UCLA
UCLA Electronic Theses and Dissertations

Title

For the Love of God: Islam, Mysticism, and Spiritual Explorations of Queer/Trans Iranian Americans

Permalink

https://escholarship.org/uc/item/71p442wk

Author

Jadali, Shawndeez

Publication Date

2022

Peer reviewed|Thesis/dissertation

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA

Los Angeles

For the Love of God:

Islam, Mysticism, and Spiritual Explorations of Queer/Trans Iranian Americans

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the

Requirements for the degree Doctor of Philosophy

In Gender Studies

by

Shawndeez Davari Jadali

2022

ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

For the Love of God:

Islam, Mysticism, and Spiritual Explorations of Queer/Trans Iranian Americans

by

Shawndeez Davari Jadali

Doctor of Philosophy in Gender Studies

University of California, Los Angeles 2022

Professor Purnima Mankekar, Chair

This dissertation explores the rich terrain of queer and trans divine connection, all the myriad ways individuals seek out, relate to, visualize, and understand God. Through the eyes of second-generation queer and trans Iranian Americans of the Los Angeles diaspora, this dissertation entertains the complex relationships between queerness/transness and Islamic identity. Attentive to the migratory traumas of the parent generation (The Revolution and Hostage Crisis), the racial posturing they constructed (White, Aryan Race, non-Muslim), and modern American racial discourses (post-9/11, Muslims as terrorists), *For the Love of God* asks how queer/trans members of the Iranian diaspora are articulating and experiencing their religious and/or spiritual beliefs. This dissertation honors their multivalent identities, their fears, their hopes, and their dreams, as instructive sites of queer/trans imaginaries and futures.

The dissertation of Shawndeez Davari Jadali is approved.

Sherene Halida Razack

Zeynep K. Korkman

Aomar Boum

Purnima Mankekar, Chair

University of California, Los Angeles

2022

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF FIGURES

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would not be here if it were not for the commitment, support, and guidance of those who love me. First, I extend sincere gratitude to my advisors and all the work they have done to help bring me to this moment. Professor Purnima Mankekar, I thank you for years of guidance: the sharp academic wisdom, the emotional support, and as always, a closeness that has felt like home in a university that too often feels overwhelming and unfamiliar. Professor Sherene Razack, I thank you for years of guidance: for critical research experience and for always asking challenging questions, those that force me to reflect deeply. Professor Zeynep Korkman, I thank you for years of guidance: for engaging deeply with my work, for pushing me to new perspectives, and for showing me how powerful a profession teaching can be. Professor Aomar Boum, I thank you for years of guidance: your sweeping knowledge, your insistence on academic rigor, and your commitment to this work. Beyond my committee, I would like to thank the members of the Gender Studies staff, Van Do-Nguyen, Samantha Hogan, Richard Medrano, and Jenna Miller-Von Ah, for countless hours of logistical and emotional support over the years.

I am forever grateful for my family and all the millions of ways they hold me up day after day. I attended UCLA for my Ph.D. knowing I had the familial support of almost all of my relatives within an hour's drive and they never failed me. I thank my mother for all the meals, the walks around Westwood, and the emotional support that encouraged me to push through when times were tough. Her resilience inspires me everyday.

In truth, I had an extremely difficult time in graduate school. On top of the academic work, I realized I was transgender, came to terms with myself, started to take hormones, and underwent surgeries. I endured a lot of violence, lost a lot of friends, yet also, found a new way to live. I learned the value of centering my happiness, my joy, and my spirit, because quietly curtailing myself was simply no longer good enough for me. It is through my transition that I learned of my own power,

my voice, my heart, and all that is possible when we enter into the realm of sheer possibility. I am an entirely different person from who I was when I entered this program in 2015, and for that, I would like to thank myself, my intuition, my inner sense of self for guiding me through the darkest of times. I lost many but I found my spirit.

To the one individual who has held me best, loved me hard, and given me all the space I needed to heal, to grow, and to become who I am today – Aly, I thank you for all that you are. Your infinite love, your transcendental wisdom, your light and playful heart have given me life. I owe all of my wisdom, epiphanies, and newfound sense of life purpose to my wife and her daring spirit.

Above all, I acknowledge the force of the divine, the spirit floating through the wind, the infinite love of God that brought all of this to fruition. It is through the power of God, the mystical forces of spirit we humans barely understand, that I have been guided to this exact moment. If I sound like a nonsensical fool, then I know I am making myself clear. Spirit is best experienced with the heart, not the mind.

<div align="center">

CURRICULUM VITAE

</div>

EDUCATION

2018   Doctoral Candidate, Gender Studies, *University of California, Los Angeles*

2017   Master of Arts, Gender Studies, *University of California, Los Angeles*

2014   Bachelor of Arts, Peace and Conflict Studies, *University of California, Berkeley*

PRESENTATIONS

Islam, Crystal Culture, & Authenticity: Queer/Trans Iranian American Spiritual Reflections
Iranian Diaspora Studies Conference, UCLA, February 16-17, 2023 (forthcoming)

Acid Trips & Queer Love: Queer/Trans Iranian American Explorations of God
Intl. Symposium on Trans* and Violence, Örebro University, Sweden, June 28-29, 2022 (forthcoming)

Exploring Queer & Trans Spiritualities: A Joy-Centered Approach
QTBIPOC Conference, UCLA, May 7, 2022

A Story of Trans Joy
Google, Sunnyvale Office, January 27, 2022; Los Angeles Office, September 16, 2021

A Story of Trans Joy: An Intimate Approach for Mental Health Providers
Open Paths Counseling Center, November 4, 2021

Exploring Queer & Trans Spiritualities: A Joy-Centered Approach
UC Davis' LGBTQ Center, February 12, 2021

Trans Anger Turned Joy: A Practice of Healing
Gender Studies 104: Gender, Trauma, & Bodies, UCLA, February 9, 2021

Nonbinary PoC Experiences: An Intimate Approach to Trans Affirmative Mental Health
Open Path's Counseling Center, October 29, 2020

Nonbinary/Trans PoC Stories: An Intimate Approach for Medical Care Providers
The Berkeley Free Clinic, June 27, 2020

Nonbinary PoC Experiences: A Personal Approach to Trans Affirmative Mental Health
Antioch University's LGBTQ Counseling Center, COLORS, April 30, 2020

Queer AND Muslim, Not Queer OR Muslim: Queer Muslim Stories
Antioch University, February 6, 2020

GENDER ADVOCACY

UCLA Health, Trans Wellness Team
Graduate Student Representative, University of California, Los Angeles, Nov. 2019-June 2022

Trans Student Experiences, Fireside Chat with the Chancellor
Nonbinary/Trans Graduate Student Representative, Chancellor's Residence, UCLA, March 2, 2020

UCLA Gender Recognition Act Task Force
Trans Graduate Student Panelist, Los Angeles, CA, October 8, 2019

The University of California Regents
Trans Student Presenter, University of California, San Francisco Mission Bay Campus, May 15, 2019

Trans Justice Forum
Conference Organizer, University of California, Santa Cruz, June 12, 2019

GRANTS, FELLOWSHIPS, & AWARDS

2021   UCLA Graduate Division, Dissertation Year Fellowship
2020   UCLA LGBT Center, Charles E. Harless Graduate Student Leadership Award
2020   UCLA Graduate Division, Diversity Fellow
2019   UCLA Collegium of University Teaching Fellows, Teaching Fellow
2019   UCLA Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer Studies Program, Teaching Fellow
2017   UCLA Graduate Division, Graduate Summer Research Mentorship

TEACHING EXPERIENCE

Gender Studies 185: Trans Magic: Spiritual Explorations of Gender Non-Conformity
Instructor, UCLA, Spring 2021

Gender Studies 104: Gender, Trauma, & Bodies
Teaching Assistant, UCLA, Winter 2021

Gender Studies 141: Gender, Culture, & Capitalism
Teaching Assistant, UCLA, Fall 2020

Gender Studies 102: Power: U.S. Empire & Queer/Trans/PoC Resistances
Instructor, UCLA, Summer 2020

Gender Studies 98T: Muslim Feminisms: Queer & Trans Perspectives
Instructor, UCLA, Winter 2020

LGBTQ 181: Queer & Trans Muslim Interventions
Instructor, UCLA, Fall 2019

Gender Studies 102: Power: Policing Racial, Queer, & (Trans)Gender Difference
Instructor, UCLA, Summer 2019

Gender Studies/Film TV M124: Sex, Race, and Difference in Transnational Film
Teaching Assistant, UCLA, Fall 2018

Gender Studies 10: Introduction to Gender Studies
Teaching Assistant, UCLA, Fall 2016, Winter 2017, Spring 2017, Fall 2017, Winter 2018, Spring 2018

PREFACE

The Potential in Grief, The Realm in God

I sit to write. Coincidentally, today is November 20, 2020 – Trans Day of Remembrance, or as some have renamed it, Trans Day of Resilience. I am thinking about all of the trans lives lost to suicide and/or cis violence repeatedly year after year at the same moment as I'm supposed to be writing an introduction for this work, that seeks to finally share some of our stories, our fears, and our struggles. I'm grieving. I'm grieving the life of a fellow queer/trans Iranian American that was taken not long ago. This entire project is nothing, worthless, if it does not begin with the realities of our lives and our deaths.

I begin *For the Love of God* with this somber but intentional introduction to outline very clearly the overarching goal of this work: to share the experiences, worries, successes, losses, contemplations, and overcomings of the queer and trans Iranian American community. But I also share this to make a commitment at the outset to not shy away from the difficult, the messy, the outliers that disrupt the analysis. My absolute primary commitment as a scholar, activist, researcher, and now in my spiritual guidance practice is to embrace the *real*.

I am invested in the real, in what is real for you, not the 'shoulds' nor the 'scripts.' I want to hear about how you fantasized about wearing your brother's clothes as a young 'girl' and all the shame you still feel for having those thoughts. I want to hear all about your hesitations and insecurities before walking into a mosque and how that left you feeling even more distant from God. I want to know how difficult it is for you to imagine your own wedding, because of how much homophobia you've lived through. I want to know what you say to God when you're praying all alone at night and what signs you receive as guidance. I want to know what parts of yourself you show to the world and what parts you've been taught to conceal, and if you ever plan on making room to see where that exploration takes you.

1

As much as my research questions were formalized, refined, and practiced, I believe my underlying lines of inquiry were the following: How is your heart? How do you cope? How do you make sense of all the violence? Do you find solace in the words you use to label yourself? What do you do if you don't? Can you see a future for yourself? Is that possible for you? What do you look like in it? Do you believe in your own joy? What will it take to make that possible?

I began today with a prayer ritual to honor the lives of those lost this year to transphobic violence. I lit my candles, burned my herbs, and said a few words in their memory. As I set out to introduce this work, I find it essential to honor our deceased as a reminder of our impermanence; our bodies, our lives, our experiences, our words, all a fleeting experiment in time, space, and matter. And it is through seeing our precarity in this world, so many systemic axes invested in our death and decline, that I've focused my project on God, on the spiritual, the transcendental – as powerful undervalued sites of resilience, overcoming, and survival.

If nothing else, I offer this work here as a testament to our lives. We were here. We struggled with our gender non-conforming clothes. We cried over lost parents. We drunk danced at queer parties. We laughed at our own religious confusion. We will continue to survive just as we always have. And even as some of our clan will not make it with us, we carry their essence with us. We honor them as best we can, in hopes that someday we will reunite.

Preface, Nov. 20, 2020.

Colorado.

INTRODUCTION

Make Room: Nonbinary as Critical Trans Methodology

> I used to always pray, 'I hope my grandma doesn't know that I'm gay cuz I feel like it'll break her heart.' I don't know what she would do if she knew I was trans. She really did love me, but I… I can't fathom what she would say to me knowing that I'm trans now. I still feel like I talk to her and I'm connected to her... She comes in my dreams a lot which is really nice, and I talk to her, but I don't ever see what I look like when I'm talking to her, so I don't know what she's seeing me as, which I would assume since it's my dream, she's seeing me as me. ...I don't know what to think because maybe now that she's gone, she's okay with it? And she's seeing that I'm happy? And I'm not causing any trouble. But I never really took a minute [to notice] 'what is she seeing when she talks to me?' And I don't know how to feel about that.

The sun was peeking through a cluster of clouds as Shahpour shared some of his most intimate thoughts with me. We spoke of faith, of fear, and his cherished relationship with his late grandmother as the afternoon sun drew nearer to the horizon, paralleling his dive into emotional vulnerability. He gripped the picnic table as he spoke calmly, sinking his fingers through the weaved metal holes of the tabletop, holding on as if the tighter he gripped the less he would feel. Both of us queer, trans, Iranian Americans born and raised in southern California to two Muslim parents, I understood his fears as if they had been my own, because at some point, they had been.

I begin *For the Love of God* with Shahpour's musings to showcase not only what it means to simultaneously exist in ways that the world finds impossible, but to exist beyond those confines and to find meaning for yourself in other ways, forms, and realms. Shahpour's reflection invites us to grapple seriously with trans fears, with dreamscapes, with the supernatural, with ancestral guidance, with the form and function of prayer, with the power of God, and how all of this engages with a body read as queer, trans, Iranian American, and Muslim in the United States today.

When he's sharing about his grandmother, his face lights up. He smiles. He feels warmer, connected to a divine energy that is radiating through him. I see the love they have for each other as he talks. And yet still, even as he seems more smiley now, I sense his anxiety and the uncertainty that

3

overtakes him as he questions how she sees his face, his body. Does she see his body in his newly transitioning form? Does she see his transness the way he does? Will she ever?

His discomfort is all we have for now. Yet, I can tell he is determined to find out, determined to grow through this obstacle in their relationship. Through prayers, through dream visits, through small trinkets she had left behind, Shahpour was committed to preserving their connection. In spite of an entire world loudly declaring that many aspects of his body, his identities, cannot exist nor coexist, he not only does, but is able to find spiritual connection and meaning beyond that. In this moment, he was not even refusing these limitations, he was simply beyond them. His spiritual endeavors gave him the room to explore and cultivate what he cherished over identity fixtures and their accompanying discursive debates – the love and connection he shared with his grandmother. In offering primacy to this relationship, Shahpour prioritizes his own agency, embodying the love between grandchild and grandparent, between youth and elder, between the living and the deceased; and that is a radical intervention.

And so, I begin this work with Shahpour's narrative to speak to the resilience, the potential of what is possible through the realm of the supernatural, the nonmaterial, the spiritual. I believe in starting from where we are, who we are, what our lived conditions and realities are, as a way of understanding how these circumstances shape our experiences with God.

Why God? The Possibilities Beyond

Trained primarily in the fields of critical race and gender studies, I have spent years exploring how the figure of the Muslim is racialized, gendered, classed, and sexualized in the modern American political landscape. I entered this academic project seeking to unearth theoretical forms which could help me understand why the world enacts so much violence on my body, and bodies similar to mine – gender non-conforming, queer, trans, Iranian American, and Muslim. I have spent

my life pondering these elementary, yet existential, questions: Why do people hate us? Why do they attack us? Why do they think we're all mad, terrorists waiting to violently kill women, children, and queers? Why is it so easy to forget we are human?

I read every academic text I could get my hands on that engaged questions of Muslim identity through a critical race lens, texts which championed the dismantling of white supremacist racial formations which had for so long targeted Muslim life.[1] Though as a gender studies scholar, I found that much of this scholarship which centered racial and/or anticolonial politics ignored or undervalued the palpable dimension of gender. I turned to scholarship which addressed race and gender simultaneously, surveying the field of critical Muslim women's studies scholarship.[2] Even as I

---

[1]Frantz Fanon, *A Dying Colonialism*, [1st Evergreen ed.] (New York: Grove Press, 1967); Mahmood Mamdani, *Good Muslim, Bad Muslim: America, the Cold War, and the Roots of Terror* (Pasig City, Philippines: Anvil, 2005); Deepa Kumar, "Islamophobia and Empire: An Intermestic Approach to the Study of Anti-Muslim Racism," in *What Is Islamophobia?* (Pluto Press, 2017), https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt1rfsndp.9; Junaid Rana, *Terrifying Muslims: Race and Labor in the South Asian Diaspora* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011); Leti Volpp, "Passports in the Time of Trump," *Symploke* 25, no. 1–2 (2017): 155–74, https://doi.org/10.5250/symploke.25.1-2.0155; Kumarini Silva, "Expulsion and What Is Not: Defining Worthiness of American Citizenship," in *Brown Threat* (University of Minnesota Press, 2016), https://doi.org/10.5749/j.ctt1g0b7zx.6; Khaled A. Beydoun, "War on Terror, War on Muslims," in *American Islamophobia* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2019), 92–124, https://doi.org/10.1525/9780520970007-006; Saher Selod, "Moving from South Asian and Arab Identities to a Muslim Identity," in *Forever Suspect* (Ithaca, NY: Rutgers University Press, 2019), 30–48, https://doi.org/10.36019/9780813588377-002; David Tyrer, *The Politics of Islamophobia: Race, Power and Fantasy* (London: Pluto Press, 2013); Arun Kundnani, *The Muslims Are Coming!: Islamophobia, Extremism, and the Domestic War on Terror* (London ; Verso, 2014); Hamid Dabashi, *Brown Skin, White Masks* (London: Pluto, 2011).

[2] Rabab Abdulhadi, Evelyn Alsultany, and Nadine Christine Naber, *Arab & Arab American Feminisms: Gender, Violence, & Belonging*, 1st ed (Syracuse, N.Y: Syracuse University Press, 2011); Sherene Razack, *Casting out: The Eviction of Muslims from Western Law and Politics* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007); Amaney A. Jamal, "Trump(Ing) on Muslim Women: The Gendered Side of Islamophobia," *Journal of Middle East Women's Studies* 13, no. 3 (2017): 472–75, https://doi.org/10.1215/15525864-4179144; Banu Gökarıksel, "The Body Politics of Trump's 'Muslim Ban,'" *Journal of Middle East Women's Studies* 13, no. 3 (2017): 469–71, https://doi.org/10.1215/15525864-4179133; Lara Deeb, *An Enchanted Modern: Gender and Public Piety in Shi'i Lebanon*, Princeton Studies in Muslim Politics (Princeton: University Press, 2006); Sunaina Maira, *Missing: Youth, Citizenship, and Empire after 9/11* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009); Amaney A. Jamal and Nadine Christine Naber, *Race and Arab Americans before and after 9/11: From Invisible Citizens to Visible Subjects*, 1st ed., Arab American Writing (Syracuse, N.Y: Syracuse University Press, 2008); Mervat F Hatem, "The Political and Cultural Representations of Arabs, Arab Americans, and Arab American Feminisms after September 11, 2001," in *Arab and Arab American Feminisms* (Syracuse University Press, 2011); Haideh Moghissi, *Feminism and Islamic Fundamentalism: The Limits of Postmodern Analysis* (London; Zed Books, 1999); Lila Abu-Lughod, *Do Muslim Women Need Saving?* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2013); Leila Ahmed, *Women and Gender in Islam: Historical Roots of a Modern Debate / Leila Ahmed* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992); Leti Volpp, "Disappearing Acts: On Gendered Violence, Pathological Cultures, and Civil Society" 121, no. 5 (2006): 1631–38, https://doi.org/10.1632/S003081290009996X; Leti Volpp, "Protecting the Nation from 'Honor Killings': The Construction of a Problem," 2019; Arzoo Osanloo, "On Not Saving the Muslim Women (and Men)," *Journal of Middle East Women's Studies* 13, no. 3 (2017): 479–82, https://doi.org/10.1215/15525864-4179166; Hanadi Al-Samman, "Invading Muslim Bodies in the Era of Trump," *Journal of Middle East Women's Studies* 13, no. 3 (2017): 483–85,

had expanded my analytic, I noticed there was still a lack of attention to sexuality and/or queerness

in these texts. I did my best to locate scholarship which addressed the critical study of race, gender,

and (queer) sexuality in a Muslim context.[3]

https://doi.org/10.1215/15525864-4179177; Mohja Kahf and Banah Ghadbian, "Hypervisibility and Middle Eastern Women's Studies," *Journal of Middle East Women's Studies* 13, no. 3 (2017): 476–78, https://doi.org/10.1215/15525864-4179155; Sara Smith, "Gendered and Embodied Geopolitics of Borders, Marginalization, and Contingent Solidarity," *Journal of Middle East Women's Studies* 13, no. 3 (2017): 350–53, https://doi.org/10.1215/15525864-4178990; Fatima El-Tayeb, *European Others: Queering Ethnicity in Postnational Europe* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), https://doi.org/10.5749/j.ctttbbx; Peter Baehr and Daniel Gordon, "From the Headscarf to the Burqa: The Role of Social Theorists in Shaping Laws against the Veil," *Economy and Society* 42, no. 2 (2013): 249–80, https://doi.org/10.1080/03085147.2012.718620; Ulrike Spohn, "Sisters in Disagreement: The Dispute Among French Feminists About the 'Burqa Ban' and the Causes of Their Disunity," *Journal of Human Rights* 12, no. 2 (2013): 145–64, https://doi.org/10.1080/14754835.2013.784661; Christine Delphy, *Separate and Dominate: Feminism and Racism after the War on Terror* (London: Verso, 2015); Karina Horsti, "Digital Islamophobia: The Swedish Woman as a Figure of Pure and Dangerous Whiteness," *New Media & Society* 19, no. 9 (2017): 1440–57, https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444816642169; Nisha Kapoor, *Deport, Deprive, Extradite: 21st Century State Extremism* (La Vergne: Verso, 2018); Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad, *Muslim Women in America: The Challenge of Islamic Identity Today* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006); Alicia Izharuddin, "'Free Hair': Narratives of Unveiling and the Reconstruction of Self," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 44, no. 1 (2018): 155–76, https://doi.org/10.1086/698281; Sunera Thobani, "The Visuality of Terror: Gender, Sex and Desire in War," *Social Identities* 25, no. 4 (2019): 523–41, https://doi.org/10.1080/13504630.2018.1514166; Laura Briggs, "Making Race, Making Sex: Perspectives on Torture," *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 17, no. 1 (2015): 20–39, https://doi.org/10.1080/14616742.2013.855089; Kandida Purnell, "Body Politics and Boundary Work: Nobodies on Hunger Strike at Guantánamo (2013–2015)," *Alternatives: Global, Local, Political* 39, no. 4 (2014): 271–86, https://doi.org/10.1177/0304375415575208; Louis A. Cainkar, *Homeland Insecurity: The Arab American and Muslim American Experience After 9/11* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2009), https://doi.org/10.7758/9781610447683; Anny P. Bakalian and Mehdi Bozorgmehr, eds., *Backlash 9/11: Middle Eastern and Muslim Americans Respond* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009).

[3] Melanie Richter-Montpetit, "Empire, Desire and Violence: A Queer Transnational Feminist Reading of the Prisoner 'Abuse' in Abu Ghraib and the Question of 'Gender Equality,'" *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 9, no. 1 (2007): 38–59, https://doi.org/10.1080/14616740601066366; Jasbir K. Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times / Jasbir K. Puar*, Next Wave (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007); Jasbir K. Puar and Amit S. Rai, "Monster, Terrorist, Fag: The War on Terrorism and the Production of Docile Patriots," *Social Text* 20, no. 3 (2002): 117–48, https://doi.org/10.1215/01642472-20-3_72-117; Alex Adams, "Graner's Laugh: The Conceptual Architecture of a Guantanamo Rape Joke," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 44, no. 1 (2018): 107–30, https://doi.org/10.1086/698279; Maryam Khan, "LBTQ Muslim Women in Intersectionality: Examining the Resistance Strategies" (York University, 2018), https://yorkspace.library.yorku.ca/xmlui/handle/10315/35788; Joseph Massad, "Re-Orienting Desire: The Gay International and the Arab World," *Public Culture* 14, no. 2 (2002): 361–86, https://doi.org/10.1215/08992363-14-2-361; Asifa Siraj, "British Pakistani Lesbians Existing within the Confines of the Closet," *Culture, Health & Sexuality* 20, no. 1 (2018): 28–39, https://doi.org/10.1080/13691058.2017.1323349; Momin Rahman, "Queer as Intersectionality: Theorizing Gay Muslim Identities," *Sociology (Oxford)* 44, no. 5 (2010): 944–61, https://doi.org/10.1177/0038038510375733; P. Tamimi Arab, "Solidarity, Selective Indignation, and Queer Muslims: In Conversation with Dino Suhonic," 2017; Judith Butler, "Sexual Politics, Torture, and Secular Time," *The British Journal of Sociology* 59, no. 1 (2008): 1–23, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-4446.2007.00176.x; Huda Jadallah, "Reflections of a Genderqueer Palestinian American Lesbian Mother," in *Arab and Arab American Feminisms* (Syracuse University Press, 2011); Shanon Shah, "Constructing an Alternative Pedagogy of Islam: The Experiences of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Muslims," *Journal of Beliefs and Values* 37, no. 3 (2016): 308–19, https://doi.org/10.1080/13617672.2016.1212179; Scott Alan Kugle, *Homosexuality in Islam: Critical Reflection on Gay, Lesbian, and Transgender Muslims* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2010); M. Alipour, "Islamic Shari'a Law, Neotraditionalist Muslim Scholars and Transgender Sex-Reassignment Surgery: A Case Study of Ayatollah Khomeini's and Sheikh al-Tantawi's Fatwas," *The International Journal of Transgenderism* 18, no. 1 (2017): 91–103, https://doi.org/10.1080/15532739.2016.1250239; Gabeba Baderoon, "'I Compose Myself': Lesbian Muslim

However, the more time I spent with these texts, the more I realized almost all academic attention to the 'Muslim experience' in this field was focused solely on questions of race, gender, (and at times sexuality), devoid of attention to the religious or spiritual. How could it be that studies on Muslims were not paying any attention to the spiritual, the mystical, the forces of religion which shaped Muslim life? Were we not missing an important dimension to the lives we sought to understand, to explain? As instructive and insightful as these critical interventions were for my conceptualizations of Muslim life in the U.S., I found myself longing for more. What about the religious dimension? What about the mystical?

At a conference on *Feminist Approaches to Understanding Anti-Muslim Racism* held at UCLA in December of 2019, I had the opportunity to engage with top scholars in the field on some of these very questions. During a break, a senior scholar kindly asked me what I was researching, to which I shared exactly what my project is – the exploration of how queer and trans Iranian Americans from the Los Angeles diaspora relate to secularity/Islam, to God, and to spirituality. As I spoke of my fascination with spiritual rituals, beliefs, and practices, particularly how queer and trans Muslims engage with(in) these debates, she seemed impressed. "That's interesting, but yeah, we definitely don't do that!" Her reply captures the difficulties I have repeatedly come up against in my epistemic, theoretical, and methodological terrain. Grateful as I was for her time and guidance, I remember feeling a bit despondent at her comment. Is there room for the spiritual when we critically analyze Muslim life? Is there room for the spiritual when we critically analyze queer and trans Muslim life?

Autobiographies and the Craft of Self-Writing in South Africa," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 83, no. 4 (2015): 897–915, https://doi.org/10.1093/jaarel/lfv075; Nadine Naber et al., "On Palestinian Studies and Queer Theory," *Journal of Palestine Studies* 47, no. 3 (May 1, 2018): 62–71, https://doi.org/10.1525/jps.2018.47.3.62; Ghadir Shafie, "Pinkwashing: Israel's International Strategy and Internal Agenda," *Kohl: A Journal for Body and Gender Research* 1, no. 1 (2015): 82–86, https://doi.org/10.36583/kohl/1-1-7; Katarina Jungar and Salla Peltonen, "'Saving Muslim Queer Women from Muslim Hetero-Patriarchy'. Savior Narratives in LGBTI Youth Work," *Norma: International Journal for Masculinity Studies* 10, no. 2 (2015): 136–49, https://doi.org/10.1080/18902138.2015.1050862.

My life experience sustained my belief that it was possible, but I had yet to see it emerge in academic form.

Detecting this disciplinary indifference to religion, I broadened my focus even further to include Muslim scholarship which addressed the religious, the faith, the devotion of Muslim life.[4] I looked particularly for scholarship which paid attention to the Shi'i dimension of Iranian Muslim life, both nationally and in the diaspora as a consequence of the 1979 Revolution.[5] I finally found the attention to the religious and the power of the religious to evoke social change, but found myself limited by the lack of explicit attention to not only race and gender, but the mystical, spiritual, the potential of the divine beyond formal normative religious tradition.

I had a massive challenge before me – to make these fields speak to one another in ways they likely never have, nor have ever needed to entertain. It was no easy feat to bridge these scholarly worlds, to merge critiques of secularism and anti-Muslim racism within a trans Iranian context or to appreciate the roots of Islamic mysticism apparent in a queer Iranian love story. Every single body and story I wish to recollect required a detailed discursive dive into academic terrain

---

[4] Fazlur Rahman, *Islam and Modernity: Transformation of an Intellectual Tradition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982); Sayyid Qutb, *Milestones*, Rev. ed. (Cedar Rapids, Iowa: Unity, 1981); Shahab Ahmed, *What Is Islam?: The Importance of Being Islamic* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016); John L. Esposito, "Introduction: Muslims in America or American Muslims?," in *Muslims on the Americanization Path?* (Cary: Oxford University Press, Incorporated, 2000); Aziz al-Azmeh, *Islam and Modernities* (London: Verso, 1993); Jamal al-Din al-Afghani, *The Truth about the Neichari Sect and an Explanation of the Necharis. Hakikat-i Mazhab-i Nichiri va Bayan-i Hal-i Nichiriyan.* (Hyderabad, India, 1881); Seyyed Vali Reza Nasr, *The Shia Revival: How Conflicts within Islam Will Shape the Future*, [Paperback ed.]. (New York: W.W. Norton, 2007); Fouad Ajami, *Vanished Imam: Musa al Sadr and the Shia of Lebanon*, 1987; Reza Aslan, *No God but God: The Origins, Evolution, and Future of Islam*, Updated ed. (New York: Random House, 2011); Helena Cobban, "The Growth of Shi'i Power in Lebanon and Its Implications for the Future," *Shiism and Social Protest*, 1986, 137–55; Juan Ricardo Cole and Nikki R. Keddie, eds., *Shi'ism and Social Protest* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986); Yitzhak Nakash, *The Shi'Is of Iraq* (Princeton: University Press, 1995); Augustus R. Norton, *Hezbollah: A Short History*, Princeton Studies in Muslim Politics (Princeton: University Press, 2007).

[5] Hamid Dabashi, *Theology of Discontent: The Ideological Foundations of the Islamic Revolution in Iran* (New York: University Press, 1993); Hamid Dabashi, *Shi'ism: A Religion of Protest*, 2011; Jalal Al-e Ahmad, *Gharbzadegi (Weststruckness)*, trans. John Green and Ahmad Alizadeh (Lexington, KY: Mazdâ Publishers, 1982); Ali Shariati, *Marxism and Other Western Fallacies: An Islamic Critique*, trans. R. Campbell (Berkeley: Mizan Press, 1980); Moojan Momen, *An Introduction to Shi'i Islam: The History and Doctrines of Twelver Shi'ism* (Yale University Press, 1987); Kamran Scot Aghaie, *The Martyrs of Karbala: Shi'i Symbols and Rituals in Modern Iran*, 1st ed. (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2004); Abbas Amanat, *Apocalyptic Islam and Iranian Shi'ism*, 2009; Ruhollah Khomeini, "Islamic Government: Governance of the Jurist (Velayat-e Faqeeh)," trans. Hamid Algar, 1979.

which may have, until now, never been interwoven in such a way. As challenging as the project seemed, I realized it would be impossible to grasp the complexity of my community's everyday experiences without doing precisely that. So, I immersed myself in many academic subfields: Iranian diaspora/nationalism studies, secularity/secularization studies, critical anti-Muslim race/gender studies, critical trans studies, queer/trans Muslim and/or Iranian studies, classical Muslim studies, as well as scholarship on spirituality/Islamic mysticism. Interweaving fields considered foreign to one another, *For the Love of God* starts within this methodological query in order to highlight the infrastructural impossibility of our lives, and the persistence which fostered an analytical approach centering that very impossibility.

So why God? After being formally trained as an academic in the fields of critical race and gender studies, how can it be that the spiritual became the focal point of my project? Why this attention to the immaterial, the 'irrational,' the 'unreal', as many call it? To put it simply, because this is where the magic happens.

The things we cannot explain, the mystical forces which bring us miracles, sudden 'aha' moments, are so far beyond our control, beyond our realms of analysis, beyond our very comprehension – why a homophobic mother suddenly starts to love her queer child one Tuesday morning, why a trans person finally discovers the power of radical self-love for their body after a powerful dream, why snowflakes begin to fall the minute you hit 'send' on a life-changing email. There are ways we rationalize, theorize, and make sense of everything without attention to the spiritual, or even, by theorizing and intellectualizing the spiritual. However, I believe the only way to interpret the value, the significance, the meaning these moments hold is to honor their spiritual power and respect their transcendental quality – an ethic I hope my work reflects.

I have always been curious about God, how other people relate to God, how and why they carve out their religious practices as they do, what they call themselves, who they allow and do not

allow in their groups, what rituals they honor, what practices are off limits, and on and on. These questions have circled in my mind since childhood, an endless fascination with something greater, something more powerful, something so far beyond human comprehension.

I have come to learn that as a scholar, it is of primary importance to me to honor the spiritual dimension, alongside and through other dimensions of race, class, gender, sexuality, religion, nationality, ability, and age. Not just to attach it to the list of identity axes I analyze, but to actually make space for it, allow it to guide the terrain of understanding, give it the attention and emphasis that those who live it do. After all, if I truly respect the agency of those I wish to understand and learn from, I must allow their conceptualizations and ideas the power to guide my way of describing them.

The realm of spirituality offers us a massive opening, a site of transformation, of endless potential, of exploration, of freedom, of a peace and solace immeasurable, a security, a safety that we cannot explain nor quantify. That lack of ability to explain this phenomena is precisely why I have made it the centerpiece of my work. This is an intellectual and emotional fusion between both my spiritual experience and academic expertise – how do you measure something that is beyond our very tools of measurement, beyond our schema of understanding value? Is it even possible to quantify or assess the value of God in an academic form? Dare we even try?

In *For the Love of God* I make my humble attempt. By restructuring and reorienting my entire methodological approach to scholarship, to academia, to analysis, this piece is dedicated to the pursuit of academic spiritual depth. Possibly foolish, possibly impossible, I accept the work as it emerged and all of its limitations and insufficiencies. I hope that if nothing else, it gives us cause to entertain the spiritual, the mystical, the sacred, the otherworldly as sites of radical transformation, sites that have been left unexplored for far too long in the academic world.

Lived Experience: Our Stories, Our Selves

I begin with the body, the everyday, the mundane, the real. In making sense of social life, there is nothing more substantive or instructive than paying attention to the everyday. Following the guidance of radical activists and scholars who draw from the everyday as a way to theorize power dynamics, I too utilize daily experience as the most useful and honest way to make sense of our social world.[6]

For me, how the cashier smirks at you before handing you a receipt, how the businesswoman grudgingly holds the elevator open for you, how a neighbor smiles and gently waves hello, all are potent sites of making sense of our lives as political experiences. The personal is utterly political and in this work, dictates how I make sense of the many relationships we engage in, with institutional forces, with one another, with ourselves. As Cherríe Moraga wrote in her seminal work, "a theory in the flesh means one where the physical realities of our lives — our skin color, the land or concrete we grew up on, our sexual longings — all fuse to create a politic born out of necessity. Here, we attempt to bridge the contradictions in our experience."[7] Drawing from Moraga, I too theorize outward from lived experience, drawing lessons, insights, and ideas from both how I have

---

[6] Zareena Grewal, *Islam Is a Foreign Country: American Muslims and the Global Crisis of Authority* (New York: NYU Press, 2013); Kate Harding, "How Do You Fuck a Fat Woman?," in *Yes Means Yes: Visions of Female Sexual Power and a World Without Rape*, ed. Jaclyn Friedman and Jessica Valenti (Seal Press, 2008); Leslie Feinberg, *Trans Liberation: Beyond Pink or Blue* (Boston, Mass: Beacon Press, 1998); "The Combahee River Collective Statement," April 1977, https://www.blackpast.org/african-american-history/combahee-river-collective-statement-1977/; Audre Geraldine Lorde, *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (Trumansburg, NY: Crossing Press, 1984), http://www.aspresolver.com/aspresolver.asp?BLTC;S8108;parent; Minoo Moallem, *Between Warrior Brother and Veiled Sister: Islamic Fundamentalism and the Politics of Patriarchy in Iran* (Berkeley, Calif: University of California Press, 2005); Che Gossett and Juliana Huxtable, "Existing in the World: Blackness at the Edge of Trans Visibility," in *Trap Door: Trans Cultural Production and the Politics of Visibility*, ed. Tourmaline, Eric A. Stanley, and Johanna Burton (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2017), 39–55; Julia Serano, *Whipping Girl: A Transsexual Woman on Sexism and the Scapegoating of Femininity* (Emeryville, CA: Seal Press, 2007); Sima Shakhsari, "From Homoerotics of Exile to Homopolitics of Diaspora: Cyberspace, the War on Terror, and the Hypervisible Iranian Queer," *Journal of Middle East Women's Studies* 8, no. 3 (2012): 14–40, https://doi.org/10.2979/jmiddeastwomstud.8.3.14.

[7] Cherríe Moraga, *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*, ed. Gloria Anzaldúa and Toni Cade Bambara, First edition (Watertown, Mass: Persephone Press, 1981).

come to navigate this world and how my fellow community members have come to navigate this world.

As a nonbinary, Iranian American, trans, Muslim queer, born and raised in Southern California, I am a member of the very community I spent years studying, researching, and engaging with. I have many experiences that parallel those of the individuals I interviewed, many stories and memories that speak to these lines of inquiry, as well as many that vary significantly. Able to speak to a rare and unique lived experience myself, I believe my personal anecdotes magnify certain aspects of the work, offering a transparent reflection on parallels, differences, and honest truths about what it means to be a queer, trans, Iranian American Muslim in Los Angeles.

(Re)Write: Making Sense of Methodologies

A piece that centers the lives of individuals with so many axes – Iranianness, Americanness, queerness, transness, secularity, Muslimness, among many others – is first and foremost a battle of methodological structure. I have sat with this question for years, written and rewritten this entire work countless times because the ultimate question remains unanswered and unanswerable: how do you write a piece which adequately respects and acknowledges all dimensions of an individual's identity without necessarily privileging one more than another? How do you do this given the limitations of language, of time and space, of the ever-present truth that these people grow, shift, adapt, and change even as you write them into the concrete of our trade, Times New Roman font?

As Najmabadi shares in the introduction to *Women with Mustaches and Men Without Beards: Gender and Sexual Anxieties of Iranian Modernity*, she set out to analyze the function of gender in the formation of Iranian modernity. Shortly thereafter, she realized she was conceptualizing gender in a purely binary man/woman form that she soon determined "turned out to be a very modern imperative [which] overlooked the erasures that made this binarity of gender possible in the first

place."[8] Similar to Najmabadi's predicament, where she "ended up reconceptualizing and rewriting the entire manuscript," I too have had to work and rework the structure of a methodological paradigm which makes room for the multiple valences of the bodies I am researching.[9] I started over not because I operated from the assumptive operative force of a binary gender system, but because I continually found it impossible to adequately categorize people with so many social axes within the epistemic, theoretical, and ontological categories as they currently exist.

Grappling with similar queries, Ido Katri explores the fluctuations, movement, and incoherence of identity in "Trans-Arab-Jew: A Look beyond the Boundaries of In-Between Identities." His work ventures into questions of trans identity formation and the significant conceptual openings made possible by transitory states. Drawing from Gozlan's work, he writes "the in-between might offer us an affective intervention if we consider it as a transitional space where there exists a 'capacity to accept reality as an always shifting compromise formulation, never absolute, always in question.'"[10]

These questions have perplexed academics for decades, yet my intervention here lies primarily in a methodological concern, in how to structure something with so many axes, so many valences. Jasbir Puar outlines her own critique against some of these very limitations by illustrating the inability of intersectionality theory to fully grasp the ways time and space complicate human life. In the conclusion of *Terrorist Assemblages*, she argues,

> As opposed to an intersectional model of identity, which presumes that components - race, class, gender, sexuality, nation, age, religion - are separable analytics and can thus be disassembled, an assemblage is more attuned to interwoven forces that merge and dissipate time, space, and body against linearity, coherency, and permanency. Intersectionality demands the knowing, naming, and thus stabilizing of identity across space and time, relying

---

[8] Afsaneh Najmabadi, *Women with Mustaches and Men without Beards: Gender and Sexual Anxieties of Iranian Modernity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 3.

[9] Najmabadi, 3.

[10] Ido Katri, "Trans-Arab-Jew: A Look beyond the Boundaries of In-Between Identities," *Transgender Studies Quarterly* 6, no. 3 (2019): 348, https://doi.org/10.1215/23289252-7549442.

on the logic of equivalence and analogy between various axes of identity and generating narratives of progress that deny the fictive and performative aspects of identification: you become an identity, yes, but also timelessness works to consolidate the fiction of a seamless stable identity in every space.[11]

Similar to Puar here, I suggest that in order to grasp the complex realities of shifting bodies, particularly trans bodies which shift through various categories, our analytical attention must be able to make room for growth, for a change in identity, or for strategic concealment of select portions of identity, all of which I outline below. This is not to suggest however, that only trans bodies grow, as many individuals in my research grew and shifted in ways that would leave them uncategorizable if using stark binary categories of analysis.

For instance, I spent hours interviewing a nonbinary trans Iranian American, Mina, who identified as a Muslim as a young person, then took on the title of 'atheist' for a while as they grew into adulthood. In college, they felt more comfortable with calling themself 'culturally Muslim' and yet even now, they do not refer to themself as Muslim, but still do in select moments where they feel the need to deploy their cultural background to undermine liberal whiteness. How do we put that person in a category of either 'secular' or 'Muslim'? It became obvious to me fairly quickly not to waste my time by forcing the multiple dimensions of human life into binaries that cannot nor do not encapsulate the full richness of these lived experiences.

In fact, in speaking with Mina, they utilized a nonbinary analytic to conceptualize their relationship to religion. Drawing directly from their expansive gender consciousness and growth, they were able to reformulate their understanding of religion in a way that makes sense for them – an autonomous, powerful, and necessary blow to binary form. They said,

> So, for me being nonbinary gender [and] queer in my sexual orientation, those both feel very outside of binaries to me. I think I also wanted to move out of this atheist/super religious binary too, and I think I've moved into a place where I'm like, is there a possibility that something like God exists? Sure. Are we ever going to know beyond a reasonable doubt that something like God exists? Not in my lifetime. And I'm fine with not knowing the answer to

---

[11] Puar, Jasbir K., *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times* (Duke University Press, 2007), 212.

that. ...I think I've kind of moved it towards this more, almost agnostic, kind of open to whatever, but not feeling like I need to have a sense of what that is for myself.

Using personal experience with the expansiveness of gender and sexuality, Mina was able to describe their relationship to God in such terms: as something that is unknown to them, uncertain, indeterminable, yet still something they are willing to acknowledge and rest in the uncertainty with. This ease of sitting in a spot of tension, of a conceptual uncertainty, perfectly encapsulates the spirit of a nonbinary analytic. As I will describe below, this nonbinary analytic is in fact, the only theoretical paradigm that allows me to make sense of multidimensionality in a way that honors all facets of identity, the shifts and growths included.

As I continued interviewing Mina, I asked them the cardinal question: do you believe in God? To which they replied, "No. But I'm open to the possibility that God could exist." Again, this ability to rest in ambiguity, to feel safe enough to be honest about one's beliefs and rest in the hesitation of another possibility, the very language of "I am open to the possibility," demonstrates the ethos of a nonbinary analytic.

Linguistic Limitations: A Creative Visual Approach to Analysis

Engaging with the spiritual in my work, I would be seriously remiss to ignore alternative ways of knowing as I establish this project. To honor and respect other ways of demonstrating and absorbing knowledge, I have come to value the efficacy of visuals, creative writing, poetry, among other forms of articulation in further solidifying an argument. In fact, it has been through years of graduate level training and doctoral research that I have come to understand the limits of academic language, and the consequential value of visuals, imagery, and creative writing as potent communicative sites.

I have found myself reading dense critical gender theory time and time again, seeking a visual, a drawing, a mapping of the theoretical interventions proposed. I found myself reading Puar

asking, 'How do you draw this assemblage you describe? What would it look like? What would happen if we asked five different people to draw it? What other theoretical interventions are possible when we move from theory to imagery? Can we appreciate the engagement between the two as we continue to theorize and create?'

I am no professional artist, but I have come to the realization that imagery will help me make my arguments clearer in ways that no wordsmithing could do. Given this humbling epiphany for an academic, I have interwoven small drawings, hand-drawn by myself, throughout the piece. As a form of honoring alternative forms of knowing, I hope these images bring clarity, depth, and insight where my words lack.

Conducting Research: Switching Sexes, Switching Names

I set out to study the relationship Iranian Americans in the Los Angeles diaspora have with Islam, with secularity, with God, with the religious and spiritual world, and immediately realized my own underlying agenda – I cared much less about cisgender and heterosexual Iranian Americans in diaspora; instead, I was fascinated with specifically how queer and trans Iranian Americans relate to God. Do they believe in a higher power? How do they talk with that higher power or God? What do they think God thinks of them? Do they care? What do they call their God(s)? How often do they communicate, if they do, and what does it look like? Do they ever receive miraculous signs from God? Has their spiritual or religious exploration helped them heal from racial, sexual, gender, or even religious violence? Do they share these epiphanies with anyone? Do they even want to?

Arguably the most powerful undercurrent present in my research was the tension produced by the anti-Islamic sentiment of the Iranian American diaspora community. By this, I mean specifically the ways in which Iranian Americans themselves, championed largely by the first-generation, subscribe to and proliferate intensely anti-Muslim ideas and beliefs to shame and shun

any association with Islam. A phenomenon Iranians both in the diaspora and the nation encounter on a regular basis, this palpable vitriolic hatred for Islam shapes much of Iranian American relationship to religion. Reza Gholami, in the only scholarship to date which has truly grappled with this occurrence, calls this anti-Muslim sentiment, *non-Islamiosity*, a project which seeks to disarticulate the 'Islamic' from the 'Iranian.'[12] As I will demonstrate over the course of this project, this anti-Islamic sentiment that the Iranian diaspora community (re)creates, is in fact a powerful racialized, gendered, and sexualized trauma response to decades of political violence.

I thought, planned, and prepared to conduct my fieldwork: a compilation of online surveys, ethnographic research at Iranian American events and important cultural sites across the Southern California region, formal at length interviews with 18 individuals, and dozens of informal interviews over the years. I knew that as interested as I was in jumping to specifically how queer and trans people engage with their God, the primary conceptual content I would be engaging with and sorting through would be the non-Islamiosity of the parent generation and how much that had affected the second-generations' understandings of the religious/spiritual realm. As I prepared to conduct my research, I ruminated repeatedly over the questions which have guided me for decades: Why do our parents hate Islam so much? What does that hatred teach us children? How is our relationship with God, or Islam, compromised or shaped by these feelings? And of course, underneath it all, is it even possible to connect with God in light of these politically charged associations with religion? If so, what does it look like?

Speaking casually with Farhad, a fellow gender non-conforming trans Iranian American Muslim, I listened as he told me how he cannot pray in front of his parents. He said he performs formal Muslim prayers, but that he makes sure not to pray in their presence. "I can't do that in front

---

[12] Reza Gholami, *Secularism and Identity: Non-Islamiosity in the Iranian Diaspora*, 1st ed., Studies in Migration and Diaspora (Farnham: Taylor & Francis, 2015), https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315608020.

of them. They get all mad. You know how it is!" Alluding to the rampant non-Islamiosity he experiences in his home, a common occurrence in the broader Iranian American diaspora, Farhad's self-policing of spiritual/religious experience offers an example of the kinds of challenges second-generation Iranian Americans face when engaging with Muslim religiosity. Indicative of a greater current which sweeps through the diasporic population, the outright hostility towards Islam and its practices, beliefs, and symbolism, proved to be an important battleground for discourses of intergenerational cultural transmission. Nonetheless, I set out to unearth the ideas which upheld these disputes and how queer and trans Iranian Americans of the second-generation found spiritual connection.

As a professional researcher, I refined and prepared all that I could before beginning the process of formally conducting research. What I soon realized was that no scholar, advisor, theory, nor citation could help me with one fundamental aspect of the research process – how does one conduct research as a trans person undergoing transition? I had so many fears before going into my ethnographic work, wondering who would prepare me for the transphobia I would undoubtedly experience. I stayed up at night debating what to do, whether or not people would let me interview them, or if they would get up and leave once they saw me. I feared how Iranian parents and elders would see me or treat me at events, if they would say anything or just leave me to disintegrate from the disgust radiating out from their eyes. After all, it was a familiar feeling. As a visibly gender non-conforming person for most of my adult life, I knew intimately how transphobia operated. Now that I was actually transitioning, there were only going to be more stares, looks, and mumbled comments.

It was certainly going to be a challenge for me, both conceptually and emotionally, to conduct the research while in transition, as it proved to be. But I did it, and I could not have imagined it any other way. It also proved to be another invitation to heighten and expand my analysis. Through repelling stares, confused looks, and unwelcome tones (primarily at events with

middle-age adults), I was able to draw out many new theoretical frames for conceptualizing race, gender, sexuality, and religious identity in an Iranian American context, many of which made it into this work.

I wish to be transparent about my trans experience throughout the research process and how it coincided with factors of racial, religious, and sexual identity in order to demonstrate several points that undergird my entire project. Firstly, I do this to demonstrate that trans people (of color) can, and do, conduct academic research and they can do so while undergoing transition. I have read no other work that directly addresses this experience on the side of the researcher and am, mainly, pleased to be able to share this experience for forthcoming trans scholars.[13] If anything, I hope this brief anecdote serves to enhance the attention to trans scholarship, trans scholars' needs, and the unique interventions possible with trans experience.

Second, I share this to say I can be honest about my fears of experiencing transphobia and still conduct research. As mentioned earlier, the attention to the everyday is a guiding fiber weaved through my work. What purpose would it have to study the everyday life experiences of queer and trans Iranian Americans without being able to honor my own experiences as a part of the process? As a nonbinary trans scholar looking within my own Iranian American Muslim community, I knew how important it would be to be able to sit in that tension, the uncertainty, the not knowing what could happen, and yet making room for it all the same.

Thirdly, that even as I did experience transphobia at times in research venues, I was able to take them as moments of analytical potency. I was able to learn from them. I recovered and continued on, as we do, and I was able to uncover important analytical interventions because of the

---

[13] To my fellow aspiring trans academics, I hope, if nothing else, this work invites you to imagine yourself conducting research and following your lines of inquiry. I hope by sharing my experience, you feel more capable of venturing into the research process.

very forms of transphobia I experienced, better able to understand the ways in which Iranian

Americans erect identity boundaries along a particular race, gender, and sexuality optic.[14]

In addition to my own experiences with transition and body shifting while conducting

research, I spoke with multiple trans individuals who were similarly undergoing shifts, whether in

clothing and attire, names and pronouns, physical changes and/or surgical body modifications. I

have done my absolute best to respect all of their racial, gender, sexuality, and religious complexity

by choosing anonymous names which represent their ideological growth around all these various

axes, as well as pronouns and names that match the ways they identified themselves. Anonymizing

their names, stories, and experiences serves to further protect these individuals who so graciously

opened their hearts to me. I do not take their safety lightly and have done everything in my power to

protect their anonymity in this work.

When I ponder how to refer to these individuals, the common options come to mind:

subject, interviewee, agent, informant. I have even seen a scholar use the word 'teachers' to speak of

the ways she was educated by the people she interviewed.[15] I for one, have been thinking about this

very question since it became clear to me that I was going to conduct ethnographic research. What

will I call these people? What word encapsulates the way I understand our relationship, a non-

pathologizing form of connection between two equals? Two equals, where one ultimately gets the

final word? How many scholars before me have pondered these very questions and come up with

words that I still find insufficient?

---

[14] I do not wish to propose here that trans scholars have to sacrifice themselves or that we should turn all of the violence
we experience into sites of analysis, in trauma porn style. I wish to simply share my personal experience as a young
scholar who underwent gender transition while conducting my doctoral research and what I experienced as a result. I did
experience transphobia, ambiguity around my gender, but also at times, trans affirmation. This retelling is simply to share
what I was able to draw from those moments to better understand Iranian American identity posturing, and certainly not
to indicate that we must all put ourselves in danger as we conduct research.

[15] Khabeer, Su'ad Abdul, *Muslim Cool: Race, Religion, and Hip Hop in the United States* (New York: NYU Press, 2016), 2.

I realized what my main aversion was to these preexisting terms – they lack *the real*, the ability to capture the connection, the laughter, the warmth, the mutual grief, the emotional literacy we reverberate off of one another as we converse. What do I call someone who I spend time with, who I build this much connection with, someone who tells me of their most intimate fears? I call that person a friend.

Friend is absolutely the word to describe the individuals I spent my time with as I conducted my research and how I related to these individuals over the last several years. I have no doubt about the meaning, implication, or function of the word, and in fact, it communicates quite vividly the emotional connection I shared with these individuals. This too, as a point of operative rhetoric, shares that feeling of the real throughout the entirety of my work. By referring to them as friends, the reader absorbs my proximity to the individuals I spent time with.

Friend also conveys the tension, the imperfect, the miscommunications that emerge as a facet of relationship. It does not preclude inequalities, rough spots, and lingering doubts of being misunderstood. I choose this word to both highlight and honor the fluctuations of human relationships and to emphasize that I do not wish to paint a notion of friendship as perfect, easy, and without conflict. In fact, it is the very existence of said conflict, confusions, or misconnections which offers insight into new and varying worldviews. Friendship is not neat, linear, nor is it flawless, and that is precisely its beauty. It is messy, heartwarming, anxious, full of connection, and still yet, an uncertain timeless collection of moments shared.

I am implicated in my work, in my research, in my community. These individuals could very well be me and I am aware of that as I speak with them and hear their stories and as I take on the responsibility of sharing them with the rest of the world. I consider them my friends and they consider me one as well, something I cherish deeply.

Nonbinary Assemblages: A Theoretical Approach for Multidimensionality

Popularized in the last handful of years, the term nonbinary has come to mean a gender expression which falls outside of the classically understood gender binary, man or woman. Emerging as the predominant third gender umbrella term, nonbinary now encapsulates a vast array of genders and gender expressions: androgyny, genderqueer, agender, bigender, genderfluid, thirdgender, etc. Nonbinary rose to fame largely because a sizable portion of trans and gender non-conforming[16] individuals felt that their gender was not appropriately understood within the gender binary. This is not to suggest that all trans or gender variant people feel this way, as many trans people are comfortable identifying within the binary as trans women, women, trans men, or men. This is also not to suggest that a nonbinary gender identity is new and modern. In fact, there are countless examples of how many nonbinary gender forms have existed in various cultures across the globe historically.[17] However, this is to point out the recent popularity of the term nonbinary itself, and its incredibly effective analytical utility.

Nonbinary means, quite literally, to not be in a binary. As I see it, is not solely a gender optic. In fact, it can be, as I wish to introduce it, a purely theoretical apparatus which invites us to judiciously deconstruct the overreliance and obsession with binaries, whether they exist in the social/physical world or the theoretical/conceptual. As the backbone of much of Western

---

[16] The term gender non-conforming has risen in popularity as the way to describe someone who's gender expression or presentation does not match their assumed gender/sex at birth. I personally think a far more descriptive term would be gender binary non-conforming or binary non-conforming, which specifies that the individual is not conforming to the gender binary as opposed to not conforming to gender. Alas, I will be using gender non-conforming because of its familiarity.

[17] For references, see Ta'shia Ifalade Asanti, "Living with Dual Spirits: Spirituality, Sexuality and Healing in the African Diaspora," *Journal of Bisexuality* 10, no. 1–2 (April 9, 2010): 22–30, https://doi.org/10.1080/15299711003760600; Jennifer Denetdale, "Securing Navajo National Boundaries: War, Patriotism, Tradition, and the Diné Marriage Act of 2005," *Wicazo Sa Review* 24, no. 2 (2009): 131–48, https://doi.org/10.1353/wic.0.0034; Alfredo Mirandé, "The Muxes of Juchitan: A Preliminary Look at Transgender Identity and Acceptance," *California Western International Law Journal* 42, no. 2 (2012): 509-; Qwo-Li Driskill, "Doubleweaving Two-Spirit Critiques: Building Alliances between Native and Queer Studies," *GLQ* 16, no. 1–2 (2010): 69–92, https://doi.org/10.1215/10642684-2009-013; Najmabadi, *Women with Mustaches and Men without Beards*; Everett K. Rowson, "The Effeminates of Early Medina," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 111, no. 4 (1991): 671–93, https://doi.org/10.2307/603399.

knowledge production, present in both epistemes and ontologies, the binary feels omnipresent. However, the emergence of a nonbinary analytic can offer us new avenues into epistemes and ontologies we have yet to fully explore.

Understood as a practice, nonbinary suggests an exercise of disarranging, dismantling, and disarticulating the binary form altogether – an artful commitment to the deconstruction of binary limitations wherever they emerge. I find it useful to conceptualize this nonbinary optic as a practice, a process, an ongoing project, as I will show, that seeks to not only dismantle the binary form but also fundamentally, to create new forms of being altogether. It is the creative dimension of the nonbinary analytic that allows us to move from pure deconstruction, to creation, to other ways of being, of seeing, of conceptualizing.

First and foremost, a nonbinary optic is a dedication to what is *real*, to the lived realities of individuals whose lives circumvent, overflow, or do not fit into categories. Nonbinary as an optic allows a level of insight that respects the messy, the unexpected, the unfamiliar as not only a frustrating component of our analyses, but a valued, cherished, and necessary site of grasping the fullness of the lives we explore. It pays attention to those moments, those parts of us that do not fit on an application, the stories that do not fulfill the liberal narrative, the experiences that challenge what we thought we knew. That is nonbinary.

That is precisely why I begin with this nonbinary optic, to offer an analytical apparatus which is effective for looking into the lives that I am. What good is my research if it cannot grapple honestly with the lived realities of the people I am studying? What is the purpose of my work if I discard or erase the portions of their lives that do not 'fit' my presupposed categories of analysis? What do I need to do in order to honor their multidimensions, their fears, their growth over the course of their lives? Through this infrastructure of a nonbinary analytic, I hope to honor their multitudes, their truths, the richness of their lives.

In hopes of conceptualizing gender in new ways, as less of an identity and more of a consciousness, I draw from the work of Strassfeld and Henderson-Espinoza in "Introduction: Mapping Trans Studies in Religion." Outlining their work at the intersection of trans studies of religion, they share how understanding gender as an ever-evolving assemblage opens up new avenues for conceptualizing both transness and religion. They argue,

> Trans studies of religion is well positioned to move outside or beyond the gender abolitionist framework of cisgender feminist studies of religion when it imagines not that gender is something that will someday be overcome, but that gender is a form of assemblage within which new potentials for generativity and becoming can creatively emerge. Transgender in this sense is not a teleological development but a movement within an ever-unfolding arrangement of the material and immaterial realms, without a clear beginning or a knowable end, whose genesis and eschaton are just stories we can tell.[18]

It is precisely this conceptualization, "transgender as a movement within an ever-unfolding arrangement of the material and immaterial realms," that I situate my understanding of nonbinary as an analytic.

In the following, I will describe the various forms and facets of a nonbinary analytic: Between, Either/Or, From-To, Both, Neither/Nor, and Beyond. Each dimension is paired with one identity axis, used as an explanatory tool, to better illustrate the ways in which nonbinary identity offers us newfound conceptual possibilities. Through a brief explanation of these six dimensional facets of a nonbinary identity, I hope to offer an analytical approach which can appreciate the depth of queer and trans Iranian American Muslim livelihoods.

---

[18] Max Strassfeld and Robyn Henderson-Espinoza, "Introduction: Mapping Trans Studies in Religion," *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly* 6, no. 3 (August 1, 2019): 285, https://doi.org/10.1215/23289252-7549400.

Between [Iranian/American]: Nonbinary as Unbound
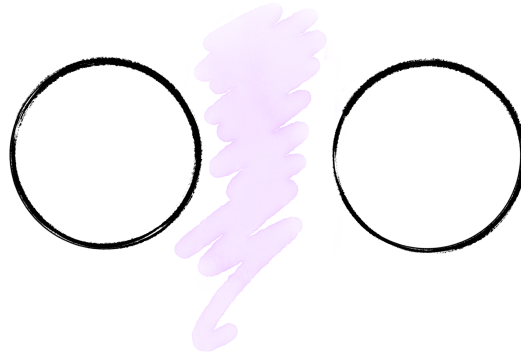
Figure 1. Between – Nonbinary as Unbound (2021)
Digital sketch by author.

Arguably the most popular understanding of nonbinary gender is that it means to be *between* man and woman. I start with the *between* as it offers a necessary initial intervention into binary categories altogether. It gives us space to dislodge and unbind binary form. Likely the most conceptually digestible, the notion of *between* allows a space to understand the ways in which our bodies, identities, and life experiences do, at times, fall in between binary categories. In this instance, *between* is an apt formulation for understanding how my subjects balance their racial understanding between Iranian and American. For instance, many of my friends knew themselves to be Iranian and American, but also that they were not fully Iranian as in their cousins 'back home' nor were they fully American like the 'other white kids at school.' They very clearly understood themselves as somewhere in between the two, and therefore labeled themselves as Iranian American.

The designation of an Iranian American identity speaks to the inseparability, the indivisibility of Iranianness from Americanness. Stitching the two together in a two-word title, the racial identity swallows any attempt to separate the two from one another, placing those who use it squarely in

between these two racial groups, laying claim to both. Pushing beyond the binary of Iranian or American, an Iranian American identity allows for other ways of living, of relating, of understanding, and experiencing that rejects a subscription to not only a binary form, but also projects of racial purity.

What this nonbinary optic also allows for is the reality of multidimensionality beyond just Iranian and American. For instance, some of my friends were Iranian Chinese American, Iranian Iraqi American, or Iranian Armenian American. What would it do, if I were to label them just Iranian or just Iraqi? Chinese Iranian American or American Iranian Chinese? Using a nonbinary assemblage as an optic further allows me to appreciate the fact that many of my friends were not 'just Iranian' or 'just Iranian American.' As Ella Shohat shares in "Dislocated Identities: Reflections of an Arab Jew," "Some of us refuse to dissolve so as to facilitate 'neat' national and ethnic divisions."[19] A nonbinary optic allows me the space to appreciate the expansiveness of my community, the various experiences and global trajectories that make up our lives, without erasing the messy. In fact, it gives me room to absorb the messy as important, as instructive, as insightful. Nonbinary assemblage as an optic does not shy away from further nuance in identity. Rather, a nonbinary optic embraces the multiplicitous lived realities of my friends and allows them to be theorized as they are: complex, multidimensional, and gloriously messy, beyond the bounds of our current categories.

---

[19] Ella Shohat, "Dislocated Identities: Reflections of an Arab Jew," in *On the Arab-Jew, Palestine, and Other Displacements* (Pluto Press, 2017), 78, https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt1pv89db.7.

Either [Queer]/Or [Straight]: Nonbinary as Strategic
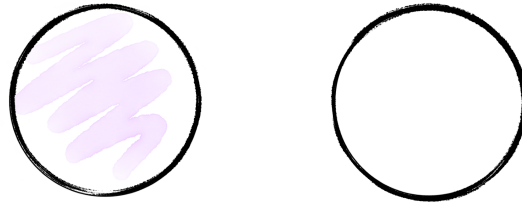
Figure 2. Either/Or – Nonbinary as Strategic (2021)
Digital sketch by author

Understanding nonbinary as *either/or* requires an interrogation of how we conceptualize our bodies' relationships primarily to time, but also to growth, to shift, to malleability. Using examples from a nonbinary gender identity as well as queer sexuality, I show how certain aspects of our identity can be concealed or embellished depending on our circumstances, and how attention to this maneuver is vital in order to understand my friends' lives. The primary distinction in understanding the *either/or* dimension is whether or not the individual chooses to be interpreted as such, a question of autonomy I will outline below.

Many nonbinary individuals are assumed to be in fact, binary cis[20] individuals. A common misconception of nonbinary gender identity is that individuals who are nonbinary must be visibly gender non-conforming, must appear androgynous, or must appear to be both masculine and feminine. Therefore, this erases the reality that many nonbinary individuals do not present

---

[20] Cis is an abbreviated form for the word, cisgender, which means an individual who is comfortable with their sex/gender assigned at birth. Another way to understand cis is individuals who are non-trans.

simultaneously feminine and masculine gender expressions and may in fact, appear binary at times. The cis world then, interprets and assumes them to be cis. As Julia Serano argues in *Whipping Girl: A Transsexual Woman on Sexism and the Scapegoating of Femininity*, "the cissexual indiscriminately projects their cissexuality onto all other people, thus transforming cissexuality into a human attribute that is taken for granted."[21] She goes on to argue that this cissexual assumption forces trans individuals to have to constantly come out to others.

I refer to these individuals as 'cis-perceived' as opposed to 'passing as cis.' I use the language of cis-perceived or 'perceived to be cis' because it is the social world, the eyes of the cis system and gender binary which assumes and names these individuals as cis, not what they see themselves as. As Serano suggests,

> Cissexual attributes are simply taken for granted—they are assumed to be 'natural' and 'normal' and therefore escape reciprocal critique. This places transsexuals at a constant disadvantage, since we have generally been forced to rely on limiting cissexual-centric terminology to make sense of our own lives.[22]

The gaze, language, and cis assumptions dictate the way the nonbinary person is perceived, historically framed as 'passing.' For me, the shift to this language of being cis-perceived highlights the operative power of cis gaze as well as the reality that the nonbinary individual may in fact, feel, live, and understand themselves as nonbinary irrespective of what the cis world dictates. Not to mention, the obvious reality that many nonbinary individuals may not seek, desire, or aspire to look cis, a phenomenon the cis world has yet to fully grasp.

Therefore, the blanket assumption that everyone who looks cis, is cis, is simply inaccurate. However, it is a material reality of nonbinary experience that many are cis-perceived, granting them unfathomable social, political, and material privilege as opposed to their visibly gender non-

---

[21] Serano, *Whipping Girl*, 165.

[22] Serano, 161.

conforming counterparts. This distinction is of utmost importance because although some may identify as nonbinary, as not cis, as not even wishing to be seen or understood as cis, the sweeping material privilege of being cis-perceived dramatically alters the reality of lived experience.

This revolving door dimension of *either/or* proves tactful for understanding sexuality and how queer individuals are able to shift, conceal, or sidestep questions of sexuality in order to preserve or protect themselves. Queer sexuality therefore, can be seen as analogous to a cis-perceived nonbinary gender identity, something that can be kept hidden and unrevealed if need be.[23] Referring back to Puar's critique of intersectionality theory, she argues that it cannot grasp "the fictive and performative aspects of identification."[24] Using a nonbinary optic allows us to appreciate the selectivity, the autonomy, the self-narration of identity as we move across and through time and space. This optic addresses the instability of identity, tending to the inability of intersectionality theory to interpret shifts, moves, growth, intention, selectivity, and randomness.

Some of my friends were perceived to be straight and chose to occupy that space for a myriad of reasons: safety from homophobic violence, prevention of invasive questioning, maintaining access to family, financial security, and cultural support, among other reasons. My friends used this perception to their advantage, navigating the closet with straddles, sidesteps, hops, and leaps to wherever made the most sense for them. Any theoretical frame which wishes to grasp the operative function of queerness, nonbinary gender, and the politics of perceptibility around it must be able to tend to these shifts. Many individuals choose to be selective with their disclosure of sexuality and/or gender as a means of mitigating homophobic and transphobic violence. Queerness

---

[23] This is not to assume that all queers have equal access to this ability to conceal their sexuality, as gender visibly alters the way the world reads an individual. Therefore, gender non-conformity as a facet of queerness disallows gender variant individuals from being able to conceal any aspect of their queerness/transness.

[24] Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages*, 2007, 212.

and transness are not linear, stable, or concrete experiences. In fact, they are fluid, selective, and at times, inherently contradictory.

Using nonbinary assemblages as an optic therefore allows us to understand the ways in which a nonbinary individual may remain in a binary space or the ways a queer person may allow themselves to be read as straight, as a strategy of personal safety.[25] This is not about assessing the value or validity of the reasoning for why individuals may allow the world to perceive them as belonging to dominant categories, so much as it is to demonstrate the need to tend to these nuances in order to grasp queer and trans life. Sometimes being nonbinary looks like being binary – as contradictory and counterintuitive as it may seem; and if we plan to understand and analyze queer and trans secular/Muslim Iranian American life, we must understand this at the outset.

From [Woman]/To [Man]: Nonbinary as Processual
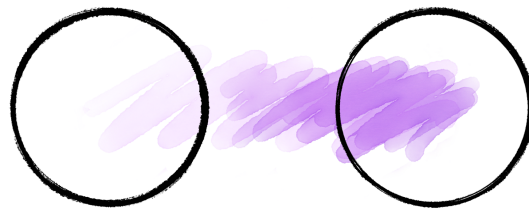
Figure 3. From/To – Nonbinary as Processual (2021)
Digital sketch by author

---

[25] It can be understood as strategy for personal safety, but invites in the question of how this may, at times, compromise queerness as well. For instance, how being read or interpreted as straight may limit their ability to join in and engage in queer/trans circles.

Tending to the movement, the transition, the progression, nonbinary as *processual* speaks to the circumstantial interweaving of time and space when our bodies do not register in binary form. Typical understanding of trans individuals is the notion that people assigned male at birth 'switch' to being female, and people who are assigned female at birth 'switch' to being male. This may, and does, describe a big portion of the trans community and their experiences. However, here I want to highlight the process, the transition, the moving between and beyond categories as we see them and what that does for our understanding of identity. Learning from nonbinary experiences, what happens when individuals have no desire to 'switch' from female to male? What happens if they wish to stop 'in between' or to move beyond both categories? Using nonbinary as an optic will illustrate the marvel and beauty of shifting forms.

In "The Persistence of Transgender Travel Narratives," Aren Z. Aizura describes the ways a cis world has mapped out the spatial logics of a gender transition to erase any visibility of a nonbinary or gender non-conforming body. They write, "Transsexuality comes to be socially and culturally tolerable in a limited sense only if it conceals the possibility that gender is not binary and presents transsexuality as a one-way trip from man to woman or woman to man."[26] Aizura's work demonstrates how trans bodies are only socially legible, tolerable, if and when they complete the spatially appropriate journey through transitioning from man to woman or woman to man, tangible starting points and end goals necessary to legitimate the identity. What this slight liberal opening makes permissible is a binary trans life, leaving nonbinary individuals no room to exist; specifically, no room to be seen.

They continue to suggest that this gender non-conformity as a process of transition, or gender indeterminacy as they call it, "haunts gender everywhere" because of its threat to a binary

---

[26] Aren Z. Aizura, "The Persistence of Transgender Travel Narratives," in *Transgender Migrations*, ed. Trystan Cotten (Routledge, 2012), 145.

gender system. Aizura argues that this gender indeterminacy is forced to a spatially contained location "the 'elsewhere,' or the liminal moment when the trans individual is imagined to cross from one gender to the other."[27] Of most importance is that the transitory state cannot be seen. Assumed to happen 'elsewhere,' anywhere but *here*, the process of transition is relegated to the margins, censored, for it threatens the very understanding of a binary gender system.

My question therefore becomes, what would it mean to see gender nonconformity? What does appreciating the difficult elements of a gender transition do for how we understand gender? What does honoring our most uncomfortable gender non-conforming attributes do for how we conceptualize gender, and race, and religion? I believe the attention to the discomfort, the frustration, the tension that emerges at the positing of these questions is what proves substantive for a nonbinary optic. This is the only way to appreciate our real, our messy as a theoretical paradigm. We must be able to see, to acknowledge, to receive the parts of us that we have found disgusting, ugly, unworthy, unlovable, if we are to appreciate queer and/or trans life.

For example, some individuals dislike the labels of Female to Male, FtM, and Male-to-Female, MtF. Instead, some prefer FtX or MtX, implying a gender conceptualization that wholly rejects the binary switch from one to another, a start to a finish. These interventions force us to think about the process as something that is ongoing, unending, and potentially intermittent. These disruptions and nonlinearities instruct a theoretical paradigm that understands the 'nonsensical' nature of gender fluctuation, (de)transition, and growth.

Drawing from my own experience, I never felt comfortable with the descriptor of FtM. Challenging the very cissexual-centric terminology Serano referred to above, I prefer to think of my gender experience as XtX, or even XtXtX∞, or X∞ for short. These formulations emerge from my nonbinary optic, allowing me space and room beyond not only binary gender and binary categories,

---

[27] Aizura, 145–46.

but the very linguistic registers they wish to confine us to. This penetration of the gender binary and moving into a nonbinary form facilitates newfound linguistic interventions, allowing trans people to self-narrate their lives and bodies outside of cis words and cis categories; that may very well be its most powerful analytical intervention.

Both [Muslim & Secular]: Nonbinary as Simultaneity

Figure 4. Both – Nonbinary as Simultaneity (2021)
Digital sketch by author

The conceptual terrain of *both* has baffled scholars for centuries. How can it be that someone can claim to be two opposing things at once? *Both* is an important element of the nonbinary analytic because it demonstrates the clear and powerful ways individuals find themselves belonging to opposing binary categories simultaneously, a very necessary analytical approach to the question of religiosity. Mayanthi Fernando illustrates this well in *The Republic Unsettled: Muslim French and the Contradictions of Secularism*, describing the ways in which the Muslim French adopted a 'both' stance which challenged binary oppositions. In her work, she shows how,

tracing how secular assumptions about freedom, authority, choice, and obligation make Muslim French religiosity unintelligible in law and public discourse... Muslim French challenge these binaries by conceptualizing practices like veiling, praying, and fasting as *both* modes of personal freedom *and* authoritatively prescribed acts necessary to becoming a proper Muslim subject.[28]

Her description here illustrates how Muslim French individuals claimed these religious acts as sites of both freedom and obligation, wholly impossible to comprehend without the ability to hold multivalences, the *both* element of a nonbinary analytic. My friends' lives also utilize the conceptual possibility of *both*, yet primarily as an experience of identifying both as religious and secular, two binary opposites. Although her analysis bridges an experience of *both* as two phenomena within religious experience (religious obligation and personal freedom), her work illustrates the analytical necessity of holding two opposing truths at once.

What the nonbinary optic allows for is an understanding of religious and secular as potentially hybrid, potentially held and claimed alongside one another, utterly disruptive of the idea that they are hermetically sealed and mutually exclusive identity categories. In fact, as my friends show, one can be both Muslim and secular simultaneously. One can occupy the spaces of both at the same time, can claim both at the same time, and can, and do, manage them according to their specific circumstances. Again, the assumption of the immutability or stability of identity categories, solely religious or secular, disallows us to see the manifold ways in which individuals make and remake their identities constantly. Attention to nonbinary as simultaneity facilitates the analytical space of holding what seems to be contradictory and learning how to be okay with that tension. As Mina mentioned prior, "I'm fine with not knowing the answer to that."

This element of simultaneity requires a brief mention of the history of how the religious and secular came to exist, as words but also as social spaces demarcated as separate and distinct. As Talal

---

[28] Mayanthi L. Fernando, *The Republic Unsettled: Muslim French and the Contradictions of Secularism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014), 146–47 (emphasis added).

Asad notes, "one's conception of religion determines the kinds of questions one thinks are askable and worth asking."[29] Invested in a nonbinary analytic that appreciates the simultaneity and blending potential between religiosity and secularity, I find it instructive to outline how this notion of the religion v. secular emerged.

In *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity*, Asad posits that the very origin of the idea of a religious-secular divide emerged in a specific European history through conflicts with the Church. Through Christian self-doubt, Biblical scholars began to question the sole authority of the Church, facilitating the establishment of a modern, secular historiography.[30] Asad argues, "a secular critique developed, accidentally as it were, out of a concern with the apparent unviability of Christian traditional practice and *that in itself* helped to constitute the field of written secular history."[31]

The truth-space of 'non-religion' therefore emerged in direct opposition to the Christian episteme, which in result, produced an epistemological framing of secularity in direct opposition to Christian religiosity. Shahab Ahmed goes on to suggest that this epistemological break-up maps onto spatial terrain, limiting the space of religion to two entities – the Church as the sole permissible religious institution and the realm of the private belief.[32] In effect, the epistemological construction of the very concept of religion, and its opposing spatial/temporal conceptual counterpart, was produced through European history and enmeshment with the Church. The very notion of a secular was born through the quarantining of religious belief/practice to the institution of the Church and private, personal space. Therefore, we need to locate the emergence of the analytical categories of

---

[29] Talal Asad, *The Idea of an Anthropology of Islam* (Washington, D.C: Center for Contemporary Arab Studies, Georgetown University, 1986), 12.

[30] Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity* (Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press, 2003), 42.

[31] Asad, 42 (emphasis in original).

[32] Ahmed, *What Is Islam?*, 177.

'religion' and 'secular', with their respective spatial demarcations, squarely within 19th century European history.

In *For the Love of God*, I operate from within this epistemic critique of the origins of the secular-religious divide. I do not take religion and secularity to be diametrically opposed binaries, but rather, understand them through my nonbinary analytic as two constructed poles which people float between, through, alongside, and with. For this reason, in this piece I will use Muslim/secular to refer to the realm of beliefs my friends hold when it comes to God, faith, belief, religion, and secularity.

