

*Unlikely Sex Change
Capitals of the World:
Trinidad, United States, and
Tehran, Iran, as Twin Yardsticks of
Homonormative Liberalism*

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Surgically turning a man into a woman is as easy “as skinning a rabbit” in . . . Trinidad, the tiny town stranded in the middle of the dusty Colorado prairie that . . . has earned the title Sex-Change Capital of the World.

—Molly Watson, *Evening Standard* (London), August 15, 2000

Transsexuals aren’t a cultural marker typically associated with religiously inflexible dictatorships, but they are common in Iran—by some estimates, there are 150,000 Iranian transsexuals, and the country hosts more sex-change operations per year than any country outside Thailand.

—Jesse Ellison, *Newsweek*, February 18, 2008

IN THE TURBULENT FIRST DECADE of the twentieth-first century, Trinidad, Colorado, a predominantly Catholic town with a population hovering around 9,000, came to share its long-standing title as “the Sex-Change Capital of the World” with Tehran, Iran, a city of almost eight million and the literal capital of an Islamic theocracy. Or so it would seem, if one reads the articles published in international mainstream media outlets (such as the *Los Angeles Times* and the London-based *Guardian*) that write in astonished terms of the support for and purported popularity of sex reassignment surgeries (SRS) in Iran. Despite *Newsweek’s* hint at a global

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statistic about which countries host the most surgeries, the media's concept of "capital" actually has little to do with comparisons or with numbers; rather, it revolves around the way that specific locations have garnered significant attention because the practice of SRS in these places at first seems to challenge Western mainstream conceptions of "liberalism" regarding sex and gender.¹

Given that Tehranians are predominantly Shi'i and Trinidad's population is predominantly Catholic, the news reader might assume that SRS would be religiously contested in both "capitals." However, part of the media-generated surprise is that both Tehran and Trinidad have legitimated their SRS practices locally with the support of religious norms, leaders, and institutions.² The media's use of "unlikely" plays off the presumption that transsexuality and the practices associated with it can be supported only in places already known for permitting the visibility of nonnormative subjects (such as San Francisco or Bangkok). The corollary presumption is that rural places or places in which religion governs social structure (such as Trinidad or Tehran) would not generally support transsexuality. Mainstream media representations of transsexuality are thus thoroughly dependent on a very specific spatial imagination that draws on normalizing ethnic hierarchies.

Working at the intersection of cultural geography and queer theory, we and other scholars recognize the mutual constitution of place, identity, and power.³ As our analysis shows, the phrase "the unlikely sex change capital of the world" suggests that it is the places that are "unlikely"; it is the places that are made to do the work of culturally constructing the meanings associated with transsexuality. Our aim is not to determine the truth or falsity of the shared classification of Trinidad and Tehran. Nor do we propose any interpretation of SRS or of transsexuality apart from our media assessment. Instead, we focus on the work that these two places are made to perform via their association with SRS and how associations with and assumptions about each of these cities make this work possible.⁴ Initial surprises notwithstanding, in most journalistic rhetoric, SRS in Trinidad comes to signify the Western achievement of sex and gender freedom, and SRS in Tehran comes to prove that Muslim states are resolutely oppressive around sex and gender.

What we find is the resilience of homonormative frameworks that carry ethnosexual⁵ judgments of these two places in the media coverage. In order to conceptualize the interaction of place and sexuality, we draw on transnational approaches to ethnicity, in which ethnicity is understood to be not only constituted through language, religion, and culture but also through various kinds of social and geopolitical borders and boundaries.⁶ As Joane Nagel has argued, “Ethnicity and sexuality are strained, but not strange, bedfellows. Ethnic boundaries are also sexual boundaries—erotic intersections where people make intimate connections of ethnic, racial, or national borders. The borderlands that lie at the intersections of ethnic boundaries are ‘ethnosexual frontiers’ that are surveilled and supervised, patrolled and policed, regulated and restricted.”⁷ In this article we argue that the homonormative liberalism registered in the media construction of “unlikely sex change capital of the world” contributes to the everyday performativity of ethnosexual frontiers and hierarchies.

Edward Said and subsequent scholars have described powerful Orientalist assumptions about ethnicity that have for centuries pervaded a wide range of Western productions from the artistic to the journalistic to the academic.⁸ Since the eighteenth century, feminists have also contributed to Orientalist discourses about sex and gender, beginning with Mary Wollstonecraft’s use of the harem as the foil of Western enlightenment and continuing to contemporary charges that SRS in Iran is the product of religious sexism and homophobia. Moralizing and othering rhetoric about sex and gender in the Middle East has, as one scholar put it, a “deep pedigree in Anglo feminism.”⁹ We aim here to highlight an emergent form of Orientalism that is grounded in specific ethnosexual investments and found in widely circulating representations of SRS in Tehran and Trinidad.

Before continuing, it is necessary to contextualize our use of the term “homonormative liberalism.” In the United States, liberalism suggests that civil “rights” are freedoms that might be gained by identity-based groups (for example, African Americans, women, people of indigenous nations, and gay people). The (neo)liberalism of the last quarter-century has made it clear that people become deserving of rights first by constituting themselves as constituencies and second by successfully representing them-

selves as normative and valuable within certain political economies. Queer theorists and activists in the United States have criticized gay rights activism for pursuing rather than challenging such (neo)liberal models of rights through its reliance on homonormativity. As Lisa Duggan and others have argued, seeking gay rights as civil rights requires policing sex and gender expression and also maintaining dominant race and class exclusions; and indeed, this is what homonormativity does best.¹⁰ As scholars such as Jasbir Puar and Joseph Massad have suggested, homonormativity also posits that the “gay” or “lesbian” subject as imagined in the United States is in fact a universal subject, and gayness itself is a universal form of human existence. This therefore extends the impact of homonormativity beyond U.S. civil rights discourse and thus signals the need to interrogate homonormativity’s participation in global politics, particularly in the construction of geopolitical ethnic hierarchies. Media representations of SRS in Trinidad and Tehran are fueled by these politics, as our analysis aims to show.

Although we resist imposing universalizing “rights” discourses on transsexuality in Trinidad or Tehran,¹¹ it is useful to clarify some of the local issues that affect the practice of SRS in each location. Both cities have drawn on religious leadership to legitimate SRS. In both, surgeons follow the World Professional Association for Transgender Health protocols for determining appropriateness (and in Iran, the legality) of surgery, including the requirement that the patient receive a psychiatric diagnosis of gender identity disorder. In Iran, the state medical office, like all governing bodies of the Islamic Republic, is mandated to abide by shari’a or Islamic law, and thus definitions and protocols for SRS are federally regulated. The United States, in contrast, has no federal law regulating or defining sex reassignment, so what constitutes legal sex change varies drastically state by state. The Iranian government provides financial support for up to one-half the cost of surgeries in the form of loans from Imam Khomeini Charity Foundation.¹² In the United States, no public health insurance covers surgeries related to sex reassignment; privately owned medical insurance companies rarely and only in a few locations cover procedures related to sex reassignment. Thus, we emphasize that in both places, the question of who gets to be a “candidate” for SRS is complexly

determined by medical, legal, and economic protocol as well as by religious views and not by the individuals who may or may not desire surgical procedures related to gender identity.

Because the primary data for this article consists of mainstream newspaper coverage in the United States and the United Kingdom, justification of journalistic rhetoric as an object of study is warranted. First, since the 1950s, the media have been a major vehicle for constituting and publicizing transsexuality. Historian Joanne Meyerowitz has shown that transsexuality cannot be understood apart from its media construction, and we find that, in its coverage of the topic, the media focus most attention on the phenomenon of SRS. This emphasis has drastically circumscribed what “counts” or what is “imagined” as transsexuality itself. Socially and culturally even within the United States alone, transsexuality vastly exceeds the realm of SRS, but journalist rhetoric nevertheless focuses almost exclusively on SRS as the signifier of transsexuality, in the process overrepresenting male-to-female (MTF) transsexuality.¹³ As we show here, rather than suggesting the complexity of culture and gender, journalistic rhetoric instead gives us a window into the manner in which liberalism represents and constructs places in ways that depend on and reify homonormativity, that is, a construction of gender and sexuality that assumes a universal “gay” subject and that assumes certain places to be inherently more repressive of that subject than others. Of course, media coverage does not alone create homonormativity. And yet, we do see journalistic rhetoric as an exemplary discursive act¹⁴ that helps to normalize certain sexual categories and ethnosexual judgments, particularly when engaged in transnational or other boundary-making and boundary-crossing contexts.

