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Persian Miniature Writing: An Ethnography of Iranian Organizations in Washington, D.C.

by

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ABSTRACT

Persian Miniature Writing:

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By

Nahal Naficy

Based on eighteen months of ethnographic fieldwork (2004-2005) amongst Iranian non-governmental political, civic, human rights, and scholarly organizations in Washington, D.C., this dissertation makes two major observations: One, that many Iranian scholars and activists as well as lay individuals see Iranian political culture as an ailing and malfunctioning body, suffering from fissures, inactivity, personalism, organizational chaos, and sentiments such as fear, distrust, suspicion, submission, alienation, indifference, envy, paranoia, hypocrisy, insecurity, and pessimism. Second, that the two major organizations that I worked with, one human rights and the other civic education, saw the cure in what I call an “ethos transplant” operation through which these traditional structures, affective landscapes, and patterns of socialization are transformed and replaced by new norms and attitudes (beliefs, knowledges, and sentiments pertaining to political processes). Whether through training Iranians in the practical skills of participation in democracy such as voting or petitioning or by teaching Iranians how to reconfigure their understanding of the individual, rights, life, sovereignty, and will in democratic as opposed to totalitarian terms, the sheer feasibility and affordability of becoming (instead of the existentialist concern with being) characterizes these organizations’ mission to make American citizens (in their minds, i.e. democratic subjects).
Instead of a mere critique of neo-liberalism (teaching docile subjects the norms of the capitalist world order) or resorting to National Character and Culture as Pathology studies, this dissertation aims to evoke and give form, through major native artistic traditions (Persian manuscript paintings, circa 14th-18th centuries AD) as well as non-native literary forms (Bram Stoker’s Dracula), to the above-mentioned shifting and contrasting structures, affective landscapes, and patterns of socialization. In doing so, it destabilizes the categories of native and non-native, modern and traditional, democratic and totalitarian, and their utility in conceptualizing and articulating affects, ethics, and socialities. By appealing to artistic styles and writerly sensibilities, this dissertation offers a creative engagement with the age-old anthropological question of life versus mechanisms of pinning down and making sense of it.
Acknowledgements

Not just this dissertation but my being here, at Rice and in the United States, where I have spent the past seven years working on my Ph.D. and exploring the new meanings and potentials of life and self, would have been impossible if it wasn't for my uncle, Hamid, and his lovely wife, Kelly. They offered me a true home away from home and treated me like one of their own. They saw my potential and provided me with an opportunity to pursue my calling and test my abilities towards what has been a life-long dream. I realize it must have been one heck of a responsibility for them, but at the end, I could not have felt happier and more fulfilled. For that, and for their unfailing love, understanding, respect, trust, and support throughout some of the most transforming and overwhelming years of my life, I am now and forever grateful to them and I hope I can, like they have always asked me to whenever the subject has come up, "reciprocate" by being the best I can and doing for "some other kid" what they did for me.

My parents, Nasrin and Alireza, and my sisters, Nastaran and Yasaman, have helped me get here in more than just the obvious ways. My parents’ love of adventure and learning landed them in Budapest where my older sister was born in 1970 and in England where she spent her first few years, my own birth and first few years took place amidst the revolutionary fervor that consumed my parents like many of their generation in the mid to late 1970s, my younger sister was born and raised in the notorious years of terror and war in Iran in the 1980s; for me to take on the journey that has resulted in this dissertation and much more is a continuation of these shared experiences of wanderlust, knowledge quest, struggle, change, and survival, albeit in different senses and contexts.
As I have had to re-visit and re-live some of our shared experiences through the seven
years that the preparation, research and writing for this dissertation has taken, I have felt
at once closer to them than ever and longing more than ever for their companionship and
presence. Both of my parents' love of stories and storytelling, my father's marvelous
imagination, resourcefulness, and sense of humor in telling stories and my mother's
passion, perseverance, and immense talent in writing them, have influenced my intuition
to write this dissertation in a storytelling fashion. Both my parents and sisters have
followed the development of this dissertation with a great deal of interest and
intelligence, have asked questions, offered insights, and inspired me with their own
intellectual, emotional, spiritual, and material quests. I am grateful to them, beyond
words, for their unending, unconditional, and unmatched love and support.

It is not without much oscillation and considerable agony that I have decided to
acknowledge the individuals and organizations that participated in my research in
Washington DC without using their actual names here. They did not ask me to remain
anonymous, and I was not interested in gaining and disclosing any information about
them that they would consider confidential or that would harm their reputations, lives, or
livelihoods in any way. Nevertheless, considering the small-town quality of Washington
DC and its close-knit Iranian community, I have tried to lessen the possibility of hard
feelings and interpersonal conflicts by staying away from naming any names. Writing
about people whom you know and who know you personally is always a risky affair, and
I am, of course, by no means free of concern about whether or not I have been fair to the
people I have written about; I have only tried. To the Historians at HRF, the Participation
Promoter and the Executive Director at CEO, the Editor and the Former Minister at SF,
and the Mothers, I can only offer my heartfelt appreciation for their generosity and insight and for allowing me to participate in and observe their lives and works. Without them, this dissertation would not exist; and I hope that it will contribute to our understanding of ourselves. I would also like to thank Taqi Mokhtar, the editor of Iranian, for giving me an interview and a ride back, and the National Endowment for Democracy, particularly Abdulwahab Alkebsi, for their interest and assistance.

For letting this prying novice anthropologist stick her nose into art history and venture into the world of Persian manuscript paintings, and for being so kind and encouraging and smart about it, I am thankful to the lovely Massumeh Farhad, the Chief Curator and Curator of Islamic Art at Freer and Sackler Galleries. This has been no miniature task and I appreciate her support and insights very much. May the conversation continue!

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To Jim Faubion, I am most grateful for putting up with (even watching with a certain amusement) my meandering style and hopelessly un-theoretical mind at work throughout the years. I can only imagine how hard it must have been for him, considering
his own extraordinary erudition and clarity, to deal with lesser mortals such as myself, which he did with a touching generosity of spirit and invaluable support and kindness. I thank him for telling me to trust my intuitions and be daring with my dissertation. I feel fortunate for having been his student.

Chris Kelty shared my fascination with the hilarious, neurotic, and tragic incidences and coincidences of life and the human fields that we study and are a part of. He taught me not to trade off the epiphanies of the ephemera for some trite systematicity that I found alien to my encounters in life and in the field; instead, he constantly pushed me to push myself to engage anthropologically with what might have at first come as a distraction from my ostensive purpose. This dissertation owes a lot to him and is a stage in what I perceive to be an on-going attempt at precisely that kind of anthropological engagement.

I am deeply indebted to Hannah Landecker for her generosity and support, not just in treating me to morning coffee and rich, smooth, stimulating conversation at Salento and Brazil, or for the little purple Sony that became my first laptop and which accompanied me to the field and in much of the writing of this dissertation, but also for being such an intelligent and sensitive reader and writer, for inspiring me and reminding me every time I talked to her of the joy and discovery that writing should be—it has been mostly.

George Marcus has been a constant source of inspiration. I would not have found a home in anthropology if it wasn’t for his loving disputations with this impossible task through thick and thin and his fascination with certain productive ambivalences and “failures.” I thank him for his kind words and encouragement, for helping me articulate
my impressions and speculations, and for appreciating in my work (and specially in my use of Persian manuscript paintings in my ethnography) what others might find roundabout, even superfluous.

Hamid Naficy has been my greatest mentor, from my first adolescent infatuations with the idea of “exile” through his books and letters to my real grappling with its liberations and limitations, both as concept and experience, throughout my Ph.D. work. He has offered me and my research an endlessly inquisitive and exacting vision that my own incurably poetic ways would not allow. Above all, however, I shall thank him for seeing, appreciating, and encouraging in me at once a certain kind of wisdom and a certain kind of madness that I wasn’t sure I had.

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I dedicate this dissertation to my parents and sisters, to Taraneh and Navid, the un-met pieces of my heart who will form our future, and to my larger family (in person or in memory) of a total of five grandparents, two brother-in-laws, five aunts, nine uncles,
some twenty great aunts and uncles, at least seventy-some-odd cousins, and all their spouses and dependents with whom I grew up in Iran, for what they have gone through and what they have accomplished. I admire them and learn from them always and everywhere.
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Iranian Organizations

The Washington Persona

Persian Miniatures

And the Design of an Ethnographic Field

I did my fieldwork amongst Iranian human rights, oppositional (to the Iranian government), scholarly, and civic education organizations in Washington, D.C. from July 2004 to December 2005. My aim was to understand the nature of their activities and associations amongst themselves and with regards to the Iranian-American community, the current political and intellectual debates inside Iran, and of course, considering their approximation to it, the American policy world. I had previously worked for six weeks in spring 2004 with one of these organizations, a small non-governmental non-profit

bedroom foundation (one literally consisting of a server, a few computers, a fax/photocopy machine, a printer/scanner, and a few file cabinets in a bedroom), which I am going to refer to throughout this dissertation as simply the Human Rights Foundation (HRF). Founded in 2001, HRF was run by two historians in their forties (from here on referred to simply as the Historians), both educated at major European universities, one a former visiting fellow at the International Forum for Democratic Studies, the other a former consultant with the Women's Rights Division of Human Rights Watch. Their political genealogy could be traced back to the National Front², though they were no

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¹ Behnam 1986: 113
² A political opposition group founded by Mohammad Mosadeq and other French-educated individuals of Nationalist, Liberal, and Social-Democratic orientation in the late 1940s. Although Shapur Bakhtiar, Deputy Minister of Labor during Mosadeq’s premiership, had been a chief member of the dissident Front and had been imprisoned off and on for a total of six years during the reign of the last Pahlavi Shah, the Shah appointed him as Prime Minister for the last few months before the success of the Revolution in February 1979. The hope was that Bakhtiar, having been a dissident, would attract the support of the angry revolutionaries and by dismantling the secret police
longer members of that organization or any other. While HRF was funded by Lynde and
Harry Bradley Foundation, Inc. ($50,000 in 2005), Smith Richardson Foundation
($150,000 in 2003), and National Endowment for Democracy ($85,000 in 2005 and
previously in 2002-2004), the Historians did not take any salaries for themselves and
depended entirely on personal wealth for anything but office supplies or staff salaries.

HRF’s goal was to document all the human rights abuses since the Revolution in
Iran, starting with summary executions, through a human rights database publishable on
the World Wide Web. The online memorial was to be accompanied by a Human Rights
and Democracy Library, an electronic database containing books, articles, memoirs,
letters, documents, and information designed to further the understanding, dissemination,
and implementation of human rights and democracy in Iran. They were in dire need of
bilingual people who could be trusted, as the website had not gone public yet and, given
the nature of their work and their previous experiences with the Iranian government, they
had to be very cautious about whom they let in. I was introduced to them through a
mutual acquaintance and, as it coincided with my search for a site to observe different
types of Iranian organizations in the US (I had already worked extensively with the

(SAVAK), reducing repression, and creating a civilian government, present a better
option than the victory of “the mullahs or the Communists.” Bakhtiar accepted the
premiership in hopes of a peaceful transition to a more democratic situation, but this
angered a lot of his National Front compatriots. When at the eve of the Revolution, he
opposed Khomeini’s idea for the establishment of an Islamic Republic through a
referendum and asked instead for elections with different political parties, the
revolutionary-minded National Front members expelled Bakhtiar from the group. A few
months after the Revolution in 1980, when Bakhtiar fled to Paris, he started a new group
called The National Movement of Iranian Resistance (NAMIR), which still exists even
though Bakhtiar himself was assassinated allegedly by the agents of the Islamic Republic

According to Mediatransparency.org and the website of the National Endowment for
Democracy (NED)
Iranian Society at Rice and interviewed Iranian filmmakers and writers in Houston), I seized the opportunity. Things went very well in those six weeks: I got an offer to work as a part-time paid intern at HRF for eighteen months and the Historians were enthusiastic to be my "natives," as they laughingly referred to themselves.

In the summer of 2004, before I went to the field, I met the representatives of yet another DC-based organization, a non-partisan, non-political, non-sectarian, and non-profit 501c3 organization that I refer to throughout this dissertation as the Civic Education Organization (CEO). I met them at a table at the biannual conference by the International Society for Iranian Studies in Bethesda, MD, where they gave handouts and talked to interested Iranians about their organization's mission to "promote Iranian-American participation at all levels of American civic life." The handout encouraged Iranians to use CEO's resources to participate in and organize breakfasts with local and federal officials, send letters to officials on issues of concern, set up meetings with their House representatives, organize workshops for the community, and so forth. I later checked their website, which looked very organized and professional, and learnt that they took interns and volunteers year-round. CEO's focus on Iranian-Americans and their participation in American political and civic life seemed like a nice counterpart to HRF's focus on human rights violations inside Iran, the main reason for the widespread immigration of Iranians to America in the early 1980s. Moreover, instead of the oppositional (to the Iranian government) background of the HRF's founders, the CEO's 11-member board consisted almost entirely of successful Iranian-American philanthropists, and its president (from here on referred to simply as the Participation Promoter) was a Ph.D. student in International Studies at a prestigious university at the
time. I emailed CEO and asked if I could intern with them while studying and interviewing them for my own research. They asked for a more detailed description of my research, my CV, and a list of other organizations I was planning to study.

I did not want to disclose the name of HRF, naturally, so I left it rather vague and contacted the Historians immediately to find out what they preferred me to do. They were made very uneasy by the fact that CEO was now curious about who else I studied; they said they were not sure about CEO’s intentions and believed that while it emphasized its non-political nature, it was at best doing the Islamic Republic a favor by making Iranian-Americans apolitical and diverting their attention from atrocities in their homeland to their tax status in the United States. At worst, CEO could be “somehow” (note these expressions of proximity; they will become central in my discussion in the next chapter) even funded by the Islamic Republic to improve IR’s image in the US and push for the normalization of relationships between the two countries (normalization, of course, meaning accepting the legitimacy of the Islamic Republic). As a result, CEO was “almost” (another one of those central expressions of proximity) accorded the status of a lobby or spy for the Islamic Republic by HRF and my rather strong-in-tune correspondence with the Historians regarding this matter proved from the very beginning, before I even arrived in the field, that juggling work between the two organizations was not going to be an easy task.  

Their concern, the Historians assured me, was not for

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4 I did get the internship with CEO, nevertheless, and worked with them in the summer and fall of 2004 on two projects: creating a database of all the Iranian organizations in the US for networking purposes, and preparing a petition for recognizing minority status for Iranian-Americans. I also helped put together a guide for Iranian-Americans regarding the 2004 Presidential Elections in the US. The guide consisted of the views of each of the candidates on questions of relevance to Iranian-Americans as well as an explanation of the voting procedures in the US.
themselves as they were planning to go public sooner or later anyway, but for me as, they believed, I would jeopardize my safe return to Iran by letting CEO know that I had anything to do with HRF.

According to Sourcewatch.org, CEO has been a recipient of grants from the following U.S. foundations:

- The Open Society Institute
- Tides Foundation
- National Endowment for Democracy
- Kenbe Foundation
- Kamyar and Goli Foundation

To remedy the uncomfortable situation of CEO wanting to know who else I worked with and HRF strongly urging me not to tell, I decided to think of other organizations that I could possibly study so that I could give their names to CEO and continue working with HRF quietly. One of the places that came to my mind was, in fact, Islamic Republic’s own Interest Section at the Embassy of Pakistan in D.C. My reasoning was that if I went directly to the representatives of the Iranian government and in a way logged my research with them, it would be much easier to defend my purely scholarly intentions later, if need be, as opposed to appearing like I was mysteriously collaborating with secret organizations that planned a regime overthrow in Iran via D.C. They did not need to know that I had already gone ahead and picked a couple of organizations to study; I could ask for their advice on whom to look at for my research. Although all they would have to say to me would most likely be formulaic official statements made for public consumption, it would be interesting to know who they recognized as an Iranian organization worth studying. With my twenty some years of life in the Islamic Republic,
of saying something and doing something else, of veiling defiance in legality, I was fairly confident about my abilities to face the Islamic Republic officials in D.C.

In the meanwhile, on one of the first nights since I started my fieldwork, I was invited to dinner at the house of one of the Historians where the president of a major American institution for supporting pro-democracy movements around the world and the editor of a well-known journal on democracy were also invited. The aforementioned took an instant interest in me and my work for at least two obvious reasons: first, upon learning that I had been a student of Azar Nafisi, the author of the best-selling memoir, Reading Lolita in Tehran, they felt that I would have something unusual and powerful to say about the conditions of life for women who studied English literature in Tehran (a topic related to the spread of democracy in the Muslim world); and second, my research could generate some scientific knowledge on why the aforementioned institution was not receiving grant applications from Iranian organizations, in Iran OR abroad, the same way that it was from other nationals in similar political conundrums, like other Muslim countries or Eastern European countries back during Socialism. The president of the institution said that they would be happy to provide me with access to any documents that could help me conduct research on the topic. I was invited to go to the institution for a brownbag talk on democracy in Palestine a few weeks later and right after the talk I was led to the office of the Director of the Middle East and North Africa Division to talk about my research. Upon learning of my plan to contact the Iranian Interest Section, the Director said that he actually knew their staff well as they had met at Friday prayers at the Islamic Center and that they were good guys. He also smiled at my two already made choices, CEO and HRF, and said that their institution funded and respected both and did
not care about their differences. His comment about the guys at the Iranian Interest Section, however, when I recounted it to the Historians, created suspicions that, as an Arab-American Muslim, the Director could be “somehow” in cahoots with the Islamic Republic agents and that, worse yet, this American pro-democracy institution could be “somehow” infiltrated by Islamic elements sympathetic to the regime in Iran. The Historians started to worry about the institution now knowing about my work with CEO and HRF. Seeing that this was already making things more complicated, I forwent the idea of contacting the Interest Section at all.

Another organization that was recommended by one of the Historians was the Iranian Mothers for Freedom. The Historian wrote me in an email before I arrived in Washington:

I talked to the Mothers and they did not hesitate to adopt you […] Nahal jan at some point I think you should know the mothers, the reason is that NGOs like [SF] or [CEO] are rather professional ([CEO] is somehow a state sponsored one and [SF] is blooming out of one person’s careerism), the mothers however is a civil society development focused on a cause. [HRF] for its part, although it is a civil society endeavor, for a cause, but because of security concern so far has been socially secluded, and elitist. The mothers or other such NGOs would give you a better idea of an Iranian American collective endeavor. If I dare say so. Sorry for

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5 Towards the end of my fieldwork, I interviewed the Director and asked him how their institution defined democracy, as CEO and HRF had such different understandings of and practical solutions for democracy in Iran. For instance, while CEO sent a group of Iranian-Americans to teach Iranians in Iran how to set up election campaign booths, a project for which they received funding from the institution, HRF asked strongly for the boycott of all elections inside Iran as a way to refuse the legitimacy of the regime. The Director responded very briefly that, oh, they just meant the very “standard” definition of democracy that could be found on their website. I suppose he meant this: “freedom is a universal human aspiration that can be realized through the development of democratic institutions, procedures, and values.” (personal interview at the institution, December 2005)

6 Referring to another Iranian organization in the suburbs of Washington DC that I refer to throughout this dissertation simply as the Scholarly Foundation (SF)
the unrequested advice, I could not help it. (June 2004)

The email pointed out a few interesting things: 1) The Historian’s saying that the Mothers would not hesitate to “adopt” me was actually part of the kinship terminology through which she envisioned and understood my relationship to them, something that came up repeatedly during my fieldwork: I as the young pupil in search of knowledge and they as nurturing and protective elders with wisdom and experience. CEO obviously did not fit into this pattern, as we were more like peers generationally and it also felt strongly against operating in close-to-kinship terms and strived to put things in strictly “professional” terms; as a result, the knowledge/power relationship between me and CEO seemed hard to define for HRF: how could I be learning from them? And if not, most likely they were sucking information out of me. 2) The depiction of CEO as “somehow” “state sponsored” was interesting not just for the processes that had led HRF to make such an accusation (I will discuss how this came to be throughout the dissertation) but for the level of comfort with indeterminacy and imprecision in the statement as far as hard and fast evidence goes; judgment was legitimately a matter of gut feeling and a sense for truth, not provable information (this is mostly dealt with in the second chapter of the dissertation). 3) Careerism and “professionalism” were considered contrary to a genuine civil society development; the latter had to do with a collective cause. 4) HRF saw itself as “socially secluded”—and therefore not suitable for social science research—and elitist, albeit for security concerns not inherently so. 5) My research was understood as the study of a collective endeavor, i.e. not simply professionals going about their careers. 6) The Historian simply could not help but advise me on my research, something that held on for the duration of my fieldwork.
The Mothers were said by the Historian to be particularly interesting because some of their most active members used to be members of the Confederation of Iranian Students, National Union (CISNU), a group originally formed in 1960 as a coalition of Iranian students in France, Britain, and Germany and joined with the Iranian Students Association in the United States in 1962 to form the largest and most active opposition (to the Shah) group outside Iran in the 1960s and 1970s (half of Iranian university students were studying abroad during this period, according to Afshin Matin-Asgari 2002). The mutation of that large, highly politicized group that relied on (anti-Imperialist, Marxist, etc.) ideology for its struggle into the very small and modest group of Mothers who strived to express and protest simply the human suffering inside Iran, as

