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# Navigating the (Im)Perfect Performances of Queer Iranian-American Identity

## Abstract

Within the social sciences and humanities, failure to adequately account for the intersectional ways people of color navigate their multiple identities within contesting cultural systems, creates an unfinished portrait of queer identity. For queer people of color, negotiating queer identity is always in relation to their nationality, race-ethnicity, class, gender, religion, and family. While many queer of color stories share similar obligatory cultural norms, the legal ramifications that impact the lives of queer Iranians and their families, both within Iran and abroad, challenge many queer of color expectations. Due to stringent cultural and legal influences, Iranian social discourse heavily impacts the family unit and an individual's ability to navigate sexual identity within those structures. Ascribing to a collectivist orientation, Iranians consider family a cohesive, interconnected, and integral system that relies on extended families for financial, emotional, and social support. Correspondingly, when Iranian women deviate from normalized expectations (e.g., heterosexuality, marriageability, maintenance of virginity, traditional gender roles) they are seen as having betrayed their families and their entire ethnic communities. Thus, the pressure to remain committed to traditional social scripts is imperative for the preservation of family, making the risk of deviating from those conventions for queer Iranians and Iranian-American women, even greater. Within the context of the United States, many of the same social and familial obligations remain steadfast. Despite ideological limitations, the rise of acceptability for LGBTQ identity in the U.S. has given leeway for some queer Iranian-Americans to share their sexual identities with their immediate families. However, since similar expectations are placed on queer Iranian-American women, many are still compelled to hide their identities from their families of origin, distance themselves from the Iranian community, and/or enter heterosexual partnerships. Utilizing women of color feminism driven by intersectionality, this project explores how queer identity performances function as tools working to reify and/or resist systems of power and privilege. By utilizing personal narrative interviewing and poetic transcription, I explore the ways in which first-generation, queer Iranian-Americans perform their sexualities through an amalgamation of feelings of shame and guilt, the expectation to remain loyal to both family and community, and the possibilities for agency and resistance.

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Presented to

the Faculty of Social Sciences

University of Denver

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In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Philosophy

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by

Shadee Abdi

June 2017

Advisor: Bernadette Marie Calafell

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### **Abstract**

Within the social sciences and humanities, failure to adequately account for the intersectional ways people of color navigate their multiple identities within contesting cultural systems, creates an unfinished portrait of queer identity. For queer people of color, negotiating queer identity is always in relation to their nationality, race-ethnicity, class, gender, religion, and family. While many queer of color stories share similar obligatory cultural norms, the legal ramifications that impact the lives of queer Iranians and their families, both within Iran and abroad, challenge many queer of color expectations. Due to stringent cultural and legal influences, Iranian social discourse heavily impacts the family unit and an individual's ability to navigate sexual identity within those structures. Ascribing to a collectivist orientation, Iranians consider family a cohesive, interconnected, and integral system that relies on extended families for financial, emotional, and social support. Correspondingly, when Iranian women deviate from normalized expectations (e.g., heterosexuality, marriageability, maintenance of virginity, traditional gender roles) they are seen as having betrayed their families and their entire ethnic communities. Thus, the pressure to remain committed to traditional social scripts is imperative for the preservation of family, making the risk of deviating from those conventions for queer Iranians and Iranian-American women, even greater. Within the context of the United States, many of the same social and familial obligations remain steadfast. Despite ideological limitations, the rise of acceptability for LGBTQ

identity in the U.S. has given leeway for some queer Iranian-Americans to share their sexual identities with their immediate families. However, since similar expectations are placed on queer Iranian-American women, many are still compelled to hide their identities from their families of origin, distance themselves from the Iranian community, and/or enter heterosexual partnerships. Utilizing women of color feminism driven by intersectionality, this project explores how queer identity performances function as tools working to reify and/or resist systems of power and privilege. By utilizing personal narrative interviewing and poetic transcription, I explore the ways in which first-generation, queer Iranian-Americans perform their sexualities through an amalgamation of feelings of shame and guilt, the expectation to remain loyal to both family and community, and the possibilities for agency and resistance.

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## Chapter One: Telling the Truth

*“Particularly for people of color, life lived... is the root of our beginnings and the root of our understandings” (Madison, “That Was my Occupation” 214).*

*“Oppressed people resist by identifying themselves as subjects, by defining their reality, shaping their new identity, naming their history, telling their story” (hooks, Talking Back 43).*

*It appears my whole life has been a series of negotiations about my identity. Secrets I’ve kept from my community, my family... my mother. I am constantly in a state of flux, living on /over/in between the margins, moving fluidly through the many facets of my life that mark me as abject.*

*I am exhausted.*

*I make room for my queer identity only in times where I am not forced to have to fully perform my Iranian identity. Oddly, I feel closer to my culture when I succumb to the pressures causing me to question just how attracted to men I am expected to be. I find myself attempting to reconcile whether these moments have been conditioned in me since childhood, or if instead, I have simply taught myself how to cope with my divergent identities as a means of survival. I am reassured that I am not alone when I read Cherrie Moraga’s words, “For a lesbian trying to survive in a heterosexist society, there is no easy way around these emotions” (33). So then maybe I must concede that it is a little bit of both. Conceivably, I have let the voices in my head telling me to get married before my*

eggs get too old, drown out what little emotional energy I have left to spare. In any case, I question whether these concerns stem from the pressures of my family, who is pressured by their family, who is pressured by their government, who is pressured by a dangerously misguided interpretation of queer identity all together... the “Western ‘disease.’”<sup>1</sup> I frequently question just how much of my culture I should reject, just to survive. What is certain however, is that it is because of these questions that **I** continue to feel **pressured** to stay inside of this suffocating Persian closet (Abdi). I have come to learn that despite being reminded of the contrary, it **doesn’t** always get better. Eventually, I must sit uncomfortably in the reality that being a queer person of color means always having to oscillate between different worlds. And the only way to live authentically is to break free of the cultural, familial, and political restraints while simultaneously living inside of them, using story and narrative trespass to simply exist (Abdi 8).

*I am a queer Iranian-American woman.*

*I am also the daughter of a single mother who relied on food stamps and section 8 housing so that I never had to question where I would sleep or where my next meal would come from. I owe my mother everything. I owe her honesty, but at what cost? Do I hide who I am and allow our relationship to grow further and further apart? Do I tell her the truth and risk losing her all together? Like a flick of a light switch, I fluctuate between the U.S. American voices in my head yelling, “It gets better. You’re her daughter. She **HAS** to accept you,” and the louder, more heavily accented Iranian voices that force me*

---

<sup>1</sup> In 2012, the secretary-general of the Iranian High Council for Human Rights, Mohammad Javad Larijani, described homosexuality as an “illness and malady,” and as a Western ‘disease’ (Dehghan).

*to empathize and understand, "She grew up learning a different lesson. Don't be selfish. Your story is also her story."*

**REWIND...**

*I consider the risks of going back to Iran to see my family. I long to be with the ones I love most, and more than anything, I miss my grandmother. Conversely, I reflect on the alternative - turning my back-- never telling them why I had to stop visiting or why I couldn't bother to return the millionth missed phone call. Then I think about not being able to see my grandmother again, and my choice becomes clearer. I don't tell them. It doesn't make sense for them to know. Not for my own well-being, my mother's, and certainly not for theirs. So, I guess that I am angry that I am lucky to get to even have that choice to begin with. I am lucky because I will never know what it's like to be a gay Iranian living in Iran. I will never know what it is like to feel the way that I feel and not be able to act on it without fear of repercussion. I will never know what it is like to fall in love and be afraid of being caught, only to be harassed, arrested, chastised, whipped, or hanged. Though arguably, there are people here that can feel that way too. But, I will never know what it is like to have to move through the world, flesh and blood, breathing, speaking, listening as someone tells me that there is no one like me in my own country.*

*To be told that I am*

*A phenomenon.*

*A monster (Calafell, Monstrosity).*

*Or, that I don't even exist.*

*What I do know is what it is like to have those values instilled in your community... in your family. I do know what it is like to be described in ways that always end with, "but..." I do know what it feels like to know that by simply living your life, you are risking the lives of those you love most.*

**REWIND...**

*I am staring out my office window located on the first floor of Sturm Hall, a building nestled precisely between the intersections of Gaylord and Race street. The irony of which, does not escape me. My head feels heavy on my shoulders, perhaps signaling my need for sleep. I roll my neck and try to rub the exhaustion out of my eyes, while I count the seconds between each breath I take. I look back to my computer screen and gaze intently on the brightly lit "confirm" button that has been staring back at me for the last hour and a half. Unexpectedly this time, I feel my pulse quicken. Before I can go through the list of pros and cons in my head for the thousandth time, my trembling hands cup the top of my wireless mouse, and I press down.*

Trip Summary			
<b>Flight Summary</b>			
<b>Alternate Date Flight</b> You saved money by choosing an alternate date flight. As a CheapOair customer service courtesy, you have 4 hours to change your flight if you'd like. For changes to the itinerary call us 24/7 Toll Free: <b>1-888-670-8101</b>			
<b>From:</b> Los Angeles, CA, US ( <b>LAX</b> )	<b>Depart:</b> Sun, Jul 27, 2014 04:20 pm - 05:50 am (+2 day) (1 Stop)	<b>Airline Confirmation:</b> Alitalia : LM34UM Belavia : YKHWEA Air France : 8IHD4U	
<b>To:</b> Tehran Khomeini, IR ( <b>IKA</b> )	<b>Return:</b> Wed, Aug 27, 2014 04:40 am - 04:30 pm (2 Stops)		
Traveler Name	Ticket Number	Meal Preference	Special Request
Abdi, Shadee (Adult)	0557462008022/23 E-Ticket	Any meal	—
<b>Disclaimer:</b> All special requests, meal preferences, seat requests are not guaranteed. You must contact your airline to reconfirm that they have received this request and confirmed it.			
Flight Booking Details			

*"Fuck it. One more time." I sigh in relief and close my computer screen. "I'm going home."*

## **FAST FORWARD...**

*I couldn't breathe. Literally. The summer of 2014, the day before I was set to fly to Tehran, I was sitting in a hospital bed grasping for air that my lungs refused to produce. My face was burning, reflecting its' scorching red hue, and was stained with the residual track marks of cold sweat and hot tears. My mother sat with me, wiping a damp compress over my forehead, humming to herself in worry. I remember studying her closely that warm July evening, differently than I had in years. Her cheeks were flushed, and her eyes were filled with what can only be described as a mixture of unconditional love and inexplicable fear. I had never had a panic attack before. Anxiety, yes. But never like this. My mother had never seen me **like this**. And now we were here, together, not speaking. And I know that she is terrified.*

*Hours later, we leave the hospital. I struggle to find my balance with one fist clenched around a prescription for Xanax, while my mother safely holds my other hand. I feel her squeeze tightly to reassure me that there's nothing to worry about – that she is not angry - that I was safe with her. I think to myself that this is the moment I had written about years before – the one where I would finally have to tell her the truth (Abdi). She would have to understand. And if she ~~couldn't~~ wouldn't, I would be halfway across the world in a matter of hours anyway. So finally, while sitting beside each other in her fragrant cigarette-scented 2000 Toyota Camry, I whisper, "Will you stop loving me if I tell you the truth?" She gives me that confused mom look that I have come to know so well, which forces me to turn away before I lose my nerve. I stare out the passenger side*

*window, looking for a sign. Frozen in time. Eventually, though I don't recall how many minutes later, I manage to stumble, "Maman, I have to tell you why this happened."*

*That evening,*

*I learned that it is impossible*

*to forget the sound*

*of your mother's heart*

*break/ing.*

### *Introducing Iranian Sexuality*

Across a myriad of disciplines within the humanities and social sciences (e.g., sociology, psychology, ethnic studies, women's and gender studies, etc.), scholarly work written about Iranian sexual identity is scarce, and the works written about Iranian and Iranian-American sexual identity from the perspective of queer identified researchers with Iranian backgrounds are almost negligible. Due to stringent social and legal influences, Iranian cultural discourse heavily impacts the family unit and an individual's ability to navigate their own identities within those structures. In other words, Iranian cultural norms dictate that an individual is always understood in relation to their immediate family, extended family, and in many ways, are a representation of the entire Iranian ethnic community. Moreover, much of the social, cultural, legal, and familial expectations are implicitly (explicitly) linked to the female body. Iranian women are expected to strictly adhere to rigid legal and cultural obligations to emphasize the preservation of the nuclear family (the foundation upon which Iranian culture is built). Consequently, if Iranian women deviate from these normative scripts (i.e.,



heterosexuality, marriageability, maintenance of virginity, gender roles, etc.) they are seen as having betrayed their families and their entire ethnic communities (Abdi and Van Gilder; Van Gilder and Abdi). As such, the pressures for Iranian women both in and outside of Iran to remain committed to these social scripts for the preservation of family is substantial, making the risk of deviating from those norms even greater.

Since the 1979 Iranian Revolution, the United States has seen a dramatic increase of Iranian immigrant families, and currently holds the largest population of Iranians outside of Iran, resulting in a considerable new generation of Iranian-Americans (Bozorgmehr and Douglas). Thus Iranian-American identity is understood as a duality of cultural existences wherein:

This dualism combines a unique mixture that can only be termed Iranian-American, a mixture that is perpetually blended and brewed. Through the process of their diasporic immigration, Iranians absorb, reject, and assimilate specific elements from both Iranian and American cultures. (682)

Mostofi describes Iranian-American identity as:

a combination of (1) American notions of freedom and liberty and (2) Iranian cultural traditions and concepts of the family. Although the process of constructing an identity in and of itself may be taxing, this dualism itself is not adverse. In other words, Western- especially American- culture, political rhetoric, and lifestyles have been a part of the Iranian psyche since World War II. Additionally, the emergence of a Westernized, middle- to upper-middle professional class bred on American political theory, Parisian fashion, Italian cinema, and German friendship during the Pahlavi regime demonstrates the historical link between Iran and the West. (682)

As such, within the context of the United States, Iranian-American women are presented with more opportunities to explore their sexualities outside of the restrictive governmental laws, though many of the same social and familial obligations remain

steadfast. Unsurprisingly, this becomes challenging for queer<sup>2</sup> Iranian-American women attempting to make sense of their sexual identities within these competing cultural scripts, one of which considers homosexuality<sup>3</sup> illegal and non-existent, and the other which fosters unrealistic positive messages promising that, “it gets better.” Despite these ideological limitations, the rise of acceptance for LGBTQ identity in the United States has given leeway for some queer Iranian-American women to share their sexual identities with their immediate families. However, because of the similar cultural and familial expectations that are placed on Iranian-American women, many are still compelled to hide their sexual identities from their immediate and extended families in Iran, distance themselves from the Iranian community, or enter compulsory heterosexual partnerships (Abdi; Abdi and Van Gilder; Afary; Najmabadi; Van Gilder and Abdi). Van Gilder and Abdi report that because Iranian-American sexual identity negotiation is found to be contingent upon parental perception, acceptance, support, and understanding of LGBTQ identity all together, queer Iranian-American women are discouraged from “coming out” due to potentially negative parental perception alongside the anxiety of possible ostracization from the Iranian community for both themselves and their immediate and extended families.

### *Queering Non-Western Families*

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<sup>2</sup> For the purposes of this paper, “queer” will be utilized as an umbrella term to describe a spectrum of non-normative sexual identifications for Iranian-American women. This term also reflects the language used by most participants in this research.

<sup>3</sup> For the purposes of this paper, the terms homosexual and homosexuality are used purposefully in conversation with Iranian ideology to signify the pathologizing of the LGBTQ people within the context of Iranian cultural and legal discourse.

When attempting to recognize the ways in which non-Western families make sense of unfathomable identities, scholars must be able to move away from individualist conventions surrounding the intersections of race, culture, gender, sexuality, and the family. Few family communication scholars have explored the complicated relationship between queer identity and familial negotiation (e.g., Suter and Daas), and minimal work has focused on the complex intersections of culture and family (Suter et al.). Likewise, of the limited cultural communication scholarship considering specific communicative methods that individuals and families use to make sense of conflicting racial and sexual identities, less than a handful have addressed the complexities of queer identity within contesting cultural systems, like that of Iranian-American families (Abdi; Abdi and Van Gilder; Van Gilder and Abdi).

Consequently, there is a need for more diverse scholarship about queer identities that move us past stagnant representations by asking us to instead consider how sexual identity negotiation is influenced by race-culture, gender, nationality, religion, class and other intersectional identities. For a queer person of color, balancing sexual identity is always already in relation to these intersections, and failure to adequately address these cultural nuances creates an unfinished portrait of culturally contingent queer identity formations (Yep, Lovaas, and Elia 4). Still, while many queer of color stories share similar obligatory cultural norms, the legal ramifications that impact the daily lives of queer Iranians and their families, both within and outside of Iran, challenge many queer of color expectations. In this way, scholarship accounting for the negotiation of gender, sexuality, race-culture, nationality, and family for queer Iranian-American women serves

as a critical move toward challenging traditional theoretical approaches for both critical cultural and family communication studies.

The complex negotiation of sexuality alongside cultural and familial expectations becomes one area that requires further explication as queer Iranian women born or raised in the U.S. transgress normative family expectations yet are simultaneously understanding their sexual identities through familial maintenance and (re)creation. These experiences lean toward asking important questions about how queer Iranian-American women make sense of their intersectional identities within their families of origin and their families of creation,<sup>4</sup> as influenced by broader cultural structures of power. Importantly, Western imperialism is one of the prominent themes that surround the lives of queer Middle Eastern and North African (MENA) people, as it serves as a predominant framework for talking about queer identity in the MENA region while simultaneously painting the region as otherwise barbaric or backwards. In this work, I hope to move us past blame and cultural finger pointing, toward a more nuanced understanding of what lived queer experience looks like for Iranian-American women.

Given this goal, the current project is primarily interested in exploring ways in which gender, sexuality, race-culture, nationality, class, ability, and family influence first-generation, queer Iranian-American women's lived experiences. Situated between Intercultural Communication, Middle Eastern and North African (MENA) studies, Family Communication Studies, and Gender and Queer Studies, this work aims to challenge assumptions about MENA communities. Specifically, I consider how Iranian-

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<sup>4</sup> Families of creation in this research constitute families that are constructed beyond biological bounds.

American women negotiate and perform heteronormative cultural expectations within contesting ideological frameworks and within cross-cultural familial and social relationships through narratives of resistance. Building on Calafell's work on theories of the flesh, I propose a women of color feminist and intersectional framework (Anzaldúa; Calafell; Collins; Crenshaw; hooks; Lorde; Mohanty; Moraga; Moraga and Anzaldúa), which employs personal narrative (Conquergood; Langellier) and poetic transcription (Calafell; Faulkner; Madison) to consider how Iranian-American women speak to and perform their multiple and intersecting identities, to better understand the ways in which queer Iranian-American women resist, reify, and traverse heteronormative cultural and familial expectations. Ultimately, the goals of this dissertation are to further a dialogue that asks how queer Iranian-American women are negotiating and performing their sexual and cultural identities while resisting longstanding cultural expectations and coming to recognize their relationships with their families of origin. Further, this work aims to contribute to the growing literature about the practices of non-White families. Given the aforementioned goals, this research project moves to answer the following research questions, (1) How are queer Iranian-American women speaking to and performing their multiple and intersecting identities (like, race-culture, gender, sexuality, and class) in their everyday lives? (2) How are queer Iranian-American women resisting, reifying, or traversing heteronormative cultural expectations within their families of origin? (3) What does the study of queer Iranian-American women negotiating their sexual and familial relationships add to the study of critical family communication?

This research attempts to fill the gaps in culture and family communication scholarship that works to challenge normative ways in which families are understood, so that we may begin to see broader and more inclusive research written about family in Communication Studies. This commitment is enacted in two specific ways. First, this project attempts to move away from Western centric discourses that dominate queer studies which that often fail to consider the ways that gender, sexuality, race-ethnicity, citizenship, nationality (particularly within conflicting structural contexts), shape individual experiences *differently* for historically marginalized or invisible communities. This call directly lends itself to considering the complex negotiation of incompatible identities distinctive for queer Iranians born and/or raised in the United States. Second, this research attempts to bridge critical cultural and family communication by responding to the call for critical family communication scholarship that accounts for 1) power, 2) collapse of the public-private familial binary, 3) critique, resistance, and/or transformation, and 4) reflexivity (Suter 2). By considering the ways in which intersectional identities are negotiated alongside culturally dependent family structures, this research asks how families on the margins of social consideration, maintain/(re)create the family despite and in spite of cultural transgression. Accordingly, the presence of people of color and transnational family stories, like Iranian family narratives, should be seen as an act of (re)framing, (re)centering, and resisting dominant Western discourses about queer identity negotiation and familial maintenance that can help to color in our conceptualization of *what makes a family*.

Admittedly, the core rationale for this project goes further than simply wanting to fill academic gaps. In fact, this research is meant to serve as a political project that moves beyond the scope of academia. Flores argues that for Chicana feminists, writing is often done from the position of having a foot in two cultural worlds, driven by feelings of isolation and solitude (142). Building on that conceptual framework, this work is meant to create space where queer Iranian-Americans, with feet in both worlds, can exist politically, so that the possibility of community becomes tangible. As academics, when we begin making space for invisible narratives to be heard, we are simultaneously recognizing that people exist, that their identities matter, and that the stories that make up their lived experiences do indeed have the political capability to foster change. Perhaps these goals seem idealistic, but I concede to the fact that I am a critical optimist that believes that when you are invested in something you do not critique it because you hate it, rather, you critique it because you ~~want~~ need it to be better. Like Moraga, I contend that the political writer is “the ultimate optimist, believing people are capable of change and using words as one way to try and penetrate the privatism of our lives” (257). This leads me to believe that this research might at least serve as a step in the right direction.

In Chapter Two, I provide an overview of literature that delves into MENA sexuality, the Iranian family, the expectations surrounding sexuality within Iranian families, the move against these restrictions, and an overview of the family as a social structure. Moreover, this chapter will discuss intersectionality and women of color feminisms as critical theories used to frame this research project. Chapter Three will discuss the critical reflexive methods used to garner the stories of queer Iranian-American

women. This chapter will explicate performance and personal narrative as means of challenging longstanding approaches to studying Others. Within this chapter, I will also provide an overview of poetic transcription, which was used as a means of transcribing the stories of my participants in a way that offers credence to their words, their inflections, their meanings, and their intentions. Like Madison, I used poetic transcription so that their words could not be divorced from their bodies and so that these stories would be honored and read in the way they were intended (“That Was My Occupation”).

In Chapter Four, I employ poetic transcription, personal narrative, and performative writing to share the stories of first-generation, queer, Iranian-American women. This chapter gives space for each co-participant to share their stories, concluding each with a poetic transcription that captures our conversation. Chapter Five analyzes the stories and poems in Chapter Four, by breaking the interviews into themes reflecting family/cultural loyalty, shame/guilt and agency/resistance. Finally, in Chapter Six, I will conclude the project and will review the implications and foundations of this research, while explicating the potential for future directions of locating a queer Iranian-American *Theory of the Flesh*. Particularly, by highlighting the ways in which sharing narratives of queer people of color from the MENA region can be used as one way to enhance our understanding of culture, queer identity, and family.



## **Chapter Two: Iranian(American)/Families**

Despite the growing number of critical cultural communication scholars writing about the complex negotiation of identity, the absence of MENA and Muslim experiences and voices in this research is significant. This is particularly important to note within the current political climate in the U.S., where the over-politicized (re)presentations of Islam and the MENA region have been homogenous and overwhelmingly negative. The disparaging image of MENA and/or Muslim people as barbaric terrorists or profoundly oppressed has been perpetuated by the media and has permeated dominant Western perceptions of the region and of the religion (important to note, these are not mutually exclusive categories). For example, we continue to see MENA peoples, including Iranians painted as anti-American, radically oppressive threats to national security in films like *Argo*, *Rosewater*, and critically acclaimed television shows like *Homeland*.

These sloppy portrayals of MENA and/or Muslim communities coupled with facile arguments made by grossly misinformed media commentators have resulted in a dangerous correlation between the actions of a few extremist minorities like Daesh (ISIS) and the practices of 1.6 billion people privately and peacefully observing Islam around the world (Jones). Even beyond terror-based images, conversations surrounding morality and sexual identity for MENA and/or Muslim women remain frigid and often uncontested by Orientalist (Said) misunderstandings of sexual subjectivities. Thus, the

anecdote of the oppressed, repressed, invisible Muslim woman is relentlessly reproduced.

As H  lie posits:

such an approach not only ignores the sexual plurality that existed in Muslim communities and cultures prior to encounters with ‘the West,’ but also fails to recognize the way women in Muslim societies have designed empowerment strategies within their own societies that draw on existing traditions. (2)

In their poignant anthology, *Sexuality in Muslim Contexts: Restrictions and Resistance*, Anissa H  lie and Homa Hoodfar contend that Islam, much like other religious traditions, does not lend itself to conservative agendas, rather it aims to promote emancipatory standpoints. As such, the authors within this collection work to actively reject perspectives that reinforce singular “Muslimness,” to delegitimize excuses for disregarding the multiplicity of identities within Muslim communities (H  lie 2).

In the same vein, the Western creation of totalitarian ‘Muslimness’ has become the predominant site of understanding MENA women’s sexuality. This is particularly problematic when considering queer identity, because as Puar suggests, it is within these totalitarian conceptualizations that we have culturally generated a form of “homonationalism,” a production of normative ways of enacting homosexuality underscored by neoliberal democratic citizenship (*Terrorist Assemblages* 38). Thus, the way in which we perceive “the closet” for many queer people of color, particularly queer MENA individuals, is contingent upon a Western ideology that doesn’t entirely translate, both literally and metaphorically. As Massad suggests, the labeling and identifying sexuality for people from the MENA region, is not a sign of progress, but rather an

imposition of Western ideology, “By inciting discourse about homosexuals where none existed before, the Gay International is in fact heterosexualizing a world that is being forced to be fixed by a Western binary” (383). “The closet” then, should be seen and understood as a Western creation, as it becomes one way that we problematize LGBTQ authenticity, and because it reinforces the conventions that assume only Western notions of queer identity are legitimate. Thus, we must not accept “the closet” to be a ubiquitous liberatory space, particularly for queer MENA bodies where the language of a closet does not exist, since “the closet” is predicated on Western terminology and identification that is not always translatable within different cultural contexts (Massad).

Therefore, for MENA and Iranian communities, “the closet” simply does not work as an accurate metaphor for coming to understand sexuality; thus, the same yardstick cannot be used to measure gay and lesbian identity across the board. Moreover, as Beeman clarifies, “The notion that one is either “gay” or “straight” does not accord with what we observe in human sexual behavior, which is far more flexible. This categorization is an artifact of American culture, which glories in binary categories for classifying people.” For many years, MENA people have explored their sexualities in ways that are undefinable, because sexuality has always been an unspoken fluidity (Najmabadi). Conversely, many queer Iranian-Americans do use this vernacular to come to terms with their identities; thus, we must simultaneously understand that for some, this language does work to liberate, despite its problematics. In other words, it’s complicated.

Like other queer of color folks, everything comes down to learning how to balance multiple lives within one existence.

Accordingly, scholarship pertaining to the MENA region, with an emphasis on sexual identity, must not and cannot be centered on an imaginary transnational Muslim culture (Hélie). Rather, research focused on the MENA region and/or Muslim communities must focus on explicit cultural frameworks paired with specific manifestations and forces of imperialism that influence the construction of those identities. As Kugle notes, “Identity takes shape in the interaction between forces at four different levels: individual psyche, family relationships, community defined by religious tradition, and citizenship defined by national belonging” (10). Therefore, to engage in the discussion of queer Iranian-American identity and the negotiation of family, this proposed research project will address these four levels by predominantly focusing on identity formation in relation to Iranian cultural discourses concerning gender, sexuality, and the family.

### *The Role of Iranian Women*

The 1979 Iranian Revolution and the subsequent fall of the monarchy completely reshaped the Islamic Republic of Iran (hereinafter, the IRI) as we know it today. Because the economic, educational, social, and political foundation of the “modernized” IRI was being overturned, so were the ways that women were expected to perform within the cultural climate, drastically shifting the politics within the IRI (Poya). At the time, women were becoming a larger part of the workforce, but were still simultaneously

expected to preserve and uphold traditional family values. Almost forty years later, the IRI maintains that collectivist orientation, emphasizing the importance of honor (and perceptions of honor), family, and tradition, which impacts both the public and private lives of Iranians (Sadeghi).

Iranian social and cultural discourses emphasize the importance of family, often relying on extended family for financial, emotional, and social security. This is consistent with other honor-shame cultures, wherein “a person’s family is their primary source of honor, social status and identity. Like other ethnic communities, family honor is more important than money or any other form of wealth or status” (Tate 54). As Mostofi posits, “the main components of Iranian identity are family, education, hospitality, and artistic traditions” (687). For this reason, children’s lives are greatly impacted by familial influence, which informs identity formation and the ability to traverse cultural expectancies as:

Muslim families often extend seamlessly into the wider Muslim community. The family often acts to control its members to preserve family honor, reputation, and standing in the community (which is often valued more than an individual family member’s own identity or welfare). (Kugle 11)

The expectations of upholding these values are paramount, as girls and women are viewed as the biggest potential threats to the family honor and cohesion (Sadiqi 102).

Ozyegin describes the code of honor as a commitment to moral purity within a community:

That is the group defined as family, lineage, caste, class, region and nation – and this honor is determined by the behavior of its womenfolk. Honor is

lost as a result of female misconduct. Women thus carry the burden of safeguarding group identity and group honor. The female body symbolizes the social boundaries of cultural identities, and virginity ultimately represents the demarcation between ingroup and outgroup mores. (111)

As Tate contends, within honor-shame cultures:

Every family member is expected to contribute to the family's honor and thus to its social standing. Honor gained by one individual is honor gained by the whole family. Equally important, shame brought upon any one family member brings shame to the whole family. (54)

Therefore, debates about women's chastity remain at the forefront of discussions regarding women's sexuality and the preservation of family honor. For Iranian families, "the very identity of women has been defined in terms of their dependencies and obligations within the institutions of family and marriage as daughter, sister, wife, or mother" (Milani 62). To subvert the potential for honorable transgression, women's sexual identities are typically monitored and controlled by their fathers, brothers, and husbands (Tohidi 130). However, conversations concerning sexuality and the preservation of purity for MENA women continue to be met with several contradictions between dichotomous perceptions of "honour and shame, purity and pollution, virtue and temptation, chastity and permissiveness, domination and submissiveness" (Obermeyer 250).

This fixation on women's bodies lends itself to a "false vision of a modern nation-state and polity composed of the sovereign, ungendered, autonomous subject conceived as explicitly transcendent of kinship, embedded in honor code" (Ozyegin 112).

Accordingly, relationships between men and women are heavily scrutinized and sexual relationships are only considered when referencing (heterosexual) married couples:

Any relationships (particularly sexual ones) between men and women outside of marriage are socially, culturally, legally, and religiously forbidden in Iran, and most Iranians consider it important and that young people (especially females) abstain from any physical intimacy and sex until marriage. (Farhani et al. 30)

### **Virginity and Women's Virtue**

Iranians consider virginity and chastity as the quintessential gauge of morality and family honor, and believe virgins to be elite females within that social order. In the strictest sense of the word, virginity refers to the condition of not yet having had penetrative sexual intercourse. Section One, Article 63 of the IRI's Penal Code defines penetrative sex between unmarried men and women as: "any act of sexual intercourse, including anal intercourse, between a man and a woman who are forbidden (*haram*) to each other, unless the act is committed unwittingly" (Mir-Hosseini and Hamzić 96-97). Because the undamaged hymen is considered the irrefutable emblem of virginity, the thinnest layer of flesh located within the most private and vulnerable part of every young Iranian woman, has the power to uphold or dismantle her life. Obermeyer emphasizes the significance of virginity preservation met with inequitable gendered double standards, "While it is considered natural that men have strong sexual needs and can seek satisfaction with many women, good women remain virgins until marriage and have limited interest in sex afterwards" (243). It is important to note here, that for Iranian families, the symbolic complexity of virginity maintenance extends far beyond hymen

preservation and includes performances of chastity in all aspects of everyday life because “everything in Iran is political and politicized” (Mahdavi, “The Personal is Political” 36).