Second, journalistic rhetoric provides an opportunity for studying this dynamic in a widely accessible genre. The media outlets we focus on, such as the *New York Times*, the *Guardian*, the *Washington Post*, *Los Angeles Times*, *Newsweek*, and the (London) *Evening Standard*, are widely circulated and could all be characterized as part of mainstream or liberal print media. Although media are merely one player among various institutions (including the academy) that rely on homonormativity to draw ethnosexual boundaries, it is one that has an extremely wide reach.¹⁵

Third, the media usage of the concept “unlikely sex change capital” invites us to consider whether representations of the gender/sex practices in already-othersed places can ever challenge homonormative liberalism. What is especially telling is that media accounts resolve the paradox of SRS status in Tehran in ways that reinforce ethnic and sexual boundaries rather than erasing or redrawing them. We emphasize that the media are not the sole object of our critique but, rather, serve as proxy for U.S. and European liberalism and specifically the boundaries that liberalism relies on to imagine and contain national and ethnic places. For that reason our focus is not on what motivates specific journalists and editors, but on the ways that their discourse about SRS in these two “unlikely” places relies on and affirms logics of homonormativity.

Finally, the value of a comparative study of these media reports is that it allows us to analyze the assumed paradoxes¹⁶ that make the status of SRS in each location unlikely. Thus, this article seeks to discover what it means that mainstream media have made such a simultaneous but seemingly unconnected sensation of SRS in these two very different places. The twin foils of two very different cities, each being classified as “the unlikely sex change capital of world,” provides an opportunity to uncover gender, sexual, ethnic, and national attachments¹⁷ that we might not otherwise be able to see, much less explain.

FROM MECCA TO CAPITAL

Just as SRS has figured into the historical definition of transsexuality, place has always figured into the history of SRS.¹⁸ For the last fifty years, metaphors of pilgrimage have had a prominent place in transsexual narratives of sex change surgery, with the location of surgery frequently exoticized and only tenuously connected to a transsexual’s more mundane location before and after surgery.¹⁹ Pilgrimage is a useful metaphor, as the transformation wrought via SRS is not entirely comprehensible within dominant sex/gender paradigms of the United States and Europe; one must indeed traverse meaning systems and often do so both physically and spiritually. But although sex change surgeries necessarily take place in real geographical locations, those locations are often—particularly by

media—writ larger than life as places that can somehow support crossing the purportedly great divide between two sexes.

Prior to the 1970s, Casablanca, Morocco, was widely dubbed the SRS “mecca” due to the large percentage of MTF transsexuals who received surgeries there.²⁰ Coverage of SRS at that time often portrayed Casablanca as a fitting location for what was then an uncommon and—some thought—a nearly occult practice. Journalist Jan Morris relayed her experience of SRS in Casablanca as something of an Oriental fairy tale: “[It was] like a visit to a wizard. . . . The office blocks might not look much like castle walls, nor the taxis like camels or carriages, but still I sometimes heard the limpid Arab music, and smelt the pungent Arab smells . . . and I could suppose it to be some city of fable, of phoenix and fantasy, in which transsubstantiations were regularly effected, when the omens were right and the moon in its proper phase.”²¹ Both African and Arabic, Casablanca represented an otherworldly place that made it suitable as a location to receive this surgery.

It wasn’t long, however, before this “mecca” was replaced by a “capital”: specifically, Trinidad, Colorado. MTF clients in particular began traveling to that way station along the historic Santa Fe Trail to avail themselves of the private practice of surgeon Stanley Biber. Word spread rapidly of his first surgeries performed in 1969,²² and through the 1970s and well into the 1980s, this single town’s small hospital was home to two-thirds of all SRS performed in the United States and—some believed—one-half of those performed in the world. International clients and surgeons alike soon came to consider Trinidad “the sex change capital of the world,” an insider’s title that major media sporadically leaked to broader audiences from the mid-1980s to 2002.²³

Even this initial and tentative media attention to SRS in Trinidad signaled a significant shift from representing SRS as an exotic practice that could only happen in exotic places governed by phases of the moon, omens, and wizards²⁴ to a Western technology buttressed by medical and psychiatric authorities, liberal individualism, and the mandates of capitalism. “Bringing SRS home,” we will see, entailed showing how locals in Trinidad were progressive and enlightened in their own way. The story of SRS in Trinidad, especially when seen in relation to Tehran, turns out to

be an exemplary story of Western—and in our view, homonormative—liberalism.

CROWNING UNLIKELY CAPITALS

Since the mid-1990s, Trinidad has received periodic waves of national and international attention turning on the “unlikeliness” of a few hundred SRS taking place each year in a “former mining town” that is “remote,” “isolated,” and “distant from big cities and any major research institute.”²⁵ Although one might think this story would quickly become old news, the volume and intensity of reports actually increased beginning in 2002. That year, an Associated Press article circulating in the *New York Times* and *USA Today* portrayed Trinidad as a believe-it-or-not exhibit in which the peculiar effects of sex change have become part of the fabric of the place; in the view of that journalist, Trinidad is a place where, at the local café, “groups of well-dressed women [MTF transsexuals] stand out like fashion models on a pig farm.” In August 2002, the *Evening Standard* ran a similarly sensationalizing piece about the tiny town stranded in the “dusty Colorado prairie” where the local surgeon is as adept at SRS as he is at skinning rabbits.²⁶ The mainstream storyboard follows simple journalist enticements. Readers (and occasionally mainstream television viewers) are told things such as “when people decide to make one of the most drastic changes in their lives, they often head to the most unlikely town you could ever imagine.”²⁷ Trinidad is “remote” and thus—we are led to presume—peopled by those who, by virtue of their isolation, would maintain conservative and unexamined attachments to normative (and fixed) sex/gender.

This is the setup for the surprising contradictions used to describe Trinidad. For example, “If Trinidad seems a bizarre place to be attracting transsexuals from [all over the world], Dr. Biber is an even more unlikely practitioner of some of medicine’s most controversial, complicated and demanding surgical procedures.”²⁸ Biber was for a time the only general surgeon in town who delivered babies, removed tonsils, and fixed broken bones. Most of the locals therefore knew and revered him as a good man who fit right in wearing a cowboy hat and blue jeans. The Catholic-inflected institution where SRS occurs also seems an unexpected host. The tiny Mt. San Rafael Hospital, we learn, is “run by nuns.” Transsexual

patients—as well as others—climb the steep hill to pray at the shrine of the Virgin Mary overlooking the hospital where their surgeries will take place.²⁹ How in the world, we are led to ask, could such a place support the “drastic” practices associated with transsexuality?

