

# In search of queer spaces in Tehran: Heterotopias, power geometries and bodily orientations in queer Iranian men's lives

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## Abstract

This article is based on an ethnographic study that provides insights into queer Iranian men's lives in Iran, and specifically in Tehran. It was conceived in response to concerns about accounts provided by gay internationalist framings of the queer Iranian subject as reducible to a meta-narrative of homophobic persecution at the hands of an Islamic repressive state. By employing Foucauldian analytic frameworks that attend to questions of heterotopic spatiality in conjunction with Massey's notion of *power geometries* and Ahmed's queer phenomenological perspective, we illuminate the complexity of queer Iranian men's spatio-temporal modes of sociality and practices of doing sex. We draw primarily on interviews with eight gay-identifying men as vital sources of data that speak to the terms of the livability of a queer life under repressive conditions of Islamic jurisprudential governance in Iran.

## Keywords

Criminalization of homosexuality, geometries of power, heterotopias, queer Iranian men, queer spaces

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## Introduction

In this article we draw on ethnographic data to provide an account of queer-identifying men's lives in Iran, and more specifically within the urban context of Tehran. We employ both Butler's perspective on 'giving an account of oneself', and a Foucauldian analytics of power, which attends to questions of spatiality and embodiment, to investigate how queer Iranian men constitute themselves as particular sorts of sexual minority subjects under specific repressive conditions of Islamic jurisprudential governance in Iran. We also rely on Massey's notion of *power geometries* in its capacity to illuminate the 'complexity of [spatial] networks, links, exchanges, connections, from the intimate level of daily lives' vis-à-vis examining the accounts provided by queer Iranian men themselves (Massey, 2009: 16–17). Our understanding of queer sociality is also informed by Ahmed's (2006: 544) phenomenological insights into 'the lived experiences of inhabiting a body', and what this means for building a deeper understanding of the spatial enactment of same-sex desire, *bodily dwelling* and the *orienting* of bodies for queer men in urban contexts such as Tehran.

This focus on the accounts of queer Iranian men's perspectives on living a *livable life* under quite specific repressive conditions of Islamic governance is important and necessary, especially given the problematic Western liberal secular imaginary that has come to determine the limits for representing the experience of queers in Iran (Rastegar, 2012). The terms of such representations have been delimited by a reductive focus on the figure of the executed and persecuted *gay Iranian* and on Iran as 'a grand prison for homosexuals' (Shakhsari, 2012: 21). These representations tend to expropriate a gay internationalist discourse of 'the normative Iranian homosexual ... as a victim of homophobic Iranian-ness, awaiting liberation' (Shakhsari, 2012: 14) made possible by the advocacy of Western gay activist networks of governance (Long, 2009; Massad, 2002).

Our aim in this article, therefore, is to provide some empirical and phenomenological insights into the lived experiences of queer men's lives in Iran, given that there is sparse research which documents such accounts outside of these Western liberal secularist frames of reference (see Waites, 2008). In fact, within the context of globalization and transnational studies of sexuality there has been a call for the need to attend to 'the complex terrain of sexual politics' and rights as a necessary response to the inadequacy of understanding globalization through political economy or through theories of 'Western cultural imperialism' (Grewal and Kaplan, 2001: 663; Hearn et al., 2014).

Our research is conceived as a response to addressing these particular concerns. Waites, for example, specifically refers to the criminalization of homosexuality in Iran, and argues for the need for critical attention to transnational, Western liberal framings of the problem, but more significantly for 'far more concentrated empirical research and theorization' that is capable of addressing transnational polemics involving LGBT human rights, especially given the 'general lack of research about sexuality among Iranians' (Waites, 2008: 66). In fact, Farahani (2014: 151)

claims: ‘studies on men, masculinity and male sexuality in (and from) Middle Eastern contexts remain poorly examined’. As Rastegar (2012: 22) points out, the effect of Western LGBTQ activist representations, which tend to highlight the persecution of Iranian queers, can ‘blind us to complexities that are both intellectually deficient and politically ineffective’. The result, as Blasius (2013: 22) points out, is a degree of foreclosure in terms of *doing justice* to generating knowledge and supporting sexual minorities inside Iran with regards to ‘expand[ing] the space’ and possibilities for expressing ‘same gender sexuality’.

## Theoretical and analytic frameworks

We draw on Butlerian and Foucauldian inspired analytic frameworks, as well as on the queer phenomenological approach elaborated by Ahmed, which inform our understanding of how same-sex desiring Iranian men make sense of their sexual lives in terms of their queer embodied and spatial relationality in a specific urban locale. Butler’s (2001) explication of *giving an account* is useful in that it is concerned with a focus on the norms that govern the terms of self-constitution and recognition, for there is ‘already not only an epistemological frame within which the face appears, but an operation of power as well’ (Butler, 2001: 23). With regards to queer Iranian men, what norms specifically constitute their recognizability and possibility of becoming in terms of enacting and expressing same-sex desire under Islamic state governance, where criminalization of homosexuality is sanctioned? These conditions of governance and operations of power are important in terms of how the ‘gay subject’ is officially rendered legible by the state as a pathological, perverted and morally reprehensible category of person. Given these conditions and official terms of *address* with regards to conferring recognition, how do queer Iranian men come to account for and embrace the livability of a queer life and the *daily practices of doing sex* (Plummer, 2008: 9)?

