Int. J. Middle East Stud. **51** (2019), 21–41
doi:10.1017/S002074381800048X

Wayne Martino and Jón Ingvar Kjaran

THE POLITICS OF RECOGNIZABILITY: GIVING AN ACCOUNT OF IRANIAN *GAY* MEN'S LIVES UNDER REPRESSIVE CONDITIONS OF SEXUALITY GOVERNANCE

Abstract
In this article we examine accounts of self-identifying Iranian gay men. We draw on a range of evidentiary sources—interpretive, historical, online, and empirical—to generate critical and nuanced insights into the politics of recognition and representation that inform narrative accounts of the lived experiences of self-identified *gay* Iranian men, and the constitution of same-sex desire for these men under specific conditions of Iranian modernity. In response to critiques of existing *gay* internationalist and liberationist accounts of the Iranian *gay* male subject as a persecuted victim of the Islamic Republic of Iran's barbarism, we address interpretive questions of sexuality governance in transnational contexts. Specifically, we attend to human rights frameworks in weighing social justice and political claims made by and on behalf of sexual and gender minorities in such Global South contexts. In this sense, our article represents a critical engagement with the relevant literature on sexuality governance and the politics of same-sex desire for Iranian *gay* men that is informed by empirical analysis.

Keywords: criminalization of homosexuality; Iranian *gay* men; Islamic Republic of Iran; same-sex desire; sexuality governance; transsexuality

This article investigates accounts of self-identifying *gay*[1] Iranian men about their lives as sexual subjects, both inside and outside of the Islamic Republic of Iran. We draw on a range of sources, from historical accounts documenting conditions of same-sex desire[2] and its enactment to theoretical, media, and empirical sources, which provide insight into how *gay* men are constituted and constitute themselves. These sources are employed to examine the politics of recognition and representation that inform narrative accounts of the lived experiences of self-identified *gay* Iranian men. The focus is on the socio-political-legal framing, limits, and grids of intelligibility that govern the terms for recognizability, admissibility, and livability of a *gay* life under specific conditions of modernity and Islamic jurisprudence.[3] Our aim is to provide a nuanced understanding of sexuality governance vis-à-vis the social and legal regulation of the enactment of same-

Wayne Martino is a Professor in the Faculty of Education and an affiliate member of the Department of Women's Studies and Feminist Research, University of Western Ontario, Ontario, Canada; e-mail: wmartino@uwo.ca; Jón Ingvar Kjaran is an Associate Professor in the School of Education and at the United Nations University for Gender Equality Studies and Training (UNU-GEST), University of Iceland, Reykjavík, Iceland; e-mail: jik@hi.is

sex desire in the Iranian context, and its implications for envisaging sexual justice in a globalizing world.[4] This is important given the proliferation of media accounts fueled by a Western, liberal, secular imaginary in which the barbarism of the Islamic Republic of Iran is pitted against the civilizing potential of the West as the harbinger of democracy and human rights for victims of sexual oppression in the Middle East.[5]

From Judith Butler, we are aware that an account can never be taken as an unmediated source of "truth" and, hence, as a definitive representation of *gay* Iranian men's lives.[6] Thus any social account of oneself or another is always embedded in the norms that govern the terms of that recognizability. Butler, for example, claims that while norms confer intelligibility, there is always that which "exceeds the norms of intelligibility itself."[7] In this regard, we are conscious of the deployment of epistemological frames *for seeing and judging* "from within which the face appears," and the operations of power in which they are imbricated.[8] Moreover, as Butler argues, "the way in which that self is produced and producible" is underscored by the effects and demands of truth telling for which there are consequences, "as well as the price that must be paid."[9] So what price must be paid for embracing or avowing the norms governing the conditions of one's own emergence, knowability, and self-recognition as a *gay* male subject in Iran, especially given the legal, medical, sociocultural, and religious forms of constraint on constituting a legitimate sexual subject? How are the terms of recognizability, enactment, and livability of same-sex desire, in the Iranian context, understood and negotiated by *gay* Iranian men under historically specific conditions of disavowal and criminalization of homosexuality? We take up these questions through an engagement with significant scholarship in the field,[10] as well as by drawing on accounts of Iranian *gay* men's lives accessed through online sources[11] and interviews conducted by the second author in Tehran during his fieldwork there in 2015.[12]

This sort of critical engagement and framing entails nuanced analysis of the historical and sociopolitical contingencies and regulatory constraints governing the emergence and livability of same-sex relations and *gay* male subjectivity in Iran. It entails attending to both the costs of certain identificatory practices for *gay* Iranian men, and the enactment of same-sex desire for Iranian men more broadly.[13] We extend Katarzyna Korycki and Abouzar Nasrzadeh's critical historical account of key distinctive moments in the modern constitution of the *homosexual* subject by focusing on the official recognition of transsexuality in compliance with Islam as state policy in Iran, and a site for reinscribing the *othering* of homosexuality as a morally reprehensible form of criminal behavior and sexual perversion.[14] In so doing, we raise questions about sexual governance and human rights frameworks in weighing social justice claims made by and on behalf of sexual and gender minorities in Global South contexts such as Iran.[15] Our approach is informed by our reading of Nancy Fraser who calls for the need to adopt a "wide-ranging, open-ended mode of reasoning"[16] when addressing critical questions of justice, vulnerability, and sexual identities in a globalizing world.[17]

We begin by addressing interpretive questions of sexuality governance in transnational contexts, followed by a discussion of the politics of *misframing*[18] as it relates to the representation of *gay* Iranian men by gay internationalist media sources.[19] We then address the emergence of the politics of same-sex desire after the 1979 Islamic Revolution. This critical framing and contextualization serves as a basis for examining accounts of *gay* Iranian men's lives. Our focus on *gay* Iranian men is important, as it adds to a growing

body of knowledge on same-sex desires in the Middle East as they relate to governance of sexuality and its intersection with gender.[20] Furthermore, with regards to the criminalization of homosexuality in Iran specifically, Matthew Waites[21] argues for the need for critical scholarship to address the limits of transnational, Western, liberal framings of the politics of representation involving Iranian *gay* male subjects. As Mitra Rastegar has explicated, the predominant framing of persecution of Iranian *gays* within the limits of such liberal social imaginaries can "blind us to complexities that are both intellectually deficient and politically deficient."[22] We understand the effects of such *misframing* as doing injustice in generating knowledge and supporting sexual minorities inside Iran vis-a-vis "expand[ing] the space" and possibilities for expressing "same gender sexuality."[23]

SEXUALITY GOVERNANCE IN TRANSNATIONAL CONTEXTS

In examining the constitution of the *gay* male Iranian subject as an object and target of governance, it is important to address the debates surrounding the politics of representation vis-à-vis the *gay* subject in the Global South. Scholars in the field have argued that such a logic of representation in the Global North is driven by liberal democratic ideals that fail to understand the specificity of sexuality governance in the Middle East and postcolonial contexts.[24] By engaging with these debates, our aim, following Mark Blasius, Butler, and Fraser,[25] is to explicate a heuristic approach to understanding the politics of sexuality governance in transnational contexts and for a globalizing world. As Korycki and Nasirzadeh point out, "the West should be seen as a referent in a 'conversation' in which both parties create images of each other and produce anti- and pro-homosexual stances that vary across time."[26] For example, they argue that Iran "first borrowed an anti-homosexual stance from the West only to later claim homosexuality itself was a Western import."[27] In this sense, they stress that homophobia has been employed as a tool for *state crafting* in historically specific ways that have come to define constitutive modernizing moments in the rearticulation and assertion of heteronormativity through a repudiation of male love and same-sex desire.[28]

In a similar vein, Blasius argues that it is important to avoid "western triumphalism," whether in imperialist or liberatory terms, in conceiving of LGBTQ human rights advocacy in international contexts, particularly in the Global South. However, he points out that there is a need to take stock of the politics of homosexuality and the operation of homophobia as a basis for building an understanding of "the global politics of sexuality across cultures."[29] According to Blasius, this means attending to advocacy claims and debates pertaining to charges of *Westoxification*[30] wherein homosexuality is framed as an imported foreign influence that is inconsistent with "a culture's traditional values." Moreover, he states, it involves searching out *motifs* within the context of an international and transnational human rights advocacy-debates agenda.[31] Thus such a search for *motifs* is motivated less by a desire to find solutions than by a commitment to provoke thought about the specificity and contingencies underscoring sexuality governance in transnational contexts. In this respect what is iterated is a need for ongoing interrogation and reframing vis-à-vis the norms governing self-recognition and becoming/being recognized as a sexual subject under particular historico-political circumstances.[32]