7 The group was, in fact, predominantly National Front-oriented at the beginning and only leaned towards the Left more with time. The Students were not only extremely active against the Pahlavi regime in their countries of residence (by holding large demonstrations in front of the Iranian Embassy or protests against the Shah’s and his officials’ visits, by pushing international organizations such as Amnesty International and United Nations to address Iran’s atrocities, by influencing in the United States, for instance, Carter’s harsher stance towards human rights abuses in Iran in the years that led to the Revolution, by preventing European or American officials from traveling to Iran to take part, for instance, in the Shah’s extravagant and largely unpopular art festivals and celebrations of the 2500 years of continuous monarchy), but they also joined radical student movements that were not directly related to Iran, such as the 1968 protests in Europe and the anti-Vietnam War and civil liberties movements in the United States. Due to its large impact, the group was outlawed in Iran in 1971. By 1975, the group was fractioned into different, often clandestine guerilla-type groups; and when in the years and months closely preceding the Revolution the students returned to Iran one after another to join the revolutionary force, the Confederation saw its end. The group has been largely criticized by the more liberal members who left it for its strong Maoist leanings (Azar Nafissi does so broadly in her memoir, Reading Lolita in Tehran, as she was involved with the Confederation for a short while during her studies at the University of Oklahoma and left due to their harsh and “totalitarian” regulations about how you were expected to look, what you were expected to read, etc.). Nowadays, even those formerly Maoist students who stayed with the Confederation until the end criticize some of their past approaches and question the path that, despite all their efforts, led to a more dictatorial revolutionary regime than the Shah’s. A large number of former Confederation members live today in Europe and the United States as refuges and immigrants.
a human not political agenda, was what I could study, the Historian suggested. The Historians were close friends with the Jewish former Confederation member who headed the Mothers along with a few other women and were very happy with this shift of focus from ideology to human rights and civil liberties. This, in their mind, was a sign of “evolution” in the Iranian political culture and mentality, which had partly come about due to the decline of the Leftist ideology in the West so that activism of the sort that the Confederation and other student movements in the 1960s and 1970s engaged in did not have much appeal anymore and was not going to instigate much change in American policy. Now was a time of NGOs. As it turned out that, in the Historians’ view, I had to focus on the notions of human will and agency and the meaning of liberty and sovereignty amongst Iranians who currently live in a democracy (United States), this evolution was worth observing. Sites for observation with this group were not many, however. The Mothers did not think of themselves as an organization and did not have an office, website, directors, or members. Every once in a while, depending on the occasion, they (three or four women) got together in a coffee shop in the suburbs of D.C. and made decisions. They paid out of their own pockets. They did not want me to mention their names. It was not clear how they were being more effective than something like the Confederation had been back in the day as far as influencing American public opinion and foreign policy went, but they said more Iranians showed up to their events than they did to any other and that they even received letters from political prisoners inside Iran who asked them to continue the struggle. Although during my
fieldwork I did go to an event organized by the Mothers and attended one of their so-called coffee shop meetings\textsuperscript{8}, there was not much fieldwork to be done there.

Lastly, there was the organization that I refer to in this dissertation as the Scholarly Foundation (SF), a non-profit, non-partisan, and non-political educational and research institution, a short metro ride away from D.C. SF was founded in 1981 by a former female Minister of State (from here on referred to simply as the Former Minister) during the Shah’s time\textsuperscript{9}, and with a large sum of money endowed by the Shah’s sister, to study and disseminate knowledge about Iranian culture and contemporary issues. I knew about SF, of course, through its prominent scholarly projects and conferences and widely acknowledged publications. It was run by a staff of no more than five people. Their Board of Trustees consisted of another former Minister of the Shah’s and four scholars,

\textsuperscript{8} Both the event, commemorating the Tehran University student riots of July 1999, and the coffee shop meeting were spatially pastiche-like: The meeting was held at a La Madeleine French Café and Bakery in North Virginian suburbs on a Sunday afternoon, and almost all the other tables were occupied by groups of 5-10 Iranians meeting for one cause or another; you could tell there were liberals, Marxists, even some Islamists amongst them; you could barely hear what was being discussed at each table and there was a “circuit of gazes” and of leaflets and flyers amongst tables. The commemoration event, for its turn, was held at a highschool in Fairfax County, VA, and while the Iranians occupied the amphitheatre, a weekend class on Karate was going on in the hall downstairs. The kids were loud and the Iranians too charged with emotions, looking at slides of beaten and bloodied students, broken glass, fire, listening to revolutionary songs of hope and struggle, arguing over the song the organizers had chosen as the “national anthem,” reading confessionary essays about where they thought they had gone wrong with the Revolution, wiping tears off their eyes. At some point the conflict between the shouting and laughing of the Karate kids and the Iranian commemoration event became too much and one of the Iranian guys bent down from the staircase and screamed at the Karate kids in the hall: “You don’t understand? We want silence.” You don't understand? We want silence.

\textsuperscript{9} She had held other key government posts related to women’s affairs, as well as academic positions such as department chair in a major university in Iran, prior to the Revolution. In the United States, she had continued her work for women, particularly in Muslim majority countries, through NGO work and participation in global women’s conferences and so forth. She is the author and editor of several books regarding women in Iran as well as Muslim women and politics of participation.
some of whom quite well-known. Part of their program was to provide opportunities for artists, scholars, and intellectuals inside Iran to get exposure and participate in dialogues with their counterparts abroad. In my interview with the Former Minister, she pointed out that SF was created in order to cut out of the overwhelmingly ideological and revolutionary discourses of the years preceding and following the Revolution some space for dynamic scholarly give-and-take on issues of importance to Iran, “also to keep alive, for ourselves and for the foreigners both, our culture and identity, our Persian-ness, our Iranian-ness, as opposed to the predominantly Islamic Revolutionary identity that was being propagated” (personal interview, SF office, December 2005). While SF had maintained a cool head in the midst of the revolutionary fervent in all these years, consistently emphasizing scholarly merit and “expert opinion” over vehement for-or-against expositions, it had not escaped accusations of being pro-Pahlavi—not saying monarchist per se, but pro-Pahlavi, meaning they didn’t necessarily want to reinstate monarchy in Iran as the form of government, but they were not so overtly critical of the Pahlavis as everyone else was; they saw the shortcomings but believed things could have been improved had it not been for the Russian-inspired revolutionary ideology that predominated in the intellectual discourse in Iran since the 1940s and basically rendered the state as a form of evil power that could not be trusted, improved, etc. This was not least because of SF’s funding by the Shah’s sister and the state positions of the Former Minister, basically her having been part of the Shah’s modernization programs that had alienated people in the decade leading to the Revolution.

10 This problematizes Edward Said’s notion of the role of the intellectual as always oppositional, never working with the state, “speaking the truth to power.” “There is no question in my mind that the intellectual belongs on the same side as the weak and underrepresented.” (1994: 22)
The Historians had personal and familial ties with the Former Minister, but there were always soap operas due to personality clashes and also the fact that neither group seemed to take the other seriously. To the Former Minister, the Historians represented a unique combination of wealth, intelligence and education, and seclusion and elitism, which afforded them the luxury to sit at their bedroom office and shun absolutely anything and anybody that had to do with the Islamic Republic, including the many artists, writers, activists and intellectuals who lived and worked under it—if they were not imprisoned, in hiding, or dead, they were either somehow in cahoots with the regime or practically inefficacious. To the Historians, The Former Minister represented an almost pathological case of career opportunism with a bossy and possessive character. The fact that the Former Minister did believe in dialogue with elements inside Iran, in not abandoning the country through sanctions and boycotts and so forth, and in the benefits of having organizations like CEO for the Iranian-American community indicated to the Historians that she did not care about democracy and human rights in Iran as much as she claimed to. I did intern and volunteer for SF for a couple of months in 2004, helping them upload most of their publications in two languages (Persian and English) onto their website as an attempt on their part to catch up with technology and the English-speaking Iranian youth. Then I conducted interviews with the Former Minister and the editor of their major publication in 2005 (from here on referred to simply as the Editor). The

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11 The Editor had an interesting life trajectory that I’m going to briefly recount here as it is very typical in a sense of Iranian scholars of his generation: In highschool, following the 1953 coup d’etat against Mosadeq, he had become a sympathizer of the National Front and taken part in protests and published newsletters, like most kids did at that time since there was not much other alternative. There had been the Tudeh (literally the “Masses” Party, Russian-inspired Marxist group), but he found them non-inclusive for somebody like him who simply had nationalist ideals. He felt the
Editor told me that they were tired after some twenty-five years and were not interested in fundraising after they ran out of the Pahlavi money – this while he said he had heard that Tufts University had put aside 100 million dollars for the study of developing the same way about the more religious branch of the National Front with people like Sadeq Qotbzadeh, Ebrahim Yazdi, Mostafa Chamran and others who were close to Khomeini during his exile in Paris in 1978 and rose to prominent roles in the Islamic Revolutionary government. The Editor received a law degree from Tehran University and was amongst the first group of people from Iran to receive a Fulbright scholarship to study in the US. He graduated with a degree in International Studies from Columbia University. While in New York City, he was among the founders of the Association of Iranian Students, which later joined the Confederation of Iranian Students in Europe to form the Confederation of Iranian Students, National Union (CISNU). Because of his activities and since the Confederation was outlawed by the Shah’s regime in 1971, he was called by the SAVAK upon return to Iran and forbidden to teach. Only about a month before the Revolution, he was called again and invited to join the faculty at the Tehran Law School. After the Revolution but before the universities were closed down for Cultural Revolution, The Editor, who had engaged in publishing newsletters condemning the ongoing tortures and executions of former regime officials and political opponents, was summoned to the Revolutionary Court. Friends advised him to leave the country immediately as this could be the end of him, too. So he fled to Madrid through Pakistan with his two-and-a-half- and four-year-old children. As he was unable to secure an American visa, he moved to Paris and joined Jebheye Nejat e Iran (Iran Rescue Front?) to help the Crown Prince Reza Pahlavi gain control over the situation in Iran. When Reza Pahlavi moved to the US, he asked The Editor to move with him and The Editor became his consultant and speech writer for five years (1986-1991). That was where he met the Former Minister and her husband and began working with them as the editor of their major scholarly publication (personal interview, SF office, November 2005). The Editor’s trajectory indicates a move away from oppositional to the Shah’s government (of the specifically pro-Mosadeq kind) to a soft stance towards the Shah and realizing that he has not been as bad as the opposition made him look. In his interview with me, the Editor expressed his belief that the 1979 Revolution had been more induced by leftist intellectuals who were foreign-educated and/or lived abroad than by the real social and economic needs of the people. He said that the middle class were doing so well economically, even the secretaries at the university could spend their vacations in Europe, and socially, well, people could wear what they wanted, could have parties, drink what they wanted, etc. It was the foreign-educated intelligentsia who had these models in their minds of what Iran had to look like, whether it was Russia and China or France and Switzerland. He believed that the ideological fervor was finally past its heyday and people inside Iran were no longer striving for a certain model of government but for economic comforts, civil liberties, “similar to the economic and social rights as instated by the UN.” It seems like what the Historians saw as the evolution of Iranian political culture and mentality was nothing but a change in the spirit of the times, in the Editor’s view, part of the natural cycle of things.
countries and they could potentially apply for some funds there. While he talked to me, he constantly got on the phone to settle personal issues; every once in a while he reached towards his rolodex and searched among the cards for contact information of people I could interview. After each contact information that he gave me, the Editor looked at me and said: "Tell them I sent you; we know each other very well." You could tell he was a well-connected man, the Iranian diaspora merrily going round on his rolodex. The Former Minister, for her part, told me that the problem of Iranians was that they did not know how to organize, how to disagree, debate, and still organize themselves to achieve goals. This, she said, was something I had to address first and foremost if my research was about Iranian organizations in the US:

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12 Among those was a frequent contributor to political commentary columns in Persian-language publications in the US, who, according to the Editor said, had been in the US for 45 years. The Editor added: "If you close your eyes and listen to him talk, it will sound exactly like we are in 1952; these are people who have fossilized here." I never got to talk to this person, but I did conduct an interview with another individual recommended to me by the Editor, Taqi Mokhtar, the Editor of Iranians, a weekly publication for the Iranian community in the US (since 1996). Mokhtar recounted the following story to me from back in 1980 when he published a different newspaper for the Iranian community called Arash:

"There was a rug store on Wisconsin Ave., across the street from our office in a five-story building. This guy, Haji Nahidian, a very religious man, owned the store. He used to appear on American TV and praise the Islamic Republic. One day he called me up and said, look, if you don't want to enjoy the same fate as those who are being arrested, jailed, executed, etc. in Iran, you better stop publishing these reports [about the atrocities that were going on in Iran right after the Revolution]. He threatened me. I said, C'mon this is America, you can't do shit. Well, one morning not long after this phone conversation, I came to work and I saw police cars all over the street. They stopped me, I remember very well, right in front of a flower shop that was there, and told me that somebody had torched my office last night and destroyed everything. They asked me if I suspected who it might have been. I said, sure, it's the rug store guy. At that time, my case was being examined for Green Card at the Immigration Office. They told me that my insurance wouldn't pay for my loss because the cause of the damage appeared to be political, because I was politically active. I took my complaint to the immigration office and the expedited my case and I got my Green Card right away."
Everything is political and yet we do not talk about politics. How is it that we can’t organize? How many op-eds have we read and written? How many of us have been living in a democracy for 26 years? How many more years is it going to take for us to not see something behind everything, to be fair, to be respectful towards other individuals? I wonder, I wonder what it is. Can it be because we have made these self-made ghettos that we live in? We never agree with each other; it’s distressing. We victimize ourselves so much. It’s always somebody else who did this to us. There is a huge amount of money in Washington right now to promote diversity; if we had a federation, and a minority status, we could get the money. (Personal interview, SF office, December 2005)

And this was all the fieldwork with SF amounted to.

There were, of course, a variety of other organizations in the DC/Maryland/Virginia area; cultural and professional societies (clubs, associations, centers, saloons) that are born and die everyday across the United States, each with a different definition of “culture” to promote, each with their own “imagined communities:” The Iranian American Technology Council; Civil Society, Mihan Foundation; Iranian Alliances Across Borders, (IAAB); Iranian Academic Association; Iranian Dental Club; Iranian Medical Society of Greater Washington; Professional Iranian Networking Society; Society of Iranian Professionals; Iranian-American Cultural Society of Maryland, House of Iran; Iran Cultural and Educational Center; Iranian American Cultural Association; Iranian-American Volunteer Alliance; Kanoon Iran; Mehregan: Iranian Teachers Association; Persian Cultural Center; Roshan Cultural Heritage Institute; Iranian Artist Scholarship, Iranian Community School; and more than one Iranian Student Association at each of the area’s many universities. Poetry nights, celebrations, talks, discussion groups, happy hours, tea parties, ad infinitum. Perhaps this was exactly what the Former Minister had referred to as Iranians having difficulty with forming true organizations with broad effects, just every several individuals getting together and forming their own little niche, and even within those always quarrelling,
always spending all their time discussing age-old recurring topics, for about thirty years at least. Perhaps that is what CEO planned to change through its networking project, a comprehensive database of all the Iranian organizations in the US which would encourage Iranian-Americans to network and collaborate. Perhaps also CEO’s efforts to establish itself as THE megaphone of the Iranian-American community, THE organization that the media, policy makers, etc. could directly go to communicate with the Iranian-American community, was a result of seeing this lack of a representative voice in the ocean of little Iranian groups all over the place.

And then, there were Iranian individuals who gave talks around town, at Washington’s many universities, think tanks, or clubs. One of these was a talk in fall 2004 at Washington’s National Press Club by the showman of a one-man Iranian satellite TV program out of Los Angeles, Dr. Ahura Yazdi (aka Hakha), whose job it was to appear on the screen and invite the people of Iran to take to the streets and “kick out the mullahs.” The talk was titled “Is Iran Next?” and subtitled “Iranian Americans Demand to Know How the Presidential Candidates Plan to Confront the Mullah Threat.” Representatives of the Bush and Kerry campaigns were invited to come and answer. I was working at the CEO office when Hakha’s publicity person called to ask CEO to encourage its members to attend this session. My supervisor asked, but who is he representing? The publicity person, an American, said he was “representing the people of Iran, of course.” My interlocutors both at CEO and at HRF dismissed the guy immediately and said it would be a waste of time to go, considering that he was probably going to “repeat the same monarchist crap as these LA products usually do.” I took a few hours off and went to the National Press Club to check him out. Yes, of course, men
and women in professional suits and with Iran’s royal flag pins on their coats greeted me and gave me a name tag. Inside, there was another huge flag with the lion and the sun, looking proud. There were quite a few media people from NBC, ABC, and places like that. Hakha, however, was not speaking English that much, taken by a sudden rush of passionate nationalism perhaps, and the talk had nothing whatsoever to do with US plans regarding the “mullah threat.” He was basically using this opportunity to unravel his own grand plan to go to Iran and change the regime on October 1st (about a month from then) personally. He talked about how there was no government in Iran and there were only seven mullahs to topple, and that should be easy because, he said, he was planning on having several charter planes pick up Iranians and other enthusiasts from around the world and land them in Iran. By then, the seven mullahs would have packed their bags and escaped to Saudi Arabia or some place like that where he said they belonged. He said the schools were asked (through his satellite TV) not to start on September 23rd, as they normally would, and postpone commencing until October 2nd when the regime would have nicely changed and the kids would be able to start the school year in a free Iran (I was curious as to how he was planning to tackle the problem of textbooks). According to his plan, regime change in Iran would take one afternoon; and that was not all he was planning to do on that afternoon. October 1st is also an ancient Persian fall holiday that Hakha was planning to celebrate with all the people of Iran on the streets. One busy afternoon.

Finally, there came the Q and A time. The NBC reporter jumped in to ask his prepared question, which was lucky for him because, as I said, Hakha kept forgetting to speak English. “So, what is your plan once you land in Iran and change the regime?”
Hakha got irritated for some reason and said that all he wanted to do was to light the lights over in Persepolis, and “hopefully everything will go back to the ancient times.” He said that he had appointed the interim government (but he coyly refrained from naming names at that session) and it would be all up to the people to decide what they wanted after that. He had taken the trouble to awaken the people; did they want him now to go sweep the streets of Tehran, too? What did they mean by what he planned to do once he changed the regime? “But don’t you think the Revolutionary Guards can arrest you in no time and do to you what they did to all the different groups that tried to say something against the government in the past 25 years?” No, they will pack their stuff and go; now that’s the end of that. The NBC guy and other reporters left. Then Hakha asked everyone to rise and sing a patriotic song with him, which they did with tears in their eyes, and I could not pretend that I was not Iranian and didn’t know the song because they had already seen me forget not to take notes when Hakha forgot to speak English. After the session was over, I hung around to see if I could get any interesting ethnographic details. I heard a woman saying to another: “It is hard what this Mr. Dr. is trying to do, but you know, the harder we get democracy and freedom in Iran the dearer it will be for us; just as when you buy a sweater from Marshall’s, you just throw it in the washing machine, but when you buy something at Saks Fifth Avenue you are always careful to take it to the dry cleaner’s and hang it properly and so forth.” I was enchanted and felt very content with my ethnographic eavesdropping. That afternoon, I enthusiastically checked Hakha’s website upon return to the HRF office. There in the “events” bar, there was “October 1st: Regime Change” sandwiched between “September 2: happy hour at Café Citron” and a frightening void where the events bar ended. Then I
also saw that in an interview published on the web he had referred to his style of regime change in Iran as “a cultural movement.” Regime Change in Iran as a Cultural Movement.

A couple of weeks after Hakha’s talk, I heard of another talk at the American University, this time by a woman parliamentarian from Iran, Elaheh Koolayi. This time I went with one of the Historians, though we planned carefully to part ways as soon as we got off the cab we shared and to make sure we didn’t talk to each other, so if anyone from CEO was there they would not know that we knew each other. The speaker, one of the “reformists” in Iran, went on and on about the peculiar problems of the struggle for democracy in countries like Iran where there is a long and strong tradition of patriarchy, extreme religiousness, high rate of poverty, etc., making sure she did not directly criticize the current ruling elite in Iran for blocking the way to democracy. All through her talk, a few well-shaven middle-aged men in suits and ties (monarchist look) kept moving their chairs noisily and laughing audibly in mocking every time she said something positive about Iran. It was clear this was part of a plan to undermine her and create tension in the room. When the speaker was done, the blond American moderator opened the session to discussion.