The current sexual rules (both written and unwritten) in the IRI seek to define and confine women to stringent regulation compelling them to circumnavigate deviant sexual behavior despite traditional expectations. With over two-thirds of the IRI’s population being urban, educated, and under the age of 30, regulations placed on women’s sexual behavior are consistent with Iranian customs and beliefs which place great significance on ‘family honor,’ despite being in direct contrast to the social realities (Tohidi 130). So, while the concept of virginity remains an indication of women’s worth in theory, for younger generations of Iranians, the practicality of hymen preservation is rapidly decreasing (Sadeghi). Consequently, Iranian women have found alternative ways to negotiate their sexualities by “performing” technical virginity for the community amidst heavy social restriction. In this way, young Iranian women are directly (or indirectly) resisting stringent cultural, familial, or governmental restrictions and are rejecting compulsory virginity traditions. This is explicitly evident in the rapidly changing social climate in the IRI due to urbanization, education, and the sexual revolution, where young Iranians are actively carving out their own spaces of resistance (Afary; Najmabadi). Importantly, this expectation of virginity is still considered within U.S. contexts as:

Many Iranian families still subscribe to the traditional notion that men have uncontrollable sexual needs that must be satisfied. Families expect, and in some cases encourage, Iranian men to have sexual experiences before marriage. But many men and their families expect women to be virgins upon marriage. (Hanassab 70)



### **Enghelab-i-Jensi (Sexual Revolution)**

In *Passionate Uprisings*, Pardis Mahdavi analyzes contemporary Iranian youth and political resistance in response to the IRI's stern social rules and regulations (*Passionate Uprisings*). Throughout this text, Mahdavi unpacks what she calls an *enghelab-i-jensi* (sexual revolution), happening in the IRI, a form of mimicry of the perceived sexual freedoms of U.S. American counterparts (*Passionate Uprisings*). Mahdavi describes the *enghelab-i-jensi* as an attempt by Tehran's sexual youth to engage in "Western" practices to "subvert the fabric of morality" (*Passionate Uprisings* 37) by "consuming goods prohibited by the regime, and engaging in activities deemed immoral by the regime (i.e. wearing "revealing" Islamic dress, downloading Western Music online, dancing, drinking, or premarital sex)" (*Passionate Uprisings* 18). Mahdavi articulates the several important implications that the *enghelab-i-jensi* has for the shifting social climate in the IRI and for Iranians abroad:

For many people, engaging in the sexual revolution [is] about understanding their own sexualities and sexual identities. For some it was about pushing the envelope, seeking out ways of changing the discourse on sexuality, while for others involvement in the sexual revolution led them to comport their resistance, to become part of a larger social movement, and to try to speak back to the regime that had sought to regulate their bodies and social habits. (*Passionate Uprisings* 37)

Ultimately, the *enghelab-i-jensi* is a social movement that attempts to challenge how Iranians in general think about sex, and the ways in which young Iranian women can assert their sexual and social agency. By outlining the IRI's current political and social climate, Mahdavi eloquently illuminates the shifting attitudes about sex in the IRI where

young people in and around Tehran have begun “changing discourse on sexuality, creating discursive and physical spaces for alternative forms of sexuality, and creating a social movement that is pushing for social and political reform” (“Questioning the Global Gays(ze)” 225). Iranian women have moved toward affirming a greater desire for sexual pleasure on their own terms, despite having to simultaneously live up to familial and social expectations. Thus, asserting sexual agency should be understood here as one way that Iranian women are resisting and empowering themselves. For that reason, it is imperative to look at the means with which Iranian women conceptualize sex not just as a hormonal, reproductive, or love-induced endeavor, but rather, as a strategy of materializing an independent identity.

The *enghelab-i-jensi* has also been a way for young Iranians to begin shifting discourse about queer identity in Iran:

Between 2005-2007, some of my interlocutors began to talk about the birth of what they called a ‘strategic gay movement’ and started discussing LGBT (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender) activism in Iran as a part of the sexual revolution that seeks to change discourse on sexuality as part of a push for social change in Iran. (Mahdavi, “Questioning the Global Gays(ze)” 224)

However, for queer Iranian and Iranian-American women, deviating from cultural or familial expectations still means risking the loss of cultural community, which becomes a very real threat to the family structure, and individuals’ well-being. Within the IRI, the negotiation of law alongside social and familial expectations leaves little room for queer Iranian women to embrace their sexual selves, evidenced again through heterosexual marriage as the only acceptable entryway to sex.

This disjointed notion of sexual purity demarks and expunges narratives of those that do not fall under the strict heteronormative cultural expectations of proper Iranian families. Similarly, Tate writes:

Every culture has many untold stories. Nor do the experiences of all its members appear on the maps of a culture. Thus, some members discover their experience is invisible... privileged members of a society have stories that closely match the mainstream story. These stories have instant credibility. Stories and themes that do not fit with the mainstream perspective, however, go untold. Some are labeled culturally taboo. Thus, within every culture, there are many stories no longer heard. These stories have been silenced because the experience they speak of do not fit within the cultural canon. They are labeled too incredible to be believed. (25)

Understandably, little has been written about the lived queer Iranian experience, particularly since the complexities of sexuality are often under contextualized, highly politicized, and seemingly unapproachable within Iranian cultural discourse. This normative silence has prevented the construction of a community for queer Iranians, since:

People with ‘incredible’ stories exist on the margins of mainstream society. Often, they live in isolation, unaware that others share their suffering. Their stories are rarely shared or are only told within the hushed confines of a minorities community with those who share their alienation. (Tate 26)

Despite this lack of communal social support, there have been several recent contributions to scholarship concerning sexuality and Iranian identity. In particular, I turn to current works of Iranian feminist and sexuality scholars that have attempted to uncover guarded notions of divergent sexual identities within Iranian populations (Afary; Bucar and Shirazi; İlkkaracan; Mahdavi, Moghadam; Najmabadi; Shakhsari).

*Queering the (Iranian) Family*

The IRI remains one of five countries where homosexuality is considered a capital crime. Paradoxically, Iran goes to great lengths to insist that homosexual identity simply does not exist, and that there is no such thing as homosexual Iranians. Importantly, much of the discourse about homosexuality refers to longstanding “culture wars” between the East and the West, whereby much of the friction between the societies were amplified by conflicting moral values. Accordingly, homosexuality in the IRI has since been understood as being a Western invention or phenomenon brought in by the West to corrupt MENA social order. On the other hand, a rejection of homosexuality “has become a means of affirming cultural integrity and authenticity” (Dalacoura 1291). Hence through denying its existence, Iranian social discourse symbolically acts as a rejection of degenerate Western morals.

Consequently, for queer Iranians and Iranian-Americans, making sense of their sexualities within the context of Iranian cultural discourses remains a complicated and sometimes dangerous intersectional impasse. Abdi and Van Gilder contend that “homosexual identities are delegitimized in two distinct ways: (1) by framing homosexuality as an “ailment” and (2) by framing homosexuality as a “Western phenomenon” (8). Further, the stigma against homosexuals is intrinsic to the Persian language where “The government and state media use the term *hamjens-bazi*, which has a derogatory connotation as someone who ‘plays’ with people of the same sex. The closest, but not universally agreed upon translation is ‘faggotry’” (Rasmussen n.p). In response, Afary urges Iranians to move toward redefining homosexuality in Persian to “encourage a

more modern gay culture extended to the domain of language itself” moving from the use of *hamjens baz* (“faggot”) to *hamjens gara* (“homosexual orientation”), in hopes of re-centering the discussion of queer subjectivity (352).

Notably, it is not actually homosexual identity that is illegal in the IRI; rather it is homosexual sexual acts that are punitive. For this reason, much of the emphasis on homosexuality in the IRI is in relation to male-male sexual relationships since the act of sodomy is predominantly what is subject to disciplinary action (explicitly for passive partners, and espoused active partners) (Bucar and Shirazi). Expanding on her notion of collective normative heterosexuality, Najmabadi describes attempts at heterosocialization in the IRI, such as allowing women to be more available to men and by turning a blind eye to sexual acts between men so long as those men settle with women and reproduce. These endeavors were unsuccessful in part because the regulation of sexuality by the dominant regime “remained centered on practices rather than on inherent forms of desire” (Najmabadi 57). Najmabadi defines these acts as a stringent refutation of queer predisposition, asking:

Is this not a cultural move to make homosexuality an “unreadable text,” at best a temporarily containable phenomenon? It marginalizes same-sex desire through temporal boxing rather than through minoritization. Instead of considering homosexual men a minority of peculiar queer disposition, men are seen to engage in same-sex practices, but only for a marginal period of their life cycle. (58)

Given that much of the focus around homosexuality in the IRI is in relation to men, lesbians and women who have sex with women are further segregated from public discourse (Bucar and Shirazi 428). Much as Anzaldúa describes lesbians of color

experiences of negotiating family, community, and culture, it is as if Iranian lesbianism “doesn’t even exist” (165). It is evident however it does indeed exist, as supported by Iranian law, which states:

Same-sex behavior between two women is dealt with in Articles 127–134 of the Iranian Penal Code. The law defines lesbianism, referred to as *mosaheqeh* in Persian, as “same-sex relationship between women with genital contact” (Art. 127) ... Punishment for female–female sex acts, however, differs from sodomy: the first three times it is proven in court by four witnesses (Art. 128), 100 lashes are prescribed for each party involved (Art. 129). The fourth time the act is proven in court, the penalty is death (Art. 131). (Bucar and Shirazi 418)

Understandably guided by pressure to adhere to social and familial governance, many queer Iranian women feel compelled to remain silent and preserve the nuclear family by entering heterosexual marriages, living double lives, or in some extreme cases, undergoing government-funded sex-reassignment surgery<sup>5</sup> (Afary 23; Najmabadi). Afary notes that some queer Iranians have come up with pragmatic solutions, such as arranging marriages between gay men and lesbian women so that each can remain socially positioned while leading their own private sexual lives (24). Moreover, because homosociality is encouraged in the IRI, and while it is becoming slightly more acceptable for Iranian women to leave their parents’ home before marriage, it is entirely possible for queer couples, particularly lesbians, to cohabitate under the guise of college roommates or as “friends” (Najmabadi 257). Even still, many couples are forced to eventually

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<sup>5</sup> While homosexuality is condemned and remains a capital crime in Iran, transsexuality is considered a curable ailment that can be forgiven by Allah. In other words, it can be fixed. As such, the Iranian government funds necessary sex-reassignment surgery (Najmabadi).

separate, as one or both eventually become pressured to marry the opposite sex (Najmabadi).

### **Queer Iranian Discourses in the U.S.**

Within the context of the United States, Iranian-American women are presented with more opportunity to explore their sexualities outside of the restrictive governmental laws, though many of the same social and familial obligations remain steadfast. For Iranian-American families, conversations about women's sexuality are almost always met with conflicts regarding family values the perseveration of Iranian culture (Rashidian, Hussain, and Minichiello 871). As Hanassab suggests:

Since their immigration to the United States, Iranian parents have struggled to retain their traditional culture. Iranian youth, however, have acquired a new set of values and new ways of thinking about sexual and romantic relationships. As a result, tension has arisen between the two generations. Of course, there is no clear-cut solution that suits the entire Iranian immigrant population. Iranians must inevitably develop their own distinctive adaptation, which may be different from both the American and Iranian cultures. (74)

Van Gilder and Abdi argue that queer Iranian-American women in particular, “face unique challenges to identity management, as they not only conceal their identities to family members or close family friends, but they describe a need to conceal their sexuality from their entire ethnic community” (164). Moreover, since similar cultural expectations are placed on Iranian-American women as they are for Iranian women, many queer Iranian-American women are still compelled to hide their identities from their families, distance themselves from the Iranian community, or enter heterosexual partnerships (Abdi; Abdi and Van Gilder; Afary; Van Gilder and Abdi).

Meanwhile, because homosexual identity is understood as the antithesis of the family, queer Iranians and Iranian-Americans endure “feelings of guilt towards their own families. For example, they think they could never fulfill their parents’ wishes, such as getting married and having children” (Nematy et al. 370). By conducting online interviews, Van Gilder and Abdi explored the ways that queer Iranian-American women were coping with issues of societal and familial expectations. The findings indicated that queer Iranian-American women were motivated to manage their identities because of shame anxiety, which included feeling “*fear* (fear of the consequence that may result from their sexual identities being uncovered) and *guilt* (guilt for disgracing their ethnic communities and families)” (160). The authors also noted the strategies adopted by queer Iranian-American women to manage those shame anxieties including: (Co-)Covering (toning down sexual identities in front of other Iranians and/or having others cover for them), Deceiving and/or Passing (performing heterosexual), and Avoiding (actively avoiding all discussion of the subject) (Van Gilder and Abdi 162-164).

In a parallel study, Abdi and Van Gilder consider how first-generation, queer Iranian-American women make sense of their experiences of being both queer and Iranian-American, while managing their sexual identities within their ethnic communities and within their families. Using an intersectional framework, findings revealed that queer Iranian-American women experienced feelings of cultural isolation because of the homosexual identity de-legitimization that is often perpetuated within the Iranian community. The study found participants coped with the feelings of cultural isolation by



creating cultural distance between themselves and the Iranian community with whom they experienced that isolation and ascertained that the messages queer Iranian-American women received from their families and communities about their identity hindered their ability to disclose their sexual identities (Abdi and Van Gilder 8). Interestingly, anthropologist Dale Eickelman notes that these dueling cultural scripts are rooted in the Persian language, thus further complicating Iranian-American diasporic identity:

The "architecture" of Iranian verbal interaction indicates a pervasive distinction between the "external" (zaher), public aspects of social action and speech and an "inner" (baten) core of integrity and piety revealed only to one's family and trusted intimates. In the "external" social world, characterized by insecurity and uncertainty, the cultural ideal is the clever dissimulator (zerangi), the shrewd and cynical manipulator capable of maintaining a "proper public face" and holding "true" feelings in check to trusted family and intimates. (222)

Despite palpable cultural limitations, the rise of acceptance for queer identity in the United States has given leeway for some queer Iranian-Americans to be able to share their sexual identities with their parents, ultimately privileging their American autonomy. This negotiation is tough to say the least, especially for first-generation queer Iranian-American women having to engage in conversations with Iranian parents raised in Iran, who have had little to no access to diverse knowledge or perspectives about queer identity. Thereby it is imperative to consider what stories are told in relation to broader cultural contexts because, "To tell a story in conflict with the mainstream culture can be difficult, often painful, even when that story is a person's actual experience" (Tate 25). As described by Abdi and Van Gilder, queer Iranian-American women's biggest fear when coming out is the potential for negative parental perception alongside the anxiety of

possible ostracization from the Iranian community for both themselves and their parents. Moreover, for queer Iranian-American women, identity negotiation is found to be contingent upon parental perception, acceptance, support, and understanding of queer identity all together (Abdi and Van Gilder; Abdi; Van Gilder and Abdi). Consequently, how parents understand their daughters' sexuality (in relation to Iranian social/cultural script) should be understood as a motivating source of feelings of shame, guilt, preservation of face, and collectivist thinking that impact queer Iranian-American women's practices. Moreover, Kugle notes that while queer Muslims often face difficulty coming to understand themselves in relation to their families, they often continue to experience deep feelings of love and devotion toward their parent(s):

One pattern... that may surprise readers is the loving appreciation that transgender, lesbian, and gay children often feel toward their parents, despite the intense disagreements or coercion that they endure. This should caution us against seeing the formation of homosexual or transgender identity as a rejection of the family itself or as repudiation of one's parents. To the contrary... many transgender, lesbian, and gay Muslims feel deep and abiding affection for their parents and a profound desire for their parents' blessing, even if they are rejected, threatened, or ostracized by their families. (11)

What Kugle underlines here, is the complexity of individual vs. collective relational negotiation for non-White families. Parents and families are not seen as the villains in these stories, but rather as those who gave up their lives to provide better opportunities for their children. As reflected by many of the narratives I heard throughout this project, queer Iranian-American women simply do not want to disappoint their parents, who have longed for the successes of their children.

*The Closet and the Violence of Heteronormativity*

The complicated negotiation of collectivist family structures and individual identity, particularly for those with dueling cultural norms (e.g., Iranian-Americans), creates a paradox that impedes upon Western and Eurocentric articulations of the closet where “‘Race’ is often ignored” (Eguchi 8). Ross, for example, critiques Sedwick’s *Epistemology of the Closet*, and other canonical White queer theories/theorists, by highlighting the problematic central assumption of European-white-classist ideology that comprises “the closet” metaphor, which largely ignores the histories and experiences of raced and classed people. Hammonds further speaks to queer of color invisibility when she describes Black women’s sexuality as understood through “metaphors of speechlessness, space, or vision; as a void or empty space that is simultaneously ever visible (exposed) and invisible, where black women’s bodies are already colonized” (171).

Accordingly, understanding “the closet” through this individualist Eurocentric lens completely eradicates the experiences of domestic and international queer people of color for whom it is not always possible to “come out.” For queer people of color, particularly those born with divergent cultural norms, the closet implies the choice to ignore all other factors that play into sexual identity negotiation. For them, empowerment and resistance strategies may be more strategic, wherein they may be able to express their sexualities without having to “come out’ to their families due to oppressive societal or familial norms. Thus, it is essential to further deconstruct the differences of “the closet”

through collective narratives that are racialized, nationalized, and politicized, because sometimes “rather than claim the truth of one’s own life experience, it can be easier to remain silent” (Tate 25).

Howard considers cultural location when speaking to how we come to understand our interlocking identities. In *Black Queer Identity Matrix: Toward an Integrated Queer of Color Framework*, Howard contends that “the Black, female lesbian finds herself in a matrix of interlocking systems of oppression which work as a pivot around negotiating and communicating sexual identity as well as navigating with the dominant society as well as her own Black community” (13). Howard’s research is a foundational step in considering how cultural/national differences and social locations create further structural complications for queer people of color, particularly those whose families of origin were raised in/with divergent cultural codes. For queer people of color, being honest about their sexualities is not generally conceptualized through narratives of hope, or with slogans reminding queer youth, that “it gets better.”

This is particularly true for queer Iranians and Iranian-Americans, where “coming out” is always in relation to the family, and therefore is rarely seen as an act of liberation. Rather, it is often understood as immoral, unbelievable, and the antithesis of what it means to be a good Iranian. Because of Iranian cultural norms, the individual is no longer the sole subject of discussion, but rather queer Iranian-Americans (in conversation with other queer identified peoples from the MENA region) consider their families and alternative cultural norms as a part of their own identity negotiation. For queer Iranian-

American women, this convoluted identity compromise must go a step further to consider how nationality contributes to individual sexual identity negotiation. U.S. American citizenship becomes one way that impacts the experiences of queer people of color domestically, because though some attitudes and beliefs might not align, there are laws in place that protect the lives of LGBTQ Americans, and thereby works as a privilege that must be acknowledged.

Imperative to understanding queer of color experiences with homophobia, I borrow from Yep's discussion of the violence of heteronormativity to describe the four distinct ways that the perpetuation of hegemonic heteronormativity through cultural practices and knowledge systems is violent for queer people of color: (1) *interior-individual*, a form of internalized homophobia caused by years of mediated messages and interpersonal exchanges lead to self-hatred and self-destruction. Interior-individual causes what Yep terms, soul murder, or the "torment of heteronormativity," (2) *Exterior-Individual*, externalized homophobia, whereby pain is inflicted upon queer individuals, by others, fueled by heteronormatively driven homophobia, (3) *Interior-Collective*, discursive violence, or the everyday "words, gestures, tones, images, presentations, and omissions used to differentially treat, degrade, pathologize, and represent lesbian and gay subjectivity and experience," and (4) *Exterior-collective*, systemic heteronormative ideology within social institutions that instigate socially accepted forms of violence inflicted upon queer bodies. This system of homophobia permeates families, domestic

and intimate life, education, social policies, and mass media and popular culture (Yep “The Violence of Heteronormativity” 22- 23).

Thus, what is understood in the West to be a very individualist process, “coming out” for queer people of color should always be contextualized through their nationality, ethnicity, gender, religion, families, and class (Yep, Lovaas, and Elia). Similarly, reflecting on her mixed-race identity and the disconnect between her experiences growing up in the United States and her mother's experiences being raised in Mexico, Moraga explains the, “huge disparity between what I was born into and what I was to grow up to become” (28). Likewise, I describe the internal conflict of coming to terms with my own queer identity within the confines of conservative Iranian culture. My inability to “come out” to my family is linked to a history of cultural unacceptability, “I am unwilling to tell my aunts and uncles, my cousins, or my mother, that I am gay... Most Iranians are not exposed to the intricacies of orientation, or given the opportunity to express their own sexual identities. In our culture, gay people simply do not exist” (Abdi 10-11).

### *All in the Family*

The ways culturally diverse familial expectations impact the ability to explore sexual identity is a foundational area of consideration for family communication research. However, there is a noticeable lack of critical scholarship considering the intersections of sexuality and culture within family communication studies, which has traditionally focused on White, heterosexual nuclear families. This is evidenced in a 2013 study

conducted by Stamp and Shue which analyzed 20 years of family communication research, and reported that only 1% of family communication research published in *The Journal of Family Communication* were critically oriented. In fact, in its 15 years of publications, *The Journal of Family Communication*, the premier journal for family communication research, has not produced a single (auto)ethnographic/narrative account exploring the intersections of race-culture and sexuality within the context of the family. Moreover, of the works pertaining to queer experiences within the family published in *The Journal of Family Communication*, all have solely accounted for predominantly White queer experiences (Berry and Adams; Bergen, Suter, and Daas). To be perfectly candid, research within family communication studies has pushed these identities toward the margins, which has in turn limited our knowledge of what family means for those who do not fit within that traditional, black and white, binary. This work is meant to move us away from margins, towards an understanding of what family looks like, in color.

### **Critical Family Communication**

Importantly, there has been a radical conversational shift within family communication scholarship within the last year. Just recently, the *Journal of Family Communication* produced its first ever, edited volume focused explicitly on critical approaches to family communication research (Suter and Faulkner). In the introduction to the special issue, Suter emphasizes the absence of critical voices within family communication studies and stresses the need for works to consider, resist, and critique

traditionally accounted for family structures. Suter theorizes critical family communication (CFC) as a critical approach to studying families that is committed to theorizing the family within broader socio-cultural considerations. The four primary commitments of CFC include addressing: (1) power, (2) collapse of the public-private familial binary, (3) critique, resistance, and/or transformation, and (4) reflexivity (Suter 4). Ultimately, CFC serves as a political project that can potentially produce an inclusive array of research that would broaden much of traditional and often homogeneous understandings of family. This critical turning point makes room for troubling how families function discursively across a multiplicity of identity factors. This move is particularly important when we consider the understudied experiences of families who cannot/should not/will not ever fit within normative family scripts. One way we could expand this research is to consider how intersectional identities are negotiated alongside the culturally dependent family structures. Because family is an example of ideological institution and family dynamics represent institutional restraints, uncovering how families negotiate identity in relation to cultural norms is imperative to considering how intersectionality functions at the family level (Few Demo, Moore, and Abdi).

Thus, to respond to and further Suter's call for more inclusive family communication scholarship, one of the goals of this work is to consider a very authentic familial dynamic, that has so far gone unconsidered not just within family communication research, but within communication research in general. These stories are an important indicator of how queer Iranian-American women resist, reify, and traverse



longstanding cultural expectations within their families of origin and their families of creation. Since identity negotiation for queer Iranian-American women is contingent upon parental/familial support, it can be assumed that discourse plays a significant role in how Iranian-American families can make sense of the competing ideological frameworks surrounding queer identity. Namely, one that reflects the legal and social ramifications of queer identity, and the other which recognizes queer identity as a visible lived reality.

Galvin suggests that all families are discourse dependent and that “Discourse contributes to the creation of family identity both implicitly and explicitly” (18). Members utilize discourse to make sense of familial transgressions to “create, maintain, reconfigure and/ or disconfirm” family identity (18). If we are to understand the family as an ideological institution, then this area of research is foundational for troubling dominant Western discourses, which largely frame queer identity as something families will eventually learn to accept, or at the very least, learn to tolerate. Galvin notes that while discourse is most often used to recreate or maintain familial identity, it can also be used to deconstruct family ties:

Also, occasionally individual members reject their close relatives' beliefs, values, or behaviors and, in doing so, explicitly or implicitly renounce their family membership. Such circumstances occur infrequently given that many families accept, even if unwillingly, a wide range of individual differences rather than disown a member. In many cases, for denial of membership to occur, there must be highly problematic circumstances reflecting deliberate, recurring behavior, viewed as extremely negative by other members. (30)

This example further highlights the ways in which queer identity affects relational expectations differently when considering cultural specificity. While the Iranian-

American immediate family residing in the United States *might* be able to follow a U.S. American cultural script that may lead to eventual identity acceptance, the same cannot be said when we consider how the collectivist community functions globally. For instance, the fact that Iranian families place high value on extended family support, opinions, and perceptions, alongside the legality and negative association of homosexuality for Iranian families, leaves little room for acceptance as an option. Thus, for queer Iranian-American women, making sense of their own identities in relationship to relational maintenance for their families of origin, and in the creation of their own families, is a convoluted, but inherently discourse dependent process. Especially since queer Iranian-American women are left to create and adhere to strategic discursive strategies to mitigate the perception of their sexual identities to sustain their familial identities vs. their lived realities. In the following chapter I will provide an overview of women of color feminism and intersectionality, as well as an explication of my methods including narrative performance interviewing, personal narrative, and poetic transcription.

### **Chapter Three: Theory and Methods**

#### *Theory: Intersectionality and Women of Color Feminism*

The way in which we navigate the social world is through a negotiation of our different overlapping identities. For queer people of color, these identity formations are always in flux and understood contextually. In order to explicate the importance of considering queer Iranian experiences and Iranian family narratives within Communication Studies, I must first contextualize them through an intersectional feminist framework. Queer women of color have written extensively about the difficulty of balancing divergent cultural messages (Anzaldúa; Calafell; hooks; Moraga). The multiplicity of the oppression faced by queer people of color becomes much greater than that of racism or homophobia on their own. Thus, intersectionality can be used as a means of identification across differences where “race can also be a coalition of straight and gay people of color, and thus serve as a basis for critique of churches and other cultural institutions that reproduce heterosexism” (Crenshaw 1299).

At its most basic level, intersectionality works to move away from essentializing identity politics, to a more complex way of accounting for how power, privilege, and oppression operates and is (re)produced within and between multiple shifting social positions. While originally intended to highlight the intersections of race and gender, Crenshaw’s intersectionality theory asks us to account for the ways in which the

multiplicity of our identities works to shape our social worlds (1245). The main purpose of utilizing intersectional theories and methods is to question human and group similarities and differences through social classifications working together to produce new contextual categories of social locations to consider how we might be simultaneously empowered and disempowered within those dominant structures. Importantly, intersectionality does not see these identity vectors as acting independently of one another, but rather as dependent on each other. In other words, identities are always in motion, in flux, unstable, fluid, volatile, on the line, in/between those lines.

One major advantage of intersectionality is its ability to be utilized as a theoretical, methodological, and paradigmatic approach to studying culture. As Brah and Phoenix posit, “Intersectionality takes up the political project of making the social and material consequences of the categories of gender/race/class visible” (82). Notably, Puar critiques intersectionality for sometimes failing to acknowledge contextual historical and economic changes that impact individual intersectional experiences. Puar questions certain mainstream intersectional analyses asking, “What does an intersectional critique look like—or more to the point, what does it do—in an age of neoliberal pluralism, absorption, and accommodation of all kinds of differences?” (“I Would Rather” 53). Puar notes that if we are to use intersectionality, we must also acknowledge recent historical events, particularly when analyzing the experiences of women from the MENA region:

in the context of recent historical events, such as September 11th and the occupation of Afghanistan and Iraq, transnational and postcolonial scholars point out that the categories privileged by intersectional analysis do not necessarily traverse national and regional boundaries nor

genealogical exigencies, presuming and producing static epistemological renderings of categories themselves across historical and geopolitical locations. (“I Would Rather” 54)

So, while some critique intersectionality to be an additive reiteration of identity politics that “operate through a Western/Euro=American epistemological formation” (Puar, “I Would Rather” 54) that views identity categories as stagnant, fixed, and “discursively created” (McCall 1777), other feminists of color (Collins; Crenshaw; hooks; Lorde; Moraga) have argued that critics have framed intersectionality simplistically, incorrectly, and unfairly. Further, McCall argues that through an intracategorical model of intersectionality we can reject the notion of homogeneity about white women’s familiarities, and instead acknowledges the intrarelated socio-cultural complexities as experienced by marginalized communities.

For women of color, intersectionality is pivotal to understanding how multiple socio-cultural identities intersect and impact how we exist/understand the world. For Moraga, the politics of everyday life are influenced by cultural construction and have material consequences for women of color for whom “no aspect of our identity is wholly dismissed from our consciousness, even as we navigate a daily shifting political landscape” (xxii). Anzaldúa emphasizes an intersectional way of understanding lived experiences and writes of intersectional identity as theorized through Borderlands Theory, which suggests:

stigmatized social identities based on sexuality, gender, race, class, ethnicity, and physical ableness are not additive; they do not result in increased oppression within an increased number of stigmatized group memberships. Instead, individual’s various sources of oppression are

conceptualized as intersecting in a variety of ways depending on social context. (8)

Anzaldúa clarifies that social revolution can emerge out of the recognition that identities are different, partial, and confrontational and can transcend inflexible cultural limitations. She asks that we move forward so that we can all live on the borderlands where we can begin to recognize that diverse identities are simultaneously hostile and fluid. She asks us to reject static ways of being, to embrace the plurality of existence, and to negotiate our clashing identities. For Anzaldúa, the borderlands are a place where we might be able to address and celebrate our differences, and reject the boundaries that attempt to keep them apart.

Collins expands upon the concept of intersectionality through her conceptualization of the “matrix of domination,” wherein she acknowledges the ways “major systems of oppression are interlocking” (264). For Collins, the ways our identities intersect vary in regard to our social locations and various structural contexts. For example, Collins writes:

Because oppression is constantly changing, different aspects of an individual U.S. Black woman’s self-definitions intermingle and become more salient: Her gender may be more prominent when she becomes a mother, her race when she searches for housing, her social class when she applies for credit, her sexual orientation when she is walking with her lover, and her citizenship status when she applies for a job. In all of these contexts, her position in relation to and within intersecting oppressions shifts. (274-275)

For Collins, intersectionality must reflect how our multiple identities function, but in consideration of the systems of power we occupy. Similarly, for queer Iranian-American

women, different intersections may be more salient, depending on the context within which she finds herself.

Cho, Crenshaw, and McCall have argued the importance of moving beyond asking what intersectionality is, to asking the more important question of what intersectionality does. For communication scholars, intersectionality functions to understand social and relational complexities in tangible and meaningful ways and across contexts, “Critical scholars argue that a more complex world needs more complex ways of understanding its populations” (Moon 39). Moon contends that integrating intersectionality and positionality into our research might help us create more context understandings of culture, where “scholars are more likely to produce knowledge that is specific and local, rather than abstract and overly generalized. In addition, we are more likely to be able to observe how issues of power and privilege may play out in intercultural interactions” (41). Moving a step further, Yep calls for scholars to move even further into the notion of thick(er) intersectionalities (“Toward Thick(er) Intersectionalities”). Thick intersectionalities are:

exploration(s) of the complex particularities of individual lives and identities associated with their race, class, gender, sexuality, and national locations by understanding their history and personhood in concrete time and space, and the interplay between individual subjectivity, personal agency, systemic arrangements, and structural forces. (“Toward De-Subjection” 173)

Yep maintains that intersectional work is full of potential and “can produce more nuanced, richer, and more intricate research that captures the embodiments and lived

experiences of individuals and groups inhabiting multiple identities ... at a particular moment in history and geopolitical location” (“Toward De-Subjection” 174).

Through intersectionality, scholars interested in queerness can contextualize those experiences not in relation to Whiteness, and White queer experiences, but rather through an engagement of the broader systems of power that work to (re)shape the identities of queer people of color. Or as Cohen explains, “At the intersection of oppression and resistance lies the radical potential of queerness to challenge and bring together those deemed marginal and all those committed to liberatory politics” (“Punks, Bulldaggers” 24). Thus, utilizing intersectionality as a critical framework is one way that we may begin to trouble family *normalcy*, particularly as it relates to racial and national suppositions.

### **Intersectionality and the Family**

As demonstrated above, intersectionality addresses all four tenets of CFC. Specifically, intersectionality can be utilized to 1) locate issues of power as external to the individual in relation to family systems, 2) collapse the public/private binary between broader social inquiry and individual lived experience, 3) critique, resist, and transform normative family structures by considering the narratives of people of color existing within multiple conflicting identities and 4) engage in researcher reflexivity (Suter 2). Through its commitment towards dismantling macro structures rooted in histories privileging power, intersectionality can be used to complicate understandings of gender, race, class, nationality, and sexuality in conversation with other social identities that impact lived familial experiences. Intersectionality is one way that family communication



scholars can begin to shift research to the margins, subsequently destabilizing the ways we recognize how to have/make/maintain/create/keep a family without ignoring how racism, sexism, nationality influences familial negotiation differently for women, people of color, queer people, and others.

To advance an intersectional framework within this well-established field of study, researchers must consider how those who have been historically understudied are understanding, negotiating, and (re)making family on their own terms.<sup>6</sup> Intersectionality insists on a political agenda that critiques broader systems of power that support the reification of longstanding ideological structures that contribute to the marginalization of certain bodies. Through a consideration of family as an ideological structure influenced by socio-cultural norms, intersectionality expands beyond categorical dependence toward a consideration of how the contextual multiplicity of our identities work simultaneously to (re)create lived experiences. Thus, one way to create more complex classifications of family is to not begin our research from a comparative starting point, but rather, to localize those starting points in such a way that shifts families on the margins of social consciousness from within the footnotes of family research, to the center of the conversation. Ultimately, the goal of integrating intersectionality within family communication research reaches far past representational politics, toward a de/reconstruction of an inclusive definition of family that alters our frame of reference to

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<sup>6</sup> Importantly, there have been several cultural scholars writing about family, though not in the scope of family communication studies (see Calafell “Responsible Sponsor”; LeMaster “Telling Multiracial”; Moraga *Loving*).

that which has so far been reserved for the margins. Here, I respectfully echo Cohen's antiassimilationist call, where she powerfully writes:

Fuck the heterosexual, nuclear family. Let's make families which promote sexual choices and liberation rather than sexual oppression. We must learn from the legacy of resistance that is ours: a legacy which shows that empowerment comes through grassroots activism, not mainstream politics, a legacy which shows that real change occurs when we are inclusive, not exclusive. ("Punks, Bulldaggers" 30)

Because families are not generalizable, critical work is not only desirable, but also necessary to function *alongside* post positivist and interpretivist research within family communication studies, so that we might begin to broaden our understanding of family both politically *and* personally. If we are to assume that the intersections that make up our individual selves and familial systems vary, and therefore change and alter normative familial conversations, then the conversations about family ought to start at those distinctions. As Mohanty argues:

The contours of the world we occupy now: a world that is definable only in relational terms, a world traversed with intersecting lines of power and resistance, a world that can be understood only in terms of its destructive divisions of gender, color, class, sexuality, and nation, a world that must be transformed through a necessary process of "pivoting the center" (to use Bettina Aptheker's words), for the assumed center (Europe and the United States) will no longer hold. (43-44)

In an ideal world, I would encourage the creation of a completely new space that goes against the dominant structures that have so far defined and outlined what family *is* and *should be*. However, I also believe that to begin critiquing power we must first be a part of that conversation.