If U.S. audiences would presumably find the status of SRS unlikely in Trinidad, they might be downright shocked by its status in Tehran, Iran. Like Casablanca, Tehran represents an Oriental, otherworldly space, in which a spiritual transition might take place. But a mecca in the Western imagination it is not. Iran is the home of violent revolutions, a hostage crisis, a fatwa calling for the assassination of novelist Salman Rushdie, and the death penalty for proven acts of homosexuality. In the Western imagination, Tehran is a place of sex and gender repression and regression. Distinctions between female and male Iranians are crucial for the regulation of public space: all women, regardless of religious affiliation, must veil in public; most public spaces, such as schools, buses, mosques, and arenas are segregated by sex; and in Iranian courts, citizens’ legal rights to divorce, inheritance, and custody of children are determined by whether they are female or male. Tehran is a place where legal, cultural, and religious institutions assume established sex and gender binaries and therefore provide no logical basis for understanding sex and gender variability. Or so one might have thought. But in August 2004 Western readers learned that Tehran became an unlikely sister city to Trinidad when the *New York Times* reported, “after years of repression, the Islamic government is recognizing that some people want to change their sex, and allowing them to have operations and obtain new birth certificates.” That same year the London-based *Independent* ran an article titled “The Ayatollah and the Transsexual” in which we are told the incredible fact that “recently dozens of transsexuals—including a former Republican Guard—have been able to openly seek treatment to switch sexes.”³⁰

In his 2005 *Guardian* article, Robert Tait writes that

it could take something extraordinary to move the late Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini to issue a fatwa. The novelist Salman Rushdie did it by challenging the sanctity of the Prophet Mohammed in the *Satanic Verses*, provoking Iran’s austere revolutionary leader into pronouncing the death sentence. For Maryam Khatoon Molkara it required the equally dramatic

step of confronting Khomeini in person and proving, in graphic terms, that she was a woman trapped inside a man's body. To do so, she had to endure a ferocious beating from bodyguards before coming face-to-face with the Ayatollah in his living room, covered in blood, dressed in a man's suit and, thanks to a course of hormone treatment, sporting fully-formed female breasts. . . . The encounter produced, in turn, a religious judgment which—unlike the unfulfilled edict on Rushdie—has had an enduring effect that still resonates. Because today, the Islamic Republic of Iran occupies the unlikely role of global leader for sex changes.³¹

As with Trinidad, Tait's presentation makes Tehran seem a bizarre place for SRS to occur but for a set of very different reasons. The unlikeliness of SRS availability in Iran is largely attributed to Iran's status as an Islamic Republic: as a regime that is perceived to make a very explicit distinction between female and male citizens for religious reasons, SRS seems unthinkable. That a fatwa legalizes Iranian SRS, from Ayatollah Khomeini no less, is startling to say the least.

However, this is not merely a matter of equating Islam with fundamentalism. Key to Tait's construction of Tehran as an unlikely sex change capital of the world is that an Islamic theocracy is assumed to function as a repressive entity in the lives of Iranians because it creates a specific ethno-sexual Muslim (read as nonliberal) public space. In an Islamic Republic, shari'a law is the basis for a wide range of social and legal norms that make strong distinctions based on sex.³² The liberal assumption at play is that this sort of public role for religion necessarily constrains individuals' choices and curtails self-expression and determination. The *Guardian* article is so unsettling because it reports theological permission for SRS in Tehran, which implies the unthinkable: clerics appear to be enlightened "in a society still intolerant of sexual unorthodoxy." As we saw in the opening epigraph, *Newsweek* describes an "apparent paradox" of transsexuals as "a cultural marker [not] typically associated with religiously inflexible dictatorships."³³ Surprising to the *Financial Times* is that "there now exists an accepted and religiously approved procedure for those wanting to change their sex." The *Statesman* (India) writes, "it would probably seem strange to a lot of people that a regime that is perceived to be fundamentalist almost throughout the world" allows SRS.³⁴ With these comments we begin to

see that the unlikely nature of Tehran as SRS capital, as in the case of Trinidad, is based on a complex web of seeming contradictions and paradoxes: fatwas that bring freedoms; acceptance of sexual unorthodoxy by an orthodox nation; and a clerical class more enlightened about sex/gender than common Iranian citizens—and possibly more than many Westerners.

THE EVOLUTION OF ETHNOSEXUAL YARDSTICKS

In the process of crowning Trinidad and Tehran unlikely capitals of SRS, the media use a number of tropes, sensationalized personal narratives, and startling factoids to grab the reader. But as tantalizing as places for SRS created by cowboys and mullahs may be, there is apparently something unsettling about this shared status. This becomes particularly clear in light of a shift in media interpretations of why these cities are capitals of SRS and in subsequent attempts to explain away the unlikeliness. Media explanations rely on extremely different logics for Trinidad and Tehran, reflecting the variable yardsticks deployed to measure the relative liberalism of “the West” and “the Mideast.”

Around 2003, the tone of the media attention to Trinidad began to shift. For all that the newer wave of articles marched out familiar tropes and queried things like “how does a cowpoke, dying mining town become the place to turn your penis into a vagina?” they tended to place new emphasis on the sophistication and compassion of locals who model for the readers an appropriately enlightened attitude. Dr. Biber regularly referred to Trinidad as sophisticated; as he put it in 2005, “The town itself was really no problem. They still accept it very well because they’re so used to it, you know. They’re more sophisticated than in some of the bigger cities where you have all the religious groups that would be against it. . . . And so we have a very sophisticated group of people living here now. They’re the experts on transsexualism.”³⁵

That story is told in matter-of-fact terms, and the “real explanation” behind the hospital and town accepting SRS is elaborated in economic terms. Put simply, Dr. Biber’s practice brought an average of one million dollars per year to the small hospital, and his successor, Dr. Marci Bowers, maintains a practice that exceeds that figure. In addition, local hotels,

cafés, bars and restaurants, florists, and other shops count on a year-round stream of transsexual clients and their families and friends to provide business to what otherwise is a modest and inconsistent tourist industry.³⁶ The owners of the Main Street Bakery, for example, acknowledge that SRS “brings a lot of people here from all over the world.” As one co-owner put it, “He’s [Biber] very good for business. . . . You would think that a small little coal mining town would shun them, but it doesn’t.” Locals not only tolerate transsexual subjects but even respond to sensationalist journalists and prurient readers with a “get over it already” stance. Trinidad is no longer a nest of inexplicable contradiction but rather a model “humanitarian city” in the world.³⁷

Religion plays an opening but ultimately submerged role in the story of Trinidad’s acceptance of SRS. Media features frequently begin with references to Trinidad as a “Catholic” town with a “Catholic” hospital; they also routinely recount Dr. Biber’s story of how, after quietly providing a few surgeries in 1969 and 1970, he gathered together “local leaders” and a “ministerial alliance” for a series of lectures on transsexualism; and at least one article reported the claim that the local Catholic leadership “took it all the way to the Vatican” and “[Dr. Biber] was given the Vatican’s blessing.”³⁸ But journalists have not probed these claims, nor explained anything about Catholicism that would counter the implication that this religion and transsexuality do not mix.³⁹ Instead, articles redirect readers to a version of American ideals of tolerance and capitalist economic interests.

Racial, historical, and environmental elisions contribute to the story of this enlightened Trinidad. For example, although articles occasionally reference patients praying at the hilltop shrine to the Virgin Mary, we never learn of the more makeshift yet still substantial shrine to the Virgin of Guadalupe that is just a few yards away. Articles are fond of the Santa Fe Trail and “frontier” aura of Trinidad, but not a single article has included attention to its indigenous and colonizer histories as well as more recent economically motivated migrations and conflicts that have shaped its complex culture. Absent such context, Trinidad appears to “lack ethnicity” altogether. Trinidad’s achievement of tolerance and rationality, if not an effect of whiteness, at the very least appears to depend on this representational reification of mainstreaming normativities.