Neither [Free]/Nor [Unfree]: Nonbinary as Rejection
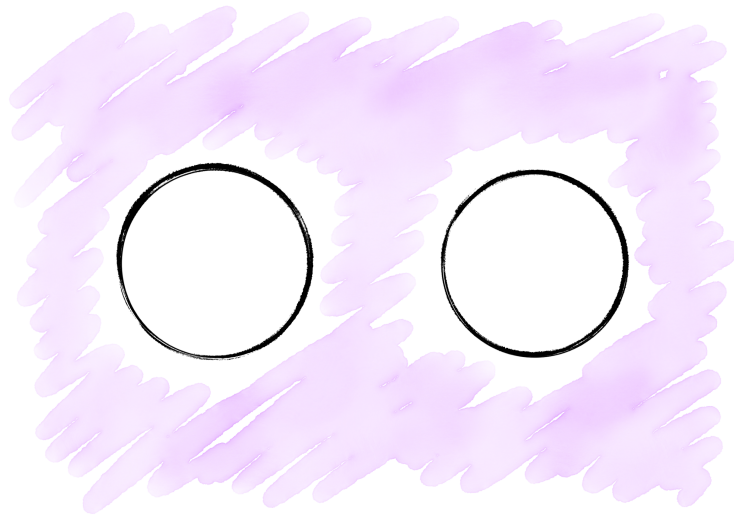
Figure 5. Neither/Nor – Nonbinary as Rejection (2021)
Digital sketch by author

Another primary facet of a nonbinary analytic is its operative force as a rejection of binaries, not simply existing outside of it. This rejection, this refusal not only undermines the gender binary but also demonstrates a declarative posture – I refuse to allow you to dictate who I am, what I am,

how I am. This rejection of the gender binary produces a particular subject position, allowing

nonbinary individuals to create themselves against, outside of, and even beyond the binary.

The importance of being *neither/nor*, a veritable difference from *either/or*, showcases how

some nonbinary individuals feel that they are neither men nor women and that is a significant space

in and of its own. To be *neither/nor* requires a conceptualization of identity as beyond the realm of

the categories that exist, another central dimension to how nonbinary optics operate. Furthermore,

nonbinary as rejection very eloquently paves the way for something else, something new, something

unprecedented. Refusal is the first step to embracing newness, and being able to step into the realm

of creating other forms of existence. As Sarah Haley argues in *No Mercy Here: Gender, Punishment, and

the Making of Jim Crow Modernity*, Black women's acts of refusal thwarted carceral timetables, capitalist

productivity, and white supremacist notions of ownership over Black bodies in early Jim Crow

modernity. Sharing stories of Black women's resistance to carceral discipline and order, Haley reads

these acts as "a refusal to accept the conditions that made them vulnerable to death, and the

collective creation of alternative, if fleeting, life-alternatives."[33] Refusal then, paves the way for

alternative modes of being.

Similarly, understanding nonbinary as rejection allows us to move from understanding

gender in the negative, what it is not, into the positive, what it can be. This is a massive intervention

in gender lexicon, as it allows us to theorize a gender positionality which is completely outside of the

realm of cisgender binary terms. It is a necessary pivot point in order to move to what else is

possible, what other creations we are capable of. In application, nonbinary as *neither/nor* helps

illustrate the ways in which people reject the categories forced onto them.

---

[33] Sarah Haley, *No Mercy Here: Gender, Punishment, and the Making of Jim Crow Modernity* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2016), 195–248.

Beyond [Binaries]: A Manifestation of Limitless Potential
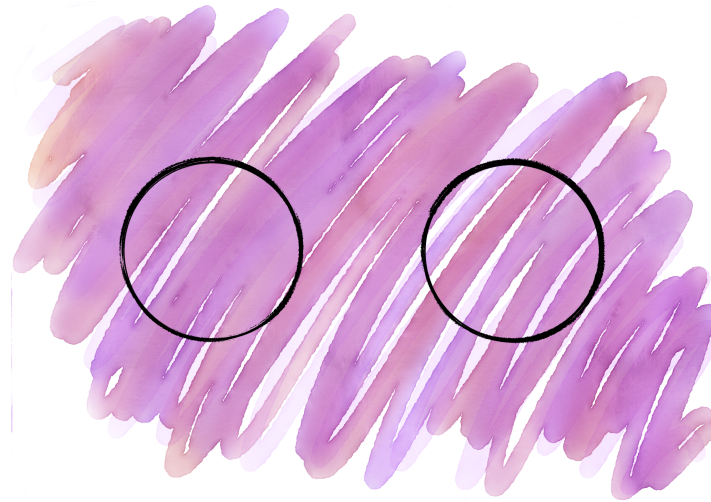
Figure 6. Beyond – Nonbinary as a Manifestation of Limitless Potential (2021)
Digital sketch by author

Now some may argue that this nonbinary optic seems to have deconstructed itself into oblivion and that it could not possible serve any effective analytical purpose. How could something be *between*, *either/or*, *from-to*, *both*, *neither/nor*, potentially all at the same time? What are we even left with after all of this deconstruction? Have we not deconstructed ourselves into nothing? To that, I wish to emphasize first and foremost, nonbinary identity not only exists, it has become immensely popular because of its success at one particular function – a nonbinary analytic *opens up space*.

By that, I mean to suggest that as opposed to answering to the rigidities of binaries by operating within and through them, a nonbinary optic opens up space by inviting a new worldview, one that is invested in more space, in more room, in endless potential to be something other than. I name this final dimension of a nonbinary analytic *beyond*, to encapsulate the reach into the unknown, to surpass, to transcend, to exceed. This utterance, this declaration, this investment in what else is possible and what else can be, is the central and foundational tenet of nonbinary analytics. We no longer need to approach our critique of what is limiting, colonizing, or enacting violence through the very vessels and means those violent systems produced. In fact, a nonbinary analytic dares to shed

this epistemological and ontological reliance on binaries altogether, operating from another plane, another realm, another world – where anything is possible.
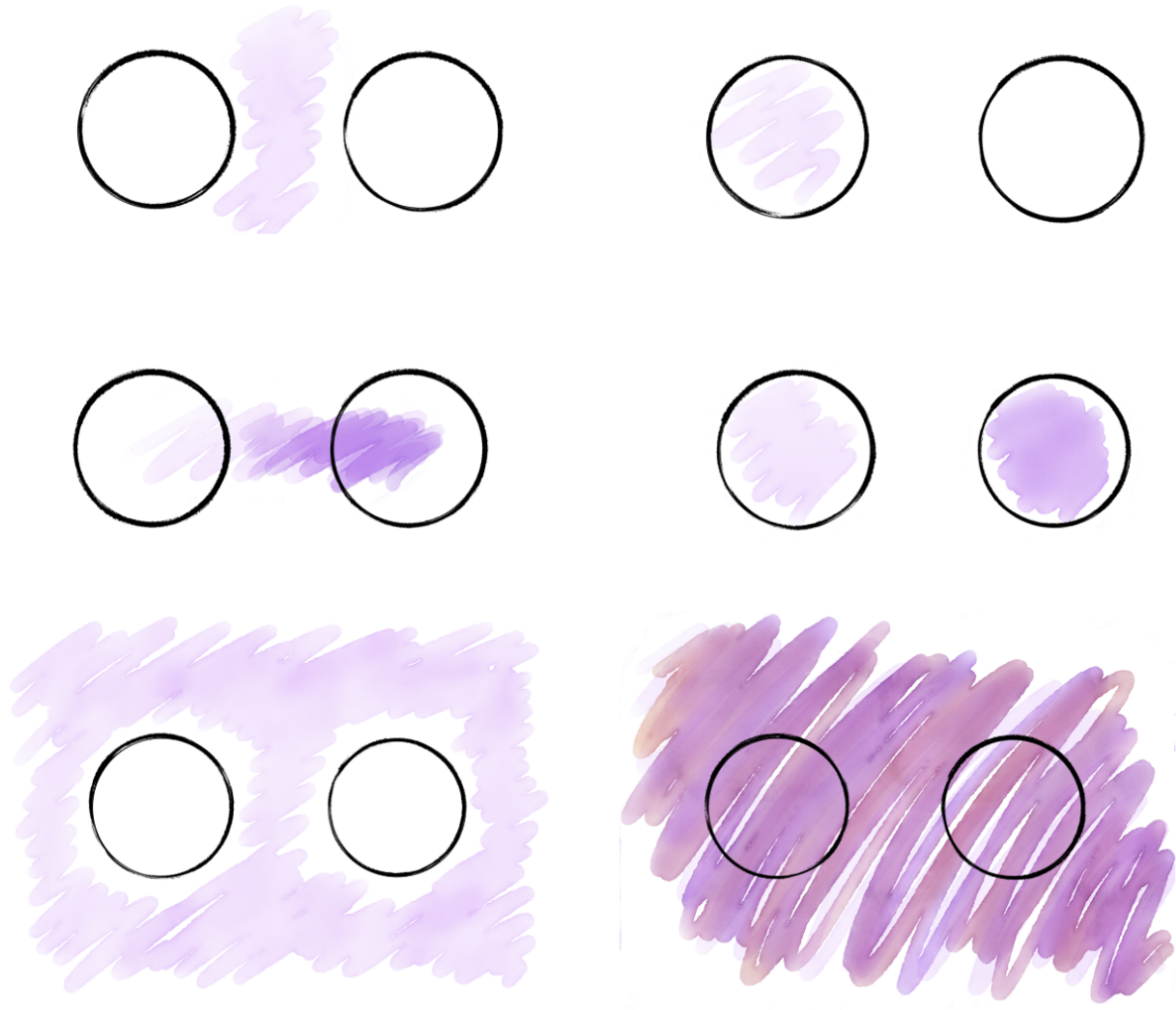
Figure 7. Six Dimensions of Nonbinary Ontology (2021)
Digital sketch by author

In order to conceptualize queer and trans secular/Muslim Iranian Americans of the Los Angeles diaspora, I offer nonbinary assemblages as a theoretical paradigm equipped with the tools of multidimensional analysis. As I write, I see how unwieldy the terms are: queer and trans, second-generation, secular/Muslim, Iranian Americans, of the Los Angeles diaspora. Here, at the outset, it is

already impossible to neatly name our bodies, our lives, and our multiple axes. The clunkiness of the rhetoric is a testament to how our lives and our bodies are too much, too complex, too difficult to even linguistically process.

I call my friends queer and trans secular/Muslim Iranian Americans from the Los Angeles diaspora, knowing full well it is an insufficient, incomplete, and inadequate descriptor. Nonetheless, I appreciate the discomfort it forces on us as an indication of how these bodies and lives are always forcing a discomfort in white, cis, settler colonial, hypercapitalist, heteropatriarchal, secularized/Christian society and its ontological binaries. It is important for me to name and respect this discrepancy as a way to memorialize the difficulty of categorizing such multiplicitous bodies. It is an enactment of a decidedly trans nonbinary analytic to self-narrate these bodies are they are, beyond the categorical forms that exist.

As Aizura articulates, "it is no accident that the epistemological problem of how to contain gendered indeterminacy imbricates racial or geo-cultural difference as well as the mobility of class in its distribution of gendered significations across different spaces."[34] Speaking to the epistemological impossibility of conceptualizing gender non-conformity or nonbinary gender without attention to the interweaving dimensions of racial, geocultural, and class differences across space, Aizura's argument shows how ineffective our modalities of identity analysis currently are. To reify this critique, Puar reminds us how, "…the study of intersectional identities often involves taking imbricated identities apart one by one to see how they influence each other, a process that betrays the founding impulse of intersectionality, that identities cannot so easily be cleaved."[35] Therefore, as

---

[34] Aizura, "The Persistence of Transgender Travel Narratives," 146.

[35] Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages*, 2007, 212.

I conclude this introduction, I want to emphasize the six components of a nonbinary assemblage: *between, either/or, from-to, both, neither/nor,* and *beyond.*

These six dimensions of a nonbinary analytic provide a lens which allows the space for these bodies to self-narrate their stories. I see my friends as extraordinary, magical, and powerful people who have shown me so many newfound ways to conceptualize identity. In fact, through this nonbinary assemblage, I believe it is possible to more adequately understand the ways in which people draw from myriad aspects of binary categories, reject both, subscribe to both, neither, one or the other, or self-select different elements whenever they choose to. Nonbinary assemblages allow a nuanced and careful attention to the multiple facets of our identities, especially the engagement between these factors and their inability to be separated.

Highlighting an important epistemic intervention, Strassfield and Espinoza's work offers an important reconceptualization of the very ways in which knowledge around gender is produced. Encouraging a venture into new conceptual territories, they invite us to imagine what becomes possible when we move beyond canonical conditioning. They argue,

> Rhizomatic in nature, trans studies in religion opposes the idea that knowledge must always grow in an arboreal pattern, with new growth branching out from the trunk of previously accepted ideas. New thinking need not follow established patterns, and it can burst forth, rhizomatically, from any point in the assemblage. Trans studies in religion is rhizomatic in the sense that the particularity of this experimental and nonnormative work is located outside current disciplinary structures, and encourages work that has no proper or defined location within the study of religion. Trans studies in religion is rhizomatic, too, in the sense that this nascent field as we see it encourages migrations into new conceptual territories that result from unpredictable juxtapositions. Trans studies of religion may be assembled with, or proximate to, cisgender feminist, queer, postcolonial, critical race, or disability approaches; it certainly "becomes-with" these formations but does not "come-from" them in any linear or teleological manner.[36]

Upending epistemic mandates and teleological necessities, this articulation facilitates an expansive realm of scholarly potential. Noting the seeming difficulty to find a disciplinary home, questions and

---

[36] Strassfeld and Henderson-Espinoza, "Introduction," 286.

queries that set out to address the liminal spaces of academic scholarship are bound to guide us into new ideas. It is this very lack of a disciplinary structure that both siphons this work to the liminal, yet also thrusts it into the realm of experimental, exploratory, and creativity, where new ways of seeing emerge.

To further explicate the form of this nonbinary analytic, I draw from the brilliant words of performance artist Alok Vaid-Menon and how they explain their nonbinary gender identity: "I am neither a man nor a woman and I'm both a man and a woman."[37] It is the simultaneity of the refusal and affirmation of the gender categories of man and woman that best embodies the tension of a nonbinary analytic. It is the simultaneous claim to be both and neither that disrupts our understanding of gender in completely newfound ways. Alok's gender consciousness illuminates the tensions, the inconsistencies, and perfectly real experiences of racial, gender, and sexual identity construction.

With that, I offer the nonbinary assemblage as a critical trans theoretical apparatus for conceptualizing bodies that are outside of our current white supremacist, American, Eurocentric, settler colonial, heteropatriarchal, cisgender, secular(izing)/Christian categories. The bodies and lives I am seeking to introduce here are so far removed from these words and these epistemologies that creating a discursive space for them has proven to be an enormously challenging feat. However, I would prefer nothing more than to make tangible space and time for bodies and lives which have been rendered nonexistent. I hope I have done them justice in these pages, giving them the space to be, as they are.

---

[37] *The Pain and Empowerment of Choosing Your Own Gender*, 2015, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nKh85SiTmtY.

Chapter Outline

This work is my humble attempt at introducing the musings of queer and trans Iranian Americans of the second-generation and how they find spiritual/religious meaning, as well as how they have come to navigate and articulate their racial, gender, and sexual identities. Primarily a historical overview, Chapter 1 showcases the process by which an Iranian racial and gender identity was formed in the pre-modern to modern period, and how it came to be fashioned in engagement with the modern, the European gaze, and the consequential colonial modernity that came to shape the Qajar and Pahlavi dynasties. I follow the general migratory patterns of the first-generation of Iranian Americans, showcasing how as a result of the racial traumas borne of the 1979 Revolution and Hostage Crisis, many diasporic Iranians sought to distance themselves from Islam as much as possible. I close the chapter by showcasing this commitment to modernity by the parent generation, what I call a Pahlavi modernity, and how the queer second-generation has grown skeptical and dissatisfied with uncritically absorbing these identity scripts. It is this renegotiation that I interpret as a rearticulation of diasporic Iranian life, one with infinite potential, with the space, the audacity to create other modes of being.

In the following chapter, I draw from my fieldwork to demonstrate the ways in which the parent generation have relied on state-sanctioned neoliberal multiculturalist approaches to assimilate the Iranian diaspora into the mainstream American racial landscape. Using a series of examples from major Norooz celebrations to *Seezdah-Bedar* gatherings in Los Angeles, I show how the ways in which the parent generation articulate Iranian identity do not and cannot speak to the racial, gender, and sexual realities of the second-generation. It is through this shift that queer conceptualizations about diasporic belonging, cross-collective solidarities, and racial posturing emerge.

Chapter 3 outlines the processes of secularization and the secularizing logics of assimilating into an American racial landscape. I focus particularly on the ways in which Christianity operates as

a secularizing force, through stories of Christian schooling, Christmas celebrations, and Christian jewelry. I explore how my friends engage with notions of modernity, goodness, and fitting in as is required through the Christian bases of American secularism. I close the chapter by introducing the queer crystal culture phenomenon, a combination of practices drawing from myriad cultures, places, and rituals from around the globe – burning sage, crystals, astrology, tarot cards, reiki/energy work, etc. By tending to the racialized dimension of their conceptualizations of this crystal culture, I show how my friends navigate notions of cultural validity and 'hippie bullshit.'

Outlining one of my primary interventions, Chapter 4 specifies the ways in which my friends come to understand themselves as 'not really Muslim.' Drawing from a critical analysis of the ways in which colonial modernity privileges authority, tradition, and orthodoxy, I show how all my friends felt unable to call themselves Muslim, as a religious marker, but felt comfortable deploying it as a racial marker. Furthermore, through highlighting the gendered dimension of how non-Islamiosity operates, the hypermasculine attacks on Islam coming mostly from men, I show how Iranian American women come to be the bearers of spiritual and religious meaning, teaching the younger generation elements of the faith. I analyze the Muslim Ban to emphasize the specific ways in which the second-generation's relationship with Islam was altered dramatically through Trump's policies, and how they debated identity labels, claims to those labels, and the guilt, fear, and uncertainty with doing so.

Chapter 5 offers a look into traditional religious practices, weddings and funerals, and how these normative religious rituals are interpreted as sites of formality, sanctity, and yet also, sites of potential reimagination. Drawing from an ethos of queer imaginings, I show how many fantasized about their own weddings and what is possible for them through that very act. Yet, this chapter also demonstrates the wide array of fears, hesitations, and concerns that emerge when thinking up a queer Iranian American wedding against cultural expectations. Demonstrating the inner workings of

anti-Muslim racism as it pertains to queer policing of closets, I show how whiteness and white queerness produces itself as more modern, advanced, and progressive through invalidating and making inferior queer Muslim experiences. I close the chapter by highlighting the potentials of trans spiritualities, a site for overcoming liberal feminist assumptions of progress, through grieving rituals and funerary practices.

The final chapter explores the relationships queer and trans Iranian Americans actually have with God, how their God is visualized, interpreted, spoken with, and connected with. I start by showcasing their hesitations around the use of 'God,' its inherently racialized/Americanized form, and how many felt irked by the Americanness and anthropomorphic-ness of this Christian/American word. Though there were many hesitations and critiques, many still used the word 'God,' hence my continual reliance on it as well.[38] Nonetheless, this chapter speaks to their imaginations, visuals, and bodily sensations as they experienced and connected with God. I close by looking at queer love as a pathway to access divine love, a specifically Sufistic ethos, and how falling in queer love made God closer for several of my friends.

This entire project is birthed out of an ethos of love, a testament to and from my own spiritual and religious experiences. I operate from within a spiritual framework which absorbs, operates from, and seeks to (re)create this love throughout my analytical conceptualizations, my linguistic choices, as well as the entire emotive force of this project. I consider myself a deeply religious and spiritual person and that greatly impacts the lens I bring to my work. I do not wish to hide nor deny my personal experiences as they are what guide me through my intellectual curiosities, my academic epiphanies, and of course, my lifelong project of personal growth. I respect and admire

---

[38] I do not wish to suggest that God means a monotheistic God from a particular faith, a singular God (not possible of being Gods), or anything concrete and limiting. I use God merely to denote a supernatural entity or force which is considered nonmaterial. Their full musings and my interpretations of this are sprinkled throughout the text, and clarified more specifically in Chapter 6.

greatly the scholars who declared their reverence for God a part of their academic ethic, finding it instructive for theorizing the mundane just as I do.[39] As posed in the opening to "Critical Sisterhood Praxis: Curating a Women of Color Feminist Intervention for Spiritual Reclamation in the Academy," Reynolds, Botts, and Pour-Khorshid say, "we embody a collective effort of spiritual sustainability by affirming for ourselves that it is possible to be whole within and despite the academy."[40] It is through commitments such as these that I find hope for our spirits to emerge, unfurl, and transcend the limitations we experience in this realm – to allow our spirits to become guiding logics, magical vessels, the most transformative of tools we possess. As they lovingly remind us, "Sis, but how is your spirit though?"[41]

If nothing else, my primary intervention is precisely this – to no longer hide from, erase, or admonish the spiritual/religious realm. I wish to "unerase" the "myth, the magic, and the sacred," as Asad so astutely mentions about the project of modernity.[42] I believe there is so much missed, lost, and unaccounted for if we neglect the nonmaterial realm and the entirety of energies, emotions, and life experiences that occur in that space. And so, to turn this theory into a praxis I can stand behind, I find it imperative to share that I love God. I spend a lot of time with God. I have seen miracles. I have lived them. I am not an academic despite of this, I am one because of it. It is why and how I came to this project, and hopefully many more to come.

---

[39] Grewal, *Islam Is a Foreign Country*; Ahmed, *What Is Islam?*; Fazlur Rahman, *Islam*, History of Religion Series (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1966).

[40] Aja D Reynolds, Ree Botts, and Farima Pour-Khorshid, "Critical Sisterhood Praxis: Curating a Women of Color Feminist Intervention for Spiritual Reclamation in the Academy," *The Journal of Education Foundations* 34, no. 1 (2021): 14, https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ1307650.

[41] Reynolds et al., "Critical Sisterhood Praxis," 14.

[42] Asad, *Formations of the Secular*.

CHAPTER ONE

Historical Traumas & Racial Choices:
The Formation of an Iranian American Diasporic Identity

"We don't have a Qur'an in my house. What use would my dad have with one but to *burn* it?" Perhaps shocking to some, this comment and many like it are quite common in the Iranian American diaspora community. I had just asked Parisa if her family places a Qur'an on their *haftseen*[1] for Norooz, a table setting commonly set up in homes to bring in the Iranian New Year.[2] Her response highlights a powerful current in the Iranian diaspora, arguably in the larger Iranian national identity as well – a palpable hatred for Islam and anything associated with it.

For the Love of God seeks to not only excavate the contours of this vitriolic anti-Islam sentiment within the Iranian American community, but to ask how this influences and shapes the younger generations' relationship to God and/or Islam,[3] and specifically how it operates in combination with other powerful systemic political violence in the United States: anti-Muslim racism, global capitalism, the gender binary, homonationalism, and trans normativity. I am interested in how at the intersection of multiple systemic political forces that seek to discredit or demean Islam, some Iranian Americans continue to identify, relate to, and explore their relationship with the faith.

---

[1] A *haftseen* is a traditional table setting set up in homes to bring in the new year, Norooz. The word *haftseen* literally translates to seven S's, each item representing a facet of the rebirth of a new year, and starts with the letter S.

[2] The language used to refer to Norooz is manifold, being that the holiday is celebrated across the world with different ethnicities and nationalities honoring its tradition. It is also known as the Iranian New Year, Nowrooz, Noruz, Nevruz, etc. The use of Persian New Year in the Iranian diaspora has shifted to Iranian New Year, in order to demonstrate inclusion of various ethnicities in the Iranian national imaginary. However, what the rhetoric of Iranian New Year includes, further excludes other ethnic and national groups which celebrate Norooz. I acknowledge these limitations and will be using the word, Norooz, to speak of this holiday.

[3] As my work will show, the Iranian American community has a highly contentious relationship with the Islamic faith. Nonetheless, I am focusing solely on the interplay between Islam and secularity, as opposed to any other religious tradition (Judaism, Zoroastrianism, Christianity). Therefore, I intentionally use the word Islam though many Iranians and Iranian Americans may not use that language themselves.

I ask, how has anti-Muslim racism of and in the United States amplified the anti-Muslim sentiment within the Iranian American community, and vice versa, and how have those ideas been passed down to younger generations? How has homonationalist queer and trans rhetoric operated through a uniquely anti-Muslim racist discourse, further lending to the anti-Muslim rhetoric of Iranians in diaspora, and again, vice versa? My aim here is to demonstrate that though there are multiple political sources, currents, and discourses, all of which seek to deface the faith of Islam as an operative part of their political project, certain individuals continue to find meaning in their faith and their identification with the faith. Therefore, my ultimate question becomes, amidst all of these powerful political messages that the younger Iranian American generation are receiving about how homophobic, transphobic, patriarchal, and overwhelmingly violent Islam is, how do they understand, conceptualize, and relate to God? Most importantly, how do queer and trans Iranian Americans interpret these messages in constructing their own relationships and practices with Islam? How are they connecting with their God, their spirituality, their religion, if they are?

Locating Us: Queer and Trans Iranian Americans of the Los Angeles Diaspora

Born and raised in Los Angeles, I know intimately how this region functions as a diasporic epicenter for the Iranian American community. I grew up regularly going to Woodland Hills Market to pick up fresh *noon-e sangak*,[4] attending the thousands-strong *Seezdah Bedar*[5] gatherings in Balboa Park, and taking out of town guests to a Westwood *Chelo-Kabobi*[6] for some quality homemade delicacies. Even though I have spent my whole life here, I still had some fundamental questions that

---

[4] *Noon-e sangak* is a type of bread, literally translating to 'pebble bread' or 'bread of pebbles' because the dough is placed on a bed of pebbles as it cooks, giving it a grooved texture.

[5] *Seezdah bedar* is a Norooz holiday, celebrated on the thirteenth day after the new year. It literally translates to 'thirteenth outside,' and is a day when families picnic and play in parks, by streams, in the outdoors, to enjoy the newly arrived spring season.

[6] *Chelo-kabobi* is a colloquial name given to a restaurant which serves Persian food, namely kabob and Persian rice.

kept me up at night – why is my community so hostile towards Islam? Why does any mention, sight, or recollection of anything associated with Islam frustrate and anger so many of us? And where are the queer Iranians? Are there any trans Iranians? Do we even exist? What is their relationship to faith?

I centered my research on the Southern California region to capture a specific experience of the Iranian diaspora. As the largest and most popular 'home away from home' for Iranians, the Los Angeles Iranian American diaspora community offers a unique diasporic enclave with which to explore my questions of social identity and faith. Famously known as 'Tehrangeles,' 'Vestvood,' or 'Little Persia,' various neighborhoods in Los Angeles and the Southern California region[7] are home to large collectives of Iranians[8]; for instance, Woodland Hills, Pico/Fairfax, Beverly Hills, Irvine, and of course, the most celebrated, Westwood.

Though conducting my research solely in the Los Angeles region, I do not wish to demonstrate any semblance of uniformity across the diasporic community, as quite the opposite is true. Rather, my purpose is to ensure that this work does not stand to represent the various and varying experiences of Iranian diasporas across the world, as these reflections cannot be assumed to be commensurate with Iranian diasporic life in Boise, Istanbul, Lesbos, or New York City. I do not claim nor wish to make an argument that represents the entirety of the Iranian American diaspora, Iranian diaspora, Iranian community, or even Los Angeles diaspora. The arguments put forth are an attempt to realize and articulate the racial, gender, sexual, and secular/religious explorations of queer and trans Iranian Americans of Los Angeles, henceforth referred to as the second-generation.

---

[7] I will henceforth say Los Angeles, however I have interviewed people who are from regions or neighborhoods that are technically outside of the geographic bounds of the city of Los Angeles, i.e. Irvine, Newport Beach, Agoura Hills, etc.

[8] I myself was born and raised in the San Fernando Valley, another major pocket of the Iranian American community.

There are many Iranians in Los Angeles. At times our enclave is so well built that it easily

feels like we outnumber everyone else. Yet due to the structure of U.S. census racial classification,

one which takes individuals of Middle Eastern descent as 'White,' there are no exact numerical

figures on the Iranian American community.[9] In addition to the racial erasure of Iranian Americans,

the fear of political and/or social violence prevents many from registering their Iranian identity on

federal government data. Nonetheless, a 2012 analysis by the National Iranian American Council of

2010 Census results found that 289,465 Iranians had specified their race by marking the 'some other

race' box and writing in Iranian, with 157,225 coming from California.[10] According to a 2014 report

by The Public Affairs Alliance of Iranian Americans (PAAIA) there were an estimated 480,976

Iranians immigrants in the United States as of 2012.[11] According to the 2019 Census Bureau

American Community Survey, 468,798 individuals labeled themselves as of Iranian ancestry,[12] with

211,129 of those being in California,[13] and 117,117 being in the greater Los Angeles-Long Beach-

Anaheim Metropolitan Area.[14] Given that we cannot obtain adequate numerical data on the Iranian

American diaspora, I take these numbers as general approximations. According to both my research

---

[9] Neda Maghbouleh, *The Limits of Whiteness: Iranian Americans and the Everyday Politics of Race* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2017).

[10] National Iranian American Council, "The Iranians Count Census Coalition Releases the Special Tabulation Results from the 2010 U.S. Census," NIAC, accessed March 1, 2022, https://www.niacouncil.org/press_room/the-iranians-count-census-coalition-releases-the-special-tabulation-results-from-the-2010-u-s-census/. However, NIAC also reports that the number of Iranians is likely three times that, based on identity document data from the Interests Section of the Islamic Republic of Iran, the Iranian quasi-embassy housed within Pakistani embassy land in Washington D.C.

[11] Public Affairs Alliance of Iranian Americans, "Iranian Americans: Immigration and Assimilation" (Washington, D.C, April 2014), 3, https://paaia.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/iranian-americans-immigration-and-assimilation.pdf.

[12] US Census Bureau, "Census - Table Results," Selected Population Profile in the United States - Nation, 2019, https://data.census.gov/cedsci/table?q=Iranian&tid=ACSSPP1Y2019.S0201.

[13] US Census Bureau, "Census - Table Results," Selected Population Profile in the United States - State, 2019, https://data.census.gov/cedsci/table?q=Iranian&g=0400000US06&tid=ACSSPP1Y2019.S0201.

[14] US Census Bureau, "Census - Table Results," Selected Population Profile in the United States - LA Metropolitan Area, 2019, https://data.census.gov/cedsci/table?q=Iranian&g=310XX00US31080&tid=ACSSPP1Y2019.S0201.

and personal experience, I estimate that there are 300,000-400,000 Iranians in the Southern California region.

However many Iranian Americans reside in the region, it is important to note that we are not religiously homogeneous and have grouped into religious enclaves along certain geographical lines. For instance, Pico/Fairfax and Beverly Hills are predominantly Iranian American Jewish neighborhoods, whereas Woodland Hills and the larger San Fernando Valley are home to primarily Iranian American families that are Muslim and/or have Muslim backgrounds. Naturally, these are not hermetically sealed regions and there are various religious backgrounds within these areas as well: Baha'i, Christian, and Zoroastrian.[15] Although my project focuses solely on the interplay between Islam and secularity, (as opposed to these other religions) and the ways Iranian Americans structure this aspect of their lives, I want to emphasize that the Iranian American diaspora is religiously heterogenous. I offer the following map to provide a visual of the religious heterogeneity of the Iranian American diaspora of Los Angeles.[16]

---

[15] There is also a population of atheist/agnostic Iranian Americans, a unique experience I will explain later on in the chapter as I introduce non-Islamiosity, as well as Sunni Muslims, Iranian Armenian Christians, as well as tribal faiths.

[16] As this map shows, the Iranian American diaspora is religiously heterogeneous. There are populations of Iranian American Christians, Iranian Jews, Iranian Baha'is, Iranian Zoroastrians, as well as Iranian Muslims and their non-Islamious counterparts.
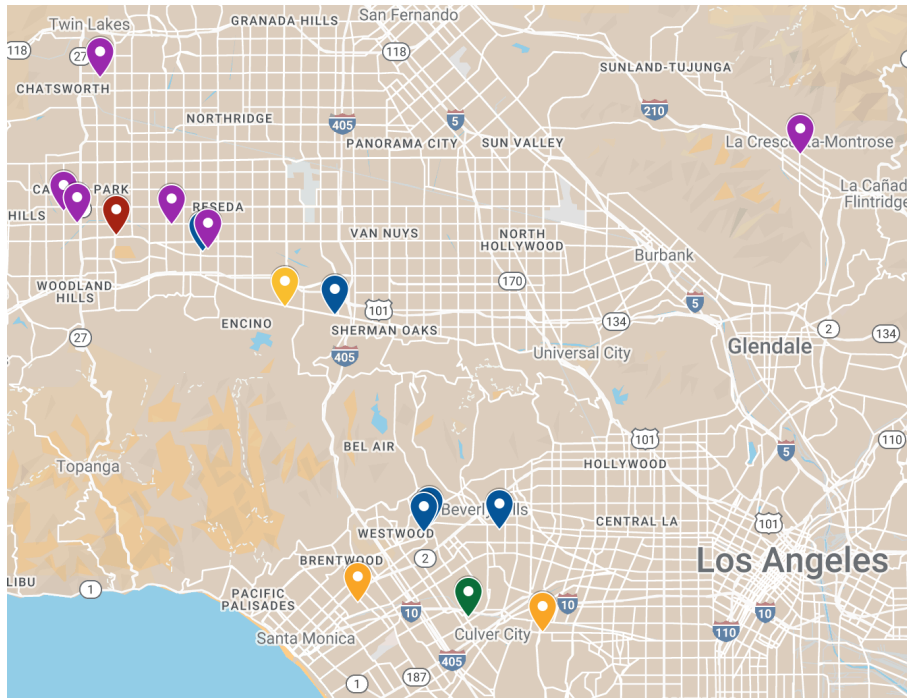
Iman Mosque/Cultural Center
Sinai Temple
Sephardic Temple Tifereth Israel
Valley Beth Shalom
Nessah Synagogue
Eretz Synagogue/Cultural Center
California Zoroastrian Center
Baha'i Community Center

Santa Monica Bahai Center
Los Angeles Baha'i Center
Christ Armenian Church
Emmanuel Persian Church
Nousazan Church
Valley Persian Christian Church
Persian Worshipers of Christ Church
Valley Iranian Church

Figure 8. Map of Iranian American Religious Heterogeneity in Los Angeles (2022) Digital map produced by author.

Making Sense of Multidimensions

Over the last four years, I have conducted thorough research on the Iranian American diaspora community in Los Angeles.[17] The bulk of my analyses comes from my formal interviews with 18 second-generation Iranian Americans, supplemented by surveys from the broader community, ethnographic fieldwork at major cultural events in the LA area, as well as hundreds of

---

[17] Most research took place between 2018-2019, however some preliminary research began in 2017 and a few final interviews extended into 2020.

informal interviews wherever I could. In truth, I may have conducted my formal research over the last several years, but I have been pondering these questions my entire life, lending to years and years of personal experience at these very lines of inquiry. Why do our parents hate Islam so much? What does that hatred teach the children? How is our relationship with God, or Islam, compromised or shaped by these feelings?

My friends were primarily born in the United States, albeit in different states, some born in Iran, and yet others in various countries across the globe. Sixteen of the eighteen I formally interviewed are queer and/or trans, with seven specifically saying they were uncomfortable with being referred to as cis, and therefore I consider these seven individuals trans. Though, those I spoke with (nine individuals) were predominantly cisgender queer women.[18] Some were born to two Iranian parents, while others one Iranian parent, and another who was Taiwanese, Iraqi, or Armenian. Some identified wholeheartedly as Muslim, while others were more ambivalent and considered themselves 'culturally Muslim,' and some not Muslim at all.

I share all this at the outset to illustrate that these bodies, these lives, do not fit neatly into our rigid epistemic categories as they have been typically demarcated. My primary objective for this research project was to unearth the relationships queer and trans Iranian Americans in Los Angeles have with their religious practices, with faith, with God. In the process of conducting this research, I learned that I am actually referring to a group of people who cannot be so easily described. I had no intention of excluding a queer Iranian because their father was Iraqi or because they did not readily identify as Muslim, so I learned to rewire the entire fabric of my project. Instead of forcing their bodies, their lives, their experiences to be something that they are not, I decided it imperative to

---

[18] Of the eighteen interviewees, two identified as cisgender and heterosexual (non-queer/non-trans), one cis woman and one cis man. Sixteen identified as queer and/or trans in some capacity, with seven of those individuals specifying that they were uncomfortable with identifying as cis. Of those seven, four identified as trans, one as specifically nonbinary/trans, and the other two as not necessarily comfortable with 'trans', but not comfortable with cisgender either. For the purposes of this study, they are classified as under the trans umbrella (meaning not-cis).

respect their fluidities, their rejection of categorization from the very outset. The guiding motive was to find queer and trans Iranians from LA, and see how they engaged with faith, Islam, and God. I have done my best to pay tribute to their fluidities and multidimensionalities in this work, respecting that their lives are far more multivalent than these words and our current theoretical paradigms allow them to be.

My focus is on how these individuals relate to God, Islam, and/or their supernatural in the everyday. I sought to determine, not just how spirituality and/or religiosity emerged around momentous life events such as deaths and weddings, which I do explore in Chapter 5, but also how their relationships with religion/spirituality shaped their everyday encounters. For instance, I am interested in if they recite a prayer everyday as they start their car, if they walk under the Qur'an as a protective measure before they leave the house, or if they burn *esfand*[19] around the home, an herb burned to keep the evil eye away.

More importantly, I wanted to know how these people understood God. How was God being visualized and conceptualized by these individuals? And how did their understandings of God shape the ways in which they not only related to God, but how they felt they could relate to God? By tending to not only the everyday encounters, but the intimate processes of self and exploration of the self through spiritual/religious experience, I unearth the sacred, the daring, the brilliant ways in which these individuals structure their own life-worlds. A messy amalgam of reverence for elders, rejection of select traditions, pioneering newfound religious practices, and exploring their spiritualities, these individuals shared stories and experiences that challenged the limitations of categorization and epistemic boundaries, forcing an entirely new theoretical paradigm.

---

[19] *Esfand* is an herb seed found in Iranian markets and bazaars, known as wild rue. The tradition requires gathering a small bundle of the *esfand* seeds and lighting them on a flame until they start to smoke and then carrying the smoking fixture around the heads of individuals, or the entire home, to ward off the evil eye. Usually, a prayer is recited as the smoking herb is carried throughout the home, scaring off the evil eye. For more historical and sacred uses, see Encyclopaedia Iranica, "Esfand," January 2012, https://iranicaonline.org/articles/esfand.

Iranians and Civilizational Modernity: A Brief Historical Overview

For the Love of God is not a historiographical project and does not take pre-modern Iran as a primary site of analysis, yet it does appreciate the ways in which geopolitical forces produced through and by Iran-European relations historically, dictate the terrain of racial, class, religious, sexual, and gender identity formation for the parent generation.[20] Moreover, I tend to the ways these currents have directly influenced and shaped how the second-generation are able to understand and formulate their own sense of Iranian American identity. Through excavating this process, as it shifts through time and space across the globe, I will demonstrate the discursive terrain upon and through which racial, class, religious, sexual, and gender identities are articulated, as well as how the second-generation has adapted, shifted, and re-articulated its own sense of Iranian American diasporic identity through and/or against these registers.

Furthermore, through examples of encounters between Iranians and Europeans and Iranians and Americans, I demonstrate how an initial Iranian American diasporic identity was formed – as Persian, secular, superficially Zoroastrian/pre-Islamic, pro-(cis)woman, and pro-(hetero)sexual. For simplicity, I will abbreviate this identity construction of the parent generation as Pahlavi modernity. This in turn shaped the ways in which future Iranian Americans came to understand their own sense of race, class, gender, sexuality, and religion.

In addition to analyzing the substance of how social identity is created and recreated through engagement with the 'Other,' I wish to trace how the project of civilizational modernity has birthed an epistemic form which continues to compromise and erode our analytical tools. Through an overview of this epistemic and theoretical posturing, I show how the project of modernity strips us

---

[20] For the purposes of this paper, the parent generation will refer to the first generation to migrate to the U.S. largely in the 70s and 80s. The second generation, or younger generation, will refer to the offspring of these parents, born largely in the 80s and 90s. This is not to assume or suppose that Iranian migrants did not come to the United States prior to the 1970s (as they did), but to highlight these two migratory waves as instructive to this work.

of an academic analysis which can appreciate not only our colorful multidimensions, but the ability

to dislodge the white supremacist ethos of a modernist paradigm.

Encountering the Modern: Gender Changes in Qajar Iran

Iranian scholars have long been grappling with the function, form, and force of civilizational

modernity as it continues to shape the ways in which Iranians make sense of their social identities.[21]

Coming up against repeated assumptions of our barbarism and backwardness, diasporic Iranian

scholars have had to sort through an endless sea of naturalized modernist claims, carefully

disarticulating their grip over not only our academic works, but of our understandings of self.

However we choose to refer to it, civilizational modernity, colonial modernity, or modernity,

we must understand it, as Talal Asad so astutely observed, as a project or a series of interlinked

projects.[22] Accepting the project of modernity through its own claims, at face value, disallows space

to understand all the ways this project functions to create racial, gender, sexual, class, and religious

demarcations, and thus, violence.[23] Through this piece, I wish to unearth and refute the modernist

claims which have come to be adopted in both diasporic Iranian scholarship and in the broader

Iranian diaspora, preventing an honest exploration of everyday Iranian American diasporic life.

Through historical excavation of Iranian gender and sexual practices, Afsaneh Najmabadi's

Women with Mustaches and Men without Beards details the specific ways in which Iranian encounters with

---

[21] Moallem, *Between Warrior Brother and Veiled Sister*; Najmabadi, *Women with Mustaches and Men without Beards*; Hamid Dabashi, *Iran: A People Interrupted* (New York: New Press, 2007); Navid Fozi, "Neo-Iranian Nationalism: Pre-Islamic Grandeur and Shi'i Eschatology in President Mahmud Ahmadinejad's Rhetoric," *The Middle East Journal* 70, no. 2 (2016): 227–48, https://doi.org/10.3751/70.2.13; Mohamad Tavakoli-Targhi, *Refashioning Iran: Orientalism, Occidentalism, and Historiography*, St. Antony's Series (Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave, 2001).

[22] Asad, *Formations of the Secular*, 13.

[23] Moallem, *Between Warrior Brother and Veiled Sister*, 3; Saba Mahmood, "Secularism, Hermeneutics, and Empire: The Politics of Islamic Reformation," *Public Culture* 18, no. 2 (2006): 326, https://doi.org/10.1215/08992363-2006-006.

European civilizational modernity caused a deep restructuring of Iranian gender and sexuality. She

argues that various forms of Iranian gender presentation, gender norms, and sexuality practices that

were present in the Qajar period (1789-1925) underwent structural transformation into the more

rigid European heterosexual gender binary through engagement with European officials, colonists,

and laypeople. Before the colonial encounter, Najmabadi mentions, "in the Qajar period, a beautiful

face could belong to either a young male or a young female with identical features."[24] Highlighting

this figure of the *amrad*, she shows how beauty in the Qajar period came to carry particular markers:

a soft face, curls, good posture; none of which required a particular gender.

However, a reformulation of what constituted normal and socially appropriate gender and

sexual practices came about through Iranian engagement with Europeans, and the European gaze

present in civilizational modernity. Locating one of the primary reasons for this shift as European

gaze on Iranian sex practices, she argues,

> The nineteenth century Iranians became acutely aware that adult man-*amrad* love and sexual
> practices prevalent in Iran were considered vices by Europeans. As 'another gaze' entered
> the scene of desire, Iranian men interacting with Europeans in Iran or abroad became highly
> sensitized to the idea that their desire was now under European scrutiny. Homoerotic desire
> had to be covered. One marker of modernity became the transformation of homoeroticism
> into masqueraded heteroeros.[25]

As Najmabadi suggests, the very process by which heterosexuality and the gender binary came to

become the social norm of Iran in the early modern period was through the encounter with

European civilizational modernity. Specifically due to the power of the European colonial gaze,

myriad forms of gender expression and sexual identities were reconfigured into the singular

heterosexual-gender binary form. This gender and sexual restructuring that occurred, forced what

---

[24] Najmabadi, *Women with Mustaches and Men without Beards*, 2.

[25] Najmabadi, 4.

she calls a "masqueraded heteroeros," namely, a way by which Iranians learned to conceal their gender and sexual practices considered inappropriate by European standards.

In further explication of this process, Najmabadi outlines specifically how these gender and sexual practices had to be undone, disciplined, and reformulated entirely in order to move Iranians into the modern. She states,

> in the nineteenth century, homoeroticism and same-sex practices came to mark Iran as backward; heteronormalization of eros and sex became a condition of 'achieving modernity,' a project that called for heterosocialiazation of public space and a reconfiguration of family life… In that sense, modern heterosocialization became, paradoxically, productive of gender as a binary.[26]

Herein, she argues how the project of civilizational modernity was not simply to eradicate a queerness considered backward or barbaric. The European project of modernity required entirely restructuring social life, forcing a heterosocialization of public space which relied on the gender binary as a central fixture of demarcating normative gender and sexual life. These shifts, produced in and through a European encounter hundreds of years ago, normalized and reified through time and space,[27] continue to shape the terrain of how Iranians and Iranian Americans lay claim to ideals of gender and sexual normativity.

Operating from within this newly fashioned gender and sexual normativity based on a heterosexual gender binary, Iranians entered the Pahlavi era (1925-1979) fully embedded in the power networks of modernist claims and discourses. Following much of the Qajar approach to modernity, the Pahlavi kings adopted the project of civilizational modernity in hopes of 'advancing' the nation, unleashing social projects which recalibrated the ways race, gender, sexuality, class, and religion were formulated. I call this restructuring of national identity Pahlavi modernity, one in

---

[26] Najmabadi, 3.

[27] Tavakoli-Targhi argues how both the Pahlavi Kings and the Qajar Kings adopted and operated from within the conceptual bases of modernity's claims – that Europe was in fact, more 'modern', and Iran needed to 'catch-up'. This choice, he argues, reifies notions of European superiority and Iranian backwardness; See Tavakoli-Targhi, *Refashioning Iran*, 7.

which select dimensions of identity became associated with achieving modernity, stitched carefully

to becoming closely European, whereas other facets detracted from that pursuit, undoubtedly

becoming marked as backward and undesirable. This process absorbs understandings of race,

gender, sexuality, class, and religion in a complex interweaving that constitutes the bases of how the

parents of the second-generation were raised. In order to understand how modern-day Iranian

Americans in diaspora construct their sense of racial, religious, class, sexual, and gender identity, I

believe it is imperative to begin with the parent generation, the first-generation of Iranian Americans

and the Iran that they remember – a Pahlavi Iran.

Introducing *Between Warrior Brother and Veiled Sister: Islamic Fundamentalism & the Politics of*

Patriarchy in Iran, Minoo Moallem states how the Pahlavi kings constructed a particular national

identity through projects of modernization. Drawing from her own personal experience, she shares

how,

> the Pahlavi regime was based on the ideology of modernization and Westernization and
> offered endless dichotomies revolving around the racial and civilizing tropes of the modern
> in contrast to the traditional… The codes of conduct were either rigidly defined or so deeply
> embedded that they became naturalized.[28]

This very dichotomous structure, the modern versus the traditional, as well as their naturalization

through state policy, became the conceptual debate which undergirds the parent generations'

experiences with social identity. A constant and recurring tension for many of my friends as they

spoke of their parents and how they were raised, the battle between modernity and tradition shaped

the discursive, rhetorical, and experiential terrain upon and through which they made sense of their

identities.

---

[28] Moallem, *Between Warrior Brother and Veiled Sister*, 2–3.

Pahlavi Modernity: De-Islamicization and the Unrequited Hopes of Becoming Modern

The Pahlavi kings ruled Iran from 1925-1979, implementing a wide array of state modernization programs which sought to move Iran into the terrain of European civilizational modernity. Many of the state policies that the Pahlavis implemented in order to produce a modern nation and citizenry emerge through specific ideas of what constituted a modern populace, through axes of race, gender, class, sexuality, and religion. Because Islam was the central means by which Iran was constructed as 'unmodern,' even 'antimodern,' the Pahlavi kings' modernity projects worked primarily to reduce the sanctity, power, and social value of Islam.[29] As Said argues, orientalist constructions of Islam are designed to mark it inferior to the 'West,' a phenomenon which "Islam is supposed to be hell-bent on opposing, competing with, resenting, and being enraged at"[30] (xxv). The reductive Orientalist construction of Islam which frames the faith as solely an antagonistic, violent, anti-Western dogma to all that is Western liberalism underpins Pahlavi modernization programs.

This process of de-Islamicization that the Pahlavis undertook at the state level demonstrated the rush to modernize Iran, implementing a series of policies specifically targeting visible displays of Muslim belief, faith, and practice. The Pahlavis were certainly not the first to attempt to modernize the nation, as examples from the Qajar era demonstrate, but their state policies embody a sweeping state project invested in the claims of civilizational modernity. All in hopes of achieving this elusive notion of modernity, the Pahlavi kings and their modernizing programs paved the terrain for much of Iranian history to come.

Moallem demonstrates how European construction of Iranian racial, religious, and gender inferiority relied specifically on the demonization and denigration of Islam. She argues that "in the

---

[29] Mamdani, *Good Muslim, Bad Muslim*; Edward W. Said, *Covering Islam: How the Media and the Experts Determine How We See the Rest of the World*, Rev. ed., 1st Vintage books ed. (New York: Vintage Books, 1997); Moallem, *Between Warrior Brother and Veiled Sister*.

[30] Said, *Covering Islam*.

Western view, Mohammedanism in Persia has an anticivilizational effect leading to the cultural degeneration of Persians and the barbaric treatment of women."[31] She continues to argue that, "in the context of modern colonial racial formations, religion becomes not only a means of racialization but also a theoretical tool for justifying the assessment of Islamic inferiority and thus the need for European intervention."[32] Through this European construction of racializing and gendering religion, namely the demarcation of Islam as barbaric and backward, colonial modernity reifies its social posture with Europe as the cultural superior, meanwhile validating the notion that Iran and Iranians need saving from their own cultural demise.

Highlighting the intertwined operative function of social axes within colonial modernity, Moallem shows how in order to further its white supremacist ethos of a superior European culture, Islam is understood as 'behind,' in racial, gender, and sexual terms. She argues,

> Racialization of Muslims works together with the representation of gender relations in Western discourse. Women and gender issues become the main signifiers of Muslim backwardness and difference… Through the racialization of Persians and the sexual objectification of Persian women, Europeans construct themselves as racially superior subjects. The depiction of Persian women both as victims of cultural and religious traditions and as accomplices enjoying their own slavery opens up a space for the emergence of a 'discourse of protection.'[33]

Through outlining the discursive formation of the oppressed, enslaved, and voiceless Persian Muslim woman, Moallem shows how the project of civilizational modernity produces Europeans as culturally superior. Validating naturalized European claims, the project of modernity therefore continuously operates through various social identity axes to reify itself and the totality of the temporal and spatial project of modernity.

---

[31] Moallem, *Between Warrior Brother and Veiled Sister*, 41.

[32] Moallem, 42.

[33] Moallem, 43–44.

Operating from within these modernist claims, the Pahlavi kings worked to reduce the cultural salience and significance of Islam in order to "modernize" their nation. Practices such as forbidding Iranian women from veiling, forcibly removing the veils off of women's heads who veiled in public, shifting Iran's calendrical system from the Islamic dating system to pre-Islamic dating methods, and using Persian names for months and ridding the calendar of Arabic/Islamic names all demonstrate the ways Pahlavi kings worked to de-Islamicize the nation.[34] These state policies embody the project of modernity, a series of interlinked projects which absorb the work of racial, religious, class, gender, and sexual difference to make Iran decidedly modern 'like the Europeans,' and not Muslim 'like the Arabs.'

Ridding associations with Arabs, Arab culture, and Arab history became a primary means of furthering this project of de-Islamicizing Iran. With Arabness and Muslimness understood as synonymous racial pollutants which held Iranians back in the advancement to modernity, the Pahlavi kings enacted state policies which not only separated Iranians from Arabs, but also framed themselves as superior, through racialized religious claims. As Mohammad Tavakoli-Targhi argues in "Refashioning Iran: Language and Culture During the Constitutional Revolution," "Arabic words were purged, 'authentic' Persian terms forged, and neologisms and lexicography were constituted as endeavors for a 'national reawakening,'" one which recreated an Iranian national identity against Islamic iconography.[35] Although this example predates the Pahlavi kings, Tavakoli-Targhi's argument demonstrates how Iranian national identity was consistently worked and reworked against Arabness/Muslimness, in a colonial encounter which cherished modernity as sacrosanct.

---

[34] Fozi, "Neo-Iranian Nationalism," 236–37.

[35] Mohamad Tavakoli-Targhi, "Refashioning Iran: Language and Culture During the Constitutional Revolution," *Iranian Studies* 23, no. 1–4 (1990): 77, https://doi.org/10.1080/00210869008701750.

This sweeping state project to de-Islamicize Iran operated through many racial, gender, sexual, and class registers, the core of which was always the erosion of Muslim values. For example, shifting Iran's calendrical system to a pre-Islamic calendar with Persian month names instead of Arabic month names is an act both secularizing and racializing. Another instance of this mutually raced and secularizing force of Pahlavi state policy is how Reza Shah Pahlavi transformed the tombs of esteemed Persian poets into mausoleums, a specific tactic to de-Islamicize Iran.[36] By turning the tombs of Sa'adi, Hafez, and Khayyam into mausoleums, he championed them as sites of visitation and pilgrimage, directly threatening and challenging the practices of Islamic *ziyarat*[37] to prominent Muslim shrines throughout Iran.[38] This is not to suggest that the revered Persian poets do not deserve social attention or that there were not gatherings at their resting sites prior, but to illustrate how this particular decision by the Pahlavi king to elevate their significance to that of a sacred ritual honoring reserved for religious figures of the highest esteem, is a direct attempt to undermine the operative power of Islam.

In addition to the eradication of anything associated with Arabness, another facet of de-Islamicizing Iran required reliance on Zoroastrian symbols and icons. To make legitimate an Iranian national identity which was outside of the bounds of Islam, Iranian state officials, discourses, and policies drew from Zoroastrian icons and symbols to produce this non-Islamic Iranian identity. As Tavakoli-Targhi suggests, "the selective remembrance of things pre-Islamic made possible the dissociation of Iran from Islam and the articulation of a new national identity and political discourse… that refashioned the *millat* from a religious collectivity (*millat-i Shi'i*) into a national

---

[36] Fozi, "Neo-Iranian Nationalism," 236.

[37] *Ziyarat* means to visit or to go on a pilgrimage, primarily to a shrine dedicated to the descendants of the Prophet Mohammad.

[38] Fozi, "Neo-Iranian Nationalism," 236.

collectivity (*millat-i Iran*)."[39] This refashioning of Iranian national identity, specifically to shift the social unit from a religious collective to a national collective, demonstrates both the project of de-Islamicization and the ways Zoroastrianism was absorbed into national imaginaries.

As Navid Fozi argues, in "Neo-Iranian Nationalism," Reza Shah Pahlavi sought to gain his political legitimacy "by claiming links to pre-Islamic Iran."[40] Although relying on a secular national symbols as well, Reza Shah Pahlavi "recognized Zoroastrians as bearers of pre-Islamic Iranian tradition and elevated their religious symbols to being national symbols, further belittling the Islamic religious establishment by describing it as a relic of the Arab invasions."[41] This Pahlavi policy worked to promote the validity of Zoroastrian symbols as more legitimate and indicative of a national Iranian identity as it also worked to reduce and undermine the significance of Islam as a symbol of national identity. Drawing primarily from Zoroastrianism to interweave notions of a 'grand Persian empire before Arab invasion,' to a modern Iranian national identity that is outside of Islam, the Pahlavi's attempted to unify the nation through this new national identity construction.

The ways in which the Pahlavi kings integrated Zoroastrian icons, in the logos of the National Bank and Ministry of Justice, in the royal Pahlavi crest, in the renaming and adjusting of the calendar dates, and public celebration of pre-Islamic rituals, became the substance by which Iranians who lived under their reign came to understand the tangibility of modernity.[42] In other words, modernity became possible primarily through the eradication of Islamic iconography and ritual, and the supplanting of Zoroastrian/pre-Islamic references and symbols.

---

[39] Tavakoli-Targhi, "Refashioning Iran," 77–78.

[40] Fozi, "Neo-Iranian Nationalism," 231.

[41] Fozi, 236.

[42] Monica M. Ringer, "Iranian Nationalism and Zoroastrian Identity: Between Cyrus and Zoroaster," in *Iran Facing Others* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan US, n.d.), 6, https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137013408_13.

Therefore, this Pahlavi modernity and de-Islamicization as its central operative force, became the substantive discursive terrain through which many of the parent generation drew from, learned, adopted, and reproduced.[43] All of my friends were intimately aware of the ways in which Pahlavi modernity influenced their parents' upbringing, their belief systems, as well as how it affected their own understandings of national, religious, racial, ethnic, sexual, class, and gender identity. In order to make sense of how my friends understood their relationship to God, to Islam, to their faith, I had to make room to conceptualize how their parents' experiences with de-Islamicization shaped that very process.

An Epistemic Emergency: The Stripping Away of the Sacred

In order to fully appreciate the sweeping reach of civilizational modernity, I must interrogate not only how it affects our social understandings of what constitutes modernity, but also how those naturalized claims came to undergird our very analytical tools. An unfortunate consequence has been that many, both scholars and not, have adopted and absorbed the claims of civilizational modernity, rendering valid its epistemic claims. For instance, many diasporic Iranian scholars operate squarely within the modernist assertions that Muslimness equates backwardness, that secularization equates open-mindedness, and/or that all Iranians wish to secularize, or even more presumptively, that all Iranians are secular.[44] *For the Love of God* wishes, first and foremost, to dislodge these stitched-

---

[43] Not all of the parent generation wholly reproduced Pahlavi modernity, and I do not wish to suggest that. However, it has become a substantive current in the diasporic collective, and therefore requires close analytical attention.

[44] Mehdi Bozorgmehr, "From Iranian Studies to Studies of Iranians in the United States," *Iranian Studies* 31, no. 1 (1998): 5–30; Maryam Daha, "Contextual Factors Contributing to Ethnic Identity Development of Second-Generation Iranian American Adolescents," *Journal of Adolescent Research* 26, no. 5 (2011): 543–69, https://doi.org/10.1177/0743558411402335; Shideh Hanassab, "Sexuality, Dating, and Double Standards: Young Iranian Immigrants in Los Angeles," *Iranian Studies* 31, no. 1 (1998): 65–75, https://doi.org/10.1080/00210869808701896; Valentine M. Moghadam, "Islamic Feminism and Its Discontents: Toward a Resolution of the Debate," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 27, no. 4 (2002): 1135–71, https://doi.org/10.1086/339639; Nilou Mostofi, "Who We Are: The Perplexity of Iranian-American Identity," *Sociological Quarterly* 44, no. 4 (2003): 681–703, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1533-8525.2003.tb00531.x; Georges Sabagh and Mehdi Bozorgmehr, "Secular Immigrants: Religiosity and Ethnicity among Iranian Muslims in Los Angeles," in *The

together modernist claims, while demonstrating the ways in which queer and trans Iranian Americans operate within, around, through, and beyond these dichotomous forms.

As Moallem notes, many Iranian scholars and members of the diaspora "have aligned themselves with the prevailing anti-Islamic racism by claiming the radical separation of Iranian culture from Islam," in essence, solidifying claims that Islam is barbaric, backward, traditional, Arab, close-minded, archaic, anti-woman, anti-queer, etc.[45] Tavakoli-Targhi, in *Refashioning Iran: Orientalism, Occidentalism, and Historiography*, critiques Iranian scholars for adopting modernist claims. He argues, "viewing modernity as belated reduplication of 'Western models,' historians of Iran often invent periodizations that are analogous to standard European historical accounts."[46] As both Moallem and Tavakoli-Targhi suggest, the assumptive claims modernity makes have come to be absorbed and reproduced by many in the Iranian diaspora, within the scholarship and beyond.

Fixed mainly to our conceptualizations of Islam, subscribing to these modernist claims has produced a vast field of scholarship which decidedly accepts Islam as unmodern, as 'holding us back.'[47] More than that, it understands Islam as irredeemable, unwanted, disgusting, and something to be eradicated entirely from our bodies and our entire way of life. In a following subsection, I will draw from the work of Reza Gholami in *Secularism and Identity: Non-Islamiosity in the Iranian Diaspora*, the only text to date which comprehensively grapples with the embodiment of anti-Muslim hatred in the diaspora, to demonstrate this phenomenon. Looking precisely at all the ways Iranian Americans in diaspora reproduce and engage with these strong anti-Muslim values, I will show how these

---

Muslim Communities of North America, ed. Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad and Jane Smith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 445–73; Maghbouleh, *The Limits of Whiteness*; Roxanne Varzi, *Warring Souls: Youth, Media, and Martyrdom in Post-Revolution Iran* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006).

[45] Moallem, *Between Warrior Brother and Veiled Sister*, 7.

[46] Tavakoli-Targhi, *Refashioning Iran*, 7.

[47] This cannot be understood outside of its politicized context – the need for the diaspora to paint itself as democratic, secular, pro-woman, pro-queer all in hopes of undermining and overthrowing the Islamic Republic of Iran.

modernist claims have come to dictate our innermost personal ideas, thoughts, and prayers as second-generation Iranian Americans.

Before moving to non-Islamiosity, I must also mention the epistemic consequences civilizational modernity brings about in academic scholarship on 'the figure of the Muslim.' In addition to making universal and normal its claims, civilizational modernity operates from within a secularizing framework which, by design, effaces the salience of religion as a category of analysis. The consequence of which has been a vast array of anti-racist scholarship on the figure of the Muslim which only tends to race, gender, (and at times, other identity factors), yet not the religious, the sacred, the spiritual, the faith, the transcendental.

Talal Asad argues in *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity*, how the project of modernity operates to 'strip' away anything that challenges the secularist bases of modernity. He writes,

> Modernity is a *project* – or rather, a series of interlinked projects – that certain people in power seek to achieve. The project aims at institutionalizing a number of (sometimes conflicting, often evolving) principles: constitutionalism, moral autonomy, democracy, human rights, civil equality, industry, consumerism, freedom of the market – and secularism. … The notion that these experiences constitute 'disenchantment' – implying a direct access to reality, a stripping away of myth, magic, and the sacred – is a salient feature of the modern epoch.[48]

Calling it a series of interlinked projects, Asad's description here illustrates how modernity is a combination of projects requiring the construction of associations between these select principles as modern and the principal project of secularism. His mention of "stripping away of myth, magic, and the sacred" as being a "salient feature of the modern epoch" articulates how religion has come to be an explicit sign of pre-modernity.[49]

---

[48] Asad, *Formations of the Secular*, 13.

[49] Asad, 14.

For me, this attention to the stripping away of the myth, magic, and sacred is fundamental to understanding precisely how successful and far-reaching the project of modernity has been. I argue that civilizational modernity has been so overwhelmingly successful at normalizing and naturalizing its claims, secularity as one of its founding bases, to the point where virtually all critical race and gender studies scholarship seeking to explore and analyze the figure of the Muslim in modern American landscapes has overlooked attention to this dimension – the myth, the magic, the sacred; also the faith, the belief, the ritual, the supernatural, the unashamedly religious component of what it means to be a Muslim; of what it means to believe in God.

As Junaid Rana argues in *Terrifying Muslims: Race and Labor in the South Asian Diaspora*, "the Muslim" has come to mean "a category that encompasses many nationalities, social and cultural practices, [and] religious affiliations (from Muslim Sunni and Shia to Christian, Sikh, and Hindu)."[50] Given the racial reality of non-Muslims suffering from anti-Muslim racism, there has been an obvious necessity to tend to the operative forms of anti-Muslim racism. However, I wish to illustrate how this academic response to combat anti-Muslim racism privileges attention to 'Muslim' as a racialized, gendered, classed, or sexualized experience, neglecting careful consideration of Islam as a means of faith, belief, and/or religious/spiritual practice; not to mention, the sweeping lack of attention to the queer/trans Muslim life, let alone how queerness and transness interplay with the oft-neglected spiritual dimension.

In addition to this compartmentalization, there is a hierarchization of racial, gender, sexuality, and class analysis over interrogations of the secular-religious, further inhibiting any analysis of the ways in which religious and/or spiritual social experience crosscuts with these other dimensions. Even in critiquing the tenets of modernity, epistemologically, the scholarship on the

---

[50] Rana, *Terrifying Muslims*, 9.

figure of the Muslim continues to relegate and ignore the significance of religiosity-secularity in its analyses. Asad is primarily concerned with how the religious and secular are framed within this project of modernity, the secular as modern and the religious as pre-modern.[51] However, I suggest that we must understand the hegemonic totality of modernity as a project in the very ways it has influenced our epistemological framings of social life. I am interested in how the "stripping away of myth, magic, and the sacred" in this modern epoch, has impaired our very capacity to understand the sacred and has in fact, relegated it to the space of insignificance.

Here I build on the scholarship of Zareena Grewal and Mayanthi Fernando to draw from their careful attention to both racial and gender subjecthood as well as the religious, the spiritual, the love for God that their informants speak of. As Grewal outlines in describing her scholarship on American Muslim student-travelers, her primary focus is to make an argument which takes these students' identities "as Americans in these global networks in the Middle East as seriously as their identity as devout Muslims."[52] Her meticulous attention to the religiosity of these student-travelers as they experience Cairo, Amman, and Damascus highlights precisely how imperative it is to appreciate the function and power of religious and spiritual experience as a part of substantiating transnational racial and gender experiences.

In *The Republic Unsettled: Muslim French and the Contradictions of Secularism*, Fernando gives meticulous attention to the salience of God for her Muslim French informants, precisely how 'love of God' is what guides these Muslim woman's livelihoods, alongside and against French state secularity. Fernando writes,

> what connects desire and obligation – what turns obligation into desire – is love of God. Through practices like praying, fasting, and veiling, Muslim French augment their love of God… The intellectual, affective, and ethical registers of subjectivity are conjoined here and

---

[51] Asad, *Formations of the Secular*, 14.

[52] Grewal, *Islam Is a Foreign Country*, 61.

sustain a feedback loop: to learn more about Islam is to cultivate one's love for God, which propels better practice and more learning, and so on.[53]

Through her ethnographic work with young Muslim French woman in Paris, Fernando's analytical attention to love for God allows an understanding of how Muslim French woman navigate the boundaries erected by a racist, secularizing French state. Her analytical scope, broad enough to appreciate not just the racialized/gendered experiences, and not even just the workings of secularization, but specifically the religious, the faith-based, the love for God in addition to those facets, allows a much more honest exploration into these Muslim women's lives.

Fernando closes the argument by arguing how Muslim French "reconfigure secular notions of personal autonomy and modern religiosity so that the normative religious authority and inner individual desire are not opposed, but rather inextricably linked."[54] It is this ability to open analytical room which allows the Muslim French woman to articulate her experience with autonomy, secularity, and religious authority, even in ways that seem outright contradictory, that I wish to draw from in my own work.

In the field of trans studies, there has been a recent interest in questions of religion, secularism, and the implications these worlds hold for, with, and through one another. Susan Stryker argues in an introduction for the Transgender Studies Quarterly's Special Edition on *Trans*/Religion*, that "because manifesting transness can have metaphysical, spiritual, or religious significance, it is thus an appropriate topic of interest for religious studies, as a growing body of work."[55] This recent attention to the world that emerges at the cusp of transness and religious/spiritual exploration offers possibilities, ontological openings, and invitations into new conceptual terrain.

---

[53] Fernando, *The Republic Unsettled*, 158–60.

[54] Fernando, 162.

[55] Susan Stryker, "General Editor's Introduction," *Transgender Studies Quarterly* 6, no. 3 (2019): 281, https://doi.org/10.1215/23289252-7549382.

More importantly, she argues how "a new wave of trans studies scholarship… increasingly parallels the critique of secularism to be found in religious studies, in that it refuses the secular/religious dichotomy, as well as the science-versus-religion framework."[56] This scholarly wave, attentive to critiques of secularity, paves the way for dreaming up the value, meaning, and function of religious/spiritual experience beyond and outside the binaries of modern v. unmodern, science v. religion, secular v. religious. Strassfeld and Henderson-Espinoza argue how the field of transgender studies has had to interrogate its secularist underpinnings. They argue, "trans studies' failure to address religion unwittingly participates in discursively marking transgender as secular."[57]

As their work seeks to map the intertwining and newly unfolding terrain of trans studies and religious studies, they emphasize the need to understand the secularist framings of transgender identity. Drawing from Asad, they argue,

> Of course, secularism is not secular; rather (in the US context), secularism functions as an unmarked (and thereby naturalized) form of white Protestantism disciplining (premodern, irrational, racialized) religion. To offer political critiques of secular neoliberal constructions of gender, trans studies must engage with religious studies. Otherwise, in our silence we risk colluding with the constitution of trans as secular.[58]

Laying out the imperative to interrogate the secular bases within which much of trans studies operates, Strassfeld and Henderson-Espinoza make a crucial intervention. Encouraging scholars of trans studies to adopt this series of queries around secularity, their work invites academics to grapple honestly with the project of modernity and its far-reaching claims.

Therefore, by being attentive to this epistemological arrangement, *For the Love of God* seeks to analyze the figure of the Muslim as a site of racial, gender, class, sexual, *and* religious/spiritual analytics. Through this epistemological reformulation, I believe, study of the Muslim figure can

---

[56] Stryker, 281.

[57] Strassfeld and Henderson-Espinoza, "Introduction," 284.

[58] Strassfeld and Henderson-Espinoza, 285.

begin to analyze the centrality of faith, belief, and Islamic practice as a part of racial, gender, class, and sexual dynamics in everyday Muslim life.

The Beginnings of an Iranian American Diaspora

Notorious for the 1979 Islamic Revolution which took the world by surprise, Iran is widely known in the United States for its dramatic overthrow of the Shah and the establishment of the Islamic Republic under Ayatollah Khomeini. Quickly becoming even more of a geopolitical shock, Iran became a common household conversation during the ensuing Hostage Crisis – in which Iranian student activists occupied and held hostage U.S. embassy workers in demand of the Shah's extradition.[59] Adding to the political turmoil, Iran was also at war with its neighboring Iraq from 1980-1988.[60] The decade proved to be an extremely violent, grief-laden, and turbulent time for all Iranians, with hundreds of thousands deceased.

Therefore, it should come as no surprise that many Iranians understand themselves as refugees, political asylees, exiled, running away from what commonly feels like incessant political violence. As historic and impactful as that decade was for Iranians, I find it necessary to outline how my conceptualization of an Iranian diaspora does not begin in 1979 as a consequence of the Revolution, nor do I locate its origins solely in the lives of those who sought to flee from the violence of the Iran-Iraq war. Iranians have long been migrating and traversing the globe, far before

---

[59] For an Iranian woman's firsthand recollection as a student activist partaking in the takeover, see Massoumeh Ebtekar, *Takeover in Tehran: The inside Story of the 1979 U.S. Embassy Capture*, trans. Fred A. Reed (Burnaby, B.C: Talonbooks, 2000). It is worth mentioning that the Iranian students who occupied the American Embassy released Black hostages and woman hostages, finding that they already experience systematic oppression. They only kept the white cis men hostage for the duration of the occupation of the U.S. Embassy which lasted 444 days.

[60] See Egle Murauskaite, "Saddam's Use of Violence against Civilians during the Iran-Iraq War," *Middle East Journal* 70, no. 1 (2016): 47–68; Thomas L. McNaugher, "Ballistic Missiles and Chemical Weapons: The Legacy of the Iran-Iraq War," *International Security* 15, no. 2 (1990): 5–34, https://doi.org/10.2307/2538864; Ray Takeyh, "The Iran-Iraq War: A Reassessment," *Middle East Journal* 64, no. 3 (2010): 365–83.

the 1979 Revolution.[61] I find it important to illustrate that my working schematic for what constitutes diaspora requires fundamentally disrupting notions of linearity, refuting the liberal aspirations embedded in assimilationist discourses.

Introducing the conceptual fiber of an Iranian diaspora, Babak Elahi and Persis Karim illustrate the academic shift from 'exile,' 'refugee,' and 'transnational' towards the language of a 'diaspora' to appreciate "what it is Iranians are and experience as a result of having left Iran."[62] Moving attention away from the normative diasporic scripts, what Clifford calls 'the ideal type' which traps us in a hierarchy of diasporic authenticity, this redirection to a diaspora allows room to appreciate the materiality of Iranian life, in the myriad forms and flows that it exists.[63]

Forty years after the Revolution, Iranian scholarship has made this important shift to the rhetoric of a diaspora, leaving behind the exilic framework which privileges a particular reading of the social unit as directly connected to one fixed homeland. This exilic framework contributes to a binaristic reading of the Iranian diaspora as exile v. homeland, here v. there, civilized v. uncivilized, past v. future, embodying the linearity that functions as an axis of liberal political aspirations.[64]

This conceptualization relies on liberal assimilationist values, wherein immigrant communities are understood as needing to alter their behavior, beliefs, and practices in order to make themselves legible in the American sociopolitical landscape.[65] This linearity serves nationalist

---

[61] Dabashi, *Iran*; Tavakoli-Targhi, *Refashioning Iran*.

[62] Babak Elahi and Persis M. Karim, "Introduction: Iranian Diaspora," *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa, and the Middle East* 31, no. 2 (2011): 382, https://doi.org/10.1215/1089201X-1264307.

[63] James Clifford, "Diasporas," *Cultural Anthropology* 9, no. 3 (1994): 306, https://doi.org/10.1525/can.1994.9.3.02a00040.

[64] Elahi and Karim, "Introduction," 381.

[65] Mahmood, "Secularism, Hermeneutics, and Empire."

discourses of racial (un)belonging, forcing immigrants to erase, sever, or lose parts of themselves in their process of Americanizing.

Purnima Mankekar argues at the outset of her book, *Unsettling India: Affect, Temporality, Transnationality*, that the way we define diaspora has important political consequences for how people are able to find social meaning, community, and senses of (un)belonging. Critiquing definitions of diaspora which are based on a notion of displacement and dispersion, Mankekar argues,

> This conceptualization has concrete consequences for the ability of migrants and, in particular, immigrants of color to construct a sense of belonging within the United States: the implication is that they do not belong in America and that the only way to earn a place here is to break ties with there. Thus, assimilationist assumptions underpinning this paradigm – the notion that migrants and immigrants alike have to 'leave behind' lives, political affiliations, histories – undergird nationalist discourses.[66]

Drawing from Mankekar's work, I too do not conceive of the Iranian American diaspora solely as a group of dispersed, dislocated, or displaced peoples. To define diaspora as directly resulting from a dislocation from the nation implies that diasporic populations do not belong wherever they 'end up' and that their 'authentic homeland' is where they in fact, belong.

Using the conceptual frame of a diaspora allows me the analytical space to appreciate the lives, stories, and trajectories of Iranian American diasporic materiality – how some went back to live in Iran for a few years as young children, how some were born in a country that they had no familial, ancestral, or legal connection to, or how some spent some time in a European country because a relative had a home there. The use of diaspora provides a lens which can understand stories that did not, and do not, neatly follow liberal conceptualizations of migration: from East to West, from religious to secular, from backward to modern, from Iranian to American.

These examples of nonlinear diasporic life, all drawn from my research, are evidence that linear notions of migration are suffocating our narratives and our narrative capacities. Reducing the

---

[66] Purnima Mankekar, *Unsettling India: Affect, Temporality, Transnationality* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015), 29.

diasporic community into the simple and neatly packaged liberal conceptualization of post-Revolution refugees flee a dreadfully violent Islamic Iran for a safe and secular America would grossly misunderstand the myriad experiences of the Iranian American diaspora community. By making space for the multinodal centers of diasporic experience, I am better equipped to appreciate the ways in which queer and trans Iranian Americans make sense of their selves in the diasporic social landscape.

However, Sima Shakhsari's work in "From Homoerotics of Exile to Homopolitics of Diaspora: Cyberspace, the War on Terror, and the Hypervisible Iranian Queer" cautions us not to blanketly adopt all romanticizations of diaspora as analytical solutions to our prior insufficiencies with the exile framework.[67] They argue how the Iranian diaspora has successfully absorbed responsibility for defending the rights of Iranian women and queers as a political move to demonstrate its modernity, democratic commitments, and open-mindedness in the face of a presumed hostile anti-woman and anti-queer Islamic Republic. Shakhsari opens by showcasing the rhetorical shift from Iranian Americans as exilees to Iranian Americans as a diaspora and how this shift has allowed the collective to position themselves as more inclusive and tolerant in contradistinction to the Iranian state. Therefore, the figure of the Iranian American diasporic woman has come to stand-in as the epitome of modernity, a free woman, free to walk around without the veil, free to participate in American society, free to travel, free to pursue education; and as I suggest, free to be not Muslim.

From Iranian to Persian, From Muslim to Secular

Unequivocally the most significant event in modern Iranian history, the 1979 Revolution forever altered the fiber of Iranian livelihood. The Revolution resulted in the largest exodus of

---

[67] Shakhsari, "From Homoerotics of Exile to Homopolitics of Diaspora."

people from Iran that the nation has ever seen, wherein many activists, political dissidents, intellectuals, artists, religious and ethnic minorities left Iran. It is estimated that around one million people left Iran during the immediate years[68] after the Revolution, with around 500,000 leaving before the end of that year.[69] Any formulation of an Iranian diaspora therefore, must respect this geopolitical reality.

However, almost all of my friends had parents that migrated to the United States prior to the Revolution, signaling several important points at the outset: their families were likely wealthier families in Iran originally, their parents left Iran over forty years ago, sometimes fifty years ago, and lastly, that they lived in a Pahlavi Iran, not under the Islamic Republic of Iran. Although this project is centered around the experiences, narratives, and anecdotes of the second-generation to determine how they engage with the consequences of their parents' migratory practices, I do find it instructive and instrumental to locate the histories and trajectories of their parents' migratory experiences, an important grounding analytic. By doing so, I am able to determine the salient political currents that the parents inherited and engaged with in 1950s, 60s, and 70s Iran, Pahlavi modernity.