The first person to ask a question was an oldish man from Radio Farda (Radio Tomorrow), an Iranian Washington-based station that provides 24-hour service to Iran. He started speaking in Persian, to which the blond moderator objected by “oh, but, sir, I’m afraid you need to speak English.” Continuing to speak Persian and translating one out of three (four, five) sentences into broken English, he went on and on about how whatever the parliamentarian had said was not to be believed and how the true Iran was
the land of..., and the blond moderator: “sir, I’m afraid I need to cut you off now.”

Accusing the organizers of the session of having no interest in knowing about the true Iran, he then turned to the audience and continued his speech in Persian. Widened blue and green eyes stared in a mixture of terror and amusement. Another Iranian guy said somebody had to stop “this foolish old man” from taking up all the time, to which yet another Iranian man in a suit and tie objected by “shut up!” “No, you shut up! Why don’t you shut up?!” And soon half of the audience was engaged in shutting the other half up. Finally the blond moderator said: “I’m afraid I have to ask that from now on only AU students can ask questions. And no Iranians, please.” Nathan introduced himself as a freshman who knows nothing about Iran and asked that people understand his nervousness since he’d never been to a session as emotionally charged as this. At least four or five Iranians from the audience tried to answer Nathan’s question at the same time as the speaker parliamentarian. An American girl got up and asked the typical good-hearted American question: “But what can we, as Americans, do to help Iranians in their quest for democracy?” Before anyone said anything, an obese American man raised his voice and said: “It is their business, and clearly they are taking care of it! They don’t need us to get involved!” At which point the blond moderator announced that the session was way past over and thanked everyone for their interest. Iranians stayed in the room for at least an hour after Nathan, the good-hearted girl, the obese guy, and the blond moderator had left, to take care of their business. I hung around to take note of what was by far more interesting than the talk we had sat through.
This summary of my fieldwork points to a pathology of organizational development amongst Iranians that both those studying Iranian *political culture* and Iranians themselves love to talk about. This pathology has been most elaborately discussed by James Bill as the “web-system” (1972). In this system, political power is exercised by means of informal gatherings and personal ties rather than through formal institutions. Inter- and intra-group suspicions and quarrels are part and parcel of this web-system:

Committees, commissions, associations, and formal organizations have never been prevalent and where they existed they have not operated as such. They have been characterized by fissures, arguments, inactivity, personalism, and in general, by organizational chaos. Even professional organizations such as the Iranian Medical and Bar Associations have been little more than gatherings characterized by strife and factionalism. The more subtle, intricate, and complex facets of tension and rivalry do not thrive in a formal setting where votes are counted and minutes recorded (Bill 1972:45).

Bill states that, instead, Iranians negotiate power through a network of cliques, called *dowrehs* or *dowrahs*. *Dowrehs*, which Hamid Naficy (1993) also discusses in the context of the Iranian community in Los Angeles during the 1980s and early 1990s (and Beeman 1986), are small groups of people who meet periodically, usually rotating the meeting place among the membership. There could be professional *dowrehs*, family *dowrehs*, political *dowrehs*, intellectual *dowrehs*, former-classmate *dowrehs*, gambling *dowrehs*, religious *dowrehs*, and so forth. *Dowrehs* have a long history in Iran, dervishes and Sufi leaders would gather in such small groups to chant, the “debating Muslims” in Fischer’s account (1990) discuss things in that manner, important political and business decisions have been made over card tables, in gardens, and during hikes and hunting trips. Of course, knowing only too well how personal the political is, it becomes the job
of the secret police to manipulate and persecute these dowerehs and private gatherings among family and friends, even if they are simply to recite the Quran or poetry.

Reza Behnam (1986) expresses a similar idea when he says that Iranian sociality is traditionally defined in terms of kinship; citizens think of their leader as a charismatic father figure that they respect and fear and never directly address. There are no formal written rules and regulations about how to treat each other, but generally it is the father's role to provide for his family and protect the honor of the motherland, particularly against outside forces. Iranians have traditionally tended to socialize exclusively within their homes, separated from the outside world by high walls; everybody outside the home has been viewed with mistrust and suspicion; therefore, opportunities for cooperation and association amongst citizens have been lost. Behnam then goes on to say that it is common in the Middle East in general for people to work through sprawling conglomerates of personal cliques, familial networks, and regional factions, hence the lack of a formal group structure and the absence of organizational rationale. He contends that while modern institutions have been introduced to Iran, the social structure has remained traditional and people have continued to work through “an ad hoc constellation of miniature systems of power, a cloud of unstable micropolitics, which compete, ally, gather strength, and very soon overextended, fragment again” (Behnam 1986:113). For an effective administration, these structures and patterns of socialization must change, the father figure must be demolished, and new norms leading to a self-governing political system in which power is shared not centered must take its place.

Similarly, in The Role of Political Culture in Iranian Political Development, Dal Seung Yu (2002) states that democracy (note that in Bill’s and Behnam’s accounts, the
question is modernity, not democracy) cannot be brought about merely through democratic institutions but that a democratic attitude is needed, a combination of beliefs, knowledges, and feelings pertaining to political processes. According to Yu, the Eastern or Asiatic syndrome from which Iranian political culture suffers is made of certain sentiments with regards to politics, such as fear, distrust, suspicion, submission, alienation, indifference, opportunism, hypocrisy, insecurity, pessimism, etc., and in order for democracy to take effect, these sentiments must first be changed.

This discussion of their "affective malfunction" is a popular one amongst Iranians. It is common to think that we suffer from one political and economic disaster after another because of the types of people we are. "We are dishonest," "we cannot respect a person we disagree with," "we are all conspiracy theorists," one often hears Iranians say. It seems like the self-criticism has been going on for a while, as already in the writings of the intellectuals of the Constitutional Period in the late 19\textsuperscript{th} and early 20\textsuperscript{th} century one finds abundant references to such problematic character traits, resembling those made by European travelers in Iran in the previous centuries (Chardin 1630, Lady Sheil 1856, Sackville-West 1926, Bell 1928, and others). My research on Iranian organizations in Washington DC, then, took place against the backdrop of this already existing widespread perception of our disease and its cure in changing our norms, attitudes, patterns of sociality, and the systems through which we "traditionally" make sense of the world and negotiate power. In a sense, it is a common scenario of encounter between the colonized and normative modernity, repeating itself in an encounter between Iranians and American democracy. The following incidence indicates the pathology in
terms of which my research has commonly been perceived amongst Iranians, those that I worked with in DC and those who hear about it:

In March 2007, I attended an award ceremony held by the Society of Iranian American Women for Education (SIAWE) in Houston. Upon learning that I was in the process of defending my Ph.D. about Iranian organizations in Washington DC, a very well-dressed slim Iranian woman pressed me to explain what types of people I had found we were. Seeing my reluctance to respond to such a broad question, she offered: “we are complex people, right?” Right. She then continued: “we never trust each other, we are always suspicious, we can’t work together.” I told her that my findings confirmed some of those statements, but that Washington was a kind of place that lent itself to suspicion and mistrust because of its small scale and the overwhelming density of places and people of power that made you think you were constantly being watched, and a lot of times you were. Later, a well-dressed clean-shaven Iranian man approached me and said: “I hear you have a Ph.D. on Iranians. I have two questions for you, if you can tell me in two seconds: How can we deal with paranoia? And how can we deal with envy?” I laughed and said that he needed to make an appointment and come to my clinic for such serious chronic ailments. It was clear that in that party, surrounded by Iranian doctors with different specialties, I had become the Culture Doctor and they expected my diagnosis and prescription. He, then, told me that he didn’t think his generation could be “fixed,” anyway, and if anything could be done by or for Iranians, it would have to be by people under thirty-five years of age.

For me, as an Iranian who has spent the larger part of her twenties exploring the new meanings and potentials of life and self in a continuous and intimate relationship
with America (more so because I never left or received any visitors from Iran in seven years), the question of culture as pathology is all too familiar. At the end of my second year, when I sought help at the university’s counseling facility for unbearable depression, I was told that there was nothing in my life but something about the way I perceived it that was wrong. I was not familiar with the concept of “wrong” in psychoanalysis—which was, by the way, not what this was called; this was “counseling;” and as such, it was not about analyzing something that was happening to me but about advising me on how to fix it. Something in my mind was not quite working; and the part of it that could not be fixed by balancing my chemicals could be improved by re-training my mental capacities to perceive differently; a change of attitude, of patterns and systems of making sense. I come from a family of individuals who have been able to afford being existentialists, that is overtly conscious of and concerned about their inner lives, the terms and conditions of their existences. My great uncles read Freud and Jung among others and passed on to my young mother a certain set of perhaps what Foucault (1976) has called “technologies of the self,” skills at how to dig deep inside yourself and find the roots of your dreams and desires, not so much to transform but to get in touch with the true core of your being. From an early age, I remember my mother sitting at the breakfast table, the rims of her eyes getting pink as she stared into the distance and told us kids that she thought she suffered from “the cancer of the soul.” As early as twelve or thirteen, I was already walking around, asking, “Where does my pain come from? When did I start to feel such loss?” And I felt I needed to go on a vacation to a deserted place, following the many middle-aged intellectual-type characters of my favorite books and movies, to “sort out my life and figure out the source of my discomfort.”
To be told, then, during counseling at my American university, that the source of my discomfort was to be found in my attitude and not in my life was a shock. After all, I have lived a rather full life of dramatic events, with revolution at three and a half, war from four to twelve, arrests and executions between six and sixteen; couldn’t we find enough ground for my feelings of insecurity and loss there? No; instead, I was asked to make lists of ten things that I had done that had made me happy in a day, ten good things that I had done for other people, ten good things that other people had said about me, and so forth. Somewhere, in the process of listing and numbering and recording, instead of remembering (disproportionately and selectively as memory tends to do) and analyzing, my mind was learning how to see and make sense of data differently. I was told to let go of the association between sadness and profundity, of taking professional feedback personally, of feeling guilty for being treated well, of experiencing sensations of loss and nostalgia every time things changed even for the better; and as I cut those connections and made new ones between things, the landscape of my self was reconfigured, the structure of my feelings transformed, new norms for loss and triumph were set, and I was on my way to cure. Not just the fact that you can get an “ethos transplant” if yours is malfunctioning, but the sheer practicality and affordability of becoming (instead of the existentialist concern with being), is so American. Not all the changes of language and dress and conduct and consumption that having been in America for the past seven years has entailed for me, but this reconfiguration of ways of seeing and making sense is what has made me wonder just how “Americanized” I have become.

The question of retraining your mind in new forms and technologies of self-governance is importantly related to the democratizing projects of the two main
organizations of my study, CEO and HRF. CEO through training Iranians in the practical skills of participation in democracy (how to vote, how to get small business advantages, how to network, how to contact your representatives), and HRF by teaching Iranians how to reconfigure their understanding of the individual, rights, life, sovereignty, and will in democratic as opposed to totalitarian terms (the human rights database and the democracy library), they both tried to cure Iranians of their political sentiments, knowledges, and experiences (political culture) and cultivate in them new attitudes, norms, ways of seeing, and of making sense, new connections and configurations. This “ethos transplantation” was the gist of their subject-making projects, making democratic subjects, helping Iranians become Americans –albeit with an ethnic touch, color, flavor, accent, what is commonly referred to as “heritage.”

However, there is much more that I observed in my field and much more that those observations lead to than this rather standard critique of neo-liberalism (teaching docile subjects the norms of the capitalist world order) as a homogenizing and hegemonic force with all the essentialist and dismissive statements about the perceptual and relational systems of the Others that it contains. I have tried and not been able to settle for explaining my field in terms of the pathology of the Iranian political culture and its gradual reconfiguration according to the norms of American democracy, or else the persistence of the same ethos (personalism, suspicion, fissures, organizational chaos, ineffectiveness, etc.) despite its different locality. I have agonized over how to lose as the sole point of contact this prevalent encounter between modernity and tradition, between democracy as a political culture and the Eastern/Muslim/Asiatic/Iranian political culture, between the big power (American government) and the little powers (Iranian NGOs),
between two essentially different world orders, and to establish, instead, different trajectories of connectedness that are not easily theorizable.
To Argue Ethnographically Is to Establish a Logic of Connections

"Multi-sited research is designed around chains, paths, threads, conjunctions, or juxtapositions of locations in which the ethnographer establishes some form of literal, physical presence, with an explicit, posited logic of association or connection among sites that in fact defines the argument of ethnography." (George Marcus, Ethnography through Thick & Thin, p 90)

"The grounding act of fiction in any project of ethnographic writing is the construction of a whole that guarantees the facticity of 'fact.'" (George Marcus, Ethnography through Thick & Thin, P 33)

As the summary of my fieldwork above might have shown, the reality on the ground of the subjects that we study is messy, slippery, open-ended, and endlessly specific unless somehow attached to a grounding whole, something to give it some form of closure. This grounding act is, of course, always inevitably an act of fiction; the connection to any ulterior and encompassing whole is only a matter of thought, a way of conceiving and conceptualizing; and closure can only be constructed in later writing about the experience. Reality becomes fact only through the grounding act of fiction.

According to Marcus, anthropologists have commonly borrowed “systems” from other social science disciplines into which to situate their ethnographies: The imperatives of state and society, the spirit of history, the nature of man, the capitalist economy, something of which the ethnography of a particular place and people could be an example or an explanation by way of colorful and delicious details. Many ethnographies, thus, have simply become perfect cozy microcosms to make other disciplines’ impersonal macro-mechanisms look more knowable and accessible. Or else, they have been reruns of the tale of the small community’s resistant and rebellious diversity despite and against the domineering homogeneity of the “system.” A lot of ethnographies have been
reduced to merely case studies, something that can easily be appropriated, something that merely appropriates, because somebody chose to take the living heart of the experience and stuff it into a micro-macro dichotomy as a container. Theory as a whole (this talk of the big system) can be a devise for better seeing, or seeing differently, but it can also become a blind eye turned to reality; it can enable you to speak about something in brilliant ways, but it can also, dangerously, treat as nothing everything that cannot be spoken about in terms of theory.

How do we, then, conceive of a whole for an ethnography without shifting the center of gravity too far from the beating heart of the experience itself and the mixed and sometimes conflicting sensual, moral, practical, geographical, political, and other spaces through which it is simultaneously lived? How can disclosure of reality in writing, and the kind of closure it brings, open new spaces for social theory rather than close them through theory? How can we ‘argue’ by way of describing? How can we (continue to) tell novel and surprising stories, good stories that move and touch and breathe? Marcus argues for a whole-in-making that is intrinsic to the experience (fieldwork, reality) and concurrent with it, emerging as the project is conceived and developed, rather than ulterior and posterior to it. The whole, in this light, is not something to which our story is attached but the story itself, in the way it proceeds and delineates processes. There is certainly an element of movement in between the different—and different levels of—temporally and spatially interconnected and simultaneous entities. As such, ethnography’s “whole” is knit by passing the threads of research, observation, and imagination vertically and horizontally and diagonally between points that would appear incommensurate otherwise.
My attempt in this dissertation is to construct a certain logic of connection between different elements in my field, between the way I understood the perceptual frameworks of the people I studied and the way I understood their outer realities of life in Washington DC, between what I observed and how that made me feel, between the multiple and simultaneous planes of space and time (Iran and the US, past and present, my generation and theirs), between different presences, between elements that seemed only accidentally resonant, the affective landscapes, the distracted ways of knowing, what Bakhtin (1982) calls "words with loopholes" and "words with side-wards glances," and what Grabar (2001) calls "circuit of gazes" and "trait of witnesses." In order to do that, I have resorted, after many failed attempts to do otherwise and still with a certain (I would like to think productive if not, at the end, entirely successful) degree of two-mindedness or two-heartedness, to what I know best how to do and that is to write with writerly sensibilities. These sensibilities do not start with writing but precede it; they inform a different set of judgments about what constitutes reality, what is enough of a connection to evoke, what kind of effect one intends to generate through writing, and just the general questions of selection and design. In this dissertation, I use Persian manuscript paintings (miniatures) as a poesis, inspiration for design, to lay out my field, in the way that I conceptualize it and in writing. This dissertation has two large sections in each of which I tell a story *in terms of* Persian manuscript paintings.
Persian Manuscript Paintings (Miniatures)

Persian Miniature Painting is a style of illustration that flourished through major court-sponsored book-making projects between the 14th and 18th centuries AD. During this time, the arts of the book had the status of THE emblem of cultural sophistication and prestige and mastery. They showcased the best of the best not only in terms of the literary masterpieces that were picked for the purpose but also in terms of the team of artists and craftsmen and professionals that were hired, invited, or simply captured during conquests and wars and brought to ateliers adjacent to the courts and closely watched by the sovereign himself. Excellence and wealth also shone through the materials used from the paper to the paint, to the ink, to the brush, to the gold and silver sprinkles. Sponsoring the arts of the book was an artistic and cultural policy that was integral to the sovereign's political and military aspirations, from gaining legitimacy among a certain constituency to showing to their neighbors and rivals who had the upper hand, to promoting a certain image of themselves and their kingdoms. Most of the paintings depict courtly activities, like lavish parties, hunting and camping trips, battles, polo games, crowning ceremonies, and so forth. The tradition of Persian painting is at heart a multicultural and cosmopolitan tradition that developed at different hubs not only from Tabriz to Isfahan in Iran but also from Baghdad to Heart and from Istanbul to Delhi, inspired by and combining several traditions from Chinese and Mongol to Arab/Islamic and from Ottoman to Persian and pre-Islamic. Nevertheless, a distinct set of characteristics (like the interest in stylization or the lack of perspectival rendering) have remained fairly constant, forming, in the words of Sheila Canby, a "melody to which all improvisations and variations ultimately refer" (1993).
My interest in Persian miniatures as a crucial component of my research and writing about Iran and Iranians is nothing new. If I were to follow the thing within my own professional trajectory, I would have to start from Julie Taylor’s experimental writing class which I took in 2003, way before I had even made up my mind about what my dissertation project was going to be, and it was her shell key chain, sporting a portion of a Persian miniature painting, that started it. We were, I was, sort of stuck with these dominant narratives and discourses about Muslim women and life for women under the Islamic Republic and it become kind of hard, kind of impossible, for me to speak in any way at all, that was meaningful and to my content, about our lives as women from Muslim Iran, my mother, my grandmother, my sisters, my aunts, my cousins, my friends, and me. We were looking for something new, something with a distinct Iranian flavor, but something that was not so overused and lifeless, perhaps a ‘thing’ that I could cling my story to, something with a life and a spirit. Tango appeared to be that for Taylor in her research and writing about Argentina, and Persian miniatures became that for me. I wrote a paper for that class that was later developed into what I called ‘Persian miniature writing’, and I wrote about a picture of my sister at fourteen in a room back home that happened to be wall-papered with Persian miniature paintings. There, I had tried to bring the multi-layeredness of Persian miniatures, their amazing details and crowded scenes, into the language of my writing to create the same richness and compactness of sense in a dense writing about a small picture, one tiny piece that was a miniature of a whole lot of things that inhabited me, physically, intellectually, emotionally about being a woman from Iran, her sister, with memories from the same room. Later I wrote another paper about my sister, this time an analysis of her wedding video which I received in the mail,
and which had happened in the same room with Persian miniature wallpapers, and there I tried to further my use of Persian miniatures from a mere device for writing to artistic forms and features that could help me conceptualize and articulate a certain sociality that I observed in the wedding video. For example, how emotions were banned from faces, or how events happened simultaneously in interconnected yet different spaces next to each other, a room for men, a room for women, a place for children, etc.

When I went to the field, I carried the same sort of sensibilities with me. A lot of things from the outset resonated with Persian miniature features, like the presence of gazes and gossips, from the American government with its new ‘interest’ in Middle Eastern exile intellectuals and organizations and their advice and ‘expertise’ occasionally about matters such as whether or not to bomb Iran, whether or not to remove the sanctions, whom to support and whom to topple, to the Iranian government which we, the organization members and I, always feared had agents around that could eavesdrop on us or assassinate individuals. From people inside Iran who were actively following these organizations and their activities through the internet, radio, and satellite TV, to the organizations themselves and the Iranian-American community, in which everybody was always trying to figure out what others were doing while hiding behind a bush herself. There existed this trait of witnesses in Washington DC which is such a small city, especially the even smaller part of it that makes policy.

