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Over the last two decades a number of important scholarly works have addressed issues of gender and social progressiveness in relation to Islam. Few, however, have taken on the reality of living as a gay, lesbian, transgender, or queer Muslim. In Kugle’s Living Out Islam the intersection between gender, sexuality, and Islam is explored across a mix of geographies—South Africa, Canada, Netherlands, the United Kingdom, and South Africa. Although these societies share similarities of being primarily ‘western,’ cosmopolitan, and democratic; Kugle successfully analyzes a significant degree of divergence in the modes of progressiveness observable in each.

Using qualitative interview methods, with one or two representative voices from each locale, Kugle seeks to understand how practicing Muslims reconcile their faith, their geography, their communities, and their private and family lives. His investigation reveals that there are multiple modes of activism and engagement available to queer Muslims that vary according to social context. Kugle’s work is useful to scholars of gender, sexuality, queer theory, social movements, and political activism, as well as for anyone who employs post-modern theoretical notions of subjectivity and identity formation. Each chapter unfolds as evidence of a particular mode of activism that is highlighted by stories across multiple spheres of social life.

Chapter one tells the story of Muhsin, a gay Muslim living a politically directed life in the racially and ethnically complicated spaces of Johannesburg and Cape Town. By recounting Muhsin’s story, Kugle identifies a mode of activism that he labels “engaging religious tradition,” whereby, the textual history of Islamic practice is itself used to create a social space for non-heteronormative practices. Activists engaged in this mode are skilled and practiced readers of the Qur’an and they use their knowledge to bolster their case to family members, clergy, and other practicing Muslims. This mode of activism hinges on a deep and nuanced reading of religious text and also on a trained knowledge of hadith and shari’a.

Chapter two highlights a mode of activism that Kugle calls “challenging family and community,” which seeks to better understand how close personal relationships are navigated when someone ‘comes out’ as gay or lesbian. As we know from other work on the subject, these relations can often illustrate resilience. Kugle explains, however, that these instances can also serve to anchor social identities and provide support under the most difficult of circumstances.
Through the voice of Nargis, an out lesbian of Indian descent living in Cape Town, we see the fragile balance between the nurturing support and the powerful control of nuclear families. Urban, educated, and initially questioning, Nargis identifies as a lesbian only after attending university, where she was able to live apart from her historically conservative Indian family. Through the intervention of her brothers and family friends, Nargis faces surveillance even while away from home and must contend with the various pieces of information that make their way back to her family. By finding organizations within the university context, and by relying on the support of new and old friends, she is able to confront her family and to stake out her identity as both an Indian Muslim and a lesbian.

Chapter three takes up the issue of transgender sexuality by highlighting the story of Fatima, a transgender male who was socially identified as a female at birth. Born into an Arab-identified family of Algerians and Moroccans, most of Fatima’s childhood was spent in boarding schools in the United Kingdom. As a female-to-male transgender Muslim, Fatima was able to live as a “tomboy” for much of his childhood. Because of his age, he was able to participate in the life of the mosque and within family as a male. He studied the Qur’an and learned Arabic along with the other young boys in the community and was allowed to participate as a male by way of a youthful exception. As Fatima matured, however, he was expected to take up the attendant social practices of a Muslim woman, wherein; he encountered similar stressors reported by other transgender people who discuss moving from childhood to late adolescence and adulthood. As a child, Fatima was able to learn the historically and textually rooted tenets of Muslim life that were traditionally unavailable to females. By using this training and knowledge, Fatima was able to “adapt” his “religious politics,” which, according to Kugle, illustrated an ability to augment the arguments of political challenges that Islam posed to his sense of identity and belonging. Paralleling confrontations that Muslims often deal with regarding their ethnic and racial identities to the issue of gender and sexuality, Fatima and others engaged in this mode of activism use the same arguments once made for tolerance of physical difference to their benefit by expressing themselves as different in other ways.

Chapter four explores the activist mode of “adapting secular politics” and turns to the circumstance of being a gender and sexual minority in a religious and ethnic minority community. One example is Omar, a Syrian Muslim immigrant in a large Dutch city. Within the context of this supposedly democratic and socially liberal country, the resurgence of right-wing politics, anti-immigration rhetoric, and violence against non-whites both complicates Omar’s situation and provides a template for activism that he and others use to find