As Butler points out, we are conscious of the fact that giving such an account of oneself cannot provide some unmediated access to the truth as the ‘norms by which I seek to make myself recognizable are not precisely mine’ (Butler, 2001: 26). She argues that in living one’s life as ‘a recognizable being’ one lives ‘a vector of temporalities, one of which has my death as its terminus, but another of which consists of social temporality of norms by which my recognizability is established’ (Butler, 2001:26). In this sense, we are concerned to examine queer identificatory practices and sociality as they are lived and understood by Iranian queer men themselves, and the conditions of possibility for the livability of a queer life in the Islamic republic of Iran.

Central to our understanding of such queer sexual imaginaries and their livability is a conceptualization of heterotopic spatiality and *geometries of power*. Massey (2009), for instance, conceptualizes space as imbued with a multiplicity of power relations: ‘Space is a complexity of networks, links, exchanges, connections’ that involve both ‘the intimate level of our daily lives’ and broader local, national and global dimensions, and in this sense is ‘a product of relations within multiplicity’

(Massey, 2009: 16–17). It is in this sense that such a conceptualization of spaces is understood in social and political terms as ‘an ongoing product of relationships and exchanges’, which are constantly evolving vis-a-vis the *cartographies of power* that demarcate the limits and possibilities of queer sociality under certain conditions of repressive Islamic governance (Massey, 2009: 18).

Such a geography of power relations points to the unequal distribution of power, and how it is manifested in the spatial dimensions of the enactment and livability of queer intimacy and same-sex desire for queer men in Iran. As Massey points out, ‘power geometry’ is ‘a concept through which to analyse the world, in order to perhaps highlight inequalities, or deficiencies in democracy’ (Massey, 2009: 19), but we also conceive of this phenomenon as a means by which to capture a sort of counter hegemonic space, in all of its temporality, for enacting the livability of queer intimacy, sociality, desire and ‘a way of life’ (Halberstam, 2005: 1; see also Fraser, 1990).

Such *geographies of power* and *power geometries* are captured nicely by Foucault’s (1984) notion of heterotopias as ‘counter sites’, which we apply to spatial relationships and exchanges that come to define particular forms of queer relationality, sociality and possibility for sexual minority men in Tehran (Foucault, 1984: 3). Heterotopias are described as ‘an effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites, all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted’ (Foucault, 1984: 3). Foucault argues that while these spaces are ‘outside of all places’, they indicate ‘a location in reality’ where one can live in the shadows and oneself ‘where I am not’ (Foucault, 1984: 4). He uses the metaphor of the mirror to capture this sense of being re-constituted or of constituting one’s relationality as a presence, which is simultaneously denied in other sites contained by power geometries within the broader society. In this sense, heterotopias, as spaces for enacting the legibility and livability of queer intimacies, desire and a way of life, are places of legitimacy and reclamation in response to geometries and geographies of power and subjection that render embodied queer sociality and intimacy prohibitive, unlawful and pathological.

Queer phenomenological insights, as elaborated by Ahmed (2006), are also useful in illuminating the spatial elements of queer corporeal embodiment for same-sex desiring Iranian men in their orientations to the world and one another in this specific context. As Ahmed (2006: 552) points out: ‘Bodies as well as objects take shape through being oriented toward each other, as an orientation that may be experienced as the cohabitation or sharing of space’. Given the criminalization and literal policing of homosexual relations in the Iranian context, which speak to the official lines of foreclosure that are drawn around illicit sexual orientations under Islamic jurisprudential conditions (Jafari, 2015), we are concerned to examine *bodily horizons* that exceed these heteronormative limits. Ahmed, for example, mentions that:

... the horizon is what gives objects their contours and even allows such objects to be reached. The objects are within my horizon: it is an act of reaching ‘toward them’ that

makes them available as objects for me. The bodily horizon shows the ‘line’ that bodies can reach toward which is reachable, by also marking what they cannot reach. (Ahmed, 2006: 552)

The envisaging of such queer corporeal *horizons* in their materiality entails the spatio-temporal enactment of same-sex desires and tendencies that speak to the heterotopic aspects of queer livability. As we illustrate empirically, these queer forms of sociality are manifested in terms of their performativity through gesture, gaze and *cruising* in urban spaces in Tehran. Such phenomenological understandings of queer embodied spatiality and the temporality of its enactment highlight how the official lines that are drawn for being oriented sexually in terms of *becoming straight* are not solely determined by these heteronormative limits. As Ahmed (2006: 554) points out, *departure from the straight* cannot be conceived as only a spatial matter, but also as involving a degree of temporality. There are clear injunctions to embrace the ‘straight line’, both legally and socially, which are enforced under quite specific conditions of Islamic jurisprudential governance in Iran and in terms of *the marriage imperative* (Najmabadi, 2014: 123); we examine how queer men in the specific urban locale of Tehran navigate the limits of such *bodily horizons* and *tendencies*.

