgendered lives impossibly hazardous, while on the other, it led to its official sanction. In the 1970s, “woman-presenting males” (mard-i zan-numa) had carved themselves a space of relative acceptance in particular sites and professions (this is the subject of chapter 4). The 1979 revolution, and in particular the cultural purification campaigns of the first few years after the revolution, ruptured the dynamic of acceptability and marginalization of “the vulgar” and “the deviant” accorded by the larger society. Now, woman-presenting males not only carried the stigma of homosexuality, but they also transgressed the newly imposed regulations of gendered dressing in public.

Simultaneously, the establishment of an Islamic Republic set in motion a process of bureaucratization, professionalization, and specialization of Islamic jurisprudence and the Islamicization of the state. Among the significant effects of this shift was the way Islam as an overarching discourse of governance gained power in relation to the scientific discourses that had held sway previously. With regard to the issue of sex change, Ayatollah Khomeini had expressed his opinion as early as 1964 in his Arabic master treatise Tah-rir al-wasila, in which he had elaborated that sex change was permissible in Islam. Twenty years later, in 1984, this time in Persian and as the supreme political authority of the new state, he reissued this earlier opinion in response to a transwoman’s plea. From the late 1980s through the 2000s, legal, biomedical, and psychiatric authorities worked closely with specialized clerics to carve out legal and standardized procedures for the diagnosis and treatment of trans persons and to provide financial and social support for surgeries and care (chapter 5).

Missing from the circulating accounts of this history, in official discourse as well as most documentaries, is the critical role of trans activists in this transformation. Chapter 6 attempts to bring forth their participation. I understand trans activism in Iran not simply as a state-driven project that at most has some policy benefits for trans persons. Rather, like other domains and forms of engagement with governmental institutions, such activism forms a part of the process of state-formation itself. Iranian state-formation is an on-going, fractious, and volatile process, which—more than three decades after the 1979 revolution—continues to shape and reshape, fracture and refracture, order and reorder what we name “the state.” This attention to trans activism shows how the state and society also are marked by trans people.

Transsexual as a religio-state-sanctioned category bears the mark of an ar-
ray of challenges. But the challenges faced by trans persons—and by lesbians and gays—in Iran do not come exclusively, or even primarily, from either state or religion; they come as well from social and cultural norms. For example, a major factor is the pressure of the pervasive “marriage imperative.” Marrying constitutes an enactment of adulthood out of adolescence. While socio-economic changes have pushed the average age of first marriage for men and women alike to beyond their mid-twenties, unmarried persons live as if they are not yet adult. Male-male and female-female couples live under the severe threat of the marriage imperative, which at times contributes to the decision to consider transitioning as that which may salvage a threatened relationship. The ethnographic research in this book portrays these and other complex lived realities of some trans persons with whom I worked.

**Translations and Transplantations**

From the outset, this project faced enormous challenges of translation. I started with what seemed to be two simple, coherent, research questions. First, in a cultural-legal context where same-sex desire was considered shameful and same-sex practices were illegal, but within which transsexuality, even if overwhelmingly understood as shameful, was nevertheless legal and state subsidized, how did this configuration shape sexual and gender subjectivities? Second, how did insistent state regulations and religio-cultural codes and rituals concerning proper gender conduct shape sexual desires and gender identifications? Both questions were informed by the distinctions between gender, sex, and sexuality that had shaped my thinking over three decades of teaching, research, and activism in the United States. It quickly became clear that many of the stories I heard and lives I became part of seemed incoherent, if not incomprehensible, if I were to make them responsible for answering these questions. For instance, in some early conversations I would ask a variation of the question, “How did you come to recognize yourself as a trans and not a homosexual?” Not only did the question re-enact the legal and psychological understanding and dominant categorizations; more importantly, through that re-enactment, it participated in inciting the textbook narratives that these first interactions solicited. I was putting particular demands of accountability on trans persons that depended on unstated distinctions and reproduced the dominant delineations.

The categorical distinctions shaping my questions were even more situated and contingent than I had anticipated. When it came to issues of sexual/gender identification, desire, and practices, a single concept—*jins*—linguistically
and culturally kept them together. Not only had no distinction between sexuality and gender emerged, but, more significantly, lives were possible through that very nondistinction.

This is not a cultural relativist proposition. The contingency of these distinctions—enabling competing claims and differing ways of crafting livable lives—is, for example, argued by David Valentine in his persuasive ethnography, *Imagining Transgender*. Moreover, over the past three decades in Iran, the distinction between sex and gender has emerged powerfully in another domain—feminist activism—as a politically enabling parsing. For the topic of this book, however, those categorical distinctions proved incoherent. The tight conjunction among sex/gender/sexuality has both enabled the work of changing the body to align its gender/sexuality with its sex and set the parameters within which these changes are imagined and enacted. It has therefore necessarily contributed to the structure of self-cognition and narrative presentation among trans persons. More specifically, the persistent pattern of a tight transition from a cross-gender-identified childhood to an adolescence marked by sexual desire for one’s own peers speaks to the indistinction between gender/sex/sexuality. This indistinction regularly disrupts attempts to separate the homosexual from the trans, even as that distinction is regularly invoked.