Pahlavi modernity, as stated prior, relied on state modernizing programs – transforming Iran into a centralized state which championed a unified racial-religious identity as secularizing, superficially Zoroastrian, pre-Islamic Persian, and a gender-sexual posture as pro-(cis)woman/pro-(hetero)sexual. These claims came to substantiate the terrain of Pahlavi modernity, thereby becoming the terms of debate many of the second-generation used to base their own claims to and/or critiques of modernity.

---

[68] It is important to mention that although my project is looking at Iranian Americans, there are many pockets of diasporic Iranian communities all over the world, in places such as: Great Britain, Germany, Turkey, France, etc. I do not wish to erase these alternative diasporas but note that those are beyond the scope of this project.

[69] Gholami, *Secularism and Identity*, 83.

Pahlavi modernity worked diligently to naturalize and normalize modernist claims, a discursive, social and political project, that was unbelievably successful with the parent generation. For instance, the Pahlavi regime worked hard to present itself as pro-(cis)woman and pro-(hetero)sexual specifically through de-veiling Iranian women, a sign of women's sexual freedom inherited directly from European civilizational modernity. Through forcibly unveiling Iranian women in public, Iranian state guards performed the very acts prescribed by the Pahlavis to achieve 'modernity.' I am not concerned with whether or not 'modernity' was achieved by the Pahlavi state or whether or not this act is productive of a 'real modernity.' Rather, I am interested in how these prescriptive state practices, which the parents of my friends likely witnessed, heard about, or perhaps lived themselves, shaped the ways they understand their social identity.

More importantly, I wish to detect the ways these state policies informed the parent generation as to what constitutes a modern nation-state: women walking in public without veils, removal of Islam and Islamic practices from public life, women being visible to non-familial men, and eradicating Islam's grip on women's sexuality. Because almost all of my friends, as well as a significant portion of Iranians in the Iranian American diaspora, emigrated to the U.S. prior to the 1979 Revolution, Pahlavi modernity and the claims it holds true are some of the most potent tensions in conversations on Iranian identity. However, not all my friends had parents who emigrated prior to the Revolution, and in fact, some were born in Iran themselves. This too shapes the ways in which my friends grasped and engaged with the terms of debate, yet, Pahlavi modernity and the discursive claims it holds true are central points of contention for all Iranians, whether in diaspora or not, whether migrating prior to the Revolution or after. In that regard, I take Pahlavi modernity and its claims to modernity as salient indicators of how the Iranian American diasporic identity was formed.

In conversation with the signs and symbols of Pahlavi modernity, the parent generation adopted many of these modernist claims as a way to protect themselves from the everyday racisms they experienced in the diaspora. I argue that it is the combination of the 1979 Revolution along with the Tehran Embassy Takeover which drastically altered the ways in which Iranian Americans understood and constructed their racial, religious, sexual, and gender identities. Due to the immense violence Iranian Americans faced as a result of the media spectacle produced by the 1979 Revolution and Embassy Takeover, a systemic shift in identity formation took place: moving decidedly away from Iranian, Muslim, anti-woman, and anti-sexual, towards Persian, secular, pro-woman, and pro-heterosexual. It is through depicting this specific trajectory of racial, religious, gender, and sexual identity formation that I can illuminate the conceptual terrain within which young queer and trans Iranian Americans make sense of their own identities and their own relationship to God and/or Islam.

Because the Revolution occurred in direct response to the grievances born of the Pahlavi regime, the Revolution was grounds for a deep restructuring of Iranian and Iranian diasporic identity across the world with Pahlavi modernity as its focal point. I suggest that as a consequence to the rampant and brutal violence born of the Hostage Crisis and enacted onto the bodies of Iranian Americans, a specific racial, religious, sexual, and gender politics emerged to shield, deflect, and protect from further violence – one in which Iranian Americans wholeheartedly adopted and reproduced the normative claims of Pahlavi modernity. In order to protect from further violence, Iranian Americans largely moved towards secularity, whiteness, gender equality, and sexual freedom in order to reject associations with the how the alternative was framed, a barbaric, patriarchal, anti-sexual, and anti-American Islamic Republic of Iran.

The Emotional Journey of the Hostage Crisis: Constructing & Deconstructing the Aryan Race

The media spectacle produced by the Hostage Crisis provided the discursive terrain upon which Iranian Americans in diaspora underwent an important restructuring of social identity: from Iranian to Persian, from Muslim to secular. This is not to suggest a drastic shift, as I have shown how many adopted and operated from within Pahlavi modernity comfortably, prior to the Hostage Crisis. Rather, this is to argue that the Hostage Crisis became cause for immense social and political violence against the Iranian diaspora community, forcing a desperate and rapid identity reworking that placed racial pollutants as far away/behind them as possible. The speed, intensity, and fervor with which this shift took place can only be attributed to the material conditions of a systemic, almost omnipotent, racialized violence.

Edward Said argues in, *Covering Islam: How the Media and the Experts Determine How We See the Rest of the World*, how American media sources constructed violent understandings of Iran through imagery of the Hostage Crisis. Said argues,

> nowhere was this more evident than in the long Iranian crisis during which the American consumer of news was given a sustained diet of information about a people, a culture, a religion – really no more than a poorly defined and badly misunderstood abstraction – always, in the case of Iran, represented as militant, dangerous, and anti-American.[70]

Said goes on to demonstrate that "the media's purpose seemed to be to wage a kind of war against Iran."[71] With the media coverage blasting violent imagery, depicting Iranians as highly militant, dangerous, nonsensical, and primarily anti-American, the amount of racial violence that ensued is unthinkable. As I grew into my own racial consciousness, I remember searching for my community's experiences with this intense geopolitical moment. I always encountered a wall, a wall of silence.

---

[70] Said, *Covering Islam*, 83.

[71] Said, 101.

Somehow, we understood, we were never supposed to speak of the violence, never. So, I rarely heard about it, if I did.

Yet, I cherished the few anecdotal excerpts that I finally got to hear from the few select family members who had a budding racial consciousness, those who had grown tired of remaining silent about what they had lived through. Through their sharing with me, they were transforming their racial trauma into substance, into legacy, into memory that gave me the legitimacy I had long been searching for, someone, something to validate all the racial trauma I had lived through too. Though short and rare, I heard family members share stories of being stalked, harassed, and threatened with death by the KKK. I heard stories of homes being burned to the ground and of people being forced to hide in dog kennels at its height. Only one of my friends had heard their parents' experiences during the hostage crisis, sharing with me how their mother's brakes were cut. "She could have died," they said soberly.

Although this project does not engage the modern history of Iran as a primary site of analysis, it does appreciate and take into account the ways in which our parents shaped their identity in conversation with these powerful geopolitical forces. Because my area of focus is the second-generation, the Iranian Americans born and/or raised in Southern California, I explore the ways the youth have made sense of their parents' migration stories, racial/religious and gender/sexual posturing, and how all of that influences the way they understand God and/or Islam.

The consequence of this onslaught of racial violence during the early 1980s was that the parent generation was made clear on the reach and power of overt racial violence. In a powerful, yet complex racial move, Iranian Americans began to distance themselves as much as humanly possible from Islam, which they understood as a racial pollutant – the sole reason for the demise of their country. It was in those years that Islam became the stand-in for any and all of the violence of the Islamic Revolution, the Tehran Embassy Takeover, and the newly forming Islamic Republic. I argue

that we cannot understand the way in which the Iranian American diaspora structured its identity as secular and non-Islamic, as outside of or irrelevant to the ways in which the United States structured its racial posturing of Islam. As Said points out, Islam became framed as "inimical to United States interests"[72] and therefore Iranian American diasporic identity followed the lead of Pahlavi modernity and disassociated with Islam as quickly as possible.

Neda Maghbouleh illustrates in *The Limits of Whiteness: Iranian Americans and the Everyday Politics of Race*, how the mass of Iranian immigrants to the United States in the initial years after the Revolution and Hostage Crisis also encountered a shifting legal racial terrain. She states that "in 1978, the U.S. federal government standardized racial categories for the first time, and Iranians and others with origins in the Middle East and North Africa were definitively classified as white by law."[73] Maghbouleh illustrates how of those leaving Iran in the hundreds of thousands, 100,000-200,000 came to the United States immediately after this racial classification shift, placing Iranians in ambiguous racial territory – on the one hand they were legally white, but the media spectacle of the Revolution and Hostage Crisis left them vulnerable to immense systemic racial violence.[74]

The sweeping and systemic violence unleashed on Iranian Americans as a consequence of the Hostage Crisis media spectacle cannot be overstated. It also proves instructive for understanding the formation of anti-Muslim racism, a phenomenon that cannot be defined as emerging after 9/11. In fact, the Iranian American experience illustrates clearly the networks of racial violence enacted through state, media, and social forms since the 1980s. Maghbouleh highlights how a look into historical processes of racializing Iranians shows this phenomenon cannot be reduced to a post-9/11 climate. She says,

---

[72] Said, 84.

[73] Maghbouleh, *The Limits of Whiteness*, 25–26.

[74] Maghbouleh, 26.

While the developments following September 11, 2001, are sometimes imagined to be the turning point in the racialization of some liminal groups, the mass public browning of Iranian Americans in the late 1970s and early 1980s anticipated the further stigmatization of Muslim, South Asian, and Middle Eastern Americans after 9/11. This is not to diminish the significance of racial politics post-9/11 but to suggest that for Iranian Americans it was far from the first bout of informal or formal racialization they had experienced in the United States.[75]

A simple yet often neglected point – racial violence against Muslims is not 'new' and did not begin after 9/11. It merely shifts and repositions itself through various bodies and forms, a phenomenon diasporic Iranians, at this point, know all too well.

A prime example of how Iranian Americans experienced racial violence as a direct consequence of the Hostage Crisis is when the US government issued a mandate to each and every American university, demanding that Iranian students undergo extra questioning, interrogation, and identity documentation checks. Outlining the precise ways this state interrogation unfolded onto Iranian life, Maghbouleh states,

Campus by campus, university administrators drafted new regulations to rescind the admission of students of Iranian nationality. Onerous new tuition structures were created. One structure raised fees charged to Iranian students by more than 250 percent in Mississippi. Another limited the advancement of Iranian students in their degree programs conditional on the release of the American hostages for campus 'safety' reasons at New Mexico State.[76]

These university policies resulted in deportations, postponed degrees, some stalled and forced to drop out altogether. Some likely took on extra jobs to pay for higher tuition rates or went back to Iran. The sinister form of systemic racism is evident in how ill-equipped we are to measure its continual effects. Besides measuring deportation statistics, passport data, and/or university census data, how do we know? How can we adequately measure how many hearts were broken by racist

---

[75] Maghbouleh, 29–30.

[76] Maghbouleh, 28.

82

violence, how many bloody faces had to be patched up in someone's living room, how many lives interrupted, forever altered?

Besides the institutional racism many of the Iranian Americans experienced at their educational institutions, there are also ample examples of explicit racial violence: such as anti-Iran rallies, marches, and street fights.[77] The more they experienced racial violence, the more they worked to disassociate from Islam.

One of the consequences of enduring the racial violence of the Hostage Crisis was how the parent generation came to (over)rely on the 'Aryan' myth. Many of my friends laughed and joked at how their parents or relatives insisted that they were of the "Aryan" race and from the "greatest empire in the history of the world." In an attempt to move closer to whiteness, away from racialization as 'brown Muslims,' Iranian Americans of the parent generation desperately clung onto this racial formation.

As many of my interviews confirmed, central tropes of this Aryan myth were: the Persian Empire was the greatest and most powerful empire in the history of the world; the Persian King Cyrus the Great wrote the first declaration of Human Rights in 550 BCE; Persian poet greats, like Ferdowsi, are the reason the Persian language exists in its pure form today, without any Arabic language influence; Zoroastrianism is the monotheistic antecedent for Christianity and all monotheistic faiths; Farsi, being categorized as an Indo-European language, signals proximity to European heritage; and lastly, that many of Europe's greatest arts, architectures, and academic advancements were originally Persian.[78] Familiar tropes that my friends were all aware of as ways

---

[77] Maghbouleh, *The Limits of Whiteness*.

[78] Maghbouleh, 55.

their parents had constructed their racial identity, these themes had now become reason to poke fun

at their parents.

Sharing an anecdote from her research with Iranian Americans of the second-generation,

Maghbouleh shows how racial discussions operate around this Aryan myth. She argues,

> Across all families, when the 'What race are we?' conversation came up, as it often did, white Iranian identities were exclusively constructed and fostered by elders. That is, in account by youth of everyday household talk, Iranianness was made synonymous with whiteness through a constellation of mutually reinforcing, deeply racial explanations offered by parents and other older adults. The reasons for this are complex and draw not only from the protected and valorized status of whiteness in the United States, but also from the specific status and history of whiteness in Iran. My conversations with youth reveal that terms associated with whiteness, such as 'Persian,' 'Aryan,' Caucasian,' and 'Indo-European,' are regularly passed down from Iranian immigrant parents to children as answers or explanations for the question of what racial category they fit within.[79]

Locating this justification for identifying with whiteness by the parent generation as not only a desire

to ascend to whiteness, but also a product of how whiteness was framed in Iran, Maghbouleh shows

how the second-generation experiences a racial dissonance when speaking with their parents and

elders.

Showing how racial pseudo-science manufactured a linkage between 'ariya,' what became

understood as an etymological predecessor to the word 'Aryan,' Maghbouleh's work elucidates the

shaky origins of Iranian 'Aryan' racial construction. She goes on to demonstrate how this became

naturalized through the mass-publication of a Pahlavi dynasty history textbook. Facilitating the

national racial construction of Aryan and Iranian as synonymous, this textbook crafted "a national

narrative that linked Persian ancient and modern history with Eurocentric racial science through the

figure of the Aryan."[80]

---

[79] Maghbouleh, 53.

[80] Maghbouleh, 55.

In order to fully understand the identity posturing of the parent generation requires tending

to the ways in which the pursuit of this racialized identity marker of an 'Aryan' whiteness is part and

parcel of elevating their class status as well. We cannot understand the ways in which Iranian

Americans aspire to whiteness, through facets of race, gender, sexuality, and religion, without

appreciating the ways this identity shift is also primarily designed to facilitate the accumulation of

capital. The Public Affairs Alliance of Iranian Americans (PAAIA) published a 2008 research report

finding that one in three Iranian American households have an income of $100,000 or higher, with

37% between $50,000 and $100,000.[81] The parent generation largely absorbed claims of Pahlavi

modernity, in hopes of elevating their class statuses and acquiring financial resources. The

construction of an Iranian American diasporic identity therefore relied on tactics of de-racialization

and secularization in order to secure access to assimilationist pathways of financial success.

For example, many of my friends understood themselves as middle to upper class, a class

experience assumed natural and normal in the broader diasporic community. This is not to imply

that Iranian Americans are not largely financially comfortable or even in the extremely elite classes,

as most of my research supports. However, I wish to illustrate how the absorption of the principles

of Pahlavi modernity, and its accompanying racial posturing, facilitated the parent generation's

ability to accumulate capital, access, networks, and resources unavailable to immigrant populations

which did not emulate and reproduce whiteness in such ways.

As effective and sweeping as much of these identity posturings are, I do not wish to suggest

that all Iranians subscribe to the Aryan myth, but how prevalent a discourse it is in how the

community relies on it to substantiate their U.S. racial experience. Even though the second-

generation was imbibed with these ideas throughout their upbringing, many have grown skeptic,

---

[81] Public Affairs Alliance of Iranian Americans (PAAIA) and Zogby International, "Public Opinion Survey of Iranian Americans," December 2008, 10, https://paaia.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/2008-SURVEY-of-Iranian-Americans.pdf.

frustrated, and angry with the ways their parents dictate Aryan racial identity, aspire to whiteness, and enact overt racism against other communities of color. Some have even begun pointing out the explicitly Eurocentric, white supremacist, anti-Arab, and anti-Muslim logics required to espouse this racial positioning, and have started pushing back against it.

For example, one of my informants laughs at how her uncle goes by 'Mo' (as opposed to Mohammad), identifies as 'Italian' (as opposed to Iranian, or even Persian), and named his kids 'Hally' and 'Tony' (as opposed to explicitly Iranian names). Changing of explicitly Iranian or Muslim names to Americanized names is a common occurrence in the Iranian diaspora community, a way to buffer from racial violence. I suggest that we cannot understand these types of actions as purely 'coincidence' or to even understand them as racially or religiously separate. These decisions that Iranians in diaspora made/make in order to survive are deeply racialized, classed, gendered, religious-secularizing moves to produce a particular subject position. I suggest that the overarching motive here is to thwart any further racial violence, a form of racial deflection which the second-generation is reformulating to suit its own racial political climate.

Telling me how her father raised her to call herself Persian, as opposed to Iranian, Parisa says "I think that is actually some form of experiencing racism by … preemptively trying to course correct our identities by not identifying as Iranian." She continues to share that she has since shifted the way she understands her relationship to race and the broader diasporic racial identity, saying "I think I've actually started calling myself Iranian lately. I think that was also a strategic push back. I'm like no longer hiding behind this Persian identity." It is this shift, the rejection of the parent generation's racial posturing, that best embodies how the second-generation is reworking their identity to address the modern American racial landscape.

Disarticulating Islam from Iran: A Process of Racial Trauma

Removing any indication or association to Islam is undoubtedly the most significant, extensive, and thorough project of Iranian diasporic social identity. Drawing from hundreds of years of Iranian state policy and monarchical decrees and symbols, the move to de-Islamicize Iran and Iranian identity is not a new phenomenon. Nonetheless, the diaspora has come to construct itself as an eternally secularizing body, relying on pre-Islamic and Zoroastrian icons to legitimize and root itself in a "romantic notion of ...the glorious age of the Persian empire."[82]

Reza Gholami carefully explores this process of how Iranians in diaspora have sought to disarticulate the 'Islamic' from the 'Iranian.' Critiquing fellow Iranian scholars for neglecting to tend to the operative function of secularity in the diasporic formation, Gholami writes that this relationship between the secular and religious in the Iranian diaspora "has not received any serious attention within the existing research on the Iranian diaspora anywhere in the world."[83] Furthering his criticism, he argues how this "over-simplicity with which research on the Iranian diaspora has approached the secular reflects to a great extent the latter's unproblematic nature for Iranian diasporans, including the researchers themselves."[84]

Indeed, as Gholami suggests, the vast majority of scholarship on the Iranian diaspora wholly accepts these modernist claims to secularity or operates from the assumed bases that all Iranians wish to secularize, are secularizing, and/or at least, are not Muslim. What is also worth mentioning is the classed dimension of religiosity, and how a majority of the scholarship being produced by intellectuals, elites, and the middle to upper classes reinforces the notion that religiosity is something for the poor and working class to subscribe to, not the educated, rational, modern intellectuals.

---

[82] Moallem, *Between Warrior Brother and Veiled Sister*, 7.

[83] Gholami, *Secularism and Identity*, 95.

[84] Gholami, 95.

Demonstrating the ways in which this assumptive secular posturing operates as the tacit social bases of Iranian identity, Gholami's research unearthed how "the majority of the people [he] spoke to took it for granted that their non-Islamious identity was bounded, natural, 'Iranian', rational, coherent, continuous, righteous, and so forth."[85] This framing is imperative for assessing the hold secularization has in Iranian American identity, specifically as it pertains to how Iranian Americans negotiate the tensions between secularization and Islam.

Gholami calls this anti-Islamic sentiment in the Iranian diaspora "non-Islamiosity," describing it as "*a mode of the secular by means of which some Iranian Shi'a construct, live and experience diasporic identity, community and consciousness in a way that marginalises, excludes or effaces (only) Islam – it aims to eradicate 'the Islamic' from 'the Iranian.'*"[86] His intervention is to insist that we understand this non-Islamiosity as a mode of the secular, a Muslim mode of the secular, because it functions and operates fundamentally different from American anti-Muslim racism and Western secularism, although it learns from and draws from both. Gholami's non-Islamiosity highlights the uniquely Iranian role in constructing this form of secularity, saying "much of what passes for Iranian secularism is busy showing its teeth to Islam alone, sometimes hunting it down with a vengeance, often in ways that are markedly Iranian as well as Western."[87]

Gholami's formulation of non-Islamiosity as distinct from American anti-Muslim racism and Western secularism is important because it locates the accountability for its production within the Iranian American diaspora. This is significant, because many leave unproblematized the rampant anti-Muslim commentaries, sentiments, and actions of the Iranian diaspora community. By differentiating it from these other two anti-Muslim ideologies, the analytic of non-Islamiosity

---

[85] Gholami, 95.

[86] Gholami, 6 (emphasis in original).

[87] Gholami, 10.

understands the ways in which Iranians in diaspora produce and reify anti-Muslim racism themselves.

What is crucial to illustrate about the function and form of non-Islamiosity is the way in which the Self and Other are constructed in relation to one another. Gholami writes of the inapplicability of the term Islamophobia (or anti-Muslim racism) to conceptualize the uniquely Iranian experience, because Islamophobia has been transfixed to post-9/11 ideas as well as a binaristic framing of the West v. Islam, albeit resistive. He argues that, in this non-Islamiosity of the Iranian diaspora "'the problematic Muslim Other' is to a large extent identified as part of the self. Implicit in the concept of Islamophobia is also the idea that 'one's own way of life must be preserved or defended against an encroaching Islam… Certainly in the Iranian case … 'preservation' is not the aim."[88] The detested Muslim Other therefore, is a part of the Self, a phenomenon foreign to anti-Muslim racist posturing. Through this distinction, Gholami offers non-Islamiosity as a uniquely Iranian anti-Muslim belief structure. As he suggests, non-Islamiosity, therefore, is the process by which Iranians in diaspora are constantly wrestling "with themselves against the Islamic aspects of their cultures, heritage, and identity."[89]

Although I was fascinated to hear stories of non-Islamious relatives and experiences, I did not center my research on this particular phenomenon. Because I have been born and raised in a social community steeped in these ideas, my lines of inquiry extended beyond non-Islamiosity. To share a personal example, as I was refining my research project, I told my mother what I had decided to conduct my research on. I said, "I want to study Iranian American Muslims and their religious beliefs." "Ha!" She shouted. "Good luck finding one of those!" As she rolled away in

---

[88] Gholami, 16.

[89] Gholami, 16.

laughter, I knew exactly what my mother meant. Her answer captures the sweeping normative hold non-Islamiosity has in the Iranian American diaspora community. As Gholami himself mentions, "among Iranians this way of living and behaving was more than common; it seemed to be everywhere… And everywhere, it seemed to be accepted, unquestioned, normal."[90] Though, what fascinates me is how this pervasive non-Islamiosity has affected the younger generation's ability to explore faith and their relationship to Islam. Do they explore their faith? Do they feel like they can? Is it even considered a worthwhile pursuit? Against a rigid anti-Muslim backdrop as potent and powerful as non-Islamiosity, it would seem ludicrous to pursue my line of inquiry. That is precisely why my mother laughed.

Nonetheless, I set out to do just that, researching how and why queer and trans Iranian Americans make sense of their religious/spiritual experiences amidst a non-Islamious community. One particular story from a friend sheds light on the depth, magnitude, and sheer force non-Islamiosity has in the Iranian diaspora community. Niloofar, a queer twenty-something Iranian American, tells me how her brother has recently become a devout Muslim and how much that has angered her parents and extended family. She says "I almost see it as a coming out, like he's coming out as a visible Muslim man with a beard. And if it's time to pray, he'll stop what he's doing and pray in the street. Like he's that devout. And that was a huge blow to my family, my mom's side and my dad's side. They were *so* against it." Labeling her family as "absolutely" anti-Islam, Niloofar shares of how difficult it was for her brother to identify as a Muslim man. She uses the language of 'coming out,' no coincidence, to illustrate the severe ostracization and intense sweeping vilification Islam receives in the diaspora community.

She goes on to share an experience her brother had at a family party, a prime example of non-Islamiosity in action. She says,

---

[90] Gholami, *Secularism and Identity*, xiii.

> I have this memory of being at one of my uncle's homes… who lives in Irvine. He was having a party… and they were taking shots. And there was this one Iranian lady who was a little drunk and was like, just saw my brother and identified him as like *'Islam'* like he represented why the country is the way it is today. And just zeroed in on him and kept forcing him to take a shot. And he said, 'I'm sorry, I can't.' And he was sitting down and she was standing up and she started grilling him 'Do you know what the Muslims did?! Do you know what the *Mullahs*[91] did to Iran?!'

As she emulated the interrogative yelling she had witnessed, Niloofar and her story portray how the fervor with which non-Islamiosity operates is a part of its function – to ostracize, berate, and deface anything and everything related to Islam. When I asked her what happened after this encounter Niloofar said that her brother felt so uncomfortable that he left, while the partying and drinking continued in his absence.

What I find instructive about this story, besides the obvious attack on Islam, is that the woman's actions and comments, as volatile and excessive as they may seem to an outside eye, are rendered quite normal, acceptable, and even, worthy of support. No one intervened or interrupted the woman because what she was saying is considered an Iranian diasporic baseline, a tacit understanding in the community that Islam is an evil religion, the sole cause of all violence on the country and its peoples. This unforgiving and reductive reading of Islam as such, substantiates much of how the second-generation was raised to feel about the faith.

It is important to illustrate that not all Iranians subscribe to non-Islamious beliefs, and not all act on them or discipline others' Islamic beliefs. Many Iranian Americans still identify as Muslim and practice their faith, yet there is an overarching non-Islamious current which dictates mainstream diasporic culture. As I will show in the following subsection, an important gender analysis shapes the ways in which non-Islamiosity operates. It is a core fixture of the diasporic experience, a

---

[91] A *Mullah* is a religious cleric. In the Iranian context, it is typically used as the word to describe the orthodox theologians who now run the country.

phenomenon all in the diaspora are familiar with whether they partake in anti-Islamic critiques or not.

Over the course of my research, many friends shared examples of their parent's anti-Islam sentiments. Golnaz shared how some of her relatives "spit on religion" and "think that Islam ruined our country." Another friend shares how her father is "super anti-religious" and commonly says things like "You know Mohammad's wife was 9 years old!" Bahman shares how his father frequently refers to what is culturally understood as the point of defeat, when "the Arabs invaded" and "brought that horrid religion that took over our country." Mina describes their father's conceptualization of Islam "as nothing more than – it brought destruction to Iran. It's oppressive. And just a complete utter distaste of it entirely." This sweeping disavowal of Islam by the parent generation substantiated much of the second-generations' formative ideas around Islam, shaping and framing the ways they relate to faith, religion, and larger diasporic cultural values.

As a consequence of this non-Islamiosity, many in the second-generation adopted, took on, and perpetuated these ideas about Islam. As the rest of my research will show, the second-generation is undergoing a critical, self-reflexive, and radically transformative practice and reassessing whether or not non-Islamiosity can be neatly supplanted to the current political climate. Many have come to outgrow, transform, and reject the outright claims of non-Islamiosity, seeing it as a form of anti-Muslim racism, anti-Arab racism, and a tool of white supremacist racial logics, furthering projects of U.S. empire.

As Niloofar's story highlights, this act of wrestling the Muslim Other out of the Iranian Self is a constant iterative process which takes place almost anywhere Iranians in diaspora gather, including family parties, social events, holiday celebrations, and more.[92] Noticing the emotionally

---

[92] This non-Islamiosity also operates within Iran and is not specific to diaspora populations. Many Iranians in Iran subscribe wholeheartedly to this non-Islamious frame, espousing a particular secularized, anti-Muslim identity.

passionate ways their parents, elders, and family friends demonstrate this non-Islamiosity, my friends took these outbursts as signs of racial trauma. When I asked Niloofar to explain why she thought the woman was harassing her brother at the family party, she simply said "It was definitely trauma-related." Sara, also spoke to the trauma-based response she detected in her father's non-Islamiosity, saying, "What happened to my family was so traumatic and that trauma ripples through everything that they do." As both of these insights reveal, the second-generation detects the trauma-based origins of this vitriolic anti-Muslim sentiment.

As Gholami illustrates, "Iranians' settlement processes, constructions of identity, forms of interaction, indeed their very formation and experience of a diasporic community has been shaped and reshaped through (or against) their perceptions and (first-hand) experiences of the revolution and Iran's subsequent developments."[93] For this reason, I structured my research pool to look specifically at young Iranian Americans, aged 20-35. My purpose was to explore the ways in which those who do not have direct personal experience with the Revolution, understand and relate to it, given narratives of oral history, community dialogue, and diasporic media circulation. I wanted to see specifically how individuals who had not lived through the Revolution themselves came to understand their racial, gender, class, sexual, religious identity under this ominous shadow of the Revolution and the non-Islamiosity that was fashioned as a consequence.

A Modern Woman: Iranian American Diasporic Gender Imaginations

As many feminist scholars have shown, the project of modernity is able to make its claims by attaching itself to women's bodies, their choices, their mobilities, accesses and agencies.[94] Following

---

[93] Gholami, *Secularism and Identity*, 79.

[94] Saba Mahmood, *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011), https://doi.org/10.1515/9781400839919; Inderpal Grewal and Caren Kaplan, *Scattered Hegemonies: Postmodernity and Transnational Feminist Practices* (University of Minnesota Press, 1994).

how this materializes for Muslim women, Sherene Razack asserts how "the story of equality [requires] a journey from pre-modernity to modernity, and from the non-West to the West, the latter understood as a place of universal values."[95] Outlining the racial projects embedded in the gendered discursive claims of modernity, Razack's work showcases precisely how Muslim woman are understood as 'pre-modern.' This is apparent in that easily the most cited, discussed, debated, and referred to topic when it comes to the Islamic Republic of Iran is the subject of women's rights. I do not wish to claim that this is an issue unworthy of discussion, but rather how women's bodies have become the terrain upon which modernity makes its claims.

Standing as the marker of modernity, the Iranian American diasporic woman embodies a special subject position in the larger diasporic framing of social identity, taken to be free, advanced, and secular, in direct juxtaposition with her Iranian counterpart, understood as oppressed, voiceless, powerless, and Muslim. Shakhsari extends this critique by demonstrating precisely how the Iranian diaspora has been able to articulate its sense of exceptionalism and superiority, relying squarely on the Pahlavi modernity claims of gender and sexual freedom. Directly juxtaposed with an Iranian nation painted as violent, anti-woman, and anti-queer, the Iranian diaspora constructs itself as a bastion of modernity – free, democratic, progressive, advancing, and most importantly, secular; where women are free to walk around unveiled, free to participate in American society, free to travel, free to pursue education, free to be not 'held back' by Islam.

Iranian American men, too, engage with these modernist claims, reproducing a unique racial/gender politics furthering this distinction between a modernizing diaspora and a traditional, Muslim Iran. For Iranian American men, this takes the form of a staunch, public, and visible support of Iranian women's rights. As they (re)produce modernist claims, Iranian American men have come

---

[95] Razack, *Casting Out*, 90.

to be loud defenders of Iranian women's rights, an enactment designed to construct themselves as 'modern men,' not anything like their barbaric, patriarchal, backward, Muslim brothers back home.

This particular identity formation that Iranian men take on is an important racial, gender, and secularizing pivot, to disassociate themselves from the violence of being an assumed Muslim man. Now, this is not to suggest that all Iranian American men champion feminist politics or that there was a sudden anti-patriarchal awakening in the diasporic population. On the contrary, what I am arguing is that because of the intense racial, religious, gender, and sexual violence that took place as a consequence of the Revolution and Hostage Crisis, Iranian American men were made to position themselves as steadfast defenders of Iranian women's rights, for fear of being labeled 'hyperpatriarchal Muslim men who oppress women.'

In fact, I suggest that, even though Iranian American men were not suddenly anti-patriarchal at all, their desire to eradicate any association with Islam prompted them to publicly defend certain facets of women's freedom in order to appear less 'Muslim.' This primarily performative move is less an investment in dismantling patriarchal power than it is a dedication to one's own preservation from racial violence. Furthermore, I argue how this shift – Iranian American men's loud and proud claims to be supporters of women's rights – has in fact followed the form of empty liberal activism, disallowing Iranian women from making legitimate grievances of patriarchal violence.

As my research shows, this gendered phenomenon follows a particular trend – Iranian American men berated, critiqued, and attack Islam publicly far more than Iranian American women. Those who aggressively claim non-Islamiosity, those who staunchly rejected and angrily detested Islam the most were unequivocally Iranian American men. I believe that this intense performativity of non-Islamiosity, the deep hatred and public rejection of Islam and anything associated with it is primarily performed by Iranian American men because it was/is an effective way for them to demonstrate themselves as modern subjects, supportive (however superficially) of women's rights,

and therefore not 'backwards Muslim men.' The gendered dimension of non-Islamiosity facilitates a

unique subject position wherein many Iranian American men became ardent supporters of Iranian

women's rights.

This is not to claim that Iranian American women do not participate and reproduce non-

Islamiosity, as Niloofar's example clearly demonstrates, but to mention that the preponderance of

men aggressively rejecting Islam is again, part of the Pahlavi move towards the modern. This is also

not to assume that Iranian American men are incapable of genuine feminist politics. Rather, it is to

emphasize the larger discursive power these racializing logics have had for the ways Iranian

Americans of the diaspora structure their identities, a consequence which all of my friends knew

intimately.

Queer & Trans Problems: Tokens, Surgeries, and Diasporic Disputes

In addition to the Iranian American diasporic woman standing in as the symbol of

modernity, Shakhsari's essay highlights how the Iranian queer has also recently become another

important icon of modernist claims. They argue how Iranian diasporic imaginations have recently

begun permitting entry to the Iranian queer, for it allows yet another axis of leverage against the

Islamic Republic, understood as fundamentally anti-queer. They argue,

> The sudden seeming tolerance, and even celebration, of Iranian queers among some
> diasporic Iranian opposition groups is questionable, given that Iranian queers have
> historically been denied a legitimate space in diasporic imaginations of the nation. How does
> one account for the chic of queer – a recent political position among diasporic Iranian
> opposition groups to advocate on behalf of queers in Iran?[96]

It is this 'sudden change' as they call it which is of interest to me because it indicates the political

utility, tokenizability, of Iranian American queer identity for the diaspora. Calling it 'the chic of

---

[96] Shakhsari, "From Homoerotics of Exile to Homopolitics of Diaspora," 16.

queer,' Shakhsari's intervention allows space to understand the political motivations behind recent

absorption of the Iranian queer as a legitimate political subject in diasporic imaginations. They go on

to argue,

> In a competition over imagining the most democratic future for Iran, defending the rights of
> women and queers have become quite chic, insofar as defending gay rights and women's
> rights reflects the modernity and democratic tendencies of those who provide expertise and
> testimonials to think tanks, non-governmental organizations, and propaganda media outlets
> funded by the liberating states.[97]

Tying the chicness of Iranian queer identity to the funding offered by think tanks and NGOs for

reproducing these modernist claims, Shakhsari's work demonstrates the ways in which Iranian

queers are saturated in a terrain of political co-optability. There can be no doubt that the queer

figure too, is marked within the discursive terrain of modernity.

For instance, Judith Butler demonstrates how the Dutch government uses photographs of

two men kissing in a sort of 'gay litmus test' to determine if immigrants are prepared to embrace

modernity upon entering the Netherlands. She argues, "we can see in such an instance how

modernity is being defined as sexual freedom, and the particular sexual freedom of gay people is

understood to exemplify a culturally advanced position as opposed to one that would be deemed

pre-modern."[98] Trump's Executive Order, more popularly known as the Muslim Ban, also integrated

language of gay rights as a means of measuring sexual freedom, in direct contrast to the population

he sought to exclude – Muslims.[99] As Jasbir Puar demonstrates in *Terrorist Assemblages*, "the

---

[97] Shakhsari, 26.

[98] Butler, "Sexual Politics, Torture, and Secular Time," 3.

[99] President Donald Trump, "Protecting the Nation From Foreign Terrorist Entry Into the United States" (The White House, January 27, 2017), https://www.federalregister.gov/documents/2017/02/01/2017-02281/protecting-the-nation-from-foreign-terrorist-entry-into-the-united-states.

contemporary U.S. heteronormative nation actually relies on and benefits from the proliferation of queerness, especially in regard to the sexually exceptional homonational."[100]

As Puar outlines, specific embodiments of queerness, the sexually exceptional and the ascension towards whiteness, allow for the production of a homonational sexual subject which not only gains newfound state legitimacy to exist, but now also aligns with the very projects of the state. Queer sexual freedom is now permitted into national imaginaries, insofar as it maintains the racial, gender, class, and sexual projects of U.S. Empire.

Therefore, this posturing by the Iranian diaspora, to envelope and absorb the Iranian queer into its fold all the while acting as and speaking as their representatives, perfectly encapsulates the racial, religious, gender and sexual function of Pahlavi modernity come to life. I argue that this diasporic depiction of the Iranian queer and Iranian woman is not solely to demonstrate the diaspora as simply more modern or democratic, but primarily as secular and non-Islamic. The Iranian queer and the Iranian woman are framed as such so that they can be understood as victims of the Islamic Republic of Iran, which thereby requires the modern, democratic, and *secular* Iranian diaspora to emancipate them from Islamic barbarity. Analogous to a white savior complex and/or colonial interventions on behalf of 'the oppressed,' the ways in which the Iranian diaspora postures itself in relationship to the people of Iran relies fundamentally on undermining the Islamic Republic.

Nonethless, Shakhsari leaves us with an important question, "How does one account for the chic of queer?," this recent obsession of Iranian diasporic groups to represent, speak for, and 'defend' the Iranian queer.[101] Their articulation here hones in on the myriad geopolitical forces which are invested in representing the Iranian queer, as its political utility cannot be overstated. My friends were all acutely aware of these dynamics, situating their own lives, politics, and experiences in this

---

[100] Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages*, xxv.

[101] Shakhsari, "From Homoerotics of Exile to Homopolitics of Diaspora," 16.

discursive terrain. Navigating this diasporic formulation, which relies on a critique of Islam as a uniquely backward, pre-modern, barbaric, and oppressive religion for/to women and queers, my friends knew all too well how Islam had become the terrain for making political claims.

Even as Shakhsari excavates the linguistic socio-political terrain around queerness in the Iranian diasporic community, the trans figure is left unmentioned. I argue that transness and trans Iranians are still understood as outside of the Iranian American diaspora community, understood as a foreign phenomenon not possible for Iranians. Trans people are not taken as representable subjects with political utility as of yet, but are seen as gender deviants which largely do not cross the collective Iranian American imagination. My trans friends spoke directly to this experience, knowing intimately how their transness made them vulnerable to exclusion from the diaspora community.

If, however, the Iranian trans figure ever does enter the diasporic imagination or social commentaries, it is primarily around one central discursive debate – transgender surgeries in Iran. Because the Islamic Republic of Iran legally permits transgender people to undergo gender confirmation surgery (albeit after a series of bureaucratic loopholes), the blanket claim that the Islamic Republic is transphobic cannot and does not stand. This makes it impossible for the Iranian diaspora to claim its progressive superiority over the Islamic Republic, because the Iranian government has been permitting, and in part, funding these gender affirmation surgeries for over 30 years. Because critiques of a homophobic Islamic Republic allow the diaspora to construct itself as the secular, advanced, progressive alternative for Iranian identity, they are far more useful in political posturing. It is for this reason combined with a rampant and systemic transphobia, that Iranian American diasporic imaginations largely forgo any reference to trans Iranians.

Rather, the mainstream narrative regarding trans Iranians, circulated by the Iranian diaspora again as a tool of solidifying its own modernity, is that Iran's legalization of transgender surgeries is solely a means of forcing cisgender queer people to undergo surgery in order to eradicate the queer

population. This diasporic framing which reduces all transgender surgeries to nothing but a state-sanctioned genocide of queers fully supports the larger critiques of the Islamic Republic as homophobic, backwards, and violent. Yet it also erases the wide array of ways that transgender individuals in Iran are able to utilize state laws and medical-social resources in order to transition and receive gender affirming surgeries, as well as the reality that many queer and trans people live in Iran without experiencing the constant threat of death.[102]

As it stands, the homonationalist claims of Iranian gay rights have proven salient enough to invite the tokenization of Iranian queers at some minimal level in Iranian diasporic spaces, yet the trans Iranian American figure remains outside the boundaries, not yet tokenizable within the same discursive registers. In my research, I center the lives and experiences of trans Iranian Americans in order to challenge the notion that our lives are not significant, and/or not indicative of an Iranian American experience. Refusing to perpetuate the erasure of trans Iranian Americans, I insist that our lives are complex, brilliant, and absolutely potent sites of Iranian American diasporic experience.

How the Muslim Ban Changed Everything

As discursively potent as Pahlavi modernity has been for the diaspora (with all its de-Islamicizing and non-Islamious projects, its claims to gender and sexual freedom, and of course, its grand reach back into pre-Islamic Persian Zoroastrian greatness), all of its claims seemed to burst open through one political event – the Muslim Ban. A series of executive orders designed to prevent Muslims from entering the United States, President Trump's policies drastically altered the ways in which Iranian Americans understood their relationship to race and religion once again. Necessitating

---

[102] Zara Saeidzadeh, "Understanding Socio-Legal Complexities of Sex Change in Postrevolutionary Iran," *Transgender Studies Quarterly* 6, no. 1 (2019): 80–102, https://doi.org/10.1215/23289252-7253510.

a deep restructuring of social identity, the Muslim Ban made it impossible to remain silent on the question of Islam.

As much as the Iranian diaspora had worked to remove, distance, eradicate, and erase its associations with Islam for decades, Trump's policy single-handedly undid decades of racial maneuvering. Swiftly declaring anyone from those select nations 'Muslim' and thereby associated with terrorism and 'banned' from entering the U.S., Iranians became unable to rely on secularism or their own anti-Islam beliefs to secure their racial safety.

I was speaking to Parisa, discussing how anti-Muslim sentiment in the diaspora operated, how she operated in conversation to it, and how she framed her own racial and religious identities in light of these discourses. When I asked her if there were any important political moments that had expanded her racial consciousness, she immediately responded "The Muslim ban! That was huge! It was huge because I realized 'Okay, I guess I am one of these people. I am Muslim, I guess.'" Her reflection highlights an important epiphany for many Iranian Americans, non-Islamious or not, that whether they identified as Muslim or not quickly became irrelevant to how the state now legally framed them, as unequivocally Muslim, therefore a potential terrorist. Parisa's epiphany demonstrates how far-removed 'being Muslim' can actually feel for the second-generation raised in non-Islamious conditions, but also, how in this instance, the state's policy overrides and subsumes any aspiration or desire we have to self-narrate our identities.

Analogous to how U.S. racial classification systems declare individuals of Middle Eastern descent "White," the Muslim Ban made it so that anyone from these select nations was deemed "Muslim," even though they could be Christian, Jewish, or of any other religious experience. The dissonance between lived racialized experiences and state policies demonstrates firstly, the limitations of the state's racial optics and projects, but also, the need for a critical race approach to how individuals engage questions of race in their everyday lives.

She goes on to share how she "never thought of [herself] as being Muslim, on paper, until the Muslim ban" and how she now worries about having an Iranian passport that identifies her as such. The racial fears with being classified as Muslim are real, present, and constantly proving to be violent for diasporic Iranians and all others targeted by the Muslim Ban. Nonetheless, her comments offer a closer look into how second-generation Iranian Americans grapple with a shifting American racial landscape, one which directly contradicts our parents' insistence on our being 'Aryan.' The second-generation artfully negotiated their own sense of racial and religious identity within these debates, challenging both their parents' disavowal of Islam, American anti-Muslim racism, and their own interpretations of what a religious identification would mean in this political climate.

So, Back to Iranian? Back to Muslim?

I close this initial chapter by sharing another anecdote from Parisa, my friend who opened the chapter by saying her family's only use for a Qur'an would be to burn it. Parisa tells me of her own evolution with and through non-Islamiosity. She begins by telling me she "carbon-copied" her father's anti-Islam politics up until a couple of years ago wherein her white American partner pointed out that some of her ideas were "incredibly racist." Citing examples of her own anti-Arab and anti-Muslim racism, she confesses to being "pretty damn racist" herself. Her experience shows that the terrain of non-Islamiosity is in fact, relying on and operating alongside and through larger discourses of American anti-Muslim racism and anti-Arab racism. Her ability to note her own anti-Muslim racism only through the prompting of her white American partner demonstrates the ways in which non-Islamiosity is deeply intertwined in other forms of American racism.

Parisa says she has now moved into that skepticism, to think more critically about how she inherited non-Islamiosity from her father. Upon reflecting, she says she sees how her dad has "this *erratic repulsion* against religion because he thinks religion… ruined Iran." Although sympathetic to his

traumas, she says she is moving in a new direction. Speaking of his visceral and bodily aversion to Islam, she says "I used to have that too" but she notes "I think I've shifted my belief system a little bit".

As my research shows, this shift in Parisa's belief system is a theme, brewing throughout the second-generation Iranian American diaspora. As the Muslim Ban has compounded and heightened anti-Muslim racism in the US, these young diasporic Iranians are seeing the ways their parents have constructed a particular racial, gender, religious identity, and are reconstructing Iranian American diasporic identity to fit their political moment. The push here is to reject, as Parisa has shown, the blanket non-Islamiosity that their parents have given them as the only way to be Iranian. In fact, despite all the ways Islam is framed as homophobic, transphobic, sexist, and utterly violent, there is a growing interest in exploring and identifying with Islam.

CHAPTER TWO

Norooz, Cyrus, & *Farvahar*s:
Iranian American Ascendency to Whiteness and the Failures of Neoliberal Multiculturalism

With dreams of success, of political stability, of a calm and friendly land, many diasporic Iranians migrated to the United States in search of the 'American Dream.' Most adopted the basic tenets this cultural dream depicts as a part of their own belief system – America is safe, free, democratic, and open to all. As Lisa Lowe suggests, "It is through culture that the subject becomes, acts, and speaks itself as 'American.'[1] The constructed notions of what America came to represent were understood in direct juxtaposition with how the newly forming Islamic Republic came to be understood – Iran is unsafe, unfree, undemocratic, and not open to all. In this chapter, I explore the ways in which the parent generation of the Iranian American diaspora constructed their social identity as peaceful, hard-working, open-minded, and intelligent immigrants wishing to live happily ever after in America. I analyze the racialized, classed, and gendered dimensions of this identity construction, how it engages with neoliberal myths and promises, and particularly how it emerged as a collective trauma response to the violence born out of the Hostage Crisis.

As much as my own lived experience varies from the ways in which my diasporic elders construct their own notions of racial, gender, sexual, and class identity, I want to be clear that I come to this line of critique with the utmost compassion. I used to be filled with anger and frustration with how they had chosen to call themselves 'White,' 'Persian,' 'not Muslim,' and the whole host of meanings associated with those identity claims. As a young person, I was living life as visibly brown, queer, gender non-conforming woman who very clearly experienced the world reading me as 'non-White.' I hated that they insisted that we were. I thought that them calling us 'White' gave me no room to say, 'I am experiencing racial violence.' Since spending years with these

---

[1] Lisa Lowe, *Immigrant Acts: On Asian American Cultural Politics* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996), 3.

questions, I have learned an important lesson – the choices the parent generation made to conceal

or shield certain parts of their identities were theirs to make, as we in the second-generation now

make our own.

Again, as much as my own lived experience with the ways I have learned identity formation

vary from how they constructed identity, I am no longer entering this project, and this particular

argument, angry. I enter this chapter, critiquing liberal assimilation and neoliberal myths, with the

understanding that their choices were theirs to make. While I may not agree with all of them, I am

hopeful that this chapter can shed light on the consequences of their choices for the second-

generation and precisely why a racial rupture is unfolding between generations. By analyzing a series

of examples from major Iranian American diasporic organizations and events, I show how the

parent generation undertook this practice of ascending towards whiteness, and more importantly,

how this precise posturing has become a point of contention for the second-generation of Iranian

Americans. In an iterative process, the second-generation (re)creates their identity, diverging from

their parents' racial constructions in newfound ways while still adopting certain elements, in an

attempt to address their unique political experiences, fears, and realities.

Many in the parent generation worked diligently to construct this identity – white, wealthy,

democratic, progressive, produced by and large through the principal values of Pahlavi modernity.

As Puar points out "the factioning, fractioning, and fractalizing of identity is a prime activity of

societies of control, whereby subjects (the ethnic, the homonormative) orient themselves as subjects

through their dissociation or disidentification from others disenfranchised in similar ways in favor of

consolidation with axes of privilege."[2] Most in the Iranian American diaspora therefore, work to

---

[2] Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages*, 2007, 28.

distance themselves as much as possible from axes considered to be racial pollutants[3] – Blackness,

Arabness, Muslims, etc. particularly those considered closely associated with Iranianness. For

example, there is a concerted effort to dissociate from Arabs, Arabic language, Islam, and the

Islamic Republic because these associations locate the figure in proximity to violence, terrorism, and

un-Americanness. As the fervor of non-Islamious behavior shows, the drive to eradicate the

'Islamic' from the 'Iranian' has been an endless painstaking racial project, always of utmost priority.

Below, I have drawn a rough visual of what I call the terrain of Iranian American diasporic

identity. I imagine the cylinder with two ends, each representing conformity or deviance from the

systematic hierarchies imperialist white supremacist, capitalist, cis-heteropatriarchy offer us. The

rainbow tapestry grid is an example of one particular individual's life and how they choose to

contort their self and life experiences within these axes. It demonstrates how we are constantly

growing, shifting, and negotiating our identities between these two binary poles and how certain

aspects of our identities can propel us further towards whiteness (i.e., wealth) and vice versa (i.e.,

---

[3] Although we use the rhetoric of race (whiteness, Blackness) to speak of social identity, it is important to clarify that the ways in which identity is articulated and demarcated surpass solely racial characteristics. This will be made clear with the figure and table below.

visible queerness). I have written in an example on the chart, the axis of religion, to serve as but one example of how an individual may locate themselves between these two poles – Conformity: secular, secularizing, draws from Christianity, avidly non-Muslim, in contrast with Deviance: Muslim, practices faith publicly and/or visibly. The cylindrical form offers a visual depth, an understanding of how one individual carries, fluctuates, and situates themselves in many ways within the terrain of identity. Though imperfect, this visual helps articulate the ways in which Iranian Americans in the Los Angeles diaspora have been operating between and within this hierarchy, working diligently to ascend towards whiteness. For reference, I will outline the various dimensions of Iranian American diasporic identity conformity and deviance below:
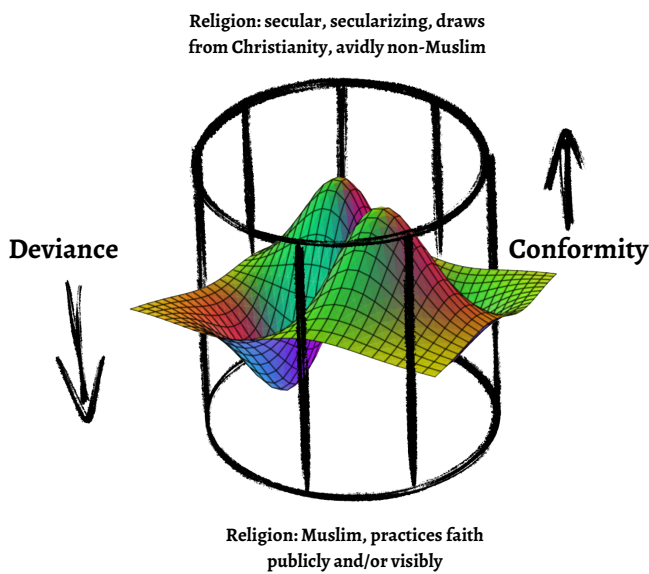
The Terrain of Iranian American Diasporic Identity

Figure 9. The Terrain of Iranian American Diasporic Identity (2021) Digital sketch by author

	Race	Gender	Class	Sexuality	Religion	Ability
Conformity	'White' 'Persian' White-passing, 'Aryan, US citizen	Cisgender, man, Gender normative, Binary gender,	Upper-middle class, wealthy, access to capital	Heterosexual, In a legally or socially respected marriage	Secular, Secularizing, draws from Christianity, non-Muslim	Mentally, physically able-bodied
Deviance	Darker skin color, Iranian, Afghani, Black, Indigenous, non-citizen	Gender non-conforming, transgender, nonbinary, woman	Working class, lack of access to work visas, poverty	Queer, not in a legally or socially respected marriage	Muslim, practices faith publicly and/or visibly	Disabled, chronically ill, neuro-divergent

Figure 10. Iranian American Diaspora Conformity-Deviance Table.

107

Although a rough outline, this schematic of Iranian American diasporic identity offers a terrain of symbols with which to understand how individuals come to label, understand, and formulate their identities between conformity and deviance. Working primarily to conform, ascend, and "make it," many adopted identities that marked them as 'good immigrants.'

Arguably most important, the rainbow tapestry which is set to symbolize an individual life, demonstrates the flow, the ups and downs, the negotiations, and the beautifully nonlinear ways we are human. I integrate the use of color, fluidity, and movement to indicate how our bodies, our lives, and our growth does not meet nor fall seamlessly into binaristic pole constructions of Muslim/non-Muslim, or White/non-White. The tapestry is a methodological reminder of the nonbinary analytic, the need for more openings, and the push beyond poles and binaries.

Neoliberalism Harnessed: Iranian American Constructions of Racialized Class

Nonetheless, an important function of this ascendency, or this move into conformity as a way of diasporic survival, has been the way Iranian Americans have utilized neoliberal economic openings as a way to increase financial wealth. As Foucault's arguments on neoliberal governmentality suggest, the unfurling project of neoliberal governmentality orchestrated a shift in how we fashion the 'Self' in relation to the market, the government, and the responsibilities assumed natural for each party. Therefore, it is through the adoption, appropriation, and utilization of core neoliberal values that the Iranian American diaspora has become able to ascend into greater financial wealth. As Thomas Lemke suggests in summarization of Foucault's work,

> The neo-liberal forms of government feature not only direct intervention by means of empowered and specialized state apparatuses, but also characteristically develop indirect techniques for leading and controlling individuals without at the same time being responsible for them. The strategy of rendering individual subjects 'responsible' (and also collectives, such as families, associations, etc.) entails shifting the responsibility for social risks such as

illness, unemployment, poverty, etc., and for life in society into the domain for which the individual is responsible and transforming it into a problem of 'self-care.'[4]

Outlining this pivotal shift from state responsibility to individual responsibility, Lemke's work showcases how the neoliberal restructuring of social values erase state responsibility. Making the individual, or the Self, the sole provider for all needs, as neoliberal governmentality dictates, is fully aligned with immigrant narratives of achieving the American Dream. Thereby, it is through this neoliberal notion of the individual who can attain all through hard work, merit, and sheer drive that the Iranian American diaspora has become able to structure their own pathways to capital.

As Susan Koshy argues in "Morphing Race into Ethnicity: Asian Americans and Critical Transformations of Whiteness," the reconfiguration of neoliberal politics requires surveying the flow of global capital alongside and through the supremacy of US geopolitical power since the 1970s. In order to make sense of racial formations and shifts, we need to tend to the ways these currents shift, transform, and alter racial posturing. Koshy argues,

> Changed demographics, class stratifications, new immigration, and a global economy have produced the rearticulation of whiteness as color blindness, thereby enabling opportunistic alliances between whites and different minority groups as circumstances warrant. This new discourse of race projects a simulacrum of inclusiveness even as it advances a political culture of market individualism that has legitimized the gutting of social services to disadvantaged minorities in the name of the necessities of the global economy.[5]

Thus, as Koshy argues, the liberal projects of colorblindness work alongside and through global capitalist ideas of market individualism, facilitating the "opportunistic alliances between whites and different minority groups."[6] The Iranian American diaspora community, utilizing and operating

---

[4] Thomas Lemke, "'The Birth of Bio-Politics': Michel Foucault's Lecture at the Collège de France on Neo-Liberal Governmentality," *Economy and Society* 30, no. 2 (2001): 201, https://doi.org/10.1080/03085140120042271.

[5] Susan Koshy, "Morphing Race into Ethnicity: Asian Americans and Critical Transformations of Whiteness," *Boundary 2* 28, no. 1 (2001): 155–56, https://doi.org/10.1215/01903659-28-1-153.

[6] Koshy, 155.

from within these currents, has ascended to whiteness precisely in such ways, operating within the neoliberal values of colorblindness, diversity, and inclusion to accumulate capital and social power.

In *Immigrant Acts*, Lisa Lowe argues how the subject of the Asian immigrant operates simultaneously as a necessary contribution to the American labor/intelligence pool as well as functioning as the eternal foreigner, always needing to be assimilated. She writes,

> Historically and materially, Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Asian Indian, and Filipino immigrants have played absolutely crucial roles in the building and sustaining of America; and at certain times, these immigrants have been fundamental to the construction of the nation as a simulacrum of inclusiveness. Yet the project of imagining the nation as homogenous requires the orientalist construction of cultures and geographies from which Asian immigrants come as fundamentally 'foreign' origins antipathetic to the modern American society that 'discovers,' 'welcomes,' and 'domesticates' them.[7]

Although specific to Asian immigrants, Lowe's argument offers a necessary insight into how Iranian Americans came to be understood in the American racial landscape – a useful pool of human capital available for assimilation and domestication, yet also marked as the "foreigner-within" always and constantly vulnerable to exclusion from the national imaginary.

Nonetheless, Iranian American immigrants have been able to successfully utilize the neoliberal openings made available to them through colorblindness, market individualism, assimilation, and inclusiveness to amass remarkable amounts of wealth. In fact, as research data suggests, Iranian Americans are one of the most financially capable immigrant groups in the United States. As a research report gathered by MIT's Iranian Studies Group shows, "The per capita average income for Iranian-Americans is 50% higher than that of the nation… Compared to the 12% of Americans with per capita incomes of $100,000 or more, there are 26.2% of Iranian-Americans making the same amount. The average value of an Iranian-American home is 2.5 times that of the average home nationally. The percentage of Iranian Americans living in homes valued

---

[7] Lowe, *Immigrant Acts*, 5.

more than $1 million is nearly 10 times that of the national average."[8] Although this research is

based on census data from 2000, I would suggest that this trend of Iranian American capital

accumulation has remained consistent, if not progressed.

As Koshy suggests, it is the way in which immigrant groups are able to utilize moments of

racial inclusion (colorblindness) that parallel with financial opportunities (market individualism) in

order to accumulate capital and resources in ways not available prior to these shifts. Reliant primarily

on these neoliberal openings of inclusiveness, colorblindness, and access to/for all, Iranian

Americans in diaspora have been able to structure their racial posturing as a process of accumulating

wealth.

The lure of financial wealth, success, and social inclusion into whiteness and white spaces,

compromised their ability to build a critical racial consciousness or racial alliances with other

communities of color, potentially sacrificed altogether. The Iranian American community, in its

pursuit of whiteness, must neglect any critical racial consciousness if it intends to be absorbed neatly

into white spaces and the culture of capital accumulation. As Puar argues, "The ethnic aids the

project of whiteness through his or her participation in global economic privileges that then fraction

him or her away from racial alliances."[9] It is this forced erasure, forced forgetting of racial violence

as it necessitates the process of ascending towards whiteness that has shaped much of the tension

between the parent generation and the second-generation. For instance, an important facet of this

ascension towards whiteness is the way in which the first-generation mandated, in a sense forced, a

white racial identity onto the second-generation. As Maghbouleh posits, "First generation Iranian

Americans tend to tell the second generation that they are unequivocally ethnic, cultural, and racial

---

[8] Ali Mostashari and Ali Khodamhosseini, "An Overview of Socioeconomic Characteristics of the Iranian-American Community Based on the 2000 U.S. Census," Iranian Studies Group at MIT (Massachusetts Institute of Technology: MIT, February 2004), 3.

[9] Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages*, 2007, 31.

whites and always have been."[10] This insistence, an enforcement if you will, has left many young second-generation Iranian Americans in a unique racial predicament.

On the one hand, the family unit is declaring unequivocal white identity meanwhile the social world, classmates, school personnel, friends, friends' parents are all informing them of their explicit non-whiteness. Throughout my research I heard many stories of overt racism my friends experienced as young people: being called terrorists, being sung happy birthday on 9/11, being called the child of Saddam Hussein, being called sand niggers, being told to go back home, and on and on. This rupture, the insufficiency of the racial posturing of the first generation to attend to the political climate of the second-generation has produced a significant shift in how the diaspora comes to identify itself. Based primarily on the amalgam of these intense racializing experiences, I suggest that by learning early on that they were not white, second-generation Iranian Americans learned how race was sutured to religion, and by extension, gender, sexuality, and class.

What is particularly sinister about this racial posturing is the reality that many of the parent generation did in fact, experience overt racial violence similar to what the second-generation experienced, if not worse. The Hostage Crisis was cause for immense systemic racial violence against Iranian Americans yet, due to the diasporic racial posturing of ascending to whiteness, the parent generation had to forgo, forget, erase much of that violence from collective memory. As the parent generation sought to conform, critical racial consciousness had to be disavowed in order to ascend the racial hierarchy.

---

[10] Maghbouleh, *The Limits of Whiteness*, 52.

Whiteness Pursued: Iranian American Organizations as the Embodiment of Neoliberal Values

Adopting this pathway to whiteness, the first generation carved out a means for capital accumulation while sacrificing access to critical race consciousness as well as collective cross-racial alliances. In the Iranian diasporic context, this took the form of erasing community histories of racial violence. In an unfathomably powerful sweep, Iranian Americans of the first-generation largely ignore, or repress, or remove from their memory altogether, any and all forms of racial violence they experienced as a process of ascending towards whiteness.

This was a palpable silence in my research with the Iranian American community of LA, wherein only one or two of my friends knew anything of their parent's experiences with race, racism, or the time of the Hostage Crisis, pointing to a systemic silence to repress or eradicate stories of racial violence which could disrupt the neoliberal ascension towards whiteness. As a prerequisite to conforming to whiteness, collective memories of racial violence had to be eradicated, leaving many second-generation Iranian Americans to navigate the terrain of racialized experience without the infrastructure of race-conscious families, groups, or organizations. In fact, the groups, associations, and organizations that the first-generation did create as a process of forging a diasporic identity and experience follow many core neoliberal tenets: diversity, equality, inclusion, colorblindness, multiculturalism, and organizational structures that absorbed these liberal values.

Operating primarily from within the liberal telos of racial advancement through assimilation, the organizations created and structured by the parent generation emulate many of these myths, hopes, dreams, and fantasies, clinging to notions of meritocracy, equality, respectability (respectable visibility), and diversity as key ways of solidifying a "better future" for the Iranian American diaspora. Adopting and partaking in this neoliberal multicultural paradigm, the first-generation of

Iranian Americans institutionalized these ideas of racial advancement into the very fabric of Iranian American organizations across the region.

Demonstrating this precise formulation, the Farhang Foundation embodies the Iranian American assimilative practices through the adoption of these neoliberal values. Investing millions of dollars[11] to organize events for the Iranian American community in the Southern California region, the Farhang Foundation champions itself as the premier Iranian American cultural organization with a distinct effort to welcome, include, and invite non-Iranians into these venues to learn about the "beauty" of Iranian culture. The Farhang[12] Foundation, founded in 2008 in Los Angeles, describes itself in its one-sentence mission statement as "a non-religious, non-political, and not-for-profit foundation with a mission to celebrate and promote Iranian art and culture for the benefit of the community at large."[13] The explicit emphasis on labeling the organization "non-religious" and "non-political" are common phenomena in the diaspora, a move to keep politics and religion away from what is understood as the sanctity, beauty, and splendor of a 'pure' Persian culture. These are not just linguistic phrases used to ascertain tax exempt status, but a dedicated emphasis on removing the political and the religious from Iranian 'art' and 'culture,' as further examples will demonstrate. The organization regularly holds film festivals, art exhibits, music performances, literature discussions, as well as collaborative efforts with both USC and UCLA to showcase the breadth and depth of Iranian artistic cultural production. Their primary goal, achieved quite successfully, is to engage the larger Iranian American diaspora in conversations concerning cultural identity, yet neatly siphoned off into solely the realms of education, art, and culture.

---

[11] Farhang Foundation, "Farhang Foundation 2018-2019 Annual Report" (Los Angeles, 2019), https://farhang.org/images/Farhang-Annual-Report-2019.pdf.

[12] Farhang translates to culture.

[13] Farhang Foundation, "About," Farhang's Mission, 2022, https://farhang.org/about/.

The Freedom Sculpture: A Symbol of Iranian American Ascendency to Whiteness

In the summer of 2017, The Farhang Foundation held one of its largest ever events with over tens of thousands of Iranian Americans in attendance – the unveiling of the Freedom Sculpture.[14] Celebrating the ancient Persian king, Cyrus the Great, this sculpture was designed to honor the infamous 'Cyrus Cylinder,' largely assumed to be the first declaration of human rights in the world. The Farhang Foundation organized, funded, and erected the Freedom Sculpture statue in the heart of West Los Angeles as a symbol and testament to his reign. A crowded-funded sculpture costing over $2 million and taking four years to ascertain and erect, the Freedom Sculpture became a widely discussed, celebrated, and championed symbol in the Iranian American diaspora community of Los Angeles. I myself recall the cultural significance and circulatory power this sculpture and its accompanying event had and, naturally, ended up attending the unveiling with family.

I am primarily interested in the rhetorical and discursive ways in which this statue, its meaning, and its overall cultural significance were constructed by the Farhang Foundation, combining the values of American neoliberalism directly to a hegemonic or idealized Iranian American diasporic identity. Championing a Zoroastrian Persian king, interweaving associations of modern-day diversity to prehistoric human rights charters, this sculpture demonstrates the precise ways in which the parent generation fashion their racialized identity.

For instance, in describing the statue, the Foundation describes,

the Freedom Sculpture, [is] a permanent iconic monument celebrating religious freedom, cultural diversity and inclusiveness -- the humanitarian ideals [of] Cyrus the Great that have been *enshrined by the Founding Fathers in the Constitution of the United States.* … It now stands like a '*Statue of Liberty* for the West Coast', in the heart of Los Angeles, one of the world's most culturally diverse cities, as a permanent symbolic reminder that *freedom, inclusiveness and respect for diversity are the foundational values that truly make America great.*[15]

---

[14] Images of this event are attached to the end of this section.

[15] Farhang Foundation, "About - Freedomsculpture.Org," Freedom Sculpture, accessed February 22, 2022, https://freedomsculpture.org/ (emphasis added).

Explicitly tying the reign of Cyrus the Great to a modern Iranian American identity which performs the American values of "freedom, inclusiveness, and respect for diversity," the Foundation's rhetoric demonstrates precisely how a secularizing, Zoroastrian, Persian identity is constructed and elevated. By naming the statue the 'Freedom Sculpture' itself, drawing a parallel between it and the Statue of Liberty, as well as directly tying its purpose to that of the U.S.'s "Founding Fathers," Farhang demonstrates exactly how Iranian American diasporic identity embodies this neoliberal pursuit of multicultural inclusion. Relying on an organizational model centering bureaucracy, hierarchy, and liberal assimilationism as a practice of diversity and inclusion, Farhang's discourses and events demonstrate a strong neoliberal ethic.

Even more evocative than the language used to describe the sculpture, was the decision to host its massive celebratory unveiling on July 4th, a move to further intertwine Iranian American diasporic identity and American identity. On July 4th, 2017, the Farhang Foundation hosted over 80,000 people, which swarmed Santa Monica Boulevard as it intersects with Avenue of the Stars in the heart of Century City. Just a block off of the intersection with Wilshire Boulevard, the Freedom Sculpture was unveiled with a lineup of the most popular Iranian artists, comedians, and celebrities in a prominent West Los Angeles intersection. In addition to the free shows by some of the most cherished Iranian artists, Ebi, Arash, and Max Amini, which drew tens of thousands of Iranians, there were many formal speeches and declarations read by the Foundation and by city and state officials. Opening the ceremonies was Farhang Vice Chairman, Farhad Mohit, declaring:

> from this Independence Day forth, let the Freedom Sculpture be a reminder that we hold these truths to be self-evident, that religious freedom, cultural diversity, and inclusiveness are the universally shared humanitarian values that we embody in Los Angeles, uphold in California, and that truly make America great in the eyes of the whole world![16]

---

[16] Farhang Foundation, "Farhang Foundation 2016-2017 Annual Report" (Los Angeles, 2017), https://farhang.org/images/Farhang-Annual-Report-2017.pdf.

The repeated reference to these liberal values as what will 'make America great' or what 'truly makes American great' indicate clear responses and rejections of Trump's ostentatious anti-liberalism. Yet nonetheless, what is of interest to me is how natural, normal, and celebrated these references were for the broader diasporic community. As I flowed through tens of thousands of fellow diasporic Iranian Americans, I realized how many celebrated, enjoyed, and supported these identity formations, the intertwining of an Iranian American identity, as they fashioned it, required vocally supporting U.S. nationalist projects and rhetoric.

Governor Jerry Brown had a proclamation read at the unveiling on his behalf, in which he shared,

> The Freedom Sculpture is inspired by the noble principles of Cyrus the Great of Persia, who 2,500 years ago ensured individual freedom, religious diversity and multicultural inclusiveness for all under his rule. These are the same rights that our Founding Fathers enshrined in the U.S. Constitution for all Americans. As such, the Freedom Sculpture is the ideal monument to represent what California embodies, a state which actively embraces and values diversity.[17]

Los Angeles Councilman Paul Koretz attended and offered a speech in support of the sculpture and its values, as well as presenting a proclamation signed by all 15 councilmembers of the City of Los Angeles, who recognized the sculpture as "highlighting American values."[18] Mayor Eric Garcetti also contributed his support through a televised speech, specifically affirming the values of inclusion, diversity, and tolerance put forth by Cyrus the Great.[19]

---

[17] Governor Edmund G. Brown Jr., "Freedom Sculpture Proclamation" (Office of the Governor, July 4, 2017), https://www.freedomsculpture.org/images/Freedom-Sculpture-Gov-Brown-Proclamation.pdf.

[18] Farhang Foundation, "Farhang Foundation 2016-2017 Annual Report."

[19] Iranian American diasporic identity, therefore, is neatly suturing its sense of identity to the modern liberal American values of diversity, inclusion, and tolerance. Moreso, the ways in which this Iranian identity is being manufactured relies specifically on iconography that possesses Persian roots that are pre-Islamic, definitively secular, Zoroastrian, and not Muslim. This reaching back to Cyrus the Great is a popular and common occurrence in the Iranian community, as mentioned prior, a way of ascending towards whiteness. Claiming that pre-Islamic Zoroastrian Persian kings, edicts, and religious practices were the antecedents to much of Western civilization is a primary facet of the operative power of this racial positioning. If one looks further on the Freedom Sculpture's own website, there exists a short segment on how the Founding Fathers of America, namely Thomas Jefferson, were greatly influenced by Cyrus the Great and his ideas. As

Seeing tens of thousands of my community happily cheering as state officials chant empty slogans, referring to liberal assimilationist values as frequently as possible in hopes of solidifying a nationalist state identity forcing the erasure of our associations to "there," left me frustrated to say the least. Through my own personal experiences, I had quickly learned to be critical of the U.S. government and its nationalist claims, ploys, and deceptions; yet here were 80,000 people screaming in support of everything these state representatives muttered, however inadequate or unreal they were. As much as I disagreed, I had to grapple with the emotional power of an Iranian American collective consciousness. Towards the end of the evening, the long elegant blue velvet drapes cloaking the statue were dropped, as smoke and fireworks filled the air above. Thousands of Iranian Americans cheered and shouted as the ultimate apex of 'freedom' revealed itself, an angular gold and silver stainless-steel statue designed by a Sri Lankan-British designer just off of Santa Monica Boulevard. Standing in the crowd, I remember the euphoric and communal joy that hovered in the air. People were shouting, clapping, and photographing this in a moment of total collective excitement.

This statue embodied so much more to the Iranian American diaspora than a few tons of steel could ever represent to anyone outside the community. This statue, to many, was a symbol of Iranian resilience, of overcoming years and years of political violence, wars, and dislocated families. Feeling the immense sense of pride exuberated by many who had gathered there, I realized the significance of this Freedom Sculpture for my parents and the first-generation. For them, this sculpture came to mean the epitome of immigrant success. It was a symbol that declared, 'we made it,' and not only that, we made it in America, in Los Angeles, in West LA. It was a sign that despite all their struggles and suffering, all the families separated by borders and unobtainable documents, all

---

Ringer reminds us, this is a tried and true method of the Pahlavi kings, a tool of Pahlavi modernity, to aspire and move the national identity towards modernity. Ringer, "Iranian Nationalism and Zoroastrian Identity."

the sacrifices – we were here, if only for a moment. Although the way they structured their social identities may no longer speak to our lived experiences in the second-generation, I find it essential to respect the ways they have chosen to exist.

Images from Freedom Sculpture Event:

Figure 11. "Crowds at Freedom Sculpture Ceremony in West Los Angeles" (2017)
Photograph by the Farhang Foundation.

Figure 12. "The Freedom Sculpture" (2017)
Photograph by the Farhang Foundation.

Figure 13. "Foundation Executives and Local Politicians Introduce the Sculpture" (2017)
Photograph by the Farhang Foundation.

Figure 14. "City Council Members with Signed Declaration in Support of Sculpture" (2017)
Photograph by the Farhang Foundation.

Figure 15. "Crowds in front of the Main Stage at Freedom Sculpture Ceremony" (2017)
Photograph by the Farhang Foundation.

Open to All: The Iranian Mosque and Public Relations

Another important site of diasporic identity formation is the IMAN Cultural Center, the Iranian American Muslim Association of North America. Housed in the Palms neighborhood of Los Angeles between Culver City and Westwood, IMAN, although formally referred to as a cultural center, is popularly known in the Iranian American community as the sole Iranian mosque in Los Angeles. The language, rhetoric, and framing IMAN utilizes in order to depict itself demonstrate specific mobilizations of race and religion. Their website describes the cultural center as "a non-profit, non-political, and independent organization" that was "established to build friendship and cooperation between Iranians and Muslims with other people from different races and religions." Already, the differentiation between Iranians and Muslims highlights the power of non-Islamiosity within the community and the need to respect the two as potentially separate groups. This alone

speaks to the depth and omnipresence of non-Islamiosity in that the sole Iranian mosque in the area must specify the distinction between 'Iranians,' as a social group, from 'Muslims.'

Furthermore, the stated dedication to cross-cultural education as the central project of the cultural center demonstrates the liberal assimilationist ethos structuring the work of IMAN – a dedication to building cooperation between "other people" and Iranians and Muslims. What is particularly important is that this cultural center is primarily understood in the community as a religious institution, yet it still names itself a 'cultural center' and not a mosque. Framing itself as cultural as opposed to religious demonstrates vague references to cultural advancement, multiculturalist projects of diversification and inclusion, as well as cross-community engagement.

These tactics used by IMAN to represent itself must be interpreted as a consequence of not only racialized notions of a Muslim identity in the American racial landscape, but also the potency of non-Islamiosity in the Iranian American diaspora. Responding to these two currents, which build off of and through one another, IMAN describes itself primarily as a site of cultural advancement, reducing and minimizing its religious offerings. Although they rely on a discourse of culture, IMAN has a mosque on its grounds with a prayer room, holds regular Qur'an classes, religious events and gatherings, and houses a library of religious texts.

The rhetoric used to describe the function of the library too, demonstrates the challenges IMAN faces in its decision to depict itself in the liminal space between religious and cultural. Outlining its purpose, the description reads, "The IMAN Library is a center for the study of various religions, especially the Abrahamic religions."[20] Articulated as such, IMAN's description demonstrates the center's need to construct itself as cross-religious and by extension, cross-cultural. Describing the center, its library, and their work as such, IMAN's language demonstrates not only

---

[20] Iman Foundation, "Iman Library," Iman Library, n.d., accessed January 25, 2020.

the reliance on neoliberal values to position itself, but also the cautious trepidation around being perceived as 'too Muslim.' The power of American anti-Muslim racism compounded with Iranian non-Islamiosity functions to create a mosque library description that elevates the study of all religions. In effect, IMAN's rhetoric demonstrates a commitment to de-Islamicization in order to be received well within the broader diaspora community and by the American public.

Norooz, Qur'ans, & Farvahars

Norooz is arguably the most important holiday celebration for Iranian Americans. Consisting of several weeks of commemorative events, Norooz[21] is cause for hundreds of gatherings, feasts, and parties around the Southern California region. Celebrated on the first day of spring, the new year being the exact moment of the spring equinox, the Persian New Year is a historic tradition with its origins dating back thousands of years. I am fascinated by how exactly this holiday has taken on a particular set of markers for the Iranian American community in Los Angeles, specifically as a secular, non-Islamious, Zoroastrian, and Persian holiday. As one can imagine, the ways in which Norooz is celebrated today have grown, shifted, and adapted to fit the particular sociopolitical moment Iranians find themselves in. Therefore, I must make clear at the outset that this is not an attempt to excavate the entire history of how Norooz has been celebrated across all the various regions and nations in which it is celebrated, nor how all Iranians in diaspora celebrate Norooz. My aim is to articulate the contours of how Norooz is framed in major Los Angeles Iranian diaspora events and foreground the racializing and gendered consequences of this construction for the younger generation. As I will demonstrate, the generation I interviewed cherishes Norooz and celebrates many of its traditions; at the same time, however there is also a budding line of critique.

---

[21] *Norooz* literally translates to 'new day.'