## About the study and methodology

The research presented in this article is part of a larger ethnographic study on queer males in Tehran. Given our epistemological concern with embodied socio-materiality of heterotopic geometries of power and bodily orientations vis-a-vis an examination of queer Iranian men’s relationality and practices of enacting same-sex desire (Plummer, 2008: 9), we employed the ethnographic method as a means by which to illuminate the spatial dimensions of their daily intimate lives. As Hearn et al. (2014: 28) point out, one of the strengths of ethnographic research is its potential to yield insights into ‘a recognition of the local and of place, location and locationality’ as set against a backdrop of ‘wider, global, and indeed transnational, processes and dynamics’, as exemplified by our concern with the reductive tendencies of gay internationalist perspectives on queers in Iran. Farahani’s (2010: 122) point regarding her own *trepidation* about inadvertently contributing to pervasive Orientalist and fetishistic constructions of the Iranian subject as already determined by the limits of specific reception regimes in which they are represented by the West and Western media’s focus as oppressed victims of Islamic fundamentalism, is one to which we were particularly sensitized, given our location as researchers situated in the global north.

Our positions and situatedness as white, gay-identifying researchers from the global north also requires some critical examination, especially in light of our engagement with scholars such as Haraway (1988), Farahani (2010) and Nowicka and Cieslik (2014), all of whom speak to the need for critical reflexivity with regards to the power relations that are implicated in both the conduct of the

research in terms of insider-outsider relationality and the representation of participants. Both authors are non-Iranians and identify as gay men, the first author being from a Nordic context in Europe, and the second author being born in Australia but having migrated to Canada over 10 years ago. In this sense, we are very aware of our *outsider* status, given both our ethnicity and nationality, and the ethical and political implications of our role in conducting this research, especially given our intellectual reading and engagement with Iranian scholars, who have been very critical of the tendency in the West to perpetuate Orientalist constructions of the Middle Eastern subject (Farahani, 2010; Najmabadi, 2014; Shakhshari, 2012). In fact, our access epistemologically to such reading, and also to Foucauldian and queer informed positions on the subject and power, has led us to be sceptical of any notion of a *docile body* that is acted upon by disciplinary external forces, and in our research we have been compelled by what Farahani (2010: 122) refers to as the ‘struggle against fixity and representation’ (see also Foucault, 1977: 1982).

While being an *insider* certainly would have afforded us with very different access points and degrees of affiliation and shared cultural understandings, not having such access meant that we had to spend a considerable amount of time reading and informing ourselves about the Iranian context and its complicated and nuanced history vis-a-vis faction-ridden governance of theocratic and democratic elements in the Islamic Republic and the process of secularization under the Pahlavi regime (Afary, 2009; Korycki and Nasirzadeh, 2016; Mir-Hosseini and Hamzic, 2010; Najmabadi, 2014). However, we are aware that any binary oppositional framing of outsider-insider status remains problematic and that identifications with our subjects are, as Nowicka and Cieslik (2014: 8) assert, ‘unstable, mobile and shifting’, and cannot simply be reduced to an alignment along ethnic and national lines. We do not deny the significance of such affiliations in terms of nationality and ethnicity, but are aware that such affinities are also undercut by other identifications such as social class, religious affiliation, gender expression and embodiment, sexuality and disability, as Farahani has illustrated in her research. These multiple axes of identification and affiliation highlight Haraway’s (1988: 584) point that there are no ‘innocent positions’ – ‘the positionings of the subjugated are not exempt from critical examination, decoding, deconstruction and interpretation’. Furthermore, within the context of global flows and circulation of discourses, Nowicka and Cieslik (2014: 9) point out that through ‘a transnational orientation and ties . . . actors can develop identities and positionalities for which “national”, “local” or ethnic is largely irrelevant’.

This latter point is particularly salient in contemplating our own positionality in the research process and how it has enabled us to reflect on the dialectical significance of insider-outsider relationality with regard to our subjects. Our sexuality and the spatio-temporality of its enactment afforded us a degree of insider access that enabled us to build certain affinities and alliances with our Iranian subjects, a positionality which also spoke to certain class alignments. For example, the first author used social media networking and dating sites to connect with Iranian queer

subjects, given his particular interest in learning more about queer life in Iran from *insiders* living there, as opposed to relying solely on media-generated accounts of their lives. It was in this way that he connected with Arash (not his real name), one of the key informants, who was then willing and able to introduce the first author to his network of queer friends.