On the other hand, it fascinated me that while Persian miniatures or portions and imitations and elements from them were everywhere where Iranians were, from their homes to their culture fairs, to their New Year celebrations, to their grocery markets, to their websites and CD and book covers and calendars, there was no conscious talk about
them and what they meant and why they were still so popular, among the historians and sociologists and scholars and writers that I worked with. Even when they heard about my research and what I was trying to do, it just appeared to them that I was this young and ambitious scholar who was trying desperately to connect two impossibly unrelated and incommensurate fields—which can still be true! With that, it really was a triumph for me when one day one of my informants, who used to make major fun of me for my clinging to Persian miniatures, said to a reporter that the participation of Iranians in politics reminded her of Persian miniature paintings in which people were merely onlookers, half-hidden, astonished, gazing and gossiping, instead of being in the open, the center, acting. I had converted her: she had gone anthropologist as much as I perhaps had gone native. My sense of triumph, of course, was somewhat problematized when my supervisor Masoomeh Farhad, the Curator of Islamic Art and Chief Curator of the Freer and Sackler galleries, where I also interned for several months, looking at and reading about Persian miniature paintings, told me to caution against this sort of essentialist use of the Persian miniatures and this freely dissecting cultural insight from what is, more than anything, an artistic style. She drew my attention to the connections I could find between the methods

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13 This is an example of the use of miniatures in service of the cosmology-as-pathology tendency that I have discussed previously in this chapter and elsewhere in the dissertation. One could use them as indications of the disregard for individuality in Persio-Islamic culture (and hence its fundamental anti-democratic or un-modern nature), or as indications of an obsession with borders and frames as represented elsewhere in the Iranian culture: in the high walls of house and daroon/biron (outside/inside), zaher/baten (outer self/inner self) distinctions, for example. This use of the miniatures as microcosms of Iranian culture, as representative of the Iranian psychic structure and patterns, as indexes of Persianate attitudes towards the world and the self, etc. is something that I eventually abandoned in this dissertation. In essence, Persian manuscript paintings are artistic styles and represent only as much of the culture and collective psyche as any artistic production anywhere does: of course art is informed by an ethos but cannot be reduced to a direct representation of that ethos.
of production and circulation of Persian miniatures and the activities of Iranian non-
governmental groups in America and questions of funding, legitimacy, circulation,
influence, promotion, identity, assimilation, and so forth.

This was not quite the route that I took in this dissertation; however, I could see
the potential for finding resonances between the manuscript paintings and my field in
Washington DC that were not stylistic but meta-stylistic in a sense: One day, as I was
leaving the Freer Gallery basement where I examined stored collections of Persian
manuscript paintings in morgue-like rooms with large white tables in the middle and grey
drawers covering all the walls half way, Massumeh Farhad invited me to join her and the
Iraqi-British director of the Galleries, Julian Raby, to a dark room with powerful desk
lamps where a resident scholar was examining a small handwritten phrase on the margin
of one of the pages of a manuscript to determine what it had said originally. It was clear,
to their trained eyes of course, that the original writing, containing the name of Ali, had
been later manipulated to erase the name of Ali, indicating, if they could prove it, the
attempt of a later Sunni patron to shift the weight of significance and legitimacy of the
manuscript originally made under a Shi‘ii patron. Consensus was not reached between
the three scholars of Islamic art that evening; however, as we stepped out of the building,
Mr. Raby referred to each manuscript as a battlefield in which questions of ownership,
origins, and legitimacy were constantly contested through drawing, erasing, and re-
drawing, and over-drawing of lines; all the scholar could do was to trace and retrace the
lines as best as one could. I found, then, another sense in which my field resembled a
manuscript painting, with the drawn, removed, re-drawn, and over-drawn lines of
ownership, origins, and legitimacy that I could only try to trace as best as I could.
At the end, what I set out to do was to discern stylistic features in Persian manuscript paintings that could be utilized in order to conceptualize and articulate a certain sociality that I observed in my field. I have tried to fashion, through the Persian manuscript paintings, a culturally specific semiotic frame for understanding the kind of poetics of collection, recording, representation, dissemination, and communication of knowledge and sentiment that my studied Iranian NGOs in DC partook in. Hence the characterization of this ethnography as one in terms of Persian manuscript paintings and not of them or thematically informed by them. These terms are as follows:

1) The miniatures mirror the mood and spirit of the story more faithfully than they handle resemblances of all sorts, to the figures and events described in the text, or to actual figures and events outside the text. I try to do the same in my ethnography: evoke a certain structure of sentiments, an atmosphere, a certain affective landscape upon which my actors acted and can be understood. I try to evoke the temporality of this “lingering moment just before fulfillment” and my interlocutors’ largely unattainable, unrequited love affair with democracy in Iran, as if modeled after the conventional love of Persian lyrics and miniatures. How does it feel to be in this place (Washington DC) at this time (War or Terror era)? The shame and pride, despair and hope, guilt and righteousness, desperation and luck, terror and relief, energy and lethargy that one feels alternately or all at once. I argue that how one feels, constantly, systematically, is not just a side effect of what one does or experiences but that it defines a mode, a structure, for what one does; it becomes this “melody to which all improvisations and modifications ultimately refer”.

14 For an interesting discussion about affective energies, see William Connolly in Neuropolitics (1999) and Anthony Molino’s edited volume, Culture, Subject, Psyche (2004).
this distinct "design", this "idiom" of terror or hope or pride or guilt. Even of madness, astonishment, desire, devotion, debasement, which are the classic Persian sentiments illustrated in the miniatures. (My use of Dracula in the third chapter is in line with this technique of atmosphere-setting instead of direct resemblance; Dracula sets a tone, creates a mode, a structure of feelings, an idiom.)

2) The miniatures are formed through repetition, yet slight modification, of a limited but recognized number of optemes. These optemes are true to convention, but not necessarily to reality; they represent types flawlessly, but not recognizable specific figures necessarily. I intend to take advantage of this trait to represent certain elements in my field. Although unitizing individuals, events, and organizations under one -eme or another can prove simply wrong, simplistic, and very unfair, some fields, I believe, yield to this kind of construction or viewing more than others—and to more useful ends. In my case, I could easily have categories such as "The Recovering Marxist", "The Monarchist", "The Lady Who Thought True Democracy Was Such Good Quality It Could Be Found in Saks Fifth Avenue", "Tank-Toped at Think Tanks", "The Iranian Who Embraced His Country as the Axis of Evil", "The Non-White Iranian" or "The White Iranian", "The Chain Smoker", "The Man with the Hard Liquor Who Never Stopped Discussing Things", just like the titles of individual Persian miniature illustrations and Chekhov's short stories. Each of these categories has its own type of

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15 To take the emphasis away from the individuals, and in an attempt to stay away from the kind of gossips and soap operas in my field that naming names in this dissertation may only contribute to, I have resorted to a certain language of types, not dissimilar to the Persian manuscript illustrations and Chekhov's short stories: I refer to my focus organizations as the Human Rights Foundation, the Civic Education Organization, the Mothers Foundation (real-life name), and the Scholarly Foundation; to my interlocutors
events that go with it: workshops, poetry nights, protests, happy hours, forums, meetings, campaigns, etc. Marxists don’t have Happy Hours, but they do have poker nights; second generation Iranians would never hold poetry nights, but workshops for sure; leftist or monarchist organizations don’t take interns, they have followers, fans, and friends; they don’t fund raise either, etc. Things that you would know if you are in the pool, or in the “garden”, as Iranians say. (Again, Dracula for me is one such opteme; it represents a conventional classification of politics in general in the Iranian political ethos. That it is a monster, an Undead entity, essentially an anomaly is very telling of the depiction of political power for many Iranians, including myself. That normative modernity in the form of Victorian Englishmen sets out to kill Dracula and, by killing it, to give it peace and set its soul free is reminiscent of the Bush administration’s “global democracy strategy,” for instance, to liberate the East of its autocratic rulers/monsters/undead forms of governance.)

3) The miniatures invite a distracted way of viewing, with multiple centers of interest, somewhat equally distributed over the page, not so much in terms of center and periphery. I use the trope of distraction in both sections of my dissertation: In one, I set out to read Gaston Bachelard’s Poetics of Space (1994) and instead run into one of my interlocutors with whom I exchange a few sentences. This becomes the subject of the next sixty pages or so whereby I describe and analyze why that exchange was so poignant. In this moment of distraction from my ostensive purpose (reading the book) lies the gist of all I have to say about my field. Again in the second section, I set out to watch a ballet performance of Dracula but I get sidetracked by another one of my

as the Historians, the Participation Promoter, the Former Minister, the Editor, the Director, and the Mothers.
interlocutors and end up missing the show and having an argument with her, an argument that comes to embody, again, the gist of my field experience. I try to legitimize the use of distractions and accidental resonances in the production of a sense of the field, both while doing fieldwork and while writing. These modes of knowing are, at any rate, an important part of how we make judgments in everyday life; there is no reason in our ethnographies of everyday life to discard these modes as not valid because not clear enough or not scholarly and analytical enough. In the miniatures, it is not always clear what the *main action* in the scene is and you have to pay attention to all the elements equally in order to get the full essence of what is being depicted.

4) The miniatures work through what Oleg Grabar calls a "trait of witnesses" (2001). If you pay close attention, which is how you are supposed to 'see' a Persian miniature painting, you will notice all these figures who are lurking from behind half-drawn curtains and half-closed doors, from the balconies and roofs, behind rocks and bushes, everywhere, in the most bizarre places, always looking at the main scene and commenting with their hands in front of their mouths or biting the finger of astonishment. But it is not just this weight of gazes and gossips that you feel; it is also that a lot of times, rocks, clouds, plants, birds, and other things in the picture appear as though they are mimicking the general mood of the story, be it the restless energy of love or the anxiety of confrontation or the heat of the battle, and that's quite interesting considering that the humans, as I mentioned earlier, don't show much energy and emotion in their faces and figures. I could certainly feel this in my field: the presence of gazes and gossips, from the American government with its new "interest" in Middle Eastern exile intellectuals and organizations and their advice and "expertise" occasionally about
matters such as whether or not to bomb Iran, whether or not to remove the sanctions, whom to support and whom to topple, to the Iranian government which we, the organization members and I, always feared had agents around that could eavesdrop on us or assassinate individuals. From people inside Iran who were actively following these organizations and their activities through the internet, radio, and satellite TV, to the organizations themselves and the Iranian-American community.

5) Persian miniatures are two-dimensional, often densely detailed, carefully framed, compositionally harmonious, and lacking what is known as perspective in the European Renaissance sense. What you get, then, is these plains of far and close, inside and outside, high and low, and even temporally, now and later, that appear side by side each other, with no sense of hierarchy often, creating a complex pastiche. This provides a model that resonates the layout of Washington as I will describe later in this chapter.
The Washington Persona

A few weeks before Christmas 2005, I met a trumpet player by the name of Reginald, who could, I thought, finally put in my fieldwork amongst Iranian NGOs in Washington DC the romantic twist that I’d been awaiting. An embodiment of all the attraction, union, and transformation, the “falling in,” that is supposed to be part of the ethnographic field affair. Reggie, my trumpet player, was a native alright. He was black and he played on the streets of Washington at nights and on weekends; I have no idea what he did during the week days, count his money perhaps, for he said he made quite a lot of it; but he wasn’t a native of Washington week days, anyway. With 60% of its population black (US census 2000), Washington (or the part of it that is considered alive and is given agency, as in “Washington said...” or “Washington’s reaction angered...”) is a white city during office hours, as white as the solid Greco-Roman buildings of the National Mall: It pulsates with rushes of suited office people with ID badges hanging around their necks or clipped to their belts in the morning, at lunch hour, and in the evening, and with the lazy sprinkling of patriotic tourists in jumpers and shorts carrying super-sized buckets of soda, monument to monument and museum to museum as if running errands, between late morning and early evening. “Nobody lives here,” said a badge-bearing staff member of the Smithsonian Museum of Asian Art at a lunch break, power-walking between the Washington Monument and the Lincoln Memorial.

Just as the office staffers and tourists started retiring to their hotels and suburban homes in Maryland and Virginia, Reggie came out and put on his moves and melodies at the tired exits and entrances of the subway. I met him when I was having dinner alone late one night. He kept staring at me with a smile until I told him that I was tired and in
no mood to make conversation with strangers. But then again, the whole purpose of my being there, in Washington, was to make conversation with strangers. So we talked about Iran, the elections, human rights, regime change, American foreign policy, oh casual Washington chatter. Then I told him that I was an anthropologist-in-the-making and that Washington was my field. He was immensely fascinated by this latter fact and added, Sure, I can certainly see a certain Washington persona in the way people react to my music on the streets here, compared to how they did in Boston, for instance, if that’s what you are kind of studying. Then he asked me if I cared to help him count his money, which I did of course, straightening one dirty wrinkled dollar bill after another, making separate towers of the quarters, dimes, nickels, and pennies. It came to some 300 dollars, I believe, which, he said, was average. At the end of this rather bizarre rendezvous, Reginald, whose name was unfamiliar to me and hard to get, gave me his business card and asked me to give him a call or drop him an email some time. I said I would probably run into him some time as to get to all the organizations and individuals that I was doing fieldwork with at the time I had to pass through Dupont Circle, his usual hangout.

A few days later, haunted by his clever reference to a certain Washington persona, I emailed him and asked if he would meet with me to explain further. Undoubtedly, it read as some sort of pick-up line only an anthropology graduate student could think of (although some time before someone, a self-proclaimed “Latin American intellectual” had tried to pick me up in a bar by saying that he was writing a book about What Is Wrong with the West. Yet another time, I had sat next to a tipsy fellow in a bar whose second or third question was who was my favorite philosopher and who suggested to go to a coffee shop, where it wasn’t so noisy and smoky, to discuss Nietzsche –his
favorite, not mine. The same fellow, with whom I did go to a coffee shop, ended up
being a librarian at the Library of Congress and emailed me a few days later with a list of
material at the Library relevant to my research on the NGOs). Reginald said to meet him
at Pentagon City mall, one stop after the actual Pentagon on the Yellow or Blue Line,
where he would be playing Christmas songs for the Christmas shoppers. The next
evening, as I left work at HRF and continued walking past my apartment to Dupont
Circle where I would take the metro to Pentagon Mall, I was filled with a strange
excitement about this upcoming ethnographic encounter, one that I didn’t recall having
felt with my regular NGO interlocutors. It was 9 PM, I was going to meet with a street
musician in a shopping mall, and he was going to unravel the Washington persona for
me, oh the seduction of that unraveling. Of course I was excited. My excitement
resulted not just from the anticipation of learning about the secret of Washington, the
dark heart of the city where people lived, through as unexpected a native informant as a
street musician but also from the assumption that what he would tell or show me would
probably be very different from the Washington I had come to know through my NGO
interlocutors. The thought of having these two opposite images, the black and the white,
the photo and its negative, was in itself exciting.

He was not hard to spot as I got out of the metro at Pentagon Mall. I stood a few
steps away and listened to him play for a few minutes before his laughing eyes caught
mine. He finished what he was playing, put his trumpet in his box, gathered his
belongings, and came to me with open arms: Let’s go get something to eat. Amid
Christmas shoppers and guys in Santa suits standing with their buckets and rattling their
bells, we found our way to the food court. I told him that I’d like to buy him dinner as a
token of appreciation for helping me in my research. He laughed and said, I don’t take a
girl to dinner and let her pay. It was rather evident that we were on two different kinds of
dates, and there was no way he was going to be convinced that I was genuinely interested
in knowing about the Washington persona. He had nothing more to say about that,
anyway, as if it had been merely an irretrievable flicker of insight. Instead, he was
interested in telling me about all the tired girls that he had picked up on the subway or
elsewhere, which made me more and more disillusioned with the ethnographic utility of
our “date.” It never worked out, like much else in the field, and yet it was through this
encounter and its poetics that I was made to consider such a thing as a Washington
persona as a component of my field.

The street layout and architecture of the US capitol have been amply discussed for their
symbolism. As a symbol of governmental power, the vast open space and reflecting pool
of the National Mall designed in 1781 by Major L’Enfant, a Frenchman who fought in
the American Civil War and a friend of President George Washington, were said to
represent openness and accessibility, introducing to the world just what the new
American democracy was going to be like. Images of the buildings and monuments of
the National Mall, such as the US Congress, Washington Monument, or White House,
circulate in the everyday lives of Americans and become part of the landscape of their
consciousness:

16 In the same way that in Bruno Latour’s edited volume, Making Things Public (2005),
representations of politics and political participation in the form of parliamentary
assembly, for instance, are discussed, and the need for dissembling and new assemblages
that are representative of the ways we perceive and practice politics today, or the way
Others represent their perceptions and practices of politics in their architecture and other
forms of assemblage.
By growing up in America we feel that we know what the congress is like. We see pictures of the Capitol in the newspapers; the monuments and postcard vistas of Washington slip through our fingers when we drop a coin into a vending machine, and they cross our tongue when we stamp a letter. Every night the inside and outside of the Capitol intrude into our living rooms with yet another televised report from the lawn of the Capitol or a snippet from a congressional hearing room (Weatherford 1985:14).

To the Iranian organizations that I studied in Washington, the symbolism and significance of their location was not lost. The President of CEO (the Participation Promoter) told me in an interview in 2005 that being an American citizen was about believing in the openness and accessibility of the government and participating in it by paying visits, writing letters, making calls, and letting your representatives know what you want and what you think. He talked with great enthusiasm about his experience on Capitol Hill where, to his surprise, he had found that he could simply walk in places and knock at doors and sit and have a chat. At thirty-one and with a Ph.D. that he was still completing back in 2005 with well-known advisors at a prestigious university, the Participation Promoter spent a lot of his time on Capitol Hill in his capacity as advisor to a Persian-speaking Congressman and as the President of the largest Iranian-American organization, CEO.

While CEO is not a lobby but a non-profit bi-partisan organization by law, and while Iran is not allowed to have official lobbies in the US, the phenomenon of collaring politicians in the lobbies remains an American phenomenon that the Participation Promoter partakes in. While in James Bill’s intricate “web-system” in Iranian politics, commoners frequently try to get a hold of the Shah’s body guards or chefs or chauffeurs in order to pass on their grievances to the Shah through personal ties, the Participation Promoter strives to show Iranian-Americans that they can directly, or through
organizational representatives or “experts” such as himself, address their policy-makers and do not need to go through personal networks (I contest this belief throughout the dissertation, as happy hours, dinner parties, love affairs, running into people in lobbies, schmoozing, networking, and gazes and gossips prove to be vital modes and prominent locations of influencing policy in Washington, much in the way that Bill’s “web-system” would have it despite the other charted models, such as the ones presented by CEO, that are supposed to show the very open, smooth, and straightforward mechanisms of policy-making in a democracy like America). Also, Bill mentions that in Iran it is common for people to get things done through webs of favor and obligation, whereas the Participation Promoter strives to teach Iranian-Americans to think it their representatives’ duty to listen to them and comply to their wishes in a representative democracy like America (I also question the subtle and complex meanings of “favor” and “obligation” throughout the dissertation, for instance by discussing the concept of “collusion of interests” as in the case of Azar Nafisi’s Reading Lolita in Tehran).

HRF, too, tapped into personal networks and realized the utility of proximity to centers of policy making in Washington for new modes of relevance and effect. Of course, the Historians were no strangers to personal ties in politics: Due to family background and friendships with some high-profile dissidents during the Shah’s who became high-ranking officials in the budding Islamic regime and some high-ranking officials during the Shah’s who became high-profile dissidents with the establishment of the Islamic Republic, the Historians were used to having well-known and influential figures over for dinner. As Khomeini himself was exiled in Paris in the months leading up to the Revolution, one of the Historian as a sociology-major in college at the time had
had the opportunity to pass on to him through Banisadr (later in 1980 to become
President) a sheet of questions about his perception of Valayet Faqih (Guardianship of
the Jurist) and his plans for governance. The questions were never answered and the
young Historian was told that the Ayatollah didn’t think it was the right time to indulge in
such questions. The Historian, then, had interviewed all the other prominent Iranian
political figures in Paris at the time about what their plans were after the Shah left Iran.
All these connections, and yet the Historians had felt such utter sense of helplessness and
irrelevance in France long before Bakhtiar and others whom they knew well and held
dear were stabbed to death: In 1983, when they first published a much simpler version of
their current online human rights database in Paris, it was a small grey book put together
with meager means and largely ignored by the media, policy makers, and the public.
Now they were receiving all kinds of funding and free software to do the job, and when
they finally did go public in February 2006, many prominent media outlets such as the
Washington Post, Wall Street Journal, ABC News, Nightline, and a variety of online
outlets covered their story\(^{17}\).

These new modes of empowerment, influence, and relevance are in contrast to the
traumatized Iranian exile community of the 1980s and 1990s, described by Hamid Naficy
(1993): The exiles emphasized, in their music videos and TV programs, the destruction
and death in Iran produced by the Revolution, war, and political executions, often
juxtaposed with a prosperous and progressive Iran before the Revolution. In the
meanwhile, some political refugees used their own scarred bodies and exposed flesh as
witnesses (as ‘texts’) that tell about the tragic stories of power and resistance in their

\[^{17}\] In 2005, the State Department gave a $1,000,000 grant to an organization similar to
HRF, the Iranian Human Rights Documentation Center at Yale University.
country. For example, according to Naficy, the People's Mojahedin (major armed opposition to Iranian regime, stationed mainly in Ashraf camp city in Iraq) appeared several times on television to display their scars, burns, disfigurement, and dismemberment and to tell television audiences of their torture and escape; they also enacted political executions in their street performances and political demonstrations. Prisons and torture chambers were recreated, mock interrogations were held, and crowds of spectators were given thick albums of photographs of tortured, scarred, and maimed bodies. But a lot of times these efforts went unnoticed by the general public and the policy makers in America; and Iranians, perhaps like a lot of other new and small exile or immigrant communities, felt very invisible and very marginal. Nusha Farahi, Iranian poet and book shop owner, even set himself afire in front of the Federal Building in LA in the mid 1980s to express his objection to the coming of a top Iranian clergy to the US for a UN function.