Every single one of my friends understood 'Norooz' or 'The Persian New Year' as the most important holiday celebration in their family home. Although celebrated to varying degrees, the understanding that this holiday was in fact the most significant was made clear by each and every single friend of mine through the sheer number of memories, rituals, experiences, and stories they shared.[22] Golnaz shared how her family celebrates Norooz "aggressively" following all the customary traditions: setting up the *haftseen*,[23] gathering for *saal-e tahvil*,[24] and eating *sabzi polo-mahi*.[25] Shadi tells me that Norooz is her favorite holiday and that no other holiday, whether American or Iranian, compares. Not only did they all love and admire Norooz, but all of my friends were raised in homes that put out a *haftseen* table spread. Although some of my friends' families stopped putting up the *haftseen* table after divorces, deaths, or moves to college, all of them had been raised in homes where a *haftseen* was a central part of learning their cultural identity. Memories of buying goldfish, stacking apples, dusting off the *haftseen* mirror were all part of the recollective process. All saw this holiday and this season with affectionate eyes, a time of rebirth, joy, and family gatherings.

Many other important cultural and religious holidays, including *Shab-e Yalda*, *Jashn-e Mehregan*, *Ramadan*, *Eid-e Fitr*, *Ashura*, *Arbaeen*, were not celebrated or even acknowledged so universally. In fact, many of my friends were not aware of some of these other holidays or only knew of them vaguely but did not celebrate them. There was always a clear distinction between holidays known as

---

[22] In comparison, almost none celebrated Ramadan nor knew when it took place. I attended a Ramadan gathering (*eftar*, the breaking of the fast) at IMAN, the local Iranian American mosque, for comparison purposes. There were approximately 25 people attending a gathering on a Friday evening, whereas there were 500+ in attendance for *Char Shanbe Soori* on a Tuesday night. There were virtually no young people at *eftar*, whereas there were hundreds for the other celebration.

[23] A *haftseen* is a traditional table setting set up in homes to bring in the new year, Norooz. The word *haftseen* literally translates to seven S's, each item representing a facet of the rebirth of a new year, and starts with the letter S.

[24] *Saal-e tahvil* is the exact moment of the spring equinox, the exact moment of the new year. Because Norooz is dependent on astrological movements, the exact time and date of *saal-e tahvil* fluctuates year to year (usually between March 20-21st).

[25] *Sabzi polo-mahi* is a meal traditionally eaten on Norooz, consisting of marinated white fish and herbed rice.

'Persian' ancestrally and those considered 'Muslim' or religious holidays. Bahman shared how his mother taught him that "those other holidays are not really 'ours.' Those are 'Muslim' holidays."

As the most culturally cherished holiday, Norooz receives the most attention, with weeks of celebrations required to bring all the traditions to life. Before the celebration of Norooz is the celebration of *Char Shanbe Soori*, literally translating to Red Wednesday. *Char Shanbe Soori* is celebrated on the eve of the final Wednesday before Norooz to commemorate the end of the winter season and the coming of Spring. Small fires are set up as people jump over them reciting a mantra to the flames '*zardi-e man az to, sorkhi-e to az man*,' meaning 'I give my illnesses (yellow) to you, I draw your strength (red) into me.' The origins of *Char Shanbe Soori* reside in Zoroastrian rituals of honoring the dead, a time when spirits are thought to be closer to this realm, yet the common diasporic conceptualization celebrates it largely as a fun, exciting, pre-Norooz gathering where children get to run around, play, and jump over flames.

Then of course, comes Norooz, a dedication to the season of spring. A holiday based in Zoroastrianism, the common modes of celebrating are that families set up a *haftseen* table in their homes and gather around it for the *saal-e tahvil*, the exact moment of the spring equinox. Traditionally, families eat *sabzi polo-mahi*, a dish of herbed rice and fish fillet, and spend the next two weeks visiting elders in a practice known as *eid deedani*. The concluding holiday of Norooz, *Seezdah Bedar*, which literally translates to 'going outside on the thirteenth,' is the thirteenth day of the new year, wherein families pack up elaborate meals, snacks, games, and activities and head off to picnic in the outdoors. The purpose of *Seezdah Bedar* is to conclude the new year celebrations with a family gathering appreciating the outdoors, the passing of which meant the end of the holiday season and back-to-work for Iranians. In the following subsections, I will draw on my ethnographic research to demonstrate how these three Norooz rituals are performed, celebrated, and experienced in the diaspora community as well as how the second-generation engages with these spaces.

Permitting Persian Practices: The Bureaucratization of Char Shanbe Soori

Framed as fun, exciting, and cultural, *Char Shanbe Soori* is the commemoration of the end of winter and the soon-to-be spring season. I was raised celebrating the holiday at a family friend's house in Woodland Hills, jumping over a series of three small fires they set up on torn up metal scraps. I remember the smell of lighter fluid, the smoke of the flames rising, and parents repeating the mantra over and over again so their children could hopefully grasp this important cultural experience: '*zardi-e man az to, sorkhi-e to az man.*' 'I give my illnesses (yellow) to you, I draw your strength (red) into me.' As people jump over the fires, they repeat this phrase, speaking directly to the fire, asking for their illnesses to be banished and supplanted with the strength, power, and warmth of the fire. I always remember having so much fun at *Char Shanbe Soori*, entranced by the flames and the opportunity to honor my heritage.

Leaving home for university forced me to find another way to celebrate *Char Shanbe Soori*. Luckily Berkeley was home to the largest *Char Shabe Soori* celebration in Northern California. It was there that I experienced my first public *Char Shanbe Soori*, complete with closed streets, food trucks, DJs, a *haftseen*, two long lines of fires, and hundreds, if not thousands, of Iranian Americans. It certainly was not as intimate as my family friend's home, but it was familiar nonetheless. The sights, the sounds, the smells all evoked a familiarity to a culture I knew, a culture that was mine, even if it made no sense to me on display on a side street in downtown Berkeley. Attending that celebration for years before returning to Southern California forced me to think deliberately about Iranian diasporic identity formation, the difference between Southern and Northern California Iranian diasporic communities, and of course, the ways in which cultural identity is produced through public experience.[26]

---

[26] For a more thorough analysis of how Iranian Americans reproduce cultural identity through Americanized engagement in civil society, see Amy Malek, "Public Performances of Identity Negotiation in the Iranian Diaspora: The

As I was planning where to attend *Char Shanbe Soori* in 2019 as a part of my ethnographic research, I noticed that there were several public events to choose from yet all were charging a fee for entry. I remember when I was a teenager, most public celebrations were free and open to the public, most notably the *Char Shanbe Soori* celebrations at Dockweiler Beach. There were no policies, no rules, no regulatory oversight. All there was, was a group of Iranian Americans, some gasoline, some logs, and always, lots of food and music. Given the potential increase in the number of Iranians celebrating in diaspora, against a backdrop of neoliberalizing racial absorption into whiteness, I noticed an important recent shift in the ways *Char Shanbe Soori* is celebrated. Many Iranian American organizations now hold formal events, many of which are also having to restructure their celebrations to be in accordance with city policies, police producers, maximum capacity requirements, parking requirements, food/trash pick-up, etc. In effect, there has been a move to bureaucratize *Char Shabe Soori* celebrations, as my fieldwork at IMAN Cultural Center's 2019 *Char Shanbe Soori* celebration demonstrates.

That year *Char Shanbe Soori* fell just two days before Norooz, the anticipation palpable as the community counted down the hours. After perusing online, asking friends and family, as well as checking Iranian American media sources, it became clear that free, public *Char Shanbe Soori* celebrations were no longer happening. Now, all public events were organized by a group, association, or center, and they all charged an entry fee. The very act of having to pay to celebrate *Char Shanbe Soori* frustrated me, as I understood it as a cultural tradition that was thousands of years old, now reduced to a transaction in order to participate. Something about this requirement to pay and enter a cordoned off space irked me. How could it be that only after a couple of decades in the U.S. we had already given up our sacred rituals and commodified them? Did we, as a community,

New York Persian Day Parade," *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and The Middle East* 31 (September 20, 2011): 388–410, https://doi.org/10.1215/1089201X-1264316.

even see this bureaucratization of *Char Shanbe Soori* as an issue? Did anyone else detect this creep of neoliberal capitalism into our historic practices, emulating and valorizing notions of privatization, elitism, and state-sanctioned legitimacy?

In "Feeling Labor: Commercial Divination and Commodified Intimacy in Turkey," Zeynep Korkman argues how commodification of sacred spiritual rituals has altered the ways in which practitioners of divine services are able to conduct their work. Korkman's scholarship outlines the effects of commodified intimacy, and how practices once considered familial, cultural, and a ritual between kin, have transformed into a market-based transaction. She states, "commodification pushed divination from the privacy of feminine domesticity to the publicness of the market economy. This move transformed a relation of socializing and caring into a capitalist relation of laboring and consuming."[27] This shift, as Korkman outlines, highlights how market economies shape, influence, and redirect the form of cultural ritual. Similar to her example, the reconfiguration of *Char Shanbe Soori* celebrations showcases how an intimate, historic cultural ritual adapts/is adapted as it encounters the terrain of an American diaspora, state/local regulation, and the transcatoinal practices inherent in a market economy.

Although frustrated by this change in how *Char Shanbe Soori* was now observed, I paid my fee to the ticket booth outside IMAN and walked into the main parking lot which housed the fires, food stands, and seating areas. Sandwiched between their mosque building and their grand event hall, this parking lot was closed to cars this Tuesday night and only open to those who came to celebrate this sacred end of winter ritual, over 500 people. The energy in the air was playful, excited, joyous, as most *Char Shabe Soori* celebrations are. Children were running around playing soccer,

---

[27] Zeynep Kurtulus Korkman, "Feeling Labor: Commercial Divination and Commodified Intimacy in Turkey," *Gender & Society* 29, no. 2 (2015): 201, https://doi.org/10.1177/0891243214566269.

standing in line to jump over the fires as many times as possible, families ordering Kabob, and old

friends greeting one another with hugs and kisses.

When I was a child, families would set up a series of small bonfires in backyards or close cul-

de-sacs and invite friends and family over to partake in the rituals. As of one my friends shared, "We

always did that at home with the family. My parents would set up fireplace logs on metal trash can

lids, like three of those, and we would say the [lines] and jump." Now, the increase in Iranian

American presence and the neoliberal desire to legitimize that presence through state-sanctioned

means, requires cooperating with city policies – hiring security guards, ensuring specific distances

between the flames and buildings, using a gas line to limit the flames' heights (as opposed to natural,

open flames), limiting the number of people permitted, and on and on. These protocols were all

followed at the IMAN *Char Shanbe Soori* celebration, including having a handful of police officers

present both inside and outside the event.[28]

I argue that in order to conceptualize this shift, from backyard parties to structured, policed,

and permitted gatherings requires attention to the functions of the neoliberalized state bureaucracies,

state-sanctioned legitimacy, and liberal assimilationist projects. This move to celebrate *Char Shanbe*

Soori in such ways, in direct cooperation with the state, its police, its local policies, and fire codes,

demonstrates the swallowing up of racialized difference into a neat, liberal formulation of

assimilated immigrant identity.

As someone who has grown through and alongside this shift, I see this bureaucratization of

Char Shanbe Soori as a funneling of Iranian diasporic life into an American neoliberal immigrant

identity. Whereas many families, mine included, held mini bonfire celebrations in backyards, many

---

[28] This date of this particular ethnographic fieldwork was approximately one month after the New Zealand mosque shooting, so the heightened police presence may have been more protective than a collaborative effort with local law enforcement. However on IMAN's website, there are several photographs happily depicting police officers and their cars with Iranian American community members – a visible declaration of community engagement with local law enforcement. See Iman Foundation, "About Iman," Iman Cultural Center, 2020, https://iman.org/about/.

are now too timid to hold these gatherings. Given the overt racism of a presidential administration politically dedicated to squashing Muslim life, many diasporic Iranians perhaps feel safer attending large, organized, public events with permits and police presence. Particularly due to the ways a visible display of open flames and a gathering of 'Muslim-looking' individuals would be perceived, there is a growing fear around what holding a *Char Shanbe Soori* celebration may provoke. As much as the first-generation has worked to eradicate its association with Islam, the omnipresent fear of racialized violence shapes how and where we are able to celebrate our ancient customs. The combination of the increase in anti-Muslim racist violence alongside the multicultural neoliberalization of immigrant identity lends to a new form of *Char Shanbe Soori* celebrations, permitted, privatized, and ticketed.

A "Universally Interesting" Norooz

Following the ritual celebrating the end of winter season comes the highly anticipated Norooz. Of particular importance is how the Farhang Foundation's Norooz celebration is framed, arguably the largest and most popular Norooz celebrations in Los Angeles, the annual Nowruz Celebration at UCLA. Called "the largest Nowruz celebration in the West"[29] with "diverse family-oriented cultural programming, concerts, traditional music, dancers, cuisine, and more,"[30] Farhang's Nowruz Celebration has become quite the staple in Iranian Los Angeles culture with over thousands of people in attendance every year. I myself have attended numerous of these Norooz celebrations in UCLA's Dickson Court, watching families gather and take photos around the *haftseen*, eat meals together, or sing and dance along with the performers in traditional Persian dress.

---

[29] Farhang Foundation, *Farhang Foundation, Celebrating Iranian Art & Culture Since 2008*, Video, 2019, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Mg5YXRL28QI.

[30] Behzad Tabatabai, "Nowruz," farhang.org, accessed February 12, 2019, https://farhang.org/programs/nowruz.

As a part of my ethnographic research, I attended the 2019 celebration conveniently located on my home campus. The first thing I do every year is go to the main informational booths and pick up the free and widely distributed booklet they release every year. This year had the title, *Celebrating Nowruz: Iranian New Year,*[31] across the front cover with a ring of colorful spring blossoms and leaves circling the words. A high-quality color booklet of 80 pages, it was full of descriptions of Norooz, the *haftseen,* Farhang's mission and goals, as well as advertising from local Iranian American businesses and community members wishing everyone a happy new year.

As I flipped through, I saw an introductory one-page excerpt on "Nowruz" by Professor Ehsan Yarsharter, explaining the meaning and significance of the holiday.[32] In the article, Yarsharter explains that "of all the Persian national festivals, the New Year celebrations are at once the most important and the most colorful."[33] He goes on to write that it is "the only one in Persia that is not confined to the traditions of only one religious group" and how "it symbolizes the continuity of ancient Persian culture, which has survived so many adversities and vicissitudes."[34] These references, all staples of a non-Islamious posturing disarticulating the Islamic from the Iranian, work to undermine and delegitimize the Islamic Republic of Iran. As if

Figure 16. "Cover of the Farhang Foundation's 2019 Nowruz Booklet." Photograph by the author.

---

[31] Farhang Foundation, "Celebrating Nowruz: Iranian New Year" (Farhang Foundation, March 10, 2019), Print.

[32] Ehsan Yarsharter, "Nowruz: The New Year Celebration in Iran," in *Celebrating Nowruz: Iranian New Year* (Farhang Foundation, 2019), 4, Print.

[33] Yarsharter.

[34] Yarsharter.

declaring something for the first time, Iranian Americans in diaspora repeatedly, and loudly, reiterate

their non-Islamious politics in such terms, always against the Islamic Republic, always with utmost

fervor.

Yarsharter's commentary sets the tone for the remainder of the booklet, a text rich with

references to a grand Persian empire, a Persian culture, a Zoroastrian culture, anything and

everything possible to remove association with Islam. As much as I have witnessed these

articulations my entire life, it is always intriguing to see the precise ways in which they are

constructed. As my experience at *Seezdah Bedar* below will highlight, there is always someone

extending the boundaries of non-Islamiosity; always someone pushing the anti-Muslim hatred as far

as it can go, while I wonder if there will be anyone to challenge it.

Nonetheless, because Norooz is framed as a specifically non-religious holiday, it allows the

holiday to be conceptualized as open to any and all Iranians regardless of faith. Tapping into the

Pahlavi theme of appropriation of Zoroastrian iconography, the construction of Norooz as non-

religious and specifically pre-Islamic serves as a way to bridge together the entirety of the Iranian

American community, across what are palpable religious lines. This is significant because the Iranian

American diaspora is, in fact, home to many religious minorities, with Jews, Baha'is, Christians, and

Zoroastrians making up some of the largest religious minority groups. Although the broader

diaspora community still largely maintains religious boundaries, this production of a cross-religious

Norooz is important for it demonstrates another adoption of neoliberal multiculturalism.[35]

Farhang Foundation fortifies this construction of a unified non-religious Iranian identity by

shifting the language of the event from celebrating the 'Persian New Year,' demarcating a particular

---

[35] This is noteworthy because there is very little, if any, cross-religious connection in the Iranian diaspora. Largely, Iranian Americans tend to keep within their own religious enclaves and do not socialize much with Iranians of other religious backgrounds.

ethnic identity within Iran, to 'Iranian New Year,' allowing in all of the diverse ethnic groupings throughout the nation of Iran. This too, provides its own set of exclusions, as many peoples across the entire region and globe celebrate Norooz, from Afghanistan to India and Albania to China. Nonetheless, what matters here is the way in which the Farhang Foundation has constructed this Norooz event, as the arbiter of Iranian diasporic cultural identity formation, a nonreligious and therefore cross-religious celebration, reaching back to the pre-Islamic roots of ancient Persia.

As I was perusing further through the booklet, I noticed a list of frequently asked questions published in the back. The first question posed got my attention: "Why does Farhang focus on art and culture only?" This was a question that I too pondered. The response outlined a careful demonstration of an Iranian disarticulation of the Islamic:

> Because at Farhang Foundation we believe in putting our efforts only in areas that can bring people together and add value to the community where we live. Iranian art and culture are universally interesting and can be useful to anyone in our community, Iranian and non-Iranian alike.[36]

Claiming the universality of art and culture as directly opposed to other realms, namely religion and politics, this response demonstrates how the most prominent Iranian American organization in the Southern California region privileges art and culture as "universally interesting." This articulation makes plain that other facets of Iranian identity, for instance, Muslim rituals or practices, political organizing against US sanctions/War on Terror, charity work for Iranians suffering from natural disasters, etc., are not and cannot possibly be ways for Iranian Americans to bring people together and add value to the community in which they live. Furthering their point, the Foundation writes,

> Is it a surprise then that most of the associations the community at large has about Iran are divisive? At Farhang we're focused on changing these false images of Iran and Iranians by celebrating and promoting the best parts of our art and culture in a way that benefits the community at large. After all, America is a melting pot of the best parts of different cultures, and so it benefits from having our great culture added to it.[37]

---

[36] Farhang Foundation, "Celebrating Nowruz: Iranian New Year," 76.

[37] Farhang Foundation, 76.

Locked into the colorblind rhetoric of neoliberal multiculturalism, Farhang is unable to speak directly to the racial violence experienced by the community and, instead, refers simply to how the larger community holds "false images" of the Iranian people. In order to speak of racial violence would mean to acknowledge that stories and experiences of racial violence not only exist, but are harmful to the overall community. The ascension to whiteness disallows those who participate in it from utilizing any race-conscious language, therefore unable to refer to any of the racial violence or racism the community has experienced, and continues to, in order to further conform.

"Get That Off of There!" Qur'ans and Haftseens

One of most tangible ways diasporic Iranians work to disassociate from Islam unfolds on none other than the *haftseen* table, the grounding centerpiece of the entire holiday. A table setting put together a couple weeks before the new year, it is an iconic cultural construction. *Haftseen* literally translates to seven S's, and represents the seven items placed on the table to bring in a new spring: *sabzi*, sprouting greens; *samanu*, sweet wheat germ pudding; *senjed*, dried Persian olive; *serkeh*, vinegar; *seeb*, apples; *seer*, garlic; and *somagh*, sumac. These seven items are usually placed over a traditionally woven tapestry and supplemented with painted eggs, mirrors, flowers, candles, and gold coins to further enhance its stature. All items gathered and placed on the *haftseen* symbolize fertility, health, longevity, wealth, beauty, rebirth, and growth, making it a visual masterpiece, the locus of the Norooz.

However, as each family puts together its *haftseen* table, a specific issue emerges – whether or not to place the Qur'an on the *haftseen*. As is tradition, many families place the Qur'an in the center of the *haftseen* or, as Campo calls it, a "book of wisdom."[38] Given the contentious nature of the

---

[38] Juan Eduardo Campo, *Encyclopedia of Islam*, 2008, 525.

Iranian diaspora's relationship to Islam, the placement of the Qur'an on the *haftseen* table becomes one of the epicenters of non-Islamious debate.

Some of my friends were familiar with this dispute and when I asked them about their families' *haftseen* practices, and they shared in detail the frustrations and retorts they hear from non-Islamious relatives when Qur'ans are placed on the *haftseen*. When I asked Golnaz how her family responded she said, "oh yeah, I have a lot of family members who are like '*een cheeye*?'[39] put a *Shahnameh* on there!" Outrage, disgust, and outright anger at the sight of any Qur'an are common occurrences for those who subscribe to a non-Islamious identity formulation, particularly the sight of a Qur'an on the *haftseen* table. As Golnaz articulates, many non-Islamious individuals advocate for the placement of a *Shahnameh* on the *haftseen*, an important cultural relic I will describe below.

What is of interest to me is specifically how the Qur'an, as it is to exist on the *haftseen* table, has come to carry such meaning for members of Iranian American diaspora communities. It is an item which, by its very sight, triggers the deepest and most intense histories of political trauma. As Moallem argues in her work *Persian Carpets: The Nation as a Transnational Commodity*, "The symbolic value invested in a specific commodity in colonial modernity became a site of knowledge accumulation that provided space for the formation of national identity and diasporic ethnicity."[40] Drawing on her analysis on Persian carpets, I too show how the Qur'an has become an important site of national and diasporic identity formation. Although not a commodity, the Qur'an as a symbol has become a site of national and diasporic identity formation. Conjuring up almost every emotion imaginable – anger, frustration, fear, disgust, regret, loss, grief, outrage, and on and on – the sight of a Qur'an means one thing to the non-Islamious subject, the demise of their beloved Iran.

---

[39] Translates to 'What is this?!' The tone implies rudeness.

[40] Minoo Moallem, *Persian Carpets: The Nation as a Transnational Commodity*, 1st ed., The Routledge Series for Creative Teaching and Learning in Anthropology (New York: Routledge, 2018), 8.

In order to illustrate this, I will share an example from my own family and how my uncle, a proud non-Islamious man, triumphantly polices the presence of Islam anywhere and everywhere he possibly can. His daughter put together a *haftseen* table in her own apartment which contained a small Qur'an in the middle. Upon seeing her *haftseen*, he immediately cried out "What is that thing! Get that off of there!" Shaking his head in utter disgust, his outrage embodies the very powerful force of non-Islamiosity. He literally cannot handle the sight of a Qur'an, as for him it represents solely the destruction of Iran.

All gathered around the *haftseen* in my family home for Norooz and this same uncle began interrogating my mother for placing a Qur'an on her *haftseen*. In his bombastic outcry, just minutes before the new year, he began to question her, "Why do you put that on there?! Do you even know what it says in there!? Can you even read that?!" As he went on with his list of questions, a display of his very angry anti-Islamic sentiment, I realized how deep his trauma must go. I know well how much he loves Iran, how proud he is of Iranian history and Iranian contribution to humanity and I grieve all the ways we have been taught to hate Islam as the only way out, the only way into modernity. I grieve all the countless times we have been convinced that to spit on Islam, the Qur'an, and anything Islamic, will somehow liberate us. The irony lived on in that this particular Qur'an was his mothers and one of the only handful of items that we still have as a memory of her life. I grieve that for him, all that mattered was eradicating the symbol of Islam from his sight, a pain that seems to transcend the sanctity of his mother's most cherished object.

Interrogating his sister minutes before the new year, this series of questions demonstrates the precise form of non-Islamious policing. Yet what is happening here is a function of many currents: a racialized grasp towards whiteness, a hatred for Islam seeing it as the demise of the Pahlavi monarchy, a gendered move to demonstrate that he is not patriarchal like 'those Muslim men,' all the while yelling at his sister. This placement is an affront to the non-Islamious subject

because here the Qur'an is not only an outside element, understood as foreign, violent, and the sole cause of havoc in Iran for the last 40 years, but is seen as infiltrating and polluting the pure, Persian *haftseen* table. The Qur'an is normally understood as the emblem of everything that Islam embodies, yet placed on the *haftseen* table during Norooz specifically irritates Persian purists. Locating it as the site of cultural decline, destruction of Iran, and the sole reason for global social and economic ostracization of Iran, non-Islamious subjects detest the Qur'an.

This non-Islamious outrage at the sight of the Qur'an is not unique to my family, and in fact, is a point of contention for many and their *haftseens* throughout the diaspora, whether personal or public. Of all of the public *haftseen* displays I saw throughout the Los Angeles region during the Norooz season: Century City mall, Woodland Hills Market, Farhang's Annual Norooz Celebration, Iman Cultural Center, not one of them had a Qur'an in place. Even the IMAN Cultural Center, what is commonly understood as the Iranian mosque of Los Angeles, did not place a Qur'an on their *haftseen*. This sweeping disavowal of Islam, even within the mosque, highlights the depth, power, and omnipotence of non-Islamiosity for these Iranian American diasporic communities. I would argue that to place a Qur'an on any public *haftseen* in the LA area would be to invite hundreds of complaints, outcries, and unpleasantries from local diasporic Iranians, similar to my Uncle's.

I myself place a Qur'an on my *haftseen* in my own home, a family tradition my mother taught me that I cherish and follow, as did several of my friends. Upon sharing the photos of my *haftseen* with certain family members however, I have been reprimanded with '*Chera eeno gozashti oonja!?*' or 'Your *haftseen* is so beautiful! Why did you ruin it with that thing in the middle!' As rude as it may seem, what is of importance is the seamless comfort with which these questions can be posed. The immediate change in tone, the faces of disgust, the anger bubbling out of their eyes, demonstrates a tacit social fiber operating in the community that there is absolutely nothing positive about Islam.

Most of my friends were raised in homes with Qur'ans on their family *haftseen*, with the

exception of a couple who were raised by steadfast non-Islamious parents who insisted that the

Qur'an had no place in the home. It is important that I emphasize that even though non-Islamiosity

is a massive undercurrent in the community, something which most, if not all, Iranians in diaspora

are familiar with, there are still plenty who do not subscribe to it as loudly as my Uncle and those of

similar politics. As Mohsen Mobasher argues in "Cultural Trauma and Ethnic Identity Formation

Among Iranian Immigrants in the United States"

> In the eyes of many community members, to be a devout practicing Muslim or to attend an
> Islamic teaching center or a mosque is synonymous with being pro-Khomeini or a
> sympathizer of the Islamic government in Iran. Consequently, practicing Iranian Muslims,
> who attempt to maintain their religious identity, particularly women who wear the *hejab*
> (traditional Muslim hair covering), worry about being labeled as *Hezbolahi* (Shi'a
> fundamentalist). Fear of the negative reactions by anti-Khomeini critics has marginalized and
> pushed the practicing Muslims into the periphery of the Iranian exile community, *as if there is
> a religious and a secular Iranian community*.[41]

Illustrating the inability to neatly bifurcate diasporic Iranians along secular and religious lines,

Mobasher's analysis demonstrates the tensions diasporic Iranians navigate as they grapple with their

relationships to Islam. More importantly, there clearly are Iranians who respect, valorize, and cherish

their Islamic faith, in certain forms and fashions that are more complex than a rigid jump into pure

secularity, as non-Islamious supporters would hope. What is of interest to me though is how in

order to become a modern, American immigrant, secularizing oneself and eradicating association

with Islam is essential. As Mobasher's work suggests, the practicing Muslims are marginalized into

the periphery of the diaspora community.

One way the tension with the Qur'an is alleviated by non-Islamious Persian purists is the

placement of the *Shahnameh* in the center of the *haftseen* table. An example of this, as Golnaz

---

[41] Mohsen Mobasher, "Cultural Trauma and Ethnic Identity Formation Among Iranian Immigrants in the United
States," *The American Behavioral Scientist (Beverly Hills)* 50, no. 1 (2006): 101, https://doi.org/10.1177/0002764206289656
(emphasis added).

mentioned above, is how families decide, or instruct others, to place the *Shahnameh* on a *haftseen* instead of the Qur'an. The *Shahnameh*, or Book of Kings, is one of the most esteemed and cherished ancient Persian poetry texts, written by the prolific Abul Qasem Ferdowsi.[42] The *Shahnameh*, however, has come to carry a particular meaning in modern Iranian and Iranian diasporic discourse, a highly racialized token of cultural meaning. It is championed as the definitive epic of ethnic and national identity for Iran, due in part to the idea that Ferdowsi explicitly refused to use any Arabic words in his entire text of 50,000 couplets. Ferdowsi himself is claimed to have not used any Arabic words to demarcate uniquely Persian, and non-Arab, language, preserving the sanctity of Persian linguistic culture, as well as making a strong political statement against the infiltration of the Arabic language and Islam. A popularized claim championed by Persian purists is that Ferdowsi's work is the reason the authentic Persian language exists today.

The circulatory power of the *Shahnameh* cannot be overstated, a process of solidifying "modern nationalist appropriations" out of the "history of pre-Islamic Iran."[43] Iranians around the world, and particularly Iranian Americans in the Los Angeles diaspora, claim and cherish the *Shahnameh* for its poetic splendor but also its anti-Arab, anti-Arabic, and anti-Muslim cultural significance – the prized symbol for Persian purists. Functioning as a commodity ripe with social meaning and significance, to place the *Shahnameh* on a *haftseen* is to evoke a specifically anti-Muslim Iranian diasporic identity.

The Zoroastrian Farvahar: A Safe, Secular Symbol?

Reaching into the discursive network of a pre-Islamic Persia, references to Zoroastrianism are the substance of how the parent generation painted this non-Islamious diasporic identity. Much

---

[42] Fozi, "Neo-Iranian Nationalism," 244.

[43] Najmabadi, *Women with Mustaches and Men without Beards*, 103.

of this social construction relies on a godless notion of Zoroastrianism, explicitly stripping away its religious values, beliefs, and rituals for a manufactured series of cultural symbols. For instance, the decision to place the *Shahnameh* on the *haftseen* instead of a Qur'an is one such act, in that it functions to evoke an imagination of Persian cultural greatness, deployed primarily in service of modern racialized political grievances, for example – a rejection of Islam or Arabs. This placement of the *Shahnameh* is tied to ideas of a glorious Persian empire, an all-powerful Persian king, a land free from Islam that once ruled almost half the world. What is more, the social construction of this grand pre-Islamic Persia is that it specifically lacks religious meaning.

I suggest that this diasporic imagination, removing the religious from the Zoroastrian, even as it draws from its iconography, demonstrates the secularist underpinnings of non-Islamiosity. Gholami suggests that non-Islamiosity "readily accommodates and borrows from religions *as long as they are not Islam.*"[44] I extend this argument and suggest that non-Islamiosity draws from religions not only as long as they are not Islam, but even in doing so, extracts components of religion that can be used to further the secularizing project of non-Islamiosity. As such, much of the parent generations' construction of an Iranian diasporic identity relies on the selective extraction of various components of cultural iconography to construct a notion of Iranian diaspora outside of religious meaning.

A common way this process unfolds is in the way the parent generation relies on the highly popularized Zoroastrian creed: *pendar-e neek, goftar-e neek, kerdar-e neek*, translating to 'good thoughts, good words, good deeds.' Reducing the entire faith to this one mantra, the parent generation creates a notion of religion that relies solely on four words, taken as an admirable motto to live one's life by. Many of my friends shared how their parents repeatedly rely on this phrasing, teaching them that this phrase encapsulated the entirety of religion and religious values, all that there was to be known when it came to religion. This particular creed has become a stand-in for non-Islamious Iranian

---

[44] Gholami, *Secularism and Identity*, 48 (emphasis in original).

Americans, who rely on it frequently as a means of declaring their secularity. What is interesting here, again, is the necessary removal, erasure, and non-engagement with the religious, in this case the Zoroastrian faith. Through this, we have a secularist articulation of a religious creed, secularizing Zoroastrianism in service of a non-Islamious subject position.

Sarah Katz's research, interviewing second-generation Iranian Americans at UC Berkeley, demonstrates how the younger generation has come to absorb some of their parents' constructions of non-Islamiosity and Zoroastrian culture. Interviewing Taraneh, a second-generation diasporic Iranian of Muslim background, she says,

> Even though I am technically Muslim, I identify more with the classical Zoroastrian culture of the ancient Persian Empire because I am extremely proud of my culture and not necessarily my 'religion.' Both my family and I practice all the traditional Persian holidays, and it is taken very seriously especially around New Year's time. My family and I never go to mosque or acknowledge any of the martyrs like some religious Iranians do.[45]

Placing a clear distinction between herself and "religious Iranians," Taraneh's words demonstrate a vivid bifurcation between the 'religious Iranian' as a Muslim, and the 'classical Zoroastrian culture' which she feels free and comfortable to draw from. Furthermore, she identifies herself as 'proud of her culture,' while not proud of her 'religion,' furthering this split, attaching Norooz and cultural festivities to this vague notion of 'Zoroastrian culture.' Again, what is significant here is that the incessant reliance on Zoroastrian iconography by the parent generation, emerging from their recollections with the Pahlavi dynasty and its construction of Zoroastrian symbols, has produced a series of symbols which are now devoid of religious meaning.

In her research on second-generation Iranian Americans, Maghbouleh highlights precisely how the symbol of the *farvahar* is operating for the Iranian American diaspora (exhibited here). She argues,

---

[45] Sarah Katz, "Persian Cultural Nostalgia as Political Dissent," *Middle East Quarterly*, 2020, 5, https://www.meforum.org/middle-east-quarterly/pdfs/60028.pdf.

Rather than present-day Iranian Americans having repurposed the farvahar as a symbol of Persian exceptionalism entirely on their own, the Pahlavi regime in twentieth-century Iran recast the farvahar into a secular symbol of ancient nationhood, incorporating the holy icon into the family's coat of arms and other various emblems. ...The farvahar is often found in the tattoos and social media profile photos of Iranian Americans, or worn in diaspora as a necklace pendant.[46]

Figure 17. "Farvahar"

Accepted as a symbol of Persian identity that is safe to draw from, I suggest that the reason why the *farvahar* has been constructed as safe is not only because it draws from the Pahlavi monarchy, but one that is primarily from a pre-Islamic era as a decidedly anti-Muslim way of identifying one's Iranianness. Intricately tying claims of Pahlavi royalist modernity to an ancient pre-Islamic grand Persian empire, all the while rejecting any and all associations with Islam and the Islamic Republic, the *farvahar* has become a 'safe' icon of cultural identity that Iranian Americans utilize and cherish. However, research has shown that Zoroastrian Iranians are growing tired, fed up with the ways their religious practices and symbols are co-opted by those wishing to critique the Islamic Republic. Michael Stausberg argues how "the community is of interest only insofar as it has kept the flame of memory alive."[47]

Given all the various ways the parent generation sought to construct a diasporic Iranian identity, calling themselves 'White,' declaring art and culture 'universally interesting,' reaching back to Zoroastrian symbols, it is evident that liberal assimilation was a primary mechanism for doing so. Citing Sara Ahmed, Puar speaks of an unrequited love which works to keep racialized immigrant

---

[46] Maghbouleh, *The Limits of Whiteness*, 74.

[47] Michael Stausberg, "Zoroastrians in Modern Iran," in *The Wiley Blackwell Companion to Zoroastrianism* (Chichester, UK: John Wiley & Sons, Ltd, 2015), 182, https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118785539.ch11.

populations always waiting, always obedient, in hopes of the promise of racial equality being fulfilled. Puar writes that a central facet of this 'unrequited love' is "that this promise always appears almost on the verge of fulfillment, but is never quite satisfied."[48] It is through this promise that immigrant communities are folded into the projects of nationalism, told to continue working hard while achieving neoliberal visibility and unfurling multiculturalist projects, in the hopes that the state will *one day* allow the ever-pursued 'equality for all'. As much as fantasizing about this nationalist project has convinced the parent generation of their equality, second-generation Iranian Americans have started to grow weary, tired, and frustrated with this 'unrequited love.' Rejecting many of the core neoliberal values, the second-generation is re-articulating its own racial positioning which is not so obediently waiting for the state's approval.

The Shift: Second Generation Iranian Americans' Reflections on Race, Sex, and Gender

Although there is a palpable respect most of the second-generation shows their parents for the ways in which they leveraged and constructed their social identities so as to amass financial wealth, thwart racialized violence, and ascertain access to elite social networks through an attempted adoption of whiteness, Iranian Americans of the second-generation are at a crossroads. Whether or not to adopt these identity prescriptions, which aspects to utilize or reject, all are a constant daily battle of highly scrutinized selectivity, within a vast and unforgiving American racial landscape.

Describing how many second-generation Iranian Americans have grown out of their parents' racial projects, Maghbouleh asserts that,

> contrary to what they hear from elders, … second-generation youth are mostly skeptical and often critical of self-identifying as white. If they once believed it, their more incontrovertibly white peers have disabused them of the notion. Instead, Iranian American youth describe a profound conflict between the white identities asserted within their families and the

---

[48] Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages*, 2007, 26.

stigmatized racialization they (and their families) actually experience in the world outside the home.[49]

Outlining the rupture this Iranian diasporic racial experience produces against neoliberal teleologies of racial progress, Maghbouleh points to the failure of predominant theories of American race and assimilation to grasp the second-generations' experiences. Instead of each successive generation demonstrating a greater attachment, affection, or pursuit of whiteness as a social identity, the Iranian American second generation is largely moving away from whiteness. She writes,

> The Iranian case suggests the opposite: first-generation Iranian parents who, in some cases, arrive in the United States being certain of their own whiteness are raising a second generation increasingly certain that Iranians are in fact *not* white. Contrary to earlier expectations of their integration in the United States, multigenerational Iranian American families appear to socially and successfully 'brown' over time rather than 'whiten.'[50]

The stories of my friends echoed these very sentiments, highlighting the ways in which their parents' articulations of race no longer served or applied their current racial experience. An overwhelming majority understood themselves as having suffered from explicit overt racism, sharing stories of being ridiculed for bringing ethnic foods to school as a child, having their Persian names contorted and remade to sound like "terrorist'" names, hearing other classmates taunt them about having relatives hitting the twin towers, experiencing extra surveillance and interrogation at airports, to being exoticized and fetishized by sexual partners. Although there are many examples of racial violence experienced by second-generation Iranian Americans, I am more so interested in how these experiences shaped this generation's ability, desire, and conceptualization of religious/spiritual faith.

The root of much of the racism that they experienced at the hands of white and/or other racist peers of color relied on utilizing Islam as the explicit racial pollutant. Therefore, I seek to elucidate how after years and years of racial conditioning from the parents as white (not Muslim),

---

[49] Maghbouleh, *The Limits of Whiteness*, 52.

[50] Maghbouleh, 53.

and from the social/public world as Brown (Muslim), these Iranian Americans came to understand the relationship they have with Islam.

I do not wish to claim that all second-generation Iranian Americans have unilaterally renounced or rejected their parents' identity formations of ascending towards whiteness. In fact, many second-generation Iranian Americans have, and do, operate their racial posturing in exactly the same linguistic registers that their parents and Pahlavi modernity have constructed, even utilizing it to further their ascension. Shakhsari illuminates how some members of the Iranian diaspora have utilized these racial posturing in order to further ascend towards whiteness and all the access that provides. They argue how the war on terror and its logics are not confined to national boundaries of enemy states and include members of diasporas who act as native informers and therefore, serve neo-imperial state interests. They argue,

> While being subjected to hate crimes and anti-immigrant laws, some diasporic Iranians take advantage of the opportunities provided during the war on terror. These opportunities, enabled by the need for expertise, testimonials, and staffing for the private and governmental security industries and propaganda services, may offer upward mobility, awards, career options, and at times immigration and visa opportunities to Europe and North America. As such, the willing neoliberal … subject in the diaspora acts as an entrepreneur who is responsible for his or her own economic well-being and who markets him/herself as the source of valuable information.[51]

Utilizing their specific racial posturing, some diasporic Iranians of the second-generation have come to enact themselves as native informants in order to further pursue this upward mobility. Although most second-generation Iranian Americans themselves do not worry about documentation and citizenship issues because most were born in the U.S., the opportunity to operate and act as a native informant is a clear and open pathway; a way of supporting American state interests in order to amass more capital and career opportunities.

---

[51] Shakhsari, "From Homoerotics of Exile to Homopolitics of Diaspora," 26.

Offering an analysis of how this applies to queer bodies, Puar's theorization of homonationalism demonstrates how the U.S. nation-state is expanding its framing of sexuality beyond the heteronormative to incorporate queer bodies which, in turn, proliferate notions of a U.S. sexual exceptionalism further justifying war rhetoric rooted in anti-Muslim racisms. Additionally, she shows how queers of color are placed in a complex network of political tension, as their identities are operationalizable by many different groups. As she posits, the "queer ethnic is … a marker of the homophobia… of his or her racial/ethnic/immigrant community while in homonormative spaces, perhaps more so than a marker of the racism of the homonormative communities while in one's home community."[52] She argues that the presence of the queer of color, in this case the queer Iranian, operates along homonationalist lines, shining more light on the homophobia of the ethnic community as opposed to the racism of the homonormative community.[53] It is the exploitability of this narrative that allows homonationalist Iranian queers to leverage their identities as they ascend further towards whiteness.

This, phrased in the Iranian context by Shakhsari as self-entrepreneurship, is a potent discursive terrain in which Iranian queer and trans people find themselves in. Both Iranian queers and Iranian trans people, whether diasporic or not, are valuable tokens to a wide variety of organizations, institutions, and state entities which benefit from this select narrative experience. As Shakhsari argues, "One cannot ignore the ambitions of some diaspora Iranians – queer or not – who take advantage of this particular moment when production of knowledge about the Middle East in the name of expertise creates opportunities for self-entrepreneurship in neoliberalism."[54] It is the ever-present sea of organizations, media sources, think thanks, and other interested political bodies

---

[52] Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages*, 2007, 28.

[53] Puar, 28.

[54] Shakhsari, "From Homoerotics of Exile to Homopolitics of Diaspora," 26.

146

which invite the queer or trans Iranian to articulate their narratives of Iranian/Muslim

homophobia/transphobia to further U.S. state nationalist and war projects.

Aware of the political meanings embedded in their queerness and/or transness, Iranianness,

Muslimness, and Americanness, the friends I came to know over the course of my research spoke to

the intersecting, competing, and challenging terrain of identity formation. How did they make sense

of all of these forces? More importantly, how did this influence their ability to relate to God?

Sperm Banks & Crushing on White Girls: A Queer & Trans Norooz

I take us back to Farhang Foundation's Norooz celebration on the lawns of UCLA, yet this

time through the eyes of my queer and trans friends. I wish to demonstrate what queer and trans

Iranian Americans ponder as they experience a major cultural event, what their curiosities, interests,

and fears mean for conceptualizing a larger Iranian American diasporic identity. I attended this event

with a friend of mine, Golnaz, with plans to meet up with a few others, a trans man and his queer

wife. Although it had not occurred to me yet, I was about to be in a group of queer and trans Iranian

Americans at a cis heteronormative Iranian diaspora event, something I had never done before.

I met Golnaz first and let her take the lead, noticing how she engaged with the space as we

waited for the others to show. Although the stated purpose was for us to meet and enjoy the

Norooz event, we spent very little time engaging with the actual events organized by the

Foundation. We walked around and took photos of the *haftseen* and watched some of the traditional

song and dance routines by women dressed in *lebas-e mahali*.[55] While we were watching the women

dance on stage, Golnaz noticed two other visibly queer folks standing nearby. She quietly pointed

them out to me and contemplated out loud whether or not to go over and start a conversation. It

---

[55] Translates literally to "local" or "regional clothing." The clothing is considered traditional, worn by villagers and indigenous Iranians, and is typically very colorful and vibrant.

was clear that for her, it was far more important to connect with other Iranian queers than it was to sing and dance to Norooz songs, a phenomenon that only held her attention for a matter of minutes. Nonetheless, after a short while of watching the dancers, she suggested we buy some food and sit down to talk. With our food truck bahn-mi sandwiches in hand, we found a spot on some steps to the side of the festivities and sat down to discuss.

Although not a formal interview, I was able to gather that Golnaz felt that this event was "cute" and just that. The second-generation clearly experiences an endearing sentiment towards these Norooz events, as many shared in their interviews. They understand them as helpful for connecting community members, teaching the younger generations the rituals and customs of Norooz, as well as showcasing to the larger Los Angeles and American public important facets of Iranian culture. However, there is also a growing gap in that this generation understands that the generation prior has structured these events in ways that do not respond to or engage with their racial, religious, gender, and sexual realities, particularly for those who are not cisgender and/or heterosexual.

I bring this up to say that these events are largely seen by the younger diasporans as 'cute,' 'home-y,' and/or 'familiar' yet they are also seen as incapable of speaking to the growing current of racial, gender, and sexual consciousness that the younger generation is undergoing. As we sat on the steps and conversed, a safe distance away from the crowds, Golnaz spoke to me openly about her romantic crushes, her racial analysis of activist spaces, and how whiteness operates in workspace environments. She shared with me how she really liked this white girl, while contemplating the meaning behind race and desiring whiteness in her dating life. We spent the majority of our time on those steps discussing the role of whiteness, internalized white supremacy, interracial communication, and queer dating, a series of topics that we both tacitly understood as not only unwelcome but unintelligible in the larger venue.

148

Shortly thereafter, our other friends arrived, and we greeted one another with cheek kisses, '*chetori*s?'[56] and hugs. When I asked what was new in their lives, they quickly brought up their recent experiences with finding sperm donors, going to sperm banks, and making important decisions around child-rearing. It was clear that as we stood there talking, we had created our own queer and trans world. We were a handful of people discussing the intimacies of queer and trans childrearing – a conversation that far surpassed the function or purpose of this event. Yet in that moment, I realized that our queerness and transness brought us together in ways incomprehensible to the cisgender and heterosexual Iranian Americans around us. We were building community in the middle of a community building event that was not designed to cater to our nonnormative lives and bodies.

The casual occurrence of discussing our life concerns as queer and trans people at this event demonstrates the ways in which queer and trans Iranian Americans of the second-generation respect and understand the cultural value of such Norooz events by attending and partaking in the festivities. However, it also speaks to the limitations and exclusive nature of these events which are not designed for queer and trans people. Nonetheless, as we gathered and discussed our issues with one another, we were able to recreate a space, a set of connections, a relationship as queer and trans Iranian Americans. We were able to both hold respect, affection, and value for a cultural ritual, the celebration of Norooz, as well as honor our own queer and trans realities and experiences.

Drawing on the work of Kat Gupta, who recollects the significance of what it means to be in community with other trans people amidst a broader, larger transphobic Pride event, I want to emphasize the sanctity of finding trans community. As they share, "there was something magical about… being able to listen and watch people who articulated some of my fears and anxieties and

---

[56] Translates to 'how are you' in Farsi/Persian.

desires."[57] I suggest that this sentiment, this feeling of camaraderie, between queer and trans Iranian Americans at this larger cultural event, demonstrates precisely this magic.

The (Transphobic) Politics of Iranian American LGBTQ Neoliberalism

As our conversation unfolded on the quad of UCLA, the three of them shared with me their experiences with the sole diasporic Iranian LGBTQ organization: Raha.[58] Operating from within a neoliberal organizational structure, Raha International describes itself as "non-profit organization dedicated to creating a safe space where the Iranian LGBTQ community and its allies come together to embrace their shared experiences."[59] Primarily holding panels, therapy groups, and cultural social events to cater to the "Iranian LGBTQ community," Raha presents itself in neoliberal terms, similar to Shakhsari's articulation of diasporic self-entrepreneurship: adopting a 'Board of Directors' model, rooting itself in 'multicultural' projects, as well as hosting panels with titles such as "I-Ran Out of the Closet,"[60] accentuating its homonationalist posture.

As the three of them told me of one particular experience they had, they became visibly upset and frustrated. Sharing stories of being explicitly misgendered and being ridiculed for defending his pronouns and gender identity, Kiya was clearly upset with how his trans identity was considered fake, meaningless, and insignificant by the group's leaders. Golnaz shared how she was ashamed and embarrassed for having brought a nonbinary Iranian friend to the event because of the

---

[57] Kat Gupta, "Creating a Trans Space," in *The Emergence of Trans: Cultures, Politics, and Everyday Lives*, ed. Ruth Pearce et al. (Routledge, 2020), 66, https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315145815-8.

[58] Although there may be and are other variations of Iranian queer and trans life, such as zines, publications, collectives, social media profiles, blogs, and private social circles, Raha is the sole public Iranian LGBTQ organization which hosts events in the Los Angeles area as of this writing.

[59] "RAHA International | Facebook," About RAHA, accessed February 22, 2022, https://www.facebook.com/RAHAIntl/about/?ref=page_internal.

[60] "I-Ran out of the Closet Panel Discussion in NYC (June 27)," Raha, 2019, https://www.rahaintl.org/event/i-ran-out-of-the-closet-panel-discussion-in-nyc-june-27/.

ways in which trans identity was mocked and disregarded. They had been instructed to "calm down," and not "take things so seriously," while transness was wholly relegated to the space of unrealness, not worthy of honoring or even seeing.

Dean Spade argues in *Normative Life: Administrative Violence, Critical Trans Politics, and the Limits of the Law*, that neoliberalism as a pervasive social infrastructure has co-opted resistance movements and strategies by marginalized groups. Speaking to the ways in which gay and lesbian communities came to restructure their activisms from radical direct action to the more conservative pursuits of legal and state legitimacy (same-sex marriage, decriminalization of sodomy, military inclusion, hate crime laws), Spade suggests that this neoliberal shift greatly compromised the forms resistance takes.[61] He writes,

> The focus of lesbian and gay rights work moved toward the more conservative model of equality promoted in US law and culture through the myth of equal opportunity. The thrust of the work of these organizations became the quest for inclusion in and recognition by dominant US institutions rather than questioning and challenging the fundamental inequalities promoted by those institutions.[62]

As Spade suggests, this deep restructuring of gay and lesbian rights activism followed the neoliberal prescriptions of institutionalization, looking to the state for legitimacy, approval, and support, as well as the everlasting myth of equal opportunity. I offer this example of neoliberal restructuring of resistance movements to the Iranian context in order to elucidate the ways in which Iranian Americans in diaspora likewise came to frame and structure their organizations.

This non-acknowledgement of Kiya's trans identity, rather the open disregard and intentional misgendering of his person in a specifically LGBTQ group speaks volumes for both how neoliberal models have neatly absorbed Iranian diasporic politics and political aspirations, but also

---

[61] Dean Spade, *Normal Life: Administrative Violence, Critical Trans Politics, and the Limits of Law* (North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2015), 60–61.

[62] Spade, 60.

how transness is still understood as powerless, unworthy, and negligible. If the sole Iranian American LGBTQ organization treats transness in such ways, what does that tell us about trans Iranian American life? Where do those people go? Where do they find community? Where do they find legitimacy, safety, space to exist and explore themselves safely?

Seezdah Bedar Sundays: The Materiality of Stitching Iranian to American

Ending the Norooz celebrations is the final holiday of the season, *Seezdah Bedar*. It is common for people to lug all sorts of foods, tea thermoses, sweets, games, and activities to a park or outdoor spot, spending the entire day outside the home. In the LA area, there are many popular *Seezdah Bedar* celebrations, two of the largest being held in Balboa Park in Los Angeles and Conejo Creek Park in Thousand Oaks.

The large formal *Seezdah Bedar* celebrations are organized events, with food stands, live music, traditional dancers, bouncy houses for children, and many more forms of entertainment. These events easily attract 10,000 attendees at the larger parks, with hundreds to thousands in smaller ones. Growing up, I attended celebrations in both of the major parks regularly, as well as smaller local events when the hassle of attending such a crowded event came to be too much. Although the wish is to always celebrate it on the thirteenth day after Norooz, the realities of an American calendar and workweek typically prevent the celebration from being held on its actual date. To accommodate, *Seezdah Bedar* celebrations are always held on the second Sunday after Norooz so that more families can take part in the festivities.

As I perused through Iranian diasporic media sources, checked with family and friends as one always does before deciding which park to attend, I noticed a striking image used on the flyer to advertise *Seezdah Bedar* in Thousand Oaks. This image, used to advertise the event all across the

Southern California region, literally stitched the 'Iranian' to the 'American.' In a powerful visual (copied below), the parent generation's diasporic identity emerges, an attempt to intertwine the flags, national boundaries, and associated cultural

Figure 18. "Seezdah Bedar 2019/1398 Flyer – Conejo Creek" (2019). Screenshot.

markers, to a diasporic Southern California collective. A closer look suggests that there is no symbol on the icon which represents Iran's national borders, a testament to the opposition to the Islamic Republic of Iran meanwhile the U.S. flag is depicted in full. I argue that this image, quite precisely, articulates the racial, national, ethnic, conceptualizations of the parent generation, dreams and hopes of equality and multicultural understanding, all sandwiched in the image as a small red heart.

Flag Feuds: "If We Don't Claim the Persian Gulf in our Flag, It Will Change to Arabic Gulf Very Soon"

As a part of my ethnographic research, I attended the *Seezdah Bedar* celebration at Warner Center Park in Woodland Hills which had around 2000 people in attendance. This location is fairly new when it comes to *Seezdah Bedar* locations (only three or so years have gatherings been held at

this location), yet its placement in the heart of Woodland Hills makes it a perfect and convenient location for much of the San Fernando Valley diaspora population. Walking through the celebration, I saw hundreds and hundreds of families with their picnic blankets sprawled over grass, eating, laughing, and spending time together. There were children kicking soccer balls around, a center stage with live music and dance, as well as a long line of booths selling everything from Iranian legal services, Farsi classes for kids, to Persian jewelry.

What caught my attention, naturally, was the Iranian flag the event organizers[63] had hung up on either side of the stage. A highly contentious topic, the Iranian flag is likely the most prominent epicenter of identity tension for the community. There has been an ongoing cultural dispute over the flag ever since the Revolution in 1979, with many who are pro-Shah and non-Islamious who despise and reject the current flag of the Islamic Republic of Iran, preferring instead the flag of the Pahlavi Shah. However, the flag on display at the event was one I had never seen before. It seemed like a

---

[63] This particular *Seezdah Bedar* event was organized by Royal Time TV. The language of Royal is a direct reference to the royalty of the Shah, a specific demonstration of non-Islamiosity used in the title of the organization.

personal production, wherein somebody had taken icons of Iranian history and created a new flag with all these images (image below).

Figure 19. "A New Iran Flag –Azizgolshani" (2019)
Photograph by author

After studying it closely, I saw that each of these icons was to represent the idea of a grand Persian Empire, prior to destruction by the Islamic Republic. I have attached images of the current flag of Iran under the Islamic Republic, as well as the Shah's flag under the Pahlavi dynasty (left, right respectively) for comparison. A palpable manifestation of non-Islamiosity in practice, this new flag was created to "serve as an alternative to all Iranian flags," because "for over 40 years Iranians outside of Iran do not have a reflective flag."[64] Drawing from the same pre-Islamic iconography of the Pahlavis, the *farvahar*, Cyrus Cylinder, the *sheer-o khorshid* (sun and lion emblem), this flag represents the exact process by which Iranians of the first generation are working to disarticulate Islam from Iran. By literally supplanting the Islamic crest on the current Iranian flag with Pahlavi iconography, this flag reaches for a notion of Persian glory from the past, in hopes of eradicating the present regime.

---

[64] Moein Azizgolshani, "New Iran Flag," 2018, https://iranflags.com/.

155

Further research on the flag's website proved ripe with examples of a Pahlavi modernity come to life. Riddled with political aspirations of a Persian empire, and the compulsive threat of Arabs furthering their Muslim conquest, the writer declares that the Persian Gulf is represented on his map, because "if we don't claim [the] Persian Gulf in our flag, it will change to Arabic gulf very soon."[65] Another noteworthy trope that non-Islamious diasporic Iranians adopt and reproduce on a frequent basis is the threat of the Persian Gulf becoming relabeled the Arabian Gulf. Therefore, it is only fitting that this recreation of a national flag which draws from Pahlavi icons, rooted in a modern racial understanding of anti-Muslim and anti-Arab racism, presents the Persian Gulf as one of its many symbols for national Iranian identity.

Figure 20. "Current Islamic Republic of Iran Flag"

Figure 21. "Former Flag of the Pahlavi Monarchy of Iran"

Always impressed by the reaches of non-Islamiosity, I found these new flags a crucial site of diasporic identity articulation. Evidently, this flag had garnered enough respect and legitimacy to the point where it was on display at a major cultural event, hung on both sides of the stage for everyone to see. I argue that it is the optics of this flag, and the Shah's flag, as that is what is traditionally used to articulate this political stance, that embodies the precise secularist, anti-Muslim, anti-Islamic Republic of Iran diasporic formation. The flag here represents a visual, a national locating, the substance of a new identity articulated, one that is born as a part of the secularizing diasporic project.

---

[65] Azizgolshani.

The sun was shining on a beautiful warm spring afternoon, as I played backgammon with my friends, ate *kotlet*[66] sandwiches my *Ameh*[67] handmade, and watched people buzz around with the excitement of a new year. My gender non-conformity attracted many unpleasant stares, confused looks, and misunderstandings, even from the group I was with, but I did not let that ruin my day. I had navigated the stares of my community forever and today, a day to celebrate the closing of the new year's festivities, was no day to let transphobic confusion keep me indoors. I deserved to feel the sunshine on my skin just like everybody else.

In a heated game of backgammon with Kiya, I was just about to roll the dice when I heard the emcee announce that they were going to play the national anthem, a cultural ritual done to honor our national history. What is noteworthy here, however, is that whenever the diaspora plays the 'national anthem,' which frequently happens at major social events, they are referring to the patriotic national song 'Ey Iran,' popularized under the Pahlavi monarchy, not the current national anthem of Iran. A song familiar to all diasporic Iranian ears, 'Ey Iran' evokes the collective imagination of a nation, the collective nostalgia of a time when Iran was 'great,' 'modern,' and 'free,' unlike how it is now understood under the Islamic Republic.

I watched as people, primarily parents and elders, rose to their feet and sang genuinely in support of this national identity. It is quite common too, for many to tear, get emotional, and grieve the loss of the Pahlavis at the sound of this music. Conjuring this group nostalgia is an important element of the parent generation's diasporic experience, always referring to an idea of the past, always holding onto the grandeur of the Pahlavis as the primary way to associate with Americanness. It is through elevating the modernist conceptualizations of the Pahlavi dynasty that the parent

---

[66] *Kotlet* is a meat patty or potato patty eaten in sandwiches.

[67] *Ameh* translates to paternal aunt.

generation articulates its proximity to Americanness – we were free too; we allowed women to dance, sing, walk around unveiled too; we had intelligent minds in Iran too; and on and on. There is no way to conceptualize a second-generation experience without understanding the ways the parent generation laid claim to these modernist nationalist projects.

I draw from Daphne Berdahl's work to fully grasp the function of this cultural nostalgia, a feeling I do not take as a linear longing for a sealed off notion of what has passed. Instead, as Berdahl's work suggests, nostalgia needs to be understood as a way of producing the present, through that very longing of a past, selective as it is in what is chosen to be remembered and cherished.[68] The collective remembering evoked through the melody of 'Ey Iran,' operates as an important racializing and secularizing temporal device, allowing the parent generation to make claims of a diasporic identity that defies the Islamic Republic, while valorizing a Pahlavi past.

As the melody concluded and everyone began to sit back down, the emcee announced that they would now be playing the American national anthem. "What did she just say?" I asked Kiya, wondering if I had heard correctly. He was not paying attention, he said, as I pondered the cultural significance of this decision – How far is the parent generation willing to go to claim an Americanness through U.S. nationalist projects? Have they not seen how many ways they have been let down by dreams of American state legitimacy? Why this desperate clinging on to Americanness in such ways? Will they ever let it go?

In that moment, I felt the generational divide quite clearly. I grew tense as the star-spangled banner lyrics rolled out through the speakers. I wondered what my elders thought, those who had been forced to remake their lives in order to obtain legal citizenship, those who had watched families fall apart by militant geopolitical tensions, those who had witnessed the pain, suffering, the

---

[68] Daphne Berdahl, *Where the World Ended: Re-Unification and Identity in the German Borderland* (Berkeley, Calif: University of California Press, 1999), 202.

violence of U.S. state projects. I wondered what we were supposed to do with all that trauma, all the times we were reminded we could not be American, that we were not American, that we could never be 'just American.' How do these national anthems speak to those questions?

Alas, I remember that this is their politics. This is their way of articulating diasporic identity. This is how they have worked to articulate their identity, and it is also precisely why I set out to explore the second-generation. As much as we lower our heads in thanks to our parents and families for the endless sacrifices they have undertaken, we have grown a different politics.

It is the recurring dissonance I experience, a palpable rupture between the first and second-generation, which prompted most of my lines of inquiry. The organizations, events, and ideological narratives constructed and offered us by our parents clearly have not been inherited without question. It is through this strategic refashioning that the second-generation has come to articulate itself, through racializing identity factors that greatly challenge the ways our parents declare their own racial identities.

CHAPTER THREE

"This is a Christian Land:" Secularization, Muslim-Christians, & Queer Crystal Culture

When I asked her what she sees when she thinks of God, Nasrin replied "For some reason I see Jesus." She chuckled nervously and then questions herself saying "is that...? I don't know…" sensing that it may not have been an appropriate 'answer.' Grateful for her straightforward response, I thank her for being so open and honest with me. Feeling safer, she added, "Yeah, I think of the guy whose son was Jesus. So, Jesus' dad was God."

Raised by two Iranian American Muslim parents, Nasrin's understanding of God is quite unique to say the least. The only non-queer woman I interviewed, Nasrin demonstrated a conception of God that highlights how Iranian anti-Muslim racism as non-Islamiosity works alongside and through Christianity as a secularizing process. I begin this chapter with this anecdote to demonstrate the powerful workings of secularization, operating through uniquely Christian rhetoric, symbols, and ideations. By this, I understand secularization as a process that authorizes subjectivity based on its compliance with U.S. state projects, organizing practices within a hierarchy of legitimacy.[1] All of my friends, as I will show, have had to grapple directly with these intersections, questioning, refining, and reformulating their relationship to religion/secularity/spirituality as they go – Christianity emerges as the primary substance of the secularizing process.

Building on the works of Asad, Mahmood, and Ahmed, I show how secularization, a process which operates as a part of the diasporic immigrant ascension to whiteness, shapes the Iranian American relationship with Islam. As a consequence, the second-generation has compiled a fascinating array of practices and beliefs in order to connect with the supernatural – labeling themselves Muslim and Christian simultaneously, drawing from Buddhism, Hinduism, Christianity, or Zoroastrianism, developing new prayer practices and forms, among many other secularized

---

[1] Mahmood, "Secularism, Hermeneutics, and Empire."

tactics. As I describe the various forms these practices take, I highlight the operative force

Christianity has as a secularizing process in Iranian American diasporic life.[2]

Defining Secularization: A Process of Assimilation

      In *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, and Modernity*, Talal Asad argues that the terrain

of a secular-religious divide emerges from a particular European history. He suggests that the tracing

of this historical genealogy unearths important etymological distinctions, proving consequential for

how we deploy ideas of what constitutes a 'religious' and a 'secular.' In his work he demonstrates

that the spatial terrain of what makes up secularity, what he refers to as 'the social,' is created as

conceptually distinct from the space of 'religion,' a process he locates in 19th century European

debates.[3] He asserts,

> What we now retrospectively call *the social*, that all-inclusive secular space that we distinguish
> conceptually from variables like 'religion,' 'state,' 'national economy,' and so forth, *and on
> which the latter can be constructed, reformed, and plotted*, didn't exist prior to the nineteenth century.
> Yet it was precisely the emergence of *society* as an organizable secular space that made it
> possible for the state to oversee and facilitate an original task by redefining religion's
> competence.[4]

Situating the birth of the concept of secularity within this particular European history, Asad

underscores how the very formation of a secularly defined space, the 'social,' became possible only

through articulating itself against religion. More importantly, he argues that the emergence of

secularity must be understood within the terrain of this European debate, emphasizing its genesis

from the modern history of Christianity. Asad argues that both the secular and religious become

distinct, with corresponding spatial and temporal demarcations. Building on Asad's historical

---

[2] An actual analysis of the practices, meanings, and pathways of connecting to God will be looked at in Chapter 6. This chapter focuses specifically on Christianity as a secularizing process, not the practices that my friends deployed in their spiritual processes.

[3] Asad, *Formations of the Secular*, 191.

[4] Asad, 190–91 (emphasis in original).

genealogy, I interrogate the function and form of the secular, and all its accompanying secularizing

projects, as I assess the ways it is adapted and deployed by the second-generation.

Elaborating on Asad's work, Shahab Ahmed asserts that the very notion of "the secular" was

created against "the religious." Ahmed argues,

> To liberate themselves from their captivity in the truth-monopoly claimed by the Christian
> episteme and to liberate themselves from the institutional site of the social, political, and
> economic operation of that Christian episteme, the practitioners of European Enlightenment
> thought and politics had to *carve out* for themselves a new and independent social and
> epistemological truth-space for 'non-religion.'[5]

The truth-space of 'non-religion' therefore emerged in direct opposition to that Christian episteme,

carving out a space for secularity against the substance of Christianity as religion. As Ahmed

suggests, practitioners of European Enlightenment sought to legitimize their newly developing

world view, the secular, which required new truths and space for new truths. In order to enact this

legitimizing process to materialize the secular, as both a spatial and conceptual project, they had to

explicitly "carve out" a new "truth-space" – the domain of the secular.

Ahmed goes on to suggest that this epistemological break-up had a consequence for the

spatial terrain of religion, limiting it to two distinct areas – the Church as the sole permissible

religious institution and the realm of the private belief.[6] In effect, the epistemological construction of

the very concept of religion, and its opposing spatial/temporal conceptual counterpart, the secular,

was produced through European history and its enmeshment with the Church. The very notion of a

secular was born through the quarantining of religious belief and practice to two acceptable venues:

the institution of the Church and private space.

I postulate Islam, a non-Christian religiosity, through a theoretical register which appreciates

the multiple currents which operate and unfold within what it means to evoke the 'secular' – the

---

[5] Ahmed, *What Is Islam?*, 177 (emphasis in original).

[6] Ahmed, 177.

European history of the formation of the concept as well as how Christianity operates as a secularizing force through American anti-Muslim racisms and Iranian non-Islamiosity. An example of this is showcased by what one of my friends shared as I asked her to tell me about her parents' spiritual and religious practices. Describing her mother as spiritual, Sara says "I think she would call herself a Muslim, but if she wants to pray, the church is near her house, so she goes to church." In order to understand the ways in which Iranian Americans in diaspora structure their religious experiences then, it is imperative to respect the multiplicitous discursive circuits which guide their choices. As Sara's example demonstrates, there is an interweaving of convenience, of being saturated in a highly anti-Muslim U.S. and Iranian diasporic culture, as well as her overarching desire to pray and to find a space which facilitates her prayer, landing her in church.

Extrapolating the precise ways in which secularization operates in relation to Muslims in the United States, Mahmood's work demonstrates how the doctrine of secularism works to produce a particular religious subject – a secularized Muslim subject as the only register in which Muslims become tolerable in the liberal framework. Sunaina Maira's assertion of a 'good Muslim' versus 'bad Muslim,' building on Mamdani's cultural analysis of Muslim life post-9/11, explicates this neoliberal binarized identity formation and how Muslims are forced to articulate themselves within this binary. Maira argues, "'Good citizenship' is performed by Muslim American individuals and organizations in a variety of ways, testifying loyalty to the nation and asserting belief in its democratic ideals, often through public testimonials that emphasize Muslims are peaceful, loyal U.S. citizens."[7] Whereas, the 'bad' Muslim is understood as "the alien, sometimes bearded, often working-class Muslim and Arab immigrant men who speak in foreign accents and pose a threat to womanhood, there and here."[8]

---

[7] Sunaina Maira, "'Good' and 'Bad' Muslim Citizens: Feminists, Terrorists, and U.S. Orientalisms," *Feminist Studies* 35, no. 3 (2009): 634.

[8] Maira, 636.

Through her gendered analysis of how goodness v. badness come to be substantiated in the U.S. liberal racial landscape, Maira's work showcases the challenges Muslim American communities face as they construct their social identities. Although the parent generation of the Iranian diaspora works diligently to produce its identity as secular and decidedly non-Muslim, I suggest that their articulations of secularity rely on the racialized, gendered, and sexualized possibilities of a 'good Muslim' subject.

Nonetheless, Mahmood's work examines the myriad ways in which the U.S. government effectuates the production of a 'moderate Islam,' a political project undertaken to directly counter and challenge a 'fundamentalist Islam.' Through this work, Mahmood shows how the doctrine of secularism cannot be understood as simply the separation of religion and state or the granting of religious freedoms to all groups, as it is typically presented to be. Mahmood argues, "secularism has sought not so much to banish religion from the public domain but to reshape the form it takes, the subjectivities it endorses, and the epistemological claims it can make."[9] Reminding us that to accept at face value the primary claims of secularism (the banishment of religion from the public domain/state) is insufficient, Mahmood prompts an extensive critique of the operative form of secularism, particularly as it applies to Muslim American life.

Mahmood suggests that the doctrine of secularism is "the kind of subjectivity that a secular culture authorizes, the practices it redeems as truly (versus superficially) spiritual, and the particular relationship to history that it prescribes."[10] She invites us to understand secularization, not as a clean and simple removal of 'the religious,' but as a war of ideological reformation which seeks to secularize Islam in order to make it more congruent with liberal political rule.[11] Of particular

---

[9] Mahmood, "Secularism, Hermeneutics, and Empire," 326.

[10] Mahmood, 328.

[11] Mahmood, 335.

significance is Mahmood's emphasis on secularism as a doctrine which produces a certain kind of subjectivity. This secularized subjectivity is integral to understanding the ways in which the secular-religious divide not only seeks to reformulate Islam and Islamic practice, but also the very ways in which Muslims are rendered in the space of the secular. For instance, this secularized subjectivity becomes the normative and appropriate approach to religiosity, forcing Muslim religiosity into these secularized terms. As Mahmood articulates, secular culture authorizes a particular kind of subjectivity, therein hierarchizing varying forms of religious faith, belief, and practice.[12] This excavation of the operative powers of secularization will illuminate the ways in which my informants constructed, handled, and engaged with their religious and secular terrain.

Secularized Subjectivity: Just Believe in God, Only God

This secularized subjectivity Mahmood describes, illustrates a prominent theme many of my friends brought up about their parents as they shared of their migratory experiences. Several of my friends told me how their parents were "much more religious" until they came to the United States. For example, Omid shares of how his mother would always fast for Ramadan, and then stopped the practice entirely after coming to the United States. He tells me how she tried it for a few years while she was here, but eventually "just stopped." Shahpour tells of how his parents' belief systems and religious practices have shifted after spending time in the U.S. He says,

> They practiced a lot when they were in Iran. I think my mom more so than my dad, so she's always had a pretty strong connection to God… Now, she says… she wouldn't call herself a Muslim but she's just very spiritual and very connected to God. I just don't think she wants to put a label on it. And then my dad, he says he's not religious, but he believes in the Ten Commandments… He just believes in being a good person.

---

[12] For example, various forms of spiritual or religious practice are considered illegitimate or nonsensical: magic, paganism, energy work, voodoo, and crystal culture. I will elaborate more on this and how many of my friends framed some of these practices as 'hippie bullshit' in the second half of the chapter.

Watching his parents undergo a secularization process wherein normative Islamic practices, and even the label of Muslim became signifiers that lost social and cultural value, Shahpour's anecdote about his parents demonstrates the exact function of Mahmood's secularized subjectivity. In particular, his dad's stated belief in the Ten Commandments while being "not religious" further illustrates the ways in which Christianity operates as a secularizing force.

In Shahpour's recollection, as well as his parent's conceptualization, the only identifier that resonates as a 'religion' is Islam and anything else is free, open, up for engagement, so long as it is within the secularized subjectivity as Mahmood describes. As I argued in the previous chapter, this convenient drawing from other religions as long as they are not Islam is also a process of secularization wherein the very religious nature of other religions is secularized to fulfill this secularized subjectivity.

Emblematic of this is how Shahpour felt virtually no pressure to conduct himself as a 'normative Muslim,' nor did a single second-generation Iranian American I spoke with. In fact, as many of them shared, to claim a Muslim identity in diaspora was reason to be read as potentially backward, barbaric, and filled with shame. For Shahpour's parents, the Christianizing element presents the ways in which secularization is intertwined with Christianity – in which his mother rescinded her identification with 'Muslim' for a more spiritual, secularized label and his father identifies as "not religious," while using the Ten Commandments as his moral compass for achieving goodness. It is through these reaches into non-Muslim religions as a mode of articulating their secularity, that the parent generation establishes its religious-secular subjecthood.

Shahpour goes on to describe in more detail his father's religious ideologies, repeating how his father believes that "all religion is the same. We all praise the same ten commandments basically." Indeed, a very non-Islamious iteration, Shahpour's father's comments demonstrate the ways non-Islamious Iranian Americans in diaspora draw from Christianity as a secularizing process,

166

legitimating their Americanness, secularity, and non-Muslimness simultaneously. Taken to be completely normal to both Shahpour, his father, and undoubtedly a large swathe of non-Islamious Iranians, the citing of Christianity's Ten Commandments becomes intelligible as a part of Iranian American Muslim experience.

A common manifestation of this secularizing subjectivity, besides drawing explicitly from Christianity as in the case of Shahpour's father, is the formulation of 'just God.' This secularized refashioning of religious subjecthood, demonstrates how the parent generation carved out a diasporic experience to reflect their non-Islamioisity, from Muslims to 'just believing in God.' Shadi says how her parents taught her to "just 'believe in God.' That's it." Golnaz shares how her parents believe in God and only God, and that their only religious teaching to her was making sure she held that same respect for God. Sharing too, how her parents follow this shift, Nasrin says her parents never taught her anything explicitly religious, they just said "we believe in God."

This strategic reformulation of spiritual/religious experience from Muslim to 'only God,' I argue, follows Mahmood's secularized subjectivity paradigm, in which Iranian American Muslims have come to refashion their religious identities in order to assimilate to a secularizing, liberalizing social experience in the United States. Compounded with the realities of American anti-Muslim racisms as well as the non-Islamiosity which undergirds much of diasporic experience with Islam, Iranian Americans created 'just God' as a recourse.

However, what is of significance to me here is to not label Iranian Americans as purely 'secular' as much of Iranian diasporic scholarship has suggested. It is crucial that I emphasize this 'just God' formation created by the parent generation, for it highlights the continual commitment to belief in God, as opposed to a neat, linear, logical secularism, atheism, and/or agnosticism that immigrant groups are expected to fall into. As significant as Mahmood's articulation of a secularized subjectivity is, particularly in being able to demonstrate the discursive workings of secularization

167

against Muslim populations, I find it important to reiterate that largely, the parent generation did not come to adopt an atheist or agnostic belief. Even with the anti-Muslim hatred apparent in non-Islamious outcries, there is still a very healthy, powerful, and strong belief in God, understood as a nonreligious, nondenominational, and nonpartisan God. Of course, this removal of the Islamic is precisely what Mahmood's argument suggests, to which her description is wholly accurate. Yet, I wish to illustrate the 'just God' formulation of the parent generation to say that the U.S. nationalist project of secularization has not been able to fully eradicate the 'God' from the Iranian – a distinction which proved highly evocative for the second-generation.

Queer & Trans Syncretic Faith Practices: Yoga, Buddhism, and Secularity's Stumbles

A consequence of this nonreligious 'only God' formulation is that the second-generation grew to engage with, learn from, and understand their religious/spiritual self through this particular lens, one in which religion was not only not required but structurally deprioritized. It was quite common for many of my friends to locate their own religious explorations in non-Muslim terms – drawing from yoga and/or meditation in their faith practice, relying on Christian forms for religious understanding and practice, as well as drawing from multiple other faiths in their prayer practices. As I listened to all the manifold ways these individuals related to and connected with God, the comfort and freedom they felt to explore through these various religious pathways was palpable. None felt that they were unable to do so. This widespread systemic permission to explore and discover one's relationship to God through any means (so long as they are not Muslim) shapes the ways the second-generation found meaning in their religious-spiritual endeavors. Their processes highlight an opening of religious-spiritual experience, one in which the secularizing approach of their parents invited them into, with belief in God as the only requirement.

In all the countless hours I spent conversing and discussing with my friends, my primary

inquiry revolved around these questions – who is God to you? How did you come to know this?

What does your prayer practice look like? Where did you learn your pathways for spiritual

exploration? What does it provide for you? Is that something you think about? I spent much time

interviewing different queer and trans Iranian Americans in order to gain further insight into what

constitutes our religious/spiritual experiences as a social group. What are our religious experiences?

Where do we find religious/spiritual connection after being excluded in so many ways, so many

spaces? Do we even care to find spiritual purpose? For those of us who have moved beyond anti-

Muslim racisms and non-Islamiosity, what is out there? What can that guide us into?

An immediate response of most was to strictly differentiate religion from spirituality,

identifying with the latter. I will elaborate on the full analytical significance of that distinction in the

following chapter, yet I do want to highlight how a majority of my friends outlined this discomfort

with religion as a premise to their engagements with the nonmaterial realm. A recurring theme that

emerged was the reliance on yoga and meditation as salient spiritually elevating practices. The fact

that so many felt comfortable drawing from yoga and meditation speaks to the nonissue of

breaching Muslim 'code,' feeling safe and able to engage with "non-religious" spirituality (as their

parents' generation demonstrated through secularizing various religious traditions), as well as the

enactment of an 'only God' ethos.

For example, when I asked her if she prayed, Azar promptly responded, "I don't pray. I

meditate." Making clear a distinction between prayer and meditation as she tells of me of her routine

yoga practice, Azar shares,

> I either think about what I'm grateful for, what I want to manifest in my life, or I'm just
> there and I'm taking it all in. But no, I don't pray… I meditate every night before bed, or
> sometimes twice a day when I do yoga. It's just kind of like being in God's presence.