This position is consistent with Butler's stance concerning the political ramifications of how one is addressed as a particular subject. How one is addressed relates to an ethical

consideration of what particular forms of address say about the framing of one's subjectivity or identity, and "the range of human possibility that exists, and even to prepare ourselves for or against such possibilities."[33] The terms of address that come to inform how one is hailed as a particular sort of sexual and gendered subject pertain specifically to the legal designation of *gay* men and *lesbian* women in the Iranian context as sexual deviants, criminals, and moral degenerates. How do these judgments, as endorsed within a regime of sexuality governance that is built on official, legal, moral approbation of same-sex desire/practices and the threat of prosecution, come to inform the accounting of oneself that *gay* Iranian men give within the context of such forms of address? What is the impact of transnational, LGBTQ human rights advocacy networks on such self-narrations?

As Blasius points out, these ethical considerations address concerns about conceiving and enacting *just* governance, particularly as they pertain to debates about same-sex desiring and gender diversity, and their framing through specific cultural lenses and traditions.[34] In this sense, it is important to remember how discourses of sexual orientation and gender identity, derived and developed from within Western modernist frames of reference, travel across various nation-states, and are translated in Global South contexts where different norms govern thinking about similar identities and practices. As Blasius stipulates, we need to pay attention to how "widely used but culturally nuanced language of 'social justice' mediates through international human rights norms of sexual orientation/gender identity and the area of 'relational justice' where such norms are enacted."[35] Ultimately, the central concern for Blasius, as well as for us, is the political ramifications and exigencies that are implicated in how individuals are constituted and constitute themselves as gendered, sexual, and erotic subjects/agents, which requires some deciphering of the regimes of sexuality governance that demarcate legitimate sexual citizenship and identity in differing cultural, geopolitical contexts.[36]

Brian Whitaker, for example, points to important geopolitical specificities in different urban contexts such as Cairo and Beirut, with the latter city represented as more "gay friendly" and providing "opportunities for gay social life and activism."[37] He also quotes *gay* men from Saudi Arabia who speak of private "gay parties" and the existence of cafes and shopping malls as cruising sites in Riyadh. These are well-known and important social places for gay men to interact with one another despite repressive laws against homosexuality. In addition, Whitaker claims that while Saudi law prescribes execution for sodomy, it is seen as an extremely rare possibility because one has to be caught in the act. However, he points out that sexuality governance and the law are important analytic frameworks because the private sphere of the household in Saudi Arabia is considered "an autonomous self-governing unit in which state does not interfere." As a result, such *protected* spaces allow for a degree of socialization outside of the purview of state intervention.[38] In this respect, the focus needs to be on an analysis of the grids of intelligibility for making sense of sexuality governance, both within and across nation-states. In this way, attention is given to "how sexuality is constituted through knowledges, norms and institutions, and subjectivities," the basis for providing a better understanding through microlevel analysis of the everyday lived experiences of sexual and gender minorities in transnational contexts.[39]

Fraser, however, points out that neither an analytic focus on recognition nor one on redistribution is adequate for understanding the politics of justice in a globalizing world.[40] She outlines a three-dimensional analytic framework in reframing justice,

which also includes the political dimension of representation. The latter involves addressing the "criteria of social belonging . . . who is excluded from the circle of those entitled to a just distribution and reciprocal recognition."[41] While Fraser acknowledges all dimensions are, of course, political, she employs representation in what she deems "a more specific, constitutive sense, which concerns the scope of the state's jurisdiction and decision rules by which it structures contestation."[42]

Such frameworks are useful in investigating the politics of representation in the Islamic Republic of Iran (and other Middle Eastern nation-states) as well as how sexual and gender minorities are differentially and respectively constituted as illegitimate and legitimate subjects with respect to the law.[43] These are matters of *relational justice*, which require an examination of the impact of regimes of sexual governance and morality in terms of how they are negotiated and mediated in the everyday lives of *gay*-identifying and same-sex-loving men, as well as *lesbian* women.[44] This critical examination of sexual governance in turn relates to the *framing* of transsexuality as a coconstitutive factor in the recasting of same-sex desire in criminalized and pathogenic terms. This constitution of transsexuality serves as a definitive moment in the context of Iranian modernity in the heteronormalization of public space.[45]

These matters relate to addressing inclusion and exclusion from the public domain, but they also have ramifications for the surveillance of sexual minorities and their same-sex relations, which pertain to questions of the *framing* of justice in a globalizing world. Fraser, for example, indicates that, while material governance and matters involving economic maldistribution and misrecognition are indeed necessary to address within nation-states, "the forces that perpetuate justice cannot be confined to 'the space of places.'"[46] Rather what is needed is a consideration of "the space of flows" and, in this sense, *how* the *gay* Iranian male subject gets constituted and constitutes himself. This construction of the *gay* male Iranian subject is particularly salient in a consideration of the epistemic terms of the grammar of political claims making that is employed in the *mediascapes* through which they are represented politically.

Sima Shakhsari provides a critical account of the politics of representation of Iranian *gays* in the mainstream international media and cyberspace.[47] She argues that the hypervisibility of the Iranian *gay* male subject in transnational media and on the Internet is driven by certain orientalist impulses and a civilizational logic of "Iranian backwardness,"[48] which tends both to cast them as victims of an Islamofascist state and to rely on "sensationalized accounts of gay persecution in Iran."[49] She argues that such accounts, particularly those by Iranian *gay* men in exile, are underscored by a certain foreclosure and disavowal of homoeroticism at the hands of the Iranian state. Shakhsari contextualizes *gay* diasporic accounts as feeding into a broader geopolitical orientalist agenda that has been resuscitated by the War on Terror. She states that some diasporic *gay* Iranians have taken advantage of the opportunities provided by these circumstances for "securing immigration and visa opportunities to Europe and North America," and through acts of "self-entrepreneurship." As such they have inserted themselves as representable subjects within a transnational imaginary that is grounded in Western liberatory and civilizational frames of reference. The result, Shakhsari claims, is that "the Iranian homosexual is produced and deployed as the marker of freedom in civilizational discourses and practices that divide the world into binaries of liberated/repressed, free/unfree, and democratic/theocratic."[50]

While acknowledging the limits of such discourses, we argue that this interpretive framing of Iranian *gay* diasporic subjects requires further analysis. Such analysis is especially important because of the absence of scholarly attention to the accounts provided by Iranian *gays* themselves, and their knowledge claims about sexuality governance in Iran, as well as their own self-constitution as same-sex desiring subjects. As Fraser highlights, addressing epistemic and empirical questions related to the grammar of the struggle for justice through a critical democratic lens means coming to terms with the proper frame for theorizing justice in terms of the "who" and "how": who is entitled to claim justice and how "in a given case should one determine the pertinent frame for reflecting on justice."[51] Such disputes over the "who"—i.e., the claims of justice made by Iranian *gays* themselves with regards to matters of sexuality governance in Iran—relate to addressing fundamental questions of how such claims are to be weighed or judged without resorting to the civilizational rhetoric that tends to drive and define much of the *gay* internationalist framing through which such justice claims are made.[52]

Rastegar illustrates how these sorts of discourses need to be understood within a broader post-9/11 context of the War on Terror in which the hypervisibilization of the liberal, secular West is pitted against the religious fundamentalism of predominantly Muslim nations in the Global South.[53] This analysis, which draws attention to the politics of *misframing*, illustrates the dangerous repercussions of adhering to a liberationist rhetoric around sexuality governance for those in the Global South. In fact, Scott Long argues that representing the *gay* Iranian subject as a victim of Islamo-fascist state governance forecloses dialogic possibilities, and a full consideration of the political ramifications of such advocacy for LGBTQ communities inside Iran.[54] Whitaker argues that *gay* lobby groups and rights-based organizations in the West have actually contributed to an intensification of antihomosexuality discourses in the Middle East, which have not served the interests of LGBT individuals in that geopolitical context. He suggests, for instance, that such activism has led to a displaced tendency to deny the existence of homosexuality, and in turn incited a discourse about its perversion which claims that homosexuality leads to a "devilish lifestyle."[55]

It is in this sense, as Fraser points out, that there is a performative dimension to framing and its democratic legitimacy in terms of the politics of representing "who is affected and by what,"[56] which relates to addressing the question of "*how* we should determine the *who* in a globalizing world."[57] Given the critical analysis of *misframing* of the Iranian *gay* subject at the hands of gay international activists and media-generating outlets, we take into consideration both the perspectives of sexual and gender minority Iranian subjects themselves, and a critical assessment of the political implications and ramifications of importing a universal *gay* human rights agenda.

