Scenes of Self-Conduct: Transnational Subjectivities from Tehran to Laplanche

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Afsaneh Najmabadi’s Professing Selves: Transsexuality and Same-Sex Desire in Contemporary Iran (2014) narrates a fantasy reported by several candidates for sex reassignment surgery (SRS), whose transitions happen in serial operations over an extended period for several reasons, among them the fact that the government only pays a small portion toward surgical reassignment, an expensive and arduous proposition. “Imagining death” Najmabadi writes becomes the condition of a wish that expresses an ideal. “When my body is … washed for burial, I want the washer (wo)man to see a completely (fé)male body” (2014: 245). Although legally able to live as and to enjoy the rights of their reassigned gender, including marriage and adoption, many transitioners persist on the SRS path even after having earned their new certification. State recognition of gender reassignment is insufficient to appease a yearning that is again and again expressed in these terms of finitude, one that paradoxically promises new life.

Knitting the New Self

With the publication of this study of the history of transsexuality in law, medicine, popular culture and transactivism in Iran from the 1930s, scholars of Middle East, West Asia and North Africa are newly able to test our speculative theories of contemporary subjectivity and its entanglement with modern state power. Arguing that Iran’s Islamicized modernity paradoxically elaborated new subjectivities through the regulation of sexual and gendered morality, habitus, and identity, in law, medicine and civil status, Professing Selves locates a crucial techne of state power multiplied in the proliferation of interview, questionnaire, affidavit, testimony,
and case study that sediments official state discourse on trans habitus. Najmabadi’s historical approach locates attitudes in popular media, psychiatry and law in the pre-revolutionary period the better to track the medicalization of transsexuality as co-eval with that of Europe and North America at that time.

Contemporary medical notions of psychology, pharmacology and cognitive therapies do not constitute a foreign or “western” scientific matrix, though their implantation has necessarily evolved in tandem with the currents of local culture and taken up vocabularies of self and other that reflect regional, sedimented and linguistic as well as religious inflections of place and people. The medical view, one preceding the Islamic Republic yet surviving the transition of state, that transsexuality reflects a “gender identity dysphoria” dovetails with one traditional, religiously informed view that the trans person suffers a discrepancy between soul and body (rather than gender, for on this account there is no clear notion of gender) that can be corrected by acknowledging social reassignment. As early as 1964, Ayatollah Khomeini published the view that sex change is permitted in Islam while his 1984 formal ruling or fatwa affirmed the piety of sex change in response to a transwoman’s request. This laid the foundation for the refinement over the next twenty years of a bureaucratic and medical apparatus resulting in the institutional approach to trans habitus today. SRS is as achievable, partially funded and regulated as highly as is immigration, education or any of a host of other government functions that shape our citizen being. This is to say that gender reassignment is not a matter of sovereign choice but a form of agency highly mediated by a social process. And yet, the juridical change of status proceeds from and requires as foundation, the personal perception of suffering and, key, of a suffering soul whose social appearance and physical body fail to reflect inner being.

Despite significant disagreement among Islamic jurists, the weight of Khomeini’s fatwa is indisputable as the basis of law while its authority is directly attributable to “his unique position as the leader of the most massive revolution in the late 20th century. … Only Khomeini in fact had the combined religious and political authority that would translate
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his ... ruling into law.” (Najmabadi, 2014: 174). Countering the legal obligation to enforce SRS in all found cases of transsexuality, the state fully covers only the costs of hormones not SRS and thus the obligation to pursue surgery is unenforceable, while enforcement itself would be unpopular with a number of conservative religious jurists.

Reassignment also highlights personal narratives and an informal register of social chatter and cultural production in the particular forms of self-narration that support the medical and legal assessment of bodies and subjects. A dialectical pair emerges in the surfeit of a new confession-al apparatus: the same-sex player (kuni, which is only unevenly described as “gay” and never as “lesbian”) and the transsexual (and in particular male-to-female [MtF] persons), whose mutual self-definition highlights the entanglement of two seemingly incompatible models of subjectivity: the psychological, deep subject of self-reflection and the contingent self-in-conduct, who finds themself in litanies of action and surface appearance. Intertwined by law, medicine, parties and home, this couple poses fundamental questions for postcolonial critiques of psychoanalysis and transnational accounts of subjectivity.