However, the fact that most of the participants were recruited through Arash does point to certain limitations, and a foreclosure in terms of acknowledging that we provide access only to participants from a particular segment of Iranian society. For example, most of the participants were from middle-class backgrounds, identified as gay<sup>1</sup> and were secular in their worldviews, claiming to refute any religious affiliations. In this sense, we are conscious of not wanting to claim that the accounts we provide are in any way representative of the Iranian queer community in Tehran. Rather, like Farahani, what interests us is how these queer Iranian men come to understand the conditions of their emergence as queer subjects and its spatio-temporal manifestations with regards to their bodily orientations in this particular geopolitical context.

The second author was involved in reading the interview data and in sharing/writing extensively about the spatiality and enactment of queer embodied relationality in terms of his engagement with Iranian literature, and also his reading of Ahmed, Butler, Foucault and Massey. His interest in the topic was sparked by his reading of Iranian queer activist Arsham Parsi (2015), who lives in Toronto, and of critiques of diasporic perspectives provided by Iranian scholars such as Shakhshari (2012). Reading media coverage that tended to construct Toronto, the place of residence of the second researcher, as 'a maple syrup Mecca for Iran's gays', referring to the Canadian city as *Tehranto*, also spurred his interest in gaining further empirical insight into the perspectives of queer Iranian men from inside Iran (Strochlic, 2014; Zerehi, 2011).

Fieldwork was conducted in Tehran by the first author, who went there four times between 2014 and 2015. It involved 10 semi-structured interviews, six biographical in-depth interviews and six informal interviews/talks/chats with queer males. Some of the interviews were conducted either via Skype or Viber. The data used for this article draws on four semi-structured interviews and four informal interviews/talks/chats with queer males living in Tehran, plus field notes collected during four fieldtrips to Tehran. The reason we limited the data in this article to eight interviews in total is because it is an ongoing research project, and we are still working on and analyzing the rest of the data. However, we think that the voices of queer Iranian men presented here provide some insights into queer livability in Iran, although, as mentioned previously, we do not claim to be giving a representative account of queer Iranian and same-sex desiring men's lives in urban Iran.

The participants were selected purposively, being born shortly before or after the Islamic Revolution of 1979. As already mentioned, most of them came from middle-class families, and lived in the northern part of Tehran, except for a gay couple who lived in the southern part of the city and could be defined as lower



middle class in terms of income and social status. All the participants were accessed mainly through Arash, one of the key informants in Tehran. He also arranged for the first author to attend various gay gatherings and parties during his four fieldtrips to Tehran. Before the first author arrived in Tehran, he had contacted queer Iranian men through the dating app Hornet, and other dating sites for gay males such as Manjam, which is now rarely used by Iranian gays. All of the participants agreed to take part in the research and knew that the researcher identified as gay. It was felt that such disclosure was productive in gaining their trust and confidentiality. They were open about their feelings and wanted to contribute to the research by providing accounts of how they experienced a queer way of life in Iran.

The first author does not speak Farsi, so the interviews were mostly conducted in English. Most of the participants had an academic degree or were studying and thus had a good knowledge of English. For those who did not speak English fluently, the interview was conducted in Farsi with the help of Arash. In order to protect them, pseudonyms were used and the meetings were mostly in public places, for example in parks or cafes. Moreover, the participants were assured that the interview data would be used only by the researchers. All except one agreed to have his interview recorded. The interviews were conducted and transcribed verbatim by the first author. Where the interview was conducted in Farsi, Arash helped the first author to write it up and clarify nuances. Each interview took around 90 minutes. When the first author attended parties or other social gatherings, or when he visited some of the 'cruising places' in Tehran, field notes were written shortly afterwards. These enabled the researcher to make connections to the accounts provided by the participants in order to shed light on the spatialities of their social networks, exchanges and intimate relations. In order to enhance the trustworthiness of the interpretation of the data, one of the informants agreed to read the article and to offer comment on its interpretive insights before its submission for review/publication. He is currently undertaking doctoral studies abroad, and is well versed in both theory and research methods that are informed by a reading of Foucault and Butler.

## Findings

### *Public spaces of queer embodied relationality and sociality*

'Honestly you can see gays everywhere', Arash told the first author when they were chatting on Viber about queer public spaces in Tehran. This is partly true, and during fieldwork in Tehran the first author met queer men in various settings and spaces and from different social class backgrounds. However, the fact remains that spaces in Tehran where queer men can meet and gather in public are rather few and limiting, according to many of the informants. Furthermore, they change regularly due to the constant regulatory power of the government, which points to the uneven distribution and tenuousness of such power geometries and the extent to



which, as Massey points out, the spatial relationships shaped by them are ‘always under construction’ and imbued with a certain temporality (Massey, 2009: 22).