THE POLITICS OF SAME-SEX DESIRE IN POSTREVOLUTIONARY IRAN

As we have argued from the outset, accounts of self-identifying *gay* Iranian men need to be historically contextualized and understood within specific conditions of sexuality governance, regimes of representation, and self-formative/self-fashioning potentialities. Such conditions of emergence, where same-sex desiring Iranian men—in giving an account of themselves as sexual subjects—refer to themselves as "gay," cannot be understood in terms that are reducible to the importation of Western sexual identity categories.

Korycki and Nasirzadeh, for example, point out that such claims to a "gay" identity are significant, given that these men tend not to invoke other discourses about homoerotic attachments, where the male is constituted as an object of same-sex desire and love, a phenomenon for which a rich vocabulary exists in Persian literature and in the Persian context.[58] They argue that the politics of same-sex desire and its emergence, as well as its denial, need to be understood against the backdrop of the historical legacy of Iranian modernization. In this section we will focus on the historical moment when homosexuality became highly punishable and criminalized after the 1979 Islamic Revolution. As Afsaneh Najmabadi has argued, in order to reinvent itself as a nation-state, the Islamic Republic drew on a discourse of othering the West and the Pahlavi dynasty through regulation of women and the criminalization of homosexuality. Such framing resonated with many Iranians who despised the Shah, with whom they had come to associate a Western-induced form of permissiveness as evidenced by the presence of same-sex practices, despite a long history of the enactment of same-sex desire in Iran dating back to premodern times.[59] This shift, Korycki and Nasirzadeh point out, also resulted in strict regulatory controls over women's bodies and segregation of public spaces. It is in this sense that the figures of the *new* segregated woman and the criminalized homosexual were invoked through "religion and re-invented tradition."[60]

The attention that Korycki and Nasirzadeh pay to the Islamic penal code, and how it was used to enforce and administer a social and moral regulation of same-sex desire, with significant implications for sexual governance and the policing of private morality, is particularly invaluable to our framing of the accounts of *gay* Iranian men provided in the relevant literature and empirical sources. Under Islamic law in Iran at this time male same-sex sexual relations came to be designated as *lavat* (sodomy), and are still considered a criminal offense warranting execution.[61] However, whereas the focus of Islamic law was on the classification of *deviant* sexual acts, these regulatory systems, as Korycki and Nasirzadeh point out, were instrumental in creating a subject category of *the homosexual* as a moral deviant and, hence, "an irredeemable other."[62] While documenting the specific historical conditions of emergence for the classification of such morally degenerate sexual subjects, these scholars are quick to add that such state-sanctioned forms of biopower, particularly with regards to the constitution of *the homosexual* as a deviant subject, have historical antecedents and conditions of emergence in the West.[63]

With the election of Seyyed Mohammad Khatami in the late 1990s, the internationalization of human rights discourse started to have an impact on Iranian society. In fact, Korycki and Nasirzadeh claim that these conditions opened up a space for addressing human rights in Iran, providing a fertile ground for "the linking of human rights to gay rights found in the Western discourse and growing links to the West through cyberspace," in addition to the availability of positive modes of self-identification.[64] Thus, rather than casting the *gay* international movement in terms that limit its influence to a missionary neocolonial zeal for liberating the queer subaltern subject in the Global South, Korycki and Nasirzadeh see such Western influences as providing "ready-made positive markers of identity" for *same-sex desiring* subjects inside Iran. For example, they claim that such self-identificatory categories have been employed by sexual minorities in subversive ways as a means to counter the derogatory references to their sexuality in the Persian language. In addition, in response to the charges that they have simply appropriated a Western import of gayness, Korycki and Nasirzadeh state that *lesbian* and *gay*

activists inside Iran have simultaneously constructed "new Persian words" to explain, in more positive terms, same-sex identification: *hamjins-gara'i* (same-sex love, same-sex desire, same-sex orientation) as a counter to *hamjins-bazi* (same-sex play, same-sex lust). This positive self-identification as "gay," coupled with discursive strategies for inventing new terminology and referents for same-sex desire, points to the productive effects of power. It is being mobilized by *gay* and *lesbian* activists and subjects inside Iran to disrupt the grid of intelligibility for constituting and *othering* sexual minorities "as non-authentic Iranians."[65] However, Korycki and Nasirzadeh indicate that many of Khatami's reforms were thwarted by the fragmentation of the Iranian state, which permitted hardline conservatives to block his progressive interventions.

TRANSSEXUALITY AND HOMOSEXUALITY IN POSTREVOLUTIONARY IRAN

A distinctive moment in "the heteronormative mapping of the social space" for the production of the visibilized Iranian homosexual subject was the incitement to a discourse about same-sex relations through the official avowal of transsexuality and SRS (sexual reassignment surgery).[66] This moment, we argue, was integral for the reconstitution of the *homosexual* subject in Iran and for the intensification of discourses about the enactment of same-sex desire and grids of intelligibility for making sense of a distinctive criminalized and deviant category of person. In drawing on Najmabadi's[67] recent work on transsexuality, we further extend Korycki and Nasirzadeh's interpretive analytic insights into how regulatory systems of sexual governance are intertwined with the machinations of the Islamic state in ways that illuminate the reinscription of the *homosexual* as a pathologized, medicalized, and criminalized *category of person*,[68] and, hence, an abject figure of derision and moral approbation. It is in this sense that we are concerned to further illuminate "the interaction between systems of regulation and the individual subject of state's machinations," while being careful not to reduce the *gay* Iranian subject to a *docile body* immobilized by forces of sovereign juridical domination.[69] Such forces and their regulatory effects in the lives of *gay* Iranian men are central to understanding the accounts of recognizability and livability of a sexual personhood that speaks to embracing same-sex sexualities and gender diversity—a focus we take up specifically in the following section of the article where we examine empirical accounts of self-identified *gay* men as illustrative sources.

Najmabadi's historical and empirical analysis is significant in that it highlights the conditions under which the distinction between the *acceptable trans* and the *deviant homosexual* emerged in Iran, and how it was made possible through the mobilization of state-sanctioned biomedical, legal, and jurisprudential discourses since the 1930s.[70] She maps the shifts in how transsexuality became constituted in the 1930s, with sex change transformative possibilities being framed as "scientific marvels" and a sign of medical advancement. Significantly, her work points to the vernacularization of psychology and sexuality—often imported from Western sources—and its increasing dominance in the medical and health fields, which Najmabadi claims was central to demarcating the category of the transsexual person from that of the intersex person and implicating the former, along with the homosexual and transvestite, as sexual deviant types. Central to the criminalization of such types, she points out, was *the physio-psycho-sexology* apparatus, which enabled such diagnostic capability and the establishment of these classificatory

https://doi.org/10.1017/S002074381800048X Published online by Cambridge University Press

grids of intelligibility. However, this association of criminality with deviance, as Najmabadi acknowledges, continues to drive the stigmatization and policing of male homosexuality in Iran, and to plague transwomen's lives.[71] It is this analysis of the implication of male homosexuality and its stigmatization for the configuration of Mtf transitions, that defines a key modernizing moment in the governmental heteronormalization of social spaces in Iran.