*Women of Color Feminism/Theories of the Flesh*

Feminist consciousness was radically reformed when women of color began carving out their own space in writing amid White, Western feminist discussion. Works like: *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color* (Moraga and Anzaldúa), *Ain't I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism* (hooks), *Feminism without Borders* (Mohanty), *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (Collins), and *Sister Outsider* (Lorde), began opening space for women of color and queer women of color to challenge prevailing feminist frameworks that had so far excluded Othered subjectivities. Presently, women of color feminists are challenging longstanding suppositions that women of color in the U.S. face unified types of oppression, and are advising scholars to move away from homogenizing representations of women of color to instead identify the uneven, unequal, and complex perspectives of transnational or Third World women (Kaplan and Grewal). For Mohanty, “this challenge has implications for the rewriting of all hegemonic history, not just the history of people of color” (55). Chowdhury further urges researchers to look beyond domestic women’s issues so that transnational women can be invited to participate in a conversation that often lends itself to ethnocentric conventions:

while there are important points of intersection between histories and struggles of US women of color and third world women, and therefore potential for powerful alliances, collapsing the two in to one category smudges over the necessity of analyses around nation as well as race. (57)

Calafell writes “the practice of feminism by many White feminists, and those women who perform Whiteness, prompts similar questions about the viability of coalitional alliances between women” (“The Future is Feminist” 267). Accordingly, the

project of Third World Feminism lies in its commitment to both critiquing and re-building. In this way, the strength of Third World feminism rests on its reliance upon solidarity, “mutuality, accountability, and the recognition of common interests as the basis of relationships among diverse communities” (Mohanty 7). To move toward this goal, Mohanty suggests that women of color and Third World feminists begin to create an “imagined community,” a distinctive space that fosters coalition and potential alliance:

The idea of imagined community is useful because it leads us away from essentialist notions of Third World feminist struggles, suggesting political rather than biological or cultural bases for alliance. It is not color or sex that constructs the ground for these struggles. Rather, it is the way we think about race, class, and gender- the political links we choose to make among and between struggles. Thus, potentially, women of all colors (including white women) can align themselves with and participate in these imagined communities. However, clearly our relation to and centrality in particular struggles depend on our different, often conflictual, locations and histories. This, then, is what indelibly marks this discussion of Third World women and the politics of feminism together: imagined communities of women with divergent histories and social locations, woven together by the political threads of opposition to forms of domination that are not only pervasive but also systemic. (46-47)

We see this commitment rearticulated in the introduction to the newest edition of the groundbreaking book, *This Bridge Called My Back*. Moraga discusses the necessity for women of color feminists to continue expanding research to include forgotten about or abandoned communities, “It is not always a matter of the actual bodies in the room, but of a life dedicated to a growing awareness of who and what is missing in that room; and responding to that absence” (xix). Specifically, Moraga argues that the noticeable lack of MENA and Muslim feminist voices within feminist discourse is problematic when (re)imagining a larger transnational feminist network:

Thirty-five years ago, Egypt, Afghanistan, Nigeria seemed very far away. They are no longer so far... the prism of U.S. Third World Feminist consciousness has shifted as we turned our gaze *away* from a feminism prescribed by white women of privilege (even in opposition to them) and turned *toward* the process of discerning the multilayered and intersecting sites of identity and struggle – distinct and shared – among women of color across the globe. (xvi)

However, MENA and Muslim women continue to be presented as one:

singular, monolithic, undifferentiated, subordinate and power-less group which primarily constitutes the contradictory ‘Eastern’ pole of Western women. Western texts have commonly promoted fixed universal images of Muslim women and have presented them as poor, veiled, illiterate, victimized, sexually constrained, and docile housewives. (Sadiqi xvi-xvii)

In her analysis of the relationship between Western and Third World feminism, Nayaran critiques the misrepresentation of Third-World feminists as having to have succumbed to Western ideology in order to seek gender equality:

Many Third-World feminists confront the attitude that our criticisms of our cultures are merely one more incarnation of a colonized consciousness, the views of ‘privileged native women in whiteface,’ seeking to attack their ‘non-Western culture’ on the basis of ‘Western’ values. (3)

Abu-Lughod has also written about the dangers of accepting the oppositional binary of Islam and the West as truth since:

those many people within Muslim countries who are trying to find alternatives to present injustices, those who might want to refuse the divide and take from different histories and cultures, who do not accept that being feminist means being Western, will be under pressure to choose, just as we are: Are you with us or against us? (788)

Accordingly, MENA and Muslim women continuously fight back against pervasive depictions of the region by (re)negotiating and reclaiming their subjective identities on

their own terms. Simply put, to promote more inclusive feminist scholarship, MENA and/or Muslim women must be able to reclaim agency so that we might begin to understand the impact of patriarchy both locally and transnationally.

In the same vein, cultural scholars must not use the same yardstick to measure MENA women that would be used to measure Western women, because, “Unlike western feminism, which has a history of being more individualistic, third-world feminism has a deep connection to family and nationalism” (Muaddi 195). The differentiation between Western and Third World women is imperative to understanding complex and culturally nuanced women’s experiences, and to resist “the assumption of a unity of women’s interests on the basis of White experience” (Anthias and Davis 71). Moraga asks, “At home, amongst ourselves, women of color ask the political question: *what about us?* Which really means: *what about all of us?*” (xix). To answer this question, women of color and Third World women are encouraged to theorize through embodied knowledge or, *theories of the flesh*. Moraga and Anzaldúa write, “*Bridge* is an account of U.S. women of color, coming to late 20<sup>th</sup> century social consciousness through conflict-familial and institutional-and arriving at a politic, a ‘theory in the flesh’” (19) that makes sense of the seeming paradoxes of our lives; that complex confluence of identities-race, class, gender, sexuality-systemic to women of color oppression and liberation.

For Moraga and Anzaldúa theories of the flesh are where “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” (23). Theories of flesh resist dominant narratives to

reclaim agency for those stripped of particular histories, “giving women of color back the power to speak as authorities about their own experiences” (Calafell, *Latina/o Communication* 8). For people of color, theories of the flesh privilege agency and shed light on the lived realities unlike those accessible to other, dominant groups. To remain accountable to these objectives within identity research, purposeful methodological choices must be made so that “We don’t have to remain scattered throughout the heavens floating listlessly alone” (Gutierrez-Perez, “Warren-Ting” 201). In other words, the methods we use as critical cultural scholars should reflect our commitment to the communities we work with, to own researcher reflexivity, and to an ethic of social justice. For this reason, traditional methods are inadequate for studying diverse communities (Rodriguez 492). Thus, for scholars committed to inclusive feminist pursuits, there must be a willingness to set aside dominant narratives, so that Other voices have space to tell their own stories.

*Methods: Performance and Personal Narrative*

Aligned with intersectionality and women of color feminism, this study utilizes performance studies and performative methodologies to challenge traditional approaches to communication theory building. The performance paradigm works as a “site of intervention” (Calafell, *Latina/o Communication* 6) that rejects the Cartesian notion of the mind/body split, and is instead concerned with embodied materiality within social and cultural contexts. For Conquergood, performance is a:

border discipline, an interdiscipline, that cultivates the capacity to move between structures, to forge connections, to see together, to speak with

instead of simply speaking about or for others. Performance privileges threshold-crossing, shape-shifting, and boundary-violating figures, such as shamans, tricksters, and jokers, who value the carnivalesque over the canonical, the transformative over the normative, the mobile over the monumental. (“Cultural Struggles” 27)

Importantly, performance has the capability to rupture, decenter, and resist master narratives, whereby scholars can critically interrogate issues of power, privilege, oppression, and examine how these subject positions are lived and performed in people’s daily lives (Corey; Langellier). Alexander maintains that the performances are fluid, and should be understood on a continuum that “pivots on the enacted nature of human sociality, and the active process of human sense-making” (“Performing Ethnography” 414). Performance works to rupture longstanding binaries, creating “bleeding borders... semi-permeable membranes between the public and the private, between the professional and the personal, and between the politics of power and propriety that always threaten to hold tension-filled historical relations in stasis” (Alexander, “Performance Ethnography” 433). Ultimately, performance challenges our knowledge of “how human beings fundamentally make culture, affect power, and reinvent their ways of being in the world” (Madison and Hamera xii).

Conquergood explores the shift in research approaches and techniques at the decline of colonialism. The politics during this time were focused on the objectivity vs. subjectivity in research. The period after the deterioration of imperialism and scientism, known as a "crisis of representation," gave scholars an opportunity to situate themselves as subjective researchers. Concerned with social justice and accountability to



communities we collaborate with as researchers, Conquergood's dialogic, reciprocal, and co-performative research method defies paradigmatic expectations and instead situates bodies on the line. Dialogic performance is defined as the blending of "self and Other together so that they can question, debate and challenge one another" (Conquergood, "Performing as a Moral Act" 9). Madison describes Conquergood's move toward dialogic performance as a way for researchers to value voice, speak with and not for a community, account for researcher reflexivity, and understand culture as verb rather than noun (Madison, "The Dialogic Performative"). The goal of dialogical performance is to dismantle longstanding notions of the self and other as separate entities, and asks researchers to engage in an ethics of responsibility for the communities they wish to study. Instead, dialogical performance is a means to bring those voices together, to defy assumptions, and to work in synchronicity to make meaning out of that shared negotiation. As Willink contends, "conversations become a medium for transformation as interviewer and interviewee conspire in the process of becoming" (9). Ultimately, it is through speaking, listening, and acting together that communication is understood to compose and reveal the lived experience. In turn, this practice involves a sort of bodily coming together in the same time and space.

Conquergood approaches dialogic performance as co-performative witnessing, a political act whereby meaning is made through the shared experiences of the researcher and the interviewee, in conversation with a mutual temporality. The return of the body emphasizes the importance of embodied knowledge within scholarship, for the sake of

both researchers and their participants. Ultimately, it is through speaking, listening, and acting together that communication is understood to compose and reveal authentic lived experience. Conquergood further suggests that boundaries and borderlands need to be understood as malleable, penetrable, and able to bleed into one another. No culture or its traditions are clear-cut or separate from others, thus marking difference as existent but not impossible to permeate. Differences are reconstituted as being a part of the self, wherein identities are not autonomous, rather, they are constructed through interactions with one another. Madison contends that as cultural researchers, we must keep Conquergood's approach alive, so that we are reminded:

that cultures are performing bodies in struggle to belong with and for each other across infinite forms of corporal suffering, geographic conflict, and discursive power, and because of these realities we will always need to keep true ideas and our conversations in service of them alive. ("Co-Performative Witnessing" 830)

Accordingly, before we can begin to address the struggles experienced by any community, we need to recognize what those struggles even are. Narrative allows us to understand what struggles people face by allowing them to share their experiences freely. The discursive struggle for this project is rooted in Iranian-American family negotiations, particularly in relation to gender, sexuality, and nationality. For queer Iranian-American women, stories become a starting place for a much larger social inquiry. Through the narratives of queer Iranian-American women, we can begin to understand how they are simultaneously resisting and reinforcing longstanding cultural complications. By simply giving room for stories to be heard, we can begin to critique, resist, and traverse what it

means to simply exist (Corey). Therefore, in effort to unearth these historically untold stories, the current research project will employ personal narrative as a means of centering the voices of queer Iranian-American women who share their stories of identity and family negotiation.

### **Personal Narrative**

Scholars (e.g. Calafell, Langellier, Madison) have used personal narrative to privilege the voices of communities to maintain a social justice ontology that gives voice to individuals that have been historically silenced. Personal narrative works to disrupt and trouble traditional ways of knowing by giving space for subjective experiences that refuse to be quantified. Following the trajectory of scholars who have long committed to demarking the centrality and pervasiveness of longstanding colonizing methods, I too have turned my focus toward the “everyday intellectualizing” of historically subjugated knowledge (Calafell, *Latina/o Communication* 7). Like Calafell, I am committed to highlighting the ways in which women of color have always spoken about the world; particularly those whose existences are mired by larger social structures that have so far made the telling of their stories ~~seem~~ impossible.

Personal narrative moves away from placing agency solely on the researcher to present data, toward allowing “narrators to make meaning of their lived experience” (Baxter et al. 57). Personal narrative gives way for marginalized populations to (re)write dynamic social stories that preserve collective identity about themselves in relation to others, creating room for a multiplicity of “critical exchange[s] where one voice does not

destroy and eliminate another” (Nafisi 6-7). Personal narrative “opens a liminal, embodied space” where researchers are able to dismantle privilege and power by identifying and countering particularly salient histories (Willink 2). Moreover, the use of critical methodologies, like personal narrative, works as an unspoken commitment to the people who so trustingly shared their stories for research. No research is ever objective, as there is no one Truth. Truth is multifaceted and to say truth is objective, denies much of the lived experiences, particularly of women of color who rely on stories to tell their truth. As T. Minh-ha suggests, “If we rely on history to tell us what happened at a specific time and space, we can rely on the story to tell us not only what might have happened, but also what is happening at an unspecified time and place” (120). Thus, stories move researchers away from solely seeking an objective Truth, toward questioning the ways in which individual experiences might help to illuminate broader social injustices.

Though narratives are not meant to be stagnant, the symbols, emotions, and historical experiences that form particular cultural histories often work to sustain collective understanding and maintain systems of power. Since culture is inextricably linked to power, the performances of everyday life become a space of transformation and visibility for those bodies “governed by silence” (Corey 249). As such, personal narratives serve an ideological function, in that they “evolve from a structure of power relations and simultaneously produce, maintain, and reproduce that power structure” within the political, social, and cultural discourses in which they are shared (Langellier,

“Personal Narratives” 267). In this way, personal narratives encompass cultural contexts, *already*, and are crucial for those “communities left out of the privileges of the dominant culture, those bodies without voice in the political sense” (Langellier, “Two or Three Things” 129). This is particularly true where “identities are forged and felt, agency is negotiated, citizenship rights are enacted, and the ideologies surrounding nation, civic culture, race, class, gender, and sexual orientation are confronted” (Denzin 231).

Jones and Calafell write that personal narratives are concerned with tellability and “the politics of voice” (962). This notion of tellability, and who can tell stories is especially important to consider when working with cultural narratives that are shared by those who are not always free to share their stories, like many queer Iranian-Americans. Through recognizing which stories continue to go untold, personal narrative works to highlight which voices do, and do not, matter. As such, critical methodologies, like personal narrative, can be used to interrogate which bodies, whose voices, and which communities continue to be excluded in current communication studies research. Within family communication, Faulkner notes, “arts-based research (ABR), ethnographic, and narrative research methods can realize the potential of critical work to critique, expand, and alter dominant discourse that circumscribes family communication research and praxis” (“TEN” 9). Moreover, as Langellier posits, “Personal narrative as cultural performance has transformative power to assert self-definitions about who matters and what matters: the existence, worth and vitality of a person or group as meanings not otherwise available to an audience” (“Two or Three Things” 134). Thus, scholars

concerned with social justice must continue to critically question which stories and whose identities continue to be heard, and continue to remain invisible (Langellier, “Two or Three Things”).

For marginalized communities, personal narratives are a way of recounting and (re)storying experiences within broader social contexts:

An individual’s story becomes meaningful through its narrative content, mode of narration, and the positionality of the storyteller in relation to the structure of relations and institutions constituting the surrounding context as in, for example, the state’s policies, conditions, and definitions of diversity and race. (Halualani et al. 74)

For queer people of color, sharing their stories involves a substantial amount of risk, though it is through the sharing of their stories that they may begin to disrupt the homogeneity of heteronormativity, especially within the family. Ultimately, narrative work is about looking for moments of transformation (Alexander and Warren). You cannot feel the pain and hurt of how communities make sense of social realities without narrative. Anguish simply refuses to be quantified. Narrative centers stories, which are important to uncover, particularly when those stories exist, and yet are simultaneously invisible (Langellier, “Two or Three Things”).

By shifting the researcher’s perspective away from “what is” to “what could be,” researchers are engaging with personal narrative as a means of opening the dominant spaces where marginalized communities are able to “disrupt, *rewrite*, and break free of master narratives” (Corey 250; Madison, *Critical Ethnography*; Hall). Moreover, the presentation of self and Others relies on a commitment by researchers to question

systems of power that make sharing of certain stories impossible. By deconstructing the ways that we look at cultures and community, critical communication scholars can begin to present more authentic accounts of what it means to exist in the world. Thus, the potential for personal narratives to trouble longstanding conceptualizations of race-culture and to produce a new kind of cultural politics, wherein subjugated voices are valued, is limitless. As Madison explains, we are “reminded repeatedly (and for good reason) that race is constructed, reconstructed, and deconstructed depending on locale, history, and power, but immediate experience sometimes penetrates deeper” (*Acts of Activism* 163). Moreover, Halualani et al., contend, “You can’t understand race until you understand how people conceptualized race in everyday life. Race therefore proves to be both problematic and temporally useful across a spectrum of privileged, compromised, and marginalized positions” (89). This radical departure in research emphasizes the possibility of a reciprocal kind of community engagement that challenges the “Western trained scholar to cultivate respect, humility and care, virtues not typically fostered by academic training” (Caracciolo 180).

Langellier urges scholars to make connections to the social frameworks that contribute to complex understandings of varied histories:

the enhancement of experience and the constitution of identity in personal narrative depend upon our bodies as our access to and means of expression. Two or three things I know for sure, and one of them is that personal narrative is a privileged form of expressing embodiment (“Two or Three Things” 139)

Therefore, much like embodied social justice work, personal narrative accounts for the possibilities that can transform and redefine preexisting and oft pervasive narratives. In that way, Alexander calls for scholars to privilege the voices of subjugated peoples to re-imagine other ways of moving throughout the world, “articulating our visions of difference” (Alexander, “Queer(y)ing the Postcolonial” 104). To do this, critical researchers must remain committed to critical self-reflection, because “these spaces, in their complexity and multiplicity, call us to be accountable to others and to ourselves in marking the workings of power” (Calafell, “(I)dentities” 7).

Finally, though hopefully implicit in dialogic research, researcher reflexivity is imperative when considering accountability and vulnerability to the communities that we serve as scholars. It is through personal narratives and theories in the flesh (Moraga and Anzaldúa) that we begin to see how the body is used to theorize experience, even before having the words to articulate those experiences. As Spry suggests, our task in [personal narrative] is to make writing perform, to make writing represent the complexity of the body’s critical expression of interacting with others in the frames social norms and expectations, and then to write the body’s transformation of those norms (101). In the same vein, the dialogical performance can be explained as an intimate synchronicity of sensibility of both the researcher and the community.

Thus, I intend to share my own experiences with my interviewees, where I am held accountable to my position as an academic interested in the inner workings of my own community, but more importantly to engage in a dialogic performance wherein my



voice converges with theirs. Ellingson notes, that the “erasure of researchers’ bodies from conventional accounts of research obscures the complexities of knowledge production and yields deceptively tidy accounts of research” (299). Moreover, as Calafell posits, “reflexive participatory knowledge privileges not only less traditionally accepted practices of theorizing, but also ‘other’ ways of knowing by challenging the mind/body split” (“Disrupting the Dichotomy” 179). As researchers, our work is never objective. The ways we see and exist in the world, are always already guiding our research investments. Hence, by placing our own bodies on the line (Conquergood), in conversation with the communities we study, we are simply being more transparent about it.

### **Poetic Transcription**

Given that personal narrative research is meant to privilege the voices of communities often left out of the traditional research, my unpacking of the narratives will subsequently align themselves with those intentions. Similarly, Faulkner writes, “This critical writing articulates personal experiences and connects to larger culture structures” (“TEN” 10). Although there are many ways to interpret data, particularly narrative interviews, researchers should be guided by “a willingness to experiment with different ways of presenting an interview text. The performative sensibility turns interviews into performance texts, into poetic monologues” (Denzin 25). Because the current study remains committed to focus on the voices of queer Iranian-American women and a critical performance perspective, it insists upon a methodological framework that honors

those stories. Not to be confused with research poetry, which often displaces the voices of the interviewees, the analysis will be conducted through poetic transcription as a means of capturing the performance of language of this group of queer Iranian-Americans (Calafell; Faulkner; Glesne; Madison).

Glesne defines poetic transcription as “the creation of poem like compositions from the words of the interviewees” (207). Consistent with dialogic performance, poetic transcription denotes the interconnectedness of voices, wherein a combination of researcher and the interviewee creates new story. Poetic transcription describes a method of “turning research interviews, transcripts, observations, personal experience, and reflections into poems or poetic forms” (Faulkner, “Concern with Craft” 219). In other words, poetic transcription works as a (re)presentation of research that encourages a move beyond linear structure and instead captures the spirit of the story/storyteller, and privileges the local vernacular of the those who share their narratives with the world (Falkner, “Poetry as Method”; Madison, “That Was My Occupation”). Calafell describes poetic transcription as a methodological move concerned with finding “certain meaning and rhythms in language and the choice of words while privileging the importance of orality in historically marginalized cultures” (*Latina/o Communication* 20-21). Further, poetic transcription “blurs the accepted boundaries between art and science [by] exploring the shapes of inter-subjectivity, and examining issues of power and authority, including that of researcher/author” (Glesne 204).

Faulkner posits, poetic transcription is where the “writing vacillates between description and interpretation using voice to write *for* those studied rather than *about* them” (*Poetry as Method* 26). In this way, poetic transcription becomes a site of opposition working counter to hegemonic systems of oppression by playing with time and linear structure to pay tribute to the nuanced articulations of lived experiences. By creating an aesthetic with words, poetic transcription emulates voices, sounds, affect, and “embodies through words the importance of the gestures and meanings that are performed and communicated in interviews” (Calafell, *Latina/o Communication* 20). Through poetic transcription, stories and experiences become tangible, visceral, and reactionary. Poetic transcription provides an opportunity for critical researchers to generate resistive, influential, and transformative texts that are inseparable from the speaker (Madison, “That Was My Occupation” 46).

Madison fears flattening lived experience wherein traditional methods appear to suffocate the voices of those who share their stories for research. Madison contends that when people choose to speak, their experiences should not be reduced to ink and paper, but rather “by transcribing the story or oral narrative in varying lengths and positioning words and phrases in a manner that projects the qualities of the human voice and body” (“Story, History, and Performance” 46). Madison argues, “In poetic form, words are not in isolation from movement, sound, and sensory body that give them substance. Words are not placed on a page in blocks of prose divorcing them from the actions and meanings of their speaker” (“Story, History, and Performance” 46). Consistent with the oral

traditions of ancient Persians, I intend to utilize poetry as a means of enlivening the stories of these women beyond the page, so that they can illuminate the theories of the flesh inherent in their articulations.

### **Narrative Performance Interviewing**

By employing the study of personal narratives to examine the intersections of identity, culture, and personal narratives, scholars complicate peoples lived experiences and are better able to explore the ways in which individuals can be empowered and/or marginalized by these complexities. Further, because narratives are a way to understand storied experiences of hurt, survival, family, and everything in-between, personal narratives allows for an intimate type of interviewing, particularly because narratives demand sharing, witnessing, audience, and understanding. This is true even when we don't necessarily share the *same* stories. From a narrative perspective, we can always connect from across our stories, particularly as queer women of color, to find the ways we coexist in the world.

While the focal point of this research is not about my own story as a queer Iranian-American, I am invested in this research project in a way that asks me to be accountable to my community in intimate ways. I have never been a researcher who has feared lines and boundaries, instead, I have always longed for the moments in the margins. I want to hear the stories that have been kept out of the conversation, out of the wider/Whiter story. These are the stories we so rarely hear, particularly from queer Iranians and Iranian-Americans - because of a fear for survival. This fear haunts us, and

our community, and makes tellability seem impossible. But the sharing of these stories opens us up to opportunities. The beautiful thing about interviewing Iranians, is rooted in a history of story, prose, poetics. Iranians have always been story tellers/livers. Thus, I turn to what Madison writes of analyses of indigenous stories:

Traditional and popular techniques of analysis must be critically and self-reflexively extended when applied to the distinctive forms of these women's expressions. In examining these forms and spaces, indigenous thought and practice emanating from the tellers' language, history, and traditions must guide, alter, add to, and adjust dominant analyses. ("The Dialogic Performative" 321)

By analyzing these interviews utilizing poetic transcription, I address the ways in which queer Iranian-American women make sense of their intersectional identities in relation to their families.

More concerned with depth and substance than numbers and validity, the limited number of participants was a purposeful way to ensure quality time spent with each interview. I followed a semi-structured interview protocol (Appendix A), where I could alter questions to adhere to conversational flow and to incorporate follow-up questions if need be. The truth is, the process changed almost immediately when I realized that through conversation, it was impossible to follow a formulaic interview schedule. Instead, I began to develop a relationship between each interviewee and myself where stories, laughter, and tears were shared, though my questions were still answered in one way or another. Each interview lasted at least an hour and a half, with the longest lasting almost three hours. Further, interviewees were recruited in a couple of different ways,

through personal introduction, prior familiarity, and through respondent-driven sampling (Salganik and Heckathorn).

While not all the interviews included Persian/Farsi, most did. In fact, Persian/Farsi was used often because of untranslatability. Certain feelings, expressions, and phrases seemed impossible, or disingenuous to translate into English. The use of Persian/Farsi turned into a tool of connection, one that might not have formed otherwise. Thus, when transcribing the data, I paid attention to when Persian/Farsi was used, and the role that that played in storytelling. Here, Madison's poetic transcription methods worked to further humanize and localize the experiences of queer Iranian-American women ("That Was My Occupation"). By accounting for textual fragments of the interviews, poetic transcription mirrors the narratives as they were performed. In other words, the line breaks, spacing, and structural play worked to recreate the aesthetic engagement for the reader, so that the voices of the women I interview would transcend the page. Moreover, because I asked these women to share stories that involved a great degree of risk, I wanted to ensure that they knew that their identities would remain safe, and that their stories are meant to do something in the world. In fact, as influenced by E. Patrick Johnson's *Sweet Tea*, which explores the experiences of Black queer men in the South, I also hope to create a performance in the future where I can further embody the voices of these women to fully capture their voices and experiences. After arduous editing and reediting, I was eventually granted IRB approval (Appendix B) ensuring my methods followed an ethical procedural code.

After conducting the interviews, I could identify and thematically code for specific narrative moments (Langellier, “Personal Narratives”) where queer Iranian-American women were resisting, reifying, or traversing heteronormative cultural expectations. I was also able to find meaning by listening for what Willink calls, *excess*, “that which does not fit, does not cohere, is not logically necessary—excess baggage (literal or psychological), excess weight (connects to and implicates bodies), excess speed (too fast/outside social conventions)” (2). Excess acts to “cement or destabilize notions of identity, collude or subvert hegemonic ideological processes, and interrupt power, regardless of the purpose of disruption” making it a transgressive way of understanding culture (Willink 2). Excess was particularly important to listen for when considering the ways in which queer Iranian-American women have historically been taught not to speak about that which brings shame to the family. As such, listening for excess prompted me to listen for moments of “emotional intensity, pauses, and silences” within their stories (Willink 8).

While my original intention was to meet with each person face-to-face, it became abundantly clear, rather quickly that would not work for most of my participants. Skype/Facetime became a tool that allowed me to have intimate, in-depth conversations with my ten participants, most of whom were self-described queer Iranian-American women (one participant identified as a formerly lesbian trans\* man, and another, an Iranian-Swiss woman). Though each of their experiences were obviously different, class standing being the most obvious differentiator, the similarities that presented themselves

within each conversation gave me as a researcher, hope. Within every story was an innate connection to Iranian, American, and queer identities that was palpable. Within every story, there were pauses, contention, and physical embodiments of both/and. These women were Iranian, they were American, and they were queer, and at no points during our conversations were those identities ever divorced. Intersectionality took human form, and with each conversation, I began to understand how our social locations, our contextual experiences, our relational positions influenced which part of our identities we shared with the world. It was through laughter, tears, and storytelling, where I quickly learned that I would develop a relationship with these individuals beyond this project. Though we may never be in the same room again, their stories are with me and I know my stories are with them. Though the poems that will be shared in the following chapter only serve as a few examples of the experiences of queer Iranian-American women, it is my hope that they offer a glimpse into the way that queer identity, family, and culture operate within this particularly underrepresented world.



## Chapter Four: The Myth of the (Queer) Iranian-American Family

*“We’re afraid of being abandoned by the mother, the culture, la Raza, for being unacceptable, faulty, damaged. Most of us unconsciously believe that if we reveal this unacceptable aspect of the self our mother/culture/race will totally reject us. To avoid rejection, some of us conform to the values of the culture, push the unacceptable parts into the shadows” (Anzaldúa 42).*

*“For women . . . poetry is not a luxury. It is a vital necessity of our existence. It forms the quality of the light within which we predicate our hopes and dreams toward survival and change, first made into language, then into idea, then into more tangible action. Poetry is the way we help give name to the nameless so it can be thought. The farthest horizons of our hopes and fears are cobbled by our poems, carved from the rock experiences of our daily lives” (Lorde 37).*

### *A Look Back*

When I originally began to pursue this project, I was nervous that I would not be able to find enough participants to do justice for the stories I longed to tell. Then, miraculously, one after another, the stories began to pour in. The words you are about to read are from queer Iranian-Americans who chose to share their deepest fears, biggest regrets, and most intimate understandings of their sexualities. What I hope you notice, is how each person’s narrative is steeped in contradiction, while simultaneously beautiful, poignant, genuine, and unfinished. With each story, I begin to outline the parallel struggles faced when the conversation moved along the hyphens of our identities, “Living between two countries, two social systems, two languages, two cultures, results in understanding experientially the contingent nature of social arrangements” (Anzaldúa 7). I see myself in their experiences. *Each one.* Their stories and anecdotes like my

familiarities growing up as a first-generation, queer Iranian-American woman, while remaining distinctive enough to (re)produce empathy - even for me, who has existed in this narrative of contradiction for as long as I can remember. Like E. Patrick Johnson's *Sweet Tea*, which considers Black gay men in the south, these narratives are rooted in a shared history of silence, where my insider/outsider positionality could build upon a collective understanding of our cultural expectations and experiences. That became clear as our conversations weaved in and out of Persian, particularly when there was no way to translate our intimate knowledge otherwise.

Through creating found poetry from my participants' narratives, three themes emerged from the conversations: Family/cultural loyalty, shame/guilt, and agency/resistance. However, when attempting to separate the poems into these themes, I found it impossible and awkward. I could not confidently label and place each poem neatly into three distinct categories, like so much of my pre-doctoral training has taught me to do. I began to realize, albeit slowly, that the reason I was having so much difficulty, was because each of their stories existed within the three themes concurrently. It felt inauthentic to separate them, and irresponsible as a researcher in the community, and insider/outsider, to try and convey their experiences as just one thing. It became painfully clear, that each conversation weaved in and out of moments that paint a picture of family and cultural loyalty, instances of shame and guilt, and powerful explosions of agency and resistance. Then, I thought that perhaps the only way to begin to understand what it means to exist in those contradictions, for these queer Iranian-Americans was to

simply give space for each of them to tell their stories, and to centralize their individual voices and lived experiences.

Like Madison, who uses poetic transcription to honor Black women's orality, I use poetic transcription to privilege the spoken word of queer Iranian-Americans:

By placing words on a page in a way that resembles the rhythm of the human voice and the speaker as a social-historical being who colors each word based on that existential fact, the text comes closer to capturing the depth inherent in the indigenous performance of black speech. ("That was my Occupation" 323)

Because, the only way to really understand what queer Iranian-Americans go through daily, is to let them share their stories, so that they can describe what it is like to live in what can only be compared to Anzaldúa's *mestiza consciousness*, a state of mind allowing "people to navigate these different social contexts and maintain knowledge of what it means to reside in these different social and political interstices" (8). Like Gutierrez-Perez's work with LGBTQ Latinos, I want to locate and work through the disruptive ambiguities of queer Iranian-Americans through highlighting materiality of their everyday lives. It is in the hybridity of their existences where I hope their "ambiguous discursive and embodied disruption is potentially decolonizing" ("Disruptive Ambiguities" 92).

Thus, with this work, I want to let queer Iranian-Americans tell their stories in their own vernacular, because like so many queer women of color, their stories have been historically silenced, "The lesbian of color is not only invisible, she doesn't even exist. Our speech, too, is inaudible. We speak in tongues like the outcast and the insane"

(Anzaldúa 165). I want queer Iranian-Americans to engage in theories of flesh, so that their words could be put back into the community (Moraga and Anzaldúa). To not try and do what so much research has already done, and define what queerness, ethnicity, culture, and family means, but to give queer Iranian-Americans a platform to paint the picture of what queerness, ethnicity, culture, and family *means to them*. My job as a researcher is not to tell you what their stories do for the world, but rather, to give space to let them tell their stories in a way that fosters agency and recaptures the essence of their identities, and to highlight issues of power that often impact the tellability of those stories.

Langellier writes:

*performance* implies the transgressive desire of agency and action. From the perspectives of performance and performativity personal narrative is situated, embodied, and material – stories of the body told through the body which make cultural conflict concrete and accessible. (“Personal Narrative” 129)

So, like Calafell, I utilize performative writing as a tool to honor the instinctive knowledge of women of color (*Latina/o*). This work is meant to give space to the voices of Iranian-Americans, so that we can continue to combat preconceived notions of the MENA region, especially in the face of this current political climate. While this is only a snapshot of queer Iranian-American lived experiences, it is my hope that it serves a springboard for more research about queer people of color and their relationships to culture and family. It is my view that when we attempt to separate those realities, we fail to acknowledge the spectrum of how queer identity is embodied, lived, and practiced. And so, through these found poems, I hope to have positioned their “words on a page to

resemble the rhythm of the human voice,” and that as a reader, you can feel their voices transcend the page, so that you can hear their stories, as they were meant to be told (Madison, “That was my Occupation” 217).