Earning the state’s certification that one is indeed in need of SRS opens the self and its narration to subjection via medicalization while also authorizing a spiritual actualization of self endorsed by the state. Spiritual, religious and moral truth of one’s gender and sexuality is laced through the impersonal materiality of a documentary archive required for certification, one that is to be made rather than found for it is created in tandem with a casting away of any similarity with the morally despised role of kuni. This negative determination is produced only in close proximity and intimate knowledge of the refused role and the negative path of determination, for legal approval and state sponsorship of SRS must pass through the knotted relation to and distinction from “same-sex playing,” even if at some level same-sex playing is a matter of one’s transsexual everyday practice. This is to say that the state can and does permit the transsexual in pursuit of trans certification and SRS approval to practice a sexuality that is not otherwise so sanctioned. Thus, in the process of becoming – a becoming that may extend indefinitely – the transsexual in
a male body may continue to live and be loved by her man, all under the watchful eye of institutional authority. This material reality along with overlapping social cliques and public meeting places draws same-sex players and transsexuals into close and continuous knots of becoming and self-definition. In short, the Revolutionary Islamic State creates spaces of emergent subjectivities, as Najmabadi puts it, “safe havens” for gays and lesbians because of the unusual state sanction of transsexuality.

By way of illustration, a vignette: In the office of the resident clinical psychologist at the Navvab Safavi Emergency Center of the Office for the Socially Harmed of the Welfare Organization, the weekly transsexual support meeting is underway.

The previous week, … [the physician] had talked about the importance of ‘knowing oneself’ (khaudshinasi – literally ‘selfology’), and had asked everyone to contemplate that topic for the following week’s conversation. He opens the day by asking if the group members had engaged in ‘knowing oneself.’ He is dismayed to see that his proposition had not been taken seriously. Shahla, an MtF, blurts out that she had had no time for it. What was she doing then? “I was busy with my boyfriend, cooking, making sure I make myself up in the style he likes.” [The physician] is clearly annoyed, “are you that dependent on him?” Shahla is not fazed, “of course, I am really in love with him.” … Yasaman, also an MtF, who was there the previous week in a black chador but on this day has shown up in his/her army uniform, is expected by the group to explain [the change of dress as change of gender habit]. “Yes, I do consider myself MtF, I do want to go for SRS, but I am also prepared to take my time. Once I change sex, I won’t be able to pursue some of my ambitions. In any case, when I am in masculine clothes, I enjoy doing manly things; when I am in feminine clothes, I like to do womanly things.

(Najmabadi, 2014: 280)

These avowals suggest a recoil from the depth model of self-reflection
that frames the clinical setting and a dispersal, but also a holding, of the trans subject in the agency of conduct. Najmabadi calls this dispersed subject the “subject-of-conduct” and shows convincingly that both models of conduct and deep interiority are interlaced through the trans and same-sex playing community.

“Maryam, another MtF,” challenges Yasaman’s commitment to their shared identity as transsexual only to face a pile up of other criticism as Houri and Shahla expand on the topic of the necessity of flexible gender habit to accommodate changeable work opportunities and the ups and downs of romance. “Yes, if my current relationship doesn’t work out and I have to go back to work, I’d switch clothes to be able to get better jobs” (281).

Yet none of these SRS potentials would consider themselves gay or same-sex players and this without necessarily sharing in a homophobia of aversion, although certainly, some do voice extreme discomfort or shame at being “mistaken” for kuni or even about sex had under the assumption that both partners were of the same sex or, in a more extreme case, when a husband and wife had sex though the wife felt herself to be male and others, including both female intimates and male friends, saw her as male identified. Trans identity in becoming is neither forced into a single path nor is it frayed or worn thin by the necessity to present as the “wrong” gender habit. Each member of the support group capably calculates with that necessity and risk of disapproval while also refusing the judgement of others who so calculate. This flexible sensibility loops back upon itself to escape the exposure of gossip and shame by avowing and embracing the potential “realities” of unpredicatable fates, including the surprising evidence of God’s “creativity” in creating the transsexual, as one testimony puts it.