Najmabadi's historical analysis reveals how the rupture of an affiliation between intersexuality and transsexuality produced the conditions that enabled Mtf transitioning to be implicated, by association, in morally reprehensible discourses of homosexuality, thereby repositioning the former in relation to sexual deviancy. This was made possible by a shift in how sex change came to be understood—initially constituted as a wonder of creation in the 1930s and 1940s and related to correcting the condition of intersexuality, but later reframed within the epistemic limits defined by the science of sexology in the 1970s, which resulted in sex change being affiliated with sexual deviancy. For example, she documents that in 1976 the Medical Council of Iran decreed SRS illegal and unethical except in intersex cases and how such a decree was further influenced by the vernacularization of the psychology of sex, with homosexuality being implicated in transvestism and transsexuality as sexual deviancies.

The fatwa issued by Khomeini in the mid-1980s endorsing SRS for transsexuals in Iran marks a definitive moment, in terms of its implications for both the legitimation of the transsexual subject and the policing of same-sex sexuality and desire, particularly for *gay*-identifying men in Iran. While Najmabadi highlights the key role played by the demands of Mtf trans-activist, Mulk-ara, in the issuing of this fatwa, which resulted in its official state-sanctioned medico-legal and religious legibility and recognizability, she admits that this endorsement did not end persecution and harassment of transsexuals by Islamic Republic security forces on suspicion of moral corruption and sexual deviancy.[72] However, the legibility and recognizability of the transsexual as a category of person, rendered comprehensible through its bio-psycho-sexological-medical compliance with Islam, led to an irruption of a discourse around homosexuality and the need to separate out transsexuality from an association with *same-sex-playing*.[73] One of the clerics interviewed by Najmabadi, Karimi-nia, with Islamic jurisprudential knowledge and expertise concerning the daily lives of transsexuals in Iran, asserts that both categories must be kept apart because pursuing *same-sex playing* is considered a crime in Islam and is punishable under the law. Such an account of transsexuality highlights the extent to which its regulatory force is coconstitutive of the criminalization of homosexuality and pathologization of same-sex desire.

Najmabadi argues, however, that challenges faced by transpersons and *lesbians* and *gays* in Iran cannot be understood solely or exclusively as emanating from either the state or religion, and that a consideration of social and cultural norms is also needed, in particular those pertaining to the operation and effects of *the marriage imperative*.[74] While we acknowledge this point, it is important not to downplay the political ramifications of the legal status attributed to transsexual persons, and the spaces it creates for engaging and negotiating with the state. Such engagement is denied to *gays and lesbians* and specifically the category of person defined as the male homosexual whose criminalization is enforced by state-sanctioned, Islamic jurisprudential-inspired legal frameworks. For example, Najmabadi mentions that the *gay* men at the trans support meetings that she attended did raise the question of whether the legally acquired rights afforded transpeople

in Iran under Islam jurisprudential circumstances is something that could be pursued by *gay* men with similar effects: "Gay men were interested in finding out if there were any biopsychological or *fiqhi* avenues they could open up, similar to the psychological discourse that now gave them exemption from military service."[75]

However, such engagement with the state requires an assessment of *gay* men as pathological subjects on the basis of confessing their same-sex desire under the medical-psychological gaze of military authorities, and opens them up to more intensified surveillance and official stigmatization. Morteza, a gay-identifying Iranian man interviewed by the second author, talks about his experience in securing an exemption from mandatory military service:

> We have some exemptions [from military service] of which one of them is proof that you are homosexual. [This] means that you have some kind of mental disorder. Military doctors will test and evaluate you psychologically, and after that they interview you again to decide whether you are really gay or not. Actually most of these doctors are not knowledgeable enough. They just know that there are feminine boys, and that these feminine boys are homosexuals. If you are not feminine enough they will not categorize you as homosexual. So most people who go there will act feminine even if they are not. They are wearing certain clothes to make them look feminine. I got this kind of an exemption card easily, but my boyfriend faces some problems because they say that he acts like a "normal" guy, and that he can correct his way of being by undertaking some therapy. Then he can return to leading a "normal" life as a heterosexual. But I talked to his mother and I asked her to come to the military medical office and to tell them that her son was like this, that when he was boy he played with dolls he did these "girlish" things. She came there and she said all these things and after that they gave him the exemption card.[76]

Morteza's account reveals the particular gender dynamics, involving deliberate and conscious gender performativity, that are at play in securing exemption from military service. He highlights how the homosexual subject only becomes intelligible in the eyes of the state through the embodied and performative inscription of femininity, which negates any trace of masculinity, the latter also serving as the corollary of a diagnostic basis for ruling out the possibility of being *gay*. Such gender performances in terms of diagnosing one's sexuality have also been reported in other Middle Eastern contexts. Oyman Basaran, for example, argues that military authorities in Turkey are directly influenced "by the culturally specific stereotype of homosexuality" in its association with effeminacy as a basis for determining exemption for gay draftees.[77] In order to secure exemption they need to perform their gender in "feminine" ways, and are required to declare an affinity for a passive role in sexual relationships. Thus, these state-sanctioned practices regarding what counts as a legible category of person and acceptable sexual personhood cannot be easily disentangled from the culturally inscribed norms of performing one's gender within the grid of a heterosexual matrix.[78]

ACCOUNTS OF IRANIAN *GAY* MEN

In this section we focus on empirical sources, including interviews with *gay*-identified men conducted by the second author during fieldwork in Tehran in 2015, as well as media-generated documentation of online accounts of gay men's lives in Iran.[79] These sources provide insights into Iranian *gay*-identifying men's interactions with one another and with the Islamic state. While such an examination requires attention to questions of *framing*, particularly with regards to the politics of representation and recognition of

which Fraser speaks, the justice claims as they pertain to the curtailment of sexual self-determination that characterizes much of this literature need to be weighed in light of an assessment of "the means by which subject constitution occurs," which must always be considered as partial and incomplete.[80]

There were many similarities between the accounts of Iranian *gay* men's lives accessible online, which tend to be framed as retrospective narrative reflections from those living in exile, and those documented in the empirical research conducted by the second author. One of these former accounts published by the Tehran Bureau correspondent for the *Guardian* newspaper is written by a gay Iranian man now living in Norway, and takes the form of a letter addressed to a "dear friend" in Iran.[81] The writer frames his lived experiences of growing up *gay* in Iran less as a form of persecution at the hands of Iranian state officials than as a form of internal suffering in response to having to contend with an official disavowal of same-sex desire as "unholy" and "sinful," which led him to "hide behind a thousand veils." Arman, a twenty-four-year-old man from the second author's research who identifies as *gay*, also experienced internal suffering as result of the repressive conditions of sexuality governance in Iran. In an interview he emphasized that he found it important to pass as straight on a daily basis, which he experiences as living behind a mask:

> What kind of life is that when you have to hide yourself behind a mask? You are like a statue, you are just alive, you don't live, you are not living, you are just breathing; it's not life, it's nothing I can call a life because when you want to live you have to live freely, the way you want, the way you are to be happy. If you have to live feeling depressed your whole life it's better to die.[82]

Arman emphasizes that living behind a "mask" is not a life worth living. In this sense, he speaks to the terms of the livability of gay life in Tehran, which are produced by the regulatory effects of a repressive regime of sexual governance that is built on state-sanctioned religious, medical, and legal interdictions for rendering homosexuality and the enactment of same-sex desire intelligible as criminally deviant behavior.

However, Farhod, a twenty-six year old who identifies as gay (also from the second author's research), states that he has never been arrested or subjected to intensified surveillance by the morality police, unlike some of his gay male friends, because he is "straight acting." However, he refuses to subscribe to a "veiled" existence, and asserts that if someone asks him about his sexual orientation he has no problem declaring that he is "gay." In fact, he claims that one would be arrested less for being *gay* than for engaging in public forms of activism directed against the government. In other words, police arrest is less about criminality than it as about an activist pursuit of *gay* rights that is interpreted as an antigovernment act:

> I want to say that the government doesn't arrest us for being gays. The government is more concerned about protest whether one is gay, Jewish or Muslim. The important word is protest. If you protest you will be arrested. If you don't protest in front of people and it is just our love but still we need to fight for our freedom. We need gay rights in this country. We need to live openly, like my neighbours do not know that I am gay but I want them to know . . . I don't want to be an actor, I want to be myself in front of people and that's the problem.[83]

Here Farhod speaks to a nuanced experience of having to live a *masked* existence as a *gay* man—one can be *gay* but it cannot be openly declared, despite the fact that he has no

problem stating that he is gay if asked. However, such openness is undercut by the fact that he is not always able to gain public recognition as a *gay* man, which highlights that there is no guarantee of such recognition being granted in terms of his daily lived experiences and interactions with others such as his neighbours. It is such a call for recognizability and legitimacy as an openly *gay* man that underscores, in his view, the necessity for a political *gay* rights activist movement in Iran.