This point also pertains to Ahmed’s rendering of *bodily dwellings* as orientations in space with their specific conditions of emergence for the *unfolding* of a queer sociality and intelligibility, which emerge in this particular case under repressive state regulation and social marginalization governed by both the criminalization of homosexuality and particular regimes of compulsory heterosexuality. Arash, for example, mentioned that when some restaurants or cafes become too popular among young people, or are regarded or recognized as queer spaces, they are raided and/or closed down by the authorities. He indicated this while talking to the first author about queer spaces in Tehran, as they were making their way to one of the primary queer locales for social interaction in the centre of the city, close to Chahar rahe valiasr street, one of Tehran’s longest avenues connecting the most southern and northern ends of the city. Arash mentioned that the authorities had recently closed down a popular cafe in his neighbourhood, which then opened again some days later. He indicated that this particular cafe was frequented by queer men on Tuesdays. On other weekdays, according to Arash, queer men gather at different cafes or restaurants. Thus queer ‘public’ space in Tehran is constantly becoming (or being) ‘made’ and ‘remade’ by the members of the queer community with their presence, actions and embodiment – in terms of the orienting of their bodies in space – and is subject to the incursion of the authorities as a defining characteristic of its destabilizing temporality (Massey, 2009). In this sense, such places afford the spatial means for enacting a form of queer corporeal sociality and recognizability, but one which is also subject to state surveillance.

However, such spaces also need to be understood in the phenomenological sense as taking shape at the limits of certain bodily horizons where *straight lines* are supposedly drawn, but within which ‘bodies perform in their comportment’ a queer *posturing* and *gesturing* that in some ways speaks to a simultaneous veiling and legibility of same-sex desire that has a particular salience in this repressive context (Ahmed, 2006: 552). For example, these places are rarely used for sexual encounters or *cruising*, and, due to their public visibility, everything is under the surface (hidden from public view) and their clients try to be rather discreet about their expressions of same-sex desire and intimacy. Thus we can see how space and power are intimately intertwined in terms of the building of a social network in which such urban locales function as a spatial hub of queer recognizability and social interaction. Furthermore, we also gain insights into the specificity of queer bodily dwellings and orientations in terms of their effects in transforming the heteronormative social space of the cafe, albeit temporally, into an *unfolding* social space, where queer sociality can gain a degree of intelligibility.

While there is clearly ‘the social pressure to follow a certain [life] course’ and ‘to live a certain kind of life’ and ‘to reproduce that life’ that is shaped by particular regimes of compulsory heterosexuality in this context, we see how queer Iranian men in their orientations to one another are able to cohabit in these urban spaces in

ways that open up *queer moments* and effects in terms of ‘the world becoming oblique’. In short, in their orientation these men create spaces – albeit temporary ones – under certain repressive conditions of sexuality governance, that enable them to follow ‘different lines of connection, association, and even exchange ... which might not have otherwise been reachable within the body horizon of the social’ (Ahmed, 2006: 564).

In fact, the constant fear of state surveillance and being ‘discovered’ is experienced by most young Iranians who act and behave outside of the cultural/moral framework of the Islamic state. As discussed by Mahdavi (2009), many young Iranians find ways to avoid state scrutiny and repression while partaking in a *sexual revolution*, by, for example, meeting at private gatherings and parties. However, there is always the risk that the authorities will raid these social gatherings. In other words, most young Iranians, whether straight or queer, are conscious of using various strategies to pursue their sexual desires or partake in a culture that the state defines as Western and decadent. This is an important point, as it highlights that state surveillance is not rooted exclusively in homophobia, but rather is part of a continuum of repressive policies aimed at enforcing a specific cultural/moral framework associated with the revolution and used to assert state legitimacy (see Mir-Hosseini and Hamzic, 2010).

With regards to searching for more intimate relations in terms of *doing sex*, Arash indicated that queer men in Tehran tend mostly to use the virtual spaces of the internet, for example various dating sites such as Manjam or Hornet, for ‘cruising’ and ‘picking-up’ men. However, these virtual heterotopic spaces for enabling queer social interactions and sociality are also subject to surveillance by state authorities. This spectre of state surveillance points to the specificity of the conditions governing queer Iranian men’s desire for intimacy of contact and for cruising in this particular context. In fact, several participants corroborated the many accounts by queer men interviewed by Human Rights Watch (2010) and other sources, which document the fear about such exchanges with other queer men online related to knowledge of entrapment and surveillance at the hands of the Islamic authorities, given that such behaviour is unlawful in Iran and is considered to violate Islamic principles of public decency and morality (Iranian Queer Organization, 2011: 23–25; *Small Media*, 2012: 61–63). It is in this sense that private and public spaces for queer sociality are intertwined and imbued with different modalities of power that have implications for queer civic participatory action, and, hence, the livability of a queer life.

Arman, for example, states that:

it’s in the private sphere that we use Internet for finding new partners or dates but it’s a bit dangerous of course, because we all know that the police is there; we all know that we are being watched for that.

He goes on to express his fears and concerns about the *Basij*, which he refers to as ‘dangerous’ and as ‘the government in the shadows’. Arman also recounts details of

entrapment by Islamic authorities of which he is personally aware:

I have heard from my close friends that they have gone on dates, and that the person on line was not who they claimed to be. They have been beaten, arrested, robbed and even raped and they have had to flee. One of them was beaten and had to flee the country ... it happens ... and there are straight guys who might arrange a date with you just to rob and blackmail you ... he will have sex with you, but after taking your picture will threaten to expose you unless you pay him money so that's another part of the problem.