169

Framed as a meditative ritual and expressly not prayer, Azar's practice of communicating with her higher power emerges specifically from yoga practice. Drawing from themes of manifestation, gratitude offerings, and meditation, Azar's explanation illustrates the process by which second-generation Iranian Americans enact their spiritual exploration as nonreligious. This reliance on yoga and meditation abides by the 'only God' formulation in that Azar does believe in a God, as her parents would require, while exploring her religious and spiritual identity through other available means, in this case, yoga and meditation.

Also locating her own spiritual experiences in a yoga practice, Parisa shares how she began exploring her spirituality through yoga retreats and workshops and how for her it was an "intense" awakening of her spiritual purpose. Ariana shared how her spirituality wholly relies on yoga, as someone who practices yoga everyday. She shares how, "being in that common space ...being in a room full of people, meditating in a room full of people; there's something so healing about that for me… It's a totally sobering experience with a higher power."[13] The end of the yoga practice, Shavasana, is where she finds she is able to connect and pray her gratitude prayers with most ease.

The enhanced presence of yoga and meditation as sites of spiritual exploration for the second-generation occurs largely due to the mainstreaming and commodification of yoga/meditation culture, making it an easier and more accessible form of spiritual exploration.[14] It also represents the ways in which they create room for spiritual exploration outside of Islam while still abiding by the 'just God' premise. This disarticulation of Islam from Iranian that the parents undertook originally through creation of a non-Islamiosity continues on as the second-generation endeavors into spiritual practice along similar lines.

---

[13] This interview took place in March 2020. Ariana was sharing her experience with in person yoga classes that had just been shut down a week or so prior. She continued on to mention how being unable to attend these in person yoga classes was really disruptive for her ability to experience spiritual connection.

[14] Andrea R. Jain, *Selling Yoga: From Counterculture to Pop Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014).

However, it is important to highlight how yoga practices were utilized by my cis friends and only cis friends. None of the trans individuals I interviewed located their religious-spiritual practices in public, group, or communal settings such a yoga classes or group meditations – likely, due to body dysphoria and the social antagonisms that emerge from having a trans/gender non-conforming body in cisnormative public space. Yet it is significant that so many of my friends located their prayer practices within a yoga/meditation practice. What this illustrates is, first, the commodified popularity of yoga and meditation as mechanisms for accessing spiritual growth and attainment and, second, the ease and comfort with which they all felt able to draw from and cultivate their spiritual experience through explicitly non-Muslim means.

'I'm Kind of Buddhist About Shit': Queer & Trans Syncretic Faith Practices Outside of Islam

Although the trans individuals I interviewed did not rely on yoga or meditation to find religious or spiritual meaning, many adopted the non-Islamious secularizing approach and drew from other religious discourses. For instance, Shahpour tells me how he feels like he "can pull things from Hinduism or Buddhism." Cyrus speaks admiringly about the 'Golden Rule' of Christianity and how he lives by the mantra – treat others the way you want to be treated. Relying on decidedly non-Islamic terms, both of these transmen understand their religious-spiritual experience as emerging through faiths outside of Islam.

Likewise, many of my other friends also felt comfortable drawing from various religions in their own practice. For example, Shadi shared how she is "really into Hinduism right now" because "you don't have to convert or anything. You just are." Bahman told me how his father routinely draws from Zoroastrianism and that he too was now exploring it because of its powerful historical effect on world religions. "Maybe they knew something," he pondered. Golnaz spoke of how she is "kind of Buddhist about shit." Coming into her own religious consciousness, she said "I do have a

religion, I just haven't said that yet… I feel like a straight girl who's saying she's gay for the first time. I'm coming out on religion!" Similar to Niloofar's anecdote about her brother who "came out as Muslim" in Chapter One, Golnaz's revelation here elicits a particular framing around what religion is and what role it plays in modern Iranian American diasporic formations. Given the normative hold of the idea that Islam ruined Iran, many of the second-generation operate from within this framework that Islam (potentially all religion) is evil, terrible, destructive, and useless. This hatred for religion is so pervasive and powerful that to even articulate any identification with it requires, as Golnaz and Niloofar suggest, a "coming out."

Although Niloofar's brother "came out" as Muslim, Golnaz's assertion demonstrates that, for her, even identifying with religion in any sense requires the undoing of her parent's non-Islamiosity – a careful dismantling of the unequivocal hatred for all things religious. Even as non-Islamiosity is constructed to draw from other religions, it does so as a secularizing project, meaning that those in the second-generation knew that whenever their parents drew from Christianity, Zoroastrianism, or any other faith, it was primarily in service of solidifying their secularized religious subjecthood. As demonstrated in the prior chapter with the Zoroastrian creed *pendar-e neek, goftar-e neek, kerdar-e neek*, translating to good thoughts, good words, good deeds, the parent generation draw from these religious rhetoric and symbols to articulate a decidedly secularist subjecthood.

Although outright hostility is reserved solely for Islam, any identification with or exploration of a faith as a religious project triggers a sensible fear in the second-generation, as Golnaz's experience illustrates. Again, it is no coincidence that both of them labeled religious identification with "coming out." Language that is reserved to elucidate the clear social deviancy of non-normative sexuality, "coming out as religious," highlights just how much religion is detested in the Iranian American diaspora community and how much that has come to shape the second-generation's faith practices.

172

Secular/Binary Failures: How Islam (Still) Exists

In addition to drawing from various faiths, many of my friends had created their own syncretic faith practices emblematic of the secularizing force of non-Islamiosity, a unique concoction of secularized Muslim rituals. Although I will elaborate on various beliefs and practices in the following chapters, I draw from two examples from my friends to demonstrate the limitations of the binary conceptualization secular v. religious. Through the two following cases which push against the hermetically sealed categories of secularity and religiosity, I illustrate the necessity for a nonbinary analytic which appreciates the nonbinary lived experiences of queer and trans Iranian Americans, centering their life experiences as guiding logics.

For example, when I asked Golnaz if she practices a particular Muslim ritual, kissing and walking under the Qur'an before leaving the house, she replied with a confident "All the time!" She tells me how she continues to follow this important tradition in her household – kissing and holding up the Qur'an and walking under it as one exits the door, a practice usually performed before a major life event or leaving home for a long trip. A tradition I too follow in my household, I was interested to hear the specifics of what brought her to the practice and how it unfolds for her in her own experience. As she's describing what brings her to conduct the ritual, she tells me how she does this because her mother taught her to. Watching her mother hold the Qur'an over her head and ask her to partake in this ritual, as Golnaz describes, "is the only religious bone I've seen in her." Citing her mother and her mother's beliefs as the guiding rationale for practicing this ritual, Golnaz says she does it more out of superstition than religious belief. She says, "My mom shows her connection to religion when she does it out of superstition and anxiety and fear… She's instilled that fear in me. I'm like if I don't kiss this Quran right now, I'm going to get into a car accident! So that's why I do it. Out of superstition."

Claiming it emerges out of superstition, anxiety, and fear, Golnaz assesses her mother's

religiosity as primarily a nonreligious practice. As Alireza Mohammadi Doostdar argues in his work,

Fantasies of Reason: Science, Superstition, and the Supernatural in Iran, the sociocultural construction of

superstition in modern Iran requires differentiation from rationality and reason. He argues,

> How is one to distinguish a rational, perhaps scientific, understanding of supernatural
> phenomena from hoaxes, lies, delusions, and uncritical repetitions of irrational ideas
> circulating among the uneducated and the gullible? To speak the word 'superstition' is
> already to make a move of social distancing and differentiation: The speaker lays claim,
> through this move, to an authoritative assemblage of reason, science, progress, and
> modernity. But in so doing, he or she must also exclude. Superstition requires 'the
> superstitious' – those people who, by virtue of deficiencies in their knowledge or reason,
> adopt and repeat irrational ideas and practices.[15]

Golnaz's personal experience however, challenges this very notion. Although she does define her

mother as superstitious, even claiming that her mother's relationship to Islam operates as a "drug

that can help her deal with fear," Golnaz's assertion is not just in the practice of distancing, as

Mohammadi Doostdar's work suggests.

Golnaz continues to identify with and practice the ritual, even though she finds it an act of

superstition. So, though she speaks the word 'superstition,' maybe tying herself to an authoritative

assemblage of reason, science, progress, and modernity, I suggest there is not such a neat, linear

logical consequence that pulls Golnaz into the space of exclusive rationality, as Mohammadi

Doostdar outlines. There is something more to the experience, something which substantiates the

desire to conduct a 'superstitious' 'nonreligious' Muslim ritual. I interpret Golnaz's superstitious

kissing of the Qur'an as an intricate example of the intermediary space between secularity and

religion, an exploration beyond the analytical categories which prevent our full grasp of her social

experience. Finding herself somewhere in between religious and secular as she continues to practice

---

[15] Alireza Mohammadi Doostdar, "Fantasies of Reason: Science, Superstition, and the Supernatural in Iran" (Harvard University, 2012), 46,
https://dash.harvard.edu/bitstream/handle/1/9282603/MohammadiDoostdar_gsas.harvard_0084L_10215.pdf?sequence=3&isAllowed=y.

this ritual, Golnaz embodies the materiality of a nonbinary analytic as it exists for queer and trans second-generation Iranian Americans, between binary poles.

The continual commitment to the practice, kissing and walking under the Qur'an, is still significant enough to perform for Golnaz, whether she locates it in superstition, cultural respect, admiration of her mother/elders or maybe even at times an actual religious blessing. The value of performing the ritual, I argue, cannot be reduced to merely a secular or a religious practice. Instead, I suggest that the ritual now takes place as an example of the intertwined nonbinary form between and through a secular and religious terrain, understood as both and neither, simultaneously.

What is instructive for me is not just to move beyond the binary poles of secular and religious, but to allow that expansiveness available beyond the binaristic framing to appreciate Golnaz's genuine experience of the ritual. By centering her heart, her spirit, her fears, her choices, another pathway for conceptualizing queer religious life emerges.

I proceeded to ask Golnaz if she ever uses the phrase *Bismillah al Rahman al Rahim*[16] in her daily life. To which, she jovially shouted "Yeah, when I'm about to do a crazy turn on the freeway girl!" As she laughed and recollected her bad driving habits, her comment illustrates the real, tangible way she utilizes this Muslim phrase in her everyday life. However, as she described it, she seemed to understand that it is "not the way it's intended to be said," finding her use of it illegitimate and less real.

What interests me here is the second-generation's notion that their use of or reference to Muslim rituals, rhetoric, and/or practices is 'less real' because they are 'not the ways they are intended to be used.' This hierarchization of religious validity, fully explored in the next chapter, demonstrates the prescriptive orthodoxy which dictates how second-generation Iranian Americans

---

[16] *Bismillah al Rahman al Rahim* translates to 'In the name of God, the endlessly gracious, the infinitely merciful.' It is the first line of the Qur'an and a very common phrase, typically used at the outset of a new endeavor, for example starting to drive a car, before giving a speech, etc.

understand and engage with Islam. Nonetheless, what is important is the ways in which they do continue to engage within these Muslim registers. I am interested in exploring this unique second-generation Iranian American diasporic construction of what constitutes secular, religious, spiritual, and superstitious belief. In the tapestry of nonmaterial ideations, how do these individuals draw from the discursive terrains they find themselves in to (re)make a world that not only makes sense to them, but that helps them potentially feel safer, less alone, and calmer?

Similar to Golnaz's example, Shahpour also exhibits the interplay between religiosity and secularity in another syncretic faith practice: using Islamic rosary beads during panic attacks as a means of calming himself down. He describes his process to me, saying that when he is having a panic attack he will roll or flip the beads of his *tasbih* through his fingers while repeating messages to himself. When I asked if they were religious statements, he said "No, just calming statements." He says he sometimes also talks to the *tasbih* beads as a way to calm himself down. Further explaining his practice, Shahpour says it's "not really using it for its intended purposes, but whatever."

Finding use in the rosary beads as a source of calming repetitive motion, Shahpour's practice shows the impressive ways in which second-generation trans Iranian Americans adapt and produce meaning in religious objects. Moallem argues in her latest work *Persian Carpets: The Nation as a Transnational Commodity*, "objects present us with a world of meanings to be interrogated, not only regarding one's attachments, but also how our desire for the world we live in could be changed, transformed, and redirected."[17] I suggest that this *tasbih*, for Shahpour, represents the site of cultural belonging, a mechanism for him to access his ancestry, heritage, and cultural foundation as a trans Iranian American Muslim. Although he understands this rolling of the rosary beads as not the "intended" religious purpose of the object, he still continues this practice.

---

[17] Moallem, *Persian Carpets*, 4.

Rolling the *tasbih* in one's hands is a prescriptive Muslim practice, typically done following the formal prayer sequence and/or intermittently throughout the day. I am not concerned with assessing Shahpour's validity as a Muslim; rather I wish to demonstrate both his and Golnaz's stories for they demonstrate the ways second-generation Iranian Americans find meaning in these decidedly Muslim practices, whether to prevent a potential car accident or to calm oneself down during a panic attack. As Moallem hints, "the desire for community is continuously expressed through symbolic consumption."[18]

Ruminating on the stories my friends shared with me, I wonder how many voices, desires, and ideas they navigate and hold onto as they take part in these Muslim rituals. It is instructive to emphasize the reliance on Muslim iconography, ritual, and practice as a part of making meaning for these second-generationers. As much as Islam has been repeatedly disparaged by the parent generation, there is still an underlying desire, intention, and impetus to connect with their Muslim lineage.

As Shahpour says, it is not the intended purpose, "but whatever." It is in his utterance of "whatever" that I find space for him, as a trans queer Iranian American to explore his relationship to Islam, to God, to mental health, to spiritual, emotional, and religious growth. What he does here, by grabbing the beads and flipping through them, by his own will, for his own betterment, demonstrates a radical autonomy. Embodying a powerful sense of agency, capability, and possibility, Shahpour's act is, I suggest, a radical process of trans Muslim queer Iranian American embodiment – a refusal to be excluded from Islam, from diaspora, from the larger Iranian community. One could even further suggest that this act is not a refusal. It is a departure, completely surpassed and beyond the ideological claims and disputes that flow back and forth in the material, social, political, discursive terrain. His act can be understood as his being above and beyond the limits, rules, codes,

---

[18] Moallem, 149.

and dictates which limit queer and trans Muslim life. He simply is who he is, flipping *tasbih* beads through his fingers.

Sewing together the secularity of non-Islamiosity with the Muslim rituals of the parents/elders, I argue that these two examples highlight the newfound ways second-generation Iranian Americans are reconfiguring religious-spiritual practices to fit their social realities. To try and locate these practices as purely religious or purely secular would be to erase, reduce, or misunderstand significant elements of the practice and the meaning it holds for the practitioners.

Prayer Practices: Queer & Trans Connections with the Divine

How some of my friends pray also articulates the powerful ways they absorb and adapt the boundaries of religion and secularity. In addition to those who understood their prayer practice as a yoga or meditation, some shared other forms of prayer that highlighted this secularized nature of religiosity.[19] When I asked my friends if they prayed, I opened the language of 'prayer' up, saying "and by 'Do you pray?' I don't just mean prayer as in a specific, routine, prescribed form of communicating with God. I want to know what or how your practice of communicating with the supernatural looks like." In response, many of my friends shared their myriad ways of connecting with supernatural forces, none of which followed the routine and typical Muslim '*namaz*' form.[20]

Shahpour described to me of how his praying looks like lying in his bed, facing the ceiling, closing his eyes, and praying to God. Niloofar has created a little shrine on a wooden chest in her bedroom and tells me she kneels before it to pray. I asked whether or not people pray in English or Farsi, and how that influences the ways they connect and/or relate to God. Bahman, shared how he

---

[19] Mahmood, "Secularism, Hermeneutics, and Empire."

[20] Only two of my friends, both transmasculine individuals, brought up that they ever tried to pray, *namaz*, normative Muslim prayer.

prays in Farsi, because "praying in English is *weird*." Whereas, Shahpour says he prays in English because his Farsi "isn't that good."

A wide array of prayer practices, these styles underscore how second-generation Iranian Americans have no simple universal prayer form. Rather, many draw from and rely on different aspects of language to connect with their God. As the rest of the chapter will highlight, the sweeping nature of Christianity as a secularizing force greatly shaped the ways many of my friends came to understand and relate to the religious-spiritual world. Dictating prayer practices, prayer forms, conceptualizations of God, morality, and more, Christianity as the institutionalized religious backbone of the United States became the main religious current Iranian Americans engaged with and responded to in their own religious experiences.

Christianity as Secularizing Islam: Christian Schooling, Churches, and Christmas

As many scholars have shown, the project of secularization works to refashion Islam, Muslims, and Muslim life into liberal form.[21] I argue that a primary facet of this secularization process is not just the refashioning of Islam to fit liberal political rule, nor to misconstrue the notion that Islam is categorically conceptualizable as a religion as Christianity is, but that Christianity operates as a form of this very secularizing process. By which, I mean to suggest that we cannot understand the work of secularization as simply the removal, reduction, or refashioning of Islam, but also the ways in which Christianized forms of religiosity register as more valid, appropriate, normative, and sanctioned by the state, thereby influencing the ways non-Christian communities operate within secularizing spaces. Put another way, Christianity and adopting Christian practices becomes the substance by which Muslims secularize. I wish to suggest that the articulation of a

---

[21] Mahmood, "Secularism, Hermeneutics, and Empire"; Asad, *Formations of the Secular*; Fernando, *The Republic Unsettled*; Ahmed, *What Is Islam?*

secularizing process requires noting how Christianity operates as a primary actor of that enactment, recreating Muslims not just into secularized Muslims nor liberally acceptable Muslims, but Christianizing/secularizing Muslims.

Mayanthi Fernando analyzes the application of secularization to the Maghrebi population of France, demonstrating how secularization and the study of secularization has prompted a reconfiguration of how we understand 'religion' as a category. Fernando argues that "this secular remaking of what is called… the religious life of non-Christian communities has refashioned other 'religions' into forms analogous with Christianity."[22] She suggests that "because Islam is unlike Christianity, it must be made analogous; it must be translated and transformed into a bona fide religion so that it can be recognized and included."[23] This processual refashioning of Islam as a category of religion to fit the Christian model is alternatively named the secularization of Islam.

In these instances, to posit Islam as a religion is to speak of Islam in terms of Christianity. Ahmed continues this argument, asserting that to place Islam and Christianity as in any way equivalent under the category of 'religion' is to speak of Islam in paradigmatic terms of Christianity.[24] He argues

> Islam is *not* a religion *like* Christianity; whatever the surface similarities, it is in its fundamental structure for the conceptualization and production of truth and meaning so *unlike* Christianity as to render 'religion' a distortive category of common analysis, precisely because 'religion' diverts us from taking stock of the truth and consequences of those fundamental structural differences.[25]

As Ahmed and Fernando's works suggest, to categorize Islam as a 'religion' prevents an understanding of Islam which appreciates the structural, epistemological, and ontological differences

---

[22] Fernando, *The Republic Unsettled*, 133.

[23] Fernando, 133.

[24] Ahmed, *What Is Islam?*, 189.

[25] Ahmed, 192 (emphasis in original).

between it and Christianity. A consequence of secularization, and the sweeping hold secularized epistemes possess over our analytical categories, this argument showcases the inability of the category of 'religion' and its fellow counterpart the 'secular' to grasp the fullness of Muslim experience. As Ahmed elaborates,

> My point is that when we conceptualize Islam as 'religion' we put on a pair of lenses that lead us to *organize* and *valorize* the object we behold in primary terms of categorical *separateness* through the questions: Is *x* religion and therefore Islam, or is *x* secular and therefore not-Islam? Is *x* sacred and therefore Islam, or is *x* profane and therefore not-Islam? Is *x* scriptural and therefore Islam, or is *x* non-scriptural and therefore not-Islam? Is *x* prescriptive/proscriptive discourse, such as creed and law, and therefore Islam, or it is non-prescriptive/proscriptive discourse such as love-poetry or wine-poetry and thus not-Islam? … This set of questions – which are the set of questions necessarily consequent upon the binary concept of 'religion/secular' – and the taxonomical commitments embedded therein simply do not help us to conceptualize Islam.[26]

Ahmed insists that to conceptualize Islam in terms of secular v. religious is paradigmatically ineffective as well as epistemically violent, as it belies the multivalent truths, meanings, expressions, ideas, and faiths Muslims live and have lived. Building on Ahmed's intervention, I deploy a nonbinary analytic which facilitates the broadening up of our analytic framework, beginning with the lives of my friends as guiding logics. I am not interested in classifying actions or sentiments as purely secular or religious. Rather I aim to demonstrate as honestly, robustly, and meticulously as possible the ways in which my friends experience the ideas and boundaries of what it means to explore the spiritual/religious worlds.

Many of my friends had complex relationships with Christianity, which I believe deserve attention as a mode of secularization itself. As Mahmood and Asad point out, secularization and secularized subjectivities prescribe certain religious practices as normative, tolerable, and acceptable within a (neo)liberalizing racial, economic, social landscape. Therefore, I explore how

---

[26] Ahmed, 196–97.

Christianization and secularization are intertwined forces, shaping much of the beliefs and practices of the second-generation Iranian Americans I worked with.

Christian Schooling: "I Was So Sacrilegious Apparently!"

Given the parent generations' subscription to assimilative practices – including a secularizing non-Islamiosity, ascendance towards whiteness, neoliberalized colorblind logics of capital accumulation, model minority scripts of meritocracy – the decision to send Iranian Americans of the second-generation to Christian schools was a common phenomenon. Many of the second-generation attended Christian schools for some portion if not all of their grade schooling. I argue, that in order to analyze the registers and discourses that many second-generation diasporic Iranians use to articulate their religious/spiritual/secular identities and experiences, I must appreciate the ways Christianity shaped their upbringing. As many of my friends' experiences show, attending Christian grade school facilitated a unique and contradictory religious experience, a combined exposure to Christianity, Islam, secularization projects, and belief in 'only God' that many were engaging with from young ages. Many had to grapple with conflicting sources of power and legitimacy early on, sorting out disputes between morality, racialized religion, and ultimately, their own conceptualization of God along the way.

First, I interpret the decision to send second-generation children to Christian school as an act solidifying neoliberal fantasies of merit-based financial success. It is both an act producing and indicative of the merit-based assumptions which undergird immigrant notions of an 'American Dream.' I argue that the Iranian American parent generation utilized emerging notions of colorblindness, specifically how that politic filters docile immigrants into the global capitalist model, as the way to and reason for sending their children to Christian schools. This act, understood as a way to solidify both their stakes in a multicultural racial American landscape as well as an upper-

middle class status made available through much of those very same logics, demonstrates how Iranian Americans of the second-generation came to enter Christian schools. The consequence of this, naturally, was that their children had to grapple with religion, religious education, and religious difference at very young ages, as many were sent from preschool all the way through grade and even high school. I find it instructive to recollect some of the memories of my friends from their grade school days to highlight the ways in which racialized religiosities came to influence the ways in which they understood their relationship to Islam, to Iranianness, Americanness, and God.

Together we sat at a large wooden rectangular table, huddled inside on a rare rainy Southern California day. I was speaking with Nasrin, hearing the raindrops fall as she shared stories of her youth, her upbringing, her religious edification. As we spoke, I asked her a question I brought up with each one of my friends: Do you identify as a Muslim? Very calmly and confidently, she responded "I identify as Muslim-Christian."

Intrigued, I asked her to tell me how she came to that identity formation and what it means for her. She said,

> I went to a Christian school growing up. Preschool, kindergarten, 1st grade to 3rd grade. So, I learned about the Bible, but I knew my grandparents were Muslim. I always remember watching my grandma pray and me wanting to pray with her and wanting to be more… aware of my actual religion which is Muslim. But since I don't know that much about the Muslim culture, I also identify myself as Christian since I went to a Christian school and I … accepted God into my life when I was there.

Calling herself Muslim-Christian, Nasrin's articulation embodies the necessity for a nonbinary analytic, able to interpret and honor her seemingly contradictory identity labels. Her description gives primacy to her "actual religion" of Islam, yet it also makes room to appreciate her experience with Christianity as the substance through which she came to accept God into her life, leaving her feeling comfortable to identify as Muslim-Christian.

As much as I decipher this experience of Nasrin's as the very embodiment of Christianity as a secularizing process, I also find it important not to eradicate the acutely religious dimension

present in her narrative. To read Nasrin's story as nothing more than a Christian secularization stripping her of her Muslim origins, belies the fullness of her experience. Nasrin's emphasis on calling herself Christian, primarily because she accepted God into her life while in attendance of Christian school, highlights an important affinity for God. I argue that to lose that simply to make an argument about the workings of Christianity/secularity contorts her lived experience as both a Muslim and Christian.

What is also noteworthy is her acknowledgement of her "actual religion" as Muslim, as many of my friends' experiences corroborated. There is an underlying awareness that we are 'actually Muslim,' but that we 'don't really practice.' This specific identity formation will be thoroughly discussed in the following chapter; however, I find it useful to highlight this as a demonstration of secularizing Muslim identity. Although many friends adopted a secularizing form of religious practice, they also understood themselves and their families as culturally or actually Muslim 'underneath it all.'

Spending several years in Christian schooling, myself included, many Iranian Americans of the second-generation are exposed to Christian religious education at very young ages. Growing up in the San Fernando Valley, I recall going to Christian grade school with a handful of other Iranian American kids. What I learned at that young of an age was that race, religion, and class markers were co-constitutive and operating simultaneously; and most importantly, that we were not 'American.' I quickly discovered my racial difference was directly tied to my religious difference.

In fact, I remember going home one day as a young child, probably no more than six years old. I remember little me, tugging on my mother's pants and asking her something that had been puzzling me: "Mom, why are we going to Christian school if we're not Christian?" I asked. I had clearly picked up on all the signs and discourses making it clear to me that I was not Christian, and I was different from every other white-Christian kid at school. She responded with something to the

effect of, 'It's good for you to learn about other religions.' Renewed in my sense of purpose, I ran

along, satisfied with my mom's response, believing that I was, in fact, learning about Christianity as a

scholarly, educational pursuit. I liked knowing I was broadening my horizons. I left feeling noble

and sophisticated, just as one might at six years old.

Now, after years of grappling with the powerful currents, themes, and discourses that are

stitched to religion and secular/religious disputes within the Iranian American diaspora community,

I see why my mother answered as she did. How could she have articulated her conceptualization of

the 'American Dream' and how she thought placing her child in Christian school brought her closer

to it? How could she have explained that to enter Christian school gave me material benefits,

resources, and access to social networks, which, in the words of Dean Spade, offer better "life

chances?"[27] How could she have explained the workings of a racialized secularization which marked

my and other Iranian American kid's difference from preschool onwards?

It was impossible. All that mattered to my mother, and many other parents of the first-

generation, was to create the conditions that allowed her child to assimilate even further into

mainstream American social and political culture – primarily to prevent any racialized violence. She

absorbed much of non-Islamiosity's claims as a survival tactic, a means by which she could deflect

any further racialized violence against herself and her children, to shout 'never again' in the face of

the violence that came out of the Hostage Crisis. Yet, as both Maghbouleh and my scholarship

dictate, this attempt to further thrust the second-generation into racial acclimation was not a

seamless, streamlined process, as much as our parents and the U.S. nationalist project wished it

would be.

Sharing more of her experience in Christian school, Nasrin tells of how formative a time it

was for her understanding of religious identity, as well as how her attending Christian school

---

[27] Spade, *Normal Life*.

reconfigured her entire family's sense of religiosity. Following in her footsteps, her little brother's

attendance to Christian school further prompted the family to remake their religious experiences,

absorbing and participating in Christian holidays as a part of that refashioning. Describing her

family's regular attendance to Easter services at a local church for her brother to experience Easter

egg hunts, Nasrin ponders openly about the difficult religious implications. Pointing out her

confusion, she shares, "but I didn't know why we would go to church." Seeing herself and her

family as "actual Muslims," Nasrin found it odd that her family attended church services, even if it

was for her brother to partake in a normalized American ritual, the festive Eastern egg hunt. It

seems that even though Nasrin identifies herself to be a "Muslim-Christian," that that does not

entail attending regular church services. The Christian descriptor is solely a mark of her experiences

with God in Christian school as a younger girl, and how that shapes her understanding of who God

is.

As we continued talking, Nasrin went on to say how nowadays in her room she keeps "a

Bible and a Qur'an on top of each other." This visual, a Bible on top of a Qur'an, demonstrates

precisely the intertwined forces of Iranian non-Islamiosity, anti-Muslim racisms, Christianity as a

secularizing process, as well as Nasrin's commitment to religiosity. Her engagement with these

various currents has been to adopt a combined religious identity, Muslim and Christian, as a process

of her religious explorations; something that, I suggest, is not uncommon in the Iranian American

diasporic experience.[28]

I argue that secularization, as it operates through Christianized signs to enact its project,

must be understood as a disciplinary practice that seeks to contort the physical body away from

Muslim modes and into Christianized modes of body posturing. As Mahmood argues, this

---

[28] To be clear, the adoption of multiple religious labels is common (Buddhist, Spiritualist, Zoroastrian, etc.), not solely the adoption of Muslim-Christian identity.

secularized subjectivity hierarchizes what constitutes legitimate religious practice, yet I extend that argument to suggest the very process by which secularism secularizes the Muslim body is through Christianizing Muslim religious practices – how one prays, how often, how to position the body, what languages are used in that prayer, and on and on. I argue that this refashioning of the body is a process of Christianity as secularization. As mentioned prior, none of my friends prayed in traditional Muslim form, save for two transmasculine individuals who had tried it several times.

Nasrin's example of prayer, as a "Muslim-Christian" highlights this disciplining of the Muslim body into Christianized modes. Nasrin tells me that she used to pray every day with her mother, a practice they did together. Describing the practice to me, she shares how they would both get on their knees alongside a windowsill in their family home, face outside, fold their hands, and take turns praying to God in English. Confirming that she understood this as Christian prayer, Nasrin offers an important intervention into how I conceptualize the borders of secularity, Christianity, Islam, and how they all operate for Iranian Americans in diaspora. What her prayer practice invites us to ponder is the obvious power of secularization working through Christianity, and how that aligns nicely with Iranian non-Islamiosity. Yet it also prompts us to consider the social value and apparent investment in religiosity, religious ritual, and religious practice in spite of the pervasive projects of secularization. Evidently, the form and fashion with which they connect with their God relies on decidedly non-Muslim terms. Yet, I suggest that the belief in God is not foregone. The 'only God' formulation emerges as a consequence of their Muslim lineage and background in combination with Christianizing body posturing to produce their religious experience.

As heartwarming as Nasrin's story may be about how she was able to accept God into her life through Christian school, not all second-generation Iranian Americans had such an easy time with the teachings of Christianity. Drawing from my interviews with Parisa, a cisgender queer

187

Iranian Chinese American woman, I show how some experiences with Christianity and religious schooling operate as a drastic deterrent, pushing her further away from religiosity. Describing her upbringing, Parisa says that as a young child she would call herself both Christian and Muslim "because [she] didn't understand" that one could not be two monotheistic faiths simultaneously. Now, although she does not consider herself a 'religious Muslim,' she is certainly pondering its racial implications and considers herself spiritual.

Nonetheless, Parisa tells me how her parents decided to send her to a Christian summer school in middle school because of its advanced mathematics program. Describing the place as "messed up," Parisa says she found that she was "always in trouble there for something," things such as "reading Harry Potter" or "passing notes." She said, "I was so sacrilegious apparently!" Telling me of the intense religious education she received as a part of this summer school program, Parisa said "I thought that if my dad wasn't Christian, he was going to hell! I was taught this in *math* class!" When I asked her what other messages she received, she said she was taught that "If you don't put God into your heart, then you're going to go to hell."

Parisa's experience resulted in a very different outcome than Nasrin's mentioned above. She told me that as a consequence of both her time at this extremely religious Christian school, as well as seeing her father's non-Islamious hatred of Islam, she too dropped religion. I offer Parisa's anecdote because it shows the complementary forces of secularizing Christianity as well as the effects of non-Islamiosity and how that resulted in her no longer believing in religion. Whatever the result may become – Muslim-Christian, cultural Muslim, anti-religious, non-Muslim believer in God, and/or spiritualist – I argue that it is essential to appreciate all the minute ways these currents shape how Iranian Americans find religious and spiritual meaning.

Christmas, Churches, and Cross Necklaces: The Substance of Racialized Religiosity

As many of my friends shared their adolescent experiences with religion and religious difference, all understood and articulated their religious difference against the contours of normative Christian religiosity. Through anecdotes of Christmas celebrations, curiosities around church, or the donning of Christian jewelry, their stories demonstrate a clear racial construction, formed primarily against Christianness. The selective suturing of secularized dimensions of Christianity to a second-generation Iranian American diasporic experience demonstrates the contours of racialized religiosity.

Christmas, and the celebration of Christmas, was a common practice in many of my friend's homes. During our interviews, when I asked if they celebrated any religious holidays, many responded immediately with a resounding "Christmas!" What is even more interesting is how many offered up Christmas as an answer before other holidays or occasions (mainly Norooz[29]), further demonstrating the cultural and social significance of Christmas in the homes of diasporic Iranian Americans. For instance, when I asked Omid what his family does to celebrate Norooz, he said "the same thing we do for Christmas and Thanksgiving, just with the [*haftseen*] added." The very framing of Norooz as analogous to Christmas demonstrates the success of secularizing projects, reducing both events to synonymous nonreligious family gatherings. Omid's description also illustrates the ways in which this secularization has worked to erase the significance of ancestral Persian traditions as well as any religious rituals of a Christmas celebration.

Nonetheless, the overarching salience of Christmas as a social experience for the second-generation operates to instruct them on their non-Christianness. Even as most all experienced the rituals growing up – getting a Christmas tree, buying and giving presents, spending time with family

---

[29] The reason many may not have said Norooz, is one, because Christmas was more important for them in their households. Two, it also could be that they understood Norooz as a non-religious holiday and felt it did not answer the question being asked. However, what is noteworthy is that they took Christmas to fit the description of a 'religious' holiday, even though it is practiced primarily as a social/cultural and non-religious event.

– they adopted Christmas as a nonreligious holiday. By recreating Christmas in such a way, as arguably many immigrant non-Christian communities might as a consequence of Christmas capitalism, my friends were able to mediate a highly Christian and therefore unavailable religious celebration into a secularized, celebration that they could partake in.

However, unlike other Muslim immigrant groups which may celebrate Christmas as a social and secularized holiday, and then continue to celebrate other important religious holidays (*Eid*s, *Ramadan*, *Arba'een*, etc.), the Iranian diaspora mainly does not. It is the combination of Christianity as a secularizing project, as well as the overarching secularization of non-Islamisioty, and the everlasting allure of being 'good Americans,' that lends to this unique diasporic formation wherein Christmas becomes such a prominent holiday in the community.

In addition to the embrace of Christmas, many second-generation Iranian Americans were forced to encounter the question of church. Understood as the sole permissible public realm of religious belief, the church operates as an important and instructive spatial terrain for how Iranian Americans made sense of their religious identities. Growing up with friends who went to church or attending schools that mandated church attendance, many were forced to encounter the site of Christian religious practice early on. Bahman tells me of his thought process as a young boy, saying,

> Honestly, I feel like I never understood that I had a religion, because I remember growing up in elementary school and people would be like 'Oh, I'm going to church on Sunday.' And I was like 'Why do people go to church? Why does my family not go to church? Is it weird that we don't go to church?'

Bahman's queries highlight the anxieties of racial and religious exclusion, yet also demonstrate the indecipherability of his own religious experience. The non-Islamious terrain of his upbringing compounded with the visible Christianity of other kids left Bahman uncertain that he even had access to religion or religious practice. He goes on to tell me he would go around asking other Black and Brown kids if they went to church, as a way to provide further solace and comfort to himself. It was only upon hearing that some of them did not attend church either, that he felt a little less

racially/religiously isolated. Bahman's account pushes us to ponder the material effects of non-Islamiosity, the erasure of Islam and Islamic symbolism from diasporic life, and also the intense confusion many young second-generationers underwent as they attempted to make sense of their racial/religious identities. As my research suggests, the confusion over what religion they identified with was a frequent occurrence for many young Iranian Americans. Because non-Islamiosity is a secularizing project, it stripped the younger generation of the language, experiences, and analytical tools with which to articulate their social identities, in ways their Christian counterparts did not have to consider.

Drawing an example from her fieldwork with second-generation Iranian Americans, Maghbouleh demonstrates the racial confusion second-generation Iranian Americans experience when articulating their identities in an American racial landscape. She quotes Roya, a teenager from Northern California, as she recollects her experience with racial classification. Roya shares,

> *I* knew I was Iranian. And Iran was in Asia, on the continent. So, I would bubble in 'Asian' as my race. No one questioned it at the time. And so, I got put in Chinese Bicultural classes. So, I really thought I was Asian for a little while. I had like all Asian friends. I remember getting in an argument with a kid about me being Asian or white and trying to defend my Asianness. And eventually I came to a realization like … oh … ok maybe I am not Asian … but it wasn't clear to me or anyone… in my world where 'Iranian' would fit.[30]

As Roya's example suggests, there is a certain illegibility of Iranianness within the American racial landscape. I extend Maghbouleh's argument to suggest that the religious dimension only further perplexes second-generation Iranian Americans. Because of the intertwining currents of Iranian non-Islamiosity, American anti-Muslim racism, as well as a racial classificatory system which does not appreciate Iranian diasporic experience, many second-generationers find it extremely difficult to make sense of their identities in terms of both race and religion.

---

[30] Neda Maghbouleh, "From White to What? MENA and Iranian American Non-White Reflected Race," *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 43, no. 4 (March 15, 2020): 620, https://doi.org/10.1080/01419870.2019.1599130.

Nonetheless, the materiality of Christianity as white racial normativity emerges not only in conversations of religious holidays or church attendance, but also in the ideas that come to be seen as appropriate, desirable, fashionable, and ultimately 'good.' Niloofar tells me how as a young girl, she repeatedly encountered the Christian jewelry of her peers, underscoring her religious difference. She recalls seeing the "cool white girls wearing cross necklaces," and how that made her want to wear one too. Niloofar says she went home and began begging her parents to get her a cross necklace, a repeated practice in her home where she pleaded for a symbol of Christianity, tied to coolness and whiteness, as Niloofar herself now reflects back to me.

She tells me how her mother insisted that "that's not our religion," and instead gave her a little Qur'an in hopes of placating her and guiding her in the direction of her cultural and religious ancestry. "I swear I threw it!" she says, recalling how angry and frustrated she was that she could not get a cross necklace. More than just an intergenerational misunderstanding, this dispute highlights the inner workings of Christianity as the substance of religious normativity in the United States.

Niloofar laughed as she recounted the ways her ten-year old self was so upset with her parents' attempts to console her desires to wear a cross necklace with a Qur'an. She saw the irony now as an adult and went on to describe that that was the age where she started realizing she was racially and religiously different. She says,

> You start realizing you're not like everybody else and your differences start to surface and you just want to wear a cross necklace. And my mom compromised and got me a 'Mary' because she was like 'We do believe in Mary!' and I wore that… Everyone thought I was Mexican, [but] I just wanted to fit in.

Accepting a gold Mary necklace in lieu of a cross, Niloofar's anecdote illustrates how her racialized hopes of 'fitting in' revolved precisely around the Christian religion, and how she came to learn the accepted and appropriate displays of religious belief; a Muslim in a Christian world. Desiring the cross necklace as a distinct sign of Christianity, but also whiteness, coolness, modernity, and

Americanness in her grade school, Niloofar was angry with her parents for even trying to give her a Qur'an to quell her religious 'misunderstanding.'

In fact, her parents' attempt to provide her with a Qur'an speaks to their attempt to raise children with their own Muslim values, rituals, and practices, and how exposure to racial-religious difference in American schools compromised and complicated the supposed streamlined transmission of Islamic values to the younger generation. As Niloofar's parents' reach for the Qur'an shows, there are experiences wherein Iranian Americans do not understand themselves as having an explicit Muslim identity, or any religious identity that restricts drawing from other faiths, until they go out into the world and come home with a 'religious misunderstanding.' Niloofar's desire to wear a cross necklace alerted the parents that, although they do not practice Islam in the 'normative sense,' they had 'failed' to teach their child that they were, in fact, Muslims, not Christians and not Jews.

Ariana, another friend, tells of how she was raised in West Los Angeles, surrounded by a community of Iranian American Jews and White American Christians. She shares of her experience attempting to decipher and make sense of the intersecting racial and religious groupings she encountered, identifying as 'Jewish-Christian' as a young child,

> I went to Jewish camp, but I didn't fully grasp it or understand it. I remember kind of pretending I was [Jewish], cuz I was like 'we celebrate Christmas and I go to Jewish camp, so what else could I possibly be?' It just wasn't discussed. And then, I think I said it out loud at a dinner, and my mom laughed and told other people in my family that I said that. … And my cousin, she kind of sat me down and was like, 'there's Allah' and told me a little more about Islam and the Qur'an. And I didn't really want to hear it cuz I didn't know anyone like that and I didn't want it to be a part of my identity.

Announcing her Jewish-Christian identity at the dinner table at seven years old, Ariana's remark made her mother laugh in astonishment. Again, it was through this noticeable 'religious misunderstanding' that the parents stepped in, and informed their children that they were, in fact, neither Jewish nor Christian, but Muslim. Although they do not understand themselves as formal,

orthodox, or obedient Muslims, Ariana's and Niloofar's stories showcase that Iranian Americans generally do acknowledge their Muslim roots particularly when misread as another monotheistic faith.

Only those who are ardent proponents of non-Islamiosity actively berate, attack, and reject any association with Islam, predominantly Iranian American diasporic men. However, many Iranian Americans use non-Islamious forms, a distinctly secularizing force, to create identity forms such as 'we believe only in God' or 'we believe in being good people' while still, in some culturally significant undercurrent, recognizing their Muslimness. That is why I believe that to postulate non-Islamiosity as a purely secularizing force would also be erroneous because the overwhelming majority of Iranian Americans do not only believe in God but revere God – with an incredibly powerful faith at that. To claim that the Iranian American community is secular or secularizing simply because of its disarticulation from 'Islam' due to racial histories and traumatic reverberations from the Revolution and Hostage Crisis would be inaccurate. By and large, Iranian American in diaspora do still value, cherish, and connect with God, albeit in contradictory secularized forms.

'You Have to Pick a Side': The Sexual Contours of Christianity

Concluding her work on gender and the sexual anxieties of Iranian modernity, Najmabadi critiques her fellow feminist historians for disregarding the historical (trans)formations of sexuality and how analyzing gender without attention to sexuality is "intellectually and politically a seriously damaged enterprise."[31] Following Najmabadi's direction, I offer examples from my ethnographic research to demonstrate the exact ways in which queer sexuality articulates the process by which Christianity as a racialized religiosity becomes material, against none other, than Islam.

---

[31] Najmabadi, *Women with Mustaches and Men without Beards*, 235.

194

Drawing from my conversation with Shadi, I will analyze the ways in which they came to understand their racial, religious, and cultural difference as a function of their sexuality. Shadi, a nonbinary queer bisexual Iranian American, spent six years in *deeni* school, Muslim religious school for young people. As one of only two of my friends to have spent any time in formal institutional Muslim spaces, their history with Islamic teaching and training effect the ways they came to understand their religious subjecthood. As we discussed her relationship to God, to religion, and to Islam, Shadi brought up her romantic relationships as a focal point for informing her religious identity. They quickly asserted that they were "heavily influenced" by the people they dated and that was much of the substance by which they came to understand themself as an excluded non-Christian. Interested in how she had come to tie her understanding of religious experience and evolution to her dating life, I asked her to share more. They said,

> My first ex was [white American] Christian and his family would *constantly* tell me to choose a side. Between Christianity and [Islam].…I went to Texas [to visit his family] and I was having nightmares about going to Texas. I was like 18 or 19 … and his dad was like 'You have to pick a side.'

Forcing them to choose between the binary of Christianity and Islam, their ex's family vigilantly policed the boundaries of familial inclusion through specifically religious terms. It was not even enough for Shadi to present as a secularizing non-Islamious Iranian, as they highlight later on, but necessary for her to choose Christianity outright in order to be accepted by her partner's family.

In essence, it is through her sexual experiences that her racial and cultural difference is articulated through a uniquely anti-Muslim racist discourse. This is precisely why I find it imperative to offer an analytical lens which is able to appreciate and absorb the multifaceted operative function of various social axes, specifically as they interoperate with religiosity. Because what is of fundamental importance to me is not simply how this experience articulated her as a racialized Other, but also how this experience prompted her to restructure her very relationship to God, to Islam, and to divine connection, as I will show below.

Shadi added that when it came time to eat, they noticed that the family "would only serve pork." A visible affront to their Muslimness, regardless of their proximity to orthodoxy, this action further demonstrates the depth of anti-Muslim racisms they encountered at their ex-partner's family home in Texas. When I asked her how she navigated that environment, she quietly muttered "I didn't eat anything." Clearly showcasing the workings of anti-Muslim racisms, Shadi's story demonstrates the tangible forms in which racialized violence is deployed, through a particular set of claims to Christian religiosity. As Judith Weisenfeld asserts, the quest for discerning racialized religiosities must interrogate the ways in which Christianity enables racial classifications and vice versa. She asks,

> Can we recognize the varied ways religious discourses have contributed to the production and reproduction of racial categories throughout American history and often lent divine authority to racial hierarchy and notions of white superiority? Can we tease out some of the ways that a white person's racial status in America might shape their religious experience and do so differently in different locations and times?[32]

These questions guide my own work, informing my analysis around how Christian claims to whiteness reify white supremacist logics – further normalizing ideas of moral superiority, goodness, purity, justness, and holiness as white characteristics. As Weisenfeld suggests, we must understand the theological associations between whiteness and godliness if we are to postulate the ways in which whiteness substantiates its claims through religious terms.[33]

The more Shadi shared, the more evident it became that this experience had deeply affected their sense of self. She went on to tell me that his parents would bring up the conversation of their future children, clearly indicating that if they did not convert to Christianity, they would not be welcomed as a wife, daughter-in-law, or mother of their grandchildren. This vigilant policing makes

---

[32] Judith Weisenfeld, "Forum: American Religion and 'Whiteness,'" *Religion and American Culture: A Journal of Interpretation* 19, no. 1 (2009): 29, https://doi.org/10.1525/rac.2009.19.1.1.

[33] Weisenfeld, 32.

plain the workings of anti-Muslim racism through a sexuality lens. It is through their sexuality that these racialized religious claims came to mark them as an Iranian Muslim outsider.

But I wanted to know more about how, in particular, this experience had shaped her understanding of religion, of God, of Islam, of Christianity. I asked her to tell me how this had shaped her religious experience. I was certainly not prepared for what they said. In her own words,

> This one guy that I really liked … was like 'I'd never date anyone who wasn't Christian.' And then I went and tried to convert … I went into a church… And I tried so hard. I went in … I walked in a church. I was so lost I think because I felt so hated by my ex's family. They saw me as like a succubus, like a temptress. And then when we broke up, this guy that I became really close with was like 'I don't date anyone who's not Christian' and in my head, my logic was, 'you only find a good man if he's *Christian*.' And then I wanted my kids to be safe, and I wanted to be good, I guess. So, I walked into a mega-church and I, I did the profession thing and I converted.

Moved to tears as they told me, Shadi seemed to have been transported back to that point in their life where they felt "so lost." As I listened to her speak, I felt the magnitude of her suffering, her confusions with race, religion, identity, and love. Of course, I could see all the ways in which whiteness had been neatly assembled to Christianity, understood as 'good,' 'safe,' 'holy,' in ways that her Muslimness could never be. I could tell how this white supremacist manifestation operated through Christianity to the point where they felt compelled to convert in order to find a "good man." As a child of two Muslim parents, a student of *deeni* school for six years, and a self-identified "cultural Muslim," this conversion story is incredibly telling. Her desire to convert in order to date this Christian man tells of the ways in which sexuality, religion, race, and gender are deeply intertwined power networks. Seeking a 'good man,' and 'safe children,' Shadi's articulation of their innermost dreams and desires – their future spouse and children – demonstrates the ways in which whiteness functions through religious projects.

I suggest that Shadi's conceptualization of what constitutes a 'good man' requires not only the consolidation of whiteness as good and holy and Christian, but a counter-conceptualization of Iranianness-Muslimness as 'bad.' The pervasive reach of these white supremacist ideas operates such

that they come to substantiate our most intimate ideas of ourselves, our lovers, our notion of family, safety, and community. This experience, as heartbreaking as it is, illustrates the depth, function, and form of how Christianity enacts to unfurl white supremacist projects as a secularizing process against the Muslim body.

For instance, when I asked them what they did as a matter of being Christian after their conversion, they said they "tried reading the Bible" and "say[ing] grace every time before [they] ate," as well as wearing "a cross ring." As these examples demonstrate, the operative power of Christianity, as a secularizing force pulling at Muslim subjects, is wholly at work in how it physically refashions the Muslim body. Taking on a Christian conversion, Christian rituals, and a Christian belief system, Shadi's story elucidates the intricate racial, gender, and sexual dimensions of secularizing processes.

Hugging a cup of Persian tea as she spoke, Shadi continued to share with me how her romantic relationships had influenced her religious explorations. I asked if they felt they were allowed to have a relationship with God. She replied,

> My instinctual answer is no. I feel like I betrayed the religion I grew up in, and so … God is mad. I feel like because I did that, I don't have a right to speak to God, in a way… because I left the one that raised me and embedded a moral foundation in me. It feels weird to go back, and it feels weird to go forward. So, it's weird to go back to the religion and it's weird to go forward without it. So, I feel … like I don't have a right to speak with [God], because I feel like I've betrayed them so much.

I share Shadi's full reflective process around her religious-spiritual identification to emphasize that for her religion/secularity cannot be understood as separate from race, from gender, from sexuality. It is the combined formulation of an identity through all of these varying axes that Shadi made sense of their own religious identity – a (cultural at times) Muslim who converted to Christianity for white love and is now reimagining their relationship to Islam.

Speaking to the shame, guilt, and hesitation she has with 'going back' to her original faith, Shadi's words elucidate a tangible tension, the sensation of guilt the Muslim subject encounters upon

engaging with secularizing processes. Given the rampant, systemic, and pervasive presence of racialized, secularizing, and Christianizing projects to disaggregate the Muslimness from the Muslim body, all Muslims are forced to engage with(in) these operations. Shadi's articulation of guilt, however, emerges as a shame because they feel that they have "betrayed the religion [they] grew up in." I argue that the universalizing white supremacist claims embedded in Christianity's assertions of whiteness as good, holy, and pure, feed off the guilt which manifests in the Muslim who participates in any aspect of that secularizing project, even as it may be an act of racialized protection. Thus, the shame and embarrassment that Shadi feels further facilitates to prevent her from engaging with Islam as a Muslim subject: her decision to entertain Christianity, even as a brief or perhaps finite exploration, prevents her from feeling a legitimate right to engage with her Muslimness.

Nonetheless, her stories bring up important questions – how can one entertain one's Muslimness in the face of secularizing, Christianizing, and non-Islamious projects? Given our racial, gender, and sexual realities as queer and trans Iranian Americans, how can we form a religious, secular, spiritual identity that makes sense for our lived realities?

Deconstructing Queer Crystal Culture: Whiteness, Anti-Religion, and "Hippie Bullshit"

A growing movement of spiritual connection, 'crystal culture' as one of my friends called it, has become a powerful current in modern queer conceptualizations of religious-spiritual practice. I am interested in how this movement came to be, how it conceptualizes religion and spirituality and the role of the individual in relationship to the supernatural, and how queer[34] Iranian Americans are navigating the racial/gendered/sexuality/religious meanings embedded in these discourses. Almost all of my queer friends spoke to the presence of this crystal culture, a resurging claim to finding

---

[34] I use only the word queer here as opposed to queer and trans, because only my queer friends spoke directly to this experience, not my trans ones. Nonetheless, when I use queer culture, it is an amalgam of queer and trans culture, a community of gender and sexual 'deviants', combined.

spiritual meaning through crystals and other associated practices: zodiac and astrological analysis; tarot cards; reiki; the burning of sage, palo santo wood, or incense; chakra and energy work; and on and on.

What is of significance for me is how this crystal culture came to be formulated as a highly spiritual form of connecting with supernatural forces and energies, a distinctly nonreligious and anti-God form. By nonreligious and anti-God, I mean to suggest that this belief system relies primarily on marking itself as different from and outside of organized religion understood as normative monotheistic faiths, as well as not subscribing to the language of God with a capital G. The very form of this crystal culture is that it emerges from and is born of resistance to normative religiosity, positioning itself against theological traditions which have ousted and rejected queerness, gender deviancy, as well as alternative forms of transcendental connection: witchcraft, spells, magic, astrological analysis, zodiac, tarot, psychic practices, etc. Relying on a specific history of New Age spirituality, this modern-day manifestation of crystal culture has become central in many queer religious/spiritual practices.

Due to the explicit and overt homophobic and transphobic violence many queer and trans people have experienced with organized monotheistic religions, the rearticulation of a venue which offers transcendental connection outside of the bounds of monotheistic tradition is, understandably, appealing to many. Facilitating the recalibration of what constitutes spirituality, sacredness, and transcendental connection, queer and trans spiritual experiences prompt a reformulation of what cosmic connection can mean, look like, and offer. As Sally R. Munt argues, "queer spiritual spaces are emergent."[35]

---

[35] Sally R. Munt, "Queer Spiritual Spaces," in *Queer Spiritual Spaces: Sexuality and Sacred Places*, ed. Andrew Kam-Tuck Yip and Kath Browne (New York, NY: Routledge, 2016), 2, https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315603247.

In the words of Strassfeld and Henderson-Espinoza, "both religion and religious studies can offer intellectual, conceptual, and affective resources for a transgender critique of oppressive forms of power/knowledge invested in the medico-scientific worldview of secular Western modernity."[36] Following their work, I suggest that by exploring this crystal culture, its practices, its prescribed boundaries, its origins, its relationship to authenticity, we can venture beyond, what they call, "the medico-scientific worldview of secular Western modernity." In its place, we can not only poke holes in the limitations of that ontological worldview, but offer a lens, a pathway, a ticket to new worlds. It is precisely this magic, this teeming sensation of emergent queer/trans spiritual life, that guides my work.

Drawing largely from a wide array of global cultural spiritual practices, this queer crystal culture pulls from various global traditions: from India, from indigenous communities across the world, from Sufistic teachings, from African tribal teachings, among others. It is the seeming nonsensical reach into 'anyplace' and 'anytime' that undergirds much of the modern production of crystal culture. However, I suggest this formulation is an intricate manufacture of select aspects of global cultures assumed to carry 'authenticity' as a vehicle for spiritual growth and ascension, unavailable in mainstream white queer (religious and nonreligious[37]) venues, in order to respond to a growing endeavor for spiritual/religious meaning among modern American queer/trans communities.

This crystal culture is currently popularized and commodified through largely white-owned businesses, products, and services, as well as commodities which center whiteness in their

---

[36] Strassfeld and Henderson-Espinoza, "Introduction," 289.

[37] A few examples of such spaces may include: bars, clubs, nightlife, art exhibitions, or queer friendly Christian religious groups. Although many more examples are possible, I share these to highlight how if and when queerness and religiosity seem to encounter one another, it is primarily through a white/Christian lens. Accessing spaces for religious and/or spiritual exploration as queer/trans PoC or queer/trans Muslims is all the more challenging.

articulations. Embedded in a neoliberal global economy circulating narratives of 'free choice' and consumptive practices that offer identity markers to consumers, crystal culture is able to profit off of the commodification of various ancient cultural traditions and rituals – many of which stripped of aspects considered 'too cultural,' for a white supremacist, secularized, capitalist project. Andrea Jain follows the trajectory of what she calls neoliberal spirituality, a growing movement of consumptive practices and regimes which center spirituality as a locus of morality, in and through neoliberal economic practices of "intelligent consumption, creative capitalism, or conscious capitalism."[38] Nonetheless, the raging success of crystal culture speaks to the collective desperation for a connection to the spiritual realm, through means that are considered 'authentic.' Given this backdrop, I sought to explore how queer and trans second-generation Iranian Americans understood and navigated this crystal culture and if they felt their own religious-spiritual practices aligned with it. Did it feel open and available to them to draw from? Was it a problem for their Muslimness? Did they feel any tension between the 'legitimacy' of an organized religion and the assumed 'nonsense' that is crystal culture? Their experiences illustrate the contentious terrain upon which their spiritual/religious explorations unfolded.

For instance, when I asked Parisa whether or not she felt allowed to have a relationship with God, she responded with a rhetorical question, almost offended that I had asked. "Allowed to!?" She retorted. "In 2019!?" She added, "the idea of God has been killed for *so* long. Like *really*?" In disbelief that I would even pose such a question, she concluded by saying "No. Because we're in a world where people don't really believe in God anymore." For her, believing in God is outdated, something antiquated, and something that no longer happens, particularly for young, queer, conscious adults. Evoking the powerful conceptual theme of modernity's projects, to be religious is

---

[38] Andrea R. Jain, *Peace Love Yoga: The Politics of Global Spirituality* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020), 8, https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780190888626.001.0001 (de-emphasis added).

to be backward, behind, pre-modern, Parisa's assertion tells me of how she came to engage with non-God religious/spiritual explorations.

Shadi echoed this by explaining to me how in popular millennial culture, people are more spiritual than religious, saying "everyone's so spiritual now and so open-minded, it seems almost close minded to be with a religion." She says she does not feel comfortable saying she is Muslim because that would lead people to think she is very rigid in her understanding of faith. Both of these friends spoke to how believing in God, squarely rooted in notions of monotheistic faith, was considered outdated, premodern, something that took place in the past, in juxtaposition to this modern formulation of a new-age crystal culture, framed as a modern spirituality, free of rigidities and religious compulsions. This distinction proved to be salient as it substantiated much of the conceptual terrain through which my friends felt safe, comfortable, able, and excited about approaching crystal culture. Not tarnished with claims of barbarity, backwardness, and/or patriarchal, homophobic, and transphobic violence, crystal culture was new spiritual terrain for them.

When I asked Shadi whether or not they felt they were allowed to have a relationship with God, their answer was two-fold, unsurprisingly juggling opposing tensions – a 'yes' to explorations of God against a loud 'no.' She described how she had recently been exploring her relationship to God, to Islam, and to the spiritual, even citing her participation in my research as a sign to continue her exploratory processes. However, they felt a strong pressure to not believe in God, saying that pressure came from "everyone else." Curious as to who made up this "everyone else," for Shadi, I asked her to tell me where these messages were coming from. They spoke of a "millennial white culture" of artists, musicians, creatives, and the like, which they called "edgy Western White people," who made them feel unable to believe in God.

Fascinated by her racialized conceptualization of crystal culture, I asked her to explain how she felt it operated in religious terms. They explained how "this millennial white culture predominantly, but also this pseudo-spiritual mysticism… rejects God… It makes me feel pressured… like loving God or the universe the way I do is wrong, close-minded, or naive." Locating a latent pressure in this crystal culture, Shadi speaks to how the emergence of this "pseudo-spiritual mysticism" discourages them from believing in God in ways that make sense to them. As a queer creative, she is aware of the pressures coming from this discursive form and explains how she feels caught in the middle, unable to be "religious," unable to be "Muslim." The salience of crystal culture is apparent in Shadi's experience, in that it too, comes to operate and enact a series of claims, authorized as natural, normal, and desirable, preventing her from connecting with God in ways she is familiar.

Similarly responding to this growing movement of spirituality, Bahman highlights how he has come to navigate the growing discourses of this spirituality movement. He says,

> Right now, I'm at a point where I'm discerning the bullshit spirituality versus like actual spirituality. Like I had a lot of friends who were into that spiritual nonsense, or whatever, but like, there's a boundary between everything being a … 'oh, this is a message from blah blah blah. I need to follow my heart. I need to do this'. All that kind of [stuff]. There's a boundary between that and living in the real world and navigating the real world.

Bahman's narrative shows that he too has experienced this growing spirituality movement, what he called 'crystal culture' for its utilization of crystals, herbs, and other spirituality-related objects. More importantly however, he draws a distinction between what he saw as "bullshit spirituality" and "actual spirituality" based on an ability to navigate with the "real world." As Mohammadi Doostdar describes in his work, Iranian public denunciations of divination "should be viewed as performances of rationality, in which opposing conceptions of superstition and reason are constructed, and their ideal social bearers constituted."[39] Bahman's articulation of bullshit spirituality versus actual

---

[39] Mohammadi Doostdar, "Fantasies of Reason," 47.

spirituality highlights the contours of reason, of viability, of possibility when it comes to his own spiritual/religious exploration.

What is intriguing is how many referred to this crystal culture phenomenon as "bullshit." Even those that participated and understood themselves as partaking in this belief system came to refer to it as 'bullshit' at some point. I believe this illustrates the existence of religious hierarchies, wherein spirituality and 'extreme' practices of spirituality are rendered 'too much,' 'unreal,' 'nonsense,' and therefore, at times, 'bullshit.' For example, when telling me of her experience drawing tarot cards with close friends, Parisa is quick to demean or invalidate her own spiritual pursuits. Parisa says, "I'm becoming more spiritual. I'm becoming a 'trust-the-universe-hippie-bullshit person.' I don't want to say bullshit, but yeah…" Locating her own spiritual processes within the discourse of crystal culture and even surmising its proximity to potential nonsense, Parisa says she is starting to feel something through this exploratory process. Again, this to me illustrates how spirituality, and specifically forms of spiritual practice which are not validated through normative religious institutions or theological prescriptions, are rendered invalid or insignificant, even by the practitioners themselves.

Furthermore, this highlights the ever present and ongoing cyclical claims to authority, whether in the terrain of religion or spirituality, always a contest of hierarchized validities. As Mohammadi Doostdar suggests, it is the recurring fear of "being duped into believing something to be supernatural when it is, in fact, the product of a charlatan's tricks or the hallucinations of a mind" that motivate the decisions to remain in the terrain of science, reason, rationality; anything "to be distinguished from the superstitions of the uneducated, the rural, and the gullible."[40]

---

[40] Mohammadi Doostdar, 10–11.

Sufistic Origins? Iranian Muslim Claims to (White?) Crystal Culture

Describing how "everyone these days is super into the zodiac and [how] we all have Co-Star," a popular phone application that gives detailed zodiac analysis based on an individual's birthplace/time, Sara tells me how she is "really a sucker for all that stuff." A definite participant in crystal culture, Sara tells me how she regularly buys, shares, and gifts crystals, performs tarot readings and zodiac analysis for herself and friends all the time. A central discursive fixture in some queer communities, zodiac, birth chart analysis, and/or referencing astrological signs as behavioral analysis have become instrumental to the formation of queer identity and community. Citing her experience with tarot cards as an important aspect of her spiritual processes, Sara says she "sees tarot as a kind of a meditative process… like that card will spark in your brain what you need to see." A comfortable self-identifying participant in crystal culture, with no apparent hesitation, Sara's conceptualization of how crystal culture is raced demonstrates her unique entry into its rituals.

Curious to see how her understanding of crystal culture engages with her racial, religious, and cultural identity, I asked Sara to explain how she understood the racial bases of queer crystal culture. Describing it as predominantly white, Sara says the whiteness which guides and articulates much of queer crystal culture is precisely what allows her to feel safe to draw from it. She says, "Honestly, that's what makes it easier for me… because I don't feel like I'm appropriating anything… [because] I don't care about appropriating white culture... and I'm just doing this cuz I like it." Locating this spiritual ideology in a solely white racial register, like Shadi, Sara finds that this allows her to feel no guilt for partaking in its prescriptive practices. Through understanding it as white, a consequence of the neoliberal commodification of spirituality Jain mentions, Sara feels safe to rely on these rituals as her own. The operative power of guilt, and the intensely racialized dimension of whether or not one has the ability to claim the religious experience of Islam or not, will be explored in the following chapter. Nonetheless, I find it important to highlight that Sara's

reading of crystal culture as white is what invites her to feel able to explore, engage, and partake in these spiritual rituals. Therefore, it is through this precise commodification of global cultural practices, a process which strips the 'too much' of culture, that facilitated Sara's relationship to these rituals as an act of non-cultural appropriation.

Ariana, however, located her understanding of crystal culture in a very different racial register. Saying that she became exposed to this spiritual pathway through a nonbinary Caribbean roommate, Ariana shares how her roommate's Black nonbinary identity wholly shaped her understanding. Describing her roommate, she says,

> They just felt like they were not on the same realm. They could tap into something that I did not have access to. … [They] have said that, [their nonbinary] identity… can be seen as closer to God or like having this access, from like past traditions in African tribes, considered just closer to and being able to kind of be that link.

Learning from her nonbinary Caribbean roommate, Ariana's formulation and understanding of crystal culture was built off of her roommate's spiritual rituals and practices, rendering it specifically Black, nonwhite. Emerging from a uniquely Black nonbinary perspective, her insight grasps a racial and gender nuance that many of my other friends had yet to explore – the sacred Black and Brown cultural histories of spiritual traditions, today co-opted by white exoticizing spiritualists in 'crystal culture.'

She went on to share how this roommate of hers would partake in many of these practices: tarot, oracle, reading the moon phases and more. Adding to her racial understanding of crystal culture, Ariana confirms that she has seen how whiteness absorbs these rituals and takes primary presence in the mainstream, saying "It is very white and I see that as well, and I have friends that symbolize that part of it. But it isn't *only*." Elaborating further, she adds, "It was really introduced to me from people that aren't necessarily white… So I don't… think of just white-privileged people. It's more complex for me than that." Ariana's assertion that it is not "only" white offers an important insight into how certain members of the second-generation are relating to a queer crystal

207

culture, depicted as such. Although she sees the viable centrality of whiteness in this spiritual

practice, Ariana is able to discern the ways in which communities of color and their practices largely

substantiate these practices crystal culture reappropriates as its own, new, modern production of

authentic spiritual enlightenment.

When I asked her to explain her own personal relationship to this crystal culture, Ariana

shared that she too has tarot cards, crystals, and crystal bracelets, and that she "welcomes" these

things into her life. Saying she is not as "well-versed" or as "disciplined" as others, she tells me how

she has a set of Rumi Oracle cards. The deck of cards, called "Rumi Oracle: An Invitation into the

Heart of the Divine," are produced by popular American spiritualist Alana Fairchild. As much as the

white appropriation of Persian poetics, Sufistic culture, and Muslim mysticism for profit vex me, I

entertain the consequences of this discursive interweb for my friend Ariana.

Engaging with these ideations, Ariana's description of how she understood her relationship

to her Rumi Oracle cards intrigues. She shares,

> I grew up going to family parties where there would be a psychic. I've had experiences where
> we would read Rumi and Hafez and interpret that as kind of like Oracle cards… It's a totally
> normal practice... It's always been a part of our family, so it feels *familiar*, like I feel more
> connected because of that.

Referring to the practice of *fal-e Hafez*, an "everyday oracular practice of using copies of Divan of

Hafez for divination," Ariana's family took part in this ancient Persian and Muslim[41] tradition.[42] To

take a *fal-e Hafez*, an omen of Hafez, is to ask or pose a question or predicament, flip open a Divan-e

Hafez (the most prominent collection of Hafez's poetry) and read the poem as a divine response.

The poem to which the book opens is said to be a response to the question asked, and is typically

---

[41] For a full analysis on how Ahmed comes to locate Hafez as a centerpiece of Muslim histories, intertwined with the Persian poets, see *What is Islam? The Importance of Being Islam* by Shahab Ahmed, 2016.

[42] Ahmed, *What Is Islam?*, 35.

interpreted by a psychic, poet, or lyricist who is well-versed and trained in the art of Persian poetry. A practice Ahmed describes as an "utter ubiquity," the act of opening the book of poems to a random page, reading the poem that emerges produces a "quotidian prophecy."[43]

Describing a lineage connecting *fal-e Hafez* to her modern-day Rumi Oracle cards, Ariana's connection shows how she understands this ancient cultural practice as a predecessor to today's crystal culture. This bridging together of ancient Persian Muslim tradition to modern consumptive queer crystal culture commodities demonstrates the interplay present for queer and trans Iranian American Muslims, how she is able to interweave the two through a history of Sufi origins to legitimize her practice with the Rumi Oracle cards.

Her comfort in using Rumi Oracle cards, and sharing that these cards, for her, exhibit the ways in which Sufism and Islam are and have transcendental, psychic, and highly spiritualized forms of connecting to the supernatural that predate this modern crystal culture, diverge from narratives which render crystal culture purely white. Whereas Sara and Shadi see crystal culture as inherently white, due to the successful co-optation and white-ification of these Black and Brown rituals, Ariana sees this crystal culture as a modern re-adaptation of ancient Sufistic practices. The explicit and intentional reference to Muslim history to locate this practice and validate her use of Rumi Oracle cards as a successor to ancient Muslim practices allows Ariana to, also, feel no guilt, dissonance, or inability to claim these practices as her own. What is noteworthy, then, is how queer crystal culture is racialized in various ways by my friends, as white and everything but white, in order to facilitate their entry into its practices, allowing them to claim them as their own.

---

[43] Ahmed, 35.

In our discussions of this crystal culture, some of my friends pointed out the ways it has come to foment its own religious edicts. Asking Ariana if she felt that the queer community utilizes this queer culture as specifically a religious experience, she responded, "Totally." Furthering this, Shadi also pointed out this important irony – crystal culture enacts a religious formula. She described,

> [this] edgy millennial culture… rejects any form of organized religion but also follows a weird, organized religion [itself]. It just is different… [where] if you believe in God, you're in a form of closed-mindedness… You have this millennial culture that's like 'send good vibes!' 'good energy!' And in a way that's prayer, but we don't say it's prayer. And I see this whole mystical culture that we've taken on as millennials [as] *very* religious but it's not the organized religion that we grew up in.

Appreciating the ways in which queer culture authorizes a particular relationship to the religious/spiritual dimension, I want to emphasize the way in which this secularized form of spirituality has become sacrosanct, within but also beyond the queer community as well. It is a decidedly anti-monotheistic formulation of the divine, which allows individuals to connect with, contact, and access the supernatural in specifically anti-religious terms. As Shadi highlights, it is a modern construction of spirituality that ultimately operates as somewhat of a religion, yet adamantly rejects and refuses religion as a sign of pre-modern antiquity. The racialized dimension of this crystal culture, as many illustrated, is also fundamental to understanding how and why it has become such a successful discursive current – there are now ample shops and stores designed purely for crystals, tarot cards, sage, spiritual candles, palo santo wood, and anything associated with this crystal culture spirituality.

What is of interest is how secularization is operating to render this form of connection with God more legitimate in the modern queer American religious/spiritual landscape.[44] As Mahmood outlined, secular culture authorizes a particular kind of subjectivity, therein hierarchizing varying forms of religious faith, belief, and practice. In this instance, we see how 'crystal culture' has become the queer hegemonic mode of accessing the supernatural, pitted directly against the 'too religious' religion of Islam or, in this case, any monotheistic faith. It has become normative and socially acceptable in queer communities to be spiritual and to practice and partake in these facets of crystal culture: tarot, zodiac, crystals, herbs, etc. while also feeling that to believe in a monotheistic God is far too limiting, violent, and most importantly, anti-queer and anti-trans.

Although I do not wish to designate this crystal culture a formal 'religion,' I can certainly appreciate the ways in which it functions, operates, and lays claim to religious experience similar to ways other theistic traditions might. By absorbing Black and Brown spiritual and cultural traditions as its precepts, crystal culture commodifies and perpetuates a spiritual experience which articulates the connections between whiteness, secularization, and queerness. I do not claim that only white people or white queers partake in crystal culture. Quite the contrary, as Ariana's experience demonstrates, many of those who practice these rituals were originally, and still are, individuals who come from cultural traditions who have held these rituals as sacred for hundreds if not thousands of years.

Many Black and brown queer and trans folks today partake in practices that have come to be understood under the umbrella of crystal culture. However, I wish to illustrate how a New Age, neoliberal commodification of spirituality, in tandem with secularizing processes, has made crystal culture a strong modality for queer communities desiring a supernatural connection. As such, how

---

[44] Important to note, still, that to reach too far into spirituality will get you into the realm of 'bullshit' and 'unreal' that is considered irredeemable or 'too far.' So, only a particular form of this spirituality is available as a legitimate source of connecting to God.

Iranian American queers come to navigate it in their own spiritual/religious process demonstrates the white, commodified forms of crystal culture, its perceived inadequacy and illegitimacy as a spiritual means and yet, a promising and important way that many use to connect to the supernatural.

In juxtaposition with the ways in which queer crystal culture is framed and understood by my friends, the next chapter will explore how Islam is imagined, understood, related to, and connected with. Combining a racial and religious analytic to observe the ways second-generation Iranian Americans comprehend their Muslim identities, I will explore how these individuals understand themselves as between not-Muslim and Muslim.

CHAPTER FOUR

Not *Really* Muslim: The Contours & Qualifications of Being a "Real" Muslim

Islam has become the discursive terrain upon which many make their claims to modernity, to religious authority, to prophetic tradition, and on and on. Influenced by centuries of colonialism, modern constructions of Islam are shaped by two decades of the ongoing War on Terror – the 9/11 attacks, the ensuing occupations and wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, military attacks in Pakistan, Syria, and Yemen, as well as the international coalitional wars against ISIS which extend far throughout the region. The colonial histories that have come to shape how we understand Islam in the modern period, in combination with the ongoing neo-imperial violence in the region, force us to reckon with what has come to be titled "Islamic fundamentalism."

Many labels have emerged throughout the years as scholars, clerics, politicians, and activists have sought to create a term which encapsulates their understandings of this sociopolitical force – Islamic revivalism, fundamentalism, Islamism, Salafism, Wahabism, or political Islam. Addressing the exact nuances and intricacies of variant strands of this sociopolitical movement is far beyond the scope of this work. I am not seeking to outline the vast and complex world of political Islam, rather to highlight specifically how ideas around what constitutes a 'real' Islam come to be, how these claims to truth are legitimized, and how these ideas shape individuals' relationship to faith. I use the term "political Islam," not because I find it without issue, but as a tactful linguistic vessel to demarcate what I understand this sociopolitical movement in the modern era – the ways in which individuals all across the globe have come to utilize any aspect of Islamic faith, iconography, or ritual as socially, politically, or religiously meaningful, likely in contestation of the ongoing effects of colonialism and U.S. empire.

As I will argue, the far-reaching success of political Islam has become so dominant that many of its self-constructed claims have become understood as truth for millions of people across

the globe – 'real' Muslims steadfastly follow all religious rules, only religious clerics in the Middle East know what 'true' Islam is, 'real' Islam emerges in the Middle East, orthodoxy is the only way to be a 'real' Muslim, etc. These claims have become universalizing, simultaneously erasing their own modern origins as well as the vast range of Muslim lived experience throughout history. The consequences are powerful in how they have shaped the ways people engage with ideas around Islam, making mainstream the idea that Islam is solely political Islamists declare it is, and more importantly, has always been this way.

In this chapter I will demonstrate that all second-generation Iranian Americans that I interviewed understood Islam in precisely these terms, relying on rhetoric and examples brought into being by a political Islam that mandates a sole proper way to be 'Muslim.' Validating its own legitimacy by claiming 'realness,' political Islam has become universal and universalizing in its claims of returning to the origins of Islam. Reaching back to the origins of the faith in order to justify and locate itself as 'real' and 'pure' combines with the ways in which political Islam simultaneously lays claim to being 'all' of Islam. This two-part construction, I argue, has severely compromised the ways in which Islam is understood, engaged with, and related to today. Every single one of my friends took these claims of political Islam as factual, true, and obvious. Not a single individual questioned or imagined that Islam as a faith could be anything but strict religious orthodoxy. Drawing from their experiences with Islam, their sources of Islam, and their identity formation in, around, and with Islam, I show how second-generation Iranian Americans are making sense of this hotly debated Muslim American identity and where they locate themselves within these debates.

The Formation of a Modern Islam: Colonial Anxieties Turned Law and Order

Before demonstrating the ways in which young Iranian Americans engage within this discursive terrain, I wish to demonstrate briefly what ideological currents lent to the birthing of

political Islam and how the colonial encounter with civilizational modernity undergirds its very inception. Hamid Dabashi explores this argument as the premise to his work in *Islamic Liberation Theology: Resisting the Empire*. He argues,

> The prevalent understanding of contemporary militant Islamism, whether generated by the US propaganda machinery or otherwise, continues to operate on an outdated epistemic assumption that we have inherited from the colonial phase of Muslim encounter with European modernity. … militant Islamism emerged from the early nineteenth century in response to European colonialism, gradually mutating a medieval faith into a solitary site of ideological resistance to colonial modernity.[1]

It is precisely this gradual mutation into a "solitary site of ideological resistance" which eloquently articulates the ways in which I understand questions of Islam in the modern period.[2] As Dabashi suggests, we continue to operate from the outdated epistemic assumption that Islam is nothing more than this solitary site of resistance, which in fact, drastically alters the ways individuals feel they relate to faith.

Shahab Ahmed highlights how this reduction of the totality of Islam into nothing more than a solitary site of resistance delegitimizes and undermines various avenues of religious belief, faith, and practice that are integral to conceptualizing Muslim history and modern Muslim practices. He argues,

> *What is new and modern*, then, is not the idea that the Pre-Text is unknowable save through the Text, but is rather the fact that this conceptualization of reality has, by force of the encounter with the Western modern, become the *dominant conceptualization of Islam in the Islamic modern*… This *re-calibration of the human relationship with reality* has led modern Muslims to the intellectual, practical and social *depreciation and invalidation of the authority and Truth-value of the practices and discourses of the Pre-Text* – philosophy and Sufism – and the concomitant *appreciation and validation of the authority and Truth-value of the practices and discourses of the Text* – law and creed.[3]

---

[1] Hamid Dabashi, *Islamic Liberation Theology: Resisting the Empire*, 1st edition (London; New York: Routledge, 2008), 2–3.

[2] Dabashi, 3.

[3] Ahmed, *What Is Islam?*, 517–18 (emphasis in original).