Other Iranian men do speak about having to come to terms with their sexuality in response to being constituted by discourses that render them intelligible as abjected subjects—as deviant others. But, as Farhod's account attests, they do not see themselves as *docile subjects* who are subjugated by the regulatory authority of the Iranian jurisprudential state. Arman, for example, mentioned that he has a Facebook account registered under a pseudonym, where he posts information about homosexuality and interacts with other *gay* men and *lesbian* women. The Internet is an important platform for him, and is understood as part of his unmasking strategy to account for himself outside of the limits imposed by the Iranian state, as the following comment makes clear:

> I think I need some place to get in touch and contact with my real personality. It sometimes helps me to calm down. I need it for myself and for my likes because there are many men and women like me who are in danger, who need help. I try to help some people on Facebook. I remember once I helped a poor girl from a rural religious bigoted part of Iran. She told me that she is a lesbian and that her parents might kill her or even force her to marry a man. In order to "cure" her, her parents took her to see a psychiatrist. She told me that she was given a lot of drugs to "cure" her homosexuality. That is so stupid. Who can cure homosexuality? Homosexuality is not a disease to be cured.

This account draws attention to the very real effects of how such state-sanctioned jurisprudential frameworks for criminalizing homosexuality can be used or resorted to by any individual citizen. It also provides an example of the vernacularization of psychiatry discussed in the previous section, and points to how effective the medical discourse is in categorizing and pathologizing *gays* and *lesbians*, and all those who somehow deviate from the gender/sexual norm as determined by the state and enforced by the marriage imperative of which he speaks.[84] In the previous quote Arman refers to a *lesbian* woman who speaks about her parents' concern with her sexuality, which they framed and understood in terms of a discourse of disease and sickness, and which they felt needed to be cured, resulting in recourse to psychiatric intervention. In fact, seeking the help of a psychiatrist as a consequence of one's sexual identity and same-sex desire is a common theme in the narratives of those Iranian men interviewed during fieldwork in Tehran in 2015. However, what is clear in Arman's account is his own sense of agency in refuting the pathologizing terms of the state's designation of homosexuality as a perversity and sickness.[85]

While there are clear convergences between *gay* men and *lesbian* women in terms of the impact of the official designation of homosexuality as a mental illness in Muslim nations in the Middle East, there are differential gender dynamics at play that need to be acknowledged. For example, Whitaker quotes a *lesbian* woman from Cairo who states that "we cannot find a specific way to meet and talk, not just to have sex," and reiterates that "heterosexuals and gay men have their pick up points, but we don't."[86] This observation speaks to a degree of privileged access to public spaces for enacting and navigating the terms of queer intimacy and sociality that appears to be foreclosed for *lesbian* women.

However, as Laila, another Egyptian lesbian woman in her twenties from Whitaker's study, points out, "having a lesbian daughter is less likely to cause a family crisis than having a gay son."[87] The reason for this "more relaxed attitude," she explains, is the existence of patriarchal ideologies according to which "lesbian inclinations" assuage the family's concerns about their daughter's sexual involvement with boys. Such sexual relations carry the potential for "dishonouring the family" in addition to the shame associated with a young woman losing her virginity or "getting pregnant" before marriage.[88]

However, as Najmabadi points out, the "marriage imperative" in the form of pressure from family members to marry is part of this heteronormalizing obligation that shapes gendered dynamics for *gay and lesbian* Iranians.[89] It is a recurrent theme that *gay*-identifying men and women in Iran speak about, and which they have to take into consideration. Many of the Iranian men in the second author's research, for instance, talked about the need to account for themselves and reinvent stories as a foil for their *gay* sexuality. This was done to ease the pressure temporally from their families to find or rather to present a suitable opposite-sex partner in marriage. Twenty-three-year-old Nima (also from the second author's research), who lives with his family in Tehran, mentioned in an interview that he told his parents that he was still too young to get married, and wanted to pursue university studies first. Ali Reza from the same research, who is twenty-six years old and lives with his family in Tehran, told his family that he wanted to finish military service before getting married.

Other *gay*-identifying men coped with the pressure from family members by moving away from their families, often to another city. This was the case with the *gay*-identifying Iranian man whose account of his life in Iran was published in *The Guardian*.[90] He talks about how, despite his family's "religious indoctrination" and insistence on the marriage imperative, he moved to Tehran where he eventually met his partner at a private party for *gay* men. They moved in together and started working at the same workplace. Rumours started surfacing about their relationship and tensions emerged with a particular jealous coworker who accused him publically of being *gay* at a meeting, which resulted in further harassment and, eventually, in his and his partern's resignation. However, he claims coworkers also contacted their landlord about their homosexuality, and so they felt compelled to find another place to rent, but then discovered that they had also been reported to the authorities. This *gay* man claims that "setting aside veils" can subject one's non-normative sexuality to increased surveillance, with devastating consequences of being subjected to the persecutory gaze of the authorities at the hands of one jealous coworker. In fact, he claims that prior to this incident, he was able to live "an almost normal life" because "close relationships between men are unexceptional." He further claims that there are many gays thriving and "living under the city's skin," where there are gay-friendly places to go—not "obviously gay" with "the rainbow flag flying," but social spaces where *gay* self-recognizability could be hinted at. This *gay* Iranian man also indicates that there is a vibrant *gay* underground community and social network of "friendly gatherings" and exclusive parties for *gays*—"friendly gatherings" that he describes as like any other "with all of the usual constraints of Iranian society."

Farhod and Arslan (from the second author's research) are other examples of gay Iranian men who construct themselves as "living under the city's skin" trying to carve out a queer social and relational space for themselves. They have been living together as a couple for years with financial support from Arslan's family. In fact, Arslan's father

knows about their true relationship, but his mother thinks they are straight. To most people they are just friends sharing a flat. They often host gay parties and other social gatherings for their gay friends. During those parties their living room becomes transformed into a public queer space, which they refer to as a small "gay club."[91] In this transformative space possibilities exist and are created for envisaging and materializing a queer form of male sociality and contact denied to them outside of the walls of their private living space. In fact, these parties and social gatherings, which form an important part of *gay* life in Tehran, can be constructed as *heterotopic* spaces of networked sociality and possibility.[92]

For example, a *gay*-identifying Iranian man now living in exile in Norway, speaks of such *gay* social spaces with a degree of nostalgia and longing for the community feeling that they afforded: "Of course, the fear of the authorities was ever present. But the government was always left behind on the far side of our closed doors, outside our closely-knit circles of friends. In our safe space we were free to be us the real us."[93] The idea of this counter party site as a space of *gay* sociality functions as a mirrored place in the Foucauldian heterotopian sense where *gay*-identifying Iranians are able to see themselves reflected, and to be visible or *real* to one another, in ways that are not possible in their everyday lives, where they are otherwise required to live *masked* existences. This experience of finding oneself in the shadows speaks to the mirroring effect that such heterotopic spaces afford.[94] Such accounts about an underground gay life of partying and sociality were also confirmed by *gay* men's accounts in other Middle Eastern contexts provided by Whitaker. While the *gay*-identifying Saudi men in his study indicated that "in Saudi Arabia sexuality of any kind is something to be kept out of view," they claimed that there is "this whole underground sort of thing going on," which "for the most part [is] very discreet."[95]

Thus *the other side of the glass* is a mirrored space of self-constitution and sexual self-determination enacted at the site of the *private* party as a *sacred* intimate space where *gay* sociality and identificatory relations are made possible outside of the regulatory constraints of the state. Hence, rather than constructing Iran as a "grand prison for queers" that Shakhsari claims is characteristic of "cyberspace as a site of production for transnational queer subjectivities within a civilizational logic," these narrative accounts point to the livability of a *gay* life in Iran.[96] However such *gay* livability is understood as having to be navigated under certain regulatory constraints of veiled inhabitability in order to secure a "good" life that is framed or understood in heterotopian terms. Moreover, as Arman narrates, this kind of livability has its price and, in the long run, can result in depression for these men, whose closeted existence is rendered and understood in terms of survival under conditions of regulatory surveillance, both with respect to the state and under the heteronormative and monitoring gaze of their families.