Thus, it is not only the surveillance at the hands of the *Basij*, but the intertwining influences of criminalization and social stigmatization of same-sexual conduct that enable the perpetuation of such incidents of blackmailing and abuse against queer men living under these repressive conditions. In this sense, being watched or being under surveillance at the hands of the authorities is a preoccupation which Arman believes most queer men in Iran have to contend with. Such surveillance extends to specific cruising spots known to be frequented by queer men, such as certain parks, which Arman identifies as 'rendezvous points for gay men'. Thus, it is important to understand how particular *power geometries* are being navigated by queer men in this particular context (Massey, 2009), and how their orientations and desire for one another drive and shape how they reach into the *body horizon* of heteronormative spaces for creating possibilities for queer cohabitation, sociality and relationality (Ahmed, 2006).

Arash talked specifically about such public spaces and identified Daneshju Park and 'College Street' as infamous cruising spots for queer men in Tehran. He mentioned that rent-boys and transsexuals are known to frequent the park searching for customers. The same applies to 'College Street', he claimed, so called because the American College used to be there before the Islamic Revolution in 1979. Arash had strong opinions about this park: 'I never go to this place because it's not a good place ... people come from other cities ... *loose* people go to this park ... you go there only if you want sex'. He seemed to associate this park with a sort of abjected status, given its reputation as a space purely for buying sex and/or meeting simply for the purpose of having anonymous sex, practices which carried a significant risk to one's personal safety. In an interview prior to meeting him in person he was adamant that he never frequented Daneshju Park, and that it is 'publicly frowned upon', a space reserved in his view for 'cheap people' looking for sex – a space for sexual outcasts to gather. His own differentiation of these repudiated other queer subjects highlights the dimensions of stigmatization that operate within queer erotic populations and spaces of queer relationality. It points to the operation of sex negativity within what Rubin (1984: 278) identifies as 'the hierarchical valuation of sex acts'.

What Arash is speaking to here are hierarchies and exclusions among queer Iranian men. For example, it is not merely sexual acts that are embedded in this hierarchical (de)valuation, but (un)desirable *orientations* as they are embodied by

(homo)sexual subjects, which contravene the socially 'straight line', and are imbricated in other social relations that are inflected by factors such as social class, age and rural/urban location (Afary, 2009; Mahdavi, 2009; Najmabadi, 2005). Further research is needed to ascertain whether such spaces tend to be accessed by certain sorts of same-sex desiring subjects or men who have sex with men as opposed say to those men, for example, who identify as 'gay' and are middle class. However, while admittedly these normative valuations of same-sex conduct or 'non-normative intimacies' apply equally to queer men in global north contexts (Warner, 1999: 163), it is important to note that such stigmatization and shaming is further intensified under the repressive state conditions in which expressions of same-sex desire are officially designated as criminal and pathological behaviour, as well as an affront to Islamic moral principles (Jafari, 2015). These conditions, along with other factors pertaining to urban location and social class, in conjunction with the 'marriage imperative', for example, also impact on Iranian men's capacity to orient themselves in creating spaces for potential disruption and reordering of *straight* social paths.

These queer men indicated that they are aware of being judged, not only by the general public, by their presence there in taking the risk of being arrested or assaulted, but also by other queers, by those 'normative' middle-class *gays* who try hard to disassociate themselves from this dystopic place – judgements which appear to be motivated by presumptions of moral degeneracy. Farhod also corroborated such accounts in an online interview on Viber: 'If someone were to see me they'd think that I'm a whore'. When the first author probed further, and asked him whether the police knew about what was going on there on a daily basis, he responded: 'Yes. Let me tell you something the whole world knows about this park'.

Here Farhod was referring to the fact that most of the inhabitants of Tehran knew the *open secret* about this park and the sorts of people that frequent it. In this sense, such a park functions as a form of heterotopia – public contradictory sites of recognizability for enacting queer sexual relations and orientations, which are at once dangerous spaces of abjection and stigmatization, as well as possibilities for pursuing sexual pleasure under repressive Islamic social conditions for constituting homosexuality as a sickness and criminal offense. Daneshju Park, therefore, constitutes a geometric space of queer heterotopic deviation and temporality, wherein 'individuals whose behaviour is deviant in relation to the required mean or norm are placed' or *enter* in search of queer sex (Foucault, 1984: 5). In this sense, it is both a counter site and a *forbidden* place that is reserved for stigmatized sexual outcasts, even by those queer men who appear to be embracing a certain homo-normative identificatory positionality. Thus the park functions as a sort of *crisis heterotopia* reserved for those queer men who are compelled to live *in a state of crisis* under certain repressive conditions for doing sex and seeking sexual pleasure, conditions that are imposed by both the Islamic state and other queer men who dis-identify with such spatially embodied forms of queer relationality and non-normative expressions of sexual intimacy.