Ahmed asserts that this "depreciation and invalidation of the authority" of non-prescriptive, non-traditional, and non-authoritative means of engaging with Islam, what he calls "Pre-Text" has drastically altered how modern Muslims come to conceptualize Islam. As Ahmed suggests, this reconfiguration of Islam into solely that which validates authority, law and creed, requires the de-legitimation and invalidation of alternate theological registers of connecting to Islamic belief and practice, namely, in his examples, the philosophical and Sufistic. Locating this as a response to Western modernity, Ahmed shows that this adaptation in the face of a colonial encounter has, in fact, compromised our own means of understanding, relating to, and knowing the multiplicity of Islamic faith. As I wish to suggest, this sweeping pervasive conceptualization of Islam in the modern period has severely compromised mainstream notions of what is 'real' Muslim belief, for Muslims, non-Muslims, and those straddling the limbo in between.

In concluding his work, Ahmed goes on to argue how any discussion or debate of a modern Islam must grapple with this limiting conceptualization that was, in turn, inherited through the colonial encounter. He posits,

> To sum up, then, modernity has – or rather, Muslims in modernity have – re-constituted and recalibrated human and historical Islam by giving emphasis to Text over Pre-Text and Con-Text, and thus to law over other discourses of hermeneutical engagement with Revelation, to prescription over exploration… to literal thought over metaphorical and paradoxical thought. The considerable loss of the multidimensional spatiality of Revelation is increasingly the *leitmotif* of modern Islam.[4]

Emphasizing the loss that accompanies this deep restructuring of Islam, Ahmed articulates the ways in which Islam in the current period has become a rigid, narrow, and univocal doctrine based purely on Text.[5] Noting the role of modern Muslims in recalibrating Islam into this form, Ahmed demonstrates how modern political Islam privileges Islamic authority, orthodoxy, and jurisprudence

---

[4] Ahmed, 537 (emphasis in original).

[5] Text here refers to the Qur'an and the theological extrapolations that come from it.

as 'true' and 'pure' Islam, while devaluing alternative modes of connecting, exploring, or relating to the faith. What is of fundamental importance for me is this mention of loss, of what does not emerge and, rather, what is not allowed to emerge as a site of Muslim faith. As Ahmed's argument suggests, this loss is considerable, structurally disallowing conceptualizations of the multidimensional forms, patterns, practices, rituals, exercises, and beliefs that constitute Muslim life – and as I wish to suggest, the vast array of queer and trans Muslim practice that becomes unintelligible in that limiting formulation.

Illustrating the operative discursive power this claim to ancient origins makes, Minoo Moallem argues that political Islam, what she calls Islamic fundamentalism, is in fact, a very modern production. She points out that although "Islamic fundamentalism has been portrayed as belonging to an archaic and traditional world of Islam and Muslims... [it] is not premodern but rather a by-product of the process of modernization. As such it is in dialogue with modernity."[6] Interrogating the role of civilizational modernity as it engages with the very production of political Islam, and the discursive claims it can make, Moallem prompts a reconceptualization around its claim to antiquity and, thereby, authenticity. Remembering that political Islam, which has become the salient ideological register that Islam is understood in, emerges from a specifically contemporary formulation, requires an analysis of the interplay between political Islam and civilizational modernity. Political Islam and modernity are, in effect, constantly and mutually producing and reproducing their identities and boundaries against, off of, and through one another.

Tavkoli-Targhi demonstrates how, even as Iranians sought to ridicule their European counterparts, the colonial encounter solidified a worldview that centered on the European gaze. Tavakoli-Targhi argues,

---

[6] Moallem, *Between Warrior Brother and Veiled Sister*, 13.

By mocking Europe, counter-modernists sought to preserve the existing order and to subvert the political strategy of de-Islamicizing Iran. Both the modernist Europhilia and the counter-modernist Europhobia deployed Europe as a point of reference; both, however, were actively involved in creative construction of alternative body politics and vernacular modernities.[7]

As Tavakoli-Targhi suggests, even the counter-modernist ridiculing of Europe solidified a body politics, a national imaginary and, by extension, a religious disposition that responded primarily to the colonial European gaze. It is even in resistance to the European gaze that it continues to hold primacy as a site of reference, continually a point of comparison.

Furthermore, Shahab Ahmed points out how this specific reach back into 7th century Arabia to justify and qualify modern day Muslim mores and policies requires the erasure of hundreds of years of Muslim life and experience which challenges those said 'pure' Islamic beliefs. He writes, "The turn to the Prophet and Rashidun as the modular age is effectively an attempt to simplify Islam by de-historicizing it."[8] This modern political Islam therefore, is a process of de-historicizing Islam, circumventing the myriad ways in which Muslims have participated in contradictory, difficult, and complex hermeneutics for hundreds of years.

Building on Ahmed's assertion, Moallem argues that "cultural and nationalist Islamic claims have provided space for monolithic, masculinist narratives of an Islamic ummat that ignore the diversity and multiplicity of discourses and practices actually present in the Islamic world."[9] As she suggests, the sweeping claims made by authority figures in the Muslim world today belie the robust variations present within and across the vast array of Muslim experiences. The obsession with viewing Islamic authority, orthodoxy, and jurisprudence as representative of the entirety of Islam is, in fact, a very modern condition. It is through the colonial encounter that Islam, and its wide array

---

[7] Tavakoli-Targhi, *Refashioning Iran*, 73–74.

[8] Ahmed, *What Is Islam?*, 529.

[9] Moallem, *Between Warrior Brother and Veiled Sister*, 15.

of values, practices, and beliefs, came to be reduced to a particular discursive genealogy that privileges orthodoxical authority over all others. Through this reductive shift facilitated by modern political Islam, figures of Islamic authority take it upon themselves to readily police what qualifies as 'true' Islam and what does not, demarcating the boundaries of what constitutes 'real' Islamic practice.

Therefore, it should come as no surprise that all of my friends shared a general distaste for Islam and organized religion overall. Not a single individual called themselves "religious" and all of them hurriedly refuted it, supplanted it with "spirituality," or rejected it altogether. This is important because many still took on the label of Muslim as a political, racial, or cultural signifier but not as religious (or spiritual).

When I asked to hear what sorts of issues they took with Islam, many immediately responded with their detest for "organized religion." Prompting them even further, I wanted to know what exactly constituted their frustrations. Answering quite simply, Mina said, "the misogyny." Over half of my friends drew criticisms of the idea of a "man in the sky" who dictates a rule-based religious protocol, determining who enters heaven and hell. Although a full analysis of how God is understood by my friends is the focus of Chapter 6, I find it important to note here how their frustrations with the way God is depicted turns them entirely off from the faith. Again, because of the modern reformulation of Islam, these hypermasculine and patriarchal depictions of God are taken to be 'real.'

Though I appreciate the ways in which Islam undergoes shifts and recalibrations through the colonial encounter, it is not enough to simply refute those white supremacist articulations. Within those refutations resides an important conceptual consequence, one which pushes the contours of anti-Muslim racism, yet does not tend to how the modernist origins of political Islam have come to

"strip… away the myth, magic, and sacred."[10] Largely operating either within the epistemological registers of civilizational modernity, or in resistance to and yet still utilizing the frameworks of civilizational modernity, much critical scholarship on Muslims continues to separate out and ignore the meanings, values, and potentials of religion/spirituality in everyday life.

As Sally R. Munt argues, "queer spiritualities make a lot of people uncomfortable."[11] Extending that to a queer Muslim subject, I suggest that arguably the queer Muslim causes the most distress, seen as two identities which cannot coexist. Even more, the trans Muslim is likely to enrage, shock, and outrage. The mere existence of a queer or trans Muslim directly interrupts and challenges all of these stereotypical claims of a violent, ruthless, and homophobic/transphobic Islam. Therefore, it is the insistence on these various facets of identity, to be both queer and Muslim, trans and Muslim, which unearths the limitations of a bounded modern conceptualization of what Islam is; the queer/trans Muslim insisting on what else Islam is, has been, or can be.

'What I've Learned': My Sources of Islam

This reductive formulation of Islam, as purely fundamentalist, rigid, rule-oriented, and prescriptive, dictates a particular lived experience for Muslim Americans and their relationship to Islam. Championed by both mainstream American media, politicians, and news pundits, and Iranian American sensibilities as to what 'real' Islam is, this reductive modern political Islam greatly affects how Islam is learned about, discussed, and related to in the Iranian diaspora. Specifically, I am interested in the ways queer and trans Iranian Americans of the second-generation made sense of Islam from varying and openly contradictory messages. Linking together narrative experiences from

---

[10] Asad, *Formations of the Secular.*

[11] Munt, "Queer Spiritual Spaces," 19.

travels to Iranian *masjed*s, comments from an *Amoo*,[12] and rituals practiced by a grandmother, I show

how the second-generation took in these messages about Islam from the various sources available to

them and how that shapes the ways they relate to the faith.

"Islam Ruined Our Country!" How Islam Became Iran Became Evil Became Homophobic/Transphobic

I have already articulated the power of non-Islamiosity and how it has come to greatly shape

the Iranian American diasporic experience with Islam, seeking to disarticulate and distance 'Islam'

from an Iranian American identity as much as possible. Many of my friends saw instances of loud,

vicious anti-Islam commentary growing up, whether in their own homes or through a relative or

family friend. Again, not all Iranian Americans walk around shouting anti-Islamic commentary as

many of these iterations suggest, yet all of my friends were duly aware of this ideological current and

its popularity in diasporic discourse.

Sharing stories of how they had relatives who were "*super* anti-religious," many of my friends

were saturated in these ideas from childhood: Arabs invaded and colonized 'our' country with 'their'

religion; Islam is the reason Iran is so behind and Iranian women are oppressed; Muslims raped our

Zoroastrian ancestors; Islam is the sole cause for Iran being behind in the world; Islam is the reason

so many innocent people are tortured and killed across the Middle East; etc. As they shared these

messages, many would grow hot, angry, and emotional. Hearing these aggressive, passionate displays

of anti-Islamic fervor similar to what might emerge from the mouths of white supremacists, these

young Iranian Americans were thoroughly aware of the powerful emotional effect held by these

narratives. In short, these Iranian Americans were raised in a social environment which largely

assumes that "Islam ruined our country." In addition to these outright hostile messages about Islam

that many heard throughout their upbringing, I was interested to see how their experiences when

---

[12] *Amoo* is a paternal uncle.

221

they traveled to Iran shaped their experiences of what Islam is. Using examples brought up by my friends, I show how the construction of Islam as rigid and rule-based informed their understandings of what constitutes 'real' Islamic belief and practice, and how they took themselves to be outside of that tradition.

Many of my friends shared stories of traveling to Iran to visit relatives, see their ancestral homeland, and spend time with family. Most had been a handful of times throughout their lives, a common experience for many second-generation Iranian Americans. I offer these narratives because many understood Islam as emerging solely from Iran, something that happened in Iran, came from Iran, and was more potent in Iran. Seeing the rootedness of Islam in Iran speaks to a cultural authenticity that is seen to only emerge from specific geographic areas.

In her scholarship on Muslim American student-travelers to the Middle Eastern metropolises as a practice of studying religious tradition, Zareena Grewal explores the tropes of cultural authenticity and how it is perceived to emerge within various geographies. Grewal argues,

> The process of imbuing particular geographies with religious authority, of making a place an object of pious reflection and sentiment, is simultaneously a material and external process and an internal, imaginative one. Although the imagination is often thought of in highly individualized terms, we must also remember that relationships to places are not lived in solitary moments but most often in the company of others; the religious imagination is personally meaningful, but it is also a social formation that is shared and sustained by a collective.[13]

Conceptualizing it as simultaneously internal and external, both personal and collective, the process of ascribing particular geographies with religious authority, value, meaning, is a multidimensional project. I suggest that the Iranian American diaspora, both as individuals and as a collective, use material, external methods of understanding the Iranian nation as a site of 'Islam,' as well as their own personal, private experiences with what is understood as Islam in the geography of Iran. I was

---

[13] Grewal, *Islam Is a Foreign Country*, 54.

222

curious to see how they framed their understandings of Iran and Islam, and how they oriented themselves in this discursive topography of religious and cultural authenticities.

Nakisa tells me of her experiences in Iran as a 12-year-old, going to visit and spend time with her father's family in Tehran for a month. As she spoke of her family, she notified me that "they're originally from Qom," a known religious epicenter for the study of Iranian Shi'ism and that it was "a bit of a shock" to adjust to their religious practices. Nakisa shared a story of being instructed to wear the *roosari*[14] inside the house in the presence of any men, even cousins, which for her was incredibly unfamiliar. "It felt incestual that that's even a possibility," she said, demonstrating her personal discomfort with being forced to wear *hijab* inside the home.

After coming back to the United States, Nakisa says she became "worried that [her family in the U.S.] were bad Muslims," because they did not follow the Muslim protocols she had learned from her relatives in Iran and wondered if they "were going to hell." Speaking of her transition back to life in the U.S. after a month in Iran, she says "I was almost, in a way, brainwashed? Not brainwashed… My grandma had given me a different perspective." Given the intensity of her ideological transformation, Nakisa tells me how her mother angrily called her grandmother in Iran demanding to know what they had taught her child. As a result of this encounter, Nakisa described how she understood that that is simply how her family is in Iran and that is "just what happens there." This folding into one another, of Islam, of Islamic tradition and code, of Iran as the location within which Islam exists, of the way things "happen there," all demonstrate a robust, highly successful discursive and social project to make all of these synonymous. As my friends' experiences suggest, these claims were all assumed to be universally accepted truths.

---

[14] A *roosari* is a headscarf and Iranian state law mandates that women wear them while in public. As is socially customary, many do not wear *roosari*s while inside their own homes or with close relatives, although some do.

All Iranian Americans, specifically women, transmasculine individuals, nonbinary femmes, and trans men, know intimately the role of the headscarf and how women are required to wear one by law when outside of the house in Iran. Although my interviews did not center hijab, nor ask a single question regarding wearing it or the government mandate, many of my friends brought it up as a point of contention when describing their travels in Iran. This highlights how rhetoric attached to the hijab debate have become central political fixtures in the Iranian American discursive political terrain so that even when unmentioned, the hijab surfaces as the ultimate sign of oppression of women, always associated with Islam and its role as a violent faith. This is not to claim that women are not experiencing state violence in Iran, but to suggest that the specific reliance on and over production of the hijab debate is not only a hackneyed staple in anti-Muslim discourse and Iranian American discourse, but one that greatly shapes second-generation Iranian Americans' experiences with Islam. The hijab therefore, becomes the primary stand-in for understanding what Islam actually looks like.

This was noticeable because when I asked my friends if they had attended any mosques or shrines to explore their religious/spiritual journeys in Iran, most all said they had not. However, for the few that had even entered a mosque, their primary commentary was mentioning their frustration with the requirement to wear the longer body covering, the *chador*. Niloofar detailed how thoroughly "uncomfortable" she was in a *chador* from a trip over ten years ago and experienced no connection with the religious venue she was attending. For her, there seemed to be no connection spiritually or religiously in attending an Iranian *masjed*,[15] just a complaint of having to wear a *chador*.

When I asked Parisa if she had ever attended a mosque she said, "I don't really like those places." She tells of how her cousins wanted to take her to "some shrine by a bazaar," but how she had little to no interest in going. Referring to *Imamzadeh Saleh*, a famous turquoise domed shrine in

---

[15] A *masjed* is a mosque or Muslim place of worship.

the north of Tehran, Parisa told me how as she entered, all she was thinking to herself was "why are we here?" I don't care about this." She went on to add that she is "very rejecting" of what she considered a faith that is violent and oppressive. Describing how she views herself, she said "I'm definitely like an American girl in Iran when I go there… when I go there, I'm rejecting of the oppression stuff." Locating oppression as directly connected to Islam, and by association attending a Muslim shrine, Parisa's words elucidate exactly how for her, Islam means set, rigid, anti-woman values. Describing herself as "an American girl in Iran," she understands the distance she is able to put between herself and an Iranian/Islamic homeland as further consolidating her identity, not one of *those Muslims*.

What is noteworthy in Parisa's story is how Iranian Americans are using decidedly non-Islamious terms, very anti-Islamic sentiments, with which to view these sacred cultural and religious venues. I suggest that this framing of Islam as evil, backward, violent, and oppressive to women, again a phenomenon that is not unique to the diaspora, yet nonetheless severely compromises the ways Iranian Americans altogether engage with these historic sites. Unable, unwilling, or uninterested in exploring any alternative meaning in *Imamzadeh Saleh*, Parisa's insight shows how this intense negative framing of Islam prevents her from seeing, experiencing, learning, or enjoying any other aspects of the venue – "a considerable loss," as Ahmed may understand it.[16]

This lack of interest in exploring Islam and anything associated with it, prevents Parisa from experiencing not only the architectural masterpiece of *Imamzadeh Saleh*, but the potentials, the possibilities in exploring the communality in the women's section, the ancestral rituals on display, the political conversations and social disputes that may transpire, etc. Arguably, her lack of interest also prevents her from finding any spiritual/religious/transcendental meaning in this visit to a sacred holy shrine endowed with cultural meaning. This is not to suggest that these mosques or *Imamzadeh*s

---

[16] Ahmed, *What Is Islam?*, 537.

are solely sites of religious bliss and seamless collectivity, but to emphasize how non-Islamiosity

creates the dynamic whereby any exploration into spiritual, religious, social, and/or cultural meaning

is forgone. It is this loss, this disinterest, this emotional distancing between the Iranian American

and Islam that prevents any potential for a connection, an understanding.

Trans in Hijab: "Don't Make People Second Guess You"

In addition to the cis women who shared their experiences with hijab, trans experiences in

Iran add another dimension of complexity, inviting an analysis which not only attends to the

obsession with hijab, but how that affects trans/gender non-conforming bodies. Shahpour, a

transman, tells me of his experience being in Iran prior to medical and social transition and how he

navigated the requirement to wear hijab. He said, "being in Iran, because I was still identifying as

female, it sucked because I just… couldn't get behind wearing a hijab, being forced to wear a hijab

and getting stopped by the diplomatic police, being like "*Hijabeto sar kon*![17] … it's scary!" He went on

to share how he had issues with being forced to wear hyperfeminine clothes but did so out of

concern for his own safety.

Operating in Iran as a trans person, prior to transition, still comes with a host of social

entanglements around gender, sexuality, clothing, body politics, familial reputation, etc. Mentioning

he was somewhat gender conscious during his last trip to Iran, Shahpour's experience with Islamic

clothing and covering elucidate the multidimensionality of his social identity. He added,

> when I was going out like I tried to still dress as androgynous as I could, to whatever
> extent… like wearing bigger *manteau*s.[18] I always … wore a black hijab, a lot of black
> basically… I took my Vans with me. My parents would always be like 'you should wear heels
> or flats' and it was always like that 'Wear earrings! Wear nail polish!'

---

[17] This translates to "Pull up your headscarf!" in a forceful tone. This is speaking to when the headscarf may slip down the back of the head, either through the movements of daily life or what has become a recent trend in Iranian circles as a point of resistance and defiance against the state law. So, Iranian Morality Police officials walk around telling women to pull up their headscarves.

[18] A *manteau* is an article of clothing, a longer overcoat style garment, which women wear to cover their bodies in public.

Advised to dress in binary feminine ways, Shahpour's dress was policed to produce a cis-hetero normative body which would not attract attention. Asking about his hair, I wondered how that affected his overall gendered experience. He told me at the time it was short, to just beneath the ears. "I looked hella dykey honestly so like when I went out, I had to wear makeup." He said his mother repeatedly told him he should wear make-up, "don't make people second guess you," she would tell him.

His trans identity made him more vulnerable to gender policing, both socially and legally, as his attire rendered him more visibly gender non-conforming. Negotiating various elements, his mother's social/cultural desires for his gender normative appearance as a woman, the Iranian state's legal requirements, family and friend's commentaries, strangers' commentaries/observations, and his own gender identity and expression, Shahpour's clothing is no simple discussion.

In fact, his experience in Iran prior to transitioning demonstrates how reducing conversations about hijab to purely cis women is, first and foremost, an erasure of the various bodies that experience hijab policing – trans men, gender non-conforming women, and nonbinary/genderqueer people. Furthermore, seeing hijab as the epitome of Islamic gender violence belies the alternative facets of trans experience that are not highlighted through uniquely cis registers.[19] Nonetheless, I was interested in how Shahpour came to understand his relationship to Islam, given the terrain of anti-trans gender policing he encountered while in Iran.

Challenging Reductions: Iran as More, as Potential

In order to reach a conceptual terrain in which I can articulate queer and trans engagements with Islam, I find it important to decipher the ways that queerness, transness and gender non-

---

[19] Also, to see hijab as the sole or primary identifier of Islamic life betrays the full, rich, and vast terrain of what else is occurring for individuals within faith.

conformity reconfigure the ways Iranian Americans can engage with Iran, their ancestral homeland. I argue that as a consequence of Iranian non-Islamiosity and American anti-Muslim racisms, Iran and the population of Iran, is understood by Iranian Americans as the site of 'pure' and 'rigid' Islam and that since Islam is depicted as solely homophobic and transphobic, Iran too, is understood as exactly that. Similar to how Parisa understood her visit to *Imamzadeh Saleh* above, it is as if there is no meaning, no value, no desire to explore because scripts about Islam fix Iran as a place of pure religious violence and nothing else.

This reduction of Iran to a space, a country, an entire population of people that are homophobic and transphobic and only that, has greatly molded the ways second-generation Iranian Americans relate to both Iran and people in Iran. Drawing from our parents' non-Islamious articulations, the second-generation has come to operate through the ideological terrain they provided for us – everyone and everything in Iran is anti-gay, anti-queer, and by association anti-trans, because of Islam.

Fear of social, political, and legal violence for a queer and/or trans body in Iran is legitimate, and I do not wish to undermine that. I, as a queer and trans Iranian American, understand these fears intimately. However, I argue that the sweeping disavowal of Islam makes it impossible to see an Iranian queerness or transness, let alone support, communities, allies, or other manifestations of queer and trans life in Iran. It strategically, and conveniently for homonationalist US discourses, disallows any connection, possibility, or relationship of queer/trans Iranian life to emerge. Because of the subscription to the idea that all of Iran is Islam and all of Islam is homophobic and transphobic, I argue that queer and trans Iranian Americans do not share, experience, explore, discuss, or articulate their queer or trans lives in Iran or to Iranian people *whatsoever*. This is not to romanticize that there would be universal acceptance of queer or trans life, but to simply point out

how reductive readings of Islam attached to reductive readings of Iran prohibit Iranian Americans from any potentiality of seeing, being, and experiencing affirmations of queer/trans life in Iran.

This reductive associative force (Iran-Islam-homophobic/transphobic) thereby prevents Iranian Americans from being able to experience anything other than homophobia or transphobia while in Iran and with Iranians. This self-reconfiguration that queer and trans Iranian Americans undergo as they board planes, wear gender normative clothes, and sever any visible demarcation of queerness or transness is an important and complex process which ultimately produces what appear to be cisgender heterosexual Iranian subjects. This refashioning of the self, although born in response to realistic possibilities of state and social violence, leaves little room for queer and trans Iranian Americans to find any indication of acceptance or affirmation for their non-normative bodies/lives. Again, this is not to suggest that one needs to romp around Iran in visibly gender non-conforming clothing or to shout one's queerness from the rooftops. Rather, what I am suggesting is that this reconfiguration to prepare for what is assumed to be a purely homophobic and transphobic state, with a solely homophobic and transphobic populace, produces exactly that. It allows no room to see or experience otherwise. If we only operate through this sweeping fear, as valid and legitimate and understandable as it may be, we do not allow ourselves to experience any indication of queer or trans affirmation, curiosity, affection, or camaraderie.

For me, what is significant about this is primarily what is lost. Similar to Ahmed's argument, there is a "considerable loss" that accompanies these modern iterations of Islam. Conceptualized in such terms, this reductivity interrupts the very potential for other outcomes and that, too, is a major loss. The understanding of Islam as solely homophobic/transphobic has become so potent that we, even as individuals from the nation and the faith ancestrally, have lost our own capacity to see *any* possible alternatives.

I remember this myself as a young, gender non-conforming woman aboard the city buses in Tehran. Far prior to my own transition, I sat in the women's section of the bus wearing my hijab, quietly fulfilling my binary gender roles to avoid all the violence I had heard comes down against queers in Iran. Out of the corner of my eye I saw what appeared to be two trans women sitting huddled next to each other on the bus in the women's section. I was shocked. I was utterly unprepared. I had never, ever even dreamed that trans people existed, let alone in Iran, let alone here on my very bus. And in that moment, I started to ask: if they were trans, why were they allowed to be out? Why weren't women attacking them? Why hadn't they been killed by family or friends who were 'dishonored'?

I will never know those two women, nor what their life stories were. What I do know is that it prompted in me a new series of questions: Can queer and trans people exist in Iran? If so, what are their livelihoods like? Do they have friends and family that disown them and break their hearts? Do they have friends and family that take them in, support them, and house them until they are better? Do trans people struggle with whether or not to take hormones and how to navigate the bureaucracies of the state? Do queer and trans people also fight for social change to better their life chances and access to resources? It all became quite obvious then – we have far more in common than our governments want us to believe.

The hermetically sealed notion of what Iran is due to prefixed notions of Islamic orthodoxy limits so much, closes off so much, disallows so much. Cyrus, a queer transman, tells me he has never been to Iran. When I ask him why not, he tells me flatly, "I'd die if I go there." Explaining how his parents have never let him go for fear of his safety as a transman, Cyrus's narrative embodies the exact ways in which queer and trans bodies are universally understood as targets of Islamic fundamentalist violence. This is not to suggest that queer and trans people do not experience violence at the hands of political Islamists, their policies, laws, and social mores. There is abundant

evidence of this and I do not wish to claim such an inaccurate point. However, I am interested in the ways in which Islam, and specifically Islam, is framed as the accepted, obvious villain to a queer and trans body, even within Muslim communities themselves. The posturing of these two as diametric opposites lends to formations of homonationalism, transnormativity, and the accompanying neoimperialism of U.S. Empire. Comments like Cyrus' become prized possessions in the terrain of geopolitical warfare and its accompanying discursive disputes, wherein the U.S. state apparatuses work to tokenize and exploit queer and trans narratives of specific countries, in this case Iran, which come to justify and validate warmongering, war justifications, and ultimately, occupations of Middle Eastern countries.

Trans in Iran: The Nuts and Bolts of a Legal Identity

As mentioned in the initial chapter, being trans is legally permissible in Iran making it more difficult for the diaspora to stake its claims to modernity and secular advancement through support for trans Iranians. Shakhsari argues that the diasporic opening up of national imaginaries to include the queer subject allows the diaspora to depict itself as the democratic, free, modern future that Iran needs – not Muslim and not an Islamic Republic.[20] Therefore, the legality of transness in Iran is an important contention in diasporic claims, interrupting the convenient linearity of Iranian non-Islamiosity and American anti-Muslim racism.

It must be mentioned that while being trans is legally permissible in Iran, with many trans individuals undergoing gender affirmation surgeries, some of which are funded directly by the state itself, gender and/or sexual deviancy is still grounds for social, political, and/or physical violence. This distinction is important for it demonstrates that the materiality of transness in Iran is not a

---

[20] Shakhsari, "From Homoerotics of Exile to Homopolitics of Diaspora."

simple, romantic, seamless state-approved and easily funded transition.[21] As much as a resistive approach to the diasporic claims to modernity may be to simply point to the legality of trans life in Iran under the Islamic Republic, that too serves as a convenient romanticization of individuals' lives for public debate. Similar to how the queer diasporic Iranian is swallowed up as a token of political performance, the figure of the trans Iranian becomes likewise vulnerable to political co-optation for those who may wish to undo notions that the Islamic Republic is 'backwards.'

Nonetheless, what I wish to highlight are the ways in which second-generation experiences in Iran informed their understanding of Islam. Iran was seen as hyper-religious, unfree, rigid, restrictive, full of rules, and oppressive to women and queer/trans bodies, synonymous with how Islam came to be understood. Although many expressed it in the ways they hated wearing hijab and *chador*, the overall sights, sounds, and messages they had received in Iran shaped their formulation of the Islamic faith and its practices. Through the ways they understood their distance to Islam, almost all of my friends came to understand themselves as 'not really Muslim.'

'The Things that the Women Taught Me Felt Safe:' How Our Mothers Made Islam

Given the preponderance of non-Islamiosity in the diasporic experience, many of my friends pointed to the highly gendered consequence of how it unfolded in their daily lives. As I have already suggested, a fundamental consequence of the gendered performativity of non-Islamiosity is that primarily Iranian American men attack Islam while Iranian American women become the quiet carriers of Muslim values, traditions, and teachings for the younger generations. As Nima shared, his father was "*very* anti-Islam," but his mother was "a bit different. She was very spiritual and had a lot of faith." As I asked my friends how they felt their parents understood Islam, many differentiated

---

[21] Afsaneh Najmabadi, *Professing Selves: Transsexuality and Same-Sex Desire in Contemporary Iran* (Duke University Press, 2014).

232

between their mothers and fathers with almost all following this general trajectory – fathers as non-Islamious, mothers as more privately spiritual and respectful of the faith.

An experience common for many Iranian Americans, I suggest that this gendered response to non-Islamiosity makes it so that Iranian American women are the ones who enact tradition, passing down the faith, its values, and practices. In a highly gendered move, some Iranian American women have come to protect their relationship with Islam (whatever form that be) and their desire to ensure its survival by quietly, subtly, and privately sharing important rituals with their children, outside of the gaze of non-Islamious family and friends. This gendered theme has made it so that mothers, *ameh*s, *khaleh*s,[22] and grandmothers carry and pass down elements of Islamic teaching: these come to constitute the second-generations' primary sources of Islam. This is not to suggest that Iranian American men cannot be religious, teach their children religious values, or that Iranian American women cannot be non-Islamious, as many are and do.[23] This is simply to demonstrate the highly gendered dimension emerging in response to the particular racialized violence Iranian Americans have undergone as a consequence of the Revolution and Hostage Crisis, and how that has shaped different pathways for Iranian Americans of various genders' abilities to relate to Islam.

I wish to provide several examples from my friends of what mothers, aunts, and other women relatives have done to transmit messages about what constitutes Islam by teaching it to the younger generation in these intimate forms. Raised by a very "spiritual Muslim" mother, Azar recounts her fondness for Islam, sharing narratives of her mother's openness and deep reverence for God as indications of Islam's beauty. Describing her mother's Muslim values as central to her own understanding of what Islam is, she says, "I see a lot more love and pureness [in] Muslims than other

---

[22] *Ameh* is a paternal aunt, *khaleh* a maternal aunt.

[23] Nor does this account for how trans/gender non-conforming bodies respond and engage with non-Islamiosity, but that is hopefully made clear through the entirety of this work's anecdotes.

people, and I feel that Muslims are very inclusive." Regularly telling her to speak with God, her

mother tells her, "*ba Khoda harf bezan. Harchi mikhai besh begoo.*"[24] Azar says how seeing her mother

invite her graciously into this spiritual practice with her calm demeanor has influenced her desire to

be more connected to God herself. Offering her a comfortable and open avenue to access God,

Azar's mother has made it possible, and pleasurable, for her daughter to adopt and engage with

God. In contrast, Azar describes her father as nonreligious, "strict" and "not chill," and not a source

of Islamic value, teaching, or guidance.

Nasrin tells me of how when she was a young girl, she used to watch her grandmother pray

and how that made her want to pray with her. A common phenomenon many of my friends brought

up is watching an elder, specifically elder women, pray in the home. While they pray, the young

children are either instructed to observe, happen to observe, or specifically taught the motions of

Muslim prostration. Mina tells of how they were raised regularly seeing their grandmother pray.

They say,

> I remember seeing her pray and she would sometimes invite me to do the daily prayers with
> her. I had no idea what was going on. I didn't know what she was saying. I saw her doing
> these movements. And I would just be in the space with her and I would try to mimic or
> follow, but I didn't really have any idea what it meant.

Although speaking to the general lack of knowledge of Muslim prostration, Mina's anecdote

highlights the processes by which young queer and trans Iranian Americans came to see, interpret,

digest, and internalize Muslimness – primarily through the elder women in their families.

Telling more stories of grandmothers, Nasrin identifies her maternal grandmother as an

important site of her learning about Islam. Nasrin's experiences of hearing her grandmother's stories

motivated her decision to want to take part in a primary Muslim ritual, the *Hajj.*[25] When I asked her

---

[24] Translates to "Talk with God. Tell God whatever you want."

[25] *Hajj* is an annual Muslim pilgrimage to the holy city of Mecca. It is considered a religious duty for all able-bodied and financially capable Muslims to be carried out at least once in their lifetimes.

what her interest was in partaking in this specific Muslim ritual, one in which very few Iranian Americans seem interested in, she said "because I would hear my grandma's stories about it." She added that, based on her grandmother's stories, she "always thought of it as a magical place." Characterizing the *Hajj* ritual as a magical place, Nasrin's grandmother enables the facilitation of Muslim values, rituals, and beliefs to her grandchild. I argue that it is through this feminization of transmitting Muslim beliefs and practice that second-generation Iranian Americans come to know Islam, as something other than the violent barbarity that anti-Muslim racists and non-Islamious Iranians declare it is.

Parisa also tells me of her trips to Iran and how her time with her "religious" aunt and grandma informed her understandings of Islam. Bringing up her grandmother, she shares how she would watch her flip through *tasbih* and how she "didn't know if that was an Islam thing, or a Persian thing." Nonetheless, Parisa said, "I remember thinking it was cool and thinking, 'I want to do [that] too.'" Parisa's stories highlight an interesting genealogy in Iranian American diasporic experiences with Islam. As the child of a highly anti-Islam father, Parisa learned lessons about what Islam was from her aunt and grandmother in Iran – finding some meaning and value in these common Muslim rituals even though her father's beliefs were ardently anti-Muslim.

One of my friends, one of only two who had attended Muslim schooling in the U.S.,[26] shared how she made sense of Islam, gender, and faith through the women who taught her in *deeni* school. Shadi tells me how she attended a cultural school with classes on *deeni* (religion) and Farsi language for around six years and juxtaposes it with her experiences in the adjacent mosque. Greatly shaping their relationship to Iranian and Muslim identity, Shadi's narrative shows how their gender analysis affected what and how they learned about Islam. Making a distinction between the classroom, where

---

[26] A fairly rare occurrence, because of the potency of non-Islamiosity, many parents do not send their children to *deeni* school. However, there are still a few that do, represented by two of my friends' experiences.

all the educators were women, and the *masjed*, where all the processions were led by men, Shadi

learned the faith through a highly gendered dynamic.

Speaking of her *deeni* class, she says "I loved my *deeni* class… they taught about [an] Islam

that was peaceful." Sharing fond memories of all the children who would gather and learn about the

oneness of God, Shadi enjoyed their education in *deeni* school. In contrast, they shared how their

time in the mosque really shifted the way they understood Islam. She says,

> The mosque was a little bit aggressive… The aggression there was a little scary. It started
> pulling me away that women would sit in the back of the mosque and men in the front. I
> didn't like that they were so strict about taking our shoes off… or that people would sob for
> something I didn't understand… It was so opposite from the cultural school.

Citing the direct authority of men in the mosque, the seating of women behind the men, among

other experiences, Shadi's story shows how the hypermasculinity of Islamic authority drastically

altered what they understood Islam to be.

Drawing a direct comparison between the two worlds, they share how they cherish the

"flexibility" and "the feminine energy" that was present in "the way they introduced the religious

topics" in the classroom. "The part that scared me a lot was the masculine presence of the mosque

and the men sitting in the front." She said seeing women being forced to sit in the back and feeling

herself as a second-class citizen "really fucked with the religion that I love." In comparison, they

recall the faith their educators taught them, "that means magic to me, … the things that the women

taught me. That felt safe."

Although Shadi's story differs in that the men she was exposed to were not rampantly non-

Islamious, but rather embodying what is taken as normative orthodox Islamic practice, I find her

experience informative for demonstrating the ways in which Iranian American women carry and

transfer faith to the younger generations. They were able to connect, find meaning, and value in the

parts of Islam that were taught to them through the safety of a feminized space, whereas they found

the patriarchal gendered positioning of the mosque to be "scary." I find this hugely important, in

that these memories, these moments, these experiences constitute the very fibers of what second-generation Iranian Americans come to think of when they think of Islam. Shadi's experience is different in that it relies on normative Muslim masculinities as opposed to non-Islamious Iranian American masculinities, but, in turn, the end result is the same – the articulation of Islam by the women in our lives seems to be what gets remembered, what gets cherished.

In Between Kanye and MSA: 'Not Really Muslim' Defined

It should come as no surprise then, after decades of reconfiguring Islam, through reducing it to a particular obsession with orthodoxy and prescription, that all of my friends understood the faith to be a rigid set of archaic rules that one is required to punctually follow in order to call oneself a 'real' Muslim. Upon asking each friend if they identified as a Muslim, all of them responded with various labels and identity markers encapsulating the same central theme: I'm Muslim, but not *really* Muslim. They understood themselves to be Muslim in some capacity, but not *really* Muslim as in observing all of the rules of the faith. The overwhelming majority of my friends felt comfortable identifying themselves as Muslim specifically in direct juxtaposition against white bodies and/or Christianity, but not as *actually* Muslim, as in "actual practicing Muslims."

Using their experiences and anecdotes, I will demonstrate how the label Muslim has come to carry particular meanings, namely the subscription to Islamic codes, rules, and rituals in a flawless and routine manner, which none of my friends felt they fully followed. Therefore, they only felt comfortable identifying as Muslim in contradistinction to white people and/or Christianity, primarily as a racial demarcation and not a religious identifier. This racialized religious configuration demonstrates how Islam has been saturated with particular meanings, meanings which my friends understood and deployed when racially necessary. Through the following anecdotes, I will highlight how they locate themselves between whiteness and 'proper Islam,' as an amalgam of "cultural

237

Muslims" "spiritual Muslims" "not real Muslims" and the like, in order to make sense of their racial/religious identities.

A central crux of this racial formation conceptualizes religion as particularly rigid, totalizing, and uncompromising. Following this line of thinking, all of my friends understood 'religion' in such terms, and many preferred the language of spirituality instead. When asked if he takes himself to be religious, Shahpour offered me his definition of religion. He said, "I associate religion with … following a set curriculum. I don't know if curriculum is the right word, but like going to prayer every Friday, and making sure you always do Ramadan every time and making sure you're following all the rules… and I feel like spiritual is a little more free-flow." Opting for spiritual instead of religious as a term to describe his own practices, Shahpour demonstrates how to be 'religious' requires following a strict set of religious rituals and practices, whereas spirituality is more open, less rigid, and flexible.

As Fedele and Knibbe argue in the introduction to *Secular Societies, Spiritual Selves? The Gender Triangle of Religion, Secularity, and Spirituality*, the contours of spirituality are deployed to differentiate the self-declared spiritualist against notions of religious dogmatism. They argue how,

> spiritual practitioners produce a stereotyped idea of 'religion' that may not always be an accurate reflection of 'lived religion,' but does important work in shaping people's idea of what they want to develop under the umbrella term 'spirituality,' even when it is in some cases very similar to what people who call themselves religious may be striving for.[27]

Drawing from this formulation, I too suggest that those who sought to articulate themselves as spiritual and nonreligious did so in such terms, against stereotyped ideas of what constitutes religion, based off of Islamic associations with orthodoxy, prescriptive practices, and law and order. Nonetheless, clearly for my friends the language of spirituality felt safer, easier, and more accessible.

---

[27] Anna Fedele and Kim E. Knibbe, *Secular Societies, Spiritual Selves?: The Gendered Triangle of Religion, Secularity and Spirituality*, Gendering the Study of Religion in the Social Sciences (Milton: Taylor and Francis, 2020), 2, https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429456923.

I went on to ask him if he identifies as a Muslim and he mentioned that he does not really feel comfortable with that label. Elaborating, he says, "I don't feel comfortable enough identifying as a Muslim because I don't follow all the rules, like I eat pork. I drink alcohol. I pick and choose when or what years I'll do Ramadan. I don't do *namaz-jome*.[28] I don't do any of the routine stuff, but I still believe in a higher being whether that be God or something." Locating his inability to subscribe to Islam in his self-selection of practices, Shahpour's perception of Islam as a rigid totalizing doctrine of faith demonstrates why he finds himself 'not really Muslim.' Seeing himself as outside of what qualifies as a proper Muslim subject, Shahpour frames himself as somewhere outside of Muslimness although, as I show below, understanding himself squarely within it if the circumstances warrant.

He goes on to mention that he does call himself a Muslim, "if a Mormon comes up and tries to get [him] to go to church or convert [him]." He says he feels more comfortable identifying as Muslim "in those situations." The operative power of race, in this particular encounter, demonstrates how Shahpour understands Islam as non-white, and therefore a pool of meanings, values, and signifiers which he is closer to than his white counterpart and can draw from when socially or politically necessary, in this instance to thwart a proselytizing Mormon. This racial pivot, identifying with Islam as a direct rejection of whiteness and Christianity, or more specifically, to insist on not being invited into the folds of Mormonism, shows how Iranian Americans are able to move into and utilize the language of Islam when they see it as politically useful.

Similarly, Azar shares how she does not think of herself as religious because she too understands religiosity to require a strict adherence to rules. She says,

> I don't think I'm religious because I don't spend a majority of my time in the day or week practicing or praying… I think I'm a very spiritual person… I don't read the Qur'an. I don't go to mosque. I don't pray daily. Sometimes during *Ma Ramezoon*[29] I'll try to fast, but it's not always guaranteed because I tend to prioritize school and work over religious practices.

---

[28] *Namaz-Jome* translates to Friday prayer, which is the day Muslims gather for a communal prayer in mosque.

[29] *Ma Ramezoon* is the more common way, the Farsi way, Iranians refer to the month of Ramadan.

Also understanding religion in totalizing terms, Azar shares how she too feels more comfortable within the label of spirituality to describe her transcendental experiences. Religion, for her, requires following a set of prescribed actions, which she does not do.

Nancy Ammerman's work, "Spiritual But Not Religious? Beyond Binary Choices in the Study of Religion," showcases the precarity, constant flux, and transient nature of the boundaries of these terms. She concludes,

> The 'religion' being rejected turns out to be quite unlike the religion being practiced and described by those affiliated with religious institutions. Likewise, the 'spirituality' being endorsed as an alternative is at least as widely practiced by those same religious people as it is by the people drawing a moral boundary against them.[30]

Her assertion encourages a reflective analysis on the meaning of these terms and how their meaning emerges within the specific contextual arena of an individual's life. As I extrapolate the ways my friends understand their faith, I respect the fluidity of these terms, their meanings, and their functions. Instead of using a binary analytic of secular v. religious, or spiritual v. religious, I understand the continual negotiation that weaves throughout this discursive terrain. What is always of most significance to me is how they find meaning, what they find valuable, what they cherish as a part of their supernatural connections.

In describing her relationship to the label Islam, Azar tells me that she does identify as Muslim, but feels uncertain about it. She says, "I sometimes hesitate to call myself Muslim because I feel like I don't practice as much as like other Muslims that are like very faithful to the religion, like wear a hijab and don't drink alcohol, don't do drugs, and premarital sex and all that stuff. And that's where the hesitation lies." However, when I asked her to share how she feels about identifying as Muslim, she spoke of how given the Trump presidency and rise in white supremacist politics, she is

---

[30] Nancy T. Ammerman, "Spiritual But Not Religious? Beyond Binary Choices in the Study of Religion," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 52, no. 2 (2013): 275, https://doi.org/10.1111/jssr.12024.

"more proud *[sic]* than ever" to identify as Muslim, particularly in the face of such hostile

manifestations of whiteness.[31]

When speaking to Bahman about whether or not he identified as a Muslim, he mentioned

that he felt like a cultural Muslim instead of an "actual" Muslim. He said,

> I feel like more so *culturally* than actually *religiously*. If that makes sense? I feel like I am
> Muslim in comparison to people that are Christian you know, but I'm not like *actually*
> Muslim compared to people that are *actually* Muslim. Like I don't pray five times a day. I
> don't fast during Ramadan. I don't … do any of that kind of stuff. But I feel like my
> background is still Muslim; versus people here in America that are Christian and have a
> church kind of background. My background is Islam.

Locating himself between Christians and 'actual Muslims,' Bahman's articulation demonstrates how

he positions himself between two racialized religious poles. When I asked him to offer me examples

of what these two poles were for him, Bahman shared the following:

> I feel like I'm usually the one Muslim or Middle Eastern person in a group of a bunch of
> Christians, so sometimes I'll make jokes about that. For example, we went to Coachella a
> couple weeks ago and Kanye was having his Sunday Service and the whole time I was
> cracking jokes like [in an exaggerated southern accent] 'Oh! Y'all Christians wanna go to
> Kanye's service, Huh?!' …That's not for *me*. I don't know what *that* is. So it's like in
> comparison. But then, for example if I'm walking on campus and I run into people from
> MSA, the Muslim Student Association, and they're all in their hijabs then I don't feel like I'm
> Muslim, you know? I just feel like I'm distantly Muslim.

To which I replied, "So in between Kanye and MSA?" He shouted, "Yeah! Exactly!"

Bahman's anecdote provides insight into exactly how Iranian Americans formulate their

racial and religious identities in direct juxtaposition with certain markers, whiteness and/or

Christianity v. visibly practicing Muslims. This spectrum of racial-religious identity marking, if we are

to call it such, demonstrates how my friends understand themselves as somewhere in the middle of

these two poles.

---

[31] Towards the end of the chapter, I will highlight how Trump and the Muslim Ban have significantly altered the ways in which second-generation Iranian Americans relate to and identify with Islam.

Echoing this sentiment, Golnaz shared how she too finds herself in between these two racialized poles. She made a distinction between what she understood as 'social spaces,' places where she could identify fully as herself and not be on guard about her racialization versus 'political spaces,' venues where she felt the need to defend herself racially and religiously. When I asked if she identifies as a Muslim, she immediately responded in the negative, pointing to her peers who she feels practice Islam more diligently. She shares,

> I don't feel like I have a right to say that [I'm Muslim]. I was never raised in the way that my Syrian friend who truly [practices does]. She does identify and she practices. She prays all the time. She has a different connection with the religion. I was raised in a different way…. But in political spaces, when I'm around people who like want to pigeonhole me, I'm like 'No!'

When I asked her to clarify what kinds of people populated these political spaces she was speaking of, she said when "I'm around a bunch of Christian folks, a bunch of white people."

Similarly, Niloofar speaks to her own hesitations with identifying as Muslim because of how she understands both religion and Islam in particularly prescriptive ways. She states, "I wouldn't consider myself religious because I don't do the prayers and the fasting… [so] I'd say no I'm not religious." When I asked her how she felt about identifying as Muslim she responded with the same sentiment as the others, saying,

> I feel like I shouldn't claim it because I don't wear the hijab and I'm queer and… I show my arms and legs and stuff. A part of me is [hesitant]. … Again, it's who I talk to. If I talk to someone who's also Muslim, I'll be like 'No, No. I'm not really religious,' but maybe if I'm talking to a white person or a Christian person, I'll be very steadfast in my identity. 'Yeah, I'm Muslim' and 'yeah I believe in God.'

Herein, Niloofar shows us again how Iranian Americans have manufactured a particular racial positioning around the language of Muslim identity, claiming it only in juxtaposition with whiteness and/or Christianity, but distancing themselves from it when it comes to 'actual' Muslims. This distinction allows us to see the ways in which the younger generation has extracted what is racially and politically useful in their own subject formation.

Sara, similarly, understood her relationship to the Muslim identity in purely political terms. She shared how "my interaction with it is purely political right now" … "It's like a War on Terror thing. You're a Muslim. This racialized or marginalized [identity]." Locating it squarely within the geopolitical terrain of the War on Terror, Sara's understanding of a Muslim identity and her ability to relate to it is, as she says, "purely political." This positioning, a Muslim identity as a uniquely political-racial identity that is decidedly not religious/spiritual, has become quite commonplace. The secularization of Muslim identity as something political-racial, not religious/spiritual suggests how Iranian Americans, even in their defensive or critical anti-Muslim racist politics, absorb and respond in such terms. Then the question becomes, as I explore in my final chapter, given all of these political forces, how do queer and trans Iranian Americans *actually* relate to God?

Framing Muslim identity in this way, Iranian Americans of the second-generation have largely carved out a social identity that resonates with their experience, one which primarily responds to their racialized experience. With virtually no relationship or association to religion, the ways these individuals understand Muslim identity is centered on a specific racial politics: between whiteness/Christianity and devout Muslimness. Nonetheless, this formulation of 'Not Really Muslim' has undergone a significant shift. In the following section, I will explore how my friends understood shifts in their Muslim identities as a consequence of Trump's Muslim Ban.

Appropriative Guilt and the Politics of Claiming: The Muslim Ban as 'Our 9/11'

Along with the construction of their Muslim identity between these two diverging racial positionings, many of my friends felt a sense of guilt in their identification with Islam. Some felt that they could not and should not identify as Muslim because they were not 'actually Muslim.' This hesitation emerged for Golnaz who was concerned about calling herself Muslim. "I don't know if that's wrong or not. I still feel shitty for it," she says, as she reflects on how she readily identifies as

243

Muslim when engaging with white Christians. Emphasizing the guilt involved in claiming a Muslim identity in juxtaposition with white bodies, Golnaz demonstrates how racial posturing is not a seamless articulation. In fact, many of my friends actively grappled with their own hesitations and discomfort with identifying as Muslims and feeling that they may be co-opting something that is not theirs to claim.

Shahpour shared a similar tension with the guilt he carried when he identifies as Muslim in order to keep Mormon proselytizers away. He says he recognizes that "it's so selective" and shares how he "kind of feels bad" that he does it. Mina shares how they identified as a cultural Muslim but now also finds that "dishonest" as they do not follow all of the practices and rituals of Muslim life. What is noteworthy about the guilt that several of my friends shared is that it is emerging from not feeling comfortable fully claiming a Muslim identity. Mina, Shahpour, and Golnaz, were all born and raised to two Iranian Muslim parents, obviously with differing senses of religiosity, yet still Muslim parents by ancestry and tradition. All were clear that their parents were not, not-Muslim, as in Jewish, Christian, Baha'i, Zoroastrian, or anything else. Yet their guilt, their hesitation, and their feeling unable to identify as Muslim demonstrates how powerful non-Islamiosity has been, to the point that the second-generation feels incapable of identifying with their parents' ancestral religion.

I suggest that in addition to all the accompanying politics of American anti-Muslim racism, this guilt, this concern of appropriating something that is not 'ours' to claim, materializes because of the ways modern political Islam has reconstructed itself. Taken as the 'real' and 'pure' Islam, this rigid, rule-based faith makes it so that individuals who do not routinely adhere to all the rules and requirements, feel disallowed from identifying with the faith. However, the operative racial force of the Muslim Ban altered this guilt, its potency, and feelings of a 'right to claim' Muslim subjectivity.

A massive shift for the Iranian American diaspora, as well as the broader Muslim American and global Muslim community, was the invocation of the Muslim Ban which concretized 'Muslimness' as equivalent to terrorism, anti-Americanism, and terrorist violence. As historically significant a moment as it was, many of my friends found it a potential justification for overcoming the guilt they felt with claiming Muslim identity. As my research shows, the Muslim Ban became a pivotal moment for many of my friends, giving them the political impetus to move more fully into identification with Islam and Muslim identity. This shift comes as a result of the violence they themselves, their families, and the larger Muslim community experienced as a result of the policies prohibiting select nationalities from entering the United States. As Azar mentioned, as a direct consequence to the ratcheting up of Trump's white supremacist policies, she has "never been more proud *[sic]*" to identify as Muslim.

Many specifically claimed that the violence their families and larger community experienced, and continue to experience, as a result of the Muslim Ban gave them a legitimate right to claim Muslim identity. Parisa called it a huge moment for her own understandings of race and American anti-Muslim racism, saying, she "realized 'okay, I guess I am one of these people.'" She says how she never thought of herself as "Muslim, on paper, until the Muslim Ban," and that it forced her to acknowledge that she too carries an Iranian passport and is technically Muslim. Therefore, what the Muslim Ban creates for the second-generation of Iranian Americans is an encounter with Muslim identity, authenticated by passports and documents verifying their Muslimness. Whether they like it, subscribe to it, relate to it, believe in it or not, the Muslim Ban labeled all Iranians as Muslim and, therefore, as potential terrorists and threats to U.S. national security. The sweeping operative racial power that this had for Iranian Americans, specifically the second-generation, cannot be overstated. The reductive assumptions that all Iranians are Muslims and, as Trump has vocalized, all Muslims

are terrorists, manufactured a particular racial experience: you are a Muslim and you are a threat, no matter what you believe, think, pray to, or call yourself. This is an important racial moment for the Iranian diaspora, as even Iranians of other religious faiths came to suffer state violence, deportation, exclusion, etc. because the rhetoric of the legal policy targeted nationalities.[32]

Although experiencing what she called "nothing personal" from the Muslim Ban, Sara shares how its very implementation unleashed a whole host of concerns for her and her family. It prompted her to wonder, "Oh my god, will my family stop being US citizens? It's so fucked up. I don't [even know]." She has since had to compromise by not leaving the country, for fear of being detained or interrogated or not allowed back in the United States. Cancelling flights, not leaving the U.S., not going to Iran are all common responses many Iranian Americans took as precautionary measures to respond to the Muslim Ban and the ensuring violence enacted onto those attempting to enter the United States.[33] Although I have focused solely on Iranian Americans, namely those with American citizenship, the widespread racial affect produced by the Muslim Ban: fear, state-sponsored racial discrimination, and defamation greatly shifted the ways Iranian Americans understood their racial and religious identities.

Golnaz further elaborates on this racial consciousness in her own experience with the Muslim Ban. She tells me of her brother who lives in Southern California and how he recently married an Iranian woman in Iran. Because of the rapid implementation of the Muslim Ban, he could not get her the necessary documentation to enter the United States. Although they are legally

---

[32] This is beyond the scope of this work, but nonetheless, a very important point; particularly, how Iranian Jews, Christians, and other religious minorities also became targets of the Muslim Ban. The response of these other religious groups was to disarticulate and dissociate from Islam as much as possible. However, the legal rhetoric targeted all Iranians by nationality, regardless of religious faith (as that would violate other aspects of Constitutional law), making them just as much a target of the policy as Iranian Muslims.

[33] Also, this is not to suggest that these are new phenomena. Iranian Americans have been holding off visiting Iran, living in fear of war, fear of loss of citizenship, documentation issues, etc. since far prior to the Muslim Ban; for as long as we've been in this nation. This is just to highlight how it affected the second-generation on a much more intimate bases, affecting U.S. citizens as well as Iranian immigrants without citizenship.

married, the Muslim Ban prevented their paperwork from being processed and his wife was forced

to remain in Iran over two years after their wedding. As Golnaz recounts her family's experience as

victims of this racialized immigration policy, she breaks down in tears. She says,

> My brother got married to this girl and she can't come… she can't come! Like they got
> married two years ago. And they got married, we had such a beautiful time, the wedding.
> And my brother's had such a hard life. And finally he meets someone who he can relate to…
> [but] his wife can't come and it's just like really [messed] him up.

As she shared this story, she differentiated why the Muslim Ban was so salient for her, because it did

directly interrupt her personal life; describing how her brother's life spiraled as a consequence. She

mused how the Muslim Ban was, for her, and potentially for other second-generation Iranian

Americans, a major rupture in racial experience, whereas 9/11was not. When I asked her if she or

her family experienced anything similar during 9/11 she answered with a resounding,

> No! No! That's why I can't relate to any of that stuff. That's why it's so surprising to me to
> even feel any of this! Cuz I didn't feel anything from 9/11. I was surrounded by a bunch of
> Asians and Iranians [in Orange County]. No one gave a [damn]! … I never felt [that]. The
> travel ban is different.[34]

Marking 9/11 as distinctly different from the Muslim Ban because it did not directly disrupt her life,

Golnaz's assertion pinpoints Trump's policy as a significant turning point for the second-generation.

It is also crucial to mention that although Golnaz herself did not experience racialized violence as a

consequence of 9/11, potentially due to her younger age, the systematic racist violence that ensued

following that historic political event did target Iranian Americans.

    Sharing how the Muslim Ban forced him to reorient his priorities, Shahpour tells me how his

experience with the Muslim Ban caused a restructuring of his identity. He tells me how the Muslim

---

[34] It is important to note that a majority of my friends were fairly young children, ages 1-4, when 9/11 happened, leaving them little room to imagine a world prior to 9/11. Several of my friends who were a bit older were able to understand and locate important racial shifts as a consequence of 9/11 in ways that were unfamiliar to those who were younger. Additionally, it is crucial to articulate that 9/11 resulted in serious racialization, surveillance, and racial attacks on Iranian Americans, something that likely toddlers could not detect. All this, in addition to the prior point made in Chapter One, that Iranian Americans have been experiencing intense racialized immigration barriers since the Revolution/Hostage Crisis.

Ban not only made him acutely aware that his racial identity was under attack but that he had to, in a sense, learn to set his queerness aside in order to assess the violence against his racial community. He describes in full,

> At first it was me not liking [Trump] because of my sexuality, because I was like 'No I'm proud! I'm gay! I'm not going to be hidden. … Once he started talking about the Ban, the Travel ban, that's when I was like 'oh fuck no! *Fuck no*! … Like these are people that I come from. …like why? … Once the travel ban hit… my Mom was like… 'Your aunt and uncle are in Canada right now trying to come into the US but because they have their Iranian passports they can't fucking come!' So they got held up. And that set me off… It really made me sad.

In a decided rearticulation of identities, Shahpour underwent a significant transformation of allegiances, of priorities, of collective identification as a consequence of Trump's Muslim Ban. Hearing Shahpour's narrative, it became clear that the aspects of his identity that came to the surface were reassembled in a sense, in order to respond to the types of immediate racial violence his community was undergoing. He understood that he had to put his sexuality and transness aside in that moment to process and relate to the attack the Iranian diasporic community was undergoing at the hands of racist immigration/border policies.

This proves to be an illustrative point in that Shahpour had to bifurcate his own understanding of his identities in order to make sense of the racial violence his community was experiencing. This anecdote demonstrates that violence against certain aspects of our identities require our own constant restructuring and reformulating of our own subject formation, in order to do what is both politically necessary as well as what is required for survival. This is not to dictate or prescribe a particular practice for responding to state violence based on race, sexuality, gender or other identities. Rather, I offer Shahpour's anecdote to demonstrate how second-generation queer and trans Iranian Americans do not have the convenience or luxury to tend to only one facet of social identity. In the face of constant negotiation between race, religion, sexuality, gender, and other dimensions, compartmentalization is an important means of self-preservation and political survival.

Nonetheless, Shahpour's experience with the Muslim Ban and his family as targets of the policies shaped how he himself came to refashion his sense of religious identity.

Golnaz reflects on the fact that she now understands herself as Muslim with far less hesitation because of what her family went through with the Muslim Ban. She recounts, "I have now taken on 'Muslim' the way my cousin took on 'Muslim' in New York following 9/11." She frames her own coming into Muslim identity as a direct consequence of the racial violence her family experienced. "I feel like the second generation of that," she says, referring to her cousin's shift after 9/11. Detailing the rationale for this newfound label she says, "It becomes your armor. It becomes your self-defense."

Defending the Faith, Defending the Family: A Collective Defense of Islam

An important consequence of the Muslim Ban has been the ways in which Iranian Americans now feel compelled to defend Islam with more vigor and passion than before.[35] Many shared stories of defending Islam, whether to other youth in high school world cultures classes, to friends being racist in social spaces, or even white liberal coworkers being racist in work environments. Whatever the form or venue, all had seen or heard Islam disparaged and had varying dispositions around whether or not and how to intervene.

When I asked Parisa if she identified as a Muslim, she said, "I don't identify as Muslim, *but!*" Her emphasis on this 'but' pointed to a newfound connection she had come to regarding her relationship to Islam. She said, "I think I do talk about my Muslim heritage when I'm dealing with white people. When I'm dealing with people who think that Muslims are messed up, I'm starting to

---

[35] All of my research was conducted after the imposition of the Muslim Ban and this shaped the ways in which my informants engaged with this question around defending Islam. Many did defend Islam prior to the Muslim Ban, but my research suggests that based on their examples and stories, the Muslim Ban became an important turning point in Iranian-Muslim identity.

be like 'okay…'" Parisa went on to tell me how in the presence of white people, particularly white people who are racist towards Muslims, she feels the need to identify as a Muslim in order to defend the faith, something she has recently started doing.

The need to defend Islam has become a tacit baseline for the second-generation, a political posturing that all of my friends took to. "Absolutely!" "Of course!" "Duh…" were many of the answers I received when I asked if they felt the need to defend Islam. In response to the vast array of racial violence the Iranian American community has experienced, the most significant and recent forms emerging from the Muslim Ban,[36] the motivation to defend Islam is understood as a defense of the communal cultural, racial, and religious identity – as many put it, a defense of family.

When I asked Azar whether experiencing anti-Muslim racism made her want to identify or disidentify with the faith, she responded,

> I don't think it made me want to disidentify with anything… it made me want to not associate myself with those [racist] individuals. And it also made me want to identify more with who I am. And like if anyone has a problem with it then 'fuck you.' It's just thickened my skin.

When I asked her why she feels the need to defend Islam, she said "I feel like if I see any discrimination against other Islamic people or my family, I have the need to defend for my family, for future generations, and friends and family." Nasrin shared a similar sentiment, saying she feels the need to defend Islam because "it's who I am, my family and our history." Shahpour also felt the need to defend Islam, saying "I feel like I'm defending my family."

This notion of defending family is a hugely evocative articulation for the second-generation. A process which brings them nearer to Islam, to Iranianess, to elusive notions of cultural belonging and rootedness, the act of defending Islam becomes an important practice that many regularly took

---

[36] As of this writing, the January 2020 war scare has taken place. However, almost all of my fieldwork was conducted prior to this so only one of my friends was able to speak to that event. She specified how it exasperated her fears of losing citizenship for both her and her family members, her inability to go to Iran, and the danger of her mother trying to come back from Iran in the aftermath of this event.

part in. As such, the defense of Islam becomes the means by which they articulate their Muslimness, their identification with notions of what constitutes 'real' Muslimness, 'real' Iranianess, and locating themselves in a lineage of cultural defense in the face of colonial modernity.

When I asked Mina if they felt compelled to defend Islam, they responded by saying "I totally, totally do." Saying they want to protect the Muslims they know "who have always been super affirming of [them] being a queer and trans person," Mina's rationale for defending Islam is a process of giving "some of that back." The 'some' here, understood as love, respect, and loyalty, demonstrates the symbiotic processes of defending marginalized experiences – cisgender heterosexual Muslims defending queer/trans bodies and queer/trans bodies defending cisgender heterosexual Muslims.

Niloofar shared that she does not feel compelled to defend Islam because she is white-passing, granting her the freedom to select and choose when and how she relates with Islam. Although she shared stories of having to defend Islam to do-good white liberals who shared anti-Muslim racist comments openly, she says she understands her white-passing skin as a privilege which allows her the power to choose when and how she wants to intervene. Comparing herself to her brother who she describes as "darker" with "a full beard," Niloofar said her white-passing skin gives her room to decide when to bring it up, whereas "he doesn't have a choice."

This brings up questions of skin color, pigmentation, and appearance as a process of racial experience. As many of my friends mentioned, they do not appear visibly Muslim. The Iranian American proximity to Islam cannot be conceptualized without articulating the vastly non-Muslim appearance of diasporic Iranians, a facet of non-Islamiosity. None of my friends wore any visibly Muslim clothing, nor had any worn it as a regular practice. Those with darker hair and skin colors spoke of being racially registered as not-white: Arab, Indian, or Mexican. Whereas many of my

white-passing friends understood themselves parties to great racial privilege, the ability to operate within whiteness and white spaces in ways their siblings, cousins, and/or parents could not.

Ariana shares how she came to learn of her white skin and white-passing privileges as a young person in grade school after 9/11. Describing how her peers began to taunt and torment the other two Muslim students in her class, Mohammad and Asad, Ariana says "I remember that I didn't have that... I witnessed it, but I [didn't suffer from it] and I remember defending them, and I remember being frightened." As she reflects on her racial passing and how that afforded her great social and political safety, Ariana says "that was the first realization that I had this privilege of being white-passing." Even though many Iranian Americans experience this white-passing racial experience, granting them much more autonomy and agency in the practice of defending their racial/religious groups, many still felt the need to do so. Despite not overtly presenting as Muslim or being read as definitely Muslim, whether white-passing or not, all felt the need to defend Islam at times.[37]

Although similarly feeling compelled to defend Islam, Shadi said she still hesitates to do so out of fear of further racial violence. Pondering the question further, they say "I'm not vocal about defending Islam because I feel fear. If you defend it, then you are it." Although they said they do defend it at times, because they see it as "protecting [their] roots," Shadi's fears of being confirmed as a Muslim upon defending it demonstrate how, although many Iranian Americans may defend Islam, underneath their defenses may linger concerns, fears, and anxieties about further racialized violence. Speaking of times she's heard anti-Muslim racist commentary, she says, "When people do that it makes me feel ashamed for how I was raised, and I defend it because I'm like 'I turned out okay.'"

---

[37] Only one of my friends said he did not feel the need to defend Islam, and when I asked why, he shared simply that "there are enough people doing that." He went on to share that he does still defend Islam when he finds it necessary.

To further explore how the role of defending Islam shaped my friends' knowledge and relationship with Islam, I asked them if defending Islam prompted any reconnection with the faith. A majority of my friends shared that it certainly had, citing a direct relationship between suffering from racist violence and wanting to explore Islam more. This prompted them to be more attentive to their sources of what Islam is, what it means, and how it functions culturally.

When I asked Azar if her defending Islam has fostered a reconnection, she said "Absolutely! It makes my connection with the faith more important." Some had tried taking classes and/or looking up facets of the faith online. Shadi's response highlighted what it would mean for her to continue that exploration. She said,

> I think that's something I'm really scared to touch. I'm scared to have that conversation with myself at this point, cuz … I don't know if I want to be Muslim. Because it means I have to digest so many other things and what does that mean for my life? If I say I'm Muslim, there's a whole world that gets cut off to me. The world of dating other people, or experimentation… Do I want a life of experimentation or a more strict, less flexible life?

Uncertain about the consequences of what reconnecting with Islam would mean for her, whether or not she wants a "strict, less flexible life," Shadi contends with the role Islam is to have in her life. Acknowledging their fears, Shadi's open questioning around whether or not they want to be 'a Muslim,' shows how disjointed, unsettled, and nonlinear social identification can be. As her anecdote elucidates, Iranian Americans of the second-generation are interpreting and navigating a vast array of messages around Islam and what role it is to play in daily life. Shadi's question vocalized an anxiety many in the second-generation community continually ponder, what does it mean to call myself a Muslim?

Am I 'Cool' Yet? Muslim as Cool and Lingering Appropriation

As mentioned earlier, many of my friends felt a sense of guilt when they identified as Muslims because they did not feel capable of labeling themselves 'Muslim' given the orthodox

claims of proper Muslim subjecthood. Golnaz fully articulates the extent of this concern, pinpointing it as a trend, specifically how identifying as Muslim has become "cool." She says, "I also worry… I'm just doing it because it's publicly *cool* right now." When I asked her to explain in further detail, she says "[It feels] like a straight woman who hangs out with [queers] so much that she realizes she's gay. And then 10 years later she comes out of that too." Labeling this current political moment as one in which identifying as Muslim is rendered 'cool,' Golnaz's narrative complicates the terrain in which Iranian Americans can relate to the Islamic faith. Is it a point of social capital to call oneself a Muslim? And if so, what are the benefits?[38] This line of inquiry, as foreign and absurd as it may seem to the parent generation, is a hugely important one for the second-generation. As much as non-Islamioisity dictates the relationships many second-generationers have with Islam, the social capital embedded in labeling oneself Muslim, particularly in queer/trans/radical activist spaces, is worth exploring.

As Golnaz openly debated the role that Islam and identification with Islam is to take in her life, talk of Ramadan came up. She tells me that she cannot imagine herself fasting for Ramadan because that would feel 'appropriative.' She shares, "I would feel like I'm appropriating… I don't even know when it is. I never know it's Ramadan until someone posts about it, some white person… and I'm like 'oh right… yeah! Thank you 'Jennifer!' I would not have known!" As she breaks into laughter, Golnaz's story highlights how she has no deep connection with this Muslim ritual, let alone knowing when it takes place. Referring to an anonymous white 'Jennifer,' Golnaz's experience demonstrates how that appropriative guilt manifests itself. How can we call ourselves Muslim when we were not raised in that normative tradition, when white people think we're all devout Muslim radicals, but we don't even have the slightest clue when Ramadan is? But what do we

---

[38] For further analysis into this phenomenon, particularly as it applies to the Black Muslim American community, see Khabeer, *Muslim Cool.*

call ourselves when our family members are prohibited from entering this country because we are, in fact, understood as "Muslim?" More importantly, what about the one relative we know of who does participate in Ramadan, or the one time we tried taking part? How do we articulate our identities in this landscape? Who is allowed to call themselves a Muslim?

She feels wholly outside of the faith, unable to engage with its tenets or any of its practices without feeling like she is overstepping a boundary. Even with all of the racial-political consciousness stirred up by the Muslim Ban, there is still a palpable hesitation that many of my friends felt around whether or not they could identify as Muslim. I share these hesitations again to highlight that it is not a seamless or linear process of social identification, and how many, even amidst their political-racial consciousness as Muslim subjects, still wonder whether or not they can call themselves Muslim.

Parisa spoke of how she was still uncertain about her own motives for identifying as Muslim, saying, "I don't know if it's some warped millennial desire to feel oppressed, or if it's really some awakening of blanket racism and how it's affecting people." Musing about whether or not this desire to label oneself Muslim is a response to a particular political millennial trend, Parisa felt unsure in her own identification with a Muslim identity. She even shared that immediately following the implementation of the Muslim Ban, she considered donning the headscarf to communicate to the world of white supremacists, liberals, and anti-Muslim racists that Muslims exist and there can be Muslims like *her*, to which she meant – open-minded, queer, English-speaking, American born and raised, liberals. Although she never did, she says, "I still think about it."

Sara, an involved anti-war activist, also continued to wonder about her relationship to Muslim identity, even though she understood herself and her community as under attack due to this very identity. She feels like she can identify as Muslim because of the violence her community experiences as a racial group, primarily as a result of the Muslim Ban and War on Terror, but she

says "I feel kind of bad about it. Like can I? Is that politically correct?" Again, uncertain of her own

positionality with regards to Muslim identity, Sara's questions prompt us to consider notions of

legitimacy, ownership, claiming, and the politics of sorting through these tensions.

These accounts prove useful because they demonstrate that there is a debate around the

ability to identify as Muslim, not only about whether or not one actually follows the prescriptions of

religious doctrine enough to be able to consider oneself Muslim, but a line of questioning which

interrogates the very purposes behind identifying with the faith: is it to follow a particular activist

'trend,' or to be 'cool?' Is it because we want to feel like we are oppressed or are we really

oppressed? More importantly, how do these tensions shape how one can engage their social,

political, racial identity with their religious/spiritual identity, if they even do?

'The Parts that I Cherish': A Nonbinary Approach to Queer & Trans Muslim Practices

What fascinates me about this construction of 'not really Muslim' as many of my friends put

it, is the fact that many of them did, in fact, participate in what are considered Muslim rituals,

practices, and beliefs. The primary rationale for locating themselves as not really Muslim resided in

the fact that they were not consistent with these practices everyday nor followed a particular set

regimen. I will offer a series of examples from their own religious practices to show the complex

construction behind 'not really Muslim' and how, therefore, even potentially Muslim practices get

erased in this formation.

For example, Shahpour, although insisting that he is not really Muslim, said he likes *namaz*,

formal Islamic prayer. He shared,

> I really like hearing *namaz*. … I don't even understand half of it, but I love hearing it. I think
> it's beautiful. Especially when it's read correctly with all the ups and downs in the voice. I
> don't know. I really love that. It really puts me at peace. I could sit and listen to that in my
> car for hours.

Curious to know if he had ever done that, I asked him. He shared that he had done that several times, in fact, getting carried away by the melodic sounds of the Muslim orator. When I asked him how he learned *namaz*, he said that he watched a lot of YouTube videos and listened to the Qur'an recordings and prayers sometimes, following the movements of the instructor in the videos. Learning prostration from YouTube, Shahpour shows how his affection for and affinity for Islamic practice is a means of connecting with his higher power.

This is a really important example because it demonstrates how Shahpour went to the internet to find, learn, and study Islamic prayer practice and form, not any familial or other personal source. Relying instead on the internet, Shahpour's search for instruction on Islamic teachings shows firstly, the desire to explore Islamic faith and practice, which he found important enough and therefore acted on, but also his preference for finding Islamic teachings online as opposed to from a familial source. What is significant here is that he felt comfortable to explore his relationship to Islam and to produce a religious practice/ritual that he liked, enjoyed, and took part in as a way of connecting with God. This cannot be taken to be paradigmatically outside of Muslim practice or belief, as it is, I suggest, an act of trans Muslim exploration of the divine.

Another important example comes from Bahman who, although he had never been to Iran, took his experience studying abroad in Jordan as instructive about Islam. He spoke endearingly about the familiar sights and sounds in a Muslim country, particularly the *azan*, or call to prayer. He said, "I feel like I was immersed in the land, that is …closer to what I'm from…I think it's different just being in a Christian country versus being in a Muslim country, like the holidays are different. Friday is the holy day versus Sunday. You …hear the *azoon*[39] every hour."

---

[39] *Azoon* is a more colloquial way of saying *Azan*.

As Grewal suggests, "like most travelers to cities int the Middle East, Muslim American student-travelers are dazzled by the religious elements of these urban landscapes: the onion-shaped domes of mosques, the minarets like needles in the sky, and the crowds of veiled woman and bearded men."[40] The ingestion of the aural, the sensorial affect of the *azoon*, operates as a part of this dazzling display of Islamic identity. When I asked Bahman what it was like to hear the *azoon*, he said he felt connected, visible, and validated in ways that he had never felt in the United States. Bahman said,

> Honestly, it would make me emotional… A lot of the times I would be walking and be like 'Wow. This is so beautiful'… You know living in the US, as much as it's like 'freedom of religion' – this is a Christian land. So… you're just growing up in a land, subconsciously Othered, I feel… in terms of belief systems. Even if it's not your own personal beliefs, it's the beliefs of your ancestors… And so for me going somewhere where that is now the majority religion and that is just something you don't have to explain to someone all the time and there just playing the [*azan*] makes me really emotional. Because… these people understand my cultural background.

Although Bahman had these experiences outside of Iran, hearing the *azan* signaled a familiarity and proximity to his own cultural background that he had never felt while in the United States. Herein, the Muslim call to prayer becomes a vessel of communicating racial and cultural solidarity, a message to Bahman that his way and his family's way of living in the world were not only accepted there, but the norm. Clearly, this was very important for him as it made him very emotional, declaring a connection to the land that he had yet to feel in the United States.

Azar also shared important ways she adopted Muslim practices into her own life. Describing how her mother's practices influenced her own relationship to Islam, she says she memorized *ayatal korsi* because she heard her mother reciting it often. One of the most famous and most memorized verses from the Qur'an, *ayatal korsi* is typically recited to conjure the greatness of God as a protective

---

[40] Grewal, *Islam Is a Foreign Country*, 53.

measure. Taught to recite *ayatal korsi* before starting her car,[41] Azar shared how saying *ayatal korsi* became an everyday habit for her. Using it for its explicit religious purpose, asking God for protection before embarking out into the world, Azar and her adoption of this ritual demonstrate the myriad ways Iranian Americans curate their spiritual/religious practices. Speaking highly of the Muslim practices her mother taught her, she said, "the part I've been exposed to is what I cherish."

I offer these brief anecdotes to demonstrate that although Islam was understood, by and large, to be a religious doctrine centered around prescriptive rules and restrictions, some of my friends still drew from parts of it that made sense for their own lives and spiritual processes. Although all of them felt they were not 'really Muslim' because of their haphazard engagement with Islamic rituals and practices, many still participated in or subscribed to certain important facets of the faith. For instance, many still respected the month of Ramadan by either not drinking, being extra respectful and calling their elders, and/or going to religious events with their families. Some even tried to fast for one or more days of Ramadan, in observance when they could. Many of them had trinkets or symbols of Islam, such as a *hamzeh* hand, *tasbih*, or miniature Qur'ans that meant something meaningful to them and were used as mediums of connecting with their higher power.

Neither Muslim, nor not Muslim, many queer and trans Iranian Americans understood themselves in a complex discursive field, juggling the following series of concerns: yes, my parents are (were?) Muslim, but now they hate Islam because it 'ruined' Iran; so we're not Muslim anymore, at least not *Muslim* Muslim; white kids in (Christian) school were racist towards me, so now I don't even identify as Muslim, (but I know I'm not Jewish or Christian or anything else); anti-Muslim racism has been so powerful that we Iranians as a collective have moved towards secularity/non-Islamiosity, but some of my women elders still teach me valuable Muslim practices and rituals sometimes; I hate that Islam is violent, anti-women, and oppressive to queer and trans folks, but I

---

[41] "*Ayatal Korsi bekhoon ghablazinke ranandegi koni*" translates to, 'recite Ayatal Korsi before you start driving.'

also adopt and take aspects of it that I value and use to connect with God; but now the U.S. government wants to kick/keep us Muslims out, so I feel proud to call myself a Muslim! It's my resistance; Am I only doing this because it's cool though?

In order to grasp what seem to be such logical inconsistencies, a fluid, moving, and multidimensional nonbinary analysis is necessary to address this simple question. I set out to determine how second-generation queer and trans Iranian Americans relate to Islam and, in the process, quickly learned that there would be no neat answer. Although the central theme of feeling 'not really Muslim' became pronounced early on, I still saw many stories and experiences that my friends felt were meaningful Muslim ways of connecting with God. How had the compartmentalization of Muslim identity as purely political-racial, along with the ways non-Islamiosity has circulated in the Iranian diaspora, affect how these individuals related to Islam? And how was it that, amidst all these sweeping disavowals of the faith, that many still found something important, something valuable not only for their racial-political identities, but their religious/spiritual ones?