## **GOLI**

The story begins with Goli, a first-generation, 32-year-old, bisexual/queer Iranian-American hair stylist, from Denver, Colorado. Goli is the first person I speak to, she is local, and yet, we have never met. The interview takes place in her home, where she offers me tea and fresh pistachios that prompt memories of all the times I have seen these same snacks adorn my grandmother’s countertops in Tehran. I was not prepared for the jolt of nostalgia that would hit me in that moment. Though the feeling of warmth was temporary, as I remembered what family means to Iranians of the diaspora. For Iranians of the diaspora living in the U.S., culture is dualistic, “Along with shared traditions, other characteristics such as language, history, the role of the family, status, occupation, and interpretation of the American culture contribute to the formation of the Iranian diasporic identity” (Mostofi 687). Thus, familial perception and fear of estrangement is one of the main influential forces that drive queer Iranian-American women to feel the need to hide parts of their sexual identities (Abdi; Abdi and Van Gilder; Van Gilder and Abdi). This is particularly true for queer Iranian-Americans who weigh the risk of going back to Iran at all, or for those of us who sit in the certainty that for the safety of our families, and ourselves, that we shouldn’t...

Her voice trembles as she speaks, and I find myself mirroring this trepidation, she gets up to bring a box of tissues for us to share. The nerves were palpable, and we speak with a cautious tenseness in our voices. The first thing she reveals is that she shares her home with her wife. I am the first to admit that even I was shocked by the revelation. Here, an Iranian-American woman is in a happy, loving, committed relationship with another woman. Though Goli concedes that her parents still have trouble labeling her spouse as her wife and instead still refer to her as Goli's "friend." She goes on to explain a common theme in many of the subsequent conversations I would have, the idea that you can do what you want, as long as other people don't know, "there's even been a few times where my mom's even gotten mad at me because I've introduced her as my wife, and she's like 'why would you tell people that'" and I'm like, 'because that's what it is.'" This idea of private familial matters staying private to save face is an example of queer Iranian-American women adhering to concerns of family loyalty. Though, she tells me that while she does not blame her mother for those responses, she does actively resist her family's expectations. She shares that she and her wife now attend family gatherings together (though are careful to avoid PDA), and that her wife, who is Latina, is currently in the process of learning Persian. There is a sense of pride in her voice, but the kind that comes from years of struggle. It is obvious that she loves her family, but she has had to make her own choices, in hopes that they would meet her halfway.

Even though Goli has come a long way in her journey of self-discovery, she tells me that this wasn't always the case. Goli describes her tenuous relationship with her father, who upon learning of her sexuality, threatened her life:

“He just had a kidney transplant and so he was on all kinds of medication and a lot of the medications were making him a little crazy, anyways. And he's a Persian dad. I feel like they're slightly crazy in general, and he got to the point where... Like, I know you're my daughter but I could kill you and it probably wouldn't even faze me. Because he was just so drugged up for you know the meds, you know.”

She tells me that she was terrified of him, to the point where she had to move to California and live with her aunt. When she came back home, their relationship was still strained, and she decided to write him a letter that became the catalyst for the revival of their relationship. I tell her that my own father was never in the picture, and I was grateful to never have had that conversation. She responds cheekily, “So, you kind of lucked out in that department.” Goli's relationship to her father is consistent with the patriarchal cultural expectations placed on Iranian women in relationship to family.

While her father's reaction might seem extreme, I share a moment of relief with her, as I realize how different my own story would have been had my father been around. While Goli is torn between different anxieties, even still, she tells me that she cannot blame her parents for their reactions, because it wouldn't be fair to them either, “I don't ever expect them to ever be 100% because that's just not how they grew up. They don't know any

different. You know, you can't be mad at them for it.” I share this sentiment with Goli, as I still struggle to make room for my own mother’s acceptance, another example of how intimately connected our experiences are to our parents. This careful balancing of individual agency and collectivist identity shines a spotlight on how the queer Iranian-American narrative exists within the careful negotiation of family and cultural loyalty, shame and guilt, and agency and resistance.

*Goli: “We Are Unicorns”*

I tried *so*  
    *hard*  
not to be attracted to girls  
                    I *really* did  
I had boyfriends... one before my wife  
and, it just felt so fake  
                    like I was *pressuring* myself  
because... I knew my family  
wasn’t going to be okay with it

I *tried*...  
I didn't want that life

I came out to my mom first  
    the day I turned eighteen  
she started crying  
she just kept saying,

“What did I do wrong?  
It's my fault,  
*please God*  
just tell me what I did wrong in my life  
to deserve this?”

she blamed herself  
like it was her karma or something  
and of course, I was like,



“it has nothing to do with you,  
or the way you raised me  
this is just how I am  
It's how I was born  
It's how it is.”

and then she was  
scared. She said,

“you can't tell anybody,  
you can't tell your dad.  
He'll have a heart attack”

It was hard for her too,  
she was kind of stuck in/between,

t u g g e d

from

both

ends

I think in that moment  
my mom didn't really get it  
she didn't understand the  
**AMOUNT OF PRESSURE**  
there was on me

she was so worried about  
herself  
and everybody else  
that I wasn't even...

*in  
the  
equation*

and that's the thing...

I think with *any* Iranian family  
It's all about the name right?

“Oh, what are people  
going to think of us,  
about *our family?*”

and then... it was awful  
like, I had all this  
weight  
lifted off my shoulders,  
*finally*  
but, I was so sad  
because I didn't have my family

I was suicidal  
I tried to commit suicide a few times  
I admitted myself  
I knew, I was getting to  
*that point...*  
and, I didn't want to

so, I had to choose between them or me

I had to choose

because of the lies and living the double life...  
and,

I *had* to choose me

## LALEH

I drive up the desolate 241-toll road that leads to Inland Empire of California, to meet with Laleh, a self-identified 33-year-old, queer disabled woman of color. Laleh is a first-generation Iranian-American, once married to a man, but like Goli, is presently legally married to a woman. She invites me into her home, where her dogs accost me with licks and loving. She escorts me to the kitchen, where I meet her wife, who

introduces me to her father before graciously offering me some water. Laleh is smiling, I can't tell if it's because of nervousness, or excitement, so I contend that it was a mixture of both. She leads me outside to her expansive patio, where she has laid out snacks for us to enjoy while we chat. Another example of Iranian hospitality rears its head in this moment. We exchange knowing looks as we discuss how far along I am in my Ph.D. program. As an academic herself, Laleh shares that her experiences mirrored many of mine. She tells me that it was when she entered academia where she began to understand her sexuality, in conversation with her cultural upbringing and invisible disability. However, for Laleh, it was her ex-husband, whom she met in graduate school that asked her to explore her sexuality. And so, Laleh highlights the direct contradiction of her intersectional identities, immediately. She tells me that since her late teens, it has been her invisible disability, manic depression that has marked her body as abject to traditional Iranian familial norms. She speaks apprehensively about her family's reactions to her diagnosis, and how issues of trust would manifest in a variety of contexts. She explains that for Iranians, the marked body becomes a state of failure, and that she always felt the need to make up for her "imperfections," and the one way she knew she could do that, was through an investment in her education.

Remarkably, seven of ten of my participants pursued higher education, one earning an MFA, and six earning (or on their way to earning) their Doctorate degrees. In every conversation, education was explained in such a way that they could prove themselves to their families. Many of the individuals I spoke to would comment on the

extra pressure they felt to fulfill their educational expectations for their families to mitigate the potential animosity triggered by their queer identities. Importantly, this pressure to exceed academically certainly isn't exclusive to queer Iranian-Americans. This expectation is one that is placed predominantly on the children of Iranian immigrants and refugees, who often make sense of education through the narrative of obligation and duty. Many Iranians of the diaspora think of education as a means of giving back to their parents, who risked everything to come to this country in pursuit of a better life for their children.

Laleh explains that one of the main reasons she pursued her Ph.D., was to assuage her differences, her queerness and her disability:

“I was trying to make up for it. I'd be excited if I had a publication or if I got into my, you know, Ph.D. program, or anything... just to call it a success. But I felt like I was offering it to them as a way to say -- but I did this too... *for you*. But it wasn't always understood.”

This revelation hits close to home for me. I too, feel the need to overcompensate in ways that prove to my mother that my Otherness does not mean I am less than. My queerness is part of my identity, but I too have felt and continue to feel the weight of demonstrating my other successes to my family, in spite of and despite my sexuality. Though, for Laleh, her sexuality has always already been in conversation with her culture, her family, and her disability. She tells me that her disability has made the reading of her sexuality that

much harder for her Iranian parents to understand. Her contradictions exist in her existence.

*Laleh: "I'm a Queer, Disabled, Woman of Color"*

The queerness was  
*more* taboo  
than the disability

I have a psychiatric disability...

### **Manic Depression**

I was diagnosed when I was 17

I think that it informs how my family  
reads my sexuality  
in interesting ways...  
*problematic* ways

after coming out  
my parents always thought,  
is this just an impulsive mood issue?  
like, impulsively  
I decided this... *thing*

and it's going to	be very fluid
and it's going to	come
and it's going to	go

and it's not going to be legitimate  
because, if you have...

I had severe ups  
and  
downs

I was hospitalized once  
during my Ph.D. program  
so, there was always this idea of

can they trust what I say?

and even for myself,

can I trust what I think?  
what I feel?

so, I feel that that always came up for them

in spoken  
and  
unspoken

ways

I think they were more... comfortable?  
to talk about my diagnosis

I think the disability *felt* safer  
partially, because it doesn't always manifest.  
it's *invisible*

the only visible part  
are some scars on my arms.

the queerness is  
more threatening  
because, it's present

I see my mom's sacrifices  
and, that fills me with a lot of sadness...  
but, there's this rhetoric around  
disability  
that it's for a short period of time

We say,  
“get better soon!”  
And then it goes away.

but that same rhetoric  
doesn't *exist* with queerness  
you just are

so, I think the messages  
I got when I was younger

about a family -- I created the opposite

it's a form of resistance  
it's a form of revision  
actively rewriting

for the  
sake of survival

### **YASI**

Yasi is a first-generation, 32-year-old, gay Iranian-American woman from an upper-middle class family, living in Boston. I knew of Yasi for quite some time, but have never reached out to her before. To my own surprise, she agrees to speak with me, but asks that our conversation be held through Skype. She is careful not to share much personal information with me in our initial interaction, and I can sense the hesitation in her reply. Yasi is my first Skype interview. I realize rather quickly, that while I would have ideally loved to sit with each of my participants face-to-face, logistically it could not work for two specific reasons: First, I was not expecting the diversity in locations, and research about women of color is a grossly underfunded endeavor. As a graduate student, to fly to every city to meet with each participant would have been financially impossible. Second, most of my participants preferred the distance. It felt safer. Though we share similar sexual and cultural identities, I was asking them to engage in a conversation that was intimate, telling, and for most of us, dangerous. Almost all the women I spoke to preferred that barrier, and I had to adjust my expectations accordingly. In my previous

published works about queer Iranian-American women, this concern was even more prevalent in that my participants only felt comfortable speaking to me in private chatrooms (see Abdi and Van Gilder; Van Gilder and Abdi). At least with Skype and FaceTime I could put a face to the story, to see their reactions, to witness their laughter, their smiles, and their tears. And they could see mine.

While initially I was worried that non-face-to-face interviews would somehow lack some sort of authenticity, I was proven wrong almost immediately. I was not prepared for the familiarity that continued to permeate the interaction or for the connection that was still cultivated through the co-sharing of our stories. It helped too that Yasi was warm, endearing, generous, and incredibly funny. She is a storyteller, and our conversation was easy. Our nerves dissipated quickly and our conversation flowed effortlessly as we exchanged stories of our upbringings, our queer revelations, and our surprisingly dissimilar families. While it was not easy for Yasi to express her sexuality to her family, especially knowing she felt differently from a young age, she explains that her parents were supportive as soon as she told them. Yasi describes the moment she had the conversation with her mom:

“she asked me and I was like ‘yeah.’ I like cried into a towel. I was upset that she wouldn’t love me anymore. She wasn’t thrilled. She wasn’t -- but she didn’t treat me any different. I think it just, you know – it takes time for parents to process. But, they do kind of give themselves too much credit. They’re like, ‘For Persian parents, we are so great...so good, blah



blah blah.' It's like, 'Okay, not that great...' They are, they're wonderful people. But you know, I think they were like, 'oh we are pioneers. We are the Mohammed Ali's of like parents of gay children.'”

Yasi also reiterates Goli and Laleh's implicit/explicit feelings of guilt and shame, being the daughter of Iranian immigrants. She speaks about her insecurities as a teenager, and the feelings embedded in deep set cultural norms that made her fearful of revealing her sexuality to her parents. While noting that her expectations did not echo her reality as far as her parents are concerned, her frustrations lie with other queer Iranians who choose not to disclose their identities with their families and the Iranian community:

“I worried a lot about more about -- when I came out, like if they [Iranian community] would make things difficult for my parents, or like not want to hang out with them or something. But that didn't happen. I think they're more popular than ever, at present. I mean, I don't know, I think they think like, 'oh poor them, they have the gay daughter,' or whatever. But some of these people, we know they have adult children who are gay and are not out. And it's such a ridiculous -- I think it hurts -- had they done that 10 years ago, it would have made it so much easier for me. I understand people want their privacy. And, also you know, there's a tendency for Persians to be nosy and very like gossipy.”

Yasi's frustration is rooted in a history of silence regarding sexuality in Iranian and Iranian-American communities, particularly for queer Iranian-Americans where “the

dominant discourse of the Iranian community works to exclude LGBTQ Iranians and Iranian-Americans from ethnic identification, and consequently works to silence the voices of queer Iranian-American women” (Abdi and Van Gilder 82). However, Yasi simultaneously acknowledges that her ability to be open about her sexuality is directly linked to both her class and citizenship privilege and that she has had to learn how to carry much of the burden of being “out” for those who have made the choice not to disclose.

Shifting our conversation, we talk about Yasi’s relationship to Iran. Having been to Iran three different times in her life, I ask whether she wants to or feels like she could or would go back. In response, Yasi describes her divided relationship to Iran with a metaphor that beautifully illuminates what many of my participants expressed about their parent’s homeland:

“I often think of it as a place where -- It's like an estranged sibling, where your parents talk about it a lot, and you have very fond feelings about it, and you know a lot about it, but then when you interact with sibling you don't know really what you're supposed to say or feel. And I don't know if that's because I'm gay. But it certainly can't help. And there are plenty of gay people there... But I equate it to prohibition era United States, where you know, we're not drinking – but we're drinking. It's like everything, you know. Like everything is very -- private life is very private.”

Yasi further explains that it is through her intersectional identities that she can begin to understand her existence in the world. In our conversation, she goes back and forth about what is most challenging about negotiating her identity. She explains that it is through intersectionality that she begins to unpack the ways that her sexuality is raced, classed, and nationalized, and that those identities challenge normative assumptions of queerness.

*Yasi: "They're Both Me..."*

I wonder if I weren't gay  
what life would be like  
    in some ways           --       it would be *better*  
    in some ways           --       it would be *worse*  
    ...you can never know

I think for a long time,  
my whole life...  
I've been  
*more comfortable*  
with the       **Persian**  
*less comfortable*  
with the       **gay**

people don't choose to be gay  
they choose to come out  
and that's the great distinction  
    there are plenty of gay people living straight lives  
    and... I don't blame them  
    It's easier, in some ways  
        but,  
        I *chose* to be out

in my head  
there are a lot of obligational things  
I do to appease  
                    both           identities

if you grow up in a culture  
where Persian marries Persian  
and it's a very homogenous society...

but, we're also American kids and adults  
we grew up *here*  
we have different notions, about which  
races we're attracted to,  
which genders,  
style of dress,  
professions

so, sometimes I rely on one identity  
more than the other  
depending on the news cycle, which is  
really messed up  
but, you know  
you've got to  
***survive***

I think it makes people comfortable  
to label people  
I think they like to know  
where they stand,  
and, how do I relate to this person?  
I think it depends on a,  
cultural context  
of where a person's coming from  
and what are the sort of  
social mores and taboos are  
within that culture

I don't think it's always a race thing  
a lot of times it's a socio-economic thing  
and, I think *that's the interesting thing*  
there's all this talk about

**Intersectionality**  
what is that, you know?

it's like, people have been around forever  
who have multiple identities

I think  
for a long time being gay was a very...

**White**  
people  
thing.

and, I know they don't mean like waspy, or Catholic, or whatever  
they mean... *not* Middle Eastern  
which is not true

there are Asian Americans that are gay  
there are Black Americans that are gay

so, I think that's been the whole thing  
when something becomes political  
like, when there's a  
movement  
or  
a cause

It's usually started by a great many people  
but, it only starts getting attention  
when it effects,

*White people*

## **TINA**

Tina is 31-year-old, queer Iranian-American woman, who grew up in a working-class family in Georgia. She is currently working on her Ph.D. Tina, like Laleh, was previously married to a man and is currently in a relationship with a butch, Cis, White woman. Again, like Laleh, it was Tina's ex-husband that encouraged her to explore her sexuality. She and I bond instantly. We both come from single parent households, where our fathers took up very little space in our lives. For Tina, her father was not a part of her

life for most of her upbringing, in fact she tells me that she didn't know who he was until she was older. For me, my father was around until I was ten, only to exit from my life thereafter. In both cases, we both existed largely without a patriarchal figure in our lives. Our mothers raised us – and we both carry a sense of responsibility for their happiness. Though Tina describes queer kinship as a means of conceptualizing family, she also makes it clear that for her, family is blood. Simultaneously, she acknowledges the potential for chosen family, “I think for me, family is like, you know -- it's blood and chosen, and sometimes you choose to not be a part of your blood family.”

What differentiates Tina from the rest of my participants is that she was raised within a Bahá'í family. While none of my participants were particularly religious (in fact, most identified themselves as culturally Muslim), much of the conversation about Iranian culture and expectation is often rooted in its history as an Islamic Republic. However, for Bahá'ís, their connection to legality and existence is set to the backdrop of a century's long persecution by the state. According to a publication by the Bahá'í International Community, entitled *The Bahá'í Question: Cultural Cleansing in Iran*, the worst of the subjugation came when:

oppression of Bahá'ís was made a part of official national policy. During the early years of the Pahlavi regime (1927 to 1979), the government formalized a policy of discrimination against the Bahá'ís as a concession to the clergy. Beginning in 1933, Bahá'í literature was banned, Bahá'í marriages were not recognized, and Bahá'ís in public service were demoted or fired. Bahá'í schools — of which there were some 50 in the country — were forced to close. (“The Bahá'í Question” 42)

Therefore, Tina's understanding of Iran is vastly different than what I heard in my other conversations.

Interestingly, Tina juxtaposes her upbringing to that of her Muslim counterparts, and lists it as one of the reasons that her mother was more accepting of her sexuality:

“I think one thing that helps is that my family is Baha'i and it's -- there's a lot of stuff about it acceptance in being a Baha'i, that like is also present in Islam, but... I realized doesn't get practiced in the same way... the emphasis is very different for Baha'is, of like, how it's like so important that you be very like, loving and accepting of everyone.”

It is important to note however, that within Bahá'í writings, marriage is considered of utmost importance, and is also defined as a union between man and woman. However, I am careful here to not to confuse religiosity (particularly Islam) with the propensity to accept or not accept sexual identity, because everyone's experiences with religion is unique, and it is imperative to look at different codifications of religious texts if we begin to critique them (this project does not attempt to do that). Moreover, it is important to contextualize the propensity to underscore Islam as particularly homophobic through an understanding of US imperialism that continues to (re)perpetuate Islam as the antithesis to 'Western values of acceptance.' This can also be linked to the homonationalism, the idea that the LGBTQ identity is compatible with nationalist ideology, thereby justifying xenophobia and racism (Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages*). Still, Tina solidifies her connection to her mother through that Bahá'í upbringing, which is magnified through the

significance of her mother's sacrifices, "we're not Muslim and she left as a refugee because of that and she has a lot of -- she carries a lot of that with her in how she like interacts with people."

Tina's story also touches on the departure from Western imperialist ways of thinking about sexuality toward a more liminal understanding of queerness. Tina acknowledges that her family's upbringing greatly influenced the way she was raised to understand sexuality. She describes her parents as:

"literally old school from the village -- the way that sexuality was conceived of in Iran, a very long time ago, that's not thought about in that way anymore. Like you have to get married, and you have to procreate, and whatever else you do is what you do. Whatever gives you pleasure is what gives you pleasure."

This narrative mirrors Goli's attempt to sustain family loyalty by existing and resisting lived experience, but understanding and negotiating Iranian cultural and familial expectations. Tina credits her upbringing as one of the main reasons she has not experienced much difficulty managing her sexual identity within her family.

One of the most profound moments of our conversation however, was the moment I shared my navigation of my sexuality alongside my mother's struggles. I tell Tina how I have put much of my mother's shame on my own shoulders, and that I carry the burden of her guilt coupled with my own. At this point, Tina shares with me that she



spoke to her mother prior to sitting down with me, and that she was asked to convey a piece of advice to me to give to my mother:

“I called my mom and she was like, ‘you tell her, that the more I say it to people, the stronger I feel about it.’ She was like, ‘the first couple of times I did it, I was like really scared and really freaked out and I was worried people were going to be like, oh my god you’re a bad mom. Oh, my god, you’re a bad...’ And she’s like a single mom. She raised me alone. And she said this thing where she was like, ‘at first I was really anxious, and all this stuff, but then, when people said shitty things to me, I got really angry and defensive, because I’m like, this is my daughter and I love her and, fuck you for trying to like force her to be unhappy or something for you to be happy.’ So, she was really adamant about – it’s funny, like she has so much more of a coming out narrative than I do. Where she was just like, ‘every time I say it, I feel more empowered.’”

I think Tina would be happy to know that I did share this advice with my mother, whose only reaction, was a smile.

*Tina: “I Wasn’t Gay”*

I was... 17  
I was in a relationship with a woman  
and *somehow* lesbians came up  
I said to my mom,

“What if I was one?”

and she was like,

“Yeah but you're not.”

and it was... *fine*

I don't know

people want to think that it was some really traumatizing  
thing

but it was okay

because,

I didn't *feel* gay anyway

I didn't *feel* like I was a lesbian

I just like women and it's a totally different thing...

at one point, I started dating a man.

a cis man, and...

we were in love

and it was great.

my family

loved *him*

both of my parents

loved *him*

everybody

loved *him*

I think everyone was a little relieved

because they all *knew* I was a dyke

then we told everyone we were going to get married

to make everyone happy

and we did our *namzadi*

(Persian

wedding)

in Iran

on purpose

so, our Iranian family would have a chance  
to participate

and then, we were open, because,

he was like,

“I think you should be  
sleeping with women”

he was clearly seeing the end of our relationship

and that was really hard for me

because, I didn't want to let go of that

because, it was a great cover

and I *loved him*

I do... love him

but I didn't want to have sex with him

then my mother cornered me,

"I know."

and I'm just like,

"What of the hundred things,  
could you know?"

and, she asks,

"Well everything's okay, right?"

and, I said,

"Well, we're probably going to get a divorce."

and **THAT'S** what upset her

then she was heart/broken

it was the taboo of the divorced daughter

and that meant something, right?

that *this thing* was

**so**

**much**

**STRONGER**

**SQUID**

Squid is a 26-year-old, Iranian-American, queer trans\* male, currently active in the U.S. military. Squid's story is dissimilar to any I have heard before. It's unique to me, as so much of my research has focused on queer Iranian-American cis women. I have rarely been privileged to hear the intimate familiarities of those who recognize that their sex and gender are not compatible. I am grateful to him for sharing his experiences. Squid is a fast talker. Everything he says is rapid, as if this story is one he has spent his life preparing to share.

Squid lives in Los Angeles, California, where for many years he identified as a lesbian. We speak in great lengths about what that means for his narrative, if it has made his transition more difficult, or if it has been the step he needed to take ownership of his body, his sexuality, and his understanding of his place in the world. I ask him if he wants to talk about his life as a lesbian or his life as a trans\* man. He says both make up who he is and that he is an open book. He tells me that he hopes his story can help shed light on trans\* identity, particularly for MENA communities, where the topic is rarely broached. I ask Squid if he's open about his trans\* identity within the Iranian community, and he firmly replies, "No." Though, quickly Squid goes on to explain that he doesn't feel the need to reveal his queer Trans\* identity most days, for two reasons: the first, because of a discomfort sharing his identity with the Iranian community (unless he feels a sense of queer familiarity), and second, because of his undoubted passing privilege. He explains that in most instances where he has shared his identity, people tend to not believe him, because of his passing privilege. Conversely, Squid tells me that there are times where he

amplifies his queer Trans\* identity in public, partially because of the work he does advocating for homeless youth in Los Angeles. Though he is quick to clarify that he has received the most backlash in those instances from the high concentration of MENA people in the city, particularly Iranians and Armenians: “

There's a lot of negative feedback from that. It's either a look, or they'll say something. They'll say something thinking that I don't understand what they're saying. And so, because, I don't pass as a Middle Eastern person. I have this insane cis, White passing, you know, male privilege... it's really interesting. They don't, they don't know that I understand what they're saying.”

Squid mentions that one way he moves through the world is through a performance of hyper masculinity that began when he identified as a lesbian:

“When I identified as a lesbian, I had to perform for everybody. I had to be this super -- again, it was like this hyper masculine thing. I couldn't be a feminine lesbian. I had to be like this super hyper masculine lesbian because I had to be way more -- I had to be -- I had to pretend to be way more strong than I actually was. Because, I didn't want them to invalidate me, and I didn't want them to invalidate any lesbian, or anything like that. Because, the way it was is if you're a feminine lesbian, then you just haven't found, you know, a nice guy. You're just confused. But, if you're

like this super, hyper masculine lesbian, it's harder for them to really say something to you, because you're looked at as one of the dudes.”

He also shares that his masculine lesbian performance caused him to be openly transphobic, though he now acknowledges that his transphobia was largely internalized. Squid explains that after his transition, and as an active member of the U.S. military, he continues to feel compelled to enact a performance of hyper masculinity around his extended family and in service, to prove that he is a man.

Squid tells me about his family. He starts with their importance in his life, likening that connection to his MENA cultural roots. This is where his initial contradiction comes into the picture full force:

“My family is like the most important thing to me. I guess that comes with the Middle Eastern culture as well. Family is like, life and everything. But, it -- I -- my family wasn't always accepting. So, I was actually homeless at one point, because I got kicked out of the house, just for coming out as a lesbian. Before I transitioned.”

This deep familial bond is one that many of my participants echoed. Again, amplifying the tension of understanding one's own sexuality within collective family structures, particularly for Iranian and MENA families. Squid's intersectional experiences are the manifestation of how gender, sexuality, and culture complicate our understandings of queer identity and the ways we navigate our existences within our families.

While Squid's family had the most severe reaction of the people I interviewed, what was correspondingly dissimilar, was that the negative reaction came from his siblings as well as his parents. Whereas most turned to their siblings for support, knowing that similar upbringings would foster a more empathetic response, Squid's sisters were the first to tell him that his identity as a lesbian was unacceptable, "I came out to my oldest sister, trying to see how to gauge how she would feel or think about it. And, she was kind of like, "Uh, yeah that's not cool." Shortly after, Squid found himself homeless, and it was at that time where he also developed an intense drug and alcohol addiction. He explains that it was a friend of his sisters that found him in the park and asked to take him home. It was only after being assured of his safety that he reluctantly accepted the offer:

"I agreed to go home and sit down and talk with my family, so I did. She actually took me to my mom's work, when my mom got off. And on the drive home my mom was just going off about, 'there's no such thing as being gay, that's not going to happen in this family, that's not in our culture. That's not okay. You're just, you're going to get over it.' It's, you know -- very scary. And then I got home and nobody talked to me for a few months. You know, so I was just very alone."

It was in this loneliness that he went through bouts of self-harm and thoughts of suicide. He shares that while there were severe lows in his story of self-discovery, he could foster conversations with his family that eventually led to their acceptance. He says that by the

time he had decided to pursue his transition, his family was willing to listen and have since been nothing but supportive.

Currently five years sober, Squid tells me that when he shares his family's story, people rarely believe. He laughs while admitting that if he were told the same story, he wouldn't believe it either. He explains proudly that now every Christmas his family brings gifts to the local LGBTQ homeless shelter:

“And now my family tells me all the time... my sisters, they're like, ‘seeing how you were as a female, and seeing you now, we'd rather have you be authentic and be happy, rather than you be this girl who's always wanting to kill themselves... who we always have to worry about, like... is she dead today? Did she kill herself? Is she still doing drugs and drinking? As opposed to this guy who's into activism and super progressive, and is always helping people, and is super authentic. I think -- I think the constant authenticity triggered that, ‘Well, fuck. We're going to be authentic too.’”

*Squid: “People Don't Believe Me...”*

when I tell them that  
my family used to not be supportive

I'm a...  
Middle Eastern  
American  
Transgender  
Queer



Male

my family is the most important thing to me  
but, it – I...  
my family wasn't always accepting

my sister found out  
called me  
and just assassinated me with words,

“Don't ever come home  
you're disgusting

You  
fucking  
dyke.”

it was *emotionally* and *physically*  
degrading

they went *out of their way* to make me want to **kill  
myself**

I was homeless at one point  
for coming out as a lesbian  
...before I transitioned  
my sister's friend found me at a park  
and, told me,

“I want to take you home”

when I got home  
nobody talked to me  
I was just very alone

cut/ting  
I went through this stage of suicide  
wanting to  
kill myself

eventually, we started  
having conversations

I started educating them  
about  
who I am

I'm still your family  
I'm still your blood

they noticed how consistently authentic I was  
with myself  
and shook off this,

"well this is how our culture  
is *supposed* to be"

they've apologized

people don't believe me when I tell them that  
my family used to not be supportive

Now  
my mom donates to the  
HRC

### **TALA**

Tala is a bisexual, 30-year-old, first-generation Iranian-American psychologist living in Los Angeles, California. Unlike the others I have spoken to, Tala just recently began her journey of self-discovery, and is currently attempting to make sense of her sexual identity. Tala exemplifies the liminal space of queerness, as she sits in uncertainty about what to "label" herself for our conversation, telling me that she is more comfortable identifying her ethnicity, rather than her sexuality:

"It's only a recent step for me to even identify my sexual orientation.

Because, I was like, I would consider myself straight. So, this is more of a

recent change. Transition. So, I'm not really identifying myself with my sexual orientation, as much. But, I do -- I usually just -- Iranian-American... I just use my ethnicity.”

Tala talks of the *identity dissonance* and *isolation* she feels while trying to make sense of her sexual identity, and how she feels as if there is no community for people like her (Abdi and Van Gilder). She tells me that while she maintains a strong bond to her cultural roots, she has begun distancing herself from the Iranian community as she begins dating women. Tala says most of her friends are Iranian, and while she has felt comfortable telling those she is closest to, there are still a group of long-time Iranian-American friends that she can't confide in:

“I have a lot of Persian friends. I love my culture. I listen to Persian music. I enjoy spending time with like my Iranian friends. I speak Farsi often. Things like that. I don't -- I'm not -- I like my culture, so I enjoy things of my culture -- but, due to my sexual orientation currently, I don't spend as much time with the Iranian community, as I did before.” She explains that she doesn't think they will understand and that they would judge her, though conversely, she notes, “I think I haven't given my Iranian friends a fair chance.”

Tala shares that wishes she didn't have to distance herself from her friends, “It's unfortunate that like I can't I tell them, because I do love them, and I miss them, and I don't like to push them away. But, I'm just not ready right now for them to know, yet.”

Her concerns are shared with myself and other queer Iranian-Americans, as we navigate the amplified apprehension caused by an assumptive disavowal from the Iranian and Iranian-American community (Abdi and Van Gilder; Van Gilder and Abdi).

Like Laleh and Tina, Tala was also married to a man for a period. This commonality seems significant to note in that in each narrative of marriage, much of the conversation revolves around parental appeasement, like it served as some way to fulfill their roles as proper Iranian women. She tells me that they separated only a year and a half ago and that before him, she never saw herself getting married. She says that growing up she was a tomboy and that the idea of sex was not appealing to her, but that it was his persistence and her sense of familial obligation, that she agreed to marry him, “I married someone for my parents.” While Tala says she felt pressured to marry him to adhere to her parent’s expectations, she did eventually fall in love with him because he was a good person. When her relationship began to dissipate, Tala clarifies that she began dating women. As an impulsive person, Tala almost immediately entered into a serious relationship with a woman. She explains when they became official, she felt a strong desire to tell her friends, but only the group around her that that she knew would be supportive.

While Tala’s close friends have been largely supportive of her dating women, Tala divulges she still has trouble navigating the queer community, which has been less than welcoming. She shares that the White and Latinx queer community she has interacted with so far, has made her feel like she doesn’t belong. She thinks that this

reluctance to accept her is because she has only just begun coming to understand her sexuality:

“They throw it in your face. They constantly throw it your face. Like, you're thirty and you still haven't figure things out? They make you feel like shit. Because they would share their stories with me, and like, and just being in their presence helped me be more comfortable with like my own sexuality.”

This resonates with me in our conversation and I remember the power of storytelling and the possibilities that exist when you begin to hear stories like your own. Here, her feelings of isolation become replaced by feelings of community and support.