But while Washington can be understood as a microcosm for empowerment through access and proximity, directness and openness, it has also been perceived in its layout as secretly evil and scandalous. The most extreme of such depictions is perhaps to be found in such places as the Freemasonry Watch website, where the layout of the National Mall, for instance, is said to follow a Luciferic design, indicative of the true intentions of the people who built Washington DC as a seat of world power and domination:
A more mundane yet illuminating way to find secret and not so secret designs and networks of evil power in DC is what Brian Whitaker has done in an August 2002 Guardian article titled "US Think-Tanks Give Lessons in Foreign Policy." Whitaker lays bare what he calls a "a cozy and cleverly-constructed network of Middle East 'experts'" who share the conservative outlook of the Pentagon and "who pop up as talking heads on US television, in newspapers, books, testimonies to congressional committees, and at luncheon gatherings in Washington." He then links them to Middle East departments, think-tanks, military intelligence, best-selling memoirs, PR firms, government agencies, brownbag talks, congressional meetings, and all the other cliques and conglomerates in Washington that each water and nurture the ideas sown by the other and so end up creating consensus and legitimacy for the conservative policies of the American right-wing. He ends by saying:

Whatever outsiders may think about this, worldly-wise Americans see no cause for disquiet. It's just a coterie of like-minded chums going about their normal business, and an everyday story of political life in Washington.
Similarly, anthropologist Jack McIver Weatherford likens the US Congress to an Amazonian tribe and the congressmen and women to shamans with charisma and a bag of ritual objects who generate faith and conjure belief from the most skeptical in the audience. They play into “the common man’s fear of being squashed by overwhelming forces or falling victim to some dread disease that will leave him disabled and his family impoverished” (Weatherford 1985: 69).

Iranian organizations and individuals are not exempt from playing into and getting trapped in the same webs of power and scandal in Washington that make this small town of 68.3 square miles and 582,049 people feel very claustrophobic. On April 26, 2006, the House of Representatives overwhelmingly approved H.R. 282, the Iran Freedom Support Act, which had as one its points “to authorize assistance to support the promotion of democracy in Iran” through moral and financial support of the Iranian pro-democracy opposition. In 2005, when the bill was first introduced, CEO composed two letters, one for and one against the bill (which also included the continuation of sanctions on Iran), and asked Iranian-Americans to go to its website and pick one of the two letters according to their views, customize it, and send it to the Congress. The “against” letter said:

Most Iranian opposition groups in exile are neither democratic nor legitimate. We should not waste tax-payers’ money on exiled groups that Iranians and Iranian Americans themselves refuse to fund.

While the “for” argued:

The U.S. should adopt a policy of lending financial and moral support to the Iranian opposition in exile, including the satellite TV stations that are beaming a message of hope and freedom into Iran.
Then CEO also conducted a poll and in April 2005 released a Press Release that stated that four out of five Iranian-Americans were against bill. Both the composition of the two letters and the CEO poll incited a strongly-worded debate in the community and letters for or against CEO flooded the Letters section of Iranian.com. One of these was a letter titled “[CEO] Does Not Represent Me,” also posted on Regime Change Iran by the blogger “Doctor Zin,” (praised by Jerusalem Post and the American Enterprise Institute’s hawk, Michael Ledeen, as the fearless source of real news about Iran). This person, an Iranian, disputed CEO’s claims on the basis of the technological shortcomings of their poll, such as the fact that, according to him, it allowed the same person with exactly the same information to vote more than once from the same computer AND it allowed a non-existing email address for the voter. Therefore, for all one knew, all the 504 votes CEO claimed it had received could have been very well cast by one person, “sitting in the office of the cleric rulers in Iran.”

This problematization of place (the voice of the Iranian-American community could be coming out of a cleric’s office in Tehran), albeit due to the technological nature of a lot of the NGOs’ activities, said something about the dubious “layout” of my field in Washington DC. This became all the more clear to me when, in response to many more letters similar to the above that accused CEO of receiving support from the Iranian government to create consensus against America’s confrontational policies regarding Iran, another Iranian on Iranian.com finally wrote: “If you think a penny is being spent by the Mullahs in Iran to influence [CEO], I suggest you take a trip to Washington DC.” The implication was that by visiting the actual CEO office and staffers at work, the paranoia over secret links between unlikely places would simply melt. But CEO itself, in
its physical and virtual presences, presented an interesting problem of place: While CEO’s website showcased Iranians walking up on the marble steps of some US capitol building and, with all its rhetoric of influence and empowerment, led one to believe that they had an office on Capitol Hill, the actual office was, in fact, well, not even an office. It was a single desk in a common lab or work space for all sorts of start-up companies which each had a desk all around the work space (no partitions of any sort) — some of the desks were leased out to students or moms who needed a quiet work place for a few hours a day. The desks-offices had a common kitchen, mailroom, conference room (where I was first interviewed by CEO to get the internship) and a couple of couches in the middle. CEO’s desk office was located on top of a diner, called the Diner (literally, this one is not one of my generic coinages!), in a newly hip neighborhood of Ethiopian and other Middle Eastern and African restaurants, many cafes, ethnic chic boutiques, bar, clubs, and gay people.

Put together with HRF’s bedroom office in the wealthiest neighborhood in D.C. where you heard about Kerry and Edwards having a barbeque outside of their homes (a few blocks apart) in the neighborhood’s newsletter and saw Clinton’s lawyer watering the plants in his balcony on your afternoon promenade, a layout of my field would take shape: These were the common spaces of life and activism for my Iranian organization in Washington. This, well, was America.

As Baudrillard (1988) best indicates, America lends itself to a certain perception of itself as a concept, an idea, symbolized in a geography, rather than a place. To Baudrillard, you could take any piece of place in America and see in it the whole idea of America with its vastness of space, its worship of convenience, its simulacra, utopia

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18 As I write these lines, I hear CEO has relocated to an actual office in a much more office-y part of town.
achieved, end of history, height of modernity, hyperreality. Wheatherford, too, describes Washington as a "state of mind" "shimmering on the edge of reality."

Like Timbuktu, Sodom, and Babylon, the City of Washington shimmers on the edge of reality, more a state of mind than a physical place. Its blurred pastiche of scandal, power, and money in inconceivably enormous sums combines to paint a larger than life scene that provokes awe, comedy, and dread (1985: 3).

But there are also some very physical aspects that make Washington DC the place that it is. In my field, one of those aspects was the way that places were pregnant with other presences than their immediate ones. This, of course, is perhaps true everywhere, but in Washington, this was predominantly about the presence of "politics" (the politics politics, not the kind we find everywhere and in everything). In our postmodern globalized world, we never cease to notice and point out what we find to be bizarre combinations and simultaneities of here and there, modern and traditional, old and new, real and copy, Eastern and Western, etc. Still we cringe when we hear of McDonalds opening a branch right at the gates of the Forbidden City in China or Starbucks opening a branch in some old European capitol and not allowing people to smoke. We smile when we see an Arab in a dashasha on a camel, talking on a cell-phone, or a Pakistani wedding in which the music is fed to the speakers through an Apple ipod. We smile, of course, because we find something inherently contradictory about the combination of certain cultures (modes of dress, transportation, color, etc.) and modern technologies which we associate with a certain look as their "natural" (American white person talking on a cell-phone while patting a dog doesn't make us cringe or smile); but that is beside the point. In Washington, I found other bizarre combinations and simultaneities that, while indeed related to the conditions of a postmodern and globalized world, did not correspond to the
categories of modern and traditional, old and new, real and copy, Eastern and Western so much. I was not surprised to find an Iranian organization pushing for change in Iran from Washington DC, but I smiled and cringed to find politics in such unexpected places in a city that is the most expected place to find politics. Instead of the open spaces and Greco-Roman buildings of the National Mall, where in 1781 Major L’Enfant made a statement in layout and architecture about the new political order and power of the American democracy, I found politics in bedrooms, diners, cafes, happy hours, dinner parties, lobbies, House of Kebobs, etc. The layout and architecture of my field, then, was closer to the closed circles of James Bill’s “web-system.”

I am, of course, trained to despise and escape from politics because of my own background, and ironically, that is what I tried to do in my Washington field. I tried to only watch the simultaneous planes of my field, like a figure in a Persian manuscript painting, through half-closed doors and half-drawn curtains, from up the roofs and behind the bushes. But it ran into me and caught me by surprise. On weekends or in the evenings, I liked to sit on a bench in Dupont Circle, a small park with a fountain built in 1871 and named after Samuel Francis Du Pont, an American Civil War admiral. I liked this place because it gave me a sense of normalcy (normalcy meaning a sense of life without the overwhelming presence of politics as Washington tended to mean), life in a city like any other, not in the seat of the government of the most powerful nation in the world. Here, people spread their rugs and rags on the grass to sunbathe on sunny weekend, happy dogs were caught as if in an endless game of fetch, toddlers stripped to

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19 Both this positioning of the ethnographer’s self and the simultaneity of plains in my field in Washington are ways in which Persian manuscript paintings can help with the perception and articulation of this project.
the diapers and splashed around the fountain, homeless people played chess on stone chess tables, local bands played music, jugglers threw their many colorful balls in the air, lonely benchers fed the pigeons, ice-cream cards went around. Each day, a different group, or several at once, set up booths, distributed leaflets, and announced things on loudspeakers, from the Chinese Communist Party to the anti-abortion campaign, from Gay Pride to Christians for the Preservation of Family through the Promotion of Love between Man and Woman.

Satellite Image of Dupont Circle, from Wikipedia.com

In his novel, Dupont Circle, about a gay couple who fight for their marriage rights and the judge who fights for them and the Georgetown law student who is romantically involved with the judge, Paul Kafka-Gibbonson (2001) calls this place the “still point in a turning world,” a place that one could call the heart of the nation where all of America somehow came together in its many different styles and contradictions.

But even in Dupont Circle, one could not forget Washington DC. One of the several bookstores around the Circle, the well-known 24-hour bookstore, bar, and café
(“Latte to the literati” as they say on their website), Kramerbooks & Afterwords, for instance, was where in 1998 Counsel Ken Starr subpoenaed records on Monica Lewinsky’s purchases at the store.\(^{20}\) Of the many streets that converged in the Circle, one was the well-known Massachusetts Avenue with a total of 80 embassies from Côte d’Ivoire to Papua New Guinea located side by side on it (talk about “constellation of miniature systems of power”). Helicopters were always roaming closely overhead, interns were hurrying to talks about genocide in Sudan and slightly mistaken strategies in Iraq during their lunch breaks, every few blocks a spot was closed off by barricades and cops with snipers and gas masks due to a suspicious package, person or activity, billboards announced in colors the possibility of terrorists attacks on that day, everyone made sure they pronounced the “q” in Iraq and the “gh” in Afghanistan correctly. You could be sitting with your laptop a few days before the American Presidential Elections in 2004, sipping coffee in a café in the Circle, reading an email from CEO that said:

This year, a change is in the air. Our community is energized, educated and passionate. We finally understand that in order to succeed in our new home, we need to stop standing by and letting others decide for us. We have understood that voting is not only our right, but it is a duty and a privilege that we should embrace. We understand that regardless of our political affiliations, we can only gain as a community by becoming actively involved. So tomorrow, when you go to the polls and cast your vote, not only will you make your individual voice heard, but you will help \textbf{transform our politically dormant community} into a political force to be reckoned with! It’s showtime! Stand up and be counted!

And you could be, at the same time, watching from the café’s window the High Heel Drag Race in progression with men dressed as women, girls dressed as devils, people dressed as animals, and find yourself in tears, moved beyond your own expectation by

\(^{20}\) One of her purchases was reportedly Nicholson Baker’s "Vox," a novel about phone sex!
this carnival of the self, this parade of crossing, becoming and transgression, as if it said somehow something poignant not only about your own life and self in America but about the Iranian organizations that you studied in Washington DC. This city, after all, was where I was born as a bizarre and fantastic figuration of myself on the pages of a best-selling memoir about Iran. This city was also where I had died (refer to the section of my dissertation titled Dracula).

As one of my interlocutors and I walk out of the Freer Gallery’s exit on the National Mall, an orange and sticky sun is just mixing and melting into the large reflecting pool outside, surrounded by the White House and three Memorial monuments: the Lincoln Memorial at the bottom, the Jefferson Memorial on the right, and the Washington Memorial at the top. Further up from where we stand, the Capitol Hill stands with the Supreme Court and the Library of Congress on the top, the Senate and the House on the two sides. Pausing on the stairs for a second, transfixed not just by the heavy evening sun after hours of sunless contemplation in the museum but as if in the presence of a lofty emperor, of these breathtakingly overwhelming national symbols of remembrance, power, and pride dressed in hefty Greco-Roman architecture, place becomes consciousness and I cannot be unless I think that I am, indeed, in what might just be the most powerful place in the world, where things start to happen. Scenes from the hectic TV show, West Wing, pass by flashing in front of my eyes, provoking a sense of dynamism and urgency that always accompanies Mr. President and his crew on TV. Words from an interview I did over the summer with yet another interlocutor at one of the Iranian NGOs that I study in Washington find their way back to my head: “This is
where the war with Iraq was words in open-to-all policy forums before it was a reality in Iraq.” Is this where Pinochet started to rule, where FedEx and McDonalds started to disappear from the streets of Tehran, where the Berlin Wall started to fall? Where the Lion found courage, the Tin Man dared to love, the Scarecrow managed to think, and Dorothy returned home, all because of this Wizard that sits behind a curtain, aggrandizes his image, thickens his voice, and operates the world through a machine that is infinitely smaller and simpler that anyone has been drawn to imagine? All this and yet we are coming from such a different world, such a different sense of place, though just as captivating as this one.

We have just visited Massumeh Farhad, the Chief Curator and Curator of Islamic Art at Freer and Sackler Galleries, where she generously guided us through an exhibition of Persian miniature paintings. Although not all miniatures depict courtly activities such as hunting, camping, battles, polo games and lavish wine and music parties, most were meant to please their courtly audiences by celebrating in all details the ideal grandeur and power of the highest in the hierarchical order. As we walk back through the Mall and along the Potomac River towards Georgetown where my interlocutor’s very small NGO for democracy and human rights in Iran runs from her guest bedroom, I think and talk about my fascination with place and space, with maps, blueprints, landscapes, from the Washington Mall and its Greco-Roman monuments and government buildings to the Persian miniatures that reside quietly at one cool corner of it, dense, tense, multi-layered to the core.

“Do you know, even, that your own NGO being part of your own home, your own guest bedroom where your mom takes occasional naps and your nephew plays computer
games, and yet it being at the heart of Washington, two blocks away from where presidential candidates, Kerry and Edwards, have their weekend barbeques and President Clinton’s lawyer can be seen from his balcony, watering the flowers, all of this somehow, in a peculiar way, reminds me of the patchwork quality of Persian miniatures where the oddest planes of time and space appear side by side so casually as if there is nothing unusual about having the stars and the light of the day at the same time, to be able to see the streets, the back rooms and the polo fields behind the building all the same? Do you realize how similar this is to the landscape of a Persian miniature?"

My interlocutor, not unlike most others who ask about my research, is not quite sure what I am talking about and how this is anthropology. She looks at me like I am the same young, and by default confused and romantic, graduate student that she was some fifteen years ago as a budding historian at one of the most prestigious universities in Europe, studying secular nationalism and the rise of the French Revolution, a decision she now largely regrets. And we change the subject to how quiet Washington gets in August when the lawmakers go on vacation.  

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21 This was part of a talk, titled “the City of Washington and Politics in a Persian Miniature Landscape” that I gave on a panel about “putting ourselves on America’s political map” at the Iranian Alliances across Borders conference in 2005. Next to me on this panel was the Participation Promoter, the CEO President.
THE POETICS OF SPACE
Seductions, Distractions,
And the Miniature as Modes of Knowing

CASTELL
SCHLIECHER

WITH A NEW INTRODUCTION
BY JAMES R. STOLPE
Overview

I want to tell a pregnant story. Yet I am told that I cannot get away with just that; I need to give it away first. I hear that my readers are not going to be in for suspense. They need to have an overview of how it is going to go and what the point of the story is going to be. I comply, but it will have to be in terms of the basic elements of fiction (not that my story is fictional) and not in the form of a condensed argument for which my story will simply serve as an example or an elaboration. So I give you the plot, the setting, the characters, the theme, the point of view, and the style of my story as an overview:

**Setting:** The story spans a few hours, say from 12:00 pm to 3:00 pm, in September 2005 and a few streets, mainly in front of a Persian House of Kabob, in Washington DC.

**Point of View:** The narrator is the protagonist of the story, myself as the fieldworker or novice anthropologist, who uses the pronoun “I.” Does this narrator share the same language, voice, consciousness as the author of the story? Is the “I” writing these lines the same (in its point of view, not in its person, of course) as the “I” narrating the story that follows, the “I” that witnessed in the field the same as the “I” who writes about it from home? Is the “I” that asserts and argues the same as the “I” that tells and narrates, the same as the “I” that sensed, contemplated, did, was? Did the “I” that is writing right now even exist before I started writing, or this “I” has no past, at least no way of referring to experiences that preceded my writing unless by “evoking,” as Stephen Tyler (1987)
suggests, that lived fantasy through what it senses, contemplates, does, is, now—be it narrating or arguing or describing or whatever?

Following Bakhtin (1982), I am conscious of the disparities that exist between authorial and narrative voices, and even within a single narrative voice, of the voices of other characters and all the other voices, in the story or beyond, inside or outside one’s head/heart, voices of the epoch and the social environment, that accentuate and penetrate that voice on its way out (as if it were a “ray-word” passing through “an atmosphere filled with alien words” on its “directionality towards the object”) (Bakhtin 1982: 277), layering and limiting it. Obviously, then, I am conscious that when I say “I,” I am always inevitably an “other.” When I say “I,” or anything for that matter, I am always inevitably NOT saying “other” things, making negation/lack and otherness part and parcel of the speaking “I,” as well as the “I” that is the subject/object of my speech. The “I” that says “I,” in the words of Tyler who resists the illusion of its singular significance along with that of its punned other, the “eye”, as the sole means of knowing, “is not a fully autonomous ego, an all-knowing inductive monad, for its autonomy is fully realized in the situation of ‘saying’ by means of the saying to and saying of another.” (Tyler 1987: 57-58) The voice of the “I” in this story, then, is nothing but the “co-opera” (Tyler 1987) of a multitude of voices, a culmination of the Said, the Unsaid, and the Unspeakable. Perhaps the obsessive abundance of quotation marks and references in this entry about “point of view,” calling upon the names of others and recalling words on the pages of other books as if clinging to saints and holy scriptures to protect my self, perhaps in vein, from the transgressions and damnations of the “I,” from the pride, the greed, the wrath,
the lust, the envy, the excess, the zeal of the “I,” says something about the kind of “I” who is (whom I am) speaking (about).

**Plot:** The story starts with me setting off to lunch at a Persian restaurant with a book to read, climaxes as I run into one of my interlocutors and have a very short conversation with him, and ends with me encountering a few policemen on my walk back from the restaurant. While the encounter with my interlocutor is what sets off the conflict in this story, you could say that the conflict is really internal and the bulk of the action happens in my mind as I ponder upon the ethics of my being in the field, the affective dimensions of my relationship with my interlocutors and of theirs amongst themselves, the subtleties and anxieties of representation and information exchange for all parties involved, the consequences of my “being there” and the complex and shifting sentiments that were evoked in me, and in my interlocutors as far as I could tell, as a result of my involvement with them and what they did everyday. The basic predicament of the story could be, then, summarized in the words of Clifford Geertz on the I-Witness as the “enormous tangle of epistemological, moral, ideological, vocational, and personal doubts, each feeding upon the others, and mounting at times to something very near Pyrrhonism.” (Geertz 1989: 90) My brief linguistic exchange with my interlocutor embodies multiple dimensions of this conflict; hence the climax. The brevity of the encounter makes me think of it as the “wink” in Geertz’s discussion of “thick description” (1973).

**Theme:** In a sense, this is a story about a book that I didn’t get to read, the book that I took to lunch, on the day of the story (in fact, the story takes its title from this book,
Gaston Bachelard's *Poetics of Space*, 1994). Whatever happens in the story happens in place of what I, as the protagonist and narrator of the story, had in mind to do; it happens, therefore, as a distraction or interruption to my ostensive purpose, which is how a lot of fieldwork stories go: You set out to look for something somewhere and you “discover” something else, perhaps more important or interesting, as a result of an unexpected encounter, eavesdropping, side glancing, provoked self-reflection, and other serendipitous happenings the cumulative effect of which eventually shape your understanding of your field in ways unforeseen.