In this sense, some of these men account for themselves in terms of a fundamental sense of survival, of just being alive and nothing more. Thus, the *mask* and what is understood as a pervasive sense of putting it on, as a defining characteristic of the terms of the livability of pursuing a *gay* life under pressing conditions of heternormativivity and jurisprudential state surveillance, has its costs, despite the existence of heterotopic *gay* spaces that are created within the confines of *private* residential spaces. Moreover, access to *gay* parties is often restricted on the basis of social class, but regardless of this access, some *gay*-identifying Iranian men indicated that they are afraid of attending such parties. Nima,

for example, mentioned in an interview that he would never go to such *gay* parties for fear of police raids. He had heard about several such incidents, which were confirmed by other informants. These narratives of an underground *gay* life are also documented by Whitaker who provides corroborating accounts of raids by police after they were tipped off by "disapproving neighbors or vindictive acquaintances."[97]

In a report by Sune Engel Rasmussen,[98] who attempts to chronicle "What it's like to be gay in Iran," he includes the voices of *gay* men themselves and their reflections on the livability of a *gay* life. While Rasmussen does acknowledge that many of the media reports on *gay* life in Iran are predominantly confined to "accounts of torment and oppression" of those who live in exile,[99] he claims that these versions are "hugely different" from those provided by people who actually live in the country. He draws attention to how social class makes a difference and mentions the possibilities and means that exist for middle- and upper-class Iranians who are able to create parallel existences that enable them to escape the gaze of their families. In addition, there are added stressors for *gay* Iranians from lower socio-economic backgrounds who often face more severe stigmatization of homosexuality; they are unable to move out of the family home before marriage, and do not have the financial and social capital to create parallel veiled lives. In fact, Rasmussen quotes an Iranian spokesperson for the International Gay and Lesbian Human Rights Commission who claims that the family is the greatest "threat" for *gay* Iranians irrespective of socio-economic background, many of whom are forced to endure sexual assault and beatings from family members. Ardalan, a self-identifying twenty-eight-year-old gay man interviewed by the second author, for example, gives this account of his parents' reactions when they discovered that he was gay:

> My father became very angry and kicked me out of the house. I did not have any place to live until I went to my friend´s home where I lived for six months. After six months my mother asked me to come back home and when I came back my father did not look at me. I was no longer his son. After that I didn't have a good relationship with my father, only with my mother. My mother asked me to come back because our neighbours were asking where her son was. So she did it to keep face, not because she loved me. My parents are so religious.[100]

Here Ardalan sees Religion as a determining factor in his parents' response, but he also highlights the broader regulatory surveillance of neighbours, and the stigma that is attached to non-normative conditions of family life.

Rasmussen also recounts the experience of a gay-identifying man who attended one of the "blatantly unsubtle parties" at a holiday villa, owned by a young gay man's parents, who had organized a birthday celebration for his European boyfriend. However, he had paid off "the local moral police" to ensure that guests would be able to enter and leave the party without any risk of surveillance and detention at the hands of the authorities. In this sense, he claims that well-off *gay* Iranians are able to "hide behind their money and connections." Yet Rasmussen also mentions that such parallel lives can prove to be tenuous, and can be destroyed in an instant, as corroborated by the aforementioned account documented in *The Guardian*. For example, one informant asserts:

> The problem is that somewhere down the road, someone finds out you are gay and then starts blackmailing you. It doesn't have to be a straight person, it can be a gay guy who sleeps with you and finds you have money. You are at the mercy of the society without legal protection.

Another gay man referred to in this article corroborates such an account of having to deal with the fear of "being under constant surveillance, both by other Iranians and the state," asserting that: "We're all so fucking scared." Thus while it is claimed that Iranian authorities tend to turn a blind eye to "the gay community's escapades," apparently there is a price to be paid literally, and also in terms of the precariousness involved in bargaining with the state, and with its panoptic surveillance. For example, some of the gay men in this source claim that it is common knowledge that the Iranian intelligence service compiles dossiers on individual citizens, with the potential for using such information to build a legal case against those caught engaging in certain political or illegal activities. They are also aware that their Internet activity is being monitored by the state, and so attempts to hook up with other *gay* Iranians are always fraught with the threat of being targeted by the police with potential consequences for their safety and well being.[101]

Thus, while there is some consensus regarding the degree of tolerance and broader acceptance of *gays* and *lesbians* in contemporary Iran, especially with the new generation, as one informant asserts, "at the end of the day, it only takes one person to destroy your life." In this respect, these accounts point to the precariousness and fragility of living a recognizable *gay* life in Iran and envisaging the terms of sociality with other gay men. While these accounts do not entail comparing Iran to a prison, they do highlight that there are persistent threats to the livability of a *gay* existence under the panoptic surveillance of the state, and more insidiously by individuals who, supported by laws that sanction the criminalization and disavowal of same-sex desire, can use knowledge about another's sexuality with dire consequences for that individual in terms of the state's intervention in their lives.

One of the gay men quoted by Rasmussen points to the stigma reflected by the terms used in Persian to refer to homosexuality. He rejects being referred to as *hamjins-baz*, which as Rasmussen observes is a derogatory term used by the media and the government to refer to *someone who plays with the same sex*. This terminology conjures an older "straight" man who just wants to play around with teenage boys, and, hence, hints at a pathological association with pedophilia. Another informant quoted by Rasmussen, who self-identifies as gay, also rejects such terms, asserting, "We are not sick." In fact, Rasmussen points out that such terminology is not used by those in the LGBT community in Iran, who tend to refer to themselves as *hamjins-gara*, which literally translates as "the state of being interested in the same sex." These accounts indicate *gay* Iranian men's resistance to certain norms governing how they are discursively constituted in derogatory terms as sexual minorities. They make visible how specific language use functions as a site of both subjectification and ethical agency involving a degree of self-determination vis-a-vis the realization of one's sexual subjectivity.[102] However, the problem, as Rasmussen points out, is that there are limits to public debate in the Islamic Republic, given the official medico-religious-legal disavowal of homosexuality and criminalization of same-sex relations.

These accounts of Iranian *gay* men's lives are also corroborated by other empirical sources. For example, a report by Human Rights Watch,[103] based on interviews with 125 LGBT Iranians living both inside Iran and in exile, provides accounts of "the very real threat of prosecution" and abuse at the hands of authorities, as a result of the criminalization of same-sex conduct.[104] However, in framing such accounts it is important not to paint a picture of Iran as reducible to a conservative theocratic state, and to deny

the challenges and historical contingencies that continue to fuel contested relations between theocratic and secular democratic elements of governance in Iran, of which there is evidence of a history of bitter struggle.[105] This tension is reflected in a news report that mentions Rouhani, the current Iranian president, advocating for hardliners to stop "interfering in people's lives."[106] However, while this source does not specifically address the morality police's involvement in the lives of sexual minorities, it does document the presence of morality police vans in the streets and disciplinary surveillance targeted at women in public spaces. It also acknowledges that such presence is tangibly diminished under Rouhani's presidency, but indicates that while Rouhani has tried to "reign in" the morality police by bringing its operations under the jurisdiction of his own interior ministry, this move has been defeated by powerful conservative forces in the establishment.[107]

