beliefs and rituals. The book’s mark, however, lies in its arguments and conciseness, while covering a broad range of topics. These features make it an excellent teaching book. At the end of each chapter, the author suggests further readings on the topic. The book captures a spirit of dialogue among Muslims that should give the Western reader a more balanced understanding of contemporary Islam.

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During 2004–6, when there was global attention to the phenomenon of sex change in Iran, Afsaneh Najmabadi travelled there to conduct an investigation about transsexuality. She has previously released a number of articles and reports relating to this research. Professing Selves, however, is the first opportunity to view her research achievements comprehensively and consistently.

Despite the anthropological and historical nature of the research, the key contributions of this work are the theoretical characteristics of the research. Najmabadi attempts to map out what had been called by Foucault ‘techniques of domination’ and ‘the art of existence’ in the field of Iranian transsexuals. The main question here is, how do authorities govern the process of transsexual identification (p. 2) and at the same time how do transsexual, gay and lesbian Iranians practice a kind of creativity in order to bypass the restrictions of the current law (4). This is a mutual relation between the productivity of system and the creativity of people, dramatized in the scope of contemporary Iran. Representing a new picture of sexuality which is not victimizing, she also highlights the role of Trans-activism in changing the official sexual politics (chapter 6).

Another theoretical point is an indistinction between gender, sex and sexuality in Iran. This indistinction ‘had shaped’ Najmabadi’s thought ‘over three decades’ before the ‘professing Selves’ (7). In the absence of any integrated distinctions in Persian sexual categories, it has been difficult to distinguish between homosexuals and transgenders as such. The modern Persian lexicon of sexual language could not address or express such complexity in the Iranian legal, scientific and popular discourses. So Najmabadi uses the term ‘same-sex’ relationship everywhere, instead of homosexuality. She narrates, however, the history in which ‘transsexuality, which is sometimes confused with intersexuality or homosexuality, emerged as a standard term in the legal and scientific discourse to distinguish between “deviants” (homosexuals) and medical cases (transsexuals)’. This dichotomy has not been very solid for the ‘policing’ the sexual identities. If anything, she argues that the new
discourse around transsexuality opens some new spaces for homosexuals to avail themselves of the legal entitlements given to transsexuals by the government.

The historical scope of the volume ranges from the 1920s up to 2007. The opening chapter deals with the current situation in which people are involved in the process of realization as transsexuals, a process based on verification of ‘true’ transsexuality. However, within this process there is not, as Najmabadi shows, as hard or clear a distinction between homosexuals/transsexuals as might be expected. On one hand people sometimes lie and act-up; especially in the case of homosexuals who feel guilty about their sexual orientation or enjoy having social status and support rather than running the risk of official sanction in being recognized as gay. On the other hand, the authorities are reluctant to have a policing system. Hamid Farzadi, a member of the Tehran Psychiatric Institute, states that they don’t want ‘to play cop and robbers’, to be ‘a detective trying to trap and catch’ them (23). Although Farzadi’s statements are difficult to correspond with the testimonies of some transsexuals (24), Najmabadi became convinced during the course of research that there is no dominant will for ‘policing’ the certification of sexualities (25–6). So Najmabadi reported how TSs share their information in terms of appropriating personality; a kind of role playing in which transsexuals learn from each other to prepare for the process of being a Transsexual in Iran. This role playing has a crucial role in the concluding observations in the book, when she comes back to this idea.

Chapters 2–5 provide a history of sexual changes in Iran. In the twentieth century, the first instances of intersexual and sex-change surgery were represented by media as a ‘wondrous creation’ (41). At the time, sex surgery exclusively applied to hermaphrodites or intersex cases. Although some cases of transsexual surgery were recorded in mid-1970s, such kinds of operations were criticized by the medical community. Medical Council of Iran (MCI) eventually declared a negative consideration in 1976, according to which ‘sex-change operations, except in intersex cases, were ethically unacceptable and must be declared illegal’ (49). There are two shifting characteristics in this period: 1) the changing meaning of sex change from ‘wondrous nature/creation’ to a ‘scientific sexology’; and 2) changing the focal point from sexual organs as bases of recognition to sexual desire and practice (ibid).

Najmabadi deals with the post-revolutionary period in Iran (chapters 5–6), when the concept of transsexuality gradually emerged. Religion and science play a crucial role in creating the new concept of transsexuality. Before the revolution, when MCI illegalized sex changes except for intersexuals, Maryam Mulkara, a famous trans activist, had pursued Ayatollah Khomeini in order to get a new fatwa specified for transsexual cases (159). But after the revolution she finally convinced Khomeini to confirm sex-change surgery for non-intersex people (165). This fatwa paved a way to change the previous discourse, and Najmabadi explains how this discursive shift was possible due to the authority of science and religion in Iran.
In *Professing Selves* the concept of homosexuality co-emerges alongside transsexuality in its different forms. Before the revolution the concept of transsexuality was distinct from intersex but overlapped with homosexuality. In two chapters Najmabadi deals with these dimensions of sexuality in which there is no difference between gender identity and sexual orientation. People who are not intersex and not attracted to the opposite sex were considered as deviants or ‘same-sex gamers’ (hamjins-baz, a pejorative word in Persian), who are scientifically classified as transsexual. The same indistinction between gay and transsexuality is explained in chapter four (122). In this discourse non-heteronormative identities were usually considered as being of passive men or masculine women, who over the course of time came to be medicalized as patients. Science and theology collaborated in this medicalization after the revolution, to differentiate transsexuals from homosexuals, framing the former as having a Gender Disorder Identity requiring corrective surgery and the latter as having a disease that needs to be treated psychologically.

Explaining the complications of non-heteronormative being in Iran, Najmabadi dedicates a chapter to explaining a theory of self in terms of transsexuality. She refers here to Wahrman, who appeals to narrativity as a way of describing the mobile character of self. Erving Goffman’s concept of self as performative self is also helpful for Najmabadi. Professing Selves, as it appears in the final chapter, is an identity that explains the being and practice of non-heteronormativity in the Iranian context. Contrary to relational selves, professing selves acquire depth through relations with other ‘deep selves’. In this respect Najmabadi attempts to ‘grapple with a sense of self that is not necessarily and coherently perceived and experienced as anything to do with some deep inner truth about oneself’ (277). This is not an identity defined by an inner ‘truth’ but by the performance a ‘contingent self’.

Najmabadi presents some of the most complete and precise research we have so far on contemporary Iranian queer life, both in terms of theoretical approaches and field investigation. One critical point which should be considered is the restrictive nature of this research in representing a minority group. Getting away from the hegemonic gay-rights picture of queer life in Iran, she does not address certain alternative discourses which emerged alongside the work of legal trans activism. In the dynamic of discourse production and creation, Najmabadi’s informants are restricted to those who are lucky enough and smart enough to be able to profess themselves. One of the significant problems with such an optimistic dynamic is that we must consider why thousands of LGBT people are emigrating from Iran every year. Where are the bounds of this creativity, if some people cannot take advantage of the current laws? It seems that a part of this community is absent from the picture.

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