Importantly, Tala is the only person I speak to who explicitly states that her family's reputation outweighs her own desire to be open about her sexuality. For Tala, family comes first, without question. She explains that while she will continue to date women, she is not planning to share this information with her parents unless she finds someone who she is certain she can spend the rest of her life with. Simultaneously, she acknowledges how much she has sacrificed for her parents, explaining that she decided to end her relationship with her ex-girlfriend because she feared the future and the possibility of her parents not accepting her identity:

“I was scared about the future, and like acceptance of me completely being gay, and open to being in like a committed relationship. And then not being with her for like 2-3 months, and being super sad and like

depressed that I'm sacrificing so much because of my parents. Again. I like married someone for my parents, and now I'm going to -- end a relationship with someone for my parents... like what the fuck am I doing?"

Much of my conversation with Tala, mirrors the findings of mine and Van Gilder's research. They explain that queer Iranian-American women often experience identity dissonance and isolation when they develop "feelings of identity conflict where their ethnic and sexual identities are directly at odds with one another" (Abdi and Van Gilder 78). Though simultaneously, Tala exemplifies the many ways that people from the MENA region practice their sexualities. She moves us away from the Western imperialist influences that ask us to label ourselves for the comfort and definability of others. Scholars like Massad consider static gay identity to be a Western convention, and challenges us to move passed categorization of sexuality, particularly through a historization of sexuality in the MENA region. Conveying fixed gay identity as a Western phenomenon denotes how atypical Tala's story exists within the liminality of queerness. It's entrenched in contradiction. It's not black and white, but rather is an amalgamation of all the things that make her who she is as she navigates family support and loyalty, shame and guilt, and agency/resistance.

Toward the end of our conversation, we circle back to the idea of community support, Tala explains:

“I don't really have like a lot of support, like I don't have like a lot of people who would really understand exactly what like I'm experiencing. It's the opposite because most the people I do know are in the Latino community or like the White community, and they have no idea what my family is like. They don't understand. They think I'm a coward. And they use that word a lot. They call me a coward a lot.”

Reflecting on this conversation, I think of all the times queer White people, who were supposed to be allies, questioned my own performance of queerness, “if you don't tell your family, you're being inauthentically queer” or worse yet, “You're a danger to the queer community.” To those voices, I remind you, that for queer people of color, sexuality is not isolated. Our experiences are our family's experiences. Our cultures, our nationalities, our class standings, our religions, our abilities are always already a part of the conversation. Anzaldúa explains that for women of color, the act of *being queer* in so many ways, does symbolize choice. One that is not always shared by our White counterparts:

For the lesbian of color, the ultimate rebellion she can make against her native culture is through sexual behavior. She goes against two moral prohibitions: sexuality and homosexuality. Being a lesbian and raised Catholic, indoctrinated as straight, I *made the choice to be queer* (for some it is genetically inherent). It's an interesting path, one that continually slips in and out of the white, the Catholic, the Mexican, the indigenous, the instincts. In and out of my head. It makes for *loquería*, the crazies. It is the path of knowledge—one of knowing (and of learning) the history of oppression of our *raza*. It is a way of balancing, of mitigating duality. (Anzaldúa 41)

One of the many choices we must make is whether we can share our identities with our families or people who share our cultural backgrounds. That choice cannot and should not be the measurement of what makes queer bodies of color “authentic.” That choice is individual and is rooted in concerns of safety, well-being, and self-preservation.

Sometimes, the most radical thing we can do is put ourselves first, because our stories are not the same as the ones we read about in every textbook. As a U.S., American citizen who made the choice to tell my own mother, I do not have the right to tell others how to enact their queer identities, particularly for those whose nationalities mark their bodies as dangerous, to their families and nations of origin. As scholars doing this work, we must remember that for queer people of color, our experiences are intrinsically linked to our families, and that queerness is imbedded in the messy mixture of all our intersections, always, and that for some, “coming out” is not the solution. For many, sexuality is not fixed. It’s not that simple. To write about sexuality as if it is one thing, as if the label holds more power than the story, is to do a disservice to all those whose stories continue to go untold.

*TALA: “I’m Still Not Comfortable”*

My intuition is unconsciously being affected  
by what my parents want

So, I think the biggest fear for me is my parents finding out  
**that’s it**

I used to be                      married  
intuitively I *knew* I didn’t feel that



connection-with-him  
but  
there was nothing  
wrong with him

- ✓ HE was good looking
- ✓ HE had a good job
- ✓ HE was educated
- ✓ HIS family was awesome
- ✓ My parents loved HIM
- ✓ My friends loved HIM
- ✓ HE was a gentleman

I forced myself to make the relationship work

and, the last 6 months of our relationship  
I met a girl

a Persian girl that was gay  
in San Francisco

I had never in a million years met a Persian girl that was gay,  
And I knew *a lot* of Persian people...  
I grew up in LA for God sakes!  
but, I had never met like... this person

this *Unicorn*.

I was... proud of her  
being in her presence made me think  
about my own sexuality

my sexual identity is currently  
outweighing my ethnicity

It's *isolating*  
me

It's the piece of my life  
that I haven't conquered...

I think that in the Iranian community  
sexuality is just not a thing  
sexuality in general  
is *invisible*  
it doesn't exist

It's not in our music  
It's not in our movies  
It's not a part of family discussion

...  
because it's not important

being sexually satisfied is not as important  
as the reputation,  
of your family

and, being gay is the *worst* you could do

because the most important thing in your world  
is to be the best child for your family  
being gay means that you're doing something that's going to  
hurt your family

and no one will ever do anything that will  
hurt their families

I love my parents so much  
and their reputation is so important to me

I would                      *never*                      do that to them

## **HASTI**

I've known of Hasti for many years. In fact, we have spoken before at great length about how open she is vis-à-vis her sexuality. While our paths have never physically crossed, we are connected through social media, and I recall the many instances I have gone to her Facebook page, only to be moved to tears by the open displays of affection she has shown with her partners. It is through thinking about these interactions, that I begin to truly understand the power that social media has in connecting people to others within their communities. I wonder how much social media

plays a role in expanding different of ways of understanding the vernacular discourses of our hidden communities (Holling and Calafell). I think about all the times someone has come across my page only to discover a rainbow backdrop, and consequently known that I am family. Perhaps this is a conversation for a different time, but seeing Hasti's openness on social media has made me simultaneously envious and proud, and I am indebted to her fearlessness.

Hasti is sitting in her school's library, and has graciously offered to spend some time between her Ph.D. coursework to chat with me. Our conversation is familiar, as we begin to speak about the thing that bonds us most, our intersectional queer realities. She's a 26-year-old, queer, Iranian-American woman from an upper middle class family. While she currently lives in Utah, we discuss our experiences leaving the generally liberal Southern California, for Whiter and colder climates. I ask her if she notices if any of her identities seem to be more salient than others now that she has moved, and her response is telling in that it immediately highlights race-ethnicity:

“I think there's not much need to explain gender, I think I'm perceived as female, so that part seems obvious. I think for me, the notion of upon first contact meeting somebody, openly being like, ‘Hey yeah, I'm a queer Iranian-American’ is very uncomfortable for me... I think because my *Iranianess* in terms of like my phenotype, isn't necessarily very salient, I'm kind of ambiguous looking. I think because of the ambiguity, I've almost become conditioned to assume that when people ask, it's because of that

ambiguity. And they're curious. And, I mean... that's kind of like a problem in and of itself, that I've become socialized that way. But, I think because of the ambiguity interestingly, it's become more salient. I think it's also just more comfortable to talk about, at least that's been my experience. Until I moved to Utah.”

Our discussion turns to family, and like many of the people I have already spoken to, biological Iranian family is defined first, followed by an explication of queer family. Hasti explains that in college she became extremely close to a group of queer people of color that quickly became a source of safety. She shares that she never felt entirely safe with her blood family, save for her brother, so for her, blood ties have their limits. Still, she says both are foundational to her conceptualization of family, in important but different ways, “I think to limit it to that is -- it's excluding those that don't have that ability to feel safe or close to their biological family. So, I think it's important to be encompassing of both of those ideas.” While it was in undergrad that Hasti found her queer family, it was also there that she began to realize the complicated intersectional ways she had to navigate being a queer Iranian-American. Similar to Tala, Hasti explains that while she had told a few of her friends about her sexuality, and they were mostly supportive, it was the thought of sharing her identity with the broader Iranian community that made her experience discomfort, “I was very involved in the Iranian student group... And, it was difficult for me to come out to the community.”

Because of Hasti's openness on social media, it comes as a surprise to me when she begins to share her discomfort around the Iranian community. She begins to explain how anxiety has played a pivotal role in her life, particularly as she continues to navigate her ethnic identity with her sexual identity for her own safety. Like Tala and I, she feels a particularly strong sense of identification with Iranian culture, despite being born in the U.S. Her experiences echo mine closely, as she describes the pain she feels being connected to Iranian culture, while simultaneously feeling rejected by the same community to which you are so attached. What does differ is our presentations of self. Hasti tells me that she has experienced several microaggressions from the Iranian community, particularly for her somewhat masculine presentation. Conversely, my somewhat feminine presentation has led to more pressing familial conversations about marriageability and more emphasis has been placed on that timeline. We both find this space difficult to navigate, as our appearances are inextricably linked to our gendered performances and how we think the Iranian community understands our identities.

In the same vein, Hasti explains that she does purposely play with gender presentation, and that it often results in points of contention for her parents. She tells me that her father traveled a lot when she was young, and her mother felt as though she was raising her and her brother as a single parent. When her father was around, Hasti says their relationship was good, mostly because he liked the fact that she was a tomboy and felt a sort of masculine connection. Interestingly, she goes on to say that he was the last person she talked to about her sexual identity, and though his response was fine, he spent

hours after the conversation, crying. She goes on to say that her father still goes through bouts of denial and still has a difficult time acknowledging her partner as her partner, but that their relationship has gotten better.

Hasti expresses her mother took the news of her sexuality much differently. She shares that her mother actively resisted her masculine presentation, imploring her to wear more feminine clothes, and routinely put her in dresses throughout her childhood. Though Hasti went through a phase in high school where she wore makeup and dresses, it was when she started to explore her sexuality that she began dressing in what made her more comfortable again. She describes her ideal ensemble as skinny jeans, Nikes, and a men's V-neck. It was then that her mother began having questions, "my mom started to notice. I didn't actually tell my mom." She describes the conversation she had three days before having to take her mother to the airport for her trip to Tehran. Randomly, she says, her mother called her to ask her to be more conservative about what she posts on social media. She continues to describe the awkward encounter:

"there was a pause, and she was like -- this is like the exact wording of what she said, she's like, 'Um, I think you're telling people that you're gay.' So not like, you are gay! 'I think you're telling people that you're gay, and when you grow out of this phase, I don't want you to regret any of the stuff that you had put on your Facebook.'"

Hasti says she doesn't remember much of what happened after that other than the anger and disappointment expressed by her mother. They didn't speak from then until the day

she had to take her mother to the airport, where she had to pull over just to cry. I ask her what made her so upset, and her response hits me like a ton of bricks:

“I don't know. I feel like sometimes like when people come out, their parents like might say some very ugly and hurtful things... one of the things she said during that conversation that I still don't think I've let go of... she said that she's known I was gay since I was 11. And I was like, damn so you have intentionally been a homophobe my entire life? *You asshole*. Because that was over a decade of homophobia, when she knew I was gay from that young, you know? And it's kind of like... you were such a big part of my self-hate around this identity. And it could have been prevented. Like, if when you realized that when I was 11, you had some compassion and helped me be okay with it, you know? It would have been like totally different.”

Hasti tells me that when her mother returned from Iran, she was met with, “if you're going to live this lifestyle, I don't want you living in my house.”

Hasti's reaction to her mother's reaction is a familiar one, based on the conversations I have had previously. A mixture of hurt, blame, and uncertainty that stays with you. A common theme that has come out of these conversations is also one I have experienced in my life. This idea that while we want so much to blame something, our cultures, our families, our communities, we simultaneously and actively try to rationalize, make sense of, and empathize with them. We have gone through the processes of

reconciling the fact that we do come from two radically different cultural understandings of sexuality, and that our parents have not gone through that same journey. Like my own experience, Hasti's mother is still working on her understanding of her sexuality, and Hasti is letting her have that space and is proud of how far she has come:

“I let my mom have her process and you know she's done a lot of really great work, I think to go from that to where she is now, where like she really loves my partner and like considers her like one of her kids. I don't even know how she got to that point. I'm actually really proud of her because she really -- and she still struggles with it often -- but she's made such a big jump in what? 4 and a half years? Like that's the jump she's made. That's pretty freaking good. So, it's definitely a process, but you know, overall right now... I don't really have any complaints about either of my parents. Because, I think when I was at the beginning of my process, I never really imagined it being here, where I could feel so comfortable with my family with a female partner.”

*Hasti: “To this Day”*

I'm still  
most afraid of coming out to Iranian people  
    It's the last thing Iranians  
    learn about me  
        It's kind of this complicated thing  
        It's very anxiety inducing

because of general cultural messages  
that if I had to put it all into one theme...



is basically,

“if you're going to do that, fine,  
we just don't want to see it”

so, my mom was willing to give up  
the importance of having a family with kids,  
she was willing to let all that go  
as long as like I wasn't so

open  
about  
it

but my more masculine expression  
makes me perceived as *gay*  
more often than other people  
she still struggles with how I dress  
she's gotten better but  
she still has this mindset of,

“if you're going to do that fine  
people don't need to see,  
they don't need to know,  
why are you being so obvious about it?”  
...you know how Iranians are

I'll give you an example...

my second cousin was turning 18  
her family threw her a big Iranian birthday party...

when I dress up, I usually wear  
slacks or a dress shirt  
sometimes a vest  
sometimes a tie

that's when my masculinity shows more  
but for this event

I borrowed a dress  
I got my makeup done  
I had a manicure  
my hair was straight  
I wore heels

I did the full 20 something year-old  
Iranian girl bit

and, I *knew*  
that the discomfort associated with that  
was so much  
lower  
than the discomfort of if I had decided  
to just be comfortable in my own clothes

so, it's like...

how can I feel so strongly connected to this ethnic group...  
this community  
that faces X amount of prejudice and discrimination  
but simultaneously,  
have this other very large part of myself be  
**REJECTED**  
by the same community  
that I feel so strongly connected to?

you want to feel close to both communities,  
but you can't always do that  
these identities are fluid  
and to say that they're perfectly meshed  
and integrated  
is just...

that's not real

### **PEGAH**

Pegah is a 32-year-old queer, Iranian woman who was born in Switzerland, but immigrated to the United States as a teenager. Having spent her formative years in the U.S., she's currently a practicing veterinarian in Los Angeles, California. Pegah is another person I had known of for quite some time. Because the queer Iranian-American community is so fragmented, it is easy to spot individuals who make a point to share their

intersectional identities in public forums. Pegah makes a quip early on about her presence as an Iranian community leader, “I’m an activist -- I’m viewed as an activist as an Iranian a lot of times by the Iranian community in diaspora. That’s how they view me.”

Interestingly, and almost immediately however, she notes that that title has also led her to be known as a kind of outsider, someone who toes the line between the notion of the proper Iranian girl, and the outspoken activist. This is the first time we have had the opportunity to chat one-on-one, and I am quickly drawn to her conviction.

Pegah has a complicated relationship to the Iranian community, telling me that she only became aware and engaged with other Iranians when she entered college; “even then, I felt like there wasn’t a sense of community within Iranians.” We easily transition our conversation towards sexuality, where Pegah goes on to explain that Iranian cultural discourses taught her much about the idea of sexuality in general. Without hesitation, Pegah quickly interjects to say:

“I was always told in one way or another that gay people are bad -- but what’s interesting is that whenever they talked about gay people it’s been about men -- about gay men rather than like them even realizing that there are other people who might not be a man who might be attracted to same gender or same sex. And it’s always been looked down upon.”

This narrative is not unique to Iranian culture, yet has a deep-rooted history in Iranian cultural references toward homosexuality, where very little mention of lesbianism or queerness for women ever occurs. Scholars, like Bucar and Shirazi, write of the rhetorical

origins of Iranian sexuality, noting, that before the Iranian revolution, same-sex acts were more apt to be tolerated, but after the Islamic Revolution:

same-sex acts became illegal through codification of a particular interpretation of shari'a (Islamic law). In the Iranian Penal Code, Articles 108–126 deal with the punishment for sodomy (lavat in Persian and liwat in Arabic), defined in Art. 108 as 'sexual intercourse with a male.' (418)

Thus, Pegah's assertion that lesbianism was rarely spoken about in her household about homosexuality is commonplace as the erasure of lesbian practices and identity is often commonplace within Iranian social discourse.

Pegah opens up about the fluidity of her sexuality, explaining that she really only became attracted to women at age 25, and was before then, mainly interested in men. She shares the story of being "outed" as a lesbian by her uncle, and the misrepresentation of her identity made her feel conflicted. Pegah goes on to say that while she does not identify as a lesbian, it is easier to just accept that label than to begin trying to explain fluidity to her Iranian family or to the Iranian community. Many cultural implications are at play here, particularly as people of color often must play into the idea of fixed identity to appease apprehension within their families. In many cases, we see that while many people of color live more fluid queer identities, they are often asked to choose an identity as a means of mitigating potential uncertainty. This narrative is common within the queer Iranian-American community, particularly exemplified by the previous conversations I have had, where the idea of 'all or nothing' comes into play. As if, labeling oneself as lesbian makes it easier for heterosexual family members to understand, because again we fall into the Western imperialist notion of either/or where sexuality is a fixed state.

Pegah's reluctance to begin explaining fluidity or bisexuality to her family is not uncommon, and is read here as one mode of self-preservation.

Like Hasti, Pegah describes *mehmooni's* (Persian parties) as the ultimate site of discomfort in relation to her sexuality. She goes on to say that it is at *mehmooni's* where she feels most obligated to perform heterosexual:

“I would say at any like *mehmooni* pretty much. You know? People always ask you questions about like if you want to get married and people try to hook you up with their sons and things like that. And I just have to laugh it off and say, ‘no thanks.’ The really interesting thing is as much as my mom was like anti queer stuff, she also knew that marriage, or like getting married wasn't like the most important thing to me. So, she never pushed that on me. And whenever she would be approached about me at *mehmooni's* she would just laugh at them and be like, ‘good luck. And make a joke at them.’ But I would say it would be within those spaces when stuff like that would happen would be when yeah... you know? Because sometimes I would be in a relationship with a woman at the time, when they would like ask me those questions, and I had to pretend that I was single and I was just not interested.”

This story exemplifies the navigation of family/cultural loyalty, shame/guilt, and agency/resistance, and it is one that is echoed by many of the individuals I spoke with. Pegah however also notes that much of her rationale surrounding those performances of

heterosexuality stems from a history of cultural messages she received from her family,  
“I have this thing where -- because of like the things I've heard, I think from whether it's  
my parents, or cousins, or whatever -- they're so anti, that like... I think I connect that to  
other Iranians -- even if that's not the case, you know?”

*Pegah: “Cultural Messages?”*

I would say  
the Iranian community is...  
not very open to queerness

... as far as my parents are concerned  
I was always told  
in one way or another  
that gay people are bad

but what's interesting is  
that whenever they talked about gay people  
it's been about men...  
about gay men  
and it's always been looked down upon  
for instance,

one of the times I remember specifically  
my mom addressing this issue was once after she  
had watched a show  
on one of the Iranian satellite channels  
where a gay man was on the show  
and talking about his experience and all these  
things

she was sitting down  
she was done watching it  
and she said something like,

"if my son was ever gay,  
I would kill him, because  
I would rather have him be  
*dead*

*than  
gay"*

and these conversations  
a lot of them started during Prop 8 stuff  
so, I would say  
these are some of the messages  
I got from my family  
and then in general,  
I mean the Iranian community is...  
not very open to queerness

also  
I was *outed* as a lesbian  
I think makes it more complicated,  
because I don't identify as lesbian

so, it's...  
but then how do you explain fluidity  
or bisexuality  
or whatever you want to call it  
to Iranians?

## **PAZ**

Paz comes on to the screen and I am immediately smiling. She's eccentric, but in its best personification. She's the type of woman who commands her space, and knows that what she has to say matters, and that I am lucky to be there to listen. *I am*. Paz grew up in Arizona, and is a fashion designer currently living in Los Angeles, California. She identifies as a first-generation, queer Iranian-American woman. She's the oldest in age of the people I speak to, but her essence certainly has not caught up. She laughs at her own answer to my question about age, "well, I'm 44 by birth, but my spirit is still in its early 30s." I could not wait to hear her story, but even more so when she offered, "You can refer to me as the salty older Persian femme."

Paz's experiences reflect a different political climate of queer identity. Her "coming out" narrative was situated in the 90s, a time when radical lesbian politics were at the forefront of the queer movement. She talks of a lack of queer visibility and how that, coupled with her Iranian upbringing, caused her to heavily question her initial attraction to women; "I didn't know any gay people. There was no social media, like how was I supposed to know this shit, you know? Like, there was no Ellen DeGeneres. I mean, she was alive, but she was... Fuck." She talks of the first woman she was ever drawn to who eventually became her first girlfriend, an Iranian-British woman she met at school who gave her a "weird, nauseous, uncomfortable feeling." It was that experience that made her realize that she was a lipstick lesbian (a term she notes she used back in the 90s, but no longer claims).

Of all the people I speak with, Paz is the only one to explicitly belong to a queer Iranian and Iranian-American community. She tells me the story of finding that community after attending her first Pride parade in San Francisco, California. While participating in the Dyke March, Paz says she accidentally/serendipitously ran into a group of queer Iranian women:

"So, I was at the Dyke march -- I had never been to such a thing before, I was like this naive Persian girl, just like what the fuck is this, you know? And then I'm in the march, you know, with my friends and then I get tapped on the shoulder, and I turn around and it's like another woman and



she looks like she's of my people. And she's like, 'excuse me, but are you Persian?' And I'm like, 'yes. How can you tell?' And I turn around and we just happened to insert ourselves in the Dyke March right in front of about 12 Iranian queer women who were already a little club... In like the early 90s. So, I turn around and she goes -- she had a yellow flyer, like back then you had like old school like riot girl flyers -- I remember it was yellow. Yellow 8.5x11 piece of paper, and it was flier for their secret meetings... So, I turn around and there's all these baby dykes in their early 20s, and maybe like one older woman who's like 31. And they all had like hungry looks of oh my God, fresh Persian meat. And, I turned and my brain couldn't compute that I had just seen 12 more queer Iranian women, because I thought like -- I thought me and my girlfriend were the only ones in the whole world. So, instead of getting excited and like running to them, I got really shy, I grabbed the flyer, and I told my friends we have to exit this march right away. I ran away. I ran away from them. I was scared. I didn't know what to do. Like, I was overwhelmed with like, what. This is too much for my brain. I can't handle.”

This story was significant for more than just representation, but about the underscored presence of queer Iranians and Iranian-Americans within LGBTQ politics. Paz tells this story to foreground the idea of community, as she tells me that those women ended up being her nexus of support. Though she goes on to tell me that it was some

years later, when she met the same group of women again at a house party, that she could reintroduce herself and forge a relationship. She explains the group formed a mailing list and exchanged emails and phone calls, attempting to get together a few times a year. Their connection has continued to the present day, through Facebook. The tone suddenly changes in our conversation when she asks me whether social media has made it difficult for me to connect with other queer Iranian-Americans, “I just find that the more interconnected everyone's becoming with like social networking, the less people are actually like having amazing life experiences.” Paz’s assertion, that social media has in a way stifled the formation of community, is both accurate and inconsistent. While it is true, both in conversation and in lived experience, that queer Iranian community doesn’t really exist in public life, social media has certainly played a role in the formation of community, particularly through surreptitious modes of communication.

This kind of communicative mode or resistance is reminiscent of a type of queer Iranian vernacular discourse that draws from Latina/o vernacular discourse, where marginalized bodies are able to communicate with one another (Holling and Calafell). This is particularly true for queer Iranian-Americans, who may be able to use social media to resist dominant discourses that have so far spoken for their (invisible) identities and “reverse existing and external definitions and create their own definitions ... a means through which the oppressed can move themselves from the periphery toward their own center” (Flores 152). Because marginalized populations often lack institutional backing, social media has become a medium used to communicate their subjective experiences.

Thus, the vernacular potential presented by online communication can therefore be a distinct and essential space for marginalized bodies to engage in public discourse. In this way, queer Iranian-Americans may challenge and contest historically marginalizing attempts to erase their existence.

More than once, Paz mentions the guilt she has felt with her family in relation to her culture and sexuality. Van Gilder and Abdi write that for queer Iranian-Americans this feeling is common as it “relates to feelings of disappointing loved ones and feelings of disgracing Iranian culture” (161). She goes on to explain that eventually her family stopped asking her when she would marry, but that the weight of shame and guilt has yet to dissipate. Paz shares an example of a time where she was at the height of her career and should have been proudest of her accomplishments, but instead continued to feel as though she was disappointing her parents, her family, and her community. She continues to narrate the experience she had with her father, who one day decided to Google her name, and discover many of the radical queer endeavors of Paz’s life. She tells me that she remembers that day distinctly because her family had all gathered together, intervention style, to discuss her sexuality:

“so he had the Google list and everything that comes up when you search my name and he's like -- he just starts, he's like... I don't even know where to begin. I mean it's been so many years, but basically it was like, ‘I'm so shocked and horrified that you've been using your real name and your real last name in all these interviews. Your parents, we're like respected

Muslims in our community, we're like leaders in our community, what are people going to say?"

Paz's story harkens back to the previous conversations I had had, where parental reputation became the center of the conversation. Once again reinforcing the simultaneity of the themes of family and cultural loyalty, shame and guilt, and agency and resistance. Paz tells me that this experience has stuck with her, almost a decade later, and has influenced many of the decisions she has made since then, particularly surrounding her career and her relationships. Interestingly, the last thing Paz's father said to her is directly connected to the conversation I had with Pegah; "I read in one of your articles -- I read that you no longer identify as lesbian. For so many years, I had to get -- accept the fact that you're lesbian. And now you say you're queer. What is this?" Demonstrating again that while sexuality has never been a fixed concept for MENA communities, when it relates to self-identity and family, queer Iranian-American women are often feel obligated to define a fixed identity for the sake of familial understanding.

*PAZ: The Salty Older Persian Femme*

after 9/11,  
I felt a lot of frustration and anger  
because I felt like  
queer,  
Muslim raised people

were falling  
through  
the  
cra/cks

people were scared of you  
because you were from *that* part of the world  
and maybe you were from a Muslim family  
but then,  
your own family  
and your own heritage were scared of you  
because you were queer

so,

I really pulled away from my family

because I wanted to be *radical*

little did I realize  
how subconsciously  
my parent's opinion of me was still a *deep deep* force  
in a lot of choices, I made  
and a lot of self-sabotage

my father  
was very controlling of me  
he was always trying to make sure I was perfect  
like...  
straight A student  
virgin  
good girl  
and I did all of that  
I did *everything needed* of me  
to fulfill his ideal of who his daughter is

but at the same time  
my parents just dumped all their own self-loathing  
and all their own issues with feeling good about themselves  
and their own relationship with their religion  
and their community and...

they **dumped all that shit on me**

because I was the  
*fucking queer kid*  
you know?

I was a perfect scapegoat

so, *I* absorbed all the shame  
*I absorbed so much of my parents' shame*

so much of their own unhappiness  
so much of their own issues with their own gender  
their own gender performance  
their relationship with each other.  
*I became* their whipping boy...

my parents are no longer an obstacle  
for my romantic emotional health  
but, the ghost of the way they were in my 20s  
is still *haunting* me

I never recovered

from that feeling of betraying my people  
betraying my blood tribe  
and, bringing shame upon the family

I felt so guilty  
I felt like I crushed my parents  
they did all this stuff,  
they sacrificed so much *for us*  
I mean their story -- all the Iranian immigrant stories  
are tragic  
and hard  
and horrible

and makes you want to just be this perfect celibate doctor for them

that feeling was so powerful  
that shit sticks with you

it really...  
it can take a long time to go out of your system

I'm sure this is obvious...  
but I'll say it  
for any of us who struggle with

queerness  
in a traditional culture  
you at some point feel like you *have to*

break

to forge your own identity away  
and then you start to build  
your own chosen family

### **RITA**

A couple of months after my last interview, I received a message from Rita. I had finished my transcription process at this point, and was ready to begin crafting my found poems, but something inside of me insisted that this would be a conversation worth having. Rita is a 36-year-old self-identified first-generation, queer Iranian-American woman who grew up in Atlanta, and is currently living in Los Angeles, California. Having previously earned her Ph.D., Rita presently works in the film industry, where she notes she is usually the only queer person of color in the room. Rita is unapologetically forthright, and she delves in conversation with me as if we have been friends for years. We start talking about family, and her answers are not much different than the answers I have heard before. She loves her immediate family, and always will, but has found new ways of defining family for herself, for the sake of survival. She says that while she speaks to her family at least once a week, she has had to seek out other people to find the support and community that she always felt was missing from her life. Rita contends:

“family is something -- it's like home is wherever I rest my head. I have a similar notion around family. Because, it's too heartbreaking otherwise, because then I have to like stick with a fixed concept of family and then you just get, you know... disappointed. So, I kind of try and build my connections or networks wherever I am and then like just keep good people around, but it in terms of the people that I rely on, those are -- I mean, that's my girlfriend and my dog right now.”

Rita says she grew up culturally void in a sheltered household where she wasn't allowed to watch T.V. Instead, she tells me she spent most of her adolescence reading and doing homework. It wasn't until she went off to college that she began to forge her own identity outside of her familial expectations, though interestingly, she tells me that she “came out” as bisexual to her mom at age sixteen simply because she wanted to be different:

“in school, I didn't really have any friends, and definitely nobody had any crushes on me or anything because I was like a really weird girl. And so, I had a lot of crushes on a lot of boys. I was legitimately boy crazy. And then, as I got older, I was trying to figure out how to be more different, and I think *My So Called Life* had just come on, so I was like, you know what, ‘I'm bisexual.’ I just kind of gave myself the identity even though I didn't really identify with it. Because I wanted to just be different. Like I wanted to be like, ‘you guys cannot be attracted to me and that's fine,



because I'm not even attracted to you' kind of thing. So, that's kind of what I did with that. And then, and then when I was in college, I dated a guy... I actually went on a few dates with people and like made out with a few guys. I had like never been kissed until I was like in college. And I remember going up to my dorm room and exclaiming to like all my friends or people that were around that like kissing was really disgusting and I did not understand why people did it. And everyone was like no it's about meeting the right person it'll happen, blah blah blah. And so, it wasn't until like one drunken night like I started making out with this girl that I kind of had a crush on. And I was like, 'oh this feels really awesome.' And it had never felt awesome to me before that. Like kissing. Just basically -- just kissing had never felt good. And so, then I kind of realized I was gay.”

Rita tells me that she thinks, had she grown up in Iran, she would have probably just lived a straight life. She explains that it's been through exposure to education and seeing groups of gay people where she began to realize that she could lead a non-straight life. Conversely, she discloses that while she could easily have led a straight life, the same could not be said for her partner, also a first-generation queer Iranian-American woman:

“She wouldn't have. She's just always how she is, and I think it's less about her sexuality and more about her gender identity. Not that she identifies as

trans\* or as a man, but like her way of inhabiting woman is so butch, that it's just like... I think she would be violently ill by having sex with a guy, whereas I could do it, it would just be like a thing that I would do. Do you know what I mean?"

Like Hasti's tension of gender performance and sexuality, presentation of self takes precedence in Rita and her partner's divergent experiences.

Rita shares that she and her partner live a relatively heteronormative life, which is what she has always wanted, despite her affinity towards difference. She is aware of this tension; however, as she explains how her perspective has changed over the years, it was a shared desire for normativity that drew her to her now fiancé:

"she wanted the same things as me, you know to have a house and kids... kind of a heteronormative life. Like, we're not... it's so funny, I was trying to do so many different kinds of things when I was younger, and now I'm just like... I can't. I just -- I actually just want something that -- like I'm super in support of people who want to live non-normative lives, and I'm like... I have those people in my life, and that's awesome. I just, for myself -- I actually want a normative life. It's just very non-normative because we're like gay and Iranian."

Once again, we see the friction of conflicting cultures at play in Rita's story. Like many queer Iranian-Americans, Rita has a desire to assimilate to Western cultural values, while

still maintaining a deep-seated awareness of the differences imbued in her queer of color life.

*Rita: "Oh, the Men I Could Have Married..."*

All we want is our parents to be... *proud*  
and happy for us  
because...  
we *know* that they made so many sacrifices  
for us...

and I still feel shame for them  
around the fact that I'm gay  
I think it takes time...  
it takes you a second to figure out your sexuality  
I mean it took me a while  
before I met different people  
and understood different ways of *being* gay  
and different ways of being femme  
and different ways of this...

they haven't gone through *any of that*  
but then...  
I get upset with them  
because they don't accept me  
because it's taken me so long  
to get to a place  
*where I can accept myself*

and, I feel like I am defective  
like I have done something  
**wrong**  
and somehow,  
I am just... grateful  
that I'm included  
in *any* family gathering

that I'm still be allowed to just be there  
to have not lost my place in the family

that nobody's  
killed me...