This sort of contexualization is important in the adjudication of knowledge claims and accounts of the livability of a *gay* life in Iran, particularly for addressing questions of vulnerability pertaining to the enactment of same-sex desire under specific conditions of modernity. While we have pointed to the problematic framing of the normative Iranian *gay* subject as a victim of a barbaric Islamic state that relies on invoking a liberal secular imaginary,[108] such empirically grounded narratives of state-sanctioned and -enacted abuse cannot simply be disregarded or diminished as cases of gross misrepresentation. Rather, in weighing such claims for justice in a globalizing world, the "empirical fact of who is affected" has to be addressed alongside onto-epistemological questions that pertain to the framing of such accounts. This critical project highlights the need to engage with, and to "move back and forth among different levels and kinds of questions, some evidentiary, some interpretive, some normative, some historical, some conceptual."[109]

CONCLUSION

In this article we have attempted to open up a space for critically reflecting on the conditions of legibility, recognizability, and livability of *gay* visibility and enactment in Iran. We have tried to expose the "irreducible performative dimension" of framing and its effects in terms of rendering *gay* Iranian men's lives legible through an incitement to discourse.[110] This critical analysis, informed by both Butler and Fraser, an in engagement with Iranian scholars such as Korycyki and Nasirzadeh, Afary, and Najmbadi, does not negate the potentialities of a human and sexual rights framework that cuts across national boundaries. However, it rejects the terms of a gay internationalist framing of human rights that is driven by a liberal, secular ethic of Western deliverance and salvation from Islamic oppression. Hence, we have drawn attention to the problematics of representation involving the *misframing* of the *gay* Iranian subject as a persecuted victim of a repressive regime of sexuality governance. In fact, we have been concerned to counter the terms of such misrepresentations by addressing the nuances and complexities at play when addressing the politics of recognition and self-recognition for *gay*-identifying Iranian men. Along these lines, we concur with Sami Zeidan's point about the broader significance of the need for a reassessment of "recent criticisms aimed at orchestrated human rights campaigns in the Arab/Muslim world": "the issue is not whether concepts such as *gay* and sexual orientation are foreign imports, but whether they serve as a useful

purpose and include a right to self-determination asserted against and through disciplinary practices that constitute heterosexuality as normative."[111] In this respect, while our concern, for the most part, is with the particularities of the Iranian case, we are conscious of providing an example of a heuristic approach to reframing questions of ethics and justice that have relevance for guiding interpretive work about sexuality governance across various geopolitical locations. Blasius, for example, advocates embracing a logics of relationality between rights and sexual justice that "involves explicit recognition of the place of capacities for erotic love among the shared values of any society, that is, recognizing not just what sustains human life, but what makes it worth living."[112]

In addressing such political and ethical questions pertaining to recognizability, self-recognition, and representation of sexual minority and gender subjects, we are gesturing towards and envisaging "a new global platform" for thinking through the terms of disputations and dialogic engagement with "those on the ground," with the potential for building and fostering productive transnational alliances. Moreover, what is necessary and integral to such a transnational, political sexual rights agenda is an agential focus on local voices and actors. This focus can attend to "the human capacities occasioned by same-sex sexualities and gender diversity" with regards to generating "practical reflections about human relatedness through sexuality by 'those on the ground.'"[113] In this respect we have included a much-needed empirical focus on the voices of Iranian gay men themselves, a focus, however, that needs to be extended to include the accounts of other gender and sexual minorities. While not claiming to provide a representative account of all Iranian gay men, we have presented a number of accounts that offer insight into the terms of recognizability and livability of a "gay" life under certain repressive conditions of sexuality governance in Iran. As we have illustrated by engaging with the voices of these *gay* Iranian men, vital to the realization of an ethics of sexual justice is a theoretically informed empiricism that is centred on the accounts provided by sexual minorities themselves. It is also framed by a critical democratic approach to weighing claims for justice in both epistemic and political terms, which speak to fundamental questions of "the nature of vulnerability and the extent of interdependence in a globalizing world."[114]

NOTES

Authors' note: We would like to thank Arash, Jón´s main informant, for his help and hospitality during his fieldwork in Tehran. We would also like to express our gratitude to all of the participants in our research, who told Jón their stories and gave us insight into their lives as gay men in Iran.

[1]The identity category "gay" is italicized throughout because it refers to how the participants in the second author's study actually identified. It also signifies our own queerly informed understanding of any identity category as indeterminate.

[2]We use the term "same-sex desire" because it is consistent with our engagement with queer theoretical perspectives informed by Foucauldian and Butlerian insights into the problematic of identity categories and their regulatory constraints, which reduce the expression of same-sex desire to a specific identity category. Moreover, we use "homosexuality" deliberately and in the Foucauldian-informed sense of a particular category of person.

[3]Janet Afary, *Sexual Politics in Modern Iran* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009); Katarzyn Korycki and Nasirzadeh Abouzar, "Desire Recast: The Production of Gay Identity in Iran," *Journal of Gender Studies* 25 (2014): 50–65; Mehri Jafari, "Islamic Jurisprudence-Inspired Legal Approaches towards Male Homosexuals," in *Lesbian, Gay Bisexual and Transgender Rights in Iran: Analysis from Religious, Social, Legal and Cultural Perspectives* (New York: International Gay and Lesbian Human Rights

Commission, 2015), accessed 20 June 2017, http://iran.outrightinternational.org/wp-content/uploads/LGBTRightsInIran_EN.pdf, 19–25; Ziba Mir-Hosseini and Vanja Hamzic, *Control and Sexuality: The Revival of Zina Laws in Muslim Contexts* (London: Women Living under Muslim Laws, 2010); Afsaneh Najmabadi, *Professing Selves: Transsexuality and Same-Sex Desire in Contemporary Iran* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2014).

[4]Nancy Fraser, *Scales of Justice: Reimagining Political Space in a Globalizing World* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009).

[5]Mark Blasius, "Theorizing the Politics of (Homo)sexualities across Cultures," in *Global Homophobia*, ed. Meredith L. Weiss and Michael Boisa (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2013), 218–45; Mitra Rastegar, "Emotional Attachments and Secular Imaginings: Western LGBTQ Activism on Iran," *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 19 (2012): 1–29; Sami Zeidan, "Navigating International Rights and Local Politics: Sexuality Governance in Postcolonial Settings," in *Global Homophobia*, 196–217.

[6]Judith Butler, "Giving an Account of Oneself," *Diacritics* 31 (2001): 22–40.

[7]Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 73.

[8]Butler, "Giving an Account of Oneself," 23.

[9]Ibid., 132.

[10]Afary, *Sexual Politics in Modern Iran*; Janet Afary and Kevin Anderson, *Foucault and the Iranian Revolution: Gender and the Seductions of Islamism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005); Blasius, "Theorizing the Politics of (Homo)sexualities"; Fraser, *Scales of Justice*; Katarzyna Korycki and Nasirzadeh Abouzar, "Homophobia as a Tool of Statecraft: Iran and Its Queers," in *Global Homophobia*, 174–95; Korycki and Abouzar, "Desire Recast"; Joseph Massad, "Re-Orienting Desire: The Gay International and the Arab World," *Public Culture* 14 (2002): 361–86; Afsaneh Najmabadi, *Women with Mustaches and Men without Beards: Gender and Sexual Anxieties of Iranian Modernity* (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 2005); Najmabadi, *Professing Selves*.

[11]Sune E. Rasmussen, "Living Dangerously: What It's Like to Be Gay in Iran," *Vocativ,* 23 December 2017, accessed 20 June 2017, http://www.vocativ.com/culture/lgbt/iran-gay-laws/; Yara Elmjouie, "Iran's Morality Police: Patrolling the Streets by Stealth," *The Guardian,* 19 June 2014, accessed 15 May 2017, http://www.theguardian.com/world/iran-blog/2014/jun/19/iran-morality-police-patrol; Human Rights Watch, *We Are a Buried Generation: Discrimination and Violence against Sexual Minorities in Iran* (New York: Human Rights Watch, 2010).

[12]Fieldwork was conducted in Tehran by the second author, who went there four times between 2014 and 2015. It involved seventeen semistructured interviews. The participants were selected purposively, being born shortly before or after the Islamic Revolution in 1979. Most of them came from middle-class families, and lived in the northern part of Tehran.

[13]Blasius, "Theorizing the Politics of (Homo)sexualities."

[14]Korycki and Nasirzadeh, "Desire Recast."