The thrust of the media attention to Tehran's SRS practice also undergoes significant changes. What is particularly interesting in the case of Tehran is that earlier coverage of SRS focused on gender inequities in Iran, ignoring the issue of unlikeliness altogether. One piece that first ran in the *Guardian* in 2000 and was picked up by the wire services is titled "Sex-Change Iranian Hates Life as Woman." This article, written by a Tehran-based journalist, makes passing reference to the surprising legality of SRS in "socially conservative Iran." The main focus of this piece, however, is not the unlikely status of transsexuality in Iran but, rather, how after undergoing SRS, a woman identified by her new first name, Maryam, found it "impossible to cope with the constraints imposed by the Islamic Republic—so impossible that she now wants to reverse the operation." Maryam's desire for a reversal is offered as the ultimate illustration of how "the country's social and legal codes severely limit women's choices" and how "power resides with the man alone" in Iran. It is so bad in Iran for women, we are told, that a transsexual would rather be "trapped in the wrong body" than live under discriminatory conditions of theocratic rule.⁴⁰

But by the time Tehran is called an "unlikely capital" of SRS, the media had refocused its understanding of the significance of SRS in Iran. Take an article that ran in the *New York Times* in 2004, "As Repression Eases, More Iranians Change Their Sex." Like the 2000 *Guardian* piece, it opens with the description of a postoperative transsexual, this time a man: "Everything about Amir appears masculine: his broad chest, muscled arms, the dark full beard and deep voice. But, in fact, Amir was a woman until four years ago." However, this time a personal narrative is recounted not to prove the government's conservative understandings of gender but rather to imply a startling new state of enlightenment: "After decades of repression, the Islamic government is recognizing that some people want to change their sex, and allowing them to have operations and obtain new birth certificates." The article continues with a storyboard of liberation, focusing on how transsexuals were successfully able to campaign for legalizing SRS and all the rights of their postoperative sex including the right to obtain a new birth certificate.⁴¹

A few months later a piece titled "The Ayatollah and the Transsexual" ran in the *Independent* in which the postoperative Maryam Khatoon

Molkara is described as the catalyst for the liberalization of clerical policy toward transsexuals in Iran. There are some references to women's status in Iran: Molkara is characterized as "someone who has volunteered to go under the veil."⁴² But for the most part this article focuses on crediting Molkara with the legalization of SRS in Iran through "a personal campaign that saw her twice appeal directly to the very man who charted Iran's shift to theocracy—the Ayatollah Khomeini." This elevation of an individual transsexual to the level of hero is yet another example of how early media reports on SRS in Tehran read it as liberatory: every good liberation narrative must have a hero, and here we have a hero who rebels against the constraints of her life by trying to reform religion. In doing so, the Molkara story implicitly affirms liberalism as the ur-hero in as much as it equates liberation with individual freedom from religious oppression and state intervention in people's personal lives.

As in the case of Trinidad, SRS in Tehran is apparently so unsettling that there is a significant attempt to restore comfort through explanations that build on and fuel Western ethnosexual judgments. As seen above, Tehran was for a brief moment lauded as an oasis of sex self-determination or freedom in the Muslim world. Headlines reading "As Repression Ease, More Iranians Change Their Sex" present the status of SRS as a sign of a sexual revolution. But this early explanation implied the illogical paradox that Iran is simultaneously more backwards on gender and sex (requiring veiling, segregating women and men, making homosexuality illegal) and more progressive (acceptance of SRS) than the presumably Western and non-Muslim reader.

Perhaps too paradoxical, the sexual revolution interpretation does not endure. Instead, the explanation rather quickly transforms into one in which the West is recentered as the place, and liberalism the agent, of sexual enlightenment. Initial media reports celebrating access to SRS in Tehran are replaced with quandaries over why so many Iranians elect to have the procedure in the first place. In the Tait article, for example, a prominent physician, who by his own accounts has performed 320 sex reassignment surgeries between 1993 and 2005, asserts "in a European country . . . he would have carried out fewer than 40 such procedures over the same period."⁴³ The reason for the inflation of procedures, according

to the surgeon, is that Iran's strict ban on homosexuality creates for homosexually inclined people "a pressure to change their sex."⁴⁴ *Newsweek* reminds the reader, "while homosexuality is punishable by death, sex-change operations are presented as an acceptable alternative—as a way to live within a set of strict gender binaries." The *New York Times* paraphrases an Iranian man called Reza who "said he knew of gay men who changed their sex so that they could be recognized by the government as transsexual and mingle with men more easily."⁴⁵ These are the ah-hah moments that make the unlikely nature of SRS in Tehran into an example of an exception that proves the rule of sexual repression in Iran: SRS in Tehran is not the sign of Iranians being more advanced than the West after all; instead, it is reportedly a sign of a twisted attempt to erase the homosexual through surgical procedures. In addition to print media, this explanation is found in documentaries, scholarship, and among lesbian/gay/bisexual/transgender (LGBT) activists (some of whom have claimed that lesbian and gay individuals are forced to undergo SRS in Iran).⁴⁶ Note that the "real" explanation for SRS in Tehran is one in which the ethnosexual boundary between the West and Iran is maintained.

The significance of the new attachment to stories of Iranian SRS as homosexual repression comes into stark relief when seen in comparison to accounts of SRS in Trinidad. Regardless of whether the media, in the face of possible U.S. military aggression, pursued the startling SRS paradox in order to suggest that Iran is "backwards," the fact remains that the criteria for backwardness shifted from 2003 to 2004.⁴⁷ In sharp distinction to the story of Tehran, not one article focused on SRS in Trinidad has ever mentioned lesbian and gay rights in Trinidad or the United States. Nor do we hear of lesbian and gay subjects in Trinidad. In the Trinidad articles, the media have consistently portrayed transsexuality as a medical condition without addressing the fact that transsexuals, like nontranssexuals, have varied sexual preferences and include lesbian, gay, and bisexual identities. Media ask, "How does Trinidad uniquely embrace transsexuals (a category that includes Trinidad's current SRS surgeon Dr. Marci Bowers)?" They do not ask, "What is the status of lesbian and gay subjects (a category that also includes Bowers) in Trinidad, in Colorado, and in the United States?" Without elaborating here on the contested relationship between transsex-

ual rights and lesbian/gay rights, we note that the media's avoidance of lesbian and gay subjects in articles on Trinidad's "sophisticated" acceptance of transsexual subjects provides further evidence of the ethnosexual nature of a latent form of homonormativity deployed against Tehran.

THE LIBERAL TRAIN TO FREEDOM

A 2009 *Toronto Star* article exemplifies the liberal narrative of incremental freedoms progressively gained in the West and simultaneously questions whether these same freedoms could ever be achieved elsewhere:

[That SRS in Tehran] all sounds very enlightened and queer theory-esque. . . . We are so used to thinking of "transgender" as the last stop on the gay train to freedom and self-expression that it takes a minute for these twin realities to sink in. For the reigning powers in Iran, homosexuality exists at the opposite end of the spectrum from transgender. The former is a sin and degenerate. The latter is a useful tool for the regime to restore someone with aberrant behavior to the expected gender norms.⁴⁸

This article first naturalizes a specifically Western homonormative lesbian and gay liberation perspective by reminding readers that LGBT is not simply an acronym but a waiting line with T as the last sexual dissident to gain rights because it is presumably the least normative and the most queer.⁴⁹ And unlike the United States and Canada, the article tells us "it's easy to get a sex change in Iran." But lest we think Tehran is more progressive than most of the West, we are immediately reminded that Iran is "a place where gays are executed." The "reality" according to this logic is that there is no "freedom and self-expression" in Tehran, not for lesbians, nor for gay men, nor for women, nor for transsexuals. Quite the contrary, as transsexuality itself—once erroneously thought to be state supported—becomes ontologically impossible if it is by law a "forced" medical correction of an otherwise aberrant status. That is, transsexuality is erased in the very same surgico-legal gesture (homophobic SRS) that constructs it. Instead of sex/gender liberation, we are left with a story of oppressed women and persecuted lesbians and gays.

Meanwhile, in the face of silence on the subject, are we to presume that in Trinidad and the rest of "the West," the "gay train" has already

comfortably stopped at freedom? In one sense, yes: according to the “train” logic, if transsexuality is accepted (even in remote towns), surely lesbian and gay “freedom” goes without saying.⁵⁰ But the important point is that Trinidad and “the West” are not measured by the same logic as Tehran at all; the political achievement of the conceptual separation of transsexuality (gender identity) from homosexuality (sexual preference) in the United States means that an educated journalist knows better than to risk conflating them by suggesting that they belong in the same article or on the same freedom train.⁵¹ This reification of the separation of the most normative varieties of lesbian and gay from normative transsexuality obliterates bisexuality and evicts gender-nonconforming queers from the liberal waiting line altogether. Given that the relationship between lesbian/gay rights and transgender rights in the United States is deeply contested, it strikes us as all the more ironic and imperial to use a universalizing lesbian and gay rights model as the moral basis for assessing Islamic practices related to sex/gender/sexual preference.