CHAPTER FIVE

Queer & Trans Fears, Anxieties, & Dreams:
Interpreting Persian Weddings and Muslim Funerals

The bright turquoise dome, with its almost sensual teardrop shape, pokes through a monotonous Tehran skyline. Accented with various golds, each a deeper yellow than the next, the color palette of the *Imamzadeh* draws in the eyes. *Imamzadeh Saleh* is a famous mausoleum in the north of Tehran, bordering *Bazaar-e Tajrish*, a popular bazaar that easily makes this locale the epicenter of northern Tehran. With masses of people rushing to shop, eat, gather, pray, or catch an underground train, *Tajrish* is always buzzing with life.

Shahpour had come with his mother and a few other relatives on somewhat of a pilgrimage, to lay his grandmother to rest in the grounds of the *Imamzadeh*. As is customary in Muslim tradition, burying one's deceased in religious venues is an important ritual said to offer the departed closer proximity to God. However, Shahpour's grandmother had decided just a week before she passed that she wished to be cremated, a funerary tradition Muslims do not normally practice. Nonetheless, her family honored her wish, had her cremated, and had now brought her ashes to the *Imamzadeh* to spread. As he recounts his experience at the *Imamzadeh*, Shahpour tells me that it was "weirdly emotional." He tells of how his mother insisted he secretly dump the ashes in the garden area of the mausoleum courtyard. "*Boro! Boro!*[1] Just do it!" she commanded, assuming that his younger age afforded him somewhat of a pass. Knowing full well this was prohibited, not to mention highly socially inappropriate, Shahpour took his mother's command and secretly dunked the ashes as fast as possible. After doing so, Shahpour says they "went in there, prayed, and cried."

Sitting before me was a young trans man, but I knew his experience at the *Imamzadeh* was years prior, before he began socially or medically transitioning. I wanted to hear what he felt, what

---

[1] "Go! Go! Just do it!"

he experienced, what he was worried about as he ventured into the *Imamzadeh*, so I invited him to share. He said,

> Going into a mosque for me… [is] always kind of intense because… you have to wear the *chador* when you go in. And I never have one with me, so I always have to borrow one from the people that are outside and make sure that I'm not acting weird. But then I overthink it. I'm always in my head in a mosque because I'm [thinking] I'm gonna stick out like a sore thumb again because everyone's doing their prayers and I don't know how to do the routine… I don't know what to say… You see people grabbing onto the [*zarih*²] and they put the money in it and they're crying. Everyone's holding onto that and crying. So I went in there and I was like 'okay I guess I'll hold onto it and say something' so I would pray in my head because I don't want to speak in English.

Concerned with a whole host of issues, Shahpour's time in the *Imamzadeh* is less than tranquil. He, like most all Iranian Americans who visit Iran and engage with normative religious spaces, felt insecure, uncertain, and uncomfortable with the way he would be interpreted. He did not have his own *chador*, a full body covering worn by Muslim women in religious venues, something all my friends had in common. He shares how he feels out of place borrowing one from the entryway stand that offers *chador*s to those who do not have one, particularly in how to put it on, hold it appropriately, and walk in it. His anecdote highlights a myriad of concerns that many of my friends carried with them as they navigated religious spaces, rituals, and practices, no short list either. I am fascinated by how amidst all of these apparent nuisances, Shahpour still commits to religious/spiritual connection.

I asked Shahpour what he said when he finally grabbed onto the *zarih* and prayed in his head. He said, "All I remember was like 'God, please make sure my grandma goes to a place with a beautiful garden and flowers, where she can just rest in peace and rest easy and not have to worry about anything.'"

---

² A *zarih* is a large, ornate, lattice structure, usually gold or silver, which encases a grave in an Islamic mosque or shrine. The structure is arranged around the grave and is typically the size of a small room. It is customary for people visiting the shrine or mosque to visit the *zarih* which is typically in the center of the building, and grab hold of the *zarih* between the weaves of the lattice form while they pray. It is also customary to see paper bills or coins that have been tossed inside the *zarih*.

I offer this story at the outset of this chapter on queer and trans Iranian American experiences with funerary processions and wedding rituals to demonstrate the multilayered experiences these individuals have with what are largely perceived as uniform, traditional, and nonnegotiable practices. As this chapter will demonstrate, there is nothing uniform about how queer and trans Iranian Americans relate to and understand these highly ritualized events. In fact, many of their narratives force an intervention into how we conceptualize the boundaries of race, religion, queerness, and transness, bridging realms and reasonings that are rarely intertwined.

In this chapter, I demonstrate the ways queer and trans Iranian Americans engage with what are largely considered two of the most significant religious events: weddings and funerals. As my research will demonstrate, the role of non-Islamiosity greatly shapes the terrain of both weddings and funerals, albeit to different extents, with weddings seen as more secularized parties and funerals as more religious grieving ceremonies. Weddings, understood as joyous celebrations of love, rarely have any overt depictions of Muslim faith or ritual. If Islamic symbolism and/or rituals surface in weddings, they are limited and fixed primarily to the legalities of the formal ceremony. Funerals, understood as somber sites of grieving the newly deceased, draw heavily from Islamic iconography, ritual, and practice. Because of the association of Islam with grief, misery, destruction, and in a sense death in the Iranian American experience, I suggest that the presence of Muslim rituals at funerals is more common and respectfully tolerated.

Given this formulation of how Islam shapes Iranian American experiences with union and death, I am interested in specifically how queerness and transness intersect with these highly religious moments. What kinds of thoughts do queer Iranian Americans have about holding a queer wedding for themselves? What concerns does a nonbinary queer Iranian American have as they go to dress themselves for a wedding ceremony with all their family in attendance? How do trans Iranian Americans navigate their gender identity as it relates to commemorating the death of their

263

loved ones? And most importantly, how do these questions and concerns shape how they relate to the religious/spiritual dimension of these events? Again, because this project is an attempt to excavate the ways in which queerness and transness engage with the religious, spiritual, and supernatural realms, I have focused on precisely this intersection. My lines of inquiry centered on funerals and weddings and the surrounding rituals because I am interested in how these individuals juggle the multidimensionality of their identities in what are considered normative religious venues.

Shahpour was concerned with his non-normative gender presentation, his being forced to unlawfully dispose of his grandmother's ashes in the garden, his lack of knowledge of prayer rituals, his confusion around properly wearing a *chador*, and his inability to pray comfortably in Farsi. Despite all of these barriers to his experience inside the *Imamzadeh*, Shahpour still held onto the *zarih*, a normative practice that individuals engage once inside the core chamber of the *Imamzadeh*, and prayed for his grandmother. He shared how he cried along with his mother and how, even though the experience was far from fully comfortable for him, he felt like he had accomplished their goal. His grandmother had been successfully sprinkled across the grounds, and she had had her closest relatives pray for her as they sent her off to another realm.

Shahpour's experience inside the *Imamzadeh* dispels the myth that queer and trans people have no religious/spiritual experiences or desires, specifically with or through Islam. But more importantly, it shows how, even amidst the cacophony of reminders that he does not belong, he insisted on partaking in the funerary ritual. I draw from Mahmood's scholarship here to emphasize the significance of not presupposing what constitutes agency based on liberal feminist ideations of 'freedom:' that political conceptualization would not, could not, describe or approximate Shahpour's existence. As Mahmood argues,

> The meaning and sense of agency cannot be fixed in advance, but must emerge through an analysis of the particular concepts that enable specific modes of being, responsibility, and effectivity. Viewed in this way, what may appear to be a case of deplorable passivity and docility from a progressivist point of view, may actually be a form of agency—but one that

can be understood only from within the discourses and structures of subordination that create the conditions of its enactment. In this sense, agentival capacity is entailed not only in those acts that resist norms but also in the multiple ways in which one inhabits *norms*.[3]

Mahmood's assertion here articulates how ideas of what constitutes agency, freedom, and resistance cannot be predetermined as liberal feminism has concretized through its intellectual projects. Furthermore, to tend to the minutiae of contextual circumstances which produce each action, we can understand the ways in which actions that appear to be 'deplorable,' 'passive,' or 'docile' from a liberal point of view, may in fact be forms of active autonomy. Framed in this way, Shahpour's embodiment of Muslim practice and ritual is an important articulation of trans Muslim agency. His experience challenges many core mainstream liberal feminist notions: the unviability of queer/trans Muslim life, the impossibility of queer/trans life in an Islamic Republic of Iran, the supremacy of secularism, and the incompatibility of spirituality/religiosity and queerness/transness.

Mahmood further suggests that our analytical tools must be able to track the ways in which agency operates, functions, and manifests, even within norms and prescriptive practices. Therefore, I am able to conceptualize Shahpour's experience in *Imamzadeh Saleh* for what it is, an act of queer and trans Iranian American Muslim commitment to religious and spiritual connection: his decision to follow a prescriptive Muslim ritual, or norm as Mahmood would call it, is in fact, an enactment of his very agency. Without Mahmood's articulation, Shahpour's act may be seen as succumbing to an oppressive force or, worse, incomprehensible through a liberal feminist lens.

He insisted on being a part of the ritual, on grabbing the *zarih* with his hands, of praying, and asking God to nurture his grandmother. Despite the plentiful reasons given to him not to partake – the assumed homophobia/transphobia of Muslims, the assumed homophobia/transphobia of Iran, the lack of personal knowledge of Muslim rituals, his discomfort in the *chador*, the inability to 'fit in' to the women's section, the inability to pray properly in Farsi, his apparent Americanness and

---

[3] Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*, 14–15 (emphasis in original).

obvious foreignness – Shahpour does participate. Not only does he insist on taking part in the ritual, but he does so as a means to facilitate his connection with God. I argue that it is through his insistence, on connecting with God, speaking with God, asking God for support, that the full agentival capacity of Shahpour's experience can be understood. He is not just 'going through the motions,' to please his mother or to avoid gender policing by other women around him. His ultimate purpose is to properly honor his grandmother as she leaves this realm, a ritual of Muslim religious, Godly, and divine connection – all far beyond the purview of a liberal feminist ideas of agency. I suggest that it is through a nonbinary analytic, invested in potential, possibility, of transcendence that we can conceptualize Shahpour's experience at *Imamzadeh Saleh*. Without destabilizing the fixed binary categories which make queer and trans Iranian American Muslim bodies unintelligible, there is no way to fathom the existence of our lives, let alone our most intimate spiritual/religious moments.

Nonetheless, all of my friends had to grapple seriously with their own sense of validity, thrust between binary categories that declared them impossible and improbable. Each individual pondered their own construction of self – of what they were allowed to do and not do, who they were allowed to be and not be, what they were allowed to call themselves and not allowed to call themselves – living at, between, and through the crossroads of binary opposites. The stories they shared with me covered a vast array of human emotion: the hesitations with disrupting the perceived sanctity of marriage, the joys in imagining a queer Iranian wedding, the frustrations with Muslim performativity at a mother's funeral. As such, these accounts relay the rich, full, messy, and noncooperative ideations of second-generation queer and trans Iranian American Muslims as they encounter the sanctity of unions and departures.

Here Comes the Doom: Wedding Wishes and Worries

In *Impossible Desires*, Gayatri Gopinath demonstrates how queer diasporic cultural forms uproot and unsettle nationalist identities. She argues how "queer diasporic cultural forms work against the violent effacements that produce the fictions of purity that lie at the heart of dominant nationalist and diasporic ideologies."[4] Her work highlights how queer diasporic bodies and their respective desires, memories, and dreams stand to contest and transform what is considered the solid, coherent, and static nationalist and/or diasporic identity. As a line from my introduction to "*khejalat*: A Zine on Queer/Trans Iranian American Life" reads, "who knew my dreams could destroy an entire culture?"[5] It is the radical notion of what queer/trans dreams can invite us into, what other forms of being or other ways of existing emerge, that they come to destabilize the coherence of nationalist or diasporic formations.

I rely on Gopinath's intervention, centering queer women's subjectivities,[6] as an opening to the realm of impossibility. It is through queer and trans imaginaries, explorations of what is considered impossible, engaging with the realm of beyond, that so much space becomes available. Through a nonbinary analytic, wherein we are invited into realms, worlds, and thought-structures beyond a binary system and all its limitations, that vast expanses of possibility emerge. As I offered in the introduction, "*a nonbinary analytic opens up space*" – space to move beyond current social codes, space to see ourselves beyond a binary, space to allow ourselves to imagine what life can be if we existed outside of these limitations, space to give ourselves time to entertain these thoughts and whatever they lead to. As Bassichis, Lee, and Spade argue in the closing to their piece, "Building an

---

[4] Gayatri Gopinath, *Impossible Desires: Queer Diasporas and South Asian Public Cultures* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005), 4.

[5] shawndeez, ed., "Khejalat: A Zine on Queer/Trans Iranian American Life" (Zine, June 2020).

[6] Gopinath, *Impossible Desires*, 6.

Abolitionist Trans and Queer Movement with Everything We've Got," "*impossibility may very well be our only possibility.*"[7]

Drawing from this nonbinary analytic, the desire to open up space through queer diasporic cultural formations, dreams, and desires, I sought to unearth what role marriage held for my friends. The question of marriage has been central to queer theorizing, interrogating its reproduction of cisgender heteronormative nuclear family structures, its prioritization as an activist agenda following homonationalist projects, and its facilitation of queer assimilation into heteronormative models. I posed the question of weddings to my friends to see how they understood their relationship to this major life event as well as all the politicized discourses that accompanied it. Foregrounding an ethic of queer and trans potentials and imaginaries, I show how their ideations articulate a wide array of queer experience: fears, dreams, griefs, potentials, and fantasies.

Talking about weddings evoked many emotions for my friends, from utter distress to imaginative delight. Most had attended a family wedding and had fond memories of the Persian rituals that take place throughout the ceremony: the setting up of the *sofreh-aghd*, the *tooreh ghand* and *kalleh ghand*, the reciting of '*aroos rafte gol bechine*,' and *asal dadan*. I will briefly relay the description and function of each, followed by how my friends understood their relationship to these rituals.

The *sofreh aghd* is a traditional Persian wedding ceremony spread where legal marriage and ceremonial traditions are exchanged, a practice that has been taking place for thousands of years. The word *sofreh* means spread and *aghd* means ceremony. There are many symbolic items which make up the *sofreh aghd*, all which represent an element of the couple's new life and marriage together: mirrors, candles, fruits, herbs, sweets, rosewater, honey and, if desired, a Qur'an or other religious text.

---

[7] Morgan Bassichis, Alexander Lee, and Dean Spade, "Building an Abolitionist Trans & Queer Movement with Everything We've Got," in *Captive Genders: Trans Embodiment and the Prison Industrial Complex*, ed. Eric A. Stanley and Nat Smith, Expanded second edition. (Oakland, CA, USA ; AK Press, 2015), 42 (emphasis in original).

As the couple sits before the *sofreh aghd*, the *tooreh ghand* (directly translates to sugar cloth but is actually just a light, white, lacy fabric) is held over their heads, typically while happily married maternal elders take turns grinding the *kalleh ghand* (sugar cones) overhead. The rubbing of the sugar cones releases small grains of sugar, showering the couple with sweetness, blessings, and prosperity from one generation to the next.

As the ceremony takes place, and elder women are rubbing sugar flakes over their heads, the officiant, speaking for the groom, asks for the bride's hand in marriage. The bride remains silent not once but for two requests for her hand, while other women announce to the whole gathering, '*aroos raft-e gol bechine*,' meaning 'the bride is out picking flowers.' This playful toying demonstrates the cis-heteronormative assumptions that a bride must not be too easily "won over," and must be pursued by the husband seeking her hand in marriage. The third time the officiant asks for the bride's hand however, the bride herself speaks, accepting the request in what is the Iranian version of saying 'I do.' This moment is seen as the turning point in the wedding ceremony, wherein after the bride says 'yes,' the couple is considered to be wed and the audience claps and cheers. As a concluding part of the ceremony, the couple feeds each other *asal* (honey) off of each other's pinky fingers, which represents the continual sweetness, sensuality, and love they will give each other throughout their marriage.

Although there are others, these are some of the principal rituals that take place at Persian weddings, practices which all who had attended one had seen and experienced firsthand. What is important are the ways in which these wedding events were viewed by my friends as "cute" or "sweet" forms of cultural practice. All felt a connection to the rituals and experienced them as practices that were familiar, culturally potent, and part of a larger trajectory of Persian history. The rituals were viewed with endearing eyes, as noble practices that facilitated the transmittance of

269

cultural history onwards – something which those who had witnessed wanted to be a part of themselves.

Furthermore, what is noteworthy is how religion was factored in the spatial and temporal terrain of the wedding – nonexistent except for the (potential) placing of the Qur'an on the *sofreh-aghd* and the (potential) mention of Islamic scripture, prayers, or dictations during the legal marriage ritual. Fixed to this momentary instance, religiosity, if even present, is considered something which must be contained. Operating from a cultural disposition of non-Islamiosity, the presence of Islam and any associative iconography or symbolisms, is greatly confined. These physical demarcations assign Islam to a specific locale in a strategic manner, so as not to disrupt the non-Islamiosity of the collective.

Describing her experience at Persian weddings, Parisa says, "they're not Muslim. They're non-religious weddings." This exemplifies how many weddings have no religious components whatsoever, with no Qur'an placed on the *sofreh aghd* and a nonreligious figure officiating the ceremony. A frequent occurrence in the diaspora, the repudiation of Islam is so powerful that it may very well be that a wedding may have no signs of religiosity throughout the entire ceremony – no Qur'an present, no reading of Islamic scripture, no reference to God as 'Allah.'

Unsurprisingly, all of my friends stated they wanted no religious presence at their own weddings. None wanted a religious figure to ordain the wedding, no decidedly religious rituals or practices, or anything of the sort. For example, Mina shares how they have decided with their partner that religion is to be nonexistent at the wedding. They say "And so we've talked about 'What are the things that are important to us to have at our wedding? 'And both of us want it *completely* non-religious, [but] wanting to integrate some of these cultural pieces." All of them understood the Persian rituals as non-religious cultural practices which they admired and sought out, whereas any visible religiosity was to be strictly avoided.

In order to conceptualize queer and trans Iranian American relationships to weddings, arguably one of the most major cultural life events, we must understand the sociocultural significance of the Persian wedding as a potent site of cultural belonging. To have the wedding in this tradition marks one as Persian, in effect, makes one a Persian. Enacting these rituals connects one to cultural history, to a legitimacy and validity as Persian subjects, and facilitates the continuance of these cultural practices. Put another way, the Persian wedding creates Persian subjects and, in the process, marks and excludes those who cannot be a part of that very collective – the queer and/or trans diasporic Iranian who cannot reproduce the cultural rituals without disrupting their supposed 'sanctity.' Because queerness interrupts the cisgender heteronormativity of these cultural rituals, not to mention the sweeping homophobia/transphobia which prevents queer and trans individuals from being able to organize and hold a wedding, let alone one in the cultural tradition, they are seen as fundamentally outside of the cultural unit.

Sima Shakhsari argues how Iranian exilic discourses facilitates the notion of a fixed, heteronormative Iranian homeland, where queerness connotes a foreign pollutant. They argue,

> This disavowal of homoeroticism in exilic spaces, vis-à-vis a heterosexualized imagination of home, or what I call the homoerotics of exile, becomes necessary in imagining a coherent heterosexual nation and a fixed home. It locates homosexuality in the West and considers Iranian queers to be those who have been exposed to homosexuality outside of the Iranian national borders.[8]

As they suggest, any sort of queerness is assumed to be emerging from the West, from outside, from beyond the borders of the Iranian nation, determined to be a pure site of (cis)heteronormativity. This phenomenon is central to understanding Iranian American queer/trans life, as all had to grapple with this discursive claim – your queerness is a result of/produced by your Americanness; you are gay because you were exposed to this place (America); if you were a 'real' Iranian, this would not be an issue. The sheer intensity with which this discursive trope comes to be normalized in the

---

[8] Shakhsari, "From Homoerotics of Exile to Homopolitics of Diaspora," 24.

Iranian diaspora cannot be overstated. All of my friends had learned of this through the gender and sexual policing of their family units and were engaging with their own senses of queerness/transness amidst this interaction. As they contemplated their relationship to weddings and marriage, many had to encounter this universalizing claim – your queerness makes you non-Iranian, incapable of an 'authentic' Persian wedding.

In her work on trans Iranians, Najmabadi explores the cultural obligation of marriage as it is tied to gender and sexual expectations. She asserts that the rejection of queerness is less about a uniquely homophobic stance than it is an aversion to the loss of cultural marriage rites. She argues,

> The adulthood of everyone is bound to marriage. It is almost incomprehensible that someone would wish not to marry. If we assume that the key imperative is not the taboo of homosexuality (compulsory heterosexuality) but rather the marriage imperative, then the pressure on women and men was/is not so much not to have sex with 'their own sex' as not to become resistant to marriage, not to resist the dominant determinant of one's life plot.[9]

She goes on to suggest that many parents may even take pride in their daughter's embracing of certain masculine behaviors. Yet this pride "would slowly fade into anxiety and eventually pressure if a non-normative daughter did not grow out of these tendencies by her twenties and if the early signs of masculinity translated into a refusal to marry."[10] Therefore, as Najmabadi suggests, the centrality of marriage and the inability to participate in a cisgender heteronormative wedding is what facilitates the cultural rejection of queerness. She continues to suggest that the only way 'out' of the marriage imperative is to be so trans, to express gender non-conformity so much, that the family has to/can 'give up' on the child's ability to perform/live in their sex/gender assigned at birth – which she says, results in familial exclusion.

Although Najmabadi does not address the question of queer and/or trans weddings, her argument about the marriage imperative allows us to imagine how the focal point of nationalist and

---

[9] Najmabadi, *Professing Selves*, 124.

[10] Najmabadi, 124.

diasporic Iranian identity revolves moreso around the wedding than the queerness or transness of the individual. The function of the wedding, therefore, is to solidify cultural and social rites of passage, prescribed by cis/hetero gendered and sexual norms, which queer/trans individuals are encouraged to take part in as cis/hetero couples in order to retain their place in the community.

Queer Iranian American Wedding Fantasies: Dreaming Up the Impossible

Because of the commanding significance of marriage as the process by which Iranian Americans become adults in the eyes of their parents and family, all of my friends thought seriously about how to navigate this cultural event. Many had hesitations about getting married, about what their wedding could look like, who would attend, if it was possible to even get married, and on and on. As queer and trans people, my friends knew intimately the operative forces of homophobic and transphobic violence, and how these power currents had disciplined their bodies, their lives, their life goals, and dreams. In the narratives that follow, I will demonstrate the ways in which my friends engage with this homophobic and transphobic disciplining and how it shaped their queer and trans ideations of marriage.

Speaking with Ariana, I asked her if she had ever thought of her own wedding and what it would look like. She immediately underwent a lovely imaginative process, dreaming up an occasion that honored her Iranian culture in ways she admired. Ariana tells me how she loves seeing all the sweets, candles, fruits, mirrors, religious texts, and trinkets that don the setting of the *sofreh aghd*, the traditional marriage ceremony spread that is set up at the site where the ceremony is to take place. As she describes the intricacies of *sofreh aghd*s that she has seen at prior weddings, Ariana says she "would love to look into the [*sofreh aghd*]" as something to potentially incorporate in her own ceremony.

What is of significance for me here is the possibility embedded in the very process of a queer imaginary, one which invites Ariana to fantasize about her own queer wedding. As Dickinson suggests, in 'Love is a Battlefield: The Performance and Politics of Same-Sex Marriage in North America,'

> The same-sex wedding ritual need not simply reify the de facto equivalence of celebrant and legal subject, or of witness and compulsory arbiter of institutionalized norms, but might also earnestly imagine and playfully exploit different frameworks of everyday social relation and, by extension, political recognition.[11]

The process of this queer imaginary, a toying and tinkering with the very structures of marriage, allows Ariana to create a queerscape all her own. Honoring it as a "a fantasy of 'as if-ness'" the potential in queer imaginations of weddings allows for Ariana to see what is possible for her, what she can create as a part of her queer subjectivity.[12]

Dickinson continues this exploration of a queer imaginary, exemplifying the latent potentiality of queer wedding imaginations. He says,

> In such a rewriting the repetition of 'I do take thee …' as an active expression of individual entitlement might be replaced by any number of activist invocations of collective possibility: 'If we were to do this …'; 'If we were to do this differently …'; or even 'If we decided not to do this ... what might we become?[13]

Posing these questions demonstrates the art of a queer possibility, the terrain upon and through which queer marriages are (re)constructed, (re)contemplated, and (re)created. These inquiries allow an understanding of the signification of queer weddings and the processes through which they come to life, whether purely as fantasy or in this material world. I argue, that what is latent in these very questions, is the unfathomable power of queer and trans imagination and what types of futures it allows us to create.

---

[11] Peter Dickinson, "Love Is a Battlefield: The Performance and Politics of Same-Sex Marriage in North America," *Text and Performance Quarterly* 28, no. 3 (2008): 283, https://doi.org/10.1080/10462930802107944.

[12] Dickinson, 283.

[13] Dickinson, 283.

Parisa shared with me her ideations of a wedding, telling me she had plans to hold the ceremony in the woods by a lake in which all their friends would be invited in an open forum style gathering. She specified that for her there would be no cultural or religious rituals as a part of her ceremony, just her and her partner in the wilderness to celebrate their relationship. When I asked how she planned to integrate parents, if at all, she told me they had plans to have a legal ceremony at a courthouse, followed by a formal dinner, as a way to "appease" the parents. Parisa's articulation of her own wedding, although still in the imaginative stages and not formalized as a plan, demonstrates her nonattachment to Iranian and/or Muslim practice and ritual. For her, being out in the forest was of most importance. Her lack of concern for who conducted the ritual, and having little to no interest in cultural ritual, suggests that honoring her ancestral marriage rituals was not a priority for her.

Mina tells me how their relationship to weddings shifted drastically over the course of their growing queer and trans consciousness. Describing their youth, they say "I never really saw a wedding for myself. Ever." I suggest that as trans, nonbinary, and queer young people, the incessant systematic policing of gender and sexual behavior disallows many from even imagining their own weddings. The pervasive omnipresence of an assumed cisgender heterosexual livelihood makes it such that young queer and trans children become incapable of relating to weddings – seeing themselves as entirely outside of that cultural practice.

As Mina's point underscores, it is the stripping away from young queer and trans bodies the ability to even imagine a wedding, ceremony, or celebration of their love lives that stabilizes and authorizes the cisgender heteronormative subject as normative. A theme that emerged for many of my friends, this erasure is primarily a severing of possibility. The homophobia and transphobia operate as a mechanism of disciplining the dreamscape, the imagination, the fantasies of queer and trans children, not just their lived experiences. The question of queer weddings, fantasies, and

275

ideations cannot be conceptualized without tracing this specific history of how homophobic and transphobic violence not only refashion but prevent the queer/trans child from dreaming of any sort of wedding wherein they see themselves appropriately represented.

Sharing the growth of their consciousness, Mina continues to explain how they eventually adopted a noncommitted stance on marriages, entertaining it as some lofty far-removed idea that may happen "one day." They then shared how their consciousness grew as a consequence of their queer and trans politicization, and how they became very anti-marriage. They share, "I was very anti-marriage for a long time just because of the history of marriage: owning a woman, exclusion of gay people. I didn't want to be connected to any of those things." Growing out of that stance as well, Mina tells me of how they now realize the necessity for "legal protections" and how they would not mind having a huge celebratory party with "people who love you."

Mina's growth in consciousness demonstrates an important evolution in both their queer/trans politics as well as the shift in emotions that a queer/trans Iranian American may experience as they discover their relationship to marriage. A journey from impossibility, to a distant superficial idea, to outright hatred, and ultimately to legal protections and a loving celebration, Mina's conceptual process with marriages represents the fluidity of our form and our growth.

Nima, a transqueer in his early thirties, tells me he absolutely loves weddings and how they always make him cry. In his contemplations around his own wedding, he says he certainly wants to include all the cultural elements, finding them "really sweet." This was a sentiment that many of my friends shared, wherein they found their cultural rituals "sweet" or "cute" similar to the ways in which Norooz celebrations were understood. A pool of symbols, icons, and practices that many felt comfortable drawing from, the wedding rituals of the Iranian community were seen as festive, fun, cultural markers that connected them to their Iranianness. What is important is how queer and trans Iranian Americans repurpose and reinscribe meaning into many of these cisgender-heterosexual

performances. Dickonson's analysis of queer marriages raises the following question: how can collective reimaginations of marriage ceremonies offer queer partners the space to create new forms of being, of loving, of relating to one another and how do these reimaginations implicate the hegemonic discourses of heterosexuality and the institutions of marriage and family? The potential in this queer formulation is ripe with possibility.

This became apparent when Nima debated out loud how to handle a particular ritual he admired and wanted to honor in his ceremony but did not know how to, given its decidedly heterosexual form. Referring to the common playful enactment that takes place at Iranian weddings, Nima says to me, "I don't know what to do about the whole '*aroos raft-e gol bechine*' thing though." A ritual in which the bride playfully does not accept the groom's offer to marry until the third attempt, it takes place as a concluding segment of the wedding ceremony. Now, as Nima's hesitation illustrates, the entire schema of saying 'I do' in the Iranian cultural tradition relies on a cis heterosexual framing – "the bride is out picking flowers." How would this transqueer couple get married if there were no explicit bride? How would they articulate the 'I do,' honoring Nima's cultural tradition as he wished, without the presence of a bride? The possibilities that queer imaginaries, queer futurities, queer potentialities invite us into are magnificent manifestations of what else is possible, beyond the rigidities that dictate and police our social experience.

Although Nima did not yet have an answer for how he would solve this predicament, he did not seem too worried. He was busy telling me how proud he was that his mother was now fully in support of and excited to throw a "big gay Persian wedding."

Queer Fears: Navigating the Politics of Visibility When You're Scared

As excited as Ariana was to fantasize a dream wedding for herself which honored her cultural roots, she subtly avoided mentioning anything about her queerness. As calmly and politely

as possible, I asked her what role her queerness played in her ideas around having a wedding. Silently, I watched as Ariana began to sob, holding her face in her hands. Mumbling "sorry" to me whenever she could between her sobs, I sat in her presence, letting her release. I knew the feeling well. After several minutes of crying, Ariana eventually came back, wiped her tears, and began to speak.

Reassuring her as best I could, I secretly hoped she felt a little lighter after having releasing some of her emotions. She quietly uttered,

> I just don't know how... I don't know. Depending on who it would be with, would my family be there? I don't know. Would I pretend it's something else? I don't know. Would I have them, not have them there? I don't know. That's hard. I think it's hard for me to even imagine a wedding because of that.

Referring to the impossibility of imagining due to homophobic policing, Ariana's articulation demonstrates the depth of queer fear. I share her story here to illustrate the reality of queer fear: fear of exclusion, of loss of family, of loss of access, of loss of dreams. Even as I do, I must make abundantly clear my intention by doing so, as the highly politicized discursive terrain surrounding queer/trans Iranian American life leaves me no choice. The binarized poles of Iranianness and Americanness work to split the queer subjectivity of an Iranian American – if interpreted as an American queer, her fears are unintelligible for all she need do is declare herself, embrace her 'Pride,' and enter the world of 'inclusion;' yet if read as an Iranian queer, her fears become highly lucrative tropes solidifying greater (homo)nationalist projects of U.S. Empire, white (queer) supremacy, and anti-Muslim/Iranian racisms.

I must emphasize that I do not wish to shy away from the fears that many of my friends experienced because it would betray their lived experiences for me to neglect them. If I seek to be honest about their livelihoods, which I do, I must articulate the potency of internalized and externalized homophobic and transphobic violence that many endured and continue to. To ignore or downplay this for the sake of making an argument that resists anti-Muslim/Iranian racisms would

be a grave mistake. However, I also offer her story with a strident critique – not to be misappropriated into clips of homophobic/transphobic trauma at the hands of her Muslim/Iranian community that can be used as convenient justification for state-sanctioned racial logics/practices. As appealing and easy as it may be to extract Ariana's grief as an evidentiary claim of Iranian/Muslim barbarity and/or homophobic and transphobic Muslim communities, I argue that too would gravely misconstrue her diasporic queer subjectivity.

Her reality is multivalent. Her experience of fear is saturated in hyperpoliticized discourses surrounding queerness, Muslimness, Iranianess, and the politics of visibility/respectability, and yet, ultimately, I find myself looking at a young queer woman sobbing at the thought of not having family attend her wedding. That is the substance of her experience. That is the story that I wish to share here, honor, respect, and make room for – because it represents the materiality, the *real*, of queer/trans Iranian American diasporic experience.

Because neoliberal American LGBTQ rights activism has moved normative queer and trans bodies successfully into the 'politics of visibility,' wherein 'inclusion' 'representation,' and 'tolerance' will offer us all 'equality,' I argue that first, this neoliberal myth will, in fact, not protect us as we have repeatedly witnessed in the American queer/trans experience. Second, this formulation eclipses the material realities of queer and trans fears. It disallows us from articulating queer and trans experiences that depict exclusion, anxiety, fear, depression, and isolation. After all, how can you feel isolated when all you have to do is 'come out' and 'be proud?'

Juliana Huxtable argues in "Existing in the World: Blackness at the Edge of Trans Visibility," how the politics of trans visibility emerges from a specific liberal political genealogy, one which we would be prudent to critique in our own lines of thinking. She says,

> I think, in terms of larger fantasies and narratives around social progress, visibility just fits
> into an ideal of where we would be at this moment; it's the next logical step from third wave

feminism or cyber culture or the juridical advancements of mainstream LGBT rights. But it's an empty gesture in a lot of ways. And it's a gesture that I'm always questioning.[14]

This avenue of visibility being made available to trans bodies as "the next logical step" requires, as Huxtable suggests, questioning. I draw from Huxtable's formulation here to highlight this recent increase in visibility as the proper pathway towards social progress, to demonstrate how it incapacitates our ability to articulate stories which do not follow its narrative scripts.

The visibility moment supports tropes that foreground 'successful' coming out stories, stories of overcoming homophobia and transphobia, stories which champion the notion of a gay-friendly, progressive, advanced, and modern U.S.[15] As a consequence, stories that articulate fear, depression, trauma, and/or suicide in the queer/trans community undermine and invalidate these tropes, making them less valuable as a discursive storyline. What is more, I must reemphasize the nationalist boundaries of the visibility moment, one which is located squarely within American and American-centered queer theory. Therefore, to speak of an American diasporic queer identity requires the excavation of both how the Americanized visibility moment and the hypervisibility and tokenization of Iranian queer life shapes queer subjectivities of queer/trans Iranian Americans.

Many of my friends had to navigate these tensions, feeling trapped between nudges from white queers/white queer spaces to be 'out and proud' in normative visible ways and the fears of homophobia from their brown families that may mark them as backward, or legitimize war cries against Iran. The hyperpoliticization of their identities left many feeling responsible to perform their identities politically, in resistive ways, with little to no room for their interior feelings, emotions, hopes, and dreams.

---

[14] Gossett and Huxtable, "Existing in the World: Blackness at the Edge of Trans Visibility," 42.

[15] It must also be clarified that the rise in visibility politics, though framed as advancing queer/trans life through achievements in representation and inclusion, have, in fact, continued to predispose queer/trans life to more violence. For further reading, see Tourmaline, Eric A. Stanley, and Johanna Burton, eds., *Trap Door: Trans Cultural Production and the Politics of Visibility* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2017).

Reconciling her queerness with marriage, Niloofar tells me of her own difficulties with weddings. Similar to the others, she tells me she cannot even imagine her own wedding, quickly diverting to "I don't like the attention! I think it's a waste of money!" When I gently pushed her a little further about the role of her queerness in potentially obstructing her ability to imagine her own wedding, she grew a bit more somber. She spoke, "To me it almost feels wrong. It feels really wrong. Like there's a sanctity that is beyond me, beyond the partner. It's a tradition. It's a ritual. You can't [mess] with it. You have to leave it as is, or else, what is it? You know?" Pointing to the time-honored tradition of marriage, Niloofar did not feel capable of getting married because she sees it as a fixed cultural practice, something too holy to be, as she understands it, readapted for queer relationships.

Niloofar's sentiment is insightful because she is the only one of my friends who articulated marriage as a cultural tradition that is beyond re-adaption or reconfiguration. Although all my friends hesitated with how to imagine a wedding – whether or not they could see themselves having one, how their queerness/transness factored into the presentation, etc. – none of them represented it as an untouchable ritual. As convenient as it would be to neglect Niloofar's perspective, I lovingly offer it here as an important indication of the messiness that is queer/trans Iranian American Muslim diasporic life. Some were ready to hold their queer weddings in the woods, while others were certain they could never have a wedding because of the sanctity of the practice. I share these stories here to elucidate our realities, our fears, our most intimate thoughts and the nonlinearity of it all.

The subject of weddings also invited some of my friends to speak to the notion of 'coming out,' of being out, and the deeply racialized politics of 'outness.' When I spoke with Sara, asking her what her ideas were for her wedding, she became visibly distraught. She said,

> *Truly*, I don't know what I'm gonna do. And that's always been a huge thing for me. I don't know what I'm gonna do. It stresses me out to *no end*! ...It really stresses me out, cuz… I don't know what to do and there's no one to get advice from on that… I think about it all the time. It just, it stresses me out *all the time.*

Emphasizing her fears, anxieties, and lack of ability to rely on anyone for guidance on this question, Sara's reflection demonstrates the helplessness of a person implicated in many worlds as a queer Iranian Muslim diasporic subject. From her perspective, it too seems as if she feels unable to imagine a queer wedding for herself.

As we continued our discussion, Sara brought up what was an important distinction in her Iranian American queer experience, one which she felt differentiated her markedly from her white queer counterparts – coming out of the closet. Telling me of her queer white friends who all had simple, stress-free coming out experiences with supportive parents and communities, Sara felt far removed and distant from their life experiences. She was frequently pressured to come out by these same friends, learning quickly the ways in which queerness is racialized. Describing her friends, she said,

> I had white friends who were queer, and their experience was totally different. Like they came out to their parents and their parents were all like 'Great! We love that for you! Go for it!' And I felt really alone and the reaction I got from people hurt very much. [My friends] were like 'Why don't you just tell them to go to hell? And cut them off? This is toxic!' And I was like 'okay... that's not happening, that's just not [an option].'

Unable to relate to the queer experience of her American white peers, Sara's story shows how her Iranianness greatly shapes her queer experiences which are significantly different from mainstream liberal white narratives of 'coming out' as the solution to all homophobic violence. Her white queer

friends readily told her to cut herself off from her family due to their anti-queer sentiments, but Sara understood that as impossible, improbable and, literally, unthinkable.

The distinction that Sara makes is important because it highlights precisely how some individuals within queer ethnic communities may not be invested in the formal public performance of coming out as dictated by liberal gay culture. As Asifa Siraj argues in "British Pakistani Lesbians Existing Within the Confines of the Closet," "acknowledging a gay/lesbian identity firstly to oneself and then to others is framed as a source of empowerment affording the individual the social and cultural capital to affirm a previously stigmatised identity. Nevertheless, countless numbers of gay people continue to stay in the closet."[16] Even as Siraj's work articulates reasons why many Pakistani Muslim lesbians wish to stay in the closet – the unsuitability of disclosing the intimacies of your sex life to your parents, to respect family members and elders, the potential lack of (emotional, social, financial) resources to do so, and/or to prevent one's sexuality from being used against them – she operates from the standpoint that these women are still somehow inhibited by "cultural impediments."[17] Of her informants, she says "while they are British, [they] remained insulated from Western ideas about expressing one's sexual identity."[18]

Siraj's framing, then, perpetuates notions of cultural backwardness even as it wishes to illustrate the unique challenges that diasporic queer Muslim populations encounter in their daily lives. By representing their decisions to not come out as equivalent to cultural impediments or insulation from Western ideas, Siraj constitutes these Muslim queer bodies as located in a pre-modern space and temporality. I argue that it is possible to appreciate the ways in which queer and

---

[16] Siraj, "British Pakistani Lesbians Existing within the Confines of the Closet," 31.

[17] Siraj, 29.

[18] Siraj, 37.

trans Muslim bodies articulate their desire and intention to not come out, without relegating them to the space and temporality of premodernity. As Mahmood cautions,

> If we accept the notion that all forms of desire are discursively organized (as much of recent feminist scholarship has argued), then it is important to interrogate the practical and conceptual conditions under which different forms of desire emerge, including desire for submission to recognized authority. We cannot treat as natural and imitable only those desires that ensure the emergence of feminist politics.[19]

Drawing on her cautionary contention, I too cannot and do not wish to treat as natural, normal, and valuable only those forms of queer subjectivity which ensure and reify the whiteness of an American queer ethos. It is essential that I offer Sara's anecdote here as a way to excavate the ways in which mainstream American queer culture shapes the terrain of queer subjectivities and, furthermore, how she came to engage with these discourses as an Iranian American queer.

Sharing more of what her friends would say, Sara says they would regularly tell her "you're embarrassed of yourself. That's why you're not doing this thing. Just tell them to go to hell." Outraged as she recollected the experience, Sara emphatically stresses, "There is… *No*!... If I had said anything close to that, I would *never*, I would *never* even come close. *Never* spoken to her like that *ever*." Literally speechless as she attempts to compose a sentence, Sara cannot even fathom speaking to her mother the way her white queer friends advise her to. Packaging their critiques of Sara within her shame, this articulation demonstrates the manipulative underbelly of racist anti-in the closet culture. The very ways in which American white queerness is articulated is precisely through a distinction with and against the backwardness, behindness, and premodernity of queers who do not 'come out;' the communities of color, the immigrant communities, the Muslims that represent the tail end of a teleology of liberal advancement.

Furthermore, it requires the active reproduction of the closet as a space where only those who are stuck in shame and embarrassment reside. This formulation cannot permit, nor make

---

[19] Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*, 15.

intelligible, reasons why the closet may in fact be useful, for instance, as a means of (strategic) protection. As Fisher's work, 'Immigrant Closets: tactical-micro-practices-in-the-hyphen' suggests, there is a great deal of power for queer immigrant communities "in oscillations between visibility and invisibility."[20] Fisher's work resembles the argument I offer in the Introduction, the strategic utility of straddling queerness and being perceived as non-queer. It opens up room to both move away from the reductive notion that everyone in the closet is suffering, behind, and choiceless, as well as appreciating new ways queer/trans agency may manifest itself.

The more she talks to me, the more it becomes clear that Sara sees herself a victim of queer anti-Muslim racism. She shares how her experiences with anti-in the closet culture "have hurt more than anything." Feeling the palpable racism sandwiched into those comments, Sara learned that her Iranianness and queerness were seen as incompatible by her white queer friends.

As a facet of homonationalist articulation, her queer white friends implored her to wholly reject her family (which they easily reduced to anti-queer and nothing else) in order to become a 'liberated queer.' What is important about this formation, as it pertains to Iranian Americans, is that it requires the severance from the family unit; what is understood as a brown, backwards, homophobic, and anti-modern network of social relations that threatens to lock us into a past that is irreconcilable with the modern. Sara's experience with her queer white friends shows the intricate ways in which these homonationalist projects unfold in the lived experiences of queers of color, while also illustrating the ways in which they come to undergird their ideological projects – the queer of color's shame as the root issue, the requirement of a public and visible rejection of the anti-queer family unit. In these formulations, the closet is conceptualized solely as a site/space of fear and powerlessness. As it stands, Sara had not disowned her mother and family as her queer white friends

---

[20] Diana Fisher, "Immigrant Closets: Tactical-Micro-Practices-in-the-Hyphen," *Journal of Homosexuality* 45, no. 2–4 (2003): 171–92, https://doi.org/10.1300/J082v45n02_08.

suggested; instead, she chose to disown those friends and cultivate an Iranian queer community instead.

A central phenomenon of absorbing ethnic queers into proper white queerdom is the requirement not only to 'come out' and 'be proud' in these visibility-based tropes, but the simultaneous requirement to cut off the brown family unit. This disposability of the Muslim family is part and parcel of becoming a legible modern American queer, requiring the removal of the family, understood as nothing more than a homophobic ball and chain. I suggest that this disposability of the family, as Sara's example demonstrates, is what constitutes 'proud American queer identity,' a highly racialized experience which is incapable of thinking, dreaming up, or contemplating transformative possibilities. In the following section, I offer a story which demonstrates what becomes possible when in fact, we do not, dispose of our families.

Queering Intergenerational Wedding Wisdom: 'Tell Her I Will Come to the Wedding'

Sitting in a cozy outdoor patio in a Woodland Hills coffee shop, Nakisa tells me of her conceptual journey with weddings, particularly how she has continuously transformed her understanding of her own potential wedding. I sipped my tea while she spoke:

> I think back in the day I definitely thought of the much more American version of a wedding, which would be you know …I thought about walking down an aisle in a church, and then I realized 'wait a minute I'm not religious. I can't do this in a church.' And then I thought about 'okay, well I'll just have a ceremony with an ordained minister.' And then I was like 'wait but I want the Iranian side', like the Persian culture as well, so then I thought about having you know like the *sofreh aghd* and all that. And then I just decided I don't like being the center of attention, so I actually don't want a wedding.

Nakisa's trajectory highlights the development of her consciousness, how her race, religion, and culture mediate the ways in which she can imagine her own wedding. Noticing that she too left out her queerness, I prompted her gently to see if she had reconciled the world of her queerness with her wedding imaginings. To which, she replied,

I think that at the beginning my own internalized homophobia made it so that… well, I've dated men and I've dated women. And I think that internalized homophobia kicked in where I was like well 'If I marry a woman, I don't want to have a wedding.' I felt uncomfortable at the thought. …I also thought none of my family would be there.

Although she still stands by her choice of not wanting a wedding, Nakisa shared how she had overcome her own internalized homophobia, moving into a space where she no longer feels that her queerness forbids her from getting married. No minor feat, Nakisa's assertion demonstrates the particularities of how internalized homophobia operated for her – the assumption that no family would attend.

As we continued to sip our teas and discuss the realities of queer Iranian American life, Nakisa brought up her mother's marriage as in important site for understanding her own relationship to queerness, weddings, families, and marriage. She informed me that her mother, an Iranian Armenian Christian, had to convert to Islam in order to marry her father, an Iranian Shi'i Muslim. Her mother's family was not accepting of their relationship because of religious differences. "To this day, my mom's family doesn't even know that she did that," she tells me of her mom's secret conversion to Islam.

Nakisa describes in detail how her mother quietly left the home one night and married her father at a friend's house. She says of her mother's wedding,

Her family was not supportive of the marriage because my dad was Muslim. And so, none of her family came and she actually got married in secret. She went and had this little ceremony and that night went back to her family's house and pretended like nothing happened. And then like a month later, she came out and was like 'alright, I'm married.'

When I asked how her mother's family responded to this, Nakisa said "My mom's family disowned her for seven years."

Rejected from the family unit, her mother's decision to marry a Muslim man sent her into familial exile, a lack of the familial support, access, community, and resources that form the very substance of Iranian social existence. I immediately sensed a potential connection between Nakisa's

mother's experience and her own self-conceptualization as a queer Iranian American. Nakisa quickly tied the two together herself, linking her mom's wedding experience to her mother's recent openness to understanding her queer daughter. She tells me how she "just recently came out to [her] mom" and that "it went surprisingly well." As she puts the two together, she says, "having gone through what she went through… has made it so she's much more accepting of [my queerness]." Sharing a trajectory of her mother's relationship to queerness, Nakisa is proud of how far she has come. She tells me of how her mother used to be a comfortable and open homophobe, wholly ignoring and erasing any signs of queerness, to then embracing a silent liberalized tolerance for queerness, to now openly discussing and conversing about queerness as a normalized aspect of daily life. These shifts that Nakisa outlines took place over the course of years, culminating in her mother's receptivity and comfort with navigating queerness today.

As we spoke, Nakisa told me another story of how her mother came to embody an affirmative queer politics, personally endorsing a queer wedding ceremony. A year prior to Nakisa telling her mother of her own queerness, she was asked to host a bridal shower celebration for a close friend. Deciding to hold the bridal party at her parents' house, Nakisa became uncertain how to articulate the request, as it was for a queer wedding and, therefore, a two-bride bridal shower. There would be no way to keep this from her mother, so she decided to tell her.

Upon sharing that with her mother, Nakisa said her mom began asking all sorts of questions about the wedding, the processions, and then, most importantly, about the families. When Nakisa's mother heard that one of the bride's families would not be attending, she got "*so upset*. What do you mean they are just *not going* to their daughter's wedding?" she asked Nakisa. She says how immediately after hearing that, her mother was "so much more open to having the bridal shower" and wanted to "make sure that [that bride had] a good time." Nakisa said her mother even told her, "if she wants a mother figure, tell her I will come to the wedding."

As Nakisa describes the bridal shower party to me, she tells me how her mother attended the celebrations and said a few words while everybody was around.

> She had reminisced. She was [saying] 'I know what it's like to have a wedding without your family there.' … She was able to identify. Because it's the same feeling, you know? You're still feeling abandoned by your family. So she could identify even though she's not queer. She didn't have a queer wedding, but she can identify with not having your family there and not having that support.

What I wish to highlight is the very queer experience Nakisa's mother had with her own interfaith wedding and how that shaped and informed her own ability to understand and affirm both her daughter's queerness as well as her that of her queer friends'. Through a queer reading of her mother's wedding, we can surmise that the abandonment her mother experienced deeply shaped her capacity to engage in intergenerational dialogue about queerness. Being disowned for marrying a Muslim man paved the way for both Nakisa and her mother to be able to discuss, relate to, and understand one another across the hetero/queer divide.

I share Nakisa's stories here to emphasize the beauty, the transcendence, the possibility of overcoming social barriers and cultural 'rules.' It is an important set of experiences which embodies precisely the essence of possibility, of what is within reach. I articulate their stories as such because their lived experience directly counters the American/white queer anti-Muslim racist discourses which require the abandonment of the homophobic Muslim family unit as a practice of obtaining a valid queer subjecthood. Nakisa and her mother have a relationship, a queer affirmative parent-child relationship, precisely because she did not 'give up' (on) her family. What transformative beauties are possible when we release our commitments to disposability?

Now, as I write this argument, I wish to be exceedingly clear – I am not advising the absorption of familial abuse or homophobic/transphobic violence, nor am I suggesting that this outcome is easily achievable (by all). I also do not wish to suggest that the responsibility of facilitating understanding of queerness/transness is purely on the queer/trans party. What I am

arguing however, is this: if we follow the white/anti-Muslim racist queer proscriptions of disposing of the family unit, all hopes of growth are forgone. There is absolutely no way for cis/hetero understanding of any aspect of queer/trans life without first being willing to entertain the possibility that transformation is possible. If we buy into the myth that our families are in fact nothing but backward, violent, misogynist, and homophobic/transphobic Muslims, we disallow any potential, any possibility for alternative experiences to emerge. If we are to follow the American queer anti-Muslim racist liberalism that substantiates much of current queer discourse, as Sara's friends demonstrate, there would be no room, no space, no potential for instances like Nakisa and her mother.

I suggest that if queer/trans Iranian Americans operate from within that Americanized homonationalist register by disowning and eradicating one's ethnic Muslim family unit as a prerequisite for 'being out and proud,' it becomes impossible to cultivate understanding between cis/hetero and queer/trans bodies. The decision to remain a part of the family unit, contrary to the demands of anti-Muslim queer liberal discourse, facilitates the potential for a queer/trans affirmative family. Furthermore, it counters another sinister consequence of queer anti-Muslim racist politics, the severing of brown families in furtherance of the project of modernity.

'If There is a God, Let's Do it Right': Muslim Funerals & Gendered Grievings

As much as weddings represent the start of a new life, a ceremonious gathering of love and joy, the passing of loved ones and the accompanying funeral rituals also act as central sites of cultural practice. Because of the sweeping power of non-Islamiosity, the ways in which Islam emerges at funerals proves to be rather paradoxical. Even as the faith is understood to be a destructive, dirtying, defiling of every glorious association Iranians hold of their nation, when it came time to lay someone to rest, Islam became available as the source of tradition, faith, and

cultural ritual. Sharing my friends' stories as they memorialize their dead, I show how queer and trans eyes view these highly normative religious environments and how they conceptualize their own relationship to the deceased and their God.

Describing her mother's funeral process, Niloofar quietly told me of how her family relies on Islam in moments of need. Identifying many of her relatives as anti-Islam (non-Islamious), she noticed the marked shift when it came time to lay a loved one to rest. She says, "I think they kind of turn it on for these moments… like it becomes acceptable. Or you fall back on what you know cuz it's like mortal. 'If there is a God, let's do it right and do all the prayers.'" As Niloofar suggests, her family's reliance on Islamic code, conduct, and ritual becomes acceptable in this moment, because to deal with death requires the reliance on our normative religious faith. Therefore, her family held the processions at a mosque, and buried her mother in the Muslim section of a local funeral grounds.

She goes on to describe the process by which her mother was prepared for burial. With tears in her eyes, she tells me how she and other close female relatives washed the body and wrapped it in white cloth for burial, "the Muslim way." Soberly she said, "I never had to do something like that before" as she explained the communal gathering of women who prayed, cried, and prepared the body. Yet as she spoke, I could tell how powerful, significant, and crucial it was for Niloofar to be a part of this practice, declared as Muslim, to properly honor her mother. She tells me how she found meaning, value, and comfort in having these rituals as a process of grieving her mother's death. So though there is a current of non-Islamiosity palpable within the Iranian American diaspora, Niloofar, and her relatives, are able to rely on it as a source of cultural tradition, thereby heightening the social significance of the funeral rituals.

It is imperative to understand that the reaching into Islamic iconography and ritual is the means by which the community is able to accentuate honor and respect for the deceased. Understood as a cultural tradition which dates back hundreds of years, practicing Muslim funerary

rituals authenticates the death as a process of cultural embodiment. Without such practices, the

death stands to be interpreted as dishonorable and/or invalid.

Describing the proceedings for me, Niloofar tells of how her brother behaved at the funeral,

the devout Muslim who was attacked for not taking vodka shots described in Chapter One. Calling

her brother a "super religious Muslim," and a "huge blow to her parents'" senses of non-Islamiosity,

Niloofar shares how his actions at the funeral interrupted her grieving process. Coming to the

funeral with a large group of men whom their mother did not know, Niloofar's brother "kind of

took center stage." In what she described was a loud performance of praying, yelling, wailing, and

chanting, Niloofar shared her frustrations with her brother and his visibly Muslim funerary

demonstrations. Critiquing his actions, Niloofar tells me how this visible Muslim presentation

detracted from who their mother was and what she believed. "That wasn't her at all. There was a

disconnect for sure," she said quietly as she ruminated on how the event transpired. Telling me how

it affected her ability to properly grieve her mother, Niloofar located the hypermasculine

performativity of these Muslim practices as interruptions of her mother's genuine spiritual/religious

experience. She mused, "How much of the funeral is for the living and not for the deceased?"

Niloofar therefore, is able to draw a line of distinction for herself between what are

considered appropriate, modest, and culturally valid rituals of grieving (the washing and preparing of

her mother's body for burial with relatives) and those she considers excessive, hypermasculine, self-

centered performances (her brother's group's chants, wails, and cries). This distinction serves to

allow Niloofar entry into a series of cultural codes which offer her meaning, as acceptable, desirable,

and necessary processes of grieving the loss of her mother. Niloofar is able to demarcate what

constitutes, for her, valid forms of grief, ritual, and commemoration. Of further interest, and as I

will fully extrapolate in the following chapter, are the ways in which Niloofar's mother becomes

absorbed into her creative prayer rituals, bringing together her queerness, divine beliefs, ancestral

guidance, and Muslim faith. Nonetheless, what matters is how Niloofar situates herself in these funerary traditions. As a cisgender queer woman, she was able to partake in the body washing rituals with other cisgender women tasked with cleaning and preparing the body for burial – a process which moved her and gave her the space to appropriately grieve her mother's passing.

In another fascinating insight of gendered grieving practices, Parisa tells me of her experience with her grandmother's passing. Luckily in Iran and able to spend time with her grandmother before she passed, Parisa describes how her grandmother's last few days were ones of semi-consciousness, lingering between this realm and the next. As a way to improve her mood and bring some excitement to her final days, Parisa tells me how she decided to paint her grandmother's nails. However, she describes how this action became a central debate in the family, wherein they demanded that she remove the nail polish.

Recollecting the experience, Parisa says,

They were like 'You need to take off her nail polish!' …There was this huge discussion between the men and the women around whether or not I should wipe off her nail polish. I had painted it like the day before when she was kind of conscious. I'm sure we took it off because I don't think they'd let her be buried like that.

Describing how it became a massive point of contention, Parisa explains how this gendered dispute involved many questions: notions of 'Islamic modesty,' patriarchal claims to women's bodies, Muslim decorum decrees, funerary ritual, and ultimately a question of how to read her act, whether as one of joy, love, and ancestral connection or not. What is noteworthy here is how this story came to substantiate the way Parisa related to funerals which she understood as sites of strict religiosity and (cis)gender policing.

Frustrated with her experience, she went on to tell me how her family processed the death of her grandmother. Parisa's experience with funerals and Iranian Muslim funerary tradition shed light on how practices 'there' reinforce conceptualizations of Iran as rooted in cultural backwardness, religiosity, and pre-modernity. She described the crying, wailing, sobbing, and collective grieving

practices that take place upon the death of a loved one, finding herself confused as to how these visibly Muslim performances became a part of her family's grieving process. Referring to the sobbing and praying, she says,

> I think I tune it all out. I was thinking this is ridiculous... I don't know. I have this weird thing with the religious thing. This is ridiculous. I remember being upset about the nail polish situation because they were making such a big deal about it. And I was like 'my grandma likes to have her nails done.' [And] it was like suddenly all this religion that I had never seen before. I had never seen anything like that before in my family. I just remember my cousins reading the Qur'an suddenly. And I was like 'where the fuck is this coming from?'

Uncertain as to the preponderance of Muslim rituals as a practice for grieving her grandmother's death, Parisa locates her family's non-Islamiosity as something that is suspended in times of death. A common practice for many Iranians, the rejection of Islam is neatly set aside when rituals are needed to commemorate the deceased. As she said, "suddenly this thing that we pretend we don't really care about is very prevalent."

This experience, though in Iran and therefore a slightly more complex diasporic experience, showcases the ways in which Parisa makes sense of Iranian funerary practices. Through her diasporic lens, she detects much of their behaviors as excessive displays of Muslim ritual, saying how her family took her to "the boonies" for the actual burial. Referring to *Behesht-e Zahra*, Tehran's main cemetery with over a million deceased, Parisa's articulation posits Iranian funerary practices as more visibly Muslim and, therefore, less rational, progressive, and ultimately, less meaningful for her. In her experience, the nail polish dispute made it so she could not understand the practices of her family, whether religious or not. All she took was how they made her remove the nail polish from her dead grandmothers' hands, a sign of her love and adoration rejected by the Muslim value system she encountered.

Trans Sorrows: How Gender Non-Conformity Shapes Grieving Practices

As Shahpour's experience at the outset of the chapter illustrates, the trans subject is at once grappling with many facets of body, gender, social code, and religious formality. By spreading his grandmother's ashes in the *Imamzadeh* grounds and going inside and praying, he was able to send her off in a form that was meaningful to him, a ritual that made sense, one where he could grieve and honor her as she left this realm.

Offering more insight into a trans Muslim experience with deceased loved ones, Shahpour tells me of his experience visiting his other grandmother's tombstone in Orange County. Because he has/had a strong connection and relationship to his grandmother, Shahpour frequently visits her tombstone, a normative cultural practice, to speak with, convene with, and grieve his grandmother's departure.

He tells me of one instance where he took his partner with him to visit his grandmother. As he arrives, he tells me he knocks on the tombstone and begins his conversation with her. He says as he begins speaking with her, he wonders to himself, "what are you seeing me as? Or are you just hearing me and talking back to me?'... I wonder what she thinks of this. 'Are you seeing me as Shahpour or Nika? How do you feel about this right now?'" A series of questions with no easy answer, Shahpour's questions give us further insight into how trans bodies must constantly (re)iterate themselves to fit into a cisgender landscape. His questions highlight his fears, his anxieties, his uncertainties around what it means to be trans and still invested in spiritual/religious connection to our deceased loved ones.

He tells me of an heirloom that was left behind by his grandmother, a ring that he wears as a way to connect with her. He says,

> She left this ring [shows me the ring he's wearing]. She just left it for us, so I always wear it. If I'm in a shit situation I just kind of sit there and talk to it, and I talk to her, and like she comes in my dreams a lot which is really nice and I talk to her but I don't ever see what I look like when I'm talking to her so I don't know what she's seeing me as, which I would

assume since it's my dream, she's seeing me as me, …and I… I don't know what to think because maybe now that she's gone she's okay with it? And she's seeing that I'm happy? And I'm not causing any trouble, but I never really took a minute…[to think] 'what is she seeing when she talks to me?' and I don't know how to feel about that.

Worried about how his grandmother views him, whether in his new transmasculinizing form or his prior more feminized form, Shahpour's questions demonstrate the tensions of trans religious/spiritual connection. Although he openly posits these questions to me, it is clear that he does not speak these out loud, whether over the tombstone or to the ring. Nonetheless, his fears and hesitations with how his transness is interpreted by his grandmother does not prevent him from maintaining a connection with her. A remarkable, admirable, and beautiful act, Shahpour allows his uncertainty to be a part of his grieving practices.

As much as he is afraid of the cisgender limitations that may misconstrue his body, his life, and his relationships he does not allow those to prevent him from attending to his grandmother's gravesite, nor does he allow it to sever their relationship. Through this, I see an act of potential, of possibility indecipherable to liberal feminisms and queer theories that find spirituality/religiosity purely as sites of queer/trans exclusion or even as sites of queer/trans resistance. It is through his sheer insistence on existing, on just being alive as he is in his form and continuing to convene with his grandmother that I see so much hope, so much power. He is hesitant, uncertain of himself, yet still present and willing to bring himself as he is, with his partner, to pay his respects and continue his relationship with his grandmother. I suggest that it is through his deep religious convictions that Shahpour is able to connect with God, with ancestors, with a divine otherworldly energy, in ways that rewrite queer/trans scripts.

He continues to carry the ring, wearing it daily, as a way to cherish, honor, and remember his grandmother, even though there are uncertainties present in how his body is perceived. I take his actions as brave, honest, and powerful interventions into conceptualizing the wide breadth of queer/trans spiritualities. He shows us what is possible when we overcome the binary limitations

and oppositions dictated by colonial queer modernity. In that, I find a beautiful story of overcoming, of an honest grappling with the mundane of two bodies, one alive and shifting, one dead and no longer known in human form. His story gives us room to imagine what is possible, what has been foreclosed for so long.

CHAPTER SIX

Acid Trips, Laundry, & Queer Love: Queer and Trans Explorations of God

What does a queer prayer look like? How does a trans person imagine divine spirit? What spiritual rituals does a nonbinary person cultivate to feel more connected to their creator, their ancestors? Where does the queer/trans Muslim find space to enter into connection with God? I spent hours and hours speaking with my friends to collect these narratives, the stories that are not told, or more precisely, not allowed to be told for they destabilize so much of what is accepted as truth, as norm, as permissible. I sought to discover their innermost moments with the supernatural, the intimate, the private, the secret realm of communication between them and their higher powers. In combination with an analysis which appreciates their social identities, this chapter articulates how second-generation queer/trans Iranian Americans explore, relate to, find meaning in, and communicate with God.

Before sharing their stories, I must articulate how I am conceptualizing Islam. Drawing on the works of Talal Asad and Shahab Ahmed, I offer a definition of Islam which is invested in the fullness of human experience, encapsulating a wide array of belief, ritual, and practice, as opposed to the prescriptive/proscriptive authorities of orthodox tradition. Centering the lived experiences of individuals, my understanding of Islam allows an avenue for appreciating the ways in which queer/trans Muslims engage with the faith, its rituals, and their own readaptations.

Asad offers one formulation with which to understand Islam as an analytical concept, what he calls a discursive tradition. He defines this Islamic discursive tradition as "a tradition of Muslim discourse that addresses itself to conceptions of the Islamic past and future, with reference to a particular Islamic practice in the present."[1] Orthodoxy is introduced as a primary facet of this discursive tradition, a systematic way in which Muslims have had the power to authorize actions as

---

[1] Asad, *The Idea of an Anthropology of Islam*, 14.

Islamic and non-Islamic across time and space. For Asad, orthodoxy is not simply a collection of opinions, but a relationship of power and having the capacity to act that power out. Asad suggests that Islamic orthodoxy is wherever Muslims have the power to regulate actions as correct or incorrect, thereby authorizing Islam.

Asad's formulation of a discursive tradition has been widely cited, referenced, and utilized across the academy as a strident critique of Western epistemological failures to appropriately conceptualize Islam as an analytical category. Specifically for scholars of Islam, Asad has been a primary scholarly reference with which to introduce critique against continuing Orientalist and anti-Muslim racist theoretical frames. However useful the theoretical proposition of a discursive tradition has been, I believe it still limits our ability to conceptualize Islam as a living, breathing faith which billions of individuals engage with on a daily basis. Shahab Ahmed provides a careful, robust interrogation of Asad's discursive tradition and offers an alternative which broadens the scope of Islam as an analytical concept.

Shahab Ahmed locates his issue with Asad's discursive tradition in its authoritative prescription of the correct: "that is, in *orthodoxy*, which emerges irresistibly in his conceptualization as the 'crucial' component in Islam."[2] Showing how the emphasis on orthodoxy and prescriptive practices in Islam has become, in a way, an orthodoxizing conceptualization of Islam, Ahmed suggests that this forces us into another binary of orthodoxy and unorthodoxy/heterodoxy.[3] In Asad's formulation, the closer to orthodoxy, the more Islamic and vice versa, producing an exclusivist, proscriptive, and authoritative reading of Islam. Ahmed clarifies that this orthodoxizing conceptualization of Islam is in no way Asad's position alone, and that an overwhelming number of Islamic scholars understand Islam in a similar manner.

---

[2] Ahmed, *What Is Islam?*, 272–73 (emphasis in original).

[3] Ahmed, 274.

The obsession with orthodoxy – rules, laws, codes, tradition, authority – in this precise form, whether conceptually/epistemologically or sociopolitically/materially, has dramatically altered our senses of validity and our very senses of what is valuable. I argue that this is a consequence of the colonial encounter, wherein the attention to orthodoxy becomes the normative, appropriate, and reified form of authority, upheld by community members and scholars alike. Aspects of Islam considered outside of this "discursive tradition," are therefore lowered in the hierarchy of value and considered less meaningful, less authentic, less authoritative, and less significant.

This analytical formation is insufficient, particularly as it applies to queer/trans bodies, because it prevents any honest examination of queer/trans Muslim life. In pushing for a more intricate conceptualization of Islam which is not limited to exclusivist notions of orthodoxy, Ahmed argues for more interrogation of the role of authority. He offers what he calls *explorative authority* or the authority to explore (as opposed to prescriptive authority) as another way to conceive of authority within the discursive tradition of Islam. He argues,

> Whereas the proponent of prescriptive authority views his authority as a license to prescribe to another, the bearer of explorative authority views his authority as a license to *explore* (by) himself. Exploration is precisely the business of setting out into the unknown, the uncertain, the unexperienced, the unsettled, the new… In order to explore, one must take the view, first, that one has the authority to do so (that is, that one is not trespassing one's limits), and second, that there is something of value or meaning to be obtained from the exploration – indeed, that *exploration itself is of value and meaning*.[4]

Offering us a mechanism with which to grasp the broad life experiences of Muslim faith, belief, and practice, Ahmed's explorative authority is invested in centering the lived experiences of Muslims as opposed to the prescriptive authorities of a presumed discursive tradition. As Ahmed suggests, it is the very agential decision to set out into the unknown and decide that there is something of value and meaning to be obtained from that journey that produces the Muslim subject.

---

[4] Ahmed, 282-283 (emphasis in original).

By refocusing our attention to what is of value, what is meaningful, Ahmed's explorative authority carves out a conceptual space to understand how queer and trans people relate to and feel a connection to Islam and/or God. By remaining preoccupied with orthodox routines, practices, and rituals as the centerpiece of religion, we risk erasing the multiple and varying ways queer and trans individuals understand their relationship to Islam. Explorative authority invites us to sit in the realm of potential, of what is possible, of what is to be gained from setting out into the unknown, simply for the fact that an individual seeks to explore.

Ahmed concludes by arguing that "*to conceptualize Islam first and foremost in terms of a concern to prescribe the correct is to lose sight of Islam as an undertaking to explore the meaningful.*"[5] No other sentence encapsulates my argument and conception of Islam better than this. The very reduction of religiosity and/or spirituality to a realm of authorizing correct and incorrect behavior betrays the limitless potential of religious and/or spiritual ideas, beliefs, memories, hopes that people construct as a part of that very experience. Through explorative authority, we can adequately engage with all the ways queer and trans people relate to God, the ways they find meaning, connection, and healing. Moving beyond the racist narrative that Islam is solely anti-queer/trans, explorative authority makes room for highlighting what it is that actually constitutes queer and trans Muslim life, beyond the hackneyed tropes of repression. It is an analytical frame which can make sense of how these individuals find spiritual/religious meaning, value, and solace through faith.

I offer the following narratives from the queer and trans individuals I interviewed as a testament, first and foremost, to the fact that there is a strong and powerful connection between queer and trans people and religion and/or spirituality. Also, to argue that the outdated assumption that religiosity and queerness/transness are mutually exclusive is simply baseless and insufficient. Although undoubtedly there are pronounced discourses which articulate that queerness and/or

---

[5] Ahmed, 287 (emphasis in original).

transness are "sinful," "heretic," or grounds for "eternal damnation," I propose a worldview that allows queer and trans individuals to self-narrate their experiences with religion, God, spirituality, and faith. If I were to respond to those discourses, disarticulating the litany of texts which oust, reject, and exclude queer and trans bodies from religiosity, my work would be bereft of my ultimate purpose – exploring the myriad ways queer and trans people actually do connect with God.

Drawing on Ahmed's explorative authority, I insist that queerness and/or transness are not diametrically opposed to religiosity and, in fact, it is one of the many sinister products of colonial modernity to see these in binary opposite form. By not taking the two as mutually exclusive but, rather, allowing these individuals to share their own processes, thought-projects, praying styles, revelations, and epiphanies, I have learned that there is in fact, a robust and powerful connection between queer and trans people and their God(s), whatever name or form it may take. Rather, as much evidence shows, queerness and transness is cause for greater proximity to spirituality and God in many cultures.[6] To hear and revel in their stories and experiences was truly a magnificent experience, one which I hope will further illuminate the transcendental powers of faith for all.

So Who is God? Naming, Locating, and (Not) Seeing the Divine

Of primary interest for me is how my friends engage with, relate to, and understand God. As I demonstrated in Chapter 4, many of them understood themselves to be 'not Muslim enough' because they did not abide by a strict religious routine, thereby considering themselves to be not "real" Muslims. I see this as a direct consequence of the prevailing principles of civilizational modernity, and the centering of orthodoxy and prescriptive authority as the sole way to understand Islam, across religious, academic, activist, social, cultural, and private spaces. Nonetheless, all of my

---

[6] Phillip Picardi, "Unholier Than Thou - Trans People Are Sacred," n.d., accessed March 1, 2022; Sobonfu Somé, "Homosexuality: The Gatekeepers," in *The Spirit of Intimacy: Ancient African Teachings in the Ways of Relationships* (Berkeley Hills Books, 1997), 132–38.

friends still had a relationship with God (or their preferred name for this entity), the supernatural world, and how they communicated with forces beyond this realm. I share some of their experiences here, highlighting the ruptures queer and trans experiences create in our understanding of religion/spirituality. I am hoping we can learn from their constructions, interventions, and ideations to better understand both the fluidity of the nature of identity as well as the transformative power of the spiritual/religious terrain.

"God Feels like Such a Small Word for What It Is:" Language, Names, and Gender Feelings

Throughout our conversations, many of my friends immediately brought up their hesitations around the word 'God.' Highlighting the rhetorical implications behind the term, I show how my friends rationalized their own spiritual/religious experiences around these discursive backdrops, many creating their own linguistic ideations of what this essence should be named. A common point of contention for many was the association of the word 'God' with 'a man in the sky.' Locating this word as closely attached to Christianized notions of a judgmental (cis) man in the sky, many of my friends felt alienated by the language and were uninterested in using it themselves.

Mina says they are certain that their understanding of God is "forsure not a man in the sky that tells people whether they go to heaven or hell." In describing how she relates to her higher power, Nakisa says she does not "think of the traditional image of 'some guy sitting up there.'" Bahman explains, "I believe in a universal force. Not 'God' [as] in like 'A man in the sky.'" He went on to suggest that God strikes him as very "*Christian*… God just implies, to me, a man in the sky, as in like, a person" and that for him is wholly insufficient. He felt far more comfortable with the word '*Khoda*' (the Farsi language word for God) to understand this entity, rejecting '*Allah*' (the Arabic language word for God) as that was "too Arabi" and unfamiliar to him. He enjoyed the etymology

303

of *Khoda*, highlighting that "*Khoda*, like *khod[7]*, like self" allowed him to feel more comfortable in his relationship with *Khoda*.

Echoing this sentiment, Shadi describes how they see the different labels available to them, "God is very Judeo-Christian, *Khoda* reminds me of Islam, [and] Universe seems not tied to anything." As Michael Cobb argues in the introduction to *God Hates Fags*, "conservative Christian rhetoric can be one of the most authoritative kinds of political speech that, despite the myriad religious differences in the United States, functions as the lingua franca of American nationality."[8] Consolidating a coherent nationalist identity, the conservative Christian rhetoric Cobb mentions comes to delineate the boundaries of American identity as rooted in a Christian ethos. Furthermore, as Jakobsen and Pelligrini assert in *Love the Sin: Sexual Regulation and the Limits of Religious Tolerance*, the very expression of 'God' evokes a particular discursive history. They suggest, "When the president takes his oath of office and makes his inaugural address, there are always references to God, and we all know which God is being invoked."[9] American national identity is interwoven through a series of Christian ethical values, all marking the language of 'God,' claiming it as its own. Sensing these racialized associations, many of my friends felt uncomfortable using the word for themselves.

Yet, Shadi also outlined how *Khoda* felt imperfect for her as well, being that it is too closely associated with Islam and its normative practices. Calling it "a good middle ground," Shadi feels more at ease with the racial, nationalist, and cultural significations intertwined with *Khoda*, but still hesitates to use it at times. Ultimately, they have come to the language of 'the Universe,' which they see as a clean slate, untied to any explicit religious/racial meaning. Attracted to its explicit

---

[7] '*Khod*' means self in Farsi.

[8] Michael Cobb, *God Hates Fags: The Rhetorics of Religious Violence* (New York: NYU Press, 2006), 14.

[9] Janet Jakobsen and Ann Pellegrini, *Love the Sin: Sexual Regulation and the Limits of Religious Tolerance* (New York: NYU Press, 2003), 13.

detachment from monotheistic traditions, orthodoxies, and practices, Shadi finds connection to her higher power through the language of 'the Universe.' Highlighting the multiple languages, registers, and discursive histories available to them, Shadi's articulation shows how many forms they have for connecting with their higher power. Sorting through her multiple mediums, Shadi is comfortable with 'Universe' as her title for her God precisely because she understands it as non-Judeo-Christian and non-orthodoxically Islam. Their affinity for the language of 'the Universe' is a practical way they are able to disaggregate racialized Christian prescriptions and orthodox Muslim practices away from their sense of energetic connection to the divine.

Shadi elaborated this critique of the word God saying, "God feels like such a small word for what it is." Her assertion demonstrates that her understanding of God is vast, expansive, boundless, and decidedly, nonhuman/nonmale. For them, the descriptor 'God' is incapable of grasping their intuitive knowing of divine energy. Her sentence, poetic and inviting, encourages an imagination of God, Creator, *Khoda*, Source, Divine Spirit, as a journey into something beyond what we already know.

Shadi also emphasized that they inherited their family's use of '*Khoda*' as the more comfortable and familiar term for this entity, if they had to refer to a distinct monotheistic source. The reliance on her native tongue and the word for God, *Khoda*, allows her to feel a proximity unavailable to her through the English language word, 'God.' Yet, when I pushed them to unearth what their primary frustration was with the word God, they said "People say God and then they say '*he*.' And that feels so small. It feels really small and it feels like a guy when… it's not. It's just really small language for such a big idea."

A massive point of frustration for many of my friends, the conceptualization of God, not only as a human figure in the sky, but precisely a *man* in the sky, turned many of them off from religion entirely. Many cited this as the fundamental and primary reason for why they felt incapable

of connecting with religion whatsoever, angered by the explicit patriarchal implications of a (hu)man-God. As Bahman shared prior, he wholly rejects the idea that God is "a man in the sky." Sara also, says "I don't think that there's some *guy* up there… and we're like chess pieces." Many refuted the notion of God as a 'man in the sky' finding that as the predominant and central conceptualization of God to push back against.

When I spoke with Ariana, I asked her to elaborate on why she was frustrated by the notion of God as a man. Describing her bodily experience whenever this takes place, she says "I kind of feel like I'm being punched in the stomach." This visceral experience of a patriarchal God demonstrates the depth and power the notion of a Christian/White/God/Man in the sky has for my friends. Experiencing literal pain in her stomach, Ariana's recollection shows how painful, exclusionary, and limiting these articulations can be.