I'm just grateful that anyone accepts me

and, they feel like they're doing such an honor  
by just tolerating your gayness  
that they don't need to do anything else  
just their tolerance of your sexuality is their,

“thank you for being you”  
Or,  
“congratulations”  
or,  
“well done”

you can't expect anything more from them...  
I think *that's* been the hardest thing for me

It's like no matter what I do  
*REALLY,*  
*no matter what I do...*

I will always not have been perfect  
because of my gayness

I know I will have let  
them  
down

because of that  
it's sad –  
It's a little tragic

but you have to figure out  
how to make the sadness beautiful

because that's the only thing that you can really live in

*(Re)Storying Queer Iranian-American Identity*

As demonstrated above, every story had moments when my interviewees grappled with parts of themselves that are otherwise seen as incongruous. These experiences are not isolated, they are always already in conversation and contradiction. Each story has instances where the tugging of lived experience and theory became intertwined to exude a theory of the flesh (Moraga and Anzaldúa). Each poem reveals degrees of fear, agency, a deep connection to family and culture, and a solid understanding that these contradictions do not make you less queer or less tied to your culture. Each story shows different ways that queer Iranian-Americans experience liminal queer lives, and highlights how they navigate their existences through a kind of “narrative trespass” that gives them space to radically shift long standing suppositions through their stories and lived experiences (Abdi). Through the sharing of their narratives, we see the complicated rupturing of the “coming out” narrative, that so many queer of color scholars have worked so hard to dismantle, “The metaphor of coming out of the closet and the politics of the closet have been central to contemporary western queer experiences” (Chávez, *Queer* 84). Queer Iranian-American narratives simultaneously works against and with master narratives of queerness, but also works toward diminishing the idea that the closet is the sole location for queer liberation. Because as Ross contends:

Ultimately what I want to suggest here is that (White) queer theory and history are beset by what I call ‘claustrophilia,’ a fixation on the closet function as the grounding principle for sexual experience, knowledge, and politics, and that this claustrophilic fixation effectively diminishes and disables the full engagement with potential insights from race theory and class analysis. (162)

The narrations of theories of flesh as told by queer Iranian-Americans are pivotal in the dismantling of our understandings of queer of color identities and the White heterosexual nuclear family. Because, what we see is an echoing of what happens within so many queer intersectional stories, what Muñoz calls, disidentification, or a “third mode of dealing with dominant ideology, one that neither opts to assimilate within such a structure nor strictly opposes it; rather, disidentification is a strategy that works on and against dominant ideology” (*Disidentifications* 11). These stories confuse what has already been written about queerness because they do not and cannot neatly fit into the mold of queer theory or dominant queer ideology. They bring to surface intersectional conversations about nationality, culture, class, and all the other fragments of our lived experiences that allow us to simultaneously assimilate and resist. Stories also work to create space so that our embodied knowledge becomes the only way to accurately account for intersectionality of lived experiences. These narratives exist in ambiguity, uncertainty, and contradiction where our political performances work to uncover an *other* way of living queer life that can survive those inconsistencies (Calafell, *Latina/o*). For queer Iranian-Americans, the goal is to survive, and the act of survival manifests through the beautifully imperfect ways that they/we navigate our family and cultural loyalties, our shame and guilt, and how we are able push back to reclaim agency and to resist.

In the case of queer Iranian-American women, resistance is contradictory, and that is okay. Because... it just has to be. Our conversations are always in connection to one another, our stories are intimately familiar, and I wonder how much of our

experiences will resonate with other queer people of color, who have yet to find themselves in our writings. This sample of people serves as one population, within a much larger conversation about queer MENA identity, where citizenship became a key factor in tellability. So, I wonder too, how many stories of queer MENA bodies we have yet to hear, and what those stories offer to our understanding of intersectional queer identity? What I do know is that these stories give us a glimpse into what it is like for queer Iranian-Americans who exist in contradiction, but continue to relentlessly problematize those same limitations. These queer Iranian-American stories are just one example of how to exist in a liminal space where sexuality, culture, and family work together and serve as the foundation with which our identities and social locations shape the way we exist in the world.

In this chapter, I give space to each of my interviewees to share their unique experiences in their own words and in their own space. I also connect the similarities and disparities of their narratives to highlight the ways in which our stories as queer Iranian-Americans are interconnected. I emphasize the politics of coming out for queer people of color, particularly from a MENA perspective. Further, I explore how theories of the flesh are being created and applied by queer Iranian-Americans. In the following chapter, I will broaden my analysis of the themes that presented themselves through the narratives and found poems you just read, and connect them to relevant research about queer of color identity.

## Chapter Five: Unpacking Visibility and the Politics of Queer Iranian-American

### Identity

*“When we define ourselves, when I define myself, the place in which I am like you and the place in which I am not like you, I'm not excluding you from the joining - I'm broadening the joining” (Lorde 10).*

*“In this country, lesbianism is a poverty – as is being brown, as is being a woman, as is being just plain poor. The danger lies in ranking the oppressions. The danger lies in failing to acknowledge the specificity of the oppression. The danger lies in attempting to deal with oppression purely from a theoretical base. Without an emotional, heartfelt grappling with the source of our own oppression, without naming the enemy within ourselves and outside of us, no authentic, non-hierarchical connection among oppressed groups can take place” (Moraga 52).*

*Who are Queer Iranian-American Women?*

I have learned so much in this past year about what it means to be a first-generation, queer Iranian-American. What I have come to understand through this journey of speaking with other queer Iranian-Americans for the advancement of research on queer people of color, is that our experiences are so radically different than so many queer stories we continue to see showcased in textbooks, peer reviewed journals, and through the media. As queer women with histories tied to the MENA region, (specifically, the Islamic Republic of Iran), our stories challenge the master narrative of queerness, politics, family, cultural divergence, and resistance. Our narratives exude a *theory of the flesh* and become the personification of intersectionality as we navigate what it means to be Iranian, American, variously classed, queer, Muslim, Bahá’i, non-



religious, disabled, and transgender citizens of the United States. Our privileges and oppressions exist synchronously and work to fight back against the history of writings about queer identity in the West that has so far largely ignored and further marginalized the divergent experiences of its MENA and/or Muslim brothers and sisters. As Perez writes, “Queer” needs to interrogate its own investments in sameness” (187). Thus, research about “sexuality, gender and family become critical boundaries for demarcating community values against the juggernaut of social and cultural change” (Weeks 252).

As Eguchi and Washington contend, “The hegemonic forces of power, oppression, and privilege minimize limit and discourage the intersectional potentiality of queerness” (418). Therefore, it is necessary to showcase how the narratives of queer Iranian-Americans, alongside many queer of color stories, produce a *theory of the flesh* born out of necessity. While there are clear similarities between the stories of queer Iranian-Americans and that of other people on the margins, like queer Latinx-Americans and queer African-Americans, the politics of our lived experiences spans two cultural codes that subsist and are contingent on the history of their divergence. So, like Cohen, I ask us to (re)consider an approach toward queer Iranian-American studies that moves us past mere inclusion into the mainstream, toward an “expansive understanding of who and what is queer and is, therefore, rooted in ideas such as deviance and agency and not exception and inclusion” (“Deviance as Resistance” 28). In this way, queer Iranian-American women’s narratives can help us to extend and reassess how queerness operates when we begin to understand it from within the margins. As Calafell asserts, “these

spaces, in their complexity and multiplicity, call us to be accountable to others and to ourselves in marking the workings of power” (“(I)dentities” 7). For queer Iranian-Americans, power is manifested within our performance of queerness and relies on the balance of “authenticity” within our existences that are seemingly marred by two different cultural histories, our parents and our own, that we have all learned to navigate for our/their survival.

In this chapter, I continue to analyze the narratives of first-generation, queer Iranian-Americans through three concurrent themes: How queer Iranian-Americans understand and maintain family and cultural loyalty, how queer Iranian-Americans experience and mitigate feelings of shame and guilt, and how queer Iranian-Americans enact agency through moments of resistance, in spite of and despite family and cultural loyalty, and feelings of shame and guilt. Moreover, while these themes do emerge naturally through (re)articulations of stories that are rooted in similarity, they are also clearly malleable. As stated earlier, clear cut categorization proves awkward and inappropriate, which once again points to the (im)possibilities of navigating queer Iranian-American identities. Thus, I ask that while I have provided thematic breaks for the purposes of research, these themes should be read through the lens of simultaneity as they are always already contingent on one another. In this chapter, I further highlight the power that underscores the stories shared, the history of silence, and the *theories of the flesh* produced through the articulations of their/our intersectional experiences.

Shadee:

*I mean it's such an interesting thing... I think.*

*Because, it's kind of like this... the myth of the Iranian family, right?  
It's like... you have to...on the surface... portray this very  
normative...  
heterosexual...  
family...  
but then, you do whatever you want really want  
when no one is looking.  
But... they're always looking.  
Even when they're not... you know?  
It's just all so fascinating.  
Everyone's kind of doing what they want  
but the labeling is obviously very different.  
And I think that that's one of the most... fascinating aspects  
of this conversation as a whole...  
that closet narrative does not apply to us...  
Because it can't, right?  
It's been in existence for so long, but in such a different way.*

#### *Family and Cultural Loyalty*

While each thematic transcends the many similarities and differences between queer Iranian-Americans, the desire to commit to and demonstrate loyalty to both immediate family and cultural expectancy is apparent within each queer Iranian-American narrative. Though all but one interviewee voluntarily (in the case of Pegah, initially involuntarily) shared their sexuality with their parents and/or communities, the thematic emergence of saving face within the Iranian community for the sake of their/our parents was at the forefront. Because community is such a large part of Iranian culture, queer Iranian-Americans continue to actively account for their/our parents' reputation within that community structure. This is exemplified even within Pegah's story, as she shares that much of her hesitation around sharing her identity with other Iranians was to ensure that her mother would never find out. She tells me that after her mother passed

away, she learned to be more open about her queerness within the larger Iranian and Iranian-American community:

For me it's been a wedge  
since my mom passed away  
because she was my *biggest worry*  
I just didn't want her to know  
about my queerness,  
because she struggled so much with like...  
I just knew that would be something she couldn't  
emotionally and mentally handle

Pegah's story rings true to my own, as much of my own "coming out" narrative was entrenched in my need to preserve my mother's well-being. I remember disengaging in conversations with her to avoid any conversation that may have ended with a discussion about my relationships or my sexuality. So much of my young-adulthood was influenced by my need to protect my mother. My performance of sexual ambiguity was in many ways a reflection of how I wanted to be perceived in both communities, which allowed me to explore my queer identity in such a way that I knew could avoid hurting her. Though, as evidenced throughout the narratives of queer Iranian-American women, this internalization of appearance, face, and cultural/familial loyalty remains a driving force in much of the ways that we perform queerness in everyday life. For example, Goli speaks to the fact that she is constantly aware of how she acts with her wife in public, in part because of how she has become accustomed to perform her sexuality around her parents and family:

I honestly feel like we're around my family and stuff  
so much  
and, we're so used to just being *that way*

around them  
that even at like gay clubs and bars and events  
we're still not like most couples are...  
We're not very touchy feely  
and lovey dovey...  
I think it's because we're just around my family all the time,  
you know?

Goli's story correlates the way she acts in public to the way she has become accustomed to act in front of her family and by relation, the surrounding Iranian community.

Likewise, Hasti explains that she avoids displays of affection around her family and the larger Iranian community, even though she and her Puerto Rican/Jewish partner have been largely accepted within their respective immediate family structures:

my partner and I are very affectionate...  
not that we're like sucking face every time we go anywhere,  
but, we like to hold hands,  
we like to be standing close to each other,  
I like to put my arm around her waist... those types of things.  
But, around my parents, we don't do that.  
*Out of respect.*  
But, around her mom, it's totally fine.  
So, there are those pieces...  
even the less overt forms of affection,  
we kind of don't engage in around my family... or other Iranian people

Hasti's story differs from Goli's only in that for Goli, much of the internalized feelings that stop her from displaying affection toward her partner in public extends even to non-MENA community gatherings.

This tension of comfortability in public spaces is present in many narratives of queer Iranian-American women as they/we learn to navigate how they/we engage in queer life outside of the familial and cultural community. Laleh tells me that much of this

pressure to appear chaste comes from a “rhetoric of pureness” that is reinforced within the Iranian community:

I think there's this... Iranian rhetoric of *pureness*  
that comes up a lot.  
Not just of like, sexual orientation,  
but just in general.  
Like, you have to be a pure, clean, person  
and I think it's a radical act  
to go to a family party and...kiss your partner  
Or, just not even at a family event...  
just to walk the street holding your partner's hand.  
I think if you've been taught that any public display of affection is bad  
or that, not just sex but just any kind of sexuality is bad...  
I just have to remember that it's okay to undo that narrative of purity  
in whatever manifestation

I relate so much to these hesitancies as I find myself actively avoiding public displays of affection and work to remain ambiguous about my sexuality in spaces where I know I will be around other Iranians or Iranian-Americans. While many of these behaviors are expected of Iranian-American women in general, maintaining the outward appearance of the virtuous Iranian-American woman is seen as a crucial performance across the board. For queer Iranian-American women, adjusting to social situations wherein their/our identities might be questioned is based largely on internalized guilt that arises when we feel we have defied familial and cultural expectations. Interestingly, it is Tala, who has yet to share her sexuality with her parents, who is the most open about her sexuality in public. She tells me that one way she performs resistance in her life is to be proud of her identity in way that she can, in some ways, control:

I display it when I'm outside,  
with the girls –

I hold their hands.  
I *kiss* them.  
I take them to Westwood -- the Persian square... Hookah bars...  
I *kiss* them.  
I hold them.  
I *kiss* them  
you know what I mean?  
I'm like,  
I don't give a fuck right now...  
I just want to have fun  
I don't want people to block me.  
I don't know,  
    I think the biggest fear for me  
    is just my parents finding out.  
    *That's it.*

Tala's story exemplifies the dueling cultural codes that are ever-present in the queer Iranian-American narrative, which underscores the navigation of both individualism and collectivism. This is true for Iranian-Americans across the board, regardless of sexuality:

Like many immigrants before them, Iranians in the United States construct a dual identity. This dualism combines a unique mixture that can only be termed Iranian-American, a mixture that is perpetually blended and brewed. Through the process of their diasporic immigration, Iranians absorb, reject, and assimilate specific elements from both Iranian and American cultures into their identity. (Mostofi 682)

Here we see how Tala, the most private about her sexuality within her family, is the most open about her sexuality in public spaces and even around other Iranians.

Demonstratively, queer Iranian-American women find themselves forging alternative ways to engage in intimacy with their/our partners both in private and public spaces due in large part toward a maintenance and simultaneous resistance of appropriateness linked to a tradition of upholding familial and cultural loyalty.

Under these circumstances, it is understood that aberrations of sexual norms (e.g., loss of virginity, homosexuality, transsexuality, etc.) are ostensibly unacceptable within the context of the Iranian family and community. Queer Iranian-American women have internalized the pressures of upholding traditional gender and sexual roles; thus, they perform their queerness in distinctive and unexpected ways. For instance, while each parental reaction varied in severity for Goli, Laleh, Tina, Hasti, and Paz, each was still asked to manage their performances of queerness and either explicitly or implicitly instructed not to share their queer identities with other members of the family and/or the broader Iranian community, at least temporarily. In other words, in one way or another the message of maintaining privacy was reiterated and stressed by the immediate family unit. Much of this internalization around shame and saving face for queer Iranian-Americans and our families is rooted in longstanding histories of presenting ourselves and our families as more impressive than we are. In Persian, this notion of *aberoo*, “the conformity to social prestige,” becomes a driving force in much of the decisions we make for/within our families (Miri n.p.). In each of these stories, we see how power permeates within Iranian identity, culture, and family to affect the way queer Iranian-American identities are performed within the extended family and wider Iranian community. For Goli, who is legally married to her wife, these subtle messages still permeate conversations she has with her mother, though she has learned to understand where her mother is coming from in these interactions:

There’s been a few times where my mom  
has gotten *mad at me*



because I've introduced her as my wife,  
she's says,  
    “why would you tell them that?”  
and I'm like,  
    “because that's what it is.”  
We still argue about it.  
We still talk about things.  
I don't ever expect them to ever be 100%  
    because that's just not how they grew up.  
They don't know any different,  
you can't be mad at them for it

Importantly, this history of cultural silence for the preservation of family and cultural loyalty is not necessarily unique to queer Iranian-Americans, as explained by Yasi, “It doesn't matter if you're gay or not, there's always going to be somebody talking about something about you, like your appearance or your job... even if you're doing well.” This presentation of self and maintenance of *aberoo* stems from the pressures for Iranian-American families to present themselves as more successful than they are, as exemplars of the model minority status that so much of the Iranian-American community has relied on post 9/11 (Mostofi). In the same vein, while some families urge silence from their queer children in regard to the broader Iranian community or their extended families in Iran, much of this can also be linked to the upholding of class standing and an underpinning of retaining social capital. Apparent in each story is that appearance and face are overtly emphasized within queer Iranian-American narratives and are related to feelings of shame and guilt. For instance, one of the most openly queer Iranians (on social media) of those I interviewed, Hasti, explains that she still struggles with her mom's mindset of “why are you being so obvious about it,” adding that this message

probably stems from Iranians wanting to present themselves as “doing way better than they actually are.”

Underscored in these conversations are expectations of cultural silence, or of the maintenance of an Iranian aesthetic, one that is coded in performances of Whiteness, homonormativity, class, and the presentation of perfection. Atlas, a psychologist whose work looks at how sexuality is understood within Arab and Iranian cultures, remarks that:

The shift from certain sexual norms to new ones that are sometimes entirely different is painful and laden with shame and anxiety. In my practice I am a witness to the traumatic aspects of immigration from East to West for first- and second-generation immigrants. The second and third generations are trapped between cultural perceptions, understanding that their parents’ norms might have an impact upon their social status, but at the same time internalizing their parent’s inhibitions and prohibitions. I have met many of these people, especially women (from Iran, Morocco, Syria, Egypt, Yamane [sic], Jordan, and Iraq), in therapy over the years and have learned to recognize the embarrassment we share. In particular, I have begun to delve into and investigate the perception of sexuality in the Arab and Persian worlds. This is an exploration of many of my identities and includes attraction and repulsion, idealization and devaluation, and an investigation that has to do with immigration and its enigmatic influence on all aspects of life, but especially on sexuality. (n.p.)

Laleh contributes this silencing about sexuality to the need for the Iranian family to uphold the appearance of perfection within the Iranian community:

I feel like appearances are so critically important  
in the Iranian culture.  
I mean, to the level of like... even when we were little,  
if we got a scar or a cut,  
my mom would be really quick to put ointment on it... and cover it up  
to make sure that we weren't even marked physically.  
And, I wonder if her not telling her family in Iran about this... is like that one  
saving grace.  
Because, you have this this kind of like insistence on perfection...  
and visible perfection.

It's really curious...  
    we *have to* look perfect,  
    and we can't let anyone know what's happening.  
So, for me the idea of family  
is also connected to this guise of perfection-and-togetherness

Here we see how power manifests itself in the notion of visibility for queer Iranian-American women, particularly in relation to silence. Playing into a larger cultural politics around visibility, maintaining community standing and saving face becomes paramount against the Western pressures to come out of “the closet.” This discourse surrounding visibility and silence is also seen within queer Muslim South African women’s narratives as they demonstrate how they too perform visibility in such a way wherein silence is understood as a resistive act. In both cases, this silence and performance of heteronormativity works to protect them and other members of the family; “The investment in revelation and visibility in many stories means that there is room to explore the potential of protective and nourishing forms of silence” (Baderoon 908). Laleh’s assertion that appearance and face is of utmost importance within Iranian culture and families is shared by many other interviewees, including Goli who describes this maintenance of familial reputation as an intense pressure that is oftentimes difficult or impossible to adhere to. In one way or another, each queer Iranian-American struggles to live their queer lives authentically, while ensuring safety and security for both themselves and their families.

For some, this protection of family loyalty has resulted in a form of compromise between themselves and their/our parents/families. This compromise is about identity

management within the greater Iranian community. For others, there is a clear understanding that it takes time for their/our parents to recognize and accept their/our sexualities, and thus requires patience in hopes for an eventual overall acceptance, which can result in a broader familial support base. Here, patience becomes another common theme in my conversations, particularly in regards to giving their/our parents time to come to understand their/our sexualities. In the same vein, the choice to remain ambiguous about their/our sexualities within the larger Iranian community stems from an internalization of proper gender performance and homophobia coupled with feelings of shame and guilt. Pegah shares that she constantly feels a level of discomfort when she finds herself in MENA populated areas, and attributes those feelings to cultural and familial messages she received when she was younger about sex and sexuality in general. She explains that many of those messages have resulted in deep-rooted internalized homophobia:

It's internalized homophobia,  
but it's also like other things.  
So, PDA in my family was never viewed as a thing you're supposed to do,  
like even when you're with a guy...  
it's something that I'd never been used to doing.  
I will say that over the years,  
I've become more *comfortable* with it... walking around in LA.  
But, I am more conscious of it when I'm in Iranian or Arab areas  
or those restaurants or things like that...  
I wouldn't do anything in those places.  
like... anything  
that would suggest...  
I mean part of it is internalized homophobia,  
but I think the other part is also safety.  
I don't want to face any sort of violent abuse

The fear of rejection is seen as an everyday occurrence when interacting with the Iranian and Iranian-American community, and for many of my interviewees, the trepidation surrounding their sexual identities has led to depression, anxiety, and even attempts of suicide. Hasti confirms that she continues to feel the most anxiety around other Iranians, “I’m definitely still to this day the most afraid of coming out to Iranian people. It’s the last thing new Iranians that I meet learn about me.”

Lastly, prior to coming to terms with their queer identities, three of my participants were previously married to men. Laleh, Tina, and Tala speak at length about the familial and social/cultural pressures that led them to marry men prior to coming to understand their sexualities. Laleh shares the story of her marriage coming to an end and the pressures her parents placed on her to remain married for the sake of the preservation of face for their family. She explains that she felt she needed to stay with her husband in an effort not to hurt her family, but that it was eventually her ex-husband who asked her to explore her newfound feelings for women that led to their eventual separation. Within this exchange we are able to see how each of Laleh’s intersections play a role in the conversation about the dissolution of her marriage:

When I was twenty-three, I was married to a man.  
We were in grad school together  
and then we were together for and eight years,  
married for four.  
I had to tell my parents  
    Before that conversation,  
    I was talking to my mom,  
    and I was feeling very anxious and depressed,  
    I had been self-injuring in one way or another since the third grade --  
    those feelings were coming back.

So, I shared with my mom, you know,  
    “I think I'm attracted to women.”  
It was very interesting,  
she said,  
    “That's okay, I've always known that.”  
That brought up a lot of interesting questions for me...  
She said,  
    “It's okay... Just don't do anything about it.”

In other words, *don't leave your husband*.

So, when I told them, they were really  
**angry and enraged**  
because other than the little stuff  
that *always* comes up in a relationship,  
everything else was fine,  
right? In our relationship.  
So, they were confused.      They were angry.      They refused to talk  
about it, in the backyard...  
Because, what if the neighbors can hear us?

Laleh's story is particularly interesting as it reflects what is evident within each of these women's stories. All three convey that their marriages resulted from a need to adhere to gender/sexual norms as emphasized within their immediate families and through messages from Iranian cultural discourses, and for Laleh the pressure to remain married, despite her queerness, exemplifies how Iranian cultural discourses about gender and sexuality take precedence. Moreover, even within Laleh's conversation with her mother, the notion of face is once again reiterated through their reluctance to speak of her sexuality, even in their own backyard.

In the same vein, Tala and Tina tell me that while they both loved their ex-husbands, their marriages were certainly the result of familial pressures to marry. Tala tells me that it was through self-reflection and speaking with her therapist friends that led

her to better understand how the marriage to her ex-husband was a result of the internalization of cultural and familial messages:

I realized that one of the reasons why I married my ex-husband...  
so, my issue was -- how can I trust my intuition?  
Because I got to the point where I was like,  
I don't trust myself. I don't trust my intuition,  
even with... um, *my sexuality*.  
So, I realized, when I married my ex-husband,  
that my intuition was unconsciously being affected  
by *what my parents wanted*  
that's why I made that decision.  
And, it wasn't that my intuition was wrong,  
and it's not that my intuition is wrong right now about my sexuality...  
I just kept letting my parents, and... psychology affect my intuition of who I am  
and finally, when I was able to surpass that,  
I was like,  
"No, this is who I am."  
I finally started to trust my intuition about myself

Further, Laleh and Tina explain that telling their parents about their sexualities was made slightly easier having been previously married to men, because it proved harder for their parents to try and negate their sexual identities. As Tina bluntly states, "it helps that I was married to a dude." Tala, my only interviewee not to have disclosed her sexuality to her parents, illuminates that her prior marriage has allowed her to more freely explore her sexuality in her private life because of a lack of pressure to *remarry*, "I'm such an idiot, I always introduce the girls that I'm dating to my parents, by the way. But as a friend. Like, I introduced my ex-girlfriend to my parents many times. And they think she's a friend, you know." Because heterosexuality is assumed within Iranian cultural discourses, Tala finds herself able to navigate her sexuality both privately and publicly.

### **Performing Whiteness**

When going through and (re)reading each story and each poem that encapsulated the conversations I had with these queer Iranian-Americans, I also began to question how the performance of Whiteness and in turn, class, might be being used as a tool toward enacting social capital through various interactions. Sekimoto describes performing Whiteness as, “The effort to make [yourself] visible and intelligible reveals the centrality of whiteness in claiming power, recognition, and quite simply, a right to exist socially in the United States” (392). She goes on to explain that for Asian Americans, performing Whiteness is understood through racialized hierarchies shaped by “national origin, ethnic background, citizenship status, and the degree of Americanization” (392). She describes her own cultural modifications through everyday interactions as a means of reclaiming power, space, and agency:

As an inevitable response to this evolving, embodied sense of racialization, my efforts to adapt to American culture entailed the struggle to ‘un-otherize’ myself in front of people I encountered. My cultural adjustment has been about my desire to make myself intelligible in this particular cultural context that is vastly different from my own. (392)

Moreover, while Sekimoto’s experiences help to illuminate how Whiteness operates within communities of color, there are still cultural nuances that differ between her experiences as an Asian-American and those of my interviewees.

Performing Whiteness as a strategy for maintaining or sustaining certain privileges within contexts wherein multiple oppressions occur, complicates much of how queer Iranian-American women are moving through their various intersections in



their/our everyday lives. Alexander describes the inherent performative accomplishment of Whiteness when he explains:

Whiteness has to be acknowledged as something that is performative, something that does something in the world, or at least in the moment of its engagement. It has to be something that is linked with access, the social construction of power, worth and value—that leads to the (dare I say it) practice of privilege. (“Black Skin” 650)

This complicated privileged performance is both desired and resisted based on the contextual conditions queer Iranian-American find ourselves in. Like Sekimoto, performing Whiteness can help to mitigate much of the stereotypical misconceptions about specific cultural locations, but also clearly reinforces the omnipresence of Whiteness, and the compulsion to perform Whiteness in everyday life, especially for people of color. Shome posits that Whiteness is circumstantial:

...whiteness is contextual, and its complexities are best understood through an attention to its various geopolitical locations and their intersections with the interlocking axes of gender, class, sexuality, nation/ality, colonialism, and, today, the politics of transnationalism (although more work needs to occur on this latter category). Whiteness, then, is not a monolithic formation—it is constantly made and remade through its participation in other unequal social relations; it is a nuanced formation that secures its power in different ways through different sites—all of which nonetheless, secures its hegemony in a highly racialized global system. (368)

I began to question whether the privilege of enacting Whiteness for some queer Iranian-Americans serves as strategy used in some ways to protect our families and ourselves. In other words, are queer Iranian-American women traversing power through enacting those same strategies that have so far Otherized us? I know that for many years I too relied on a certain performance of Whiteness as a shield to protect myself from the expectation of

simultaneous cultural rejections. Sekimoto describes this effective performance as

“cultural intelligibility” (393). She goes on to assert:

... cultural adaptation is an embodied struggle; it is a disciplining of the body against the normative habit of my own culture and against the racializing gaze placed on my body. Thus, racialization and cultural adaptation are inseparable. I adapted to perform whiteness in my desire to resist racialization; yet it was through my cultural adaptation that my racial standing ... in this country was solidified. To be Americanized means to be racialized, to be incorporated into the very fabric of racial relations in the United States. (Sekimoto 393)

I continue to echo Moraga’s experiences, “I must reckon with the fact that for most of my life, by virtue of the very fact that I am white-looking, I identified with and aspired toward white values, and that I rode the wave of that Southern Californian privilege as far as conscience would let me” (34). Because of my own familiarities, I began to have several questions, particularly around strategic (though perhaps, unintentional) performances of Whiteness that play a role in queer Iranian-American experiences. More particularly, I question whether the performance of Whiteness intersects with a desire for homonormativity. In other words, are queer Iranian-American women engaging in homonormative behavior? Duggan describes homonormativity as:

a politics that does not contest dominant heteronormative assumptions and institutions — such as marriage, and its call for monogamy and reproduction — but upholds and sustains them while promising the possibility of a demobilized gay constituency and a privatized, depoliticized gay culture anchored in domesticity and consumption. (179)

Accordingly, it is apparent that for many queer Iranian-American women a performance of homonormativity acts as both a strategy of safety, as well as a space where resistance can emerge through everyday interaction.

Within each narrative, Whiteness is enacted in ways that showcase its use as a tool to alleviate many of the complexities associated with queer Iranian-American identities. Particularly, as queer Iranian-American women articulate the weight of navigating sexual identity, nationality, gender, class, ability, race-ethnicity, and family. All of my interviewees, in one way or another enacted Whiteness as a strategy. For some, like Yasi, Tina, Squid, Tala, Whiteness is enacted through choice of partner (past or present), physically placing themselves next and in relation to a White body. Perhaps this strategy works to mitigate the racialization of their own queer identities. For example, of those I interviewed Goli, Laleh, Tina, Squid, Hasti are each in relationships with non-MENA, cis-women. Moreover, while not currently in a relationship, Yasi also highlights the tendency for queer Iranian-American women to date non-Iranian women, “I mean I don't know too many people, at least stateside where like it's two Persian women together. It's like a Persian girl and some other race. White, usually.” Even Rita, who is currently in a relationship with a queer Iranian-American woman notes that prior to her fiancé, she had never been in a relationship with another Iranian. In fact, Rita says that when she dated non-Iranians her family reacted more positively because there was less pressure to adhere to the notion of proper Iranian womanhood for both herself and her partners:

I think my dad almost *prefers* to have a partner of mine who is *not* Iranian.  
Because, he's been cordial to everyone else,  
but, with my current partner... he *really* hates her.  
And it's... like he has... from the beginning.  
I think part of it is because she is Iranian,

and he... *expects* her to be... a certain kind of way...  
and she is not.  
She's crass and rude and she's like... butch.  
But also, she comes from a matriarchal family...  
she is not *mazloom* [innocent]  
in the slightest.  
And so, my dad hates that... he just *hates* that,  
I can't even tell you *how much* it upsets him.  
And so, it's that combination of misogyny and internalized...  
I don't know...  
is it racism when you apply a certain kind of misogyny  
to women of your specific race?

Conversely, Pegah explains that when she dates women, she tends to date Arab or Arab-Americans because of the cultural similarities that make it somewhat easier to explain her cautiousness when disclosing her sexual identity within MENA populated areas.

We also see how Whiteness is enacted through an assumptive White and heterosexual passing. Warren explains that Whiteness is the expression of privilege through appearance, and we see this personified through Squid's experience passing as White, cis male (185-186). Similarly, Calafell writes of her recognition of the unearned privileges she carries by virtue of her white skin and ambiguous last name, "In talking about my Whiteness and the pain of misrecognition I want to be clear in stating that I understand the unearned privileges that come along with my white skin" (Calafell and Moreman 408). Whether intentional or not, Whiteness as discourse and performance becomes almost inseparable from our queer embodiments. This corresponds with Moreman and McIntosh's work that established that for Latina drag queens, Whiteness became undeniably embedded within many of their performances. For Iranian-Americans, enacting Whiteness is a particularly complicated endeavor with connections

to a Western Imperialist history. According to U.S. census, Iranians are considered White/Caucasian, and some Iranian-Americans regard this classification as a privilege (this argument is largely paired with class), while others actively resist it (Krogstad). In many ways, Whiteness strategies have been used as one way that first-generation Iranian-Americans have been able to mitigate much of the racist and religious discrimination experienced by Iranians or Arabs in the U.S., post 9/11.

These conversations bring Hasti's question discussed in the previous chapter, back to the forefront of the conversation, how can a person feel so strongly connected to a culture that continues to face racial and religious discrimination, that simultaneously seemingly rejects their queer identities? While I still don't know how to accurately answer this question (though I doubt there even is an answer that would suffice), what is clear in the case of queer Iranian-Americans is that this navigation of culture, family, and queer identity from both the Iranian and U.S. American perspective is challenging, exhausting, and often, (im)possible. As the eldest interviewed, Paz did little to dispel the idea that this complication is only just occurring, as she tells me that she continues to feel the impact of her parents reactions as she still harbors deep-seated feelings of guilt and shame, particularly within the Iranian and Iranian-American communities. These cultural reverberations once again highlight the incompatibility of the Western and Euro-centric "closet" narrative which at its surface suggests that once you reveal your sexual orientation, you move on... it gets better; either your parents accept you or they don't. For queer Iranian-American women, who must negotiate multiple identities

simultaneously, this becomes a problematic comparative, because as Ross contends, “This narrative of progress carries the residue, and occasionally the outright intention, borne with evolutionary notions of the uneven development of the races from primitive darkness to civilized enlightenment” (163). Similarly, McCune, writes of queer African-American men who live on the down low and in turn work to actively resist “the closet” narrative, “These men challenge this overdetermination of the closet as a container of shame, pain, discomfort, and anxiety offering a counternarrative of discretion as a tactic of survival” (299).