LIBERAL LOGICS AND IMPOSSIBLE QUEERSCAPES

One thing that is remarkable about the media’s coverage of SRS in these two places is how unremarkable it appears at first glance. Although the headline announcing an unlikely sex change capital is intriguing and sensational, the media’s resolutions of the paradoxes behind these titles are easily digested when the coverage of Trinidad and Tehran are read in isolation. This situation is radically different, however, when we read the media’s diverse treatment of the two “capitals” together. This is because the questionable representations of Tehran and Trinidad in the journalistic rhetoric are based on ethnosexual logics that are not only veiled but extremely common.

Certain stereotypes about place are strengthened as sexual and ethnic boundaries are reinforced. Tehran, despite being a truly cosmopolitan urban center replete with global communication technologies, is recast in Orientalist terms of backwardness and religiopolitical repression. Trinidad, despite its small size and isolation from urban centers and universities, proves to be a model humanitarian location in its support of the right of individuals “from all over the world” to pursue SRS.

In both cases, the meanings of each place and the meanings of SRS are inextricable. Furthermore, these meanings are necessarily *etic*, stemming not from local Trinidadian or Tehranian cultures but from an unmarked, universalizing epistemological location apparently beyond the particular. When analyzed in comparative light, homonormative interpretations of SRS associate liberal individualism, capitalism, and tolerance with the United States and Europe, while places like Iran are associated with state repression and sex/gender intolerance. In the end, we are left with explanations that confirm ethnic (e.g., religious and national) boundaries through the asserted adherence to (in Trinidad) and deviation from (in Tehran) the supposed sexual freedoms of homonormativity.

The pervasiveness of the idea of a more true, progressively earned liberation in the United States has been brought home to us in working on this article. We have been asked again and again to address the ways that homophobia in Iran pressures “gay” people to undergo SRS and to the ways that SRS is coerced in Iran while SRS is a choice in the United States. We find the assumptions behind these requests troubling. Feminist scholars learned useful lessons when the United States used static judgments about veiling as a justification for imperialist feminist intervention in Islamic countries; are those lessons not relevant in this case? The belief that gay rights should be global and that gay rights naturally precedes transsexual rights has created an imperialist certainty: transsexuality and SRS in Iran must be more a product of oppression than it is in the United States. We have not been able to emphasize enough that our purpose here is not to add to discursive constructions of Iran and the Middle East as either more or less enlightened or liberated than the United States. Rather, it is to detail the discursive production of transsexuality and the role it is made to play in homonormative nationalism. That this purpose is so dissatisfying to many only speaks to our point.

Theorists from Michel Foucault to Judith Butler to Lisa Duggan have critiqued the ways that liberalism encourages identity-based “rights” frameworks that are forever destined to reinscribe normative regulatory mechanisms. Cindy Patton, for example, argued that this dynamic makes liberal queer theory impotent when it attempts to go global: “jet-lagged and, having crossed the international dateline, confused even about what

day it is, American-style queer theory does not know how to behave: it arrived not to harass extant, but in advance of, mainstreamed gay civil rights discourse.”⁵² In the United States in the late 1980s, activists embraced “queer” as a rejection of just such normalizing and the oppressive hierarchies that were achieved through identity movements. “Queer” was then a reclamation of queer’s earlier use as a highly stigmatizing epithet. However, our analysis indicates that even “queer” can slip into homonormativity when ethnicity and nationalism are involved. We note, for example, that Tehran is generally represented as “queer” in the most othering sense of the word as sexually irrational and inassimilable. As Jasbir Puar has argued, media portrayals of Muslims—including the fascination with purportedly “forced” SRS—reify Muslims as always, already, queer. Furthermore, Puar argues, “perverse, improperly hetero- and homo-Muslim sexualities” are constructed as such in inextricable relation to U.S. sexual exceptionalism.⁵³ Such constructions could not be more clear than they are in the way that media posits Trinidad as exemplary of sex/gender liberalism and freedom in contrast to the repressive sex/gender regime governing Tehran.

This so far suggests that queer maintains two distinct but not altogether contradictory meanings: queer as irredeemable within normativities and queer as purposefully resistant to those normativities. However, our comparative analysis takes this a step further: not only are both senses of queer easily co-opted within a liberal framework, but co-optation in a global rights context gives queer a third meaning that reinforces ethno-sexual boundaries as well. The media reports we analyze display a distinct homonormative dynamic in which the West and only the West gets to be newly “queer” in the liberal sense of being accepted despite sex/gender “difference.” In contrast, the explanation that SRS is legal, popular, and perhaps encouraged in Tehran due to the illegality of homosexuality relies on and confirms the impossibility of being queer in Iran in that liberal sense and also in the sense of queer as resistant.

Providing a brief history of how a small town and a cosmopolitan city became sensationally associated with SRS, this article reveals the ways that media-generated stories spoke to larger national and transnational ethno-sexual prejudices. Trinidad turns out to be small-town America at its best:

liberal but morally secure, educable, democratic, surviving hardship through creative uses of capitalism, and still able to claim normativity despite its tolerance of difference. Tehran, in contrast, shows up as foe of women, lesbians, gay men, and transgender people all at once, as the Islamic state not only pays for but—some claim—encourages SRS for those who exhibit homosexual or nonnormative gender inclinations. Although both locations—the “Oriental” and the frontier version of the “Occidental”—are each always already spectacular, their simultaneous occupation of the “sex change capital” title tells a tale of uneven development: Trinidad grows up to become a model of Western liberalism while Tehran can never do so. Hardly sister cities sharing a distinctive title, Trinidad and Tehran, as represented in the media, tell a story of the heroine and her troubled if not altogether wicked stepsister.

NOTES

The idea for this article began on Derek Krueger and Eugene Rogers’s front porch when we both described our work as focused on an “unlikely sex-change capital” and thus learned how this title was applied to two locations. We thank Derek and Eugene for the introduction, which led to an intellectually stimulating collaboration. Bucar’s work on this article was supported by a Summer Faculty Excellence Grant from the University of North Carolina at Greensboro.

1. For an early usage of the label, see John Boslough, “Trinidad: Sex Change Surgery Capital,” *Denver Post*, 18 Apr. 1976, sec. 1, 4. See also Pauline Arrillaga, “How a Depressed Mining Town Became the ‘Sex Change Capital of the World,’” *Los Angeles Times*, 19 May 2000. Also see Robert Tait’s “Real Lives: A Fatwa for Freedom,” *Guardian* (London), 17 July 2005. (The short teaser for the article states: “Maryam Molkara was a woman trapped in a man’s body. She was also living under Islamic law in the Iran of Ayatollah Khomeini. Yet, as Robert Tait reports, her determination to confront the hallowed leader has made Tehran the unlikely sex-change capital of the world.”) Also see Jesse Ellison, “Free to Be Female,” *Newsweek*, 18 Feb. 2008.