As important, some of the conceptual distinctions among gender, sex, and sexuality within the Anglo-American context, including the distinction sometimes made between transgender and transsexual (based on surgical modifications to the body), have been shaped over the past decades by the identity politics of gender and sexuality as well as queer activism and queer critical theory. Transsexuality in Iran has not been shaped by such developments. Given the different political and sociocultural contexts, to what extent were analytical categories and theoretical distinctions developed in this recent Anglo-American setting useful for understanding Iran? As Brad Epps has noted, “Gender trouble, in a global frame, needs to be at once supplemented (in the deconstructive sense) and recast as ‘translation trouble’ or, better yet, ‘language trouble.’”

A related question was, How did seemingly similar assignations carry different meanings (or not) within a different politics of sex, sexuality, and gender? For instance, many of the issues that were discussed in trans support groups in Tehran resonated with some of what I had learned from conversations and debates in the United States, such as the issue of trans people becoming a node of cultural/scientific/popular obsession, the irrelevance of etiology to the claims of rights, and so on. But even when hearing resonances of familiarity, I had to learn to hear anew these familiar soundings and understand their grammar
in a different location and moment of utterance. What happens when words leave one setting and become enfolded into another? For instance, as will be discussed in chapters 4, 7, and 8, when the term gay first appeared in Iran of the 1970s, it was largely avoided by local men who could so self-identify because it was received as the English translation of a Persian word with a highly pejorative and dishonorable load (kuni). Some twenty years later, it began to be embraced precisely for an opposite effect: It had come to provide distance from that Persian pejorative assignation and helped those who so identified to connect to a global imagined community. The broader globalized circulation of gay, compared with lesbian, here also calls for bringing in the differential genealogies and settings not only in their “original settings” but also in their “destination.”

Even the simple word sex cannot be taken to mean the same in both locations. Its historical trace in Iran is to jins as genus. But, importantly, the trace is not history. The word jins continues to be used as genus. The doubling of jins provides a distinct set of affiliation for sex-in-Persian that is not identical to its English chains of association, with the effect that jins is never just sex. Nor can genus be innocent of sex.

The issue of the change of concepts traveling from one history and context to another does not pertain to “just words.” The current procedures of diagnosis and treatment for subjects under the domain of psychiatry and psychology, including for trans persons in Iran, is based on the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders III and IV and a number of U.S.-designed tests. The dominance of American scientific discourse, training, and procedures has transported many of these concepts globally. Because of their status as science, they arrive at their destination as dislocated, as if with no history of origin. Their re-embedding in the local Iranian context, at the particular historical moment of the past two decades (discussed in chapters 1 and 5), transforms their meaning and produces specific effects in that acquired location. When thinking about imported categories and practices, my concern is not to trace the origin of import. Rather I inquire into what the borrowing, appropriation, and embracing means for the importers. What work does the import do in its local context, in relation to the many other concepts and practices with which it becomes intertwined and that inform its meaning in the transplanted space?

The destination setting includes a different concept of self. What does saying “I am trans/gay/lesbian” mean when the question of “What am I?” does not dominantly reference an I narrativized around a psychic interiorized self, but rather an I-in-presentation at a particular nexus of time and place? In a socio-cultural-historical context in which the dominant narratives of the self
are formed differently from that which has become dominant in much of the domain we name the West, how does one understand the seemingly similar emergences of concepts and practices labeled gay, lesbian, or trans? What concepts of self inform the various styles of (self-)cognition and individual subjectivities, as well as the relations between individuals and their social web, including state institutions? For two young Iranian women I will discuss in chapters 7 and 8, the accidental arrival of a self-identified Iranian-American lesbian into their lives allowed them to disavow and resist the locally available designations. For one woman, same-sex-player (*hamjins-baz*) was pejorative and morally loathed; the other currently available identification, *transsexual*, did not feel quite right and seemed to be a fad to be resisted. *Lesbian* allowed her a distinct and satisfying self-cognition. Her partner became *lesbian* because of her location in relation to her. Again, as Brad Epps pointed out (see note 11),

What is at stake if we . . . query not simply agency in language but also agency in a particular language, a specific language, . . . or, indeed, and importantly, between and betwixt specific languages, the very position, so to speak, of any number of subjects, trans or not . . . who find themselves pulled, often quite painfully but also quite pleasurably, *between* two or more languages. What, in other words, occurs when two or more languages are understood, both in accordance to the general claims about language, as sites of agency? And what occurs, moreover, when such double (or triple, or multiple) sites, such double (or triple, or multiple) agencies are in conflict?