This common theme of distracted discovery in fieldwork is stretched in this story to address also the way knowledge acquired and transmitted through distracted—as opposed to direct—means (eavesdropping, side glancing, guesswork, inference, chance encounters, word of mouth, body language, and so on) was commonly sanctioned in my field as a form of functioning knowledge even as it was looked down upon in theory for not being based on hard and fast evidence. Rather than branding this certainly cultural perception and function of knowledge (after all, there is no perception and function of knowledge that is NOT cultural) as essentially Iranian, I illustrate in the story that it also had something to do with the culture of organizational life in Washington DC and physical proximity to the sources of funding, policy, and publicity in the American capitol—it seems that the closer you get to possibilities of direct encounter, the more “distracted” the ways of communicating knowledge become. The story also illustrates that when more direct, and written, ways of acquiring and transmitting knowledge, such as recommendation letters, testimonies, curriculum vitas, or consent forms are employed by some of my interlocutors, precisely to break away from the traditional patterns and
establish new kinds of authority and legitimacy, the results are sometimes reversed. I attribute this to the affective landscape that distracted knowledges produce and operate upon, one that is nervous—in that things come at you from many directions and in unexpected ways—and relaxed—for it allows you a lot of leeway—at once. As much as more direct and institutionalized mechanisms of acquiring and transmitting knowledge (and of producing authority and legitimacy) may opt to bypass this minefield of affects and get across in more “neutral” and “professional” ways, they cannot avoid distraction entirely and they set off age-old and new knowledge-related anxieties as they go.

The theme of distraction also surfaces in a third way in this story, where I ponder upon my presence in the field as an existence within quotation marks in the sense that I often formed friendships or collaborations with my interlocutors that, while genuine, had a nagging extra-friendship or extra-collaboration purpose (for me to study them), and so my “being there,” in all its really real reality, was always already quotation-marked. I left when I was done studying. According to Bakhtin, a word put in quotation marks is deprived of authorial intention: “It involves a manipulation of context in such a way that the word is stripped of those overtones that enable it to be perceived as natural” (1982: 427). It is now hard to say whether my ostensive purpose of being there (studying) was a distraction to the friendships and collaborations that were growing, or could have grown, alongside or the other way around. Was it “natural” to let my purpose of studying them govern the field of affects in which we interacted? Would it be considered a “manipulation” of context to form friendships out of those study relations and study opportunities out of friendships? Like the general process of understanding and relating in the field, like all human relations, like life, it was and is hard to tell the intention apart
from the distraction, the natural apart from the manipulation. Bakhtin’s own coinages of a
“word-with-a-loophole” and a “word-with-a-sideward-glance” (1982: xxi) to address the
question of alterity in language are perhaps the closest to what I mean by distraction
here. They help us conceive of hyphenated and quotation-marked rather than simply
“natural”- and “neutral”-“looking” ways of knowing, relating, and being; ways of
knowing, relating and being that not just tolerate but operate upon alterity and distraction
within themselves.

My decision to take the title of my story from the book that I was distracted from
reading, Gaston Bachelard’s Poetics of Space, emphasizes the theme of distraction but
also assigns a certain poetics and space of existence to this story, one that is marked by
the presence of an absence. To make the Unread into a space within which this story was
written and into a certain poetics of how this story could be written is one way to
acknowledge the power of that which is at once dead and undying. Dead because it isn’t;
undying because it never actually was, immune to the mortality that haunts all being. The
place of what isn’t but could be is significant in this story: Frequently, people seem
unbothered with whether or not something actually IS in any way that is verifiable; but
just that it could be, as if only waiting at the threshold to happen, is enough to yield
certain knowledges and certain sentiments based on which people judge and act –proves
Tyler’s point (1987) that positive knowledge gained through rational calculations and
based on hard and fast proof is not the necessary precondition for feeling, acting, and
saying. These negative knowledges (in that they are based on something that is NOT,
yet) and sentiments, if not undying, are at least very diehard compared to “verifiable
truths;” my field always throbbed with the dread and thrill of what could happen.
In the case of the aforementioned book, however, the thrilling dread of the Unread is over now as I have read the book. Ironically, all it is about is how poetry acquires the grip that it does on our very being not through rational processes or psychological/physiological mechanisms that could be empirically explained but through a resonance-reverberation doublet that awakens new depths in us by its exuberance and sublimity. It takes us “there” not by recreating a certain physical space for our mind’s eye to see and recognize but by transcending our soul into a certain affective landscape, an imaginary space that houses certain sentiments of intimacy or immenseness, protection or vulnerability that come with our lived experiences of inside and outside, closed and open, round and sharp-angled, cornered or centered, high or low spaces (Bachelard 1994). Poetry takes us there, but as Tyler offers, it is a “sentimental journey that begins in sensation and ends in sensibility as the movement from sense to sense.” (1987: 3) Bachelard’s Poetics of Space echoes Tyler’s discussion of postmodern disdain for empirical knowledge (as in Western modernist tradition) as the only way of ‘getting there’: “knowing must be […] accompanied by an equal capacity to forget knowing. Non-knowing is not a form of ignorance but a difficult transcendence of knowledge” (Bachelard 1994: xxviii-xxix). Later he says: “Space that has been seized upon by the imagination cannot remain indifferent space subject to the measures and estimates of the surveyor. It has been lived in, not in its positivity, but with all the partiality of the imagination” (Bachelard 1994: xxxii). Non-knowing and partial imagination as forms of knowledge are essential to the theme of the story.
Style: The story takes its style mostly from an artistic convention, that of Persian manuscript illustrations of roughly the 13th to 18th centuries (this is not to say that the tradition has remained the same throughout centuries and across locales, but that certain stylistic traits that are of interest to this story have stayed fairly consistent). More specifically, I am interested in what the notable scholar of Islamic art Oleg Grabar (2001) has referred to as a “circuit of gazes” and a “trait of witnesses” as organizing principles of most Persian manuscript illustrations. In these illustrations, the striking abundance of figures lurking from behind half-drawn curtains and half-closed doors, from the balconies and roofs, from behind rocks and bushes, gazing and commenting intensely with their hands in front of their mouths or biting the finger of astonishment (note the threshold or liminal position ascribed to witnessing), and the anthropomorphic depictions of non-human elements such as rocks, clouds, plants, birds, and animals to convey a sense of energy and emotion contribute to creating an atmosphere, sometimes mysterious, sometimes claustrophobic, dominated by gazing and witnessing. But even apart from this, the illustrations are said to be organized by a “circuit of gazes” because there is often more than one focus in a single illustration; different focal points (depicting different key scenes that might be taking place even in different places or at different times in the accompanying narrative text, or simply different points of interest in a single scene) are often connected through a circuit of gazes amongst the elements of the illustration that in turn lead the gaze of the viewer from one to the next.

This highly mobile characteristic of the gaze as moving amongst simultaneous planes can be said to contribute to a distracted mode of viewing and of creating meaning. The threshold and liminal positioning of the witnessing figures in the illustration
contributes to a sense of nervousness that results from not being quite anywhere entirely, of being on your toes and withholding your breath, but it also provides fantastic opportunities for glancing not possible in more fully contained and less flexible positions. This is the style of this story: multiple planes of action, motivation, code, time, and place are evoked simultaneously, while each hints at and leads to the other. Witnesses are everywhere; while the story is narrated in first-person, it is densely populated by the others’ gazes, their comments, their astonishment, the energy of their emotions, creating an atmosphere that is at times claustrophobic while providing many windows and vents, peepholes and loopholes, at others. Again, Bakhtin’s (1994) linguistic terms “word-with-a-loophole” and “word-with-a-sideward-glance” are useful in thinking about this style of composition as one that hosts alterity and distraction within itself.

In principle, judging from some of the great illustrated texts that have survived (and, therefore, certainly not applicable to ALL surviving manuscript illustrations), the illustrations were far more than mere illustrations and played an important role in reinforcing, layering, and interpreting some of the underlying themes of the accompanying text. These manuscript illustrations, therefore, did not aspire to mirror the text they illustrated (what of the Western modernist obsession with mirror as means of representation?) but to evoke the essence and spirit of the text/tale, to reflect a place beyond the text and the tale. An illustrated scene from a particular love story, for instance, is likely to picture the anxious energy of mad love through racing clouds, intertwined tree branches, birds whirling around their nest and eggs, hunter and prey animals gazing at each other through dense, jagged and multi-colored rocks, super busy individuals (some with mundane tasks and some really bizarre), etc. much more
prominently than the two protagonists in action. In Priscilla Soucek’s view, the illustrations valued inner experience over the sensate experience (2000). I would like to think of this story as an illustration for the text of culture that I, according to Geertz (1973), have read over my “natives” shoulders. While the “text” is formed by the activities, self-presentation, representation, and reception of the organization that I refer to as the Civic Education Organization (CEO) in Washington DC and the changing perceptions and practices of participation and citizenship amongst Iranians in America, the “illustration” thickens, interprets, and problematizes that text through *evoking the spirit and inner experience of phenomena* (note how close this is to Tyler’s description of postmodern ethnography, 1987). While the narrative of the text is linear (things always happen after some other things and before some other things), the narrative of the illustration is circular, organized through a circuit of gazes (there is no chronological order).

**Characters:** There are two main characters in this story, the president of a major Washington-based Iranian-American organization which I refer to throughout this dissertation simply as the Civic Education Organization (CEO) (I refer to the CEO president as the Participation Promoter), and myself. However, as in a Persian manuscript illustration, the story is crowded with others who are recalled from other planes of time, space, and action. Those include the historian founders of another DC-based organization that I refer to as the Human Rights Foundation (HRF), a fellow anthropology graduate student from Stanford University, a professor of Persian and the founder of a Persian Studies Center in a major US university, and others, like a fifteen-
year-old genius and introverted Russian-American girl, an American guy who looked like
a policy maker, an extremely beautiful Iranian-American young lady active in the Bush
presidential campaign, a Guatemalan cleaning lady, the head of a business investment
firm in Tehran, and an ex-member of the Confederation of Iranian Students Abroad
(1960-1975).
The Story

At around noon one day in early fall, I took Gaston Bachelard’s Poetics of Space to lunch. I walked, book in hand, down a few letters and over a few numbers to my neighborhood’s House of Kabob. Luckily, the weather that day corresponded significantly to the general mood of my field and foreshadowed what was in store for me later that day, so describing it here is no idle embellishment. It was restless and uncertain. It felt as if the summer was not quite over and the fall not quite there, and you could feel this hesitance in the angle and attitude of the sun and the way the leaves hung from their ever so fragile stems as if pondering upon whether to fall or to stay, oscillating between colors. It felt as if it didn’t quite know what to be; as it was a few different things at once, simultaneously warm and cool, bright and dark, it was waiting at the threshold for the final verdict, breath withheld. Every time the breeze rose, I could hear the leaves whisper and see the sun stare intensely at dispersed spots, bold and modest as if in love, as the clouds chased each other in an oddly lowering sky.

When I got there and stood in line to order my lunch, I saw one of my interlocutors, the president of CEO, one of the Iranian-American organizations I studied, sitting out there in a fenced-off part of the street in front of the restaurant, with an American guy of clearly European descent in suit and tie. I saw this type of guys in Washington a lot; the type, unsupported by any hard proof worthy of mention, I branded as “policy maker” in my simple and imprecise mind, assuming only government people manage to be so confident while so ordinary. Myself being one of the lesser mortals and therefore perpetually in doubt about my own worth or the implications and consequences
of my actions, I decided to avoid any interaction with them and took my tray of lunch and my book to a corner and sat down to learn about poetics of space and pleasures of kabob.

Being a novice anthropologist, however, fenced in, by mere chance, with one of my few interlocutors, engaged in discussion with an American policy-maker-type in front of an Iranian restaurant not too far from the Hill in Washington DC, was no easy task. To my surprise and embarrassment, my eavesdropping ears and glancing eyes were turned on just by being placed in the middle of such an ethnographically seductive situation. Who was this guy, and what were they talking about? I couldn’t tell.

Whether or not my interlocutor’s companion really was an important American government guy, I know that my hinting casually at the possibility here is neither uncovering a hidden connection nor smearing my interlocutor with an unwanted association. It is no secret, after all, in fact a mark of distinction, that he has served as an adviser to a Congressman, worked on his Ph.D. under some of the most well-known political analysts and policy advisors to different American administrations, and frequently spoken in the media and at major American policy think tanks as a “Middle East expert.” At thirty-one and as the President of CEO, the Participation Promoter is by far the most open and ambitious advocate of Iranian presence on Capitol Hill: The CEO website features such boldly titled projects as “Iranian-American Eyes and Ears in the Corridors of Power: Washington Policy Watch,” “Befriend Your Lawmaker: Congressional Breakfast Series,” “Your Gateway to Political Influence: Legislative Action Center,” and “Register to Vote: Making an Iranian-American Difference in the 2004 Elections.” So even if in my helplessly unhyphenated Iranian mind, anything to do with the government still rhymes with debasement and danger, we are in America now,
no harm in assuming that my Iranian-American interlocutor was there breaking bread and kabob with a government guy. Or just a co-worker, or an old college friend, for all I know. At any case, the one caught in the act was not he but I.

Just as I was getting ready to dip my bread in my yogurt and concentrate on my innocent and irrelevant book, my interlocutor came over to my corner and said Salam. In what must have been a split second, I anxiously reviewed in my mind the Iranian book of manners, or what of it my family’s counterculture has managed to pass on to me in my socially reluctant and awkward twenty four years in Iran, to find if I was supposed to stand up for a guy and extend my hand in a situation like that. I did rise, half way, as my foot got stuck under the table and my purse started sliding down with my food tray on its way, slowly realizing that maybe women didn’t have to stand up for men unless the men were considerably older or higher in status. With my interlocutor throwing pleasantries at me in a Persian-sprinkled English as sportily as he unlocked his bicycle from the fence near me, I felt I was suspended somewhere in between, as if trying to balance on an invisible hyphen while my interlocutor leaped elegantly between being a culturally well-trained Iranian and being a casual and confident American. I realized I did consider him much higher in status and much more seasoned than our one-year age difference would cause.

A few young and middle-aged Iranian men said hi or salam to my interlocutor respectfully as they passed by. I glanced at his American companion who was looking on, waiting at a distance, and thought what he could be thinking: That this young American, the Participation Promoter, was indeed the type of expert they were looking for on the Hill: down with his heritage (Persian language and mannerism), known in the
community, able to network, embrace of his citizenship in the American democracy, able to travel back and forth between the two countries, able to seek out top officials on both ends, passionate for influence, not just educated in but free of shame or fear with regards to politics.

After the usual pleasantries, my interlocutor asked me that fatal question: "Are you still with the Historians?"\(^1\) Considering the risks of association with the Historians whose lives were exclusively dedicated to opposing the regime in Iran and their foundation which documented thousands of executions by the regime, also because the Historians wished to keep a low profile until their project had reached the point of going public, I had refrained from disclosing any information about my research on them to my other interlocutors. Asked by CEO which other organizations I studied, I had mentioned a few but said that there were others I wished to keep anonymous. This had not bode well with CEO that said was in favor of all things loud and open, perhaps precisely to counter this quintessential Iranian mentality of fear and secrecy that I, along with some other of my interlocutors, seemed to be suffering from. Also, well aware of its sensitive position as an organization that advocates Iranian participation in the American political and civic life, surrounded by old-school cultural or oppositional (to the Iranian regime) Iranian exile organizations in the US, CEO saw possible risks and disadvantages in being grouped, even if for purely scholarly purposes, with any organization the nature of which was not clear to CEO and openly announced. Perhaps CEO felt that appearing side by side organizations that were politically militant, or organizationally not as sophisticated,

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\(^1\) Referring to the founders of another organization that I studied in Washington, an organization for promoting human rights and democracy in Iran, referred to throughout this dissertation simply as the Human Rights Foundation (HRF)
countered its efforts to set itself apart from the above-mentioned "typical" Iranian
organizations by emphasizing its non-oppositional, professional, and not just Iranian but
Iranian-American nature. On several occasions, they had repeated their wish to know
about the unnamed organization I studied and I had repeated that unfortunately my hands
were tied. I knew this bugged them.

Maybe that is why I sensed a triumph in my interlocutor's tone of voice when he
asked me that question, sporting what I read as a piercing all-knowing smile. How did he
know? How did he know? I searched my mind. Washington is small and smaller still is
the Iranian community in and around it. I must have told someone before I realized that
the Arab-American director of an American funding agency for democracy could
accidentally meet the head official of the Iranian Interest Section in an innocent
ceremony at the town's Islamic Center, and the senior programmer at a foundation
supporting freedom around the world could be romantically interested in and therefore
doggedly digging up information about the Iranian consultant of a renowned international
human rights organization, and an Iranian fellow at an American think tank could be
dating a student who has just escaped Iran after being beat up by the authorities for taking
part in protests, and the founder of a business investment firm in Tehran would be
drinking beer with me, me of all people, at a fundraising Happy Hour I'm attending for
ethnographic purposes and asking me about a memoir by an Iranian woman in which I
am supposedly a character and referring to yet another memoir by an Iranian woman in
which he is mentioned, and that somehow, somewhere in this universe that made my
head spin, information could be exchanged as idly as cracking watermelon seeds in an
eventless evening.
You leave your blue-domed, cypress-lined, mountain-surrounded, river-sliced hometown, the historical center of clever and creative busybodies, to lose yourself in the spiral highways and skyscrapers of the 13-million-person Tehran to be who you want to be with nobody knowing who you are, and then you leave Tehran and go to America only to find yourself back in the intricate web of gazes and gossips that you thought you'd left at the beginning. The "community" embraces you like a blanket and bares you of your anonymity; invisible lines are drawn between you and your kin around the world, between the small town in the Southern deserts of Iran where your great grandfather immigrated from and the small town in the black forests of West Germany where your political uncle took refuge; once again, everybody knows who you are and where you've been so far. If you are someone like me, you feel yourself in re-possession of an unwanted power you thought you'd lost to disgrace and endanger yourself and those you care about, and fear and shame come galloping along. With a population (approximately a million) one-fourth of that of my hometown, and all armed with hi-tech means of connectedness, the Iranian community in the US bears an uncanny resemblance to a small town neighborhood.

I stuttered: "Oh, but I was never with them; I just study them, like I study you."

He said aha. But it was over. We said goodbye and he pulled out his bicycle and I finally got a chance to free my foot from underneath the table and secure my purse on the empty chair next to me, and I watched my interlocutor walk down the street, bicycle in hand, alongside his government-guy-type companion. Why did it matter so much that he knew? Why did it matter to him? Why did it matter to me? I have mentioned some reasons for my keeping this information and for his very interest in it earlier, but none
explain why I spent the rest of that day in an imaginary solitary confinement back in Tehran, hanging upside down, being whipped to throw up information. This image had both literal and symbolic dimensions for me. To start with the latter, something about all the various gimmicks of information exchange had come to really corner me in my field, presenting me with a mental, emotional, and moral dilemma as solitary and torturous as any other. (As I write these lines, even, I am sometimes not far from feeling like I am confessing to my fieldwork sins in the solitary confinement of my dissertation.)

While I understood CEO’s concerns, or even simple curiosity on the part of its staff as it could very well be, I believed the conditions of my field were such that I just had to trust my feelings about what could possibly endanger me or any of my interlocutors—even if my feelings were based on wrong judgment and habitual paranoia, and even if the case-by-case rather than standard nature of my decisions to withhold certain information from certain people at certain times could not insure balance with regards to who knew how much at any given point throughout my research. Is it dishonest and unfair to tell some of our interlocutors more than we do others? I understand that to be a fair judge or referee, balance and equality are essential; but is it our job as anthropologists to keep balance of this sort? If we are there to try to understand people and not there to rate their performance or take sides, then why do we feel dirty when we fail to give and take exactly the same amount of information to and from each of our rivaling interlocutors? When does information come to stand for understanding? And why is it so hard to shed our imagined power as gods over our subjects, as if we can with any luck bestow upon them what each fairly deserves, and to
see ourselves as actors in a human field, just as susceptible to impulse, need, danger, and error as the very people we study?

The truth is that I had indeed developed a special relationship with the Historians who treated me like family, particularly as their office *aka* my fieldsite was located at their home and in the middle of the hustle and bustle of their lives, and that my internship at HRF, unlike the one with CEO, was long-term and paid. Even if I were to keep my relationship with the Historians on a strictly office-related level, "office" at HRF had a peculiar meaning; you sort of joined the family as soon as you started working on their project in any form or capacity. From the fifteen-year-old genius and introverted Russian-American neighbor girl who had taught herself how to read and type Persian so she could make some pocket money promoting democracy and human rights in Iran to the Guatemalan cleaning lady who came in jeans and T-shirts on Tuesdays to clean and in short skirts, heels, and blouses on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays to type in the Islamic Penal Code, everybody was viewed as a potential staff member but treated not as a staff member typically would: Everybody received friendly advice on their diet, attire, and love life; everybody was joked around with, invited to play hooky on the especially bleak days, included in family gossip and squabble, and generously showered with goodies of all sorts. The Historians believed theirs was a business of the heart and if you couldn’t find it in your heart to be happy with the advantages and disadvantages of this kind of business, it was hard to be in it, even near it, at all. At HRF, the professional was always inevitably personal.