In this article, we use SRS (sex reassignment surgeries) to refer to a variety of possible surgeries that may accompany social or legal reassignment of sex. SRS is a widely used and misleading acronym, virtually always presented in the singular. There is no single surgery that transsexual people undergo; people may or may not undergo a variety of hormonal and surgical procedures depending on their interests, financial means, local technologies, and the law. More importantly for our purposes, the concept of “reassignment” is misleading because it implies a consistent legal accompaniment to (some unspecified) surgery, but in fact every jurisdiction in the

- world has its own standards about what, if any, surgical procedures achieve legal sex change.
2. Tehran has based its support of SRS on Iranian fatwas, Shi'i logics of body and soul, and relies on what are ostensibly Islamic institutions to regulate and finance SRS. On the religious justification for SRS in Iran, see Elizabeth Bucar, "Bodies at the Margins: The Case of Transsexuality in Catholic and Shia Ethics," *Journal of Religious Ethics* 38, no. 4 (2010): xxx. Trinidad has drawn on local religious leaders who emphasized the "values" and "spiritual perspective" of its once-Catholic hospital in tandem with surgeons Biber and Bowers who have educated about medical understandings of transsexuality. References to "Spiritual perspective" and "values of the hospital, founded by the Sisters of Charity in 1889," are from Dawn Di Prince, "Born Again: The Obstetrics Unit at Mount San Rafael Hospital in Trinidad Rises from the Ashes," *Blue Sky Quarterly* (Fall 2002), reprinted on-line at www.trinidadco.com/Articles/Born-Again.asp.
 3. For the mutually constitutive relationships among space, place, location, identity and power, we draw on Jasbir Puar, ed., *Geographies of Tourism*, special issue, *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 8, no. 1-2 (2002). See Eithne Luibheid and Lionel Cantu Jr., *Queer Migrations: Sexuality, U.S. Citizenship, and Border Crossings* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 2005); Anne Enke, *Finding the Movement: Sexuality, Contested Space, and Feminist Activism* (Durham, NC: Duke University, 2007); Edward Soja, *Postmodern Geographies: The Reassertion of Space in Critical Social Theory* (London: Verso, 1989); Anna Tsing, *Friction: An Ethnography of Global Connection* (Princeton: Princeton University, 2004); and Arjun Appadurai, *Fear of Small Numbers: An Essay on the Geography of Anger* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006).
 4. In work-in-progress, we individually take up both these issues: Bucar, "Bodies at the Margins" and "The Good of Ambiguous Bodies: The Challenge of Transsexuality in Catholic and Shia Ethics"; and Anne Enke, "Gender Changes: Transfeminist Activism from the 1960s to the New Millennium."
 5. We borrow the term "ethnosexual" from Joane Nagel, "Ethnicity and Sexuality," *Annual Review of Sociology* 26 (2000): 107. See also Joane Nagel, *Race, Ethnicity, and Sexuality: Intimate Intersections, Forbidden Frontiers* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003); Inderpal Grewal, *Transnational America: Feminisms, Diasporas, Neoliberalisms* (Durham, NC: Duke University, 2005); and Roshanak Kheshti, "Cross-Dressing and Gender (Tres)Passing: The Transgender Move as a Site of Agential Potential in the New Iranian Cinema," *Hypatia* 24, no. 3 (2009): 158-77.
 6. On the mutual constitution of borders and ethnicity, we draw on Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (San Francisco: Aunt Lute, 1987); Lionel Cantu Jr., "Well-Founded Fear: Political Asylum and the Boundaries of Sexual Identity in the U.S.-Mexico Borderlands," in Luibheid and Cantu, *Queer Migrations*, 61-74; Chandra Talpade Mohanty, *Feminism without Borders: Decolonizing Theory, Practicing Solidarity* (Durham, NC: Duke University, 2003); and Alejandro Lugo, *Fragmented Lives, Assembled Parts: Culture, Capitalism, and Conquest at the U.S.-Mexico Border* (Austin: University of Texas, 2008).

7. Nagel, "Ethnicity and Sexuality," 113.
8. One of the earliest popular (and Orientalist) references to surgical sex change in Iran occurred in 1954, in the midst of cold war fears and fascinations with nuclear war and globally "uneven" technological advancement. In May 1954, *People Today* purported to deliver the "latest authentic information about these secrecy-shrouded phenomena." The article begins, "Next to the recurrent hydrogen bomb headlines, reports of sex changes are becoming the most persistently startling world news. . . . In [Tehran], surgeons help a 16-year-old girl turn into a soldier of the Shah." See "New Sex Switches: Behind the Sensational Headlines Loom Unpleasant Medical Facts," *People Today*, 5 May 1954, as reproduced in Joanne Meyerowitz, *How Sex Changed: A History of Transsexuality in the United States* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002), illustration 8; Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage, 1979), and *Covering Islam: How the Media and the Experts Determine How We See the Rest of the World* (New York: Vintage, 1997); Joseph Massad, *Desiring Arabs* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007); Afsaneh Najmabadi, *Women with Mustaches and Men without Beards: Gender and Sexual Anxieties of Iranian Modernity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005); Lisa Lowe, *Critical Terrains: French and British Orientalisms* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991); and Marjorie Garber, *Vested Interests: Cross Dressing and Cultural Anxiety* (New York: Routledge, 1997).
9. Some feminist critics of surgical transsexuality have reinvigorated their claim that surgical sex change is oppressive by invoking Iran as a place that forces homosexuals and gender nonconforming individuals to undergo sex change. See, for example, the online debates around Catherine Crouch's (writer, producer, and director) fifteen-minute, 2007 film, *The Gendercator* (Canadian Filmmakers Distribution Corporation). We concur with Srinivas Aravamudan: see her review of *Harems of the Mind: Passages of Western Art and Literature*, by Ruth Yeazell, in *MLQ* 64, no. 1 (2003), who noted, "Early Western harem fantasies are, indeed, largely salacious speculations about Islamic forms of sexual segregation that thrive on the peculiar dialectics of minimal information spirally processed into maximal delusion" (130). The same may be said of contemporary Western transsexuality fantasies. We thank an anonymous *Feminist Studies* reviewer for the phrase ("deep pedigree in Anglo feminism") and the insight it attends.
10. Lisa Duggan, *The Twilight of Equality? Neoliberalism, Cultural Politics, and the Attack on Democracy* (Boston: Beacon, 2003); Susan Stryker, "Transgender History, Homonormativity, and Disciplinarity," *Radical History Review*, no. 100 (Winter 2008): 145-57; Penny Griffin, "Sexing the Economy in a Neo-liberal World Order: Neo-liberal Discourse and the (Re)Production of Heteronormative Heterosexuality," *British Journal of Politics and International Relations* 9, no. 2 (2007): 220-38.
11. Scholars of trans studies, law, feminism, queer theory, queer migrations, and queer diasporas critique universalizing human rights discourses as mired in ethnocentric and imperialist interests: Judith Butler, *Undoing Gender* (New York: Routledge, 2004); Susan Stryker and Nikki Sullivan, "King's Member, Queen's Body: Transsexual Surgery, Self-Demand Amputation, and the Somatechnics of Sovereign Power," in *Somatechnics: Queering the Technologicalisation of Bodies*, ed. Samantha Murray (Urbana:

- University of Illinois Press, 2009), 49-64; Susan Stryker, "We Who Are Sexy: Christine Jorgensen's Transsexual Whiteness in the Postcolonial Philippines," *Social Semiotics* 19, no. 1 (2009): 79-91; Chris Berry, Fran Martin, and Audrey Yue, eds., *Mobile Cultures: New Media in Queer Asia* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002); Fran Martin, Jackson, and Yue, eds., *AsiaPacifiQueer: Rethinking Genders and Sexualities* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2008).
12. See note 2. According to a report from a Tehran-based journalist, the Iranian government plans to spend six billion rials (approximately \$650,000) in 2008 in subsidies for sex-change operations: Ladane Nasser, "Iran Sex Changes Get Mullahs' Money as Regime Persecutes Gays," *Bloomberg.com*, 5 Feb. 2008, www.bloomberg.com/apps/news?pid=20670001&refer=home&sid=aKyg7EZs; Vanessa A. Barford, "Iran's Diagnosed Transsexuals," *BBC News*, 25 Feb. 2008, http://newsvote.bbc.co.uk/mpapps/pagetools/print/news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/7259057.stm.
 13. For example, the vast majority of transsexual-identified individuals in the United States will not have a single surgery related to sex change, due to lack of access and/or lack of desire. Thus, any media coverage that focuses primarily on SRS disproportionately excludes from its purview poor people, people of color, all gender variance that is not medically mediated, and the countless ways in which transmasculine and transfeminine people negotiate the sex/gender expectations of the culture around them. At the same time, media consistently fail to note the vast range of surgical and nonsurgical methods that people utilize to achieve legal, social, and/or personal legibility. Even within the reduction of transsexuality to SRS, media fail to explain the range of practices offered by specialists in surgical subspecialties. This contributes to the erroneous belief that there is a single SRS surgery and that SRS surgeons are qualified to equally serve people on a female-to-male (FTM) spectrum and a male-to-female (MTF) spectrum. Last, due in part to complex issues surrounding what historically and legally "counts" as SRS in the United States, medical practice and the media have contributed to the disproportionate representation of SRS associated with MTF reassignment and, in turn, the overwhelming overrepresentation of MTF transsexuality and the consequent marginalization of FTM transsexuality. This pattern of overrepresentation of MTF transsexuality is replicated by articles that focus on Trinidad, as surgeons there have been specialists in MTF surgeries. Although the current surgeon, Dr. Marci Bowers, is increasing the scope of FTM surgeries and services within her practice, for the period before 2005 it would be more accurate to consider Trinidad an MTF sex-change center.
 14. Judith Butler, *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 25.
 15. Meyerowitz, *How Sex Changed*.
 16. This media construction is part of the paradoxical overrepresentation of queer and trans-Iranians and is mirrored in Iranian cinema. See Roshanak Khesthi, "Cross-Dressing and Gender (Tres)Passing: The Transgender Move as a Site of Agential Potential in the New Iranian Cinema," *Hypatia* 24, no. 3 (2009): 164; Wendy Brown, "Suffering Rights as Paradoxes," *Constellations* 7, no. 2 (2000): 230-41. Our working defi-

nition of paradox follows Joan Wallach Scott's in *Only Paradoxes to Offer: French Feminists and the Rights of Man* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996). In our analysis, the construction of "unlikely sex change capitals" is the paradox offered by the media that challenges and reinforces conventional assumptions about sexual freedoms in specific places. The result of this challenge is not a displacement but, rather, a strengthening of these assumptions as the media offer explanations that make apparent irresolvable truths commensurable.

17. Sara Ahmed suggests "more reflection on queer attachments might allow us to avoid positing assimilation or transgression as choices" (*The Cultural Politics of Emotion* [London: Routledge, 2005]), quoted in Jasbir Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007), 22.
18. There have been few places in the world in which surgeries are available, relatively accessible (although still beyond the financial means of most people), and legal.
19. Early transsexual critiques of the equation of genital surgery with sex change include Sandy Stone, "The Empire Strikes Back: A Posttranssexual Manifesto," in *Body Guards: The Cultural Politics of Gender Ambiguity*, ed. Julia Epstein and Kristina Straub (New York: Routledge, 1991), 280-304. On place in narrative, we draw on Jay Prosser, "Exceptional Locations: Transsexual Travelogues," in *Reclaiming Genders: Transsexual Grammars and the Fin de Siècle*, ed. Kate More and Stephen Whittle (New York: Continuum, 2000), 83-114.
20. Before the 1970s there were only two or three surgeons in the world conducting MTF genital surgeries. Casablanca was home to the best-known and accessible surgeon, Dr. George Burou, who provided the initial "model" of MTF surgery adapted by the next generation of surgeons worldwide.
21. Jan Morris, *Conundrum* (New York: New York Review Books, 1974), 136.
22. Although most media reports suggest that transsexuals travel to Trinidad from elsewhere, Biber's first transsexual client was a local woman with whom Biber had worked for years.
23. Examples in major media outlets include S.J. Guffey, "Transsexuals Trek to Remote Town to Get 'Best' Sex-Change Surgeon," *Los Angeles Times*, 27 Jan. 1985; Michael Haederle, "The Body Builder for Twenty-five Years, Dr. Stanley Biber: America's Dean of Sex-Change Operations," *Los Angeles Times*, 23 Jan. 1995; Sue Anne Pressley, "Elderly Surgeon Makes a Tiny Hospital Mecca for Sex Change," *Washington Post*, 13 May 1998; James Brooke, "Sex Change Industry a Boon to Small City," *New York Times*, 8 Nov. 1998; Arrillaga, "Depressed Mining Town"; Pauline Arrillaga, "Sex Change Nickname Makes Town Cringe—'Nobody Cares,'" *USA Today*, 24 May 2000; Molly Watson, "It's the Sex Change Capital of the World; Surgeon Who Turns Men into Women, 'Like Skinning Rabbits,'" (London) *Evening Standard*, 15 Aug. 2000.
24. Morris, *Conundrum*, 136. In Morris's words, Casablanca is a place where "days loiter by, orientally" (*Conundrum*, 141).
25. Guffey, "Transsexuals Trek"; Pressley, "Elderly Surgeon."
26. Watson, "It's the Sex Change," 10.
27. CBS News, "The Sex Change Capital of the U.S.," 7 Sept. 2008.
28. Watson, "It's the Sex Change," 10.

29. Sisters of Charity founded the hospital in 1889 and ran it until 1970 when the Trinidad Area Health Association took over ownership. Sisters continued to be highly involved in patient care until the mid-1990s; crosses adorn the walls, and people still consider the hospital “Catholic,” influenced by Catholic spiritual perspectives and ethics, although it has no formal connection to the Catholic Church.
30. Nazila Fathi, “As Repression Eases, More Iranians Change Their Sex,” *New York Times*, 2 Aug. 2004; Angus McDowall and Stephen Khan, “The Ayatollah and the Transsexual,” *Independent* (London), 25 Nov. 2004.
31. Tait, “Real Lives,” 6.
32. Parvin Paidar, *Women in the Political Process in Twentieth-Century Iran* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995); and Ziba Mir-Hosseini, *Marriage on Trial: A Study of Islamic Family Law* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2001).
33. Tait, “Real Lives”; Ellison, “Free to Be Female.”
34. “Iran’s Transsexuals Get Islamic Approval, Face Tough Times at Home,” *Financial Times*, 30 Sept. 2004; “Gender Bender: It’s Tough to Opt for Womanhood,” *Statesman* (India), 20 June 2000.
35. Jan Sturmman, “Best for Last: Sex Change Surgery in Trinidad, Colorado,” October 2005, <http://albinocrow.com/articles/articles-frames.htm>; Brooke, “Sex Change Industry”; Pressley, “Elderly Surgeon”; Watson, “It’s the Sex Change”; Arrillaga, “Depressed Mining Town”; CBS News, “Sex Change Capital of the U.S.”
36. The first big *New York Times* article provides this angle; virtually all subsequent articles elaborate on the theme. See Brooke, “Sex Change Industry.”
37. We do not question the portrayal of Trinidad as a “friendly,” “trans-friendly” and therefore “humanitarian” town; we again emphasize that some of the logic underlying such portrayals are best understood in comparative light with Trinidad’s sex-change sister city, Tehran. See especially, CBS News, “Sex Change Capital of the US.” Dr. Marci Bowers first referred to Trinidad as a humanitarian city in 2006, in response to Protestant efforts to shut down SRS in Trinidad. See P.J. Raval and J. Hodges’s 2010 documentary, *Trinidad* (Surly Puppy Pictures).
38. Watson, “Sex Change Capital”; Dr. Marci Bowers, interview by Anne Enke, 22 July 2009, Trinidad; Practice Manager and Coordinator Robin Lassiter, interview by Anne Enke, 28 July 2008, Trinidad. The claim that the Vatican “gave its blessing” or a “special dispensation” to Biber to conduct SRS circulates widely as lore and fact. However, no documentary evidence has ever been provided to prove it, and no other national newspaper has been willing to repeat it as fact. It appears most likely that, at the time (early 1970s) the Vatican did not rule against the practice, which is not quite the same thing as a blessing. The only religiously based opposition to Trinidad’s SRS practice came from fundamentalist Protestant organizations such as Focus on the Family and some Protestant members of the Trinidad Ministerial Alliance. Protestant efforts to shut down the practice were ineffective, and they have received very little media coverage (Mike Garrett, “Trinidad’s Clergy Fight ‘Sex Change Capital’ Label,” *Pueblo Chieftan*, 2 June 2005; Jen Burke, *Transcending Gender Blog*, “Dr. Marci Bowers under Attack,” 4 June 2005, www.jenburke.com/?p=185).