What are the implications of recognizing these differential situated meanings of words for building alliances internationally on issues of sexual rights? The final chapter of the book engages with these questions.

The problem of conceptual translation—is analytical distinction of sex/gender/sexuality productive in Iran?—is compounded at the level of language itself when translating back/writing this book in English. Persian is among the languages that do not mark gender grammatically. Ordinarily translators do not worry about the disambiguating work of translation; people known as male are given “he” and “his”; “she” and “her” are used for known females. Yet over and over again, I had to ask myself what pronoun I ought to use for this or that person in this or that moment of life. Using the third-person pronouns that have emerged in trans literature in English was not appropriate for the resolution of this dilemma: unlike the conscious challenge that such invented pronouns signify, I had to address what difference it made that such inventions had not been necessary. In the end it became clear that no simple satisfactory solution for this dilemma can be found. I have stumbled along, sometimes
using “she (or he),” sometimes “s/he,” and at times simply ‘u—the Persian pronoun used for he or she—when all else seemed to fail.

Venturing into Ethnography

From its early moments of conception, this research was caught by an exoticizing anxiety of the kind all too familiar to anthropologists. Was not my imagination stirred up by “an almost voyeuristic curiosity,” as Kandiyoti had called it? As Ramyar Rossoukh noted at the time (in conversations that constituted part of my ethnographic education), I could not escape the fact that I too was in pursuit of the exotic. Was it possible to carry on this pursuit in ways that could enable a de-exoticizing of my subject(s)? Would the “angel of history” or the “thick descriptions of ethnography” save me? As I mapped various sociocultural spaces within which I imagined the subject of transsexuality was being produced—such as visual documentaries and commercial films; press and television reports; biomedical and psychology research; books, dissertations, and articles in scientific sites; psychiatry and psychology practices and discourses; Islamic jurisprudential writings; national and local scientific seminars; and state-sponsored legislation and social services—it was impossible not to notice that my own research was about to carve yet another such space of subjectivity.

As it turned out, my actual challenges were somewhat different from those I had imagined. By the time I began my fieldwork in Iran in May 2006, the trans community was used to being treated as objects of curiosity. They had become actively engaged in taking charge of the process of their own production—not only in the most obvious form, as narrators of their life stories that would enable them to get the recognition and certification they wanted, but more pointedly through intervention in the various sites of subjectivation to use those sites for their own purposes, sometimes on an individual level, sometimes in terms of what might benefit their group rights.

Such interventions took numerous forms and constituted a significant element of the cartography of the subject trans. Members of the trans community engaged with numerous organs of government and medical professions on an almost daily basis. In the medical field, several have familiarized themselves, in great detail, with various available surgical procedures and kept themselves updated on relevant scientific developments. One FtM was completing his medical education and planned to specialize in sex reassignment surgery (srs).

They monitored each other’s participation in the production of documentaries and press articles, whether as direct participants or as critics. Initially
received as welcome publicity, by the time I began my research, many trans persons had become wary of and resistant to these productions. They found the documentaries at times detrimental to their needs; they felt they had no control over a production’s narrative, its dissemination, or the effects possible politicization of their cause internationally might produce in the politically volatile atmosphere in Iran. There was a deep tension verging on hostility within the larger trans/gay/lesbian community on these issues.

The trans individuals with whom I chose to work closely were focused on engaging with government institutions and changing things to be able to live more livable lives in Iran; they were critical of those who participated in the documentaries and thought (especially after the first enthusiastic wave of reports) that such films largely portrayed a terrible trans life in Iran. They were made objects of pity; this they deeply resented. Trans participants in the documentaries were thought by others in the community to take part either for monetary gain (two persons were said to have paid for their operations from the money they got from producers) or because they wanted to become notorious so that they could make a case for asylum and leave the country.

Concerns over the character of international coverage, and in particular concern about promises not kept by producers in terms of sites of screening of documentaries, had turned them into highly skeptical and resistant actors. It was I who had to answer their questions first: What good is history and ethnography for them? My eventual “breakthrough” moment did not arrive until some of the trans activists decided that I could indeed be of use to them. They began to ask me to accompany them to various meetings with officials with the explicit assignment of adding my “scientific voice,” with the authority of the best-known American university, to their arguments. That I was conversant in Islamic jurisprudential arguments that favored their case—something that most trans activists had no patience to learn—was an unexpectedly useful skill.