Means and Jaeger critique the closet for its assumptive liberation:

This philosophy of liberation does not recognize or understand the implications of the “closet” for individuals of color who have to navigate racism, individuals with limited income who may risk financial security for coming out, and individuals in parts of the world who could face death for claiming their LGB identities. (48)

For queer Iranian-Americans, “the closet” seems to be understood as a performance in and of itself, demonstrated by the way we move across each side of the spectrum of *outness*. Most of the stories I heard throughout this process did indeed continue to use “the closet” as a metaphor to explain their sexual journeys. In this way, we see how U.S. American discourse does move throughout our dualistic upbringings. For some, articulations of the “the closet” are being used as a language tool that can explain their/our lived experiences. Language here, serves as a form of reclaiming agency wherein they/we can choose when and with whom to share their/our identities. For others, “the closet” works to further marginalize our bodies within both community

structures. The metaphor doesn't always work, however, because queer Iranian-American women often live with one foot in and out of "the closet," due in large part to a negotiation of the contentious history between Iran and the U.S. In this way "the closet" works to further emphasize a false sense of backwardness between the East and the West, by pointing out the inconsistencies between our lived existences.

What differentiates queer Iranian-American narratives from our Iranian queer counterparts, are both obvious questions of legality, and access to a language (albeit, an often problematic one) to identity ourselves within public and private spaces. Likened to Muñoz's *disidentification*, or "a survival strategy that works within and outside the dominant sphere simultaneously" (5), I argue that queer Iranian-American women are living their/our lives in (parentheses), because they/we are both a part of the narrative, but also distinct in the story they/we are telling. From Greek origins, parenthesis literally means 'to put beside,' metaphorically placing our stories beside the master narrative; but simultaneously existing both within and as a parts of different, yet similar stories ("Parenthesis"). For queer Iranian-American women, our ability to share our sexualities in both public and private life is contingent upon the identity vectors that make up our individual lived experiences within the collective sphere, and almost always require further explanation. We survive in our contradiction, in our excess, and in our difference (Willink). Furthermore, within research, the media, and even our communities, we are almost always made to feel invisible. (We move through the world within) and outside the boundaries – cultural, national, familial, or otherwise - that have kept us from sharing

our stories, whether those boundaries are cultural, national, familial, or otherwise. Thus, I argue it is in the metaphor of parentheses wherein we might be able to tell our own intersectional stories and perform our queer identities in our own vernaculars. It is here, where we may begin to tell our stories, to *trespass* (Abdi).

As Afary writes, queer sex and sexuality are not new practices within Iran and the MENA region. However, open conversations about queer sex and sexuality remain sparse in Iranian current cultural and religious discourse. This conversation however, must be contextualized within the larger historical framework of imperialism and contention between the U.S. and Iran wherein Western forces have worked to gain control of the region, its resources, and its right to self-determination. Without this contextualization, it is easy to continue to read the MENA region, particularly Iran, as “backwards” or the antithesis to Western notions of modernity. However, we must address how imperialism has been a driving force in the way queer identity is and has been understood within Iranian contexts, which in many ways have been reactionary to what the West has determined to be right or just. An important consideration to make here is how many of the actions and reactions by Iran and the MENA region are due in large part to a history of Western social intervention and the coding of queerness within the West which does not account for the ways in which the West marks all other ways of thinking about queerness as “uncivilized.”

Therefore, it is imperative to point out that within these findings, that each story exists somewhere in-between these two conversations, and in some ways, and for many



of us, the choice exists in whether we want to name our sexualities for the world. For some the safest place to be, both within the family and within the community, is to be both simultaneously in and outside of it. Despite these expectations, this tension has led many queer Iranian-Americans to lead double lives, or to manage their sexualities in public, as a means of maintaining support as well as upholding familial and cultural loyalty.

### *Feelings of Shame and Guilt*

Shadee:

*I think a lot of my managing has to with my mom  
and the way that... **I think...** that she is managing.  
Which is frustrating.*

*I've had too... I've taken on a lot of that...                      the Persian guilt.*

*But, I'm not mad at her...*

*because,*

*it's such a coming out for them, too.*

*And a re-understanding of identity for them, too.*

*and that's why I think it's so weird*

*She's just...*

*growing,*

*and learning,*

*I'm proud of her for doing that.*

*And one of my biggest fears is...*

*presenting my mom in way that makes her like any less of a mom....*

*So the way that she feels guilty about it, I take that on too.*

*I don't want her to be perceived any differently, because she's a great mom.*

*So that's one of the things that's been really hard for me,*

*I'm always like, how do I put my own stuff on the back burner so she doesn't feel like she  
did something wrong*

*So, obviously, there are times that are painful and hard for me*

*Like, "okay, here we go again"*

*...you know.*

*But, simultaneously,*

*I'm like,*

*"I'm so proud of you for going to therapy  
    and for talking it out, and for still being here."*

One of the most salient themes to emerge from my conversations is that the harboring of feelings of shame and guilt is directly related to the expectation of maintaining familial and cultural loyalty. This theme is consistent with previous research that has looked at the psychological effects of ‘homosexuality’ for queer Iranians in Iran wherein results showed a higher score for feelings of defectiveness/shame for queer Iranians vs. heterosexual counterparts:

homosexual individuals may experience feelings of shame and defectiveness because of their sexual orientation. Homosexuality is an important and inseparable part of their identity, and is generally not accepted by others. In addition, disregarding traditional rituals toward femininity and especially masculinity could activate the shame and defectiveness. (Nematy et al. 370)

Moreover, the results of the study also show that queer Iranians have a heightened need for validation and acceptance and “always carry feelings of guilt toward their own families” (Nematy et al. 370). Here we see the similarities of feelings of shame and guilt for Iranians in Iran and queer Iranian-Americans, albeit the consequences of our identities are vastly different. Thus, how we understand the Western conceptualization of “the closet” gets complicated for the children of immigrants from countries where homosexuality is seemingly non-existent or legally punishable.

For queer Iranian-Americans, many of these feelings of shame and guilt stem from acknowledging their/our parents’ sacrifices as immigrants or refugees having grown up understanding sexuality in alternative ways. In this way, sexuality is seen within these conversations and the lived experiences of queer Iranian-Americans as bringing shame to the family and by virtue dishonoring the sacrifices of their/our parents. Once again, these

internalizations have led each participant, and myself, to lead strategic double-lives or to manage our sexual identities within different environments. Even though many are noticeably open about their sexualities within their own social circles, including Goli, Laleh, Yasi, Tina, Squid, Hasti, Paz, Rita, and myself, many explain that they have learned to exist between two worlds, constantly negotiating deep-seated feelings of shame and guilt which have resulted in their/our strategic familial and communal disclosures.

Shame and guilt are present in some way or another in all our stories, though queer Iranian-American women continue to disrupt the master narrative of queerness by defining and choosing when and which each intersection of their/our identity is shared. Importantly, dominant theorizations of queerness enact an essentializing anti-identity politic, which works to actively re-center White as the normative marker of queerness. For queer Iranian-American women, queerness is enacted differently, through a performance of a double-life that for many becomes a mode of self-preservation that acts as another fissure from normative articulations of “the closet.” Though again, almost all of the queer Iranian-Americans I spoke to expressed feelings of shame about their sexuality within the Iranian community as a whole. In this way, queerness is articulated through feelings of failure in some aspect of what it means to be a “successful” Iranian, and by virtue allows for questioning about the success of their/our upbringing by their/our Iranian parents. As Nematy et al., contend, queer Iranians “have a high sense of responsibility toward their parents and, to compensate for their guilt feelings and make

their parents happy, they may self-sacrifice” (370). For those who are more public about their sexual identities, like Paz, the feelings of failure and disloyalty remain steadfast as they/we continue to feel as though they/we have betrayed the immediate family and the larger Iranian community as a whole.

For queer Iranian-American women, the pressure to live up to the gendered expectations of our parents and the Iranian community are ever-present and taxing. The burden of coming to understand your own sexuality coupled with giving Iranian parents room to process becomes an area wherein the master narrative of queerness is once again disrupted. Similarly, E. Patrick Johnson’s collection of Black gay men’s narratives further illustrates the need for queer individuals of color to maintain their connection to traditional familial structures as a cultural lifeline (Johnson, *Sweet Tea*). Unlike the individualist notion of self-fulfillment as articulated by mainstream queer discourse, the collectivist orientation present in Iranian cultural discourse makes it nearly impossible to separate oneself from feelings of guilt and shame reverberated throughout the immediate family. However, family studies and family communication studies have also alluded to the performance of heterosexuality or the negotiation of identity as a means of protecting themselves and their identities within the family:

in this family system, I too was complicit in establishing and maintaining the appearance of heterosexuality, though I felt as though I did not have much of a choice to live, or identify, otherwise; there were too many risks with identifying as queer, some of which I experienced after coming out to my relatives. (Berry and Adams 56-57)

Oswald refers to these strategies as intentionality, or:

the strategies used by gay and lesbian people and their heterosexual loved ones to create and sustain a sense of family within a societal context that stigmatizes homosexuality and fails to provide social or legal recognition for a variety of family network relationships. Intentionality includes choosing kin, managing disclosure, building community, ritualizing, and legalizing. (375)

Though what becomes complicated here is negotiation of two different cultural codes, neither of which is considered by my interviewees or myself to be the right or proper cultural code to uphold. As Mostofi contends, Iranian-Americans in general work tirelessly to uphold “a uniquely Iranian compartmentalization of Western values, incorporating U.S. civic society and individualism in the public sphere while perpetuating Iranian diasporic identity in the private sphere” (695). As such, we have each created and live within a queer hybrid space, one that reflects Anzaldúa’s borderlands, wherein we navigate, move through, and exist betwixt and between worlds, rules, mores, and expectations. Existing within a queer space, we too embody the “new *mestiza*,” where we live in constant contradiction (Anzaldúa). Queer Iranian-American women’s narratives echo Anzaldúa’s description of her *mestiza* consciousness:

As a *mestiza* I have no country, my homeland cast me out; yet all countries are mine because I am every woman's sister or potential lover. (As a lesbian I have no race, my own people disclaim me; but I am all races because there is the queer of me in all races.) I am cultureless because, as a feminist, I challenge the collective cultural/religious male-derived beliefs of Indo-Hispanics and Anglos; yet I am cultured because I am participating in the creation of yet another culture, a new story to explain the world and our participation in it, a new value system with images and symbols that connect us each other and to the planet. *Soy un amasamiento*, I am an act of kneading, of uniting and joining that not only has produced both a creature of darkness and a creature of light, but also a creature that questions the definitions of light and dark and gives them new meanings. (102-103)

Although Anzaldúa's writing is derived from a very specific political, historical and context, which differs from queer Iranian-American experiences, scholars of color and queer scholars have used Anzaldúa's work to connect how communities of color exist within multiple discursive spaces. In the same vein, I have extended (without conflation) Anzaldúa's work to apply to the Iranian-American narrative to broaden our understandings of queer of color communication.

We see queer Iranian-Americans turning to career success and/or education as a means of "making up for" the aspects of our identities that may have brought that shame to our family unit. Like LeMaster:

higher education has served as an assemblage for reframing and understanding gender, race, class, sexuality, (trans) nationalism, and religion in my life. I find that my choice to pursue higher education allows and constrains my bodily expressions and inevitably serves as a contradictory locus that is informed by the various tensions that arise from my multiraciality. (54)

Rita shares a conversation she had with her friend, another queer Iranian-American woman, who asked for advice about how to tell her father. Rita, fully aware of the tensions that exist between queerness and Iranian-American identity, tells me that she asked her friend what the ideal reaction from her father would be, and that her friend's reaction has stuck with her as a reflection of what she thinks all queer Iranian-Americans want to ultimately hear from their families:

the thing that she ended up saying,  
which is the same thing  
that I think *so many of us* want to hear is,  
"I love you, I'm sorry that I did this

and that that was so hard for you.  
I'm sorry that I wasn't able to be there for you in these ways.  
I'm sorry it took me a second to be able to understand this about you.  
I completely accept you.  
I'm so impressed with you and *everything* that you've accomplished.  
I accept who you are.  
    And how you are.  
        And I just want you to be happy.”

Rita's consideration of her friend's ideal familial reaction reflects the desire for approval despite the shame and guilt that have long infiltrated our senses of self and the way we have learned to understand and perform our queerness. I notice how she thinks back to this story and I feel the tears build in my eyes as I listen. That's all I have ever wanted to hear, too. That's it. "I love you, you're exceptional, and I want you to be happy." In so many ways, my mother has learned to convey this message to me, and still, I see her struggle with her own guilt and shame surrounding my identity. I have taken those feelings and added them to my own and in turn, have felt the weight of both of our feelings on my back. It is clear that the guilt of our parents' sacrifices is nestled deep within our narratives, our *theories of the flesh*, as we continue to navigate our own identities as subjective beings within the simultaneity of dueling cultural codes that remind us that our queer stories are not lived in isolation, but in conversation.

### *Enacting Agency and Resistance*

What is clear throughout our complex narratives is that within the simultaneity of our lived experiences, queer Iranian-Americans are constantly resisting expectations from both American and Iranian culture. We are performing queer in such a way that cannot necessarily conform to Western imperialist expectations of queer identity. While silence

is sometimes understood as cowardice, as evidenced through Tala's narrative, it is also seen as a strategic form of self-preservation, performing the "social transcript" in an effort to reclaim power for the sake of self-empowerment (Scott 2). Scott writes, "With rare, but significant, exceptions the public performance of the subordinate will, out of prudence, fear, and the desire to curry favor, be shaped to appeal to the expectations of the powerful" (2). This performance is underscored within all of our queer Iranian-American stories. We see how silence, as well as following and performing heteronormative public transcripts, can be seen as a resistive act for queer Iranian-American women performing their/our sexualities and gender identities. Here we see how performances of our identities can act as reclamations of agency. Calafell writes of a similar divergent performance through a retelling of her then husband, Mohamed's, performance of *Americanness* during an interview with immigration that would determine his citizenship status ("Performing the Responsible Sponsor"). In this piece Calafell writes of her desire to step in and to give the immigration officer a piece of her mind, and in turn describes her need to step back to understand how Mohamed's performance of *American*, was in itself, an act of empowerment and resistance ("Performing the Responsible Sponsor"). Thus, we can see how this labor of identity navigation complicates our queer lives, and proves once again that defining one way to exist is both harmful and inconsiderate of the intersectional ways queerness is embodied by people of color. More importantly though, it demonstrates how resistance is performed differently for queer Iranian-American women.



Moreover, highlighted in each story and poem are (re)articulations of strategic performances of queerness, both visible and silent, all of which are explicitly enacted for the preservation of familial face and status and the maintenance of “traditional” Iranian values. Maintaining the foundational familial structure that is “extended, patrilineal, patrilocal, patriarchal, endogamous, and occasionally polygynous” is expected of Iranian-American women (Moghadam 144). In many ways, queer Iranian-Americans employ disidentification as a means of reclaiming agency and resisting many of the longstanding notions of what it means to be both queer and Iranian-American women. As Rita explains, much of this negotiation has to do with letting go of the notion to uphold “normal” lives. Though, she expresses how her desire is to adhere to an alternative heteronormative script with her partner, including gender presentation, the desire to have and bear children, and their performance of family, she has had to learn to create a space where normalcy is redefined through the lens of queerness:

I mean,  
it's hard because  
I think partially when you're gay,  
you have to liberate yourself from these ideas  
that you had, right?  
Of like what a... 'normal life' is.  
You have to question what normalcy is  
and you think about heteronormativity...  
but when you start to think about those things...  
especially when you think about intersections  
    as a woman,  
    as a woman of color,  
    as a Muslim,  
    as an immigrant,  
you start to think about how they're all also  
    connected-to-each-other.

So, I feel like I am *more attuned*  
 to racism  
 then maybe another Iranian who is straight would be.  
 ...Because *I'm gay*.  
 I'm more attuned to  
     racism,  
     homophobia,  
     classism,  
     ableism,  
     transphobia...  
     all those things...  
 even though they're not *my* struggles.  
 I'm very *very* aware that until black gay women are free,  
*none of us* are           free.  
 I can imagine that it would be so uncomfortable  
 to figure out how to navigate...  
     like you can't date somebody that's from this class,  
     you can't date somebody who's from this education,  
     you can't date somebody from this race...  
 because, you're actively *training yourself*...  
 every fiber of your future  
 is dependent upon you training yourself to think  
 in *more complex ways than that*  
 and, so...  
     in order to think in complex ways than that,  
     you have to also *feel* in a more complex way.  
     And when you *feel* in a more complex way,  
     you can *see* in a more complex way,  
     but then you also desire more complexity...  
     And then that complex desire is -- that's not something  
     you can control.  
     You can train it.  
     I really believe that you can  
         discipline   and   train   your   desire,  
     but you cannot put (reins around it.)

Rita's narrative exhibits how disidentification is enacted through the ambiguous performance of queerness and Iranian-ness that complicates both identity vectors in such a way as to foster resistance and agency for queer Iranian-Americans. Rita's performance

of ambiguity is like Calafell's theorization of ambiguity in her analysis of Ricky Martin (*Latina/o Communication*). Martin's performance of racial and sexual ambiguity through the 1999-2000's signified a resistive strategy wherein he was able to move through the constraints of his racial and sexualized identities, "Embracing *mestizaje*, and specifically whiteness, as a cloak of ambiguity" (*Latina/o Communication* 95).

For example, we can see that Paz has held onto many of the cultural and familial messages she received in her 20s which have instilled feelings of guilt and shame throughout her life, despite a history of her personal successes. More than once Paz brings up how feelings of shame and guilt have permeated her own sense of self. For Paz, it seems that in spite of attempts to distance herself from her family and cultural loyalty, her family and the perception of her family remains a guiding force in her life and ultimately the decisions she makes. Despite the sadness in her voice, Paz story is rooted in resolve and resolution. She tells me that while she has inarguably held onto many of the negative messages she has received about sexuality, she has also come to terms with the fact that no Iranian child of the diaspora will ever really live up to the idealistic expectations of family and culture, and that for her, coming to terms with that has been a saving grace. Like an older sister, or voice of reason, she tells me that I will eventually come to this realization too, and shares with me the advice she would give herself if she could go back in time, in hopes that it can help me too:

there is no beginning and end to any journey...  
It's tough.  
I felt *so* guilty  
I felt like I c r u s h e d my parents,

I felt like they did all this stuff,  
they sacrificed so much for us...  
but, if I could go back and tell my younger self like,  
    “hey, whether you do things to please them or not,  
    your parents are going through their own journey.  
    And the fact that your parent, my parents,  
    put so much expectation on their children to make *them* happy  
    is their own very misguided spiritual learning path.”

How do I put this?

It's actually not healthy that so many Iranian parents  
project their sense of self-worth  
and accomplishment  
on how their children turn out.

They're setting themselves for deep disappointment.

My mom -- now that my mom is 70 and she can see how everyone's children  
turned out,

now she says things to me,

    “I wish I didn't care so much  
    when I was a little younger  
    what the other women  
    and their families thought about *our* family.”

Because now that time has passed  
all those people have grown up,  
all those children are in their 30s and 40s,  
and she sees everything.

    There's drug abuse here,  
    this person already had 3 divorces,  
    this person's child came out disabled,  
    this person got cancer

None of these utopian Iranian parent dreams  
of having these *PERFECT* children  
turn out that way.

And the sooner these parents  
who have to go through their own journey realize,

    “Oh, it doesn't really matter what  
    bucket list of accomplishments of my daughter  
    I can announce to my relatives and friends.  
    That's not really what I should be trying to find  
    *my* sense of power as a woman  
    and as a parent.”

The sooner they can realize,  
they're setting themselves up

for a lot of disappointment

For Paz, resistance doesn't look like a full-on disengagement, but rather, a redefining of her own self amid an understanding that she could have never fulfilled the idealistic notion of perfection set forth by her parents, even had she not been queer. Paz's story reflects a kind of forgiveness for "disappointing" her parents, by coming to terms with the fact that while she may continue to carry the cultural and familial messages on her back, she has also learned how to make sense of them, for the sake of self-empowerment.

Appearance and passing also underscore much of the resistive strategies that take place in the Iranian-American narrative. Strategic passing is a practice common to Middle Eastern individuals post 9/11, especially. Marvasti notes that individual presentation works as a strategy of resistance wherein his participants "manipulated their appearance" to pass as non-MENA (540). Calafell suggests that racial passing occurs when, "...the person manipulates the body through movement, gesture, voice, and appearance in order to communicate an/other identity" (*Latina/o Communication* 89). Though I cannot help but reframe Calafell's question of dress here when she asks, "How does one dress for an interview to establish ... legitimacy?" ("Performing the Responsible Sponsor" 79). Clearly, for queer Iranian-Americans, appearance and passing can become a site of strategic resistance. Yasi, Hasti, Tala, and myself (though I am sure most would argue my leanings toward femme presentation), it is through an androgynous presentation-of-self wherein we are able to disrupt many of the expectations of femininity for Iranian-American women. For Squid, his pre-transition performance of hyper

masculinity more explicitly challenged assumptions about femininity in such a way that left little room for refutation of his lesbian identity. Conversely, Goli, Laleh, Pegah, Tina, Paz, Rita, (and possibly/probably myself) utilize their (our) femme presentations to both “pass” in everyday Iranian social settings. Laleh describes how appearance has been a driving force in how she has learned to navigate her own aesthetic to help mitigate how her family has come to understand queerness:

I think femme appearance is a lot more safe  
for my Iranian family.  
There's also this whole other  
problematic conversation  
around this *level of expected* –  
I feel like in queer communities there's this insistence that the –  
femme woman  
is there to listen to your problems and            take care of you            and nurture  
you.  
And for whatever reason,  
I think for *my* mom at least...  
that aligns fairly neatly with what  
an Iranian woman must do, also.  
So, that idea is very safe.  
My dad in the beginning was looking at some Facebook pictures,  
and he's like,  
          “your friends look gay,  
          but you don't.”  
And I was like,  
          “But baba, what does looking gay mean?  
          What does it mean?”  
So, I've had these very interesting conversations with them,  
but they're -- I mean, both of them came from a very Muslim background.  
So, keeping all of that into consideration  
they've just grown outrageously

Laleh contributes femme presentation with the idea of safety as many of the notions around womanhood within Iranian cultural discourses rely on the performance of

femininity. For Laleh, that safety is communicated through her aesthetic is reinforced by her father's comments about her passing as straight. Moreover, the way in which Laleh challenges her father's assumption that she doesn't "look gay," moves her toward a reclamation of agency within her immediate family structure, which allows her to confront her parents' assumptions about what queerness looks like. Laleh's story demonstrates another way that queerness can be performed, which moves away from Western configurations of what queerness is "supposed" to look like. Furthermore, it showcases how we can begin to engage in these conversations within our family units. Laleh's story highlights the ways that passing and femininity can be used to strategically withhold sharing their/our sexualities within the Iranian community, as queer sexuality is rarely if ever assumed. Though as, Hudak and Giammattei assert, even within the realm of psychology, conversations about family and marriage continue to utilize heteronormative discourses in reference to family and marriage; "This silence around heterosexuality maintains it as the default position, a position of dominance and superiority" (106). Moreover, Goli, Laleh, Tina, and Rita are also all in relationships with "butch" cis women, which might also serve to (sub)consciously adhere to heteronormative norms that works to both resist and reify Iranian cultural scripts. Squid too, errs on the side of traditional heteronormative gender roles as he tends to only date femme women, which in turn upholds the outward appearance of heteronormativity.

In the same way that Laleh speaks to performing femininity as a safety, silence is also being used as a protective measure, "What is silenced or left unsaid is of tremendous

consequence” (Hudak and Giammattei 106). Tala remarks, sexuality in general is something not really spoken about within Iranian communities, “in general in Iranian communities is kind of like invisible.” So, those who have the privilege to pass as heterosexual within the Iranian community continue to carefully facilitate when, where, and with whom they feel comfortable sharing their queer identities. Moreover, if we are to understand queer Iranian-American identity in the context of coming out in *any* way, we must also remember that for almost all queer people, “Out-ness is not a one-time affair, but is instead contingent upon relationship” (Adams 62). This strategic silence is used as a means of ensuring safety for many queer Iranian-Americans, which directly contradicts much of how U.S. American queer discourse conflates visibility with power. In this way, strategic silence gives queer Iranian-American women access to move through the world with a sense of agency, where our power comes through choice. As Atlas notes:

... there is much shame around sexuality. In that sense the gap between cultures is a black hole, capturing much of what we don't talk about: the horror, the shame, the confusion. It is there, in that place where there is no one agreed upon language, that we meet silences, and these silences belong to all of us, patients and analysts, Easterners and Westerners, men and women. (114)

Thus, queer Iranian-American narratives demonstratively symbolize the way choice becomes a form of resistance for queer people of color. Unlike canonical queer stories, queer Iranian-American women are using silence to empower, thus challenging the way “the closet” has long been used to demonstrate liberation. Though each of us, with the exception of Tala, is open about our sexualities with our immediate families, it is evident



that our queer identities are navigated through a careful articulation of our considered appearances, citizenship privileges, and through the cautious negotiation of the disidentifications we embody to make sense of and survive two clashing cultural worlds, concurrently.

For most, including Goli, Laleh, Yasi, Squid, Tina, Hasti, Pegah, Paz, Rita, and myself, telling our families worked as a form of resistance. Each of us at one point or another, felt as though we were the only queer Iranians in existence, and perhaps due to this isolation, felt inclined to share our sexual identities with our families. Though, as demonstrated through many of the narratives shared, this feeling of isolation, of being the only one, has led us to form community outside of our familial and cultural spaces. But as Yasi mentions, even within our queer families, we are usually still the only person of Middle Eastern descent; “even in my queer friend group, I was still the only Persian one.” Thus, while we each negotiate our visibilities in different ways, the way we perform queerness in our everyday lives is contingent on feelings of safety, the negotiation of cultural and familial loyalty, and the understanding that our parents need space to grow alongside us.

We also see that this type of resistance and visibility is gaining traction within the U.S. media, as queer Iranian-Americans are beginning to write our stories for the world to see. In 2011, Maryam Kesharvarz released her poignant and relevant film, *Circumstance*, set in Iran (shot in Lebanon) about a wealthy Iranian teenager who falls in love her orphaned female best friend. This film received critical acclaim in the West,

scoring a fresh 85% on the film review website, Rotten Tomatoes. However, the film did not go without criticism, as Iranian writers were quick to point out conceptual misrepresentations, the film's exoticization of the East, and its portrayal of an image of Iranian youths wherein "freedom is reduced to 'sex'" (Mouri). Rao writes however, of the significance of this queer text wherein we are able to see on screen, "the epitome of yet another impossible queer life" (210). Rao also writes of the interconnectivity between family and state for Iranians and Iranian-Americans by describing the portrayal of "home" within *Circumstance*, "family is initially a refuge from the claustrophobia of nation and religion until it becomes infiltrated by the latter" (210). In his keynote, Rao compares *Circumstance* to a film featuring an Iranian transgender protagonist, *Facing Mirrors*. In his critique, Rao underscores perhaps the entire point of a project like this dissertation, when he calls out the tendency for feminists and those engaged in queer politics to approach all queer identity as singular. He writes:

Undoubtedly, the contrasting locations of the protagonists of these films in relation to state, religion and capitalism reflect differences in the positionalities and sensibilities of the filmmakers themselves, one of whom (Azarbayjani) works in Iran, and the other (Keshavarz) in the US Iranian diaspora which has long had an embattled relationship with post-revolutionary Iran. Yet the differences also attest to the distinct life prospects of different queer subjectivities even within a single politico-legal regime. Even as it negotiates its difficult relationship with feminism, a queer politics simply cannot overlook the reality that all queers are not the same. (Rao 210)

Similarly, in 2015, Desiree Akhavan wrote and directed her own movie about a bisexual Iranian-American woman, Shirin, living in Brooklyn, New York. The ironically titled *Appropriate Behavior*, received a 96% on Rotten Tomatoes, and was widely celebrated

within independent film circles. Akhavan's film showcased her relationship with her family and her White female partner who had trouble understanding why Shirin wasn't "out" to her family. Akhavan's film was one that gave an intimate glance into the particularities of queer Iranian-American women navigating their dueling cultural identities and their families alongside their sexualities.

What is evident within both personal narratives and in recent film depictions, is that for queer Iranian-American women, controlling where and when we are open about our sexualities allows us to move throughout life in such a way that challenges much of the assumptions surrounding visibility. In each of our stories (with the exception of Tala), we asked for our parents to understand that while they may not be familiar with the complexities of living a queer Iranian-American life, that they begin to move through the world alongside us. In this way, queer Iranian-American women are working to remake culture within the familial unit by asking our parents and our siblings to shift their expectations of what they assumed our lives to be. While it is important to remember how privilege is associated with tellability, our ability to tell our parents and siblings has in many ways allowed us to live our lives both visibly and invisibly. And that negotiation is empowering.

For example, in some cases it took a temporary distancing of themselves from their immediate families and the Iranian community to come to an understanding of their own position within the broader familial and cultural structure. For Rita, this distancing

became a way to challenge her family's complacency that has manifested into a kind of tolerance about her queerness, which Rita pushes back against:

I think  
my sisters think *that they are allies*  
to gay and lesbian people  
because their sister is gay,  
but what I had to tell both of them was,  
    “you guys just being cool with me,  
    doesn't make you allies of the GLBT community.  
    You guys being able to tolerate me  
    and just like me like you would love each other regardless of my  
    sexuality...  
    that is not enough of the support that I need.  
    If you really want to support me-- because I'm gay,  
    there are all these other things that you need to do.  
    To my little sister,  
    you need to have conversations with your in-law's families  
    about gay rights. And about how we just elected this massive homophobe  
    to the office.  
    To my other sister, when your husband is going off on a misogynist rant --  
    I don't expect you to stop him,  
    because I know no one can stop him,  
    but I do expect you to come up to me and me and [my partner] afterward  
    and be like, “hey are you guys okay, that was really fucked up.”  
    Like, I need you to recognize when we get **shit on** because of whatever.  
My dad is okay with the fact that I'm gay,  
but he is so misogynistic  
and because there's two women in a relationship,  
it's double-time misogyny  
that's not protected by any man.  
Whereas both of my sisters have men to... protect them.  
And I don't.  
I literally *do not* have a man,  
I have this other -- I have a woman,  
and my dad will never respect her.  
He's tolerant... but he won't ever respect --  
like he recognizes it as a relationship,  
but the way that he questions it  
puts this doubt in my ear all the time.  
He would never do that with my sisters' husbands.

Or when they were their boyfriends.

This situation reflects the constant struggle Rita has with balancing her own autonomous familial structure, wherein she has built a successful life, alongside the need to still explain the authenticity of her life to her family. Rita is aware that it will take more time for her family to fully embrace her new formed family structure, but she also refuses to allow mere tolerance to be the end-all-be-all of that relationship. She tells me that she constantly challenges their complacent behavior and it has helped her to reclaim agency within her family structure for the sake of upholding her own family values within a longstanding tradition.

In this way, we see that while telling their/our families about their/our sexualities is difficult, (we) were each able to find a way to make their/our familial connections stronger, whether it was through distancing, informing/teaching, and/or exposing. For example, Rita is the most explicit in regards to (re)defining family, as she explains:

“I don't really get the things that people say that they get from their families. Like, you know? Like a feeling of understanding or support. And I don't know if that's because I'm gay or that's just because that's like every family has their thing and there's always somebody who feels out of it... But I -- definitely recognize that I'm very different from my family.”

She goes on to say that currently, her fiancé (also a queer Iranian-American woman) and her dog constitute that definitional family she never really got from her immediate kinfolk. For others, like Yasi, there was an underlying fear that her parents wouldn't love

her anymore, but after some time, she felt that she was able to get closer to her parents. For Yasi, her parents are her support system.

These moments of resistance are the result of living between two cultures that continue to leave us wondering at our places in the world. We neither fit neatly within Americanness nor our Iranianness, and are like Anzaldúa, bridging our identities so that we may be able to simultaneously exist and resist within our communities. As Mostofi posits:

In the case of Iranians living in the United States, a melding has ensued between "Iranianness" and "Americanness." A divergence from straightforward American or Iranian identification has occurred through the combination of cultural characteristics, or perceived cultural characteristics, from both ethnicities. (681)

Like ill-fitting puzzle pieces, we exist in a third space, wherein our bodies become sites of resistance. We trouble the normative, the expected, the colonizing. We navigate our worlds for survival, and forge alternative paths that allow us to defy the categorizations that so often lead to the further discrimination of our bodies. We battle traditions of heterosexism, homophobia, transphobia, from both sides. Our performances are (im)perfect, and in this way, we rely our own agency to find ways to navigate the power of collective consciousness. Like Moraga, we constantly battle our incompatible intersections, in hopes of finding home.

The final mode of resistance I feel is important to share, and that I would like to end my analysis with, comes from the end of each conversation. After engaging in meaningful hours speaking, crying, laughing, and relating to one another I asked one final

question, perhaps the only question that remained unchanged throughout the entire interviewing process, “so I guess my last question is -- and bear with me, this is always my favorite but it's also... I feel like it's the weirdest -- What advice or words would you give to other queer Iranian-American women struggling to understand their own sexualities?” Everyone, and I mean everyone, was taken aback by this question. Thirty seconds would pass where words would begin to be formed, only to come back to silence. Eventually, and poetically, each shared a piece of advice that was unique to their own struggles, their own memories, and their own paths of coming to understand themselves, but underscored by an understanding of how living between both American and Iranian culture makes it all the more complicated. Each piece of advice was marred with contradiction, not exactly matching up with their individual stories, but instead, was reflective of so much of what the performance of queer Iranian-American identities is and could be. Interestingly, while each person’s piece of advice was different in its own way, they all became messages of empowerment. Therefore, I want to end my analysis on the theme of enacting agency and resistance, because to me, those words are powerful – they *mean* something. They symbolize hope and a path forward and the ability to live in our contradictions, on our own terms. With that, a collective poem was found. Here, I would like to highlight how these messages of hope bring together all of our voices to reflect the optimism we all share for the ability to enact agency and resistance. So, no matter where we are in our respective queer journeys, I hope that this advice transcends specific identification, but instead proves helpful in how you choose to write your own story:

That's hard because everyone has a different situation,  
or circumstance.