Aware of the hostility between CEO whom the Historians suspected as working in favor of the Islamic Republic and HRF whom some of my CEO interlocutors personally
viewed as repulsively militant, elitist and insensitive to the everyday realities of life for
the less unfortunate public, also due to the general atmosphere of mistrust and grudge in
my field, I dreaded being considered “one of them” in the eyes of the other group or those
who learnt about my research. At the same time, I felt it mattered not just to the
Historians (with whom things were more personal) but also to CEO (with whom things
were more professional) to somehow claim me as one of their own, to adopt or convert
me. I was honored and unsettled by it at the same time. In Persian, there is a saying that
when you “eat somebody’s bread and salt”, you become attached to them through what
you’ve shared, you become entangled with them through the salt you’ve consumed, you
become “salt-bond” (Namak-gir) as it were. While I was subtly salt-bond to the
Historians and perhaps my critical edge with regards to them was softened as a result of a
don’t-bite-the-hand-that-feeds-you situation, CEO seemed to want to make me its own
through other binding elements than bread and salt.

Immediately as I started my internship with CEO, I received an email from them
asking me to submit a picture and a testimonial for their website where interns and
volunteers praise CEO and state their reasons for joining the force. I responded that
although I could very well be interested in their cause (and not “interested in their cause”,
as I was for research purposes) and might consider becoming a member when all of this
was over, my association with them for the time being was merely for research purposes
(as a way for me to know them more closely in their own context and also to help them in
their tasks in return for the time and information they gave me) and did not mean that I
had “joined” them. Membership was a position I just couldn’t officially assume while
doing research. Nevertheless, I felt a noticeable effort on their part to act in public as
though I was already “one of them”, presenting me as if I was a new accessory CEO had just acquired, as the anthropologist who was studying them (and how fun and flattering that was for them) while also “working with” them, which was true but only within quotation marks. Although the purpose and nature of my “being there” was no mystery and we had signed a consent form regarding the terms of our relationship, I didn’t feel like interjecting at those awkward introductions by saying, well, just “working with them,” you know, making quotation marks with my fingers in the air, smiling and raising my eyebrows with a hint of not-quite, a hint of doubt, like we do when we are speaking in quotation marks; so I just smiled.

In truth, I felt uncomfortable with my strange quotation-mark life in the field where frequently I was “friends” with people but not really, “interested in” them but not really, “working with” them but not really. I did. But I also felt immune in my habitat within quotation marks, my little embassy of anthropology in a foreign land where I could maintain my accent: Speaking the same language as my interlocutors but in a way that reflected my inadequacy at speaking their language, my self-consciousness about speaking their language, the question intonation that I maintained while speaking their language, my accent, the reminiscent and reminder of who I was and where I came from; not so much different from them but not quite like them either.

As someone who experiences life as a series of fortunate and unfortunate intense entanglements, I cherished my fieldwork contract with my interlocutors whereby I was entitled to “participate” in relationships that were made out of the same stuff as any human relationship, only a notch lighter, less entangled, than real friendship, attraction, collaboration. I can only assume that by the same token my interlocutors were granted an
opportunity to give me “information” that was geared (accented) for my ears, a grain of
doubt or mockery away from the “real” deal. Fair enough. There is no use in pretending
that my little fieldwork was actually a slice of real life — “reality” itself being a doomed
permanent resident of the space between quotation marks, anyway — and that I didn’t
constantly look for some fenced-off garden in the middle of it all to make peace with the
awkwardness of my being there and my accented conversations and relationships in
quotation marks.

And yet some things just fell off the quotation-marked territory and became real.
I felt very vulnerable when they did, and my dread at CEO knowing about my association
with HRF had something to do with that vulnerability and that I felt I could not defend
my position and perhaps my research ethics confidently because I had transgressed, I had
somehow sinned by doing the unmentionable and developing a relationship with my
historian interlocutors outside the confines of quotation marks. Usually I am too shy and
timid to behave in obviously out-of-line ways; if I am not sure of where the lines are, I
usually imagine them closer around me rather than farther away just to be on the safe
side; it is in feeling that I frequently feel, and fear, I may transgress. It is a sin of
sentiment, an out-of-line affect, when I fear I feel more deeply and tenderly about
something or someone than I perhaps should in order to keep things in the confines of a
particular socially accepted and expected mode of relating, modes that can be described
as professional, collegial, formal, modest, casual, casual chic, and so on. I felt that I had
entered a messy field of affects with the Historians, where it was not possible for me to
compartmentalize things into “work”, “fieldwork”, and “friendship.” As I entered their
guest bedroom where the human rights database lived on four computers and as I
spooned myself generous amounts of their fantastic homemade dishes downstairs at my lunch break and as I watched TV and listened to music with them during “after-hours” work at their home/foundation and as I was invited to spend holidays and weekends with them, I felt it became harder and harder to claim that I was not somehow one of them, with them as the Participation Promoter had put it, even if, like in any other relationship I suppose, we had different understandings and reactions, different backgrounds, life styles, and experiences, and we made different choices.

Is it possible to stand at exactly the same distance from everyone, balancing and measuring data as if in scales? Isn’t it true that fairness in the field is not so much about being the same with regards to everyone but about being conscious of the nature and extent of one’s relationships with different interlocutors and the doors it opens or closes for one’s research, of the give-and-take that is involved? I wondered whether the Participation Promoter understood my position, not just my closeness to the Historians but also my difference from them, or did he feel threatened by how he perceived of my loyalties? I also wondered whether they at CEO were worried that if they did not establish my status as “one of them” in public right away, people could then pull me aside and ask my opinion on who I had found they really were and what I had observed was actually going on in CEO. (I am not suggesting that I did find things about CEO as a result of my fieldwork that the public doesn’t already know or that I was even ever looking for that kind of juicy information to make public about any of my interlocutors; that wasn’t the purpose of my research) Were they anxious that the authority to “represent” CEO could then fall into the hands of non-CEO sources such as myself? I
understood their worries about representation on three grounds, which all had to do with
the purpose and nature of information exchange in one way or another.

First, it just so happened that I was introduced to most of my interlocutors through
personal connections, so there was already a certain level of trust and informality
between us. Plus, most of my interlocutors were old enough to have lived in Iran
extensively before moving abroad in the late 1970s and early 1980s and were well-
equipped to run their own version of “background check” on me based on my last name,
my age, my connections, or which town I was from. The line that went around was that
there is this kid who is trying to write her thesis (read school assignment) on Iranian
NGOs in the US and would like to learn from you; rather than there is this social scientist
who has come to town to learn about (gather information on) the activities of Iranian
NGOs in the US; so I don’t think anybody felt threatened by me or my research. To them,
I felt, being my “informant” meant that they were to help me do my research, not that
they were expected to disclose inter- and intra-organizational information to me.
Nobody thought it was a big deal, and when I would shyly take out the consent form I
had prepared or even mention it, they would wave it away with a casual and typical
movement of the arm: “C’mon, what is this for?!” As if I was trying to make my
research look more complicated and important than it was in reality. One of them even
said, upon hearing about the whole Institutional Review Board (IRB) and consent forms
and such, “Thank God this isn’t rocket science but only anthropology!”

None of this was the case with CEO. I had become interested in CEO solely
through their activities and by browsing their website. I had simply contacted them by
email asking them to be part of my research and they had asked for my resume, a sample
of my work, and two letters of recommendation in return. I was interviewed by their president once on the phone and again, upon my arrival in Washington, by one of their board members, a lawyer, who asked me endless detailed questions about this talk I had given and that paper I had written and that other workshop I had attended, and what I meant by "intellectual" and what I meant by "political" and so forth. At the end, we had signed a consent form, with an added clause in bold letters insuring their right to review, edit, and deny the use of any information obtained about CEO through my research, and I was asked not to disclose any of my research results regarding CEO unless with their explicit permission. Our interactions were more peer-to-peer and business-like, and their precautions about representation were understandable in that context, so were all those bureaucratic measures their right and standard procedure.

Second, I suspected that CEO might consider my research an infiltrating effort by the other camp (opposition to the Iranian regime, and I don't mean particularly or solely HRF) that does frequently slander CEO for its "suspicious" (their word, their idea) demands from the American government that happen to resemble any demands made by the Iranian government if it was to send a representative directly: to lift the sanctions on Iran, to undergo unconditional talks with the Iranian government, to remove unjustified restrictions on American visas to be granted to Iranian nationals, to apologize for using demeaning terminology such as Axis of Evil against Iran, to hold Saddam Hussein accountable for his use of chemical weapons on Iranians during the Iran-Iraq war; demands that would indeed direct American foreign policy to a certain direction (what, for lack of a better word, one could brand as "engagement" rather than isolation) and all this while claiming neutrality in politics and a non-partisan nature.
CEO, of course, argues that these are the demands of the Iranian-American community that it is simply voicing not policy recommendations made by CEO, but of course not everyone believes that CEO represents the Iranian-American community, just those who have already embraced it as their representative and so take part in polls and petitions and things on their website, forming the afore-mentioned “voice”. In fact, the Iranian web space is full of attacks and counter attacks by CEO’s foes and fans regarding what CEO voices (CEO itself has maintained a professional distance from this cyber battle for the most part, only coming out every once in a while with brief, official statements confirming or denying something, never resorting to bad language as both its foes and fans widely do). Some have gone as far as accusing CEO of receiving money (“or somehow, something anyway”) directly from the Iranian government to push for its interests on Capitol Hill and to herd the Iranian-American community in a certain direction that would be harmless for the Iranian regime, unlike the militant attitudes of the opposition.

Even in the absence of charges made by the opposition, CEO has, due to its own phenomenally effective self-publicity and its loudly successful campaigns on behalf of the Iranian-American community (such as making the National Geographic correct its inclusion, in parentheses, of the words "Arabian Gulf" below the Persian Gulf label on their world atlas; countering the discriminatory policies of Monster.com, a leading job site, against Iranian resumes; or obtaining a public apology from Don Imus, a nationally syndicated morning radio program, for callously commenting on the insignificance of Iranian deaths from an Iranian passenger plane crash near Kish) and its efficiency and professionalism in actualizing certain much-needed and long-desired projects for the
Iranian-American community (such as obtaining Small Business Status for Iranian businesses in the US, creating a comprehensive database of Iranian organizations in the US, or providing weekly policy briefs for Iranians), frequently been at the center of almost any heated discussion regarding the Iranian-American community of the 21st century.

At the Second International Conference on the Iranian Diaspora held by the Iranian Alliances Across Borders (IAAB) at the University of Maryland in April 2005, I was put on a panel titled “The Politics of Representation: Putting Ourselves on America’s Political Map” with a Mechanical Engineering student from an Iranian student group in Boston who had done a sociological survey of Iranian-Americans, the Participation Promoter who talked about the role of CEO in encouraging Iranian-American participation in the 2004 presidential election, and a fellow anthropology anthropology graduate student from Stanford University, who presented a paper focusing on CEO’s “representational practices” such as its website and on-line campaigns. In my paper, I had talked about the city of Washington and the Iranian NGOs in it as a political landscape not dissimilar to that of Persian manuscript illustrations (circum. 13th-18th centuries) due to the uncanny presence of gazes and gossips, the spatial and temporal simultaneity of seemingly incommensurate entities and activities, and the situating of the figures frequently in liminal spaces and lofty margins as opposed to the middle of the scene/page. Luckily, I was given the time’s up sign before I got out of the thickets of the manuscript illustrations and had a chance to refer to CEO or any other organization specifically.
I left people in kind of a good mood, I think, among the lute-playing, wine-serving, cypress-bodied beauties of the manuscript illustrations; and, honestly, I was feeling pretty pleased myself, having just given a paper based on my fieldwork in politics, on the same panel with one of my main interlocutors, to what must have been two-thirds of the conference-going Iranian-American community, in the neighborhood of Washington DC, and yet having somehow managed to totally leave them with no worthwhile information about my field, no reference to politics, and not the slightest hue of an argument they could question, pursue, or comment on (after the session was over and in the crowded hallways, a couple of smiling people approached me and asked if they could have a copy of that “beautiful piece of writing” and one confined to me that she, too, was enchanted by art history and particularly 15th century Islamic painting).
I felt like one of my own much-discussed manuscript illustration figures, just flashing briefly through a half-drawn curtain or from behind a bush, with a face that didn’t reveal much, and a gaze that landed way outside of the frame in a non-place. Except that I had done it not as a clever representational tactic but as a result of my own evasive mind and fear of confrontation. As I sat myself back next to my sociology-minded mechanical engineer co-panelist, well within the cloud of factuality and confidence that he had created through a mixture of maleness, sociology, mechanics, and engineering, I felt shy, timid, useless and strangely proud of it. I had been stopped right at the threshold, in the safe garden of abstract Persian culture, before I had risked representing anybody in particular or, riskier yet, critiquing how they represented themselves, where things would inevitably get messy.

My fellow anthropology graduate student’s paper, titled “Iranian Diaspora and Transnational Governmentality: Representational Practices and Production of Democratic Subjects,” however, stopped no short of a hearty critique. She argued that CEO’s techniques of teaching Iranian-Americans how to embrace their American citizenship and participate in the American representative democracy could be understood in terms of neo-liberalism’s central claims of increase in social productivity and possibilities of higher self-determination and social participation. CEO propagates the neo-liberal image of the free, rational, self-determined individuals as entrepreneurs in a world free of bureaucratic tutelage. On CEO’s website, we read:

Our function is to provide Iranian-Americans with the necessary knowledge and tools to be able to participate in decision-making according to their own views.

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2 Sima Shakhsari, 2005
By providing them with a number of options and then easy techniques (such as clicking with your mouse) to “shop around”, “pick and choose”, and “order” what they want, CEO supposedly educates Iranians (as docile subjects) in the smooth, clean, and logical political processes of their adopted country. Those are understood to be in contrast with the ways of political participation in the old country that involved messy and costly situations such as revolution, armed resistance, dissidence, endless bureaucracy, etc. In America, you can participate in politics on your laptop from the quiet of your own home, just like you can pay bills, shop, and make money on-line sitting on your couch with your dog licking your leg. Again, this idea of the individual choosing between his/her options (“making informed decisions,” as CEO states Iranian-Americans deserve to do) rather than seeking to change and affect the options themselves is very much in sync with the neo-liberal ideal of the individual.

In this paper, CEO was portrayed as marketing democracy to Iranian-Americans as consumers but not producers of democracy. CEO provides Iranian-Americans with a user’s manual for democracy; again considering them users as opposed to producers, distributors, or exporters of democracy (Note the Bush administration’s rhetoric of “exporting” and spreading democracy to Iraq and Afghanistan, for instance). In doing so, it also regulates the social conduct of Iranian-Americans (just as neo-liberalism does beyond its economic domain). Among others, my fellow anthropology graduate student referred to how, under “General Tips: Dos and Don’ts,” on its website encouraging Iranian-Americans to participate in a phone campaign against the Stop Terrorist Entry Program (STEP) Act of October 2003, CEO had listed the following:
➤ Focus on no more than three key arguments

➤ Don’t just talk – ask questions to elicit feedback

➤ Don’t argue and always be polite

➤ Never lie or exaggerate

➤ Never be rude or make threats

➤ Point out how the proposed legislation will affect you and others in the Congressperson’s district

➤ Keep the conversation short – no longer than 6 minutes

➤ Always thank them at the end of the conversation, regardless of the outcome

Through instructions like these that do indeed resemble a user’s manual or a Book of Manners, a new Iranian-American political subjectivity is produced.
My fellow anthropology graduate student’s cautionary note about what she has referred to on her weblog as the “Iranian diaspora’s complicity with dominant discourses”\(^3\) did not sit too well with the Participation Promoter who took it as a wholesale rejection of CEO and immediately requested time to “defend” CEO and respond to the critique. Although each of our presentations were stopped within hardly two-thirds of their 15-minute originally granted time, extra panel time was granted so the Participation Promoter could resume his place at the microphone, addressing the audience again for what seemed at least as long as the original presentation. As soon as he finished, a well-known scholar of Persian literature and the founder of a Persian Studies Center at a major US university took hold of the microphone and criticized my fellow anthropology graduate student for resorting to “these highbrow theoretical analyses” instead of realizing and appreciating what CEO and organizations like CEO were “doing for the community,” which was what he suggested everyone needed to do—followed by quite some applause from the audience. This scholar himself represents a rare case of an academic (rather than the ever-present physicians, engineers, or businessmen) who has agreed to participate in CEO’s fundraising efforts and appear on their public announcements on TV, encouraging Iranian-Americans to take advantage of the democracy they live in. Following his comments, a heated and lengthy back-and-forth amongst the audience, Sima, and the Participation Promoter took place. “Politics of Representation,” indeed.

All in all, the atmosphere throughout the Second International Conference on the Iranian Diaspora was that of celebration (one person actually mentioned that the

\(^3\) http://englishfarangeopolis.blogspot.com/2005/05/busy-impure-blogger.html
gathering reminded her of the festivities around the Persian New Year) and
“empowerment” was the word of the weekend—to contrast the somber and melancholic
nature of Iranian exile intellectual gatherings in the last decades of the 20th century
(Naficy 1993). In his work on the Iranian television in Los Angeles during the 1980s,
Hamid Naficy talks about the celebratory versus celibate moods of Iranian exiles: While
the exilic popular culture burst and bloomed in euphoric and ecstatic expressions (as in
elaborate weddings, concerts, nightclubs, music videos, holiday celebrations, etc.), the
discourse of the elites consistently suppressed and restrained celebratory expressions and
was drenched in dystopia and dysphoria. Naficy sees the reason for this affective divide
partly in the different audiences that each culture envisioned for itself: While popular
culture dealt with audiences that were concerned “in all material, affective, and spiritual
dimensions” (1993: 13) more with here and now than with there and then, the intellectual
elite culture dealt with the retrospection resulted from the defeat and loss that the elites
felt in the aftermath of the Iranian Revolution. For the intellectual elite, therefore,
“public expression of grief [was] expected, even required, as proof of their deep, sincere
emotions” (1993: 15). This formal and affective divide between the popular and political
elite cultures seemed pretty much dissolved by the Second International Conference on
the Iranian Diaspora in 2005 where presentation after presentation focused on the new
Iranian-American presence in the American civic and political scene, celebrating Iranian-
American officials, news anchors, artists, writers, and stand-up comedians. The fog of
painful retrospection finally lifted, the here and now seemed to have made its grand entry
to the political arena (or the part of it represented in the conference) at last; the popular
and the political seemed to have merged in all material, affective, and spiritual dimensions.

As I watched the "second generation" Iranian-Americans with their perfect English and sweet accents in Persian, presenting films and slides of their (in many cases, first) trips to Iran and their cute attempts at "acting Iranian," reading, comic-reading, and even rapping about their in-between situations, talking about their achievements and the projects they had underway for better representing their heritage and helping their unfortunate peers in the old country, I could not help but think of the irony of it all: Some 20 years ago, the catastrophically somber star of the celebratory mood, the beloved pop singer of the Los Angeles exile, Daryush, had worried a bit too much perhaps about the future “Children of Iran” (title of one of his records) when he lamented:

What are we to say to our children? 
To tell them that we have no identity? 
That we have to beg for what is our own 
For our own rights 
Behind the closed doors of exile? 
How to answer our children 
When they grow up and ask where they were born? 
To tell them that we have no country? 
What is our answer? 
What is our reasoning? 
What about our home that has been turned into ruins? 
We are responsible for all of this. 
We are the ones who fooled us. 
We are the ones who mislead us. 
We are the ones who broke some idols, 
Only to replace them with new ones.⁴

Luckily for Daryush, the Children didn't seem to mind where they had ended up: There was a lot of can-do, a lot of perkiness, emanating from them; and the older Iranians, well,

⁴ My own translation
they, too, seemed drunk with success, basking in the glory of this blooming generation that had finally arrived to make it happen for Iranians here, to restore their pride and give them what they deserved. It just seemed that nobody was in the mood for hardcore analyses and that presentations like my fellow anthropology graduate student’s killed their buzz, as it were.

I realized it was in this context that CEO had come into being and operated. This celebration of empowerment and unity in diversity was as much an offspring of CEO’s efforts as a bed upon which CEO was born. CEO embraced and represented a shift in the notion of political and civic participation for Iranian-Americans, in their notions of citizenship and agency, and perhaps most important of all, in the spirit and affective mode of this community. It seemed now that anything that less than cheered CEO on and rendered it as immensely powerful yet free of troubling power relations could threaten CEO. I could see why the Participation Promoter was so careful about how people represented CEO and wanted to make sure nobody scared away its potential members and patrons by linking its democracy campaign to American neo-liberal market-driven agendas, or to the Islamic Republic.