Given the amount of publicity that the topic had received and the numerous documentaries that had been produced, my research route had to deal with the challenge of a road littered with signposts. My own entry into this research had, of course, been occasioned and initiated by these very signposts. The establishment of these early signposts had produced the effect of seeing things again and again within an already-framed narrative, making it more likely to miss seeing other things, at least initially. They had set the terms of questions that were asked again and again—and questions not asked. They had created the expectation of the questions to be asked and encouraged the ready-at-hand narrative responses, already recited numerous times. I discuss some of the challenges of being defined by this prior scene and the difficulties of find-
ing my way off the “main highway” into the vastly more complicated little side
roads and sites in several chapters.

This ethnographic venture has posed challenges and opportunities for criti-
cal self-reflection on what history and historical writing is about. Some may
sound naïve, but I was/am a naïve anthropologist. As a historian more comfort-
able with archives, with written and visual texts, I was not at ease as the maker
of my own archive of interviews and field notes. Paradoxically, relief came with
a deeper appreciation of how, as historians, we too produce our own archives as
we select some texts and ignore others, producing relevance as we go.

An additional challenge was my differential relationship with different
groups of informants, in particular the ethics of interviewing trans persons.
Having been trained in, and having practiced for decades, the “hermeneu-
tics of suspicion”—skepticism toward the transparency of texts—and having
learned to always suspend belief, I soon realized that when listening to trans
people I needed to reflect on the meaning and effects of disbelief in this par-
ticular junction. Here were subjects who had spent their lives struggling to be
believed. The whole legal-medical system has been designed to “filter the fake
from the real,” to catch the pretend trans subjects, so to speak. My critical skep-
ticism toward every story I heard or read would put me precisely where hos-
tile family/legal/medical authorities were: where any kind of empathy would
become impossible. I had to learn how to listen in a way that would not feign
a naïve belief in everything, yet would begin with (though not end on) suspen-
sion of disbelief.

This was not an easy exercise. As any anthropologist or journalist knows
well, one’s interviewees tell their stories as they want you to hear them. Factual
information varies depending on where you are hearing the story. The same
person would tell one story in a trans support group run by activists, a some-
what different version in a trans support group held in and supervised by per-
sonnel from the Welfare Organization (on which they are dependent for partial
compensation of surgery expenses and other social services), and yet another
in a face-to-face private interview (actually several stories, depending on where
we were conversing—in a surgeon’s office, in a park, etc.).

The stories are purposefully partial and will always remain so. Indeed, this
constitutes a strategic survival shield (already extensively studied in other con-
texts) that allows trans persons (and gays and lesbians, many of whom blend
into the trans community) to get what they need from doctors, officials, psy-
chologists, friends and families, journalists and filmmakers, and historian-
anthropologists. The success of this strategy depends on giving select infor-
mation or no information at all. There is a point in the production of partial
ignorance. Making room for their own tenuous existence, despite legality, depends at times on being unreadable and looking ignorant, if you will, and on other occasions looking as if they are the very subject as defined by the legal/jurisprudential/medical discourse. While power produces and organizes statistics, laws, archives, and so on, living may depend, often enough, on not being included in statistics, on looking like law-abiding folks, on making sure you do not leave any archival material as traces for the paws of power. As de Certeau put it, “Innumerable ways of playing and foiling the other’s game . . . that is, the space instituted by others, characterize the subtle, stubborn, resistant activity of groups which, since they lack their own space, have to get along in a network of already established forces and representations.”

Trans individuals (like all of us) use very different languages, and indeed perform very different personas, in different sites: for example, at the surgeon’s office; with their psychologist; in the Legal Medical Board hearings that will decide whether to issue the official trans certificate that entitles them to get hormones, surgery, and the precious exemption from military service; with their close friends; or with alienated parents. Only some of these languages and stories survive for later historians, who may be able to imagine the emergence of a trans subjectivity at the knot of legal/medical/jurisprudential discourses, but with the loss of that which leaves no trace: the creative playfulness of trans individuals’ self-subjectivation gets lost in the process of archivization. The “miniscule’ and quotidian” ways in which they manipulate the mechanisms of discipline and conform to them only in order to evade them do not make it into historical records. Combined with an acute awareness of how much material we ignore and throw out, even from the historical archives, this can only intensify a historian’s humility about the limits of our historiographical projects.

Although I became privy to several stories told, some of the stories would not remain in any recorded form. At critical points of the conversation interviewees often would ask me to turn off the recorder and not take any notes, which also implied a promise that I would not write on that point. I also have had to make decisions (I hope ethical ones) about what information to use and what to ignore totally, even from the material I was allowed to record. In that sense, I have been making up an archive for my work and possibly for future researchers. How does one reconcile ethical responsibility to one’s profession with that toward living subjects when making decisions about selective destructions? Do I have any ethical responsibility for saving as complete a bank of information as I have at my disposal?

These questions remain unanswered in this book.