There's no way about being like,

“just be yourself and everything will be okay!”

**That's not true.**

You don't know that that's going to be true for that person.

Things might get real shitty.

I think it's like layers of privilege.

If you're a White,

straight

dude,

with money

then you're sort of made in the shade.

Anything other than that, you have to make a lot of concessions.

Especially with the Persian guilt...

Actually, the advice my mom gave to me when I came out at 18 was,

“You are a woman,

you are Iranian...

in this country,

and now you're adding gay to that.

That's a tall order...

so, you better be fucking strong and ready and have a good  
job...

Because, that's a lot.”

But, I think you have to be true to yourself,

and regardless of who in your life is telling you what not to talk about...

you just have to do it.

Because, at the end of the day,

it's you that's going to carry that

**pressure.**

You can't live your life like that.

I think it's *impossible*.

It took a long time... *fifteen years*... and, my family is just now coming around.

There's a light at the end of the tunnel.

Don't ever compromise your authenticity

to make somebody else comfortable.

Ever.

You can't let them win.

You have to battle.

And, you have to win that battle.

And you always will.



Just acknowledge the time that it took you,  
as a queer person  
to arrive at a place  
that's even comfortable to articulate that...  
Just understand the privilege that you have  
to be able to arrive there,  
whereas your family... community... or your friends might not.  
Also, know that your family is important,  
but is not the only thing.  
And that's okay, because...

Identity isn't everything.  
Cover marriages can be cool.  
Don't feel like you *have to be out*.  
    If you *want to be...* go for it.  
    but you don't have to be.  
Have the conversations with your family,  
if and when  
*you* feel like *you* need to.  
    Because, there's no shame in loving your family.  
    Or wanting to make them happy.  
And, there's no "good" coming out,  
so, fuck all that.  
    Do what *you* need to do, because...

The secretive stuff is... never going to go away.  
That's going to take forever.  
Because, even straight Persian women are secretive about their sexuality.  
That's not going to change.  
But, the more you isolate,  
    the more you think that you're an outlier,  
    and the more you keep secrets,  
    the more difficult and dragged out it's going to be.  
    Socialize *more...* date *more*. Even if it's in  
secret.

And, know you're not alone... there are others of us out there.  
    We do exist.  
(We may be hidden)... but we do exist.  
I'm aware that finding a community of queer Iranians...  
is not going to be something that you find right away.

But, there are other people that will have a different level of understanding of your specific struggles...

Be open to being friends with queer individuals...  
of other marginalized racial/ethnic identities

There are a lot of parallels  
there.

Be open to that.

Find a community,

because, you need a space to be able to share your story in safety

it's in bravery, but also in safety.

Surround yourself with people who will accept you for who you are.

I think one of the other big struggles for a lot of people...

is being around people who aren't accepting of your sexuality,

or whatever identity you hold...

But, so many freaking people in our community are queer.

It's really ridiculous.

I mean I know a lot of people...

I know like 100s of people.

And some are super closeted...

but, there's a huge community out there.

Even people who you think aren't, are probably *freaking* queer

or something along those lines.

So, I would say... find pleasure in things that you find pleasure in.

And just *really, really* enjoy that.

In terms of your desire...

Less understanding it, more exploring it.

And, I guess... even just this conversation with you.

I'm 36 years old and I now know so many gay Iranians...

and, it's *still* such a pleasure to talk about what it is like to be

*a gay*

*Iranian*

Because, in my day-to-day life

it feels like

**I am a unicorn.**

Even as I know there are others out there

So, I guess my advice is...

it's some version of you're not alone,

but also, a version of... don't make yourself alone either.

*Telling Their/Our Stories*

What has become explicitly clear throughout this journey is that it is in the telling of their/our stories, through the ambiguity of their/our lived experiences, through an articulation of a *theory of the flesh* that disrupts so much of what we know about culture, sexuality, class, ability, nationality, and family, that we begin to “trespass” as a means of demanding agency (Abdi). When we begin to share our stories for the world, we resist assumptions of reticence, weakness, and inauthenticity. We break free from the confines of the systems of power that so badly want to keep us hidden. In these moments, even if/when we choose not to share, even if/when we prove sexuality is not a fixed state and vacillate in our performances of sexuality or gender, even if/when we choose to lead heterosexual/heteronormative/hetero*expected* lives, we know that our trespassing does something for the world. A community exists for queer Iranian-Americans that is not as clearly attainable for our Iranian counterparts living abroad; and though that community certainly exists, perhaps online, or within secluded pockets, or within academic research, stories prove that we are not invisible.

Our agency is rooted in the choices we make, our subjective lived realities within our dueling ideological worlds, which are in and of themselves, the ultimate forms of resistance. As we clumsily navigate feelings of shame and guilt that sometimes make it difficult to remain “loyal” to our parents and our cultures, we are always already resisting. Our bodies, our stories, our everyday lived experiences, our *theories of the flesh* are complex and in so many ways still unfinished. Thus, when we make room for

historically silenced stories to be told, we enliven and complicate theory towards a more holistic and responsible way to understand our intersectional realities.

Further, while most of the conversations revolved around the complicated intersection of being simultaneously Iranian-American and queer, many could discern a rationale behind those feelings of uncertainty and create a space of “disruptive ambiguity” (Gutierrez-Perez, “Disruptive Ambiguities”). The strain of having to navigate dueling cultural messages, codes, and histories, creates a synchronistic identity formation that transcends much of what we already assume to know about queer of color identities. Though, these feelings are certainly also articulated by other queer of color communities, as exemplified by Moraga who writes, “All along I had felt the difference, but not until had put the words "class" and "color" to the experience, did my feelings make any sense” (31). Within each conversation, this navigation of different vectors of identity were ever-present, because “the queer Iranian woman exists among/between/within/without, often violently torn in multiple directions” (Abdi and Van Gilder 82). Each participant expressed how their queerness, Americanness, Middle Easternness, and *Iranianness* contributed to their feelings of difference, particularly within mainstream queer communities. This intergenerational commonality for queer Iranian-Americans continues to be at the forefront of many challenges faced by feelings of isolation coming from multiple directions. This is particularly true for those who began to explore their sexualities later in life, like Tala, who speaks to the messages that conflate her strategic silence with cowardice.

In this chapter, I have moved through themes that exist concurrently within the narratives of queer Iranian-Americans. I have explored the ways in which upholding familial and cultural loyalty, navigating feelings of shame and guilt, and enacting strategies of resistance occur simultaneously within queer Iranian-American experiences. Moreover, I have explicated the gravelly terrain many queer Iranian-American women must walk upon to live their/our lives within the embodied convergence of intersectionality. I have explored how the narratives of queer Iranian-Americans exude a *theory of the flesh* that asks us to question our relationality to power so that we can evaluate the ways in which we balance our concurrent privileges and our oppressions (Calafell, “(I)dentities”). Finally, while these accounts are not encompassing of all queer Iranian-American experiences, and certainly do not echo the lived realities of queer Iranians in Iran, I hope to have showcased a range of intersectional experiences that prompt identification and continue to push queer of color research to the margins.

As someone who has committed her life to researching queer Iranian-American lived experiences, I too still exist in contradiction. I continue to ask myself the very same questions explored within this work, because I believe that the queer of color experience is ambiguous, undefinable, and exquisitely opaque. Growing up feeling isolated, as though I was the only queer Iranian-American on Earth, I certainly developed feelings of resentment toward my cultural duplicity. I grew frustrated with the lack of queer Iranian/MENA stories, and in turn, made the choice to write my own, and to ask others to share theirs. But, I have also come to learn that these stories must be honored, because we

are lucky to ever hear them. The ability to *trespass* is steeped in privilege, citizenship, class, geographical location or otherwise (Abdi). I am reminded that for some, sharing their/our stories does not/cannot/will not lead to liberation, and that that silence is okay.

Adams and Jones inquire, “And what of the stories we are not ready or willing to tell? What of the stories that blink and waver on the threshold of thought, speech, and intelligibility?” (Adams and Jones 109). Through this work, I am reminded of all of the stories that continue to go untold. In his critique of Eurocentric expectations around silence in the classroom, Hao suggests:

Like other multicultural perspectives in pedagogy, understanding and allowing silence as a legitimate classroom ritual is not only about appreciating each other’s differences, but more importantly providing silent students a voice that they otherwise would not have in the classroom. (282)

Similarly, I suggest that as cultural scholars, we begin to recognize silence as a resistive act for queer people of color, in this case, Iranian-American women. Conversely, for those of us who choose to and can share our stories, I hope we never stop. For some, we share to exist. And it is through that existence that we can begin to build a community. Thus, I invite the reader to read between the lines, to complicate “coming out” narratives, to defy expectation, and to challenge normative assumptions, so that we may continue to hear the stories of those whose history has been silenced.

## Chapter Six: Conclusions and Future Directions

*“I am a lesbian woman of Color whose children eat regularly because I work in a university. If their full bellies make me fail to recognize my commonality with a woman of Color whose children do not eat because she cannot find work, or who has no children because her insides are rotted from home abortions and sterilization; if I fail to recognize the lesbian who chooses not to have children, the woman who remains closeted because her homophobic community is her only life support, the woman who chooses silence instead of another death, the woman who is terrified lest my anger trigger the explosion of hers; if I fail to recognize them as other faces of myself, then I am contributing not only to each of their oppressions but also to my own, and the anger which stands between us then must be used for clarity and mutual empowerment, not for evasion by guilt or for further separation. I am not free while any woman is unfree, even when her shackles are very different from my own. And I am not free as long as one person of Color remains chained. Nor is any one of you” (Lorde 132-33).*

*What’s Next for Queer Iranian-American Studies?*

Born and raised between Los Angeles and Orange County California, I have always been surrounded by Iranians and Iranian-Americans. It was a rare day if I went to a grocery store and didn’t hear someone speaking Persian a few carts away. I learned to speak Persian when I was five during my first summer trip to Tehran. After growing frustrated by the fact that I couldn’t understand what my family was saying and that none of my cousins would play with me because I couldn’t speak with them, I locked myself in my room for 14 days, refusing to come out unless it was for essential business. On day 15, little determined five-year old Shadee, walked out of the room, sauntered up to my grandmother, and asked for some food... *in Persian*. I don’t know if this story is all from my own memory, or theirs, or is a mixture of both, but I still recall the jaws dropping and

the moments of silence that followed. I share this story because it's my family's favorite to tell about me. I carry that memory with me as a reminder, that even since childhood, I wanted to be as close to my Iranian family as possible. Even if it meant that I had to learn a new language to do so.

My connection to the Iranian community is deep-seated. It's in my blood and moves through my veins and has impacted and influenced so much of who and what I have become. Despite this love for my family, my community, and the smell of Iran, I've never felt that I fully belonged. For a while, I attributed this feeling to having little socio-economic capital – living in small apartments between North and South Orange County, instead of in the grand homes by the waters of Westlake Village, or atop the hills of Los Angeles, that my extended family enjoyed. Later, I blamed this disconnection on my U.S. American upbringing, holding onto the fact that I spoke English well and couldn't be bothered to adhere to the norms and traditions that my mother had been accustomed to. As I got older, I misguidedly criticized Islam, my cultural duplicity, and the expectations placed on me as I began to realize that my sexuality didn't fit into those very same norms and traditions that I wanted to resent so badly.

So, when I entered college, I looked, and looked, and kept looking for something, *anything* that would prove I wasn't alone. That it wasn't just me experiencing these conflicting feelings of shame, guilt, disappointment, and duty. I couldn't find anything. There was no manual or self-help book that spoke about the lived intersectional experiences of queer Iranian-American women. I couldn't see myself in the articles



written by psychologists and sociologists that spoke to the difficulties of White queer life. My experience wasn't scripted or dramatized for media consumption. I felt immense loneliness as I marched alongside those many homogenous faces, fighting for the right to marry, during the contentious election season of Proposition 8. I felt judgment by the people around me, every time I would tell someone that I ~~couldn't~~ wouldn't tell my mother. I felt myself grow more and more disillusioned about the prospect of having a happy future, all while my performance of heterosexual was becoming more nuanced around other Iranians. My back was beginning to break underneath the weight of my own secrets.

Leading up to this project has been six years of writing, researching, living, (re)living, and speaking with other queer Iranian-American women who have felt exactly what I have felt. This work is meant to serve as proof that queer Iranian-American women exist, our lives matter, and our stories are important. Because, had I been able to read about the queer Iranian-American experience in the same way I read about the White queer experience, my life trajectory would have been radically different. I would have had the language to express all the ways I had felt about what my what it meant to live as someone whose identities are always already in conflict. I would have known that there were others like myself out there, that I wasn't alone, and that maybe I didn't have to stay silent after all. This project is the summation of my masters and doctoral work, and its purpose is to ensure that queer Iranian-American women, who feel alone in this world, can see themselves in research... not in the margins, but at the center of the pages.

As Muñoz writes, “Queerness is also a performative because it is not simply a being but a doing for and toward the future. Queerness is essentially about the rejection of a here and now and an insistence on potentiality or concrete possibility for another world” (“Cruising Utopia” 1). Queer Iranian-American women are performing the possibility of their intersectional identities in many ways. Some, through a performance of heteronormativity, some through defiance of the status quo, and some use a combination of both of these strategies for the sake of their survival. Yep likens the violence of heteronormativity enforced by both society and culture to socially permitted forms of “soul murder” (“The Violence of Heteronormativity” 22). Here we can see how the potential for the inclusion of queer discourse and performativity within the context of MENA communities can offer restorative functions for those who have seen little of themselves in the world.

The historization of sexuality for Iranian and Iranian-American women was overviewed in Chapter Two. In this chapter, I speak about how both Iranian and American ideologies around sexuality, gender, class, religion, and family have historically worked to make living queer Iranian-American identity seem impossible. I outlined the cultural duality that impacts the everyday lived experiences of queer Iranian-American women, and how the intersections of our lives complicate many of the ways we have learned to perform queer for the world. I wish I had known of this history earlier, because had I understood how much sexuality has been both glaringly absent and

ever-present in Iranian social and cultural discourse, perhaps I would have been able to find a sense of ease, just a little sooner.

In Chapters Four and Five, I give space to ten, first-generation, queer Iranian-Americans who bravely chose to share their stories with me. In Chapter Four, my interviewees perform agency as each conversation to be understood on its own. Here, I wanted to give the reader a glimpse into the lives of queer Iranian-American women, in their own words. Instead of finding themes within each story, and deriving conclusions from the inferences of what I got out of their experiences, I wanted to give each person the space to paint their own picture. I showcase the good, the bad, the difficult, the (im)possibility, and the hope.

In Chapter Five, I explore the ways in which first-generation, queer Iranian-Americans perform their sexualities through an amalgamation of feelings of shame and guilt, the expectation to remain loyal to both family and community, and the possibilities for agency and resistance. In this chapter I showcase how first-generation, queer Iranian-American women exist within “Layered Complexity,” on the borderlands, “a third space between cultures and social systems” (Anzaldúa 6). Through conversations with queer Iranian-American women, we begin to see how they/we are developing what Anzaldúa calls a *mestiza consciousness*, wherein they/we can “navigate these different social contexts and maintain knowledge of what it means to reside in these different social and political interstices” (Anzaldúa 8). Once again, differing cultural nuances are at play for

queer Iranian-Americans, but the similarities of the multiplicity of our identities are sites of identification and moments for theoretical extension.

What is highlighted in these conversations, in these stories, is that for first-generation, queer Iranian-American women, safely navigating the borderlands is pivotal to survival... to existence. We all do it differently, through negotiations of our privileges and our oppressions. We all move through the multiple identity vectors that make up our intersectional understandings of how the world works. Still, our stories are only made possible through the experience of living in contradiction. It is not easy to move between cultures, perform alternative sexualities, and remain silent within the family and the community. Often, these realities are not without consequence. For many, including myself, even thoughts of going back to Iran are filled with hesitancy and fear. Our performances are dangerous, both on individual and familial levels. These complications/contradictions must be made sense of, but there is no clear-cut guide as to how. All of our stories are the same in this way, as it becomes painfully clear, that this show will never end, and our performances will continue, day in and day out, because there is no solution to what many have come to understand as a problem. Calafell explains that *theories of the flesh* “have been central to the survival of women of color and have been one of the primary ways in which we have been able to theorize about our experiences when we have been denied access to traditional forms of knowledge production” (“Rhetorics of Possibility” 105). For queer Iranian-American women, the creation of *theories of the flesh* is a resistive strategy wherein we are able to theorize

through our embodied experiences while moving through systems of power and oppression, dueling cultural codes, and historically deep-seated expectations.

I began this project with three overarching research questions: (1) How are queer Iranian-American women speaking to and performing their multiple and intersecting identities (like, race-culture, gender, sexuality, and class) in their everyday lives? (2) How are queer Iranian-American women resisting, reifying, or traversing heteronormative cultural expectations within their families of origin? (3) What does the study of queer Iranian-American women negotiating their sexual and familial relationships add to the study of critical family communication? I believe that the first two questions were answered in the previous two chapters by showcasing the performances of intersectional identity and strategies of resistance for queer Iranian-American women. Queer Iranian-American women are performing queerness through simultaneous acknowledgments of fear of shame, family and cultural loyalty and moments of agency and resistance. Further, they are navigating through their/our worlds by enacting strategic silence, their/our choices in appearance, and by moving between cultural codes. To answer the third question, I will speak to the future directions of this work in the following section.

#### *Moving Forward in (Family) Communication Research*

The methods and theories we utilize as researchers speak volumes to how we provide information about the communities we work with. For instance, within Family Communication post-positivist research still accounts for much of the work published

with *The Journal of Family Communication*, followed by interpretive research, then critical (Stamp and Shue). These paradigmatic hierarchies simplify and often work to rank how and through which means knowledge is produced, limiting the potential for methodological diversity within the field. As Droser writes, “This created sense of difference has worked against the progressive potential of the field of family communication studies, where the discourse of opposition has perpetuated a hierarchy of knowledge production” (4). Further, the emphasis on post-positivist research has made the gap between intercultural communication and family communication even wider. In fact, as Droser notes, “This strategic positioning of post-positivist research as a supreme framework pushes other approaches to the margins, shifting the responsibility of critical scholarship to those within ‘more critical’ fields such as culture and performance studies” (4). Thus, the aim of this project from the beginning has been to use methods and theories that do not attempt to define the way queer Iranian-American women exist, but to give them/us space to share how we exist amid long histories of oppressions and systems of power that have so far made us seem invisible. By using critical performance methods, I hope to have highlighted the way that embodied knowledge can be used to more holistically study families, particularly those families whose cultural nuances make quantifiability limited in its methodological scope.

When I began this project, I was frustrated. I could not begin to understand why so little had been written about people of color’s experiences with sexuality and the family within family communication. But through mentorship, guidance, and patience, I

was able to see how this project could work to bridge the enormous gap between intercultural communication and family communication. These two fields have historically been seemingly at odds, but that never made sense to me. Because, for queer of color folks, family is always cultured and culture is always understood in relation to family. They are inseparable, “What constitutes family is profoundly cultural” (Akkoor 232). For (queer) Iranian-American women, as with other women from the MENA region, family is always part of the package, “Far from being an enclave, the family is vulnerable to the state, and the laws and social policies that impinge upon it undermine the notion of separate spheres” (Moghadam 140).

As Johnson writes, “much of queer theory critically interrogates notions of selfhood, agency, and experience, it is often unable to accommodate the issues faced by gays and lesbians of color who come from ‘raced’ communities” (“‘Quare’ Studies” 3). Thus, by using women of color feminism and intersectionality, and critical qualitative methods such as, narrative performance interviewing and poetic transcription, this project was able to respond to Suter’s call for more methodological diversity within family communication, addressing the four considerations of critical family communication, (1) attention to issues of power, (2) collapse of the public–private familial binary, (3) critique, resistance, and/or transformation of the status quo, and (4) author reflexivity. In this work, I was able to, (1) bring attention to the issues of power that affect the lives of queer Iranian-American women, (2) collapse the individualistic notion that public and private are separate entities for queer Iranian-American women who must balance both

every day, (3) critique, resist, and transform the status quo by highlighting how queer Iranian-American women are already actively critiquing, resisting, and transforming the status quo just by their/our existence, (4) and offer my own narrative reflexive voice to remain transparent about why and how I chose to study my own community. For queer Iranian-American women, our intersectional realities complicate how we perform family, because our families must relearn their own performances as well.

Thus, this work is meant to offer insight into how (queer) Iranian-American families navigate intersectional incongruities, particularly through an understanding of how sexual orientation, race-ethnicity, gender, class, and nationality impact and influence various familial discourses. I argue for an inclusion of work being done about family in existing cultural frameworks within communication studies that would advance and adhere to the call toward CFC within and in lieu of traditional family frameworks. Of the limited narrative or performance based work narrative work being done within family communication studies (see Adams & Berry; Adams & Jones; Ellingson; Faulkner; Koenig-Kelis) the narratives of people of color continue to be glaringly absent. I contend that including the narrative voices of marginalized communities would offer a more holistic and inclusive analysis of family across the board. The ways that people of color, queer people, and queer people of color make sense of family cannot be summarized by generalizable family analyses and thus offers an opportunity to complicate definitions of family and provide rich insight into familial dynamics not yet explored within family communication studies. Again, it is important to note that I am



not proposing a hierarchical methodological argument, wherein paradigms are seen as oppositional. Rather, I am suggesting that these narratives be placed alongside existing quantitative and interpretive research in an effort to provide richer and more inclusive data that includes that of the lived familial experiences of (queer) people of color.

*Moving Forward in (Intercultural and Performance) Communication Research*

Calafell asks us to bridge the gaps in research by emphasizing the embodied intersectional experiences of queer people of color (*Latina/o Communication*). As researchers of color, we must follow this advice if we are to adhere to a social justice epistemology that works to advocate for our communities through their complexities. Yep also asks that as critical intercultural scholars looking at embodied intersectional experiences, we must account for the deeper and more embodied “thick intersectionalities” that exist within our narratives (“Queering/Quaring” 123). Yep writes, “the concept of thick intersectionalities suggests that we should attend to the lived experiences and biographies of the persons occupying a particular intersection including how they inhabit and make sense of their own bodies” (“Queering/Quaring” 123). Moreover, like Gopinath, we must also acknowledge that work about queerness is global; therefore, must be considered through the lens of globalization to account for the various queer experiences that happen outside of Western ideological norms.

Though queer scholars like Anzaldúa, Lorde, Moraga, and Muñoz have paved the way by sharing their stories for the world, it is evident that even now, queer of color

voices must continue the fight to be heard, and perhaps more importantly to fight for each other to be heard. Because, as Eguchi contends:

it is important to remember that queers of color communities are constructed by multiple cultural/ethnic/racial backgrounds intersecting with other social positionings. Queer color-to-color conversations continue to be less visible within and beyond the contexts of global/local White queer normativity. (18)

For queer Iranian-American women, our identities are not singular, they are in conversation, and often, our identities present real danger not only for ourselves, but also for our families living both domestic and abroad. Thus, marking our performances of sexuality exponentially different from the experiences of our White queer counterparts, which are often, the only stories, we ever get to read to about. These are the experiences that we are in-turn expected to live up to for fear of failing to live “authentically” queer lives amid the status quo. This work is meant to exemplify how one group of people is experiencing family that moves us away from the canon, while also showing how many of us live in the contradiction of also adhering to much of what the canon has put forth, because we have had to learn to survive in both spaces. Like Calafell and Moreman who work at the intersection of performance and latinidad, this work moves between performance and (queer) Iranian-Americaness with “a desire to find spaces of possibility, instability, and coalition across difference which are not static, sentimental, or overly utopian” (403).

Though this project certainly is not meant to speak for the experiences of all queer Iranian-American women, it does lay the foundation for more work about the embodied

experiences of queer Iranian-American women to continue. Because, as Muñoz asserts, “What we need to know is that queerness is not yet here but it approaches like a crashing wave of potentiality” (*Cruising Utopia* 185). Thus, in working to continue the fight for more inclusive intercultural and performance studies communication scholarship, I hope to follow scholars of color who have already called for the dismantling of power and privilege in their works (e.g., Anzaldúa, Calafell, Chávez, Gutierrez-Perez, Johnson, LeMaster, Lorde, Madison, Martin and Nakayama, Mohanty, Moraga, Muñoz, Said, Yep). As Alcoff and Mohanty write:

we contend that identities can be no less real for being socially and historically situated, and for being relational, dynamic, and at times, ideological entrapments. Moreover, we believe that identity-based knowledge can achieve objectivity, not by the (unachievable) ideal of the disinterested, passive observer, but through a more workable approach to inquiry that aims to accurately describe the features of our complex, shared social world. (6)

Similarly, I hope that this work, that invests so deeply in the complexity and multiplicity of identities, can begin to fill many of the existing gaps and literature that have for too long, pushed our queer MENA identities to the margins of research. I hope that this work can work toward new directions in inclusive communication studies research.

Through an amalgamation of performance studies, narrative, poetry, intercultural communication, family communication, women of color feminism, critical reflexivity, intersectionality, *theories of the flesh*, and cultural complexity, this work is meant to showcase how embodied research can be used as a tool of resistance by centering the voices of marginalized communities. It is my hope that we continue the conversation, to

move forward, and to challenge the power of normativity in everything we do. I echo

Sekimoto's sentiment as she writes:

... I contend that the hegemonic power of ideological interpellation lies not only in the discursive logic of identity politics but more importantly in its ability to produce the embodied, subjectively lived, and phenomenologically significant experiences. My subjective sense of worldly dis/orientation reflects, produces, and reifies the historical and ideological relations of power. (394)

As a first generation, queer Iranian-American woman who has dedicated her life to working in communication studies, I selfishly hope to have conveyed the importance of including storied intersectional experiences not just in subfields that are known to embrace this dialogue (e.g. queer communication studies, women and communication, intercultural communication), but across the field. Moreover, I hope to have laid a groundwork for more nuanced research on (queer) MENA communities within communication studies.

In the end, what I have come to learn in my years of yearning for an answer to a question that I know will never come, is that I must learn to be comfortable living without one. In the title of their groundbreaking book, Holling and Calafell ask, "Somos de Una Voz? [We are of one voice?]." I don't know. Maybe not. But what I do know is that while our queer Iranian-American stories cannot and should not ever be assumed to be the same, I wonder whether assumption could even exist without a starting point? Our stories are nuanced, they're particular, and they are ours to tell. There is no real summation of an "authentic" queer Iranian-American experience, because authenticity is language used to make others who have historically been absent in research to feel

inferior. Our invisibility is how oppressors maintain power, and it is when we show up, no longer as footnotes, but as people – with names, and histories, and families that look “different,” that we begin to take back our power and reclaim our stories for ourselves. Like Holling and Calafell, I have come to learn that the purpose of this research has never been to provide a solution. Rather, it is to problematize how we begin to conceptualize our identities in the first place. It is in that space where we can finally open space for future research.

### **PRESENT DAY...**

*“I love you, Shadee joon. No matter what.” My mom tells me as she and my sister drop me off at the ever-crowded Southwest terminal at San Francisco International Airport. She’s been telling me this more often. And though, “I love you’s” are not an uncommon exchange between my mother and I, this one felt just a little bit different. Like with those three words, she could relay everything she has been feeling since I told her, almost three years ago. We don’t talk about it much, but she asks me questions now. Sometimes clarifying inquiries about queer identity, sometimes questions about whether I’m sure, sometimes they’re about whether or not I’m dating. I still get frustrated. She still gets frustrated. Because my answers are never what I ~~think~~ know she is hoping for.*

*But, I’m noticing changes. Like when my aunts call and ask whether I’ve found a suitable husband, she replies giving me a knowing smile, “I don’t know. Why don’t you ask her?” Leaving it up to me to give my rehearsed response, “Khaleh (auntie), I’m focused on school right now. I don’t have time to think about any of that.” She rubs my*

*back as I sigh, knowing full well that that excuse won't be viable for much longer. Or a few months ago, while watching an entertainment gossip show, speaking about Brad and Angelina's split, "Maman, isn't that so sad that they got divorced?" And her response, more telling than any question she could have ever asked, "Well vat would you do if your vife told you dat she vas in love with somevon else?" The first time she had ever said wife in reference to my future. I froze. My body physically unable to process what had just come out of her mouth. She looked at me for a few moments before breaking out into a laugh that has always made my heart happy, "or husband, vatever."*

*Still, this feels **different**. Standing here, saying goodbye to her, knowing I will see her in only a few short months. And then I remember our conversation from the night before, and it all makes sense. Standing outside, the icy Silicon Valley winds blowing in our faces as we wait for my brother-in-law to bring the car around. My sister is holding my youngest nephew in her arms to keep the cold out of his face, while I hold onto my mother tightly. My sister, out of nowhere and without context, breaks through the sound of our chattering teeth and awkwardly declares, "Mom, Shadee's gay!" I look at my sister, eyes wide and in shock. I've just become accustomed to the new relationship my mother and I have formed, where the subject of my sexuality comes up only when she's ready to speak to it. I don't push, and I am annoyed at my sister for pressing those buttons. But instead of a scoff, or a grunt, or words that I would imagine I would cry over later, my mother looks at me and all she says in response is, "So."*

*And I guess, in this moment, minutes before having to board my plane back to Denver, back to my studio apartment and my little puppy, any version of “me too” feels light. Like, it’s just not enough. And so, I grab her and pull her in tightly, hot tears rushing down my already burning cheeks. And, I hope that she feels like this hug is different. Because, it is. But, in case I didn’t make it clear maman,*

*“I love you too.”*

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## **Appendix A: Interview Protocol**

### **Demographics**

Age:

Race:

Nationality:

Gender/Sex:

Sexual orientation:

Perceived Class Status:

### **Self-Identification Questions:**

1. How would you describe yourself in relation to your social identities (i.e. race, gender, ethnicity, nationality, sexuality)?
2. Tell me the story of how and when you began to understand your sexuality.
3. What has most influenced how you feel about your sexual identity?
4. Can you share a story of how you came to identify as (described sexual identity)?
5. Did you know or know of any LGBTQ Iranians growing up?

### **Culture Questions:**

1. What does it mean to you to be Iranian-American?

#### **Probing Questions:**

- a. How would you describe your relationship to the Iranian community?
- b. Can you tell me about some specific cultural messages that have influenced your understanding of your sexuality?
2. Can you tell a story about a time you felt pressured to manage your sexual identity in relation to the Iranian community?

#### **Probing Questions:**

- a. What is/are your greatest concern/s with identifying as (however participant identifies) in relation to your family in Iran?

### **Family Questions:**

1. How do you conceptualize family?

2. Can you tell me the story of how your sexuality has played a role in your relationship with your family of origin?

**Probing questions:**

- b. Can you tell me a story that exemplifies this relationship or tension?
  - c. Can you share some of the expectations your parents or your family have placed on you in relation to heterosexuality?
  - d. How do you feel now when you talk about your sexual identity with your parents?
3. Can you tell me a story about a time or times where you have had to manage or alter how you performed your sexual identity around your family?

**Probing Questions**

- a. Can you tell a story about a time you felt pressured to perform heterosexuality when you are with your family in Iran?
4. How have your cultural and familial experiences played a role in the creation of your own family?
  - 5.

**Ending/Resistance Questions:**

1. What specific practices do you engage in that reflect your (sexual identity) within your family? Do you view these practices as resistance?
2. Can you describe any circumstances where you do not ever not identify as (however participant identifies)?
3. What advice would you give to another queer Iranian-American women struggling with similar issues?

## Appendix B: IRB Approval



DATE: September 6, 2016

TO: Shadee Abdi, M.A.  
FROM: University of Denver (DU) IRB

PROJECT TITLE: [929905-1] LGBTQ Iranian-American Women and Their Negotiation of Sexuality and Family

SUBMISSION TYPE: New Project

APPROVAL DATE: September 6, 2016

EXPIRATION DATE: August 15, 2017

RISK LEVEL: Minimal Risk

CONTINUING REVIEW: Expedited

REVIEW PERIOD: 12 months

REVIEW TYPE: Expedited Review

ACTION: **APPROVED**

REVIEW CATEGORY: Expedited category # 6 & 7

**Category 6:** Collection of data from voice, video, digital, or image recordings made for research purposes.

**Category 7:** Research on group characteristics or behavior (including, but not limited to, research on perception, cognition, motivation, identity, language, communication, cultural beliefs or practices, and social behavior) or research employing survey, interview, oral history, focus group, program evaluation, human factors evaluation, or quality assurance methodologies.

Thank you for your submission of the **New Project** materials for this project. The University of Denver IRB has granted **FULL APPROVAL** for your submission. This approval is based on an appropriate risk/benefit ratio and a project design wherein the risks have been minimized. All research must be conducted in accordance with this approved submission. The IRB determined that the criteria for IRB approval of research, per 45 CFR 46.111, has been met.

This submission has received an **Expedited Review** based on applicable federal regulations. Please note that the following documents were included in the review and approval of this study:

- Advertisement - Appendix B: Facebook Post/Study Announcement (UPDATED: 08/16/2016)
- Application Form - Protocol Specific Forms (UPDATED: 07/22/2016)
- Application Form - Appendix C: Populations with Additional Considerations (UPDATED: 07/22/2016)
- Consent Form - Appendix E: Consent Form (UPDATED: 07/22/2016)
- Consent Waiver - Appendix A: Waiver of Informed Consent (UPDATED: 07/9/2016)
- DU - IRB Application Form - DU - IRB Application Form (UPDATED: 08/16/2016)