39. Without much digging, the media could have discovered that there is a distinct Catholic theological perspective on sex/gender that would affect its support of SRS. Although the Vatican does not have an official position on SRS, we have media reports of a document sent secretly to papal representatives in every country (including the United States) in 2000, and then again in 2002, to the presidents of bishops' conferences. These documents claim that sex change operations are merely superficial and external and not able to change the sex or gender of the individual: if she was born a female, she remains female; if he was born a male, he remains male. In order to understand the reasoning behind this Vatican position, one should see it as an attempt to apply the Catholic tradition of natural law to the new technologies of SRS: transsexuality is categorized as a psychic disorder because of a particular theology of the body that emphasizes the existence of two types of sexed bodies, female and male. Sex, in this understanding, is not only a biological or physical attribute. It is a consciousness known by the individual and is ontologically significant. Based on this understanding of bodies, transsexuality becomes the nonacceptance of the psychosomatic unity of body and soul, a unity that is the necessary condition of the human life. For further analysis of the theological rationale for this Vatican rejection of SRS, see Bucar, "Bodies at the Margins." At the same time, ethics are often worked out locally. For example, Father Bob Hagan, SJ, in 2005 the pastor of the Trinidad Area Catholic Community of Holy Trinity Parish and its Missions, Trinidad, said in Raval's documentary *Trinidad*: "I believe the gender reassignment process is an area where it's very difficult to come up with a one-size-fits-all morality. We need to realize that people are unique in their sexuality . . . and they may not fit neatly into pre-conceived categories. . . . It's very important that we not fail in love."
40. Geneive Abdo, "Sex-Change Iranian Hates Life as Woman," *Guardian*, 20 June 2000, 17. When published in more abbreviated forms (on the same day) as a Reuters attributed wire piece, the legality of SRS in Iran is not even mentioned. See "She Wants His Life Back," *Advertiser*; "Iranian Demands Sex-Change Reversal," *Globe and Mail* (Canada); "A Woman's Life in Iran Unbearable for Transsexual," *Gazette* (Montreal, Quebec); and "Transsexual Prefers Man's Life," *Courier Mail* (Queensland, Australia). We refer to feminist commentary on the Western media's focus on the "oppression of Muslim women" as a justification for critique of Muslim countries: Saba Mahmood and Charles Hirschkind, "Feminism, the Taliban, and Politics of Counter-Insurgency," *Anthropological Quarterly* 75, no. 2 (2002): 339-54; Lila Abu-Lughod, "Do Muslim Women Really Need Saving? Anthropological Reflections on Cultural Relativism and Its Others," *American Anthropologist* 104, no. 3 (2002): 783-90.
41. Fathi, "As Repression Eases," 3. It is worth noting, although news reports do not, that a majority of states in the United States do not allow for the provision of new birth certificates.
42. McDowall and Khan, "Ayatollah and the Transsexual."
43. Tait, "Real Lives," 6. In Trinidad alone over the same time period, first Dr. Biber and then Dr. Bowers each performed close to 300 surgeries per year.

44. Dr. Mirjalali, as quoted by Tait, "Real Lives," 6. Homosexuality is a crime in Iran punishable by lashing or death if it is proved in court. The Islamic Republic takes a strong stand against public display of gay life; the current Iranian President, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, in September 2007, while speaking at Columbia University, claimed that there were no gay people in his country. Media coverage of these remarks in mainstream outlets like the *New York Times* and *Guardian* offered the number of Iranian transsexuals as "proof" that homosexuality does exist in Iran. In contrast, even as their Iranian informants, such as the widely interviewed cleric Mohammed Mehdi Kariminia, maintain the "thick wall between homosexuals and transsexuals." Nazila Fathi, "Despite President's Denials, Gays Insist They Exist, if Quietly, in Iran," *New York Times*, 30 Sept. 2007, 6; *Guardian* Home Pages, "Doubts Over Iran's No Gay Claims," *Guardian*, 26 Sept. 2007. Also see Afsaneh Najmabadi, "Transing and Transpassing across Sex-Gender Walls in Iran" in *Women's Studies Quarterly* 36, no. 3-4 (2008): 23-42.
45. Ellison, "Free to Be Female"; Fathi, "Despite President's Denials."
46. *Inside Out*, directed by Zohreh Shayesteh, 2006 (distributed by Icarus Films); and *Be Like Others*, directed by Tanaz Eshaghian, 2008 (available at www.belikeothers.com). Scholars have tempered their initial reading of SRS as an imposed cure for (or erasure of) homosexuality: Najmabadi, "Transing and Transpassing." See, for example, Doug Ireland, "Change Sex or Die," http://direland.typepad.com/direland/2007/05/change_sex_or_d.html.
47. That the timing of the shift in media attention of SRS in Tehran coincides with the Bush administration's 2004 designation of Iran as a member of the "axis of evil" may not be a coincidence. Both depend on a specific global positioning of Tehran that is assisted by the ability to judge Tehran as repressive and "backwards."
48. Hanna Rosin, "It's Easy to Get a Sex Change in Iran; Gender Reassignment Is a Way to Deal with Homosexuality in a Place Where Gays Are Executed," *Toronto Star*, 27 June 2009.
49. In this, as in most other media, bisexuality is disappeared altogether. We do not engage the complex history of the relationship between transsexual and transgender nor the history of the meanings of each term. We do emphasize that the T in LGBT acronym refers to *Trans*. When our media sources use the word "transgender," they do so because some consider "transsexual" to be a more stigmatized term than "transgender" and not because they mean "transgender" as a broader umbrella referring to a vast range of sex/gender variance; they are still talking about SRS and transsexuality. Jay Prosser, *Second Skins: The Body Narratives of Transsexuality* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998); Sandy Stone, "Empire Strikes Back"; on transgender as an organizing principle, see David Valentine, *Imagining Transgender: An Ethnography of a Category* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007); and Susan Stryker, *Transgender History* (New York: Seal Press, 2008).
50. This is a debatable view; it was only in 2003 that *Lawrence-Garner v. Texas* effectively ruled that homosexuality is no longer to be outlawed, and it is still legal in a majority of states to discriminate against persons on the basis of sexual orientation.

51. The U.S. conceptual separation of transsexuality (gender identity) from homosexuality (sexual preference) functions more in the institutional realms of law, psychology, medicine, and social work than it does in popular culture and social practices. Within everyday culture, gender nonnormativity is still most often read as gayness, and “gay” is still a common identity for femininely identified male-bodied people of color rather than the more alienating and institutionally privileged “transgender.”
52. Cindy Patton, “Stealth Bombers of Desire: The Globalization of ‘Alterity’ in Emerging Democracies,” in *Queer Globalizations: Citizenship and the Afterlife of Colonialism*, ed. Arnaldo Cruz-Malave and Martin Manalansan (New York: New York University Press, 2002), 199; Judith Butler, “Global Violence, Sexual Politics,” in CLAGS, ed., *Queer Ideas: The David R. Kessler Lectures in Lesbian and Gay Studies* (New York: City University of New York, 2003), 199-214; Michael Warner, *The Trouble with Normal: Sex, Politics, and the Ethics of Queer Life* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000); Duggan, *Twilight of Equality*; Valentine, *Imagining Transgender*; Dean Spade, “Documenting Gender,” *Hastings Law Journal* 59, no. 1 (2007-2008): 731-841; Paisely Currah, “The Transgender Rights Imaginary,” in *Feminist and Queer Legal Theory: Intimate Encounters, Uncomfortable Conversations*, ed. Martha Albertson Fineman, Jack E. Jackson, and Adam P. Romero (Surrey, UK: Ashgate Press, 2009), 245-58.
53. Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages*, xxiv.