[15]Blasius, "Theorizing the Politics of (Homo)sexualities"; Fraser, *Scales of Justice*.

[16]Fraser, *Scales of Justice*, 41.

[17]Inderpal Grewal and Caren Kaplan, "Global Identities: Theorizing Transnational Studies of Sexuality," *GLQ: Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 7 (2001): 663–79; Elizabeth A. Povinelli and George Chauncey, "Thinking Sexuality Transnationally: Introduction," *GLQ: Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 5 (1999): 439–50.

[18]Fraser, *Scales of Justice.*

[19]Rastegar, "Emotional Attachments and Secular Imaginings"; Sima Shakhsari, "From Homoerotics of Exile to Homopolitics of Diaspora," *Journal of Middle East Women's Studies* 8 (2012): 14–40.

[20]Oyman Basaran, "'You Are like a Virus': Dangerous Bodies and Military Medical Authority in Turkey," *Gender and Society* 28 (2014): 562–82; Sofian Merabet, *Queer Beirut* (Austin, Tex.: University of Texas Press, 2014); Brian Whitaker, *Unspeakable Love: Gay and Lesbian Life in the Middle East* (London: Saqi Books, 2006).

[21]Matthew Waites, "Analysing Sexualities in the Shadow of War: Islam in Iran, the West and the Work of Reimagining Human Rights," *Sexualities* 11 (2008): 64–73.

[22]Rastegar, "Emotional Attachments and Secular Imaginings," 22.

[23]Blasius, "Theorizing the Politics of (Homo)sexualities," 22.

[24]Massad, "Re-Orienting Desire"; Shakhsari, "From Homoerotics of Exile to Homopolitics of Diaspora"; Zeidan, "Navigating International Rights and Local Politics."

[25]Blasius, "Theorizing the Politics of (Homo)sexualities"; Butler, *Gender Trouble*; Fraser, *Scales of Justice*.
[26]Korycki and Nasirzadeh, "Homophobia as a Tool of Statecraft," 190.
[27]Ibid., 174.
[28]Ibid., 180.
[29]Blasius, "Theorizing the Politics of (Homo)sexualities," 219.
[30]*Westoxification* refers to the toxic Western influences on traditional Iranian cultural practices and identity; Homa Omid, "Theocracy or Democracy? The Critics of 'Westoxification' and the Politics of Fundamentalism in Iran," *Third World Quarterly* 13 (1992): 675–90.
[31]Blasius, "Theorizing the Politics of (Homo)sexualities," 219.
[32]Korycki and Nasirzadeh, "Homophobia as a Tool of Statecraft."
[33]Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 30.
[34]Zeidan, "Navigating International Rights and Local Politics."
[35]Blasius, "Theorizing the Politics of (Homo)sexualities," 220.
[36]Scott Long, "Unbearable Witness: How Western Activists (Mis)recognize Sexuality in Iran," *Contemporary Politics* 15 (2009): 119–36.
[37]Whitaker, *Unspeakable Love,* 48.
[38]Ibid., 59.
[39]Blasius, "Theorizing the Politics of (Homo)sexualities," 224.
[40]Fraser, *Scales of Justice*.
[41]Ibid., 17.
[42]Ibid., 17–18.
[43]Jafari, "Islamic Jurisprudence-Inspired Legal Approaches."
[44]Elizabeth M. Bucar and Faegheh Shirazi, "The 'Invention' of Lesbian Acts in Iran: Interpretive Moves, Hidden Assumptions, and Emerging Categories of Sexuality," *Journal of Lesbian Studies* 16 (2012): 416–34.
[45]Najmabadi, *Professing Selves*.
[46]Fraser, *Scales of Justice*, 23.
[47]Shakhsari, "From Homoerotics of Exile to Homopolitics of Diaspora."
[48]Ibid, 24.
[49]Ibid, 21.
[50]Ibid, 26–27.
[51]Fraser, *Scales of Justice*, 31.
[52]Massad, "Re-Orienting Desire."
[53]Rastegar, "Emotional Attachments and Secular Imaginings."
[54]Long, "Unbearable Witness."
[55]Whitaker, *Unspeakable Love*, 149.
[56]Fraser, *Scales of Justice*, 40.
[57]Ibid., 41.
[58]Korycki and Nasirzadeh, "Desire Recast"; Najmabadi, *Women with Mustaches and Men without Beards.*
[59]Korycki and Nasirzadeh, "Desire Recast," 8–9.
[60]Ibid., 9.
[61]Jafari, "Islamic Jurisprudence-Inspired Legal Approaches."
[62]Korycki and Nasirzadeh, "Desire Recast," 9.
[63]Najmabadi, *Professing Selves*.
[64]Korycki and Nasirzadeh, "Desire Recast," 11.
[65]Ibid., 11.
[66]Ibid., 2.
[67]Najmabadi, *Professing Selves*.
[68]This term is informed by a Foucauldian understanding of the homosexual as a specific species or criminalized category of person; see Michel Foucault, *History of Sexuality,* vol. 1, *An Introduction* (New York: Vintage Books, 1990).
[69]Korycki and Nasirzadeh, "Desire Recast," 2.
[70]Najmabadi, *Professing Selves*, 4.
[71]Ibid., 5.
[72]Ibid.,166.
[73]Ibid., 180.

[74]Ibid., 7.
[75]Ibid., 187.
[76]Morteza, interview with second author, Tehran, August 2015.
[77]Basaran, "You Are Like a Virus."
[78]Butler, *Gender Trouble*.
[79]Our participants were mainly middle class, nonreligious, and educated, living in Tehran. We are aware of the limits of the sample and do not see it as representative of all *gay* Iranian men. However, the empirical aspect is nevertheless important given the dearth of empirical investigation that includes the perspectives of gay men inside Iran.
[80]Butler, "Giving an Account of Oneself," 36–37.
[81]"Growing Up Gay in Iran," *The Guardian,* 13 January 2013, accessed 20 March 2017, http://www.theguardian.com/world/iran-blog/2013/jan/13/growing-gay-iran-tehranbureau.
[82]Arman, interview with second author, Tehran, Iran, August 2015.
[83]Farhod, interview with second author, Tehran, February 2015.
[84]Najmabadi, *Professing Selves.*
[85]Jafari, "Islamic Jurisprudence-Inspired Legal Approaches towards Male Homosexuals."
[86]Whitaker, *Unspeakable Love*, 51.
[87]Ibid., 23.
[88]Ibid., 24.
[89]Najmabadi, *Professing Selves.*
[90]"Growing Up Gay in Iran."
[91]Jón Ingvar Kjaran and Wayne Martino, "In Search of Queer Spaces in Tehran: Heterotopias, Power Geometries and Bodily Orientations in Queer Iranian Men's Lives," *Sexualities* (2017): 1–18. https://doi.org/10.1177/1363460717713383
[92]Michel Foucault and Jay Miskowiec, "Of Other Spaces," *Diacritics* 16 (1986): 22–27.
[93]"Growing Up Gay in Iran."
[94]Foucault and Miskowiec, "Of Other Spaces," 4.
[95]Whitaker, *Unspeakable Love*, 54–55.
[96]Shakhsari, "From Homoerotics of Exile to Homopolitics of Diaspora," 21.
[97]Whitaker, *Unspeakable Love*, 137.
[98]Rasmussen, "Living dangerously."
[99]Human Rights Watch, *We Are a Buried Generation.*
[100]Ardalan, interview with second author, Tehran, February 2015.
[101]Rasmussen, "Living Dangerously."
[102]Ibid.
[103]Human Rights Watch, *We Are a Buried Generation*.
[104]Ibid., 5.
[105]Mir-Hosseini and Hamzić, *Control and Sexuality.*
[106]Elmjouie, "Iran's Morality Police."
[107]Ibid.
[108]Rastegar, "Emotional Attachments and Secular Imaginings."
[109]Fraser, *Scales of Justice*, 40–44.
[110]Ibid., 43.
[111]Zeidan, "Navigating International Rights and Local Politics," 198.
[112]Blasius, "Theorizing the Politics of {Homo)sexualities," 232.
[113]Ibid., 239.
[114]Fraser, *Scales of Justice*, 41.