In the early pages of Professing Selves, Najmabadi presents us with her regretful realization that she could not in good conscience write an ethnography of the contemporary trans community in Tehran. This insight came early in the twelve-year project, as she began to frequent trans support groups, activist spaces and clinic and court archives. She resolves her conundrum by steering between the patterning of ethnography and
an impersonal history of law and institution, all the while narrating snippets and fragments of stories told to her in over a decade of conversation and careful listening. As fragments of an archive of encounter, they have the uncanny effect of unweaving the categorical order of the state and dissolving the analytic lexicon of medicine and academic studies, while religious themes are not uncommon in the dreams and fantasies that Najmabadi reports. Several of these bear out what still other trans individuals reveal, namely, that for many their motivation or inspiration for transitioning is best expressed in a vision of their own body in death.

The Corpse Washer

“When I am buried, I want the corpse washerman to see a male body.” Preferred as an explanation for pursuing SRS even after legal reassignment has been achieved, this imaginary scene attests to a desire in excess of state law, community norms and religious dogma. Laplanche and Pontalis’s famous essay on fantasy (1968 [1964]) contains the oft-cited claim that the subject is dispersed in the scene setting of the fantasy rather than represented in a single element or character. The corpse washerman fantasy may indeed be such a syntax for the desire of the SRS aspirant, but another, later formation of fantasy enables a reading of the fantasy as a particular form of sublimation of what Laplanche calls the enigmatic message as it is carried and repeated in an ongoing address to and from the other, who presents the enigma of gendered embodiment and desire (2014 [1999]: 77-104).

In 1999, Laplanche returned to Freud’s metapsychology to argue that the seduction theory holds the kernel of “human sexuality” insofar as the infant is the recipient of nurturing care, suckling and caresses, which communicate the sexual unconscious of the caregiver and inscribe this unconscious transmission as a mystery or enigmatic signifier (2014 [1999]). The mystery of the other’s desire has many psychic destinies but includes sublimation, which Laplanche associates with symbolisation. The enigmatic message marks the irreducible dimension of otherness for which the forms of translation (repression, sublimation etc…) are “process(es) of closure to the other’s address … an enigmatic ... seduc-
tive ... sexual address” in the service of a primary drive to “know” by resolving the enigmatic message in flattening sublimations that bind the drive or by opening up to otherness as traumatic enigma (91). Far from signalling a freedom we associate with creativity, symbolization contains mystery and shuts down unbound energy. As a counterpart to binding, inspiration is an orientation of openness to trauma that “drives” the subject to seek further expression or find new symbols.

Gender is part of the message and positioned prior to sexuality in so far as the sense made of the enigma (in touch, silence, gesture, and signs between adults) arrives as already gendered and to be translated, repressed, or foreclosed as the advent of sexuality through fantasy. Among the overwhelming priority of unconscious signifiers is the question of gender as a mysterious imposition of the other’s desire and iterative closure to the other’s address or as responses to a goad. Underlining the significance of Laplanche’s intervention for gender theory, Judith Butler writes: “Laplanche’s view is that we rethink gender assignment as an unconsciously transmitted desire, a view with implications for current sociological and legal approaches to questions of gender assignment and reassignment” (2014: 126-127). The corpse washing fantasy, as an answer to the suggestion that surgery is not necessary, engages the enigmatic other by repeating the gestures of intimate care and implantation in a fantasy of last rites.