This heterotopic spatiality of the park also raises the question of whether there is a particular differentiated category of same-sex desiring men who frequent such public spaces in search of sexual intimacy, as opposed to, say, those men who self-identify as gay or who are not in committed relationships with women. It also raises important issues about bodily orientations and their spatio-temporality for entry into the park, which affords queer identificatory and relational possibilities. However, such forms of queer relationality risk marking one as an abjected subject under the gaze of other classes or categories of same-sex desiring subjects – an area of research that requires further investigation of men who have sex with men. Regardless, this analysis of bodily orientation in their spatio-temporality speaks phenomenologically to what Ahmed (2006: 565) refers to as ‘the contingency of bodies coming into contact with other bodies’ with their potential for social disorientation in the spatial embodiment and enactment of same-sex desire. The salience that is important to note here is how a particular form of normative surveillance of queer men as abjected sexual subjects under the gaze of other queer men is mediated and further compounded by the specific repressive conditions of social stigmatization, criminalization and pathologization. These conditions are enforced not only by the state, but by certain social norms governing kinship and social relations among queer men which appear to be inflected by a classed consciousness/positionality.

### *Private spaces of queer intimacy and social interaction*

The systematic denial and criminalization of same-sex relations in Iran has certainly created the need for private spaces and networks of queer sociality, intimacy and interaction to be fostered, not only online, but in the form of hosting house parties (Iranian Queer Organization, 2011; *Small Media*, 2012; Wright, 2014). Mahdavi (2009), for example, suggests that the repressive social and political system of Islamic governance in Iran has produced the need for such sexual and social underworlds. The function of the private space of ‘home’ as a heterotopic space for fostering queer sociality and community is particularly significant under these repressive conditions, given the stigmatization of ‘abjected’ identities and bodies of sexual minorities in Iran. As Ahmed (2006: 563) points out, ‘being oriented in different ways does matter, precisely because of how spaces are already oriented which makes some bodies feel in place, or at home, and not others’.

Thus, Iranian queer life is mostly confined within the private domain of the home, where queers meet, flirt and enjoy each other’s company and in so doing create sanctioned spaces and possibilities for queer expressibility, relationality and sociality. As Mahdavi (2009) has pointed out, this also applies to heterosexuals, where parties are held in order to create space for *doing sex*, taking drugs and consuming alcohol. Hence, gay and straight parties, as well as small gatherings in homes, are often held regularly in Iran, at least in Tehran. However, creating such spaces depends on the social (economic) class of the individual host, as the cost of

housing is rather expensive. Having a 'place' of one's own, therefore, is highly valued among queers in Iran.

Arman, when asked about gay parties, initially did not have much to say, apart from stating that he did not attend such gatherings any longer, and mainly preferred to socialize with close friends only. However, later in the interview, when discussing the topic of queer Iranian men emigrating, he mentioned that he knew a number of queer men who had since emigrated to the Netherlands, for example, who 'used to throw great parties' that he would attend. He stated, however, that the home of two other queer men who used to host 'big parties' was raided by the police, and that these men were subsequently 'beaten and tortured' by the authorities, once again corroborating accounts provided by Human Rights Watch (2010) and a number of other sources (Iranian Queer Organization, 2011; Rasmussen, 2014; *Small Media*, 2012; Wright, 2014). Once again the question of social class is raised in terms of being able to create such performative spaces at home for the orientation of queer bodies. However, within such localized networks of queer interaction Arman points to the precarious temporality of such modes of sociality. Those with financial means who are able to host such parties in the first place because they inhabit or have access to a place of their own are also those most likely to have the capital to emigrate.

Thus, even within the private domain of the home, throwing a party, especially if the target group is queer men, can be a risky and dangerous undertaking. Arslan, for example, emphasized that he had heard about such parties, and did wish he could attend, but would never do so because it was just too 'risky'. While he himself had not heard about such parties being raided within the context of his own queer social network, he stressed that 'there's always a possibility', which highlights the sense of panoptic surveillance and its impact on queer social networks (Foucault, 1977). Hence, such queer heterotopic private spaces in their very temporality are precariously unstable sites of queer comfortability, exposure and sociality, where a degree of identificatory possibilities and relations can be enacted and realized for sexual minorities away from the gaze of the authorities, while always remaining tenuously susceptible to its incursion into that private space. It is in this sense that such heterotopic spaces for *gathering* need to be understood in their temporality as the fleeting materialization of disorienting forms of queer social investment taking shape and set against the limits of a *bodily horizon* of state enforced compulsory heterosexuality. As Ahmed (2006: 552) claims: 'The bodily horizon shows the "line" that bodies can reach toward, what is reachable, by also marking what they cannot reach'.

Having heard about gay parties/gatherings from the participants, the first author wanted to experience and participate in these gatherings himself. Thus, on his second day in Tehran (during his second fieldtrip), he went with Arash to one of the neighbourhoods in the centre of the city. The main thoroughfare in this neighbourhood connects it with Emam Khomeini Square. We were on our way to meet a gay couple, Farhod and Barziar, who had invited us for a gay gathering later that evening.