I am fascinated by how this refutation of God "as a man" required a specific gendered analysis of who/what God is. The idea that God is a man, a man in the sky, a guy up there moving us around like chess pieces, relies on a particular gendered understanding of God as a man – something all of my queer and trans friends took issue with.[10]

As Shadi said, 'he' feels like "really small language for such a big idea." Furthermore, in order to refute the very idea of God as a man, requires an undoing of the gender of God as solely 'man.' For example, Shahpour explains how "God is no gender" and that he understands that God could be "a female." Although no one else postulated that God could be a female, I suggest that a queer and trans analysis of God requires not only the undoing of the gendered dimension of God, but also the undoing of the personification of God. In fact, the very idea of God as a man requires both a

---

[10] It is important to mention that neither of my cis-hetero friends took issue with God being referred to as 'he,' and neither mentioned any issue with understanding God as a (hu)man.

patriarchal and anthropomorphic conceptualization of God – something many felt was inappropriate and inadequate when thinking about God.

Reza Aslan, in *God: A Human History*, begins his work by outlining his concept of 'the humanized God.' He argues,

> In fact, the entire history of human spirituality can be viewed as one long, interconnected, ever-evolving, and remarkably cohesive effort to make sense of the divine by giving it our emotions and our personalities, by ascribing to it our traits and our desires, by providing it with our strengths and our weaknesses, even our own bodies – in short, by making God *us*.[11]

Although Aslan neglects the gendered dimension, his argument about the humanized God illustrates the ways humans anthropomorphize God. Adding a gendered analysis to Aslan's argument, I suggest we need to not only excavate the anthropomorphic descriptors of God, but also the ways in which that anthropomorphism is entirely patriarchal, based on a unique apex of perfected father-like masculinity. As many of my friends suggested, seeing God as a man was inadequate, limiting, and irritating for them, both on the grounds that God is beyond the human form, as well as God being beyond just 'a man.'

As such, my friends articulate a connection to the divine which requires a releasing of our commitments to a patriarchal and anthropomorphized God. Instead, the ways in which they conceptualize their relationships to the supernatural evoke ingenuity, unfamiliarity, and selective extraction from various theistic traditions they value.

God as Me: The Sufi Self & Our Deepest Interiorities

"Who or what is God to you?" I asked this question of each of my friends. I was surprised to hear how many identified God as internal to the Self. A phenomenon central to Islamic mysticism, as it is to many other (spiritual) faith systems, the location of God as within the Self

---

[11] Reza Aslan, *God: A Human History*, xiii.

proved to be an experience for many of my friends. Golnaz shares her conceptualization of God, telling me, "I don't see it as a physical entity. I see it as *me*, honestly… I see it as me… I think it's in all of us." Similarly, Parisa explained that she does not believe in the word 'God' per se, "but I believe in something. There is something out there. I think it's us. I think we are God, all of us. I think it's just us. Like combined energy." Azar shares a similar sentiment, saying that we "all have a little piece of God within us."

A core tenet of Sufistic faith, the notion of finding the God within ourselves, is an integral facet of Islamic mystic teaching, called by some "the ultimate secret." As orthodox descriptions of Islam may suggest Sufism to be outside of or external to a 'genuine' Islamic tradition, I argue that it is imperative to appreciate the substantive effect and material consequences Sufi thought, practice, and philosophic prompts have facilitated as a formative aspect of Islamic faith. Fazlur Rahman, prominent modern scholar of Islam, insists on understanding foundational Sufi texts as central to Islamic history, not as irrational, non-orthodox, philosophical strains outside of the bounds of Islam. He argues how "this trend of thought profoundly influenced the whole subsequent development of metaphysical thought in Islam, both Sufic and philosophical: its importance and depth cannot be overestimated."[12]

Outlining the significance of the role of the Self in Sufistic tradition, Shaheb Ahmed argues for attention to the intimate, the personal, the private space of the Self as the locale for divine exploration. He states,

> The deepest interiority of physical and social space is, of course, the ultimate, intimate, secret interiority of the individual Self. The notion of *secret* (Arabic: *sirr,* Persian: *raz*) is simultaneously one of the most important, and least studied, elements in Sufi discourse: it is at the level of *sirr* – of the individual's most intimate self – that the most subtle and *meaningful* experiences of the Divine Truth take place. … The consequences of this idea for the conceptualization of Divine Truth in Muslim societies that are permeated and suffused by

---

[12] Rahman, *Islam*, 125.

Sufi discourses, ethos and practices… is, again, one of the least considered elements in the history of Muslim societies.[13]

Drawing on Ahmed, I argue that we must appreciate this deep interiority as a site of queer/trans Muslim exploration. It is by engaging with this level of intimacy that "the most subtle and *meaningful* experiences of Divine Truth take place," experiences with higher powers that would be missed had I only assessed one's routine prescriptive practices. I argue that the "privileging of *prescriptive* discourses over *explorative* discourses of meaning" has compromised our ability to see, let alone grasp, the potent signifiers of meaning embedded in the Sufi tradition of the Self.[14] As my friends' stories demonstrate, the understanding of God as within the Self is already indicative of a supra-religious experience, one which draws from Sufi philosophies.

Many were able to locate their understanding of God as within themselves, emerging from themselves, and that is no minor point. I suggest that this thematic experience points to an internalized sense of knowing, an intuitive sense of spiritual connection, that guided many of my friends to reach the same ideas.

Now, my friends did not explicitly name Sufi traditions in their own articulations of how they conceptualized their relationship with God and that is nothing to overlook. None of them used the rhetoric of Sufism, Islamic spirituality, or anything similar in order to articulate their conceptualizations of God as within themselves. Likely due to their experiences of non-Islamiosity and anti-Muslim racism, a combined discursive powerhouse which devalues anything Islamic, the lack of knowledge, attention, or desire to root oneself in a Muslim discourse makes sense. However, none referred to other faiths, traditions, or spiritualities to root their assertions of God as within the Self either, demonstrating an innate, personal, interior exploration. In fact, even though none of

---

[13] Ahmed, *What Is Islam?*, 377–78.

[14] Ahmed, 335.

309

them used the language of Sufism to articulate this experience, they did not state that they came to this consciousness through Buddhism, yoga, crystal culture, Zoroastrianism, Christianity, etc. The ways in which they asserted their discovery of God within the Self were, as Ahmed suggests, explorations with the deepest interiorities of the Self. Though not articulated decidedly as such, I find it instructive to outline this parallel between their intimate explorations and Sufi tradition. As Ariana said, "to me God is within me, it's my capital 'S' Self, and it's within every single being. It's everywhere. It's omnipresent."

One of my friends, Shadi, did in fact use specifically Islamic language in her description of God, though without the knowledge that her rhetoric was explicitly invoking Islamic tradition. Sharing how their mother explained God to them, they said "My mom would say 'God is as close to you as your jugular.'" Detecting the Qur'anic reference, I asked her if she knew why her mother used that exact visual in her explanation. Although Shadi did not know of its origins, they said that they enjoyed it so much that they carry it with them through their days, sometimes drawing from it in their creative projects. When I informed her that the phrasing draws directly from the Qur'an,[15] Shadi began to explain how her mother would regularly translate portions of the Qur'an for her.

I provide Shadi's narrative here not to assess their knowledge of Islamic tradition, but rather to emphasize how queer and trans Iranian Americans absorb and interpret various messages of who/what/how the supernatural is and how they engage with that understanding. For Shadi, the exact origin of her mother's teaching was less significant for her than the fact that the visual shaped her understanding of God, and how she now carries it with her as a memento of her mother's Muslim religiosity, a channel of accessing and connecting with God. Grabbing their throat as they tell me this story, their bodily posture emphasizes how important that line has been for them. The

---

[15] Quran 50:16

310

meaning, the value, the significance of that line cannot be ignored. It very well became one of the ways she felt able to connect with God, unperturbed by not knowing the roots of its origins.

Demonstrating well the bifurcation between prescriptive authority/orthodoxy and explorative authority, Shadi's interpretation of the Qur'an verse exemplifies how they make meaning out of explicitly religious scripture, in ways that may be 'outside of' the bounds of orthodoxy. Telling me how important the line has been in her creative work, evoking themes of closeness, bodily connection, spirituality, and proximity to the divine, Shadi clearly cherishes and values this explicitly Muslim verse – one which highlights the connection between our bodies and God.

God Visualized: Energies, Blacklights, & Acid Trips

If God is not a man in the sky as many repeatedly pointed out, then what exactly is God? What does she/they/he/it look like? Where did they feel it or see it, if they did? As I spoke to my friends, it became clear that many saw and understood God as an energetic source, a nonmaterial existence. Made possible by their locating of God within the Self, articulations of an energetic web of connections were a common description many used to tell me how they saw their God.

Hearing how Parisa connects her understanding of God as within ourselves to her visualization of God as an energetic source, she says, "I think we are God, all of us. I think it's just us. Like combined energy. It's like a network of energies, like tunnels, like brain neurons. It's like a network." Describing God as a network of energies, Parisa tells me how when she is seeing this phenomenon she "keeps picturing [her] brain." Seeing it as an interconnected web of energetic flows, Parisa's articulation of God resembles that of brain neurons and a flowing transfer of sensorial information.

311

Similarly, Mina describes how they visualize God as "a universal connection" between living things. Although hesitant to share their articulation of God, for it seemed to invalidate their proximity to agnosticism, Mina shared how they see God. They say,

> I can't even believe I'm about to say this, but it's almost like this... In the same way we have a nervous system with all these neurons and cells that connect to each other. I almost feel like it's something you could put a blacklight over and see all these universal connections… Not necessarily a specific color, but I almost feel like it glows, kind of the same effect of a halo, maybe a little bit less yellow, kind of white, but glowy.

Describing a white glowing essence which connects all things, Mina's description also relies on the iconography of brain chemistry: neurons and cells that connect, transport, and transmit information. The express descriptor of the blacklight too, suggests that they understand God as something that is concealed, yet revealable. Visible only to those who have a blacklight, those who pursue the exploration of God and its functions, Mina's articulation demonstrates a level of commitment required to see/experience God's energy.

When I asked Bahman to further elaborate on how he conceptualized God, he said,

> I think it's just like, all that is, I would say. On a very … macro, existential level. Just everything. Like I believe that God, the force, created … all of this because he or they wanted to experience everything.… Like everything that is alive or is in this world, in this realm of existence has … a certain energy, like a life force. And I feel like all of that is God, so it's all connected.

Outlining a very fluid force, Bahman explains God as an energetic life force which palpitates through every living thing. Relying on a very "macro, existential level" of analysis, Bahman's God is transcendent by nature, able to flow in and out of this realm and any living creature.

All these descriptions illustrate a nonhierarchical, expansive, fluid and in flux energetic web. What is of interest is the centrality of the notion of 'connectedness' by all the various parts, nodes, or realms of this energetic force, and how three complete strangers (queer/trans/nonbinary Iranian Americans) outline such an alarmingly similar visualizations.

When I asked him to elaborate on how he visualized this energy, Bahman responded by asking me if I had ever seen a particular genre of YouTube videos, "you know those videos on YouTube that are like 'Meditation?' It's like those visuals. With the shapes and stuff. Abstract! Very abstract. Colors. Energies. That kind of stuff." His visual understanding of God was incredibly abstract and complex, rooted in moving colors, shapes, and energies, prompting me to ask how he came to this exact set of visuals. I had asked many of my friends how they visualized God and he was the only one to have an immediate answer. I wanted to know if the YouTube videos were the way he had accessed his visualization of God, or if they were just an easier, effective way of letting me know what God and his experience of God looks like. So, I asked him how he came to this formulation and he said, "Honestly, I tripped on acid and… I had some very cathartic moments to be quite honest with you."

As Bahman shared his psychedelic drug usage as a way to access, understand, and cultivate his relationship with God, I recall feeling so grateful to have been able to hear his stories. Some may hesitate to locate the validity of religious/spiritual exploration through a psychedelic drug trip, however, I find these stories instructive, insightful, honest revelations demonstrating the materiality of my community's exploration with the supernatural.[16] I find that the altered states of consciousness produced through ingesting intoxicants prove useful for my friends, as several of them represented their use of substances as pivotal moments in their spiritual consciousness.

---

[16] Various communities have long used psychedelics and intoxicants as a part of their religious and spiritual ceremonies; See Thomas C. Maroukis, *The Peyote Road: Religious Freedom and the Native American Church* (University of Oklahoma Press, 2010); Paja Faudree, "Tales from the Land of Magic Plants: Textual Ideologies and Fetishes of Indigeneity in Mexico's Sierra Mazateca," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 57, no. 3 (2015): 838–69. María Teresa Uriarte, "The Teotihuacan Ballgame and the Beginning of Time," *Ancient Mesoamerica* 17, no. 1 (2006): 27–30. Tom Froese, Carlos Gershenson, and Linda R. Manzanilla, "Can Government Be Self-Organized? A Mathematical Model of the Collective Social Organization of Ancient Teotihuacan, Central Mexico," ed. Christopher M. Danforth, *PLoS ONE* 9, no. 10 (October 10, 2014): 9–10, https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0109966.

In "Existing in the World: Blackness at the Edge of Trans Visibility" Juliana Huxtable, in

conversation with Che Gossett, outlines how she sees intoxication as an important exploratory

endeavor. She says she is a fan of intoxication because "states of intoxication are really productive

for transgression."[17] Extrapolating from the work of Huxtable, I find Bahman's description of

abstract colors and energies an important intervention into studying human relationships with the

supernatural. He was able to understand his *Khoda* through tripping on acid and seeing/feeling a

visual, unavailable to those who did not/do not experience this intoxication, and more importantly,

unavailable to himself prior to his acid trips. As atypical or peculiar as this may seem, I believe

emphasizing Bahman's use of psychedelics is instrumental in unearthing the complex terrain of how

queer and trans Iranian American Muslims relate to and understand God.

Similar to Bahman's exploratory practices through psychedelics, Ariana tells me quite plainly,

"I didn't ever think about God, until the first time I took acid." Rooting the very origin of her

relationship with the supernatural in her experience with psychedelic drugs, Ariana's experience

provides another dimension to the study of queer/trans religious/spiritual experience. Her

experience prompts questioning: where does the pursuit of the supernatural originate? Where do we

begin to think about our ideas around what/who/where/how God is and what prompts us to

continue this quest? Although I was not directing my research as to the origins of their relationships

with God, I was fascinated to hear how Ariana's entire spiritual/religious exploratory process began

because of a psychedelic experience.

Whereas she says she did not know God or care for God prior to taking psychedelics,

Ariana's experience illustrates how the very act of taking these intoxicants can in fact, be a vessel or

mechanism for convening with God, and any other associated spiritual exploration. Describing her

experience with these transgressive states of consciousness, Ariana shares,

---

[17] Gossett and Huxtable, "Existing in the World: Blackness at the Edge of Trans Visibility," 52.

I think that those substances are really powerful, and they should not be used, or at least, I just can't imagine using them like 'willy nilly.' I have, so I don't pass judgement on people who do, I understand it. But they're so powerful… In those moments of course I feel like any sort of blockage that I do have with God [disappears]. I feel kind of like a simple path, more towards a higher power… [An example] that I can think of is just being in the desert and seeing the sunset and knowing that was God. Or the ocean, I have an experience where I was with one of my best friends and we were by the ocean and it was just the two of us and I could literally hear the waves chanting *Om*. Obviously, that comes from my experience, but it felt like God was in the water.

Citing two experiences with psychedelics in nature, Ariana's reflection demonstrates a level of transcendence made available to her only through consuming intoxicants. She speaks of the removal of blockages as well as experiencing a pathway that brings her closer to God. It is precisely through ingesting the intoxicants that she feels the blockages evaporate and, thereby, an opening of a direct pathway towards her higher power. Through these experiences, Ariana is able to expand and develop a clearer relationship to God.

I cherish these stories from my friends, who were willing to be vulnerable with me and share their honest experiences with divine energy through psychedelic use. As I listened to their recollections, I could tell how impactful these moments were in their own lives: shaping their understandings of self, of life purpose, of human existence, of being in this realm. It is precisely through the use of intoxicants, which facilitate our ability to suspend social mores, codes, and all the clutter of 'daily life,' that enabled them to seriously ponder these existential and spiritual questions.

Although not with psychedelics, Sara shared how she, too, tends to have an enhanced connection with her supernatural force while in an altered state of consciousness through the use of marijuana. She says how she has "very spiritual experiences when [she] smokes weed," and that for her it has taught her "how to be present with [her]self." Forcing her to "work through [powerful] moments," marijuana is understood as a sort of spiritual support mechanism. Again, tying the use of her intoxicants to the act of being present with oneself, Sara's articulation demonstrates how the

exploration of the ultimate secret, the deepest interiority of the self, is possible through marijuana use.

By facilitating access to God, visualizing God, feeling God, and/or clarifying the Self in relation to God, intoxicants prove to be useful in my friends' experiences with the divine. Although my friends' myriad reasons for using psychedelics is beyond the scope of this research, there was a stated connection with the supernatural upon experiencing the altered state of consciousnesses produced by the intoxicants they consumed. Rather than shy away from the explicitly unorthodox use of intoxication as a religious/spiritual experience, I argue that it is crucial to understand these experiences as central to queer and trans Iranian American religious/spiritual life. Through allowing these individuals the right to self-narrate their experiences with the supernatural, I can draw out which moments have been powerful, transcendental, illuminative, and revelatory in their spiritual journeys. By not rejecting outright the use of intoxicants and, instead seeing them as useful and important in one's religious/spiritual development, I analyze how some queer and trans Iranian Americans have actually become closer to God, more concerned with God, more interested in God, and spiritually inclined, because of their use of intoxicants.

Nature & Silhouettes: The Materiality of Visualizing God

Although some understood God as energetic or immaterial, several of my friends also rooted their understandings of God in more material forms, whether through depictions of natural elements or lofty silhouettes in the sky. For several of my friends, nature emerged as a grounding logic for discerning the experience of divine connection and as familiar sites from which to draw examples. For example, Golnaz explained how she "see[s] it as the planet. I see it as that rainbow that I drove past today. I see it in the clouds in the sky. That's why I get so mesmerized." She goes on to make a distinction that for her, she believes in Gods, not a singular God and that her

316

understanding of Gods is "very nature based" and "very environment based." Repeatedly emphasizing the role of emotions, Golnaz states that "It's all about what feeling I'm getting" … "It's like a vibration… intensity. It's as if you up the brightness and the saturation of that field… lots of colors, lots of how it affects my breathing." Rooting her visualization of God in the natural elements, emotions, and her own breathing, Golnaz is able to articulate her experience of what Gods is to her through references to the natural world – planets, rainbows, and clouds. Combining the visuals of the natural world with her emotional responses, feelings, and breathing, Golnaz's understanding of Gods requires the interweaving of an emotional experience to the material imageries of the natural world.

Cyrus also used the natural world to describe his idea of God to me, starting by clarifying that he believes in an "upper power" not "God." Similarly upset by the limitations of organized religion, Cyrus' articulation of an upper power is how he connects to the supernatural. When I ask him what he sees when he thinks of this upper power, he says he sees "forests, peace, happiness." Describing a massive forest with endless pine trees, Cyrus' experience relies on the imagery of trees, greenery, and an expansive natural terrain. He says he both sees forests when he's connecting to the higher power, and that he connects to the higher power when he's in forests, suggesting that for him, this practice is similarly environment based. Thinking about his ability to access his upper power better in those environments he says, it makes "[me] want to move to Oregon."

In addition to the natural world, some of my friends saw and found their understanding of God in a figure or silhouette in the sky. Niloofar tells of how she sees God as a figure who is above this realm, but a figure nonetheless. She tells me that her conceptualization of God has "evolved" and that now she sees God as somewhat "personified," this "'big, large entity'" and that "[she] also see[s] [her] ancestors, side-by-side" with that entity. She says "It's not like God is above [them]… they're all on the same plane, working their magic into our realm. So when I pray to God I also pray

317

to my ancestors for guidance." She says it "feel[s] like more of an energetic thing" and that "they are a part of a collection of energy." When I asked her if she could offer any specificity into the visuals she sees, she says "it almost feels like a cartoon … above the clouds, like if I actually want to think about it, I do think of them above the clouds looking down and protecting me. I pray to both God and my mom and my grandmas. And I kind of do that together… As you can tell it's a work in progress."

Niloofar's conceptualization of God relies on what she calls 'a personified entity,' understood as on the same plane as her deceased ancestors, which cooperates with those said ancestors in a combined effort to work their protective magic into this realm. Naming the cartoon-like visual she sees when she thinks of this power, Niloofar's understanding is an intricate conceptualization drawing from multiple sources. The only individual to explicitly mention her understanding of God as tied to ancestral protection, Niloofar's articulation stitches together an understanding of a personified figure to her deceased elders as equal sources of protective energy.

Similar to Niloofar's visualization, Shahpour shares the visual he sees when he thinks of God as somewhat of a vague silhouette. He says, "I kind of imagine God as like a white cloud, but it's like a figurine of someone and there's just like light, or sun behind whatever… it is and I just kind of talk to it." He says that the figurine is a silhouette, and that the outline contours the shape of a human body that could be either man or woman. Understanding his God as an unclearly defined gendered figurine in a sea of clouds emitting light, Shahpour blends together anthropomorphic notions of God, a steadfast rejection of God as a man, with the natural elements of clouds and light. His framing, paralleling Niloofar's silhouette, combines a various array of attributes showcasing the way he has come to fashion his visual of God. Embracing the ethereality of clouds and light, alongside a trans-feminist stance of God as a non cis man, Shahpour's reliance on a material figurine combines these various approaches to visualizing God.

I offer these anecdotes from my friends to illustrate the myriad ways God is visualized, and how they interrogate and circumvent themes of 'a man in the sky.' As such, they discern their relationship to God through these means, as a combination of natural and figural phenomena. In the following subsection, I will outline how several of my friends were hesitant to describe God as something that could be visualized at all and refrained from relying on any material visual markers whatsoever. This experience, undoubtedly, shaped the ways they could connect, relate to, and communicate with their God.

Where is God? Bodily Experiences within the Spatiality of Spirituality

Fascinated by the myriad forms my friends used to articulate their notion of God, I wanted to discover if they experienced a physical connection to God through their own bodies. Although some saw explicit imageries, many were clear on the inability to 'see' anything as well. Drawing up ideations of God that surpass normative theistic bounds, their articulations of the supernatural rely on primal, innate experiences of the divine, emerging from their deepest interiorities of the Self. The reflections that they share with me outline the function, form, and limitations of the body/mind as the material substance of communication with God.

For instance, Azar tells me, "I don't see anything. I feel; that God is like power." For her, God is decidedly not a person, not a figure, but a feeling, a power that she can sense. What is important here is the reference to feeling as a grounding logic for experiencing God. The striking rejection of seeing God as a figure, person, or visualizable entity is again, another parallel to normative Islamic practice: Islamic iconoclasm. The root argument of Muslim iconoclasm is that God is beyond our conceptualization and should not be depicted in visual form because even our very attempts to do so will belie God's complexity and greatness. Although only Azar explicitly mused about this potential connection between Muslim anti-imagery of the divine and her own stark

rejection of physical symbols, icons, or pictures of the supernatural, many of my friends understood their visualizations of God in similar fashion, beyond human form, and potentially beyond visual imagination.

As I will suggest in the following subsection, *Love as a Pathway to God*, the avenues we use for interpreting God – be they mind-based (law, tradition, scripture) or heart-based (feeling, love, experience) – greatly alter the ways in which we understand God. Whichever source we give primacy to in our own process shapes what we consider our divine experiences. As Azar's articulation suggests, God for her is something she feels, a meta-physiological experience of the heart. Drawing from her experience with meditation, Azar shares how her prayer practices emerge through an outer body experience. She describes,

> I don't pray, I meditate. And that kind of takes me to a mindset that's not sleeping and not being awake. It's somewhere in the middle where I'm outside my body. And it feels, it feels, recharged and kind of like… My body's resting but my soul or inner energy is floating outside of my body. Kind of just there, just breathing.

Practicing a suspension of the physical body, Azar understands her proximity to the divine primarily through a meditative state wherein she is able to leave the material body. Azar's articulation shows how spirituality offers a means to transcend the limits of the physical body, a potential way to understand ourselves as spirit, in an ethereal form, outside of or beyond this physical realm. Though a cisgender friend, her meditative experience invites us to imagine what becomes possible through this practice, the intentional connection to a soul or inner energy as an entity outside of the human body. This articulation illustrates how spirit, soul, or inner essence can be conceptualized, and experienced, if only momentarily, as beyond the physical body and all its associated demarcations.

Nakisa shares how she too, does not think of God as a man but, instead, as a source of energy. She says, "I think of God as more of a, not a being or a one individual, but more of a kind of abstract, like some sort of superpower that could affect or change certain things." When I asked her what visual she saw, she said, "I just kind of see like a sky, an abyss almost. It's elevated, not on

320

this plane, [but] above." Describing an elevated superpower that lingers in an abyss like sky, Nakisa's conceptualization of God also rejects the idea of a figure, instead relying on notions of abstract energetic forces. What is interesting is her reference to an elevated plane, a process by which Nakisa demarcates what constitutes the supernatural, the divine, the otherworldly as phenomena that occur above this realm. Although a common theme for many conceptualizations of God, Nakisa's assertion of an elevated plane demonstrates how notions of divinity rupture simple ideas of linear space/time.

Expanding on this notion of an elevated realm, Mina's articulation offers an insight into how they view this connection between a raised divine energy and the physical body in the material realm. They say,

> I think it's something that connects to our bodies, but also to our consciousness as separate but obviously connected to our bodies. I think it also somehow connects to the atmosphere. …We're not just the ground, but also the sky. It both feels above and rooted and grounded. I see it as both of those things.

Explaining a literal physical connection between our bodies and the universal life force, Mina's articulation shows how the body operates as a site which is capable of interweaving divine consciousness into the mundane. Appreciating the rootedness of the ground as well as the ethereal connection to the sky/atmosphere, their description demonstrates the role they understand the (trans/nonbinary) body plays in connecting to higher powers. Their bodily experience of divine energy is one in which they understand themselves to be a vessel, a route, a medium of spiritual energy which bridges the underworld to the skies.

What these anecdotes offer us is insight into the various ways the queer, trans, and nonbinary body is understood in a spiritual/religious experience; particularly how the body is experienced as both a limitation, a vessel, a medium, or a temporary home. Their experiences allow us to imagine the transcendental capabilities of a spiritual/religious experience, while appreciating the queer/trans experience within the body.

God can be accessed, understood, and related to in manifold ways, as much of my research has shown. Yet, what fascinated me most in all of my research was the way two of my friends expressed how they came to know God – through falling in queer love. Now, this may seem counterintuitive, irrelevant, or totally sensible depending on one's own religious/spiritual experience; I find it imperative, however, to describe their experiences and their articulations. Their narratives highlight how queerness/transness and religiosity intersect in a form that has yet to receive the academic attention it deserves.

Shadi tells me how they understand and relate to God in terms of natural elements and energetic forces present in all living beings. She says, "God is everything. I think everything, love. I think I experience God in love. I think love is the only thing that transcends time and love is the only healing thing." Inviting them to share more on the visual dimension of their understanding of this force, I asked what they see when they think of God. She replied, "Trees. And like nature, like forests."

As they went on to describe what they see when they think of God, Shadi's answer took me by surprise. She said,

> I see, like right now… in this moment, I see God in the things that I did the moment my ex's dad died. I started instinctually washing [his] dishes and doing his laundry, not because I felt obligated, [or] because I was panicking, but… because I didn't want him to worry about it. For some reason, I felt God in that moment.

Shadi's example offered a radically different approach to the art of understanding how people relate to God. By telling me that they felt God in the moment that they started doing their partner's dishes and laundry out of selfless love, their experience shows how God exists for them; how, where, and when God emerges and their experience of finding God does not follow a specific prescribed regimen. More importantly, the reason she felt God in that moment, as she says, is because of her love for him and wanting to help comfort him. As they go on to explain the pure love they felt, and

their desire to nurture, care for, and alleviate their partner's pain purely out of love for him and his well-being, I understood what they meant. Love, and offering pure love to another, was a way for her to not only understand God's power, but to feel it herself. Shadi's example of selflessness as love illuminates how love itself can operate as a mode of connecting with God. In effect, loving and being in love is how they embodied the godliness within themself. She became, therefore, a vessel of God's love in that moment.

Love as a mode of connecting with God has long and powerful histories in the Sufi tradition, documented primarily through Middle Age Persian poetry. Understood in this tradition, love for the beloved is always understood as a precursor to love for the divine. Shahab Ahmed reinvigorates the study of Divan-e Hafez as an important site of Islamic knowledge production and meaning making, describing it as the "most widely-copied, widely-circulated, widely-read, widely-memorized, widely-recited, widely-invoked, and widely-proverbialized book of poetry in Islamic history."[18] He argues that we should understand the core ethos of Divan-e Hafez as a '*madhab* of Love' (*madhab-i 'ishq*). "The word *madhab* means, literally, 'way of going;' Expressed in this nomenclature is precisely that love is *a way of going about being Muslim* – a mode of being with God, of identifying, experiencing and living with the values and meaning of Divine Truth."[19]

As Shadi relays their experience of instinctually washing their partner's dishes and doing his laundry upon news of his father's passing, I see how love is operating for them. Love is not simply an act that one does, it is a mode of being, that brings her closer to God. In that moment, their love for him was their *madhab*, their *madhab-i 'ishq* and that is precisely what allowed them to "feel God in

---

[18] Ahmed, *What Is Islam?*, 32.

[19] Ahmed, 38 (emphasis in original).

that moment." She goes on to explain how significant falling in love was for her ability to grasp the meaning of God. She says,

> When I felt like I was in love, I felt the closest to God.… Falling in love did something for me that made me love other people better. It made me realize 'oh this thing that I have in my heart, I need to do this for my family. I need to do this for my friends, I need to do this for the people I care about.' It opened everything up.

It was through this experiential process with love that she says she "felt God the most." Locating their experience of God as a direct consequence of falling in love, Shadi's narrative offers an exciting new insight into the world of religious/spiritual experience and how it intersects with sexuality, queerness, and transness. Through loving, through falling in love, she was able to develop religiously and spiritually. That, in turn, provided them the impetus they needed to continue on this cycle of love furthering the love for their friends and family.

Shadi added, "When you believe in God, you feel God. And I felt God in that moment." As Ahmed asserts through *madhab-i 'ishq*, "Love functions as an elevating experience for the realization, apprehension, and experience of the values and higher Truth."[20] In Shadi's experience, love functions as an elevating experience which gives them the means by which to realize, apprehend, and be in 'higher Truth.' By falling in love and being in love, they came to feel closer to God and the power of God.

Drawing from William C. Chittick's work, Ahmed shows how there have long been debates on the centrality of love to Islam. Chittick writes,

> Those familiar with the histories and literatures of the Islamic peoples know that love… is so central to the overall ethos of the religion that if any word can sum up Islamic spirituality – by which I mean the very heart of the Qur'anic message – it should surely be *love*. I used to think that *knowledge* deserved this honor and that the Orientalist Franz Rosenthal had it right in the title of his book *Knowledge Triumphant*. Now I think that love does a better job of conveying the nature of the quest for God that lies at the tradition's heart.[21]

---

[20] Ahmed, 42.

[21] William C. Chittick, *Divine Love: Islamic Literature and the Path to God* New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013, in Shahab Ahmed, *What is Islam*?, 42.

Ahmed prompts us to move even further, arguing that

> Rather than to draw a sharp distinguishing line between 'love' and 'knowledge,' it is more accurate to conceive of love as construed and practiced by the *madhab-i 'ishq* precisely as a register or *type of knowing*. The *experience* of love is a learning experience (or an experience of learning) that *teaches* the lover how to identify value (i.e., what is valuable) and to constitute the human being … accordingly, in terms of those values.[22]

Love, therefore, becomes a register, a means, a theoretical apparatus if you will, of knowing the Divine. Through living love, being love, and offering love, one can learn specific meanings and values and structure their lives in such fashion. Ahmed's *madhab-i 'ishq* is useful here in that, similar to explorative authority, it opens the conceptual terrain with which to understand Islam and how people come to make meaning with(in) Islam. Relying on the central ethos of Divan-e Hafez, love, Ahmed's intervention allows for newfound ways of relating to Islamic history, teachings, practices, rituals, and beliefs. Shadi's story embodies the very core of this *madhab-i 'ishq* and how it brings them so much closer to God.

Similar to Shadi's experiences, Sara shared that she too had a process wherein love and loving drastically altered her relationship to God. She started off by telling me she did not believe in God and she did not believe in any religion but had had several spiritual experiences. As she described her spiritual experiences, I asked her where she tends to have these moments, if they happen in a particular place or environment. I quote her response in full:

> Okay so this might sound a little funny. The first time – cuz again I was like 'there is no, anything'. I was not… [on] any kind of any deep level with myself. [But] *honestly*, when I fell in love for the first time and I know that I was 17… I don't know how to describe it, but it *really* was such a huge deal for me. And it [did a] 180 degree turn on my personality. Like I became this person who was more empathetic. I became a better friend. I became better to the people around me. I became much more spiritual. And I honestly was like … I have a spiritual meaning, and I was put here to love you.

---

[22] Ahmed, *What Is Islam?*, 42.

Referring to her partner at the time, Sara's recollection offers another powerful insight into how queerness, sexuality, and spirituality are deeply intertwined. As Ahmed suggests, love functions as a pathway for realizing and experiencing divine energy. Love provides Sara with precisely that modality to access the divine. As she describes her revelation, a little hesitant at first, she shares that loving her partner completely shifted her personality and prompted her to not only become a better friend, but also heightened her sense of spirituality.

As she goes on to tell of how this impacted her entire sense of spirituality and is the "biggest moment" she's had in her spiritual journey, Sara's experience makes me consider the relationship between queer love and spirituality. Reflecting on both her and Shadi's experiences force me to reckon with how incredibly formative being in queer love is for spiritual meaning, pursuit, and consciousness. I take their experiences as instructive for conceptualizing a queer/trans Iranian American Muslim notion of spiritual exploration, one which takes loving and the art of loving as a central praxis for divine connection.

I argue that falling in love, opening one's heart to love, and/or loving another, are all mechanisms of gaining closer proximity to the divine. It is through these very acts of loving, this *madhab-i 'ishq*, that we are able to realize, manifest, and experience the spiritual heights of divine exploration.[23]

I suggest that it is also not only the act of falling in love, but falling in queer love, that truly shapes this radical power of love. As the *madhab-i 'ishq* ethos shows, it is a way of knowing. Love, as my friends' experiences highlight, is a way of experiencing the freedom, the safety, the openness to be fully oneself – specifically parts of oneself that have been previously considered undesirable,

---

[23] Again, it is noteworthy that neither of my friends who cited loving and falling in love as means of accessing heightened spiritual connection referred directly to Sufism or Islam in any direct way. Yet, it is important to emphasize the ways their narratives parallel a central teaching of Sufistic religiosity, loving as a means of accessing the divine. It is almost as if this interior knowing of the self, or experiencing of love, allows them to vocalize and narrate their experiences of spirituality through such terms.

unspeakable. It is the process by which this love fosters our ability to love, both ourselves and all

our 'deviances,' as well as those of our queer partners.

In fact, falling in love as a way to access divine love is stitched into the very fibers of Muslim

history. Written, memorialized, and circulated by the most prominent Persian poets, Sa'adi, Hafez,

Rumi, Attar, Sistani, Zakani, among others, the endless pursuit of unrequited divine love through the

human beloved is easily the cornerstone of the Persian poetic/literary canon. As Manijeh Mannani

says,

> In Sufi literature, sublime love almost always manifests itself in the form of the amorous
> relationship between two earthly lovers who have to overcome various obstacles in order to
> be one. The irresistible attraction of the sublime for the seeker is symbolically conveyed
> through lines depicting the physical beauty of an earthly beloved, and the pain of separation
> from the Divine through images that project a yearning lover whose existence is meaningless
> without [the other].[24]

As such, it is this ongoing yearning for the beloved, a flesh and human form, that embodies the

eternal pursuit of divine love. This spiritual dance shapes much of what constitutes historical,

Persian, Sufistic ideas around love and experiencing love as a divine experience. I find it important

to illustrate this connection between homoerotic love and divine experience, for it is, if nothing else,

an uncanny relationship which continues to survive the test of time.

It is also important to note, and beautiful to behold, the interplay between queerness,

homoeroticism, and historic Sufistic practices.[25] As but only one example of Sa'di's poetry

demonstrates, the art of specifically homoerotic love was central to learning the experience of divine

love:

> Where is this beautiful boy [shāhid] going? So sweet are his words!
> What a divine beauty, why doesn't he appear before my two eyes?

---

[24] Manijeh Mannani, "The Metaphysics of the Heart in the Sufi Poetry of Rumi," *Religion & Literature* 42, no. 3 (2010):
162.

[25] For a full analysis of the homoeroticism of Sa'di's poetry, and the centrality of gender and sexual play in his poetics,
see Domenico Ingenito, *Beholding Beauty: Saʿdi of Shiraz and the Aesthetics of Desire in Medieval Persian Poetry* (Boston: Brill,
2020).

For one reason he resembles the sun in the sky:
Whenever you contemplate him, your gaze dazzles ecstatically.

A mirror is his countenance that kindles the world
Beholding him cleanses the mirror of the heart from all impurities.

The royal diploma of beauty and the edict of grace and pulchritude
Are marked on his rosy face with the golden script of his downy beard,

Which resembles pure musk molten in fragrant liqueur,
Masterly painted on silk with the finest brush.

How can I describe his countenance and lips?
A scarlet flame, and pomegranate grains!

And when he utters words from his sweet mouth
Where are the refined spectators who can sweetly honor him?

The morning breeze has left to graze his delicate limbs:
Upon its return to the garden, the leaves of spring have dropped.

Let me be your subject, O my dear, if no shame you feel.
May I be your servant, if your honor is not compromised?

Will I ever make you mine? What a glorious destiny!
Would I ever turn away from you? How could I dare?

I cannot tell anyone the truth about my love for you
As I am too jealous for strangers to listen.

Anyone in the past would come and go from my heart:
There has been no room for others since you made your appearance.

You are more precious than my head and life:
A covetous fool I am if I didn't scatter them away for you.

Passion is not permissible, but lawful may it be
To those who, like Saʿdi, bring love to the threshold of resurrection.[26]

Though a full articulation of this trans-historical connection is beyond the scope of this work, I

admit I find it fascinating how homoerotic love has been a central ethic in Sufistic mystic practice

for hundreds of years. Interspersing political symbolisms within homoerotic courtship, Sa'di's

---

[26] Ingenito, 57–58.

poem[27] offers but one example of how queer love was a common, respected, and cherished mechanism of experiencing divine love.

I do not wish to offer this poem as a neat reach into historical life in order to justify modern notions of queer/trans Iranian and/or Muslim identity. Rather, I share this Sa'di poem to pose a few questions that continue to linger in my heart: what does it mean that queer fantasy has been an integral part of experiencing divinity for hundreds of years, particularly in the Islamic tradition? How do we honor our multivalent homoerotic love stories from the past, present, and future, and how do we conceptualize or visualize the relationship between these practices? What are the political implications of allowing ourselves as queer/trans Muslim subjects to play with, ruminate, and reflect on historical Muslim homoeroticism, and how does that influence how we understand our notions of self, history, and ancestry? How does hearing these poems, knowing these histories, give us more room, space, and inspiration to both create and lean further into the fullness of our lives?

---

[27] "The multilayered representation of male homoerotic desire is remarkably more present in Saʿdi's works than in the literary output of any other premodern Persian poet." See Ingenito, 59.

EPILOGUE

A New Day: Norooz, Spirit, & Infinite Possibility

Everything feels familiar – a gorgeous *haftseen* draped with colorful flowers, joyous Persian pop blasting through the speakers, the hundreds of people excitedly running about. The surroundings seem identical to years prior, yet a global pandemic has forever altered human life across the world. The Norooz 2022/1401 celebration at UCLA's Dickson Court is the first time Iranian Americans gathered in public to celebrate the new year since Norooz 2019/1398.

I stood there alongside family members, watching people dance, sing, eat, and take photos. I felt warm, yet uneasy, comfortable, yet uncertain. I have stood in that same UCLA quad so many times, celebrating so many prior Norooz's, but this time was different. I felt a wide array of emotions: I felt grief, for all of the lives lost to the pandemic and for the ways that those who remain are limited in their ability to connect, socialize, and be in community with one another. I felt excitement, about the growing idea that we can still be together, that there can be human connection, and it can fulfill us, though in ways we are not used to. I felt safe, in the way that one might, knowing their culture, their ancestors, and their people have endured so much. I know we will go on, though I know not how it will look.

Most clearly though, I felt a sense of closure. As I looked around at the buildings, the trees, the grass underneath and around the Norooz festivities, all places where I had laid to read, think, or prepare my classes, I realized this was the beginning of the end. I have spent many years on and around this campus, running to classes, holding discussion groups, protesting with other students. I have gotten my fair share of chalkboard debris on my clothes and parking tickets on my windshields to know this place has been home and for long enough. This campus, this land, these trees, would no longer be a part of my daily routine. I breathed in that feeling, a combination of letting go, of achievement, of moving on, of closing a life chapter, and of losing one all the same. It was a

bittersweet moment of reflection, the finishing up of a Ph.D., the ending of my time in Los Angeles, and the birth of spring, of Norooz, of a new day, to see what else is possible and out there for me.

As I stood there in reflection, I realized how present the pull of spirituality has been within me all along. I have been guided so many times to move in this way, to go in this direction, and I finally am. I close this dissertation, this degree, this academic life, as I venture into the world of spiritual guidance and all that is possible when we imagine beyond this realm, this flesh, this set of limitations we call 'real life.'

Many still find the idea of God laughable. Some find spirituality to be fluff, nonsense, pure make-believe hullabaloo. I, on the other hand, have found unfathomable depth, power, and transcendence in the spiritual realm. I have had the honor and privilege of hearing the life stories of queer and trans Iranian Americans. I have held space for their tears, their smiles, their souls, and they only deepened my passion for what is possible when we venture into spiritual power.

I have watched as teary and distraught eyes found an ounce of light, a beam of hope amidst despair. I have witnessed the essence of love transfer a magnetic energy from one individual to another, making them feel a little less alone in the world, if only for a moment. I have seen the manifest power in a heart that is experiencing love, and how that love multiplies, inspires, and moves everyone it touches. I call this force spirit. I see this energetic current as the fiber of divine experience, weaving through every facet of human life, if only we slow down enough to see it. The power of spirit is infinite, uncontainable, wild, free, and therefore, nonsensical, immeasurable, and so far beyond our human tools of conceptualization.

It is with this consciousness that I close this academic work on the visualizations, dreams, ideations of queer and trans Iranian American Muslims of the Los Angeles diaspora. Knowing full well that as much as we attempt to calculate, measure, quantify, and analyze, there is a far greater,

mystical, and unknown force at work that will always be beyond us. That force compels me to write as I do, live as I do, and believe as I do. I pray you find a connection that moves you just the same.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Abdulhadi, Rabab, Evelyn Alsultany, and Nadine Christine Naber. *Arab & Arab American Feminisms: Gender, Violence, & Belonging.* 1st ed. Syracuse, N.Y: Syracuse University Press, 2011.

Abu-Lughod, Lila. *Do Muslim Women Need Saving?* Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2013.

Adams, Alex. "Graner's Laugh: The Conceptual Architecture of a Guantanamo Rape Joke." *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 44, no. 1 (2018): 107–30. https://doi.org/10.1086/698279.

Afghani, Jamal al-Din al-. *The Truth about the Neichari Sect and an Explanation of the Necharis. Hakīkat-i Mazhab-i Nīchīrī va Bayān-i Hāl-i Nīchirīyān.* Hyderabad, India, 1881.

Aghaie, Kamran Scot. *The Martyrs of Karbala: Shi'i Symbols and Rituals in Modern Iran.* 1st ed. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2004.

Ahmed, Leila. *Women and Gender in Islam: Historical Roots of a Modern Debate / Leila Ahmed.* New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992.

Ahmed, Shahab. *What Is Islam?: The Importance of Being Islamic.* Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016.

Aizura, Aren Z. "The Persistence of Transgender Travel Narratives." In *Transgender Migrations*, edited by Trystan Cotten, 142–59. Routledge, 2012.

Ajami, Fouad. *Vanished Imam: Musa al Sadr and the Shia of Lebanon*, 1987.

Al-e Ahmad, Jalal. *Gharbzadegi (Weststruckness).* Translated by John Green and Ahmad Alizadeh. Lexington, KY: Mazdâ Publishers, 1982.

Alipour, M. "Islamic Shari'a Law, Neotraditionalist Muslim Scholars and Transgender Sex-Reassignment Surgery: A Case Study of Ayatollah Khomeini's and Sheikh al-Tantawi's Fatwas." *The International Journal of Transgenderism* 18, no. 1 (2017): 91–103. https://doi.org/10.1080/15532739.2016.1250239.

Al-Samman, Hanadi. "Invading Muslim Bodies in the Era of Trump." *Journal of Middle East Women's Studies* 13, no. 3 (2017): 483–85. https://doi.org/10.1215/15525864-4179177.

Amanat, Abbas. *Apocalyptic Islam and Iranian Shi'ism*, 2009.

Ammerman, Nancy T. "Spiritual But Not Religious? Beyond Binary Choices in the Study of Religion." *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 52, no. 2 (2013): 258–78. https://doi.org/10.1111/jssr.12024.

Asad, Talal. *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity*. Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press, 2003.

———. *The Idea of an Anthropology of Islam*. Washington, D.C: Center for Contemporary Arab Studies, Georgetown University, 1986.

Asanti, Ta'shia Ifalade. "Living with Dual Spirits: Spirituality, Sexuality and Healing in the African Diaspora." *Journal of Bisexuality* 10, no. 1–2 (April 9, 2010): 22–30. https://doi.org/10.1080/15299711003760600.

Aslan, Reza. *God: A Human History*. Random House Publishing Group, 2017.

———. *No God but God: The Origins, Evolution, and Future of Islam*. Updated ed. New York: Random House, 2011.

Azizgolshani, Moein. "New Iran Flag," 2018. https://iranflags.com/.

Azmeh, Aziz al-. *Islam and Modernities*. London: Verso, 1993.

Baderoon, Gabeba. "'I Compose Myself': Lesbian Muslim Autobiographies and the Craft of Self-Writing in South Africa." *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 83, no. 4 (2015): 897–915. https://doi.org/10.1093/jaarel/lfv075.

Baehr, Peter, and Daniel Gordon. "From the Headscarf to the Burqa: The Role of Social Theorists in Shaping Laws against the Veil." *Economy and Society* 42, no. 2 (2013): 249–80. https://doi.org/10.1080/03085147.2012.718620.

Bakalian, Anny P., and Mehdi Bozorgmehr, eds. *Backlash 9/11: Middle Eastern and Muslim Americans Respond*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009.

Bassichis, Morgan, Alexander Lee, and Dean Spade. "Building an Abolitionist Trans & Queer Movement with Everything We've Got." In *Captive Genders: Trans Embodiment and the Prison Industrial Complex*, edited by Eric A. Stanley and Nat Smith, Expanded second edition., 21–46. Oakland, CA, USA ; AK Press, 2015.

Berdahl, Daphne. *Where the World Ended: Re-Unification and Identity in the German Borderland*. Berkeley, Calif: University of California Press, 1999.

Beydoun, Khaled A. "War on Terror, War on Muslims." In *American Islamophobia*, 92–124. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2019. https://doi.org/10.1525/9780520970007-006.

Briggs, Laura. "Making Race, Making Sex: Perspectives on Torture." *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 17, no. 1 (2015): 20–39. https://doi.org/10.1080/14616742.2013.855089.

Butler, Judith. "Sexual Politics, Torture, and Secular Time." *The British Journal of Sociology* 59, no. 1 (2008): 1–23. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-4446.2007.00176.x.

Cainkar, Louis A. *Homeland Insecurity: The Arab American and Muslim American Experience After 9/11.* New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2009. https://doi.org/10.7758/9781610447683.

Campo, Juan Eduardo. *Encyclopedia of Islam*, 2008.

Chittick, William C. *Divine Love: Islamic Literature and the Path to God.* New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013.

Clifford, James. "Diasporas." *Cultural Anthropology* 9, no. 3 (1994): 302–38. https://doi.org/10.1525/can.1994.9.3.02a00040.

Cobb, Michael. *God Hates Fags: The Rhetorics of Religious Violence.* New York: NYU Press, 2006.

Cobban, Helena. "The Growth of Shi'i Power in Lebanon and Its Implications for the Future." *Shiism and Social Protest*, 1986, 137–55.

Cole, Juan Ricardo, and Nikki R. Keddie, eds. *Shi'ism and Social Protest.* New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986.

Dabashi, Hamid. *Brown Skin, White Masks.* London: Pluto, 2011.

———. *Iran: A People Interrupted.* New York: New Press, 2007.

———. *Islamic Liberation Theology: Resisting the Empire.* 1st edition. London; New York: Routledge, 2008.

———. *Shi'ism: A Religion of Protest*, 2011.

———. *Theology of Discontent: The Ideological Foundations of the Islamic Revolution in Iran.* New York: University Press, 1993.

Daha, Maryam. "Contextual Factors Contributing to Ethnic Identity Development of Second-Generation Iranian American Adolescents." *Journal of Adolescent Research* 26, no. 5 (2011): 543–69. https://doi.org/10.1177/0743558411402335.

Deeb, Lara. *An Enchanted Modern: Gender and Public Piety in Shi'i Lebanon.* Princeton Studies in Muslim Politics. Princeton: University Press, 2006.

Deepa Kumar. "Islamophobia and Empire: An Intermestic Approach to the Study of Anti-Muslim Racism." In *What Is Islamophobia?* Pluto Press, 2017. https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt1rfsndp.9.

Delphy, Christine. *Separate and Dominate: Feminism and Racism after the War on Terror.* London: Verso, 2015.

Denetdale, Jennifer. "Securing Navajo National Boundaries: War, Patriotism, Tradition, and the Diné Marriage Act of 2005." *Wicazo Sa Review* 24, no. 2 (2009): 131–48. https://doi.org/10.1353/wic.0.0034.

Dickinson, Peter. "Love Is a Battlefield: The Performance and Politics of Same-Sex Marriage in North America." *Text and Performance Quarterly* 28, no. 3 (2008): 277–97. https://doi.org/10.1080/10462930802107944.

Driskill, Qwo-Li. "Doubleweaving Two-Spirit Critiques: Building Alliances between Native and Queer Studies." *GLQ* 16, no. 1–2 (2010): 69–92. https://doi.org/10.1215/10642684-2009-013.

Ebtekar, Massoumeh. *Takeover in Tehran: The inside Story of the 1979 U.S. Embassy Capture*. Translated by Fred A. Reed. Burnaby, B.C: Talonbooks, 2000.

Elahi, Babak, and Persis M. Karim. "Introduction: Iranian Diaspora." *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa, and the Middle East* 31, no. 2 (2011): 381–87. https://doi.org/10.1215/1089201X-1264307.

Ella Shohat. "Dislocated Identities: Reflections of an Arab Jew." In *On the Arab-Jew, Palestine, and Other Displacements*. Pluto Press, 2017. https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt1pv89db.7.

Encyclopaedia Iranica. "Esfand," January 2012. https://iranicaonline.org/articles/esfand.

Esposito, John L. "Introduction: Muslims in America or American Muslims?" In *Muslims on the Americanization Path?* Cary: Oxford University Press, Incorporated, 2000.

Fanon, Frantz. *A Dying Colonialism*. [1st Evergreen ed.]. New York: Grove Press, 1967.

Farhang Foundation. "About." Farhang's Mission, 2022. https://farhang.org/about/.

———. "About - Freedomsculpture.Org." Freedom Sculpture. Accessed February 22, 2022. https://freedomsculpture.org/.

———. "Celebrating Nowruz: Iranian New Year." Farhang Foundation, March 10, 2019. Print.

———. "Farhang Foundation 2016-2017 Annual Report." Los Angeles, 2017. https://farhang.org/images/Farhang-Annual-Report-2017.pdf.

———. "Farhang Foundation 2018-2019 Annual Report." Los Angeles, 2019. https://farhang.org/images/Farhang-Annual-Report-2019.pdf.

———. *Farhang Foundation, Celebrating Iranian Art & Culture Since 2008*. Video, 2019. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Mg5YXRL28QI.

Fatima El-Tayeb. *European Others: Queering Ethnicity in Postnational Europe*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011. https://doi.org/10.5749/j.ctttbbx.

Faudree, Paja. "Tales from the Land of Magic Plants: Textual Ideologies and Fetishes of Indigeneity in Mexico's Sierra Mazateca." *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 57, no. 3 (2015): 838–69.

Fedele, Anna, and Kim E. Knibbe. *Secular Societies, Spiritual Selves?: The Gendered Triangle of Religion, Secularity and Spirituality*. Gendering the Study of Religion in the Social Sciences. Milton: Taylor and Francis, 2020. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429456923.

Feinberg, Leslie. *Trans Liberation: Beyond Pink or Blue*. Boston, Mass: Beacon Press, 1998.

Fernando, Mayanthi L. *The Republic Unsettled: Muslim French and the Contradictions of Secularism*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2014.

Fisher, Diana. "Immigrant Closets: Tactical-Micro-Practices-in-the-Hyphen." *Journal of Homosexuality* 45, no. 2–4 (2003): 171–92. https://doi.org/10.1300/J082v45n02_08.

Fozi, Navid. "Neo-Iranian Nationalism: Pre-Islamic Grandeur and Shi'i Eschatology in President Mahmud Ahmadinejad's Rhetoric." *The Middle East Journal* 70, no. 2 (2016): 227–48. https://doi.org/10.3751/70.2.13.

Froese, Tom, Carlos Gershenson, and Linda R. Manzanilla. "Can Government Be Self-Organized? A Mathematical Model of the Collective Social Organization of Ancient Teotihuacan, Central Mexico." Edited by Christopher M. Danforth. *PLoS ONE* 9, no. 10 (October 10, 2014): e109966. https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0109966.

Gholami, Reza. *Secularism and Identity: Non-Islamiosity in the Iranian Diaspora*. 1st ed. Studies in Migration and Diaspora. Farnham: Taylor & Francis, 2015. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315608020.

Gökarıksel, Banu. "The Body Politics of Trump's 'Muslim Ban.'" *Journal of Middle East Women's Studies* 13, no. 3 (2017): 469–71. https://doi.org/10.1215/15525864-4179133.

Gopinath, Gayatri. *Impossible Desires: Queer Diasporas and South Asian Public Cultures*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2005.

Gossett, Che, and Juliana Huxtable. "Existing in the World: Blackness at the Edge of Trans Visibility." In *Trap Door: Trans Cultural Production and the Politics of Visibility*, edited by Tourmaline, Eric A. Stanley, and Johanna Burton, 39–55. Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2017.

Governor Edmund G. Brown Jr. "Freedom Sculpture Proclamation." Office of the Governor, July 4, 2017. https://www.freedomsculpture.org/images/Freedom-Sculpture-Gov-Brown-Proclamation.pdf.

Grewal, Inderpal, and Caren Kaplan. *Scattered Hegemonies: Postmodernity and Transnational Feminist Practices*. University of Minnesota Press, 1994.

Grewal, Zareena. *Islam Is a Foreign Country: American Muslims and the Global Crisis of Authority*. New York: NYU Press, 2013.

Gupta, Kat. "Creating a Trans Space." In *The Emergence of Trans: Cultures, Politics, and Everyday Lives*, edited by Ruth Pearce, Igi Moon, Kat Gupta, and Deborah Lynn Steinberg, 65–67. Routledge, 2020. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315145815-8.

Haddad, Yvonne Yazbeck. *Muslim Women in America: The Challenge of Islamic Identity Today*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2006.

Haley, Sarah. *No Mercy Here: Gender, Punishment, and the Making of Jim Crow Modernity*. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2016.

Hanassab, Shideh. "Sexuality, Dating, and Double Standards: Young Iranian Immigrants in Los Angeles." *Iranian Studies* 31, no. 1 (1998): 65–75. https://doi.org/10.1080/00210869808701896.

Harding, Kate. "How Do You Fuck a Fat Woman?" In *Yes Means Yes: Visions of Female Sexual Power and a World Without Rape*, edited by Jaclyn Friedman and Jessica Valenti. Seal Press, 2008.

Horsti, Karina. "Digital Islamophobia: The Swedish Woman as a Figure of Pure and Dangerous Whiteness." *New Media & Society* 19, no. 9 (2017): 1440–57. https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444816642169.

Huda Jadallah. "Reflections of a Genderqueer Palestinian American Lesbian Mother." In *Arab and Arab American Feminisms*. Syracuse University Press, 2011.

Iman Foundation. "About Iman." Iman Cultural Center, 2020. https://iman.org/about/.

———. "Iman Library." Iman Library, n.d. Accessed January 25, 2020.

Ingenito, Domenico. *Beholding Beauty: Saʿdi of Shiraz and the Aesthetics of Desire in Medieval Persian Poetry*. Boston: Brill, 2020.

Raha. "I-Ran out of the Closet Panel Discussion in NYC (June 27)," 2019. https://www.rahaintl.org/event/i-ran-out-of-the-closet-panel-discussion-in-nyc-june-27/.

Izharuddin, Alicia. "'Free Hair': Narratives of Unveiling and the Reconstruction of Self." *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 44, no. 1 (2018): 155–76. https://doi.org/10.1086/698281.

Jain, Andrea R. *Peace Love Yoga: The Politics of Global Spirituality*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2020. https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780190888626.001.0001.

———. *Selling Yoga: From Counterculture to Pop Culture*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2014.

Jakobsen, Janet, and Ann Pellegrini. *Love the Sin: Sexual Regulation and the Limits of Religious Tolerance.* New York: NYU Press, 2003.

Jamal, Amaney A. "Trump(Ing) on Muslim Women: The Gendered Side of Islamophobia." *Journal of Middle East Women's Studies* 13, no. 3 (2017): 472–75. https://doi.org/10.1215/15525864-4179144.

Jamal, Amaney A., and Nadine Christine Naber. *Race and Arab Americans before and after 9/11: From Invisible Citizens to Visible Subjects.* 1st ed. Arab American Writing. Syracuse, N.Y: Syracuse University Press, 2008.

Jungar, Katarina, and Salla Peltonen. "'Saving Muslim Queer Women from Muslim Hetero-Patriarchy'. Savior Narratives in LGBTI Youth Work." *Norma: International Journal for Masculinity Studies* 10, no. 2 (2015): 136–49. https://doi.org/10.1080/18902138.2015.1050862.

Kahf, Mohja, and Banah Ghadbian. "Hypervisibility and Middle Eastern Women's Studies." *Journal of Middle East Women's Studies* 13, no. 3 (2017): 476–78. https://doi.org/10.1215/15525864-4179155.

Kapoor, Nisha. *Deport, Deprive, Extradite: 21st Century State Extremism*. La Vergne: Verso, 2018.

Katri, Ido. "Trans-Arab-Jew: A Look beyond the Boundaries of In-Between Identities." *Transgender Studies Quarterly* 6, no. 3 (2019): 338–57. https://doi.org/10.1215/23289252-7549442.

Katz, Sarah. "Persian Cultural Nostalgia as Political Dissent." *Middle East Quarterly*, 2020, 8. https://www.meforum.org/middle-east-quarterly/pdfs/60028.pdf.

Khabeer, Su'ad Abdul. *Muslim Cool: Race, Religion, and Hip Hop in the United States*. New York: NYU Press, 2016.

Khan, Maryam. "LBTQ Muslim Women in Intersectionality: Examining the Resistance Strategies." York University, 2018. https://yorkspace.library.yorku.ca/xmlui/handle/10315/35788.

Khomeini, Ruhollah. "Islamic Government: Governance of the Jurist (Velayat-e Faqeeh)." Translated by Hamid Algar, 1979.

Korkman, Zeynep Kurtulus. "Feeling Labor: Commercial Divination and Commodified Intimacy in Turkey." *Gender & Society* 29, no. 2 (2015): 195–218. https://doi.org/10.1177/0891243214566269.

Koshy, Susan. "Morphing Race into Ethnicity: Asian Americans and Critical Transformations of Whiteness." *Boundary 2* 28, no. 1 (2001): 153–94. https://doi.org/10.1215/01903659-28-1-153.

Kugle, Scott Alan. *Homosexuality in Islam: Critical Reflection on Gay, Lesbian, and Transgender Muslims.* Oxford: Oneworld, 2010.

Kundnani, Arun. *The Muslims Are Coming!: Islamophobia, Extremism, and the Domestic War on Terror.* London ; Verso, 2014.

Lemke, Thomas. "'The Birth of Bio-Politics': Michel Foucault's Lecture at the Collège de France on Neo-Liberal Governmentality." *Economy and Society* 30, no. 2 (2001): 190–207. https://doi.org/10.1080/03085140120042271.

Lorde, Audre Geraldine. *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches.* Trumansburg, NY: Crossing Press, 1984. http://www.aspresolver.com/aspresolver.asp?BLTC;S8108;parent.

Lowe, Lisa. *Immigrant Acts: On Asian American Cultural Politics.* Durham: Duke University Press, 1996.

Maghbouleh, Neda. "From White to What? MENA and Iranian American Non-White Reflected Race." *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 43, no. 4 (March 15, 2020): 613–31. https://doi.org/10.1080/01419870.2019.1599130.

———. *The Limits of Whiteness: Iranian Americans and the Everyday Politics of Race.* Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2017.

Mahmood, Saba. *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject.* Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011. https://doi.org/10.1515/9781400839919.

———. "Secularism, Hermeneutics, and Empire: The Politics of Islamic Reformation." *Public Culture* 18, no. 2 (2006): 323–47. https://doi.org/10.1215/08992363-2006-006.

Maira, Sunaina. "'Good' and 'Bad' Muslim Citizens: Feminists, Terrorists, and U.S. Orientalisms." *Feminist Studies* 35, no. 3 (2009): 631-656.

———. *Missing: Youth, Citizenship, and Empire after 9/11.* Durham: Duke University Press, 2009.

Malek, Amy. "Public Performances of Identity Negotiation in the Iranian Diaspora: The New York Persian Day Parade." *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and The Middle East* 31 (September 20, 2011): 388–410. https://doi.org/10.1215/1089201X-1264316.

Mamdani, Mahmood. *Good Muslim, Bad Muslim: America, the Cold War, and the Roots of Terror.* Pasig City, Philippines: Anvil, 2005.

Mankekar, Purnima. *Unsettling India: Affect, Temporality, Transnationality.* Durham: Duke University Press, 2015.

Mannani, Manijeh. "The Metaphysics of the Heart in the Sufi Poetry of Rumi." *Religion & Literature* 42, no. 3 (2010): 161–68.

Maroukis, Thomas C. *The Peyote Road: Religious Freedom and the Native American Church*. University of Oklahoma Press, 2010.

Massad, Joseph. "Re-Orienting Desire: The Gay International and the Arab World." *Public Culture* 14, no. 2 (2002): 361–86. https://doi.org/10.1215/08992363-14-2-361.

McNaugher, Thomas L. "Ballistic Missiles and Chemical Weapons: The Legacy of the Iran-Iraq War." *International Security* 15, no. 2 (1990): 5–34. https://doi.org/10.2307/2538864.

Mehdi Bozorgmehr. "From Iranian Studies to Studies of Iranians in the United States." *Iranian Studies* 31, no. 1 (1998): 5–30.

Mervat F Hatem. "The Political and Cultural Representations of Arabs, Arab Americans, and Arab American Feminisms after September 11, 2001." In *Arab and Arab American Feminisms*. Syracuse University Press, 2011.

Mirandé, Alfredo. "The Muxes of Juchitan: A Preliminary Look at Transgender Identity and Acceptance." *California Western International Law Journal* 42, no. 2 (2012): 509-540.

Moallem, Minoo. *Between Warrior Brother and Veiled Sister: Islamic Fundamentalism and the Politics of Patriarchy in Iran*. Berkeley, Calif: University of California Press, 2005.

———. *Persian Carpets: The Nation as a Transnational Commodity*. 1st ed. The Routledge Series for Creative Teaching and Learning in Anthropology. New York: Routledge, 2018.

Mobasher, Mohsen. "Cultural Trauma and Ethnic Identity Formation Among Iranian Immigrants in the United States." *The American Behavioral Scientist (Beverly Hills)* 50, no. 1 (2006): 100–117. https://doi.org/10.1177/0002764206289656.

Moghadam, Valentine M. "Islamic Feminism and Its Discontents: Toward a Resolution of the Debate." *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 27, no. 4 (2002): 1135–71. https://doi.org/10.1086/339639.

Moghissi, Haideh. *Feminism and Islamic Fundamentalism: The Limits of Postmodern Analysis*. London; Zed Books, 1999.

Mohammadi Doostdar, Alireza. "Fantasies of Reason: Science, Superstition, and the Supernatural in Iran." Harvard University, 2012. https://dash.harvard.edu/bitstream/handle/1/9282603/MohammadiDoostdar_gsas.harvard_0084L_10215.pdf?sequence=3&isAllowed=y.

Moojan Momen. *An Introduction to Shi'i Islam: The History and Doctrines of Twelver Shi'ism*. Yale University Press, 1987.

Moraga, Cherríe. *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*. Edited by Gloria Anzaldúa and Toni Cade Bambara. First edition. Watertown, Mass: Persephone Press, 1981.

Mostashari, Ali, and Ali Khodamhosseini. "An Overview of Socioeconomic Characteristics of the Iranian-American Community Based on the 2000 U.S. Census." Iranian Studies Group at MIT. Massachusetts Institute of Technology: MIT, February 2004.

Mostofi, Nilou. "Who We Are: The Perplexity of Iranian-American Identity." *Sociological Quarterly* 44, no. 4 (2003): 681–703. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1533-8525.2003.tb00531.x.

Munt, Sally R. "Queer Spiritual Spaces." In *Queer Spiritual Spaces: Sexuality and Sacred Places*, edited by Andrew Kam-Tuck Yip and Kath Browne, 1–33. New York, NY: Routledge, 2016. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315603247.

Murauskaite, Egle. "Saddam's Use of Violence against Civilians during the Iran-Iraq War." *Middle East Journal* 70, no. 1 (2016): 47–68.

Naber, Nadine, Sa'ed Atshan, Nadia Awad, Maya Mikdashi, Sofian Merabet, Dorgham Abusalim, and Nada Elia. "On Palestinian Studies and Queer Theory." *Journal of Palestine Studies* 47, no. 3 (May 1, 2018): 62–71. https://doi.org/10.1525/jps.2018.47.3.62.

Najmabadi, Afsaneh. *Professing Selves: Transsexuality and Same-Sex Desire in Contemporary Iran*. Duke University Press, 2014.

———. *Women with Mustaches and Men without Beards: Gender and Sexual Anxieties of Iranian Modernity*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005.

Nakash, Yitzhak. *The Shi'Is of Iraq*. Princeton: University Press, 1995.

Nasr, Seyyed Vali Reza. *The Shia Revival: How Conflicts within Islam Will Shape the Future*. [Paperback ed.]. New York: W.W. Norton, 2007.

National Iranian American Council. "The Iranians Count Census Coalition Releases the Special Tabulation Results from the 2010 U.S. Census." NIAC. Accessed March 1, 2022. https://www.niacouncil.org/press_room/the-iranians-count-census-coalition-releases-the-special-tabulation-results-from-the-2010-u-s-census/.

Norton, Augustus R. *Hezbollah: A Short History*. Princeton Studies in Muslim Politics. Princeton: University Press, 2007.

Osanloo, Arzoo. "On Not Saving the Muslim Women (and Men)." *Journal of Middle East Women's Studies* 13, no. 3 (2017): 479–82. https://doi.org/10.1215/15525864-4179166.

Picardi, Phillip. "Unholier Than Thou - Trans People Are Sacred," n.d. Accessed March 1, 2022.

Puar, Jasbir K. *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times*. Duke University Press, 2007.

Puar, Jasbir K., and Amit S. Rai. "Monster, Terrorist, Fag: The War on Terrorism and the Production of Docile Patriots." *Social Text* 20, no. 3 (2002): 117–48. https://doi.org/10.1215/01642472-20-3_72-117.

Public Affairs Alliance of Iranian Americans. "Iranian Americans: Immigration and Assimilation." Washington, D.C, April 2014. https://paaia.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/iranian-americans-immigration-and-assimilation.pdf.

Public Affairs Alliance of Iranian Americans (PAAIA) and Zogby International. "Public Opinion Survey of Iranian Americans," December 2008. https://paaia.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/2008-SURVEY-of-Iranian-Americans.pdf.

Purnell, Kandida. "Body Politics and Boundary Work: Nobodies on Hunger Strike at Guantánamo (2013–2015)." *Alternatives: Global, Local, Political* 39, no. 4 (2014): 271–86. https://doi.org/10.1177/0304375415575208.

Qutb, Sayyid. *Milestones.* Rev. ed. Cedar Rapids, Iowa: Unity, 1981.

About RAHA. "RAHA International | Facebook." Accessed February 22, 2022. https://www.facebook.com/RAHAIntl/about/?ref=page_internal.

Rahman, Fazlur. *Islam.* History of Religion Series. London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1966.

———. *Islam and Modernity: Transformation of an Intellectual Tradition.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982.

Rahman, Momin. "Queer as Intersectionality: Theorizing Gay Muslim Identities." *Sociology (Oxford)* 44, no. 5 (2010): 944–61. https://doi.org/10.1177/0038038510375733.

Rana, Junaid. *Terrifying Muslims: Race and Labor in the South Asian Diaspora.* Durham: Duke University Press, 2011.

Razack, Sherene. *Casting out: The Eviction of Muslims from Western Law and Politics.* Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007.

Reynolds, Aja D., Ree Botts, and Farima Pour-Khorshid, "Critical Sisterhood Praxis: Curating a Women of Color Feminist Intervention for Spiritual Reclamation in the Academy," *The Journal of Education Foundations* 34, no. 1 (2021): 14-30, https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ1307650.

Richter-Montpetit, Melanie. "Empire, Desire and Violence: A Queer Transnational Feminist Reading of the Prisoner 'Abuse' in Abu Ghraib and the Question of 'Gender Equality.'" *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 9, no. 1 (2007): 38–59. https://doi.org/10.1080/14616740601066366.

Ringer, Monica M. "Iranian Nationalism and Zoroastrian Identity: Between Cyrus and Zoroaster." In *Iran Facing Others*, 267–77. New York: Palgrave Macmillan US, n.d. https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137013408_13.

Rowson, Everett K. "The Effeminates of Early Medina." *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 111, no. 4 (1991): 671–93. https://doi.org/10.2307/603399.

Sabagh, Georges, and Mehdi Bozorgmehr. "Secular Immigrants: Religiosity and Ethnicity among Iranian Muslims in Los Angeles." In *The Muslim Communities of North America*, edited by Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad and Jane Smith, 445–73. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994.

Saeidzadeh, Zara. "Understanding Socio-Legal Complexities of Sex Change in Postrevolutionary Iran." *Transgender Studies Quarterly* 6, no. 1 (2019): 80–102. https://doi.org/10.1215/23289252-7253510.

Said, Edward W. *Covering Islam: How the Media and the Experts Determine How We See the Rest of the World*. Rev. ed., 1st Vintage books ed. New York: Vintage Books, 1997.

Selod, Saher. "Moving from South Asian and Arab Identities to a Muslim Identity." In *Forever Suspect*, 30–48. Ithaca, NY: Rutgers University Press, 2019. https://doi.org/10.36019/9780813588377-002.

Serano, Julia. *Whipping Girl: A Transsexual Woman on Sexism and the Scapegoating of Femininity*. Emeryville, CA: Seal Press, 2007.

Shafie, Ghadir. "Pinkwashing: Israel's International Strategy and Internal Agenda." *Kohl: A Journal for Body and Gender Research* 1, no. 1 (2015): 82–86. https://doi.org/10.36583/kohl/1-1-7.

Shah, Shanon. "Constructing an Alternative Pedagogy of Islam: The Experiences of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Muslims." *Journal of Beliefs and Values* 37, no. 3 (2016): 308–19. https://doi.org/10.1080/13617672.2016.1212179.

Shakhsari, Sima. "From Homoerotics of Exile to Homopolitics of Diaspora: Cyberspace, the War on Terror, and the Hypervisible Iranian Queer." *Journal of Middle East Women's Studies* 8, no. 3 (2012): 14–40. https://doi.org/10.2979/jmiddeastwomstud.8.3.14.

Shariati, Ali. *Marxism and Other Western Fallacies: An Islamic Critique*. Translated by R. Campbell. Berkeley: Mizan Press, 1980.

shawndeez, ed. "Khejalat: A Zine on Queer/Trans Iranian American Life." Zine, June 2020.

Silva, Kumarini. "Expulsion and What Is Not: Defining Worthiness of American Citizenship." In *Brown Threat*. University of Minnesota Press, 2016. https://doi.org/10.5749/j.ctt1g0b7zx.6.

Siraj, Asifa. "British Pakistani Lesbians Existing within the Confines of the Closet." *Culture, Health & Sexuality* 20, no. 1 (2018): 28–39. https://doi.org/10.1080/13691058.2017.1323349.

Smith, Sara. "Gendered and Embodied Geopolitics of Borders, Marginalization, and Contingent Solidarity." *Journal of Middle East Women's Studies* 13, no. 3 (2017): 350–53. https://doi.org/10.1215/15525864-4178990.

Somé, Sobonfu. "Homosexuality: The Gatekeepers." In *The Spirit of Intimacy: Ancient African Teachings in the Ways of Relationships*, 132–38. Berkeley Hills Books, 1997.

Spade, Dean. *Normal Life: Administrative Violence, Critical Trans Politics, and the Limits of Law.* North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2015.

Spohn, Ulrike. "Sisters in Disagreement: The Dispute Among French Feminists About the 'Burqa Ban' and the Causes of Their Disunity." *Journal of Human Rights* 12, no. 2 (2013): 145–64. https://doi.org/10.1080/14754835.2013.784661.

Stausberg, Michael. "Zoroastrians in Modern Iran." In *The Wiley Blackwell Companion to Zoroastrianism*, 173–90. Chichester, UK: John Wiley & Sons, Ltd, 2015. https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118785539.ch11.

Strassfeld, Max, and Robyn Henderson-Espinoza. "Introduction: Mapping Trans Studies in Religion." *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly* 6, no. 3 (August 1, 2019): 283–96. https://doi.org/10.1215/23289252-7549400.

Stryker, Susan. "General Editor's Introduction." *Transgender Studies Quarterly* 6, no. 3 (2019): 279–82. https://doi.org/10.1215/23289252-7549382.

Tabatabai, Behzad. "Nowruz." farhang.org. Accessed February 12, 2019. https://farhang.org/programs/nowruz.

Takeyh, Ray. "The Iran-Iraq War: A Reassessment." *Middle East Journal* 64, no. 3 (2010): 365–83.

Tamimi Arab, P. "Solidarity, Selective Indignation, and Queer Muslims: In Conversation with Dino Suhonic," 2017.

Tavakoli-Targhi, Mohamad. "Refashioning Iran: Language and Culture During the Constitutional Revolution." *Iranian Studies* 23, no. 1–4 (1990): 77–101. https://doi.org/10.1080/00210869008701750.

Tavakoli-Targhi, Mohamad. *Refashioning Iran: Orientalism, Occidentalism, and Historiography.* St. Antony's Series. Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave, 2001.

"The Combahee River Collective Statement," April 1977. https://www.blackpast.org/african-american-history/combahee-river-collective-statement-1977/.

The Pain and Empowerment of Choosing Your Own Gender, 2015. Alok Vaid-Menon. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nKh85SiTmtY.

Thobani, Sunera. "The Visuality of Terror: Gender, Sex and Desire in War." *Social Identities* 25, no. 4 (2019): 523–41. https://doi.org/10.1080/13504630.2018.1514166.

Tourmaline, Eric A. Stanley, and Johanna Burton, eds. *Trap Door: Trans Cultural Production and the Politics of Visibility*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2017.

Trump, President Donald. "Protecting the Nation From Foreign Terrorist Entry Into the United States." The White House, January 27, 2017. https://www.federalregister.gov/documents/2017/02/01/2017-02281/protecting-the-nation-from-foreign-terrorist-entry-into-the-united-states.

Tyrer, David. *The Politics of Islamophobia: Race, Power and Fantasy*. London: Pluto Press, 2013.

Uriarte, María Teresa. "The Teotihuacan Ballgame and the Beginning of Time." *Ancient Mesoamerica* 17, no. 1 (2006): 17–38.

US Census Bureau. "Census - Table Results." Selected Population Profile in the United States - Nation, 2019. https://data.census.gov/cedsci/table?q=Iranian&tid=ACSSPP1Y2019.S0201.

———. "Census - Table Results." Selected Population Profile in the United States - State, 2019. https://data.census.gov/cedsci/table?q=Iranian&g=0400000US06&tid=ACSSPP1Y2019.S0201.

———. "Census - Table Results." Selected Population Profile in the United States - LA Metropolitan Area, 2019. https://data.census.gov/cedsci/table?q=Iranian&g=310XX00US31080&tid=ACSSPP1Y2019.S0201.

Varzi, Roxanne. *Warring Souls: Youth, Media, and Martyrdom in Post-Revolution Iran*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2006.

Volpp, Leti. "Disappearing Acts: On Gendered Violence, Pathological Cultures, and Civil Society" 121, no. 5 (2006): 1631–38. https://doi.org/10.1632/S003081290009996X.

———. "Passports in the Time of Trump." *Symploke* 25, no. 1–2 (2017): 155–74. https://doi.org/10.5250/symploke.25.1-2.0155.

———. "Protecting the Nation from 'Honor Killings': The Construction of a Problem," 2019.
Weisenfeld, Judith. "Forum: American Religion and 'Whiteness.'" *Religion and American Culture: A Journal of Interpretation* 19, no. 1 (2009): 1–35. https://doi.org/10.1525/rac.2009.19.1.1.

Yarsharter, Ehsan. "Nowruz: The New Year Celebration in Iran." In *Celebrating Nowruz: Iranian New Year*, 4. Farhang Foundation, 2019. Print.