The Muslim burial rite makes few demands but among them, the body must be washed and wrapped in a clean cloth to be buried within three days. Beyond that, simplicity is the rule and variation the reality. Even the prayers may be brief. Thus the extension and suspension of time in the fantasy – its “time of fantasy – which imagines the preparation of remains for burial when the aspirant is still living, is itself both reflective of the character of Muslim rites and a violation of the simplicity and “letting go” that this simplicity serves. Practices vary; it is of interest to note that among the general rules, the eldest relative of the same gender washes the body and so, the corpse washing fantasy carries the kernel of familial care and gender decorum in the scene of after death where the encounter between the caregiver and the self stages only seren-
ity. The silent labor of the corpse washer, who looks but sees that there is nothing to see, affirms the symbolic recuperation of the subject in an imaginary form. As Laplanche puts it, contra “a certain Lacanianism,” “the ‘symbolic’ as well as the ‘imaginary’ are both in the service of the ego – and thus caught up in the almost inescapable position of ‘Ptolemaic’ reclosure” (2014: 91). Here, in the corpse washing fantasy, the symbolic reinscription and redemption of the body and its true, preferred and perceived gender works in tandem with the imaginary by “binding through the narcissistic image” (91).

This fantasy is also legible as an imaginary address to the enigma of the other – Laplanche’s primary other – who is not represented in the scene, neither washer nor the washed but who is dispersed throughout the fantasy. Fundamentally a dramatization of the awakening of the subject to “new life” and “new sexuality,” the scene conveys an image of passive receptivity or originary helplessness. What awakens here is the body as the true body, appearing in the guise of ego ideal or that which I wish another to see in me; yet, it materializes without authority, for the agency of the scene lies with the washer’s caring hands and neutral vision. As Laplanche puts it, “inspiration is conjugated via the other. Its subject is not ‘the subject’ but the other” and “in its resonance with the originary adult other, this other comes to re-open at privileged moments the wound of the unexpected, of the enigma” (99).

The fantasy of finitude, expressible as “death comes despite my life,” is also a fantasy of fatality, “my death as condition and evidence of new life”; the fantasy can be understood as a radical exposure or, as Laplanche puts it, the reopening and unbinding of the wound of the primary other’s incursion. This fantasy of one’s own death, legible as an imaginary address to, in Laplanche’s terms, the enigma of the primary other, inspires particular trans subjects to pursue a more sincere and authentic embodiment of themselves. Here, the bodily ego imagines a scene of its ideal body, the one seen by the corpse washer as only a body without surprises, as expected, indeed a body mirroring their own.

The trans fantasy of the corpse washer evokes a religious rite and spiritual devotion as a symbolization of new life. To become the ideal
body, the cis gendered body must die. Does the fantasy imagine the self as newly cis or transsexual? Does the accomplishment of SRS serve the function of erasing the labour of living conduct to replace it with the calm repose of indisputable gendered bodily form in deathly matter? Has the difference between cis and transsexual become indistinct and immaterial before the materialization of the new body, now only imaginable as lacking the animating soul? If the meaning of the religious ritual is not otherworldly but fixed on the experience of the washer after the self-in-conduct has relinquished the self, does it also carry a trace of ambivalent mourning for that unwanted body, who had to die so that they might live? Along the lines proposed by Laplanche and Freud that we imagine our own death through the death of the person “close to us,” I am suggesting that the trans-ness of the fantasy depends upon this translation or trace of the unwanted and mistaken body, while the inspiration allows the other, here the corpse washer in the “right” body, to re-appear, to re-open the wound of the traumatizing message. In Laplanchean terms, this is to read a fantasy of originary seduction and implantation of the enigmatic message (gender-sexuality) while also understanding it as a making oneself available to the “other, who comes to surprise me” (98). Serenity of the death rite is the language of this surprise.

The self-in-conduct continues its practice as, paradoxically, commitment to SRS might also act as a goad to linger in the group therapy where conduct is schooled and adjudicated and where the liberty to assert new forms of the self not following from the prescriptions of one’s fellows is upheld through the very elastic and tangled course of conversation and cultural elaboration. But this self-in-conduct conflicts with the desire of the fantasy for the serenity of the true self committed to a vita nuova for our time.

References