During such parties, Farhod and Barziar's apartment is transformed into a queer social space through the presence and embodiment of their guests. The bedroom functions symbolically as a *closet*, both literally and metaphorically, which the guests



enter to change their clothes, and *come out* performing their queer identity and embodiment more freely. Thus, the metamorphosis of the living room space can be understood as a sort of queer heterotopia, a space for *the other* to constitute themselves in a reality that is not readily available or legitimated outside of that space – it is a space ‘on the other side of glass’ where, as Foucault (1984: 4) points out, ‘I begin again to direct my eyes toward myself and to constitute myself there where I am’. It is a real space, made and re-made by its inhabitants (guests), which exists within the real world, but it is strictly separate from the wider society. In that sense, it is a space reserved for those in crisis or ‘whose behaviour is deviant in relation to the required mean or norm’ (Foucault, 1984: 4). In other words, it is a space for the abjected queer body to be reconstituted and reclaimed in its temporality, enabling one to forget or to escape momentarily the repressive and oppressive conditions in respect to the systematic denial and repudiation of sexual minorities and non-normative gender expression and the social stigma attached to transsexuals (*Small Media*, 2012). These sentiments were expressed by Mika who states: ‘Here, I can forget, I can have fun, *just for a short time*, I can be myself’ (our emphasis).

This heterotopic spatiality of queer *gatherings* in the home speaks to Berlant and Warner’s (1998: 558) conceptualization of the queer as a ‘space of entrances, exits, unsystematized lines of acquaintance, projecting horizons, typifying examples, alternate routes, blockages, incommensurate geographies’. However, as Ahmed asserts and as is reflected by Mika, it is important not to idealize such queer spaces, in that they constitute only temporal moments of disorientation that are delimited by regimes of compulsory heterosexuality.

However, Mika’s sentiment did encapsulate the general impression the first author had in experiencing first-hand such spatio-temporal queer sociality during his stay there. Everybody was rather relaxed, and the lights were slightly dimmed. Most of the guests were dancing to the music, even intimately kissing.

However, despite embracing and revelling in such intimate queer spaces of sociality, Arash at times mentioned at the party that he was worried about the police and the neighbours, particularly when it got a bit noisy. However, the hosts were not so much concerned about the noise, and when the first author asked them about it they simply recounted the following incident:

Once we held a gay party and it was a bit noisy. Then our neighbour knocked on our door, and told us that her husband was sick and asked us if we could turn down the music. We did that because we did not want her to call the police. But we wanted to tell her that all of us in the party are sick. But we did not do it.

Here, Farhod and Barziar are referring to the labels the society and authorities, in particular, apply to queer males, which cast them in pathological terms as ‘sick’ and in need of treatment so that they can be cured. Through the use of such irony, they are repudiating the terms of the identificatory categories and labels that are imposed on them in the official Islamic society that exists on ‘the other side of the glass’. In so doing, they are indirectly emphasizing the heterotopic nature of such



queer social gatherings and how, within their spatio-temporal confines, ‘sick’ people like them are able to feel more at ease and valued, in the realization of the livability of a queer social existence. However, this comment by Farhod and Barziar also speaks to Massey’s notion of power geometries and Ahmed’s point about the *world already made* in terms of illuminating how *outside* forces must be understood as always impinging on and setting certain limits to the creation of queer spaces for orienting oneself and ‘reinhabiting one’s body’ as a same-sex desiring subject (Ahmed, 2006: 563).

## Conclusion

In this article, we have provided some empirical insights into the livability of a queer life in the Islamic republic of Iran, as provided by self-identifying ‘gay’ men themselves from inside the country. However, it needs to be acknowledged that the scope of our analysis draws from the lives of relatively few ‘gay’ males, and is thus not representative of the lives and reality of all queer males in Iran. In following Hearn et al. (2014), in their focus on theorizing men, masculinities, place and space, we have also been concerned to draw attention to the need to capture the interplay and dynamics of intimate queer sociality, bodily orientations and practices of doing sex in terms of recognizing the significance of ‘the local and of place, location and locationality’ in queer men’s daily intimate social lives in Tehran specifically (Hearn et al., 2014: 28). However, in undertaking such analysis, we have been conscious of the need to contextualize our interpretive framing of these accounts as set against the backdrop of the broader transnational concerns about the impact of the gay internationalist movement, which has tended to be dogged by Western secular liberal imaginaries for constituting what has come ‘to stand for the experience of being “gay” in Iran’ (Rastegar, 2012: 4). In this respect, we have attempted to provide a more nuanced understanding of the social and legal regulation of same-sex practices and relations in Iran through ethnographic research that prioritizes the accounts of queer Iranian men themselves.

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## Note

1. While our participants self-identified as ‘gay’, we employ the word ‘queer’ as an etic category in relation to describing our participants, as it is aligned with our epistemological positioning.

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