It seemed to me that this new image of Iranian-Americanness had gained the same sanctity that the image of the Persian civilization had for the new Iranian exiles of the 1980s and early 1990s (Naficy 1993). Now the sacred and unquestionable “whiteness” of Iranians (as Aryans) was problematized as these young Iranian-Americans emphasized the difference they had felt growing up between themselves and “white” Euro-Americans and the affinity they felt with other “colored” immigrants, such as Arabs, South Asians, or even Hispanics — groups that Iranians have traditionally considered less and lower in
terms of education, economic status, race, and just general grandness. Now the
temporary status of Iranians as people who are here because their motherland has been
seized by an evil power and will be going back to their wonderful empire soon was
destabilized by the Iranian-Americans who proudly referred to themselves as immigrants,
as new Americans and not just unhappy exiles who dragged along chains of belonging to
an old civilization. Now these young Iranian-Americans were even poking fun at some
age-old Iranian traditions and darker episodes of the Iranian history such as the 1979
hostage crisis—as Omid Djalali, the first Iranian comedian to act in an American TV
show (Whoopi), said in an interview with CEO: “nobody likes cultures that are stiff.” But
it seemed that it was now this Iranian-Americanness itself that nobody dared to render as
less than positively powerful. In all its wonderful fluidity, this image of Iranian-
Americanness felt rather stiff; a fervent hyphenism not dissimilar to its nationalist
counterpart.

While the many sociology-minded professionals from other disciplines
(engineering, medicine, business) proved the strength of the community in their shiny
numbers and impressive charts, pumping in this sense of euphoria and pride, I sensed the
general feeling was that anthropologists like us were kill-joys and party-poopers who
were always looking for something fishy, for troubling relations of power and domination
in everything, always problematizing stuff, always finding ways to connect people to
what they desired most not to be and were trying their best to hide. Couldn’t we just
forget about our favorite quotation marks for a change and stop caging and closeting our
community’s “empowerment,” “success,” “democratization” between these quotation
marks like they were contagious concepts that needed to be quarantined, or else like they
would die off if we brought them out and exposed them to light? Why did we always feel
the need to somehow “contain” our people’s “euphoria”? Always missing the point and
spoiling the party.

In an interview I finally managed to do with the Participation Promoter in
December 2005 in the same House of Kabob where I had previously run into him, he
expressed his disdain for those who were always sitting around, reading, writing, and
many protests with banners? One should ask what, in truth, have you DONE for your
community.” I had felt that he was referring not just to the skeptics of the opposition but
to the skeptics of the academia, where he believed I belonged, or where I believe I
belong. This was the second ground on which I understood CEO’s concerns with any act
of representation I was thought to be engaged in.

The third ground on which I understood CEO’s worries about representation had
to do with the fact that for CEO its public image was everything and they measured any
exchange of information based on how it would affect this image. This was closely
related with their objective to prove themselves as the most efficient and empowering
option as a “representative” for the Iranian-American community. This ambition was
simply not shared with any other organizations I studied.5 Take the Iranian Mothers for
Freedom, for instance, a group of men and women who get together and organize
protests, forums, memorials, and other such events in solidarity with those who are

5 For a similarly ambitious scale of self-promotion as “representative,” one should
perhaps look at the People’s Mojahedin Organization of Iran or different royalist groups
under the banner of the late Shah’s son, Reza Pahlavi, even when these groups promote
themselves as representatives of the exile opposition or the entire people of Iran, which is
certainly not CEO’s claim.
suffering under the Iranian regime and whose voices are thus harder to hear. They don’t have an office or official members, they don’t call themselves an “organization,” they don’t raise funds by applying for grants or holding fundraising events; to my surprise, they don’t even have a website, and a Google search on their name yields no results.

Obviously, “fieldwork” opportunities for me were not many with the Mothers, as a “site” was hard to conceive of and those whom I managed to get together for an interview or “focus group” said that they did not have much to say besides that they wanted to show those suffering under the Islamic regime that they in America had not forgotten about them (no interest in affecting policy in America, their country of residence for the past twenty-some years). At a Sunday afternoon coffee meeting in a French Café in the suburbs of DC, which by the way was packed in a most surreal way with half a dozen different groups of Iranians having meetings about Iran, from the ex-Confederation (of Iranian Students in Europe and North America, 1960-1975) types with their reminiscent walrus mustaches to the Saks Fifth Avenue types throbbing under expensive jewelry, perfume, make-up, and designer clothes, one of the Mothers told me: “Those who should know us, know us and whoever feels it necessary will support us. If not, we’ll just pay out of our pockets. We don’t need much money to do what we do.” The same woman told me that I didn’t need to mention any names or numbers in whatever I would end up writing about their group because that wasn’t so important.

After about an hour or so while the four women I was having coffee with planned their next event, a forum to hear out Iranian Kurdish and Azeri separatists and their opponents, we waved and snaked our way out of the café through the tables that hosted different meeting groups, saying salam to some and Hi to others, smiling and nodding at
some and avoiding eye contact with the others, exchanging words and flyers about future events regarding Iran in the area. It occurred to me that that was what Paris or Berkley of the late 1970s and early 1980s must have been like, cafés packed with flocks of smoking hot-headed Iranians concerned with the past, present, and future of Iran. I had a Déjà Vu of something I had not experienced before but had heard about a lot during my fieldwork, except that there were a lot more grey hairs and smoking was prohibited inside. It made me emotional to imagine that this was something some of these people had been doing for the past thirty years, gathering at cafés outside Iran discussing Iran; and I wondered whether it was precisely this mode of relating to Iran and to other Iranians abroad that CEO strived to change: This café mode, the scene of nods and smiles and eye contacts and avoiding them, of simultaneous meetings happening at different tables by different groups side by side, of the half-hidden exchange of words and flyers amongst individuals at these tables and amongst the different tables, of the mystery and clarity of this those-who-should-know-us-know-us philosophy, this peculiar sense of space and status, of higher and lower and insider and outsider, at once social and spatial, of this liminality that resembled so much the landscape of a Persian manuscript illustration.

Instead of the café, CEO presents a searchable database of Iranian-American organizations that helps members gain increased exposure and enables them to collaborate and share resources for events and activities on a large scale. Also, based on the profiles of the organization, CEO proposes to assess the needs of Iranian organizations in America and design tools that specifically target those needs and interests, such as links to information on nonprofit management, fundraising, volunteers, and so forth. CEO's Annual Report (2002-2003) sports on its glossy pages the following
words and phrases in super large fonts and brilliant colors: "Strength in Numbers,"
"Transformation," "Involvement," "Business Development," "Career Development," and
"Impact." On its website, CEO quotes Congressman Jim McDermott at a CEO
Congressional Breakfast (where Iranian-American members of CEO can meet with their
representatives in an exclusive breakfast event) on May 31 in Seattle: "Iranians have been
good at keeping their heads down in order to avoid being noticed; but after 9/11, you will
be noticed nonetheless. Now is the time to keep your heads up. Raising your visibility
improves your situation."

Whatever the "situation," organizational membership is, for CEO, a fundamental
aspect of democracy:

By joining CEO your voice will be amplified by the strength of the Iranian-American
community. Your membership helps CEO demonstrate our community's strength in
numbers to leaders of this nation – in government, media, and business. The larger our
membership, the louder your voice will be heard. And the louder your voice is heard the
more influence you will have (CEO website).

The metaphor of organization as amplifier is prevalent in the discourse of CEO and those
who look up to it. In an Iranian.com article about the power of unity under one
representative organization, a frequent submitter to the site relayed joyfully what John
Fahey, President of the National Geographic, apparently had said to CEO officials who
met with him after he received thousands of requests from Iranians around the world
urging him to correct the inclusion, in parentheses, of the words "Arabian Gulf" below
the Persian Gulf label on the journal's world atlas: "Your megaphone works!"

It seemed that any interaction I had with CEO as a fieldworker in the Iranian
organizational field and any results that my research would yield could somehow not
escape this amplification effect; that, it was feared, it would come out as noise and interfere with the clarity and brilliance of the message CEO was getting out, or that it would, worse still, be heard as the message itself by all those enthusiasts sitting around waiting for the latest CEO transmittal to hit the air. Therefore, I understood that for CEO, publicity, image, and information had very different meanings than they did for a group like the Iranian Mothers for Freedom. Interestingly, the latter was recommended to me by another one of my interlocutors who believed from all the organizations I was studying, this one was the closest to a real civil society initiative, totally independent of any political group, funding agency, or business backing.

One of the Mothers, an ex-member of the Confederation of Iranian Students (1960-1975), the most active and influential group of exile opposition (to the Shah’s regime) in the decades prior to the Revolution, mentioned that at first she thought of the Mothers as very slow and irrelevant, coming from a radical political background herself, but that eventually she warmed up to them and realized that more could be done by being simply a group of genuine and hardworking people than by affiliation with this political group or the other. They said that more people attended their events than they did any others; that they did not need any publicity, and they were not worried about what others might think of them.

What interested the Mothers in my research, in the words of this particular ex-Confederation member, was that I was finally that promised youth from their children’s generation who had come to figure them out, who had shown genuine interest in whatever it was they did, their cause. As she mentioned and I myself witnessed throughout my fieldwork, there was a lot of self-criticism these days by ex-Confederation
members about whether or not they had understood the real needs and aspirations of the Iranian people from their elite position in exile, whether they had miscalculated Khomeini's power and place in people's hearts, whether or not they had employed the right methods of persuasion and coercion in recruiting new members and pushing for results, whether they had been, in their passionate youth, deeply democratic or deeply totalitarian in their ways and views. Aside from formal and semi-formal gatherings that I heard some ex-members held to discuss these issues, I was witness to many informal dinner-table discussions amongst these fifty- and sixty-year-old recovering Marxist-Leninists, resulting in tears, broken voices, break-ups, confessions, hugs, and other such moving expressions. Although the children of these aging activists, to the extent that they did come to the aforementioned dinner parties and stayed long enough for me to really get to talk to them and know them, could not be described as apolitical and apathetic, their engagement in politics was often much different from their parent's experience.

The sweetheart among these, one who always came to the parties, extremely beautiful, fit, and well-dressed, polite, social, and very cute in her accented Persian speech and manners, was a twenty-five-year-old graduate in International Relations and Political Science from UCLA who worked very hard in Bush's second presidential (2004) campaign and continued to work in the White House after Bush got re-elected. Although nobody in the many dinner parties that I attended throughout my fieldwork supported President Bush (only the Historians appreciated his harsh tone and threats against the government of Iran), rarely anybody could resist melting before this extremely charming young lady who made everybody, from leftists to royalists to liberal
democrats to hedonistic atheists to Islamists themselves, smile when she recounted one of her many Bush stories in an eyelash-batting, pleasantly confident, style. In one, her mother, proud to be her mother, had approached the president during his campaign in her neighborhood in Orange County (or Beverly Hills?) with a picture of her daughter, and after “an embarrassing encounter with the president,” the beautiful girl had us know (by this time we were all already giggling in anticipation), whereby she had reminded him of her daughter “working for him,” she had asked the president to “take these mullahs out of Iran” the way he had done with Saddam Hussein and the Taliban; to which the president—the girl switched to English and recounted in a lower voice as if communicating the very words of God or a prophet, one with a naughty sense of humor—had said: “Yes Ma’am, I promise if I could I’d bomb the shit out of Eye-ran right away!” Followed by everybody’s laughter.

Long story short, it didn’t seem like this younger generation had any interest in the way the parents had done politics. Political will and agency had taken completely different forms and meanings. Although, having come of age in the notoriously oppressive Iran of the 1980s, I shared my understanding of (the only form of) “honorable politics” as opposition and rebellion with the parents rather than their offspring, my knowledge of the actual dates and names and events and actions associated with the Confederation of Iranian Students, or any other oppositional political organization for that matter, was very little. When I expressed my embarrassment regarding my ignorance to the above-mentioned Mother, she kindly reassured me that it must have been because of the oppression under which I had grown up, government censorship and distortion of history and the fact that my parents and other adults were probably too
scared to inform me of such things or expose me to politics in any way. She said she was, nonetheless, very happy that I had finally come to learn and understand; she appreciated my curiosity.

Although my other organizations, HRF and the Scholarly Foundation (SF), were not as hermitic and dervish-like as the Mothers and did see themselves as organizations and of course cared about their good name like everybody else, they, like the Mothers and unlike CEO, did not seem to view me, along with everything and everybody else, as a venue for "representation" or broadcasting information about themselves. They did not seem to be so obsessed with "information," in fact, but perhaps with something more of the kind of "knowledge," as in scholarly analysis or insight. They did not seem to feel that what I would write about them could ruin their good name or cut their funding or reduce their membership body, but that it could perhaps shed some light on how Iranian organizations in America worked, what the problematic areas were, and how they could improve. They even suggested ways for me to do the research depending on which discipline they themselves were trained and had done research in: One said to create a chart with the number of active Iranian organizations in Washington DC, Maryland, and Virginia, description of their goals and activities, sources of funding, constituencies, membership, whether or not they had publications, and the number of years they had been active. Another introduced me to prominent philosophers of liberal thought such as Hobbes and Locks and Rousseau and suggested that I study what she called the "Iranian homodemocraticus" with regards to the notions of human will and nature. Another one had the exciting revelation one day that I should examine the concept of "accountability" amongst Iranian non-governmental organizations in America and situate that within the
perceptions and practices of accountability in Iran and the United States. They each had some idea of where their own organizations would fit in these charts and narratives of evolution and hierarchy, which shows that they were far ahead of me in the hypothesis and theoretical and methodological means to employ for what they perceived my research to be. Nevertheless, they did not seem particularly anxious about where I would eventually see fit to put them in what style I would choose for my narrative and never demanded to review, edit, or deny the use of my final analysis.

Although these other organizations, too, had suffered from accusations (SF of leaning towards monarchists because it was almost exclusively funded by an endowment from Ashraf Pahlavi, the late Shah’s older sister; HRF of fueling American hawks against Iran because of their undeterred and uncompromising objection to the Iranian regime as a illegitimate ruler; and the Mothers, well, for those who knew of them, of being too little known to be of effect), they did not seem to believe an innocent-looking graduate student’s thesis could do them much harm. And really, how could I possibly accuse them of something they were not in the absence of any evidence? What did they have to hide?

This is exactly what hearing about CEO’s bureaucratic measures made everybody ask: but what do they have to hide? CEO’s demands for standard professional procedure were read as its effort to hinder the getting of information, its desire for openness as desire to hide. In its making a big deal of this operation, CEO had made itself more vulnerable rather than more secure; it had lost sympathy at the expense of protection. The others’ don’t-ask-don’t-tell strategy, instead, was interpreted as honesty and openness in the community of my field. The more casual and relaxed they were about it all, the more honest and open they were perceived to be. Upon hearing that CEO
had asked for my picture and testimonial to put on its website, one interlocutor actually went as far as saying that it was a very Stalinesque strategy and that, therefore, it was clear that their claims to democracy were all but a sham. This statement was so extreme that even the Historians, who did suspect CEO's intentions, smirked it off as a baseless comparison.

Anxious to find what I had come to find (culture) in what I had ended up looking at (politics), I decided it was ripe time I had a shot at my prey by reading the strong reactions that CEO's behavior had aroused among my other interlocutors as indicative of a cultural difference between CEO's mode of operation and that of my other organizations. Searching in my mental book of Persian manners again, I decided that in our culture (as in others, albeit in different ways), Khodemani behavior (treating someone as one of your own) entailed waiving any or all of the guards and rules that pertained to professional or formal behavior. In a culture that can prescribe highly rule-governed and formal relations to others at times, I decided, Khodemani behavior was an alternative mode of relating to others in which a lot of the things otherwise unimaginable became acceptable—such as appearing in your house clothes, serving less than impressive food, using the informal to instead of the formal shoma to address a single person, etc.

I knew that, rather than a lack of respect, one was to feel honored and flattered to be received Khodemani-style; it was a sign of comfort and intimacy. I also knew that sometimes totally standard and reasonable professional behavior could make one (an Iranian one) feel disappointed or insulted, as if suggesting that one wasn't deserving of the gentle rule-breaking and limit-defying bestowed upon those received in comfort. Being treated "like a stranger" (even if in the most personable manner possible) was one
of the most frequent causes of heartbreak in our culture. (Note that the category of “stranger” is, at the same time, very widely applied in the Muslim Iranian code of conduct—the same code that one breaks in the Khodemani behavior. For instance, cousins, as all other “marriage” individuals, are “strangers” (Na-Mahram) and not “intimates” (Mahram) in the sense that one has to relate to them very modestly, no touching, revealing, etc.)

For CEO, it appeared, being friendly and casual, while certainly a value, did not mean that they would waive what constituted normal or standard behavior to please or accommodate me. I, then, concluded that Persian culture sanctioned within itself an alternative to what it prescribed, a space of violation, a form of transgression, that when employed at the right time and place actually functioned as more virtuous and honorable behavior than sticking to the rules and limits would (again, I’m not suggesting that every culture does not have something like this; only elaborating what it may look like in this particular case). For instance, while being truthful is of course encouraged as the right thing to do, the ability to hide and twist the truth or at least part of it at certain times and places is frequently praised as smart and proper, making truthfulness less of an absolute value and more of a contested zone ripe for social navigation (Beeman 1986, Eickelman 2002). Could it be that my other interlocutors were comfortable with whatever truth or partial truths we could gain about each other orally and informally, while CEO wanted absolutely everything to be clear and on paper?

Somehow, CEO’s inability or unwillingness to bend its rules and limits at such an obviously unthreatening social encounter (the one with me, as it was in the eyes of my other interlocutors), to be a bit more relaxed, had resulted in its failing the culture test,
raising questions about why it was so “uncomfortable” with someone wanting to study the organization. Signing a consent form, asking for my CV, recommendation letters, and writing sample, and finally requesting a testimonial to publish on its website, interestingly all written rather than oral material, had thrown CEO out of the sanctuary of acceptable unacceptable behavior. Although, as I have explained earlier, what I and my other interlocutors perceived as CEO’s discomfort could be a result of its three-fold predicament (not knowing me well enough through personal connections, having been subject of harmful slander before, and being keen on establishing its image as THE representative organization for Iranian-Americans) and not because they at CEO did not know how to perform comfort in our culture.

In the scholarship about Middle Eastern politics, there is a rather essentialist argument for things being done still very much based on familial, tribal, and personal rather than professional connections and networks (Behnam 1986, Bill 1972, Eickelman 2002). While the extent of applicability of this argument and the ramifications of such rendering of the Middle East as opposed to the highly professional and impersonal Western bureaucracy are questionable, it seems that CEO’s behavior could be read as a battle against this kind of typically Middle Eastern style of transmitting knowledge and power, part of its campaign for changing the Iranian political subjectivity and sense of agency. Worthy of note is that “personalized” service in government politics was actually referred to by the Participation Promoter in my interview with him (2005) as one of the most significant features of American democracy. He compared the way in which in some European countries government offices are set up to make it extremely hard for individuals to access their policy makers to the United States where he had easily walked
in a number of government offices and to individual congressmen to have them sign up a petition.

The Participation Promoter's point was for every Iranian-American to realize this great opportunity and take advantage of it by staying in touch with their representatives, as opposed to the general Iranian assumption that you need to have a personal connection to a person in power to be heard and receive any service at all. His point was that you have a right and should demand to receive personalized service in a personable manner, in your government as in your local supermarket, while maintaining a professional distance. While treating people like family is considered a virtue in our culture, perhaps the Participation Promoter's point was that to have an organization like theirs was precisely to learn not to treat people like family (where rules tend to melt) but to treat them professionally though personably nonetheless. He seemed to mean to institutionalize (by putting things in writing or other recordable format) the passage and exchange of information and services instead of allowing things to flow in the form of gossip, favors, rumor, unfounded or half-known assumptions and accusations, as well as in the form of informal research. Ironically, however, it seemed that in its battle against the culture of oral inexactitude, CEO had ended up deeply entangled in the very same politics.

For instance, the same interlocutor who urged me to include the Mothers in my study warned me that CEO could "somehow" be considered a state-sponsored organization, "almost" she said, because although no hard proof was in hand yet, if somebody looked well enough they could find ties between CEO and the Islamic Republic. When I looked and didn't find those ties, of course, I was immediately
dismissed as not having looked well enough: "But did you look through all their hidden files in those locked-up cabinets or did you simply rely on the glossy annual report they give out every year? Did you really grill them on who they were paid by and what benefit they got from pushing for legitimizing the Islamic Republic on Capital Hill or did you just take their word and nodded and smiled?" The latter, of course. I tried to explain to my complaining interlocutors that my purpose of getting into these places and doing these interviews was not the same as Michael Moore's, to use a popular example, as he strived to unearth hidden ties between the government and the corporations, or the government and the terrorists, or whatever. That I was not there to air anybody's dirty laundry and that if I found information that was going to be controversial like that, I would probably refrain from disclosing it to avoid affecting the lives and livelihood of my interlocutors negatively.

What I got as response was an affirmation that "you are too soft, too nice" or "well, you are not much of a researcher then; perhaps you are more of a writer." I believe I am, and I do care more about telling a good story than about disclosing information; does that make me a bad anthropologist? I never knew the answer to this question which I sensed was implied in much of my interactions with many of my interlocutors, themselves sociologists, political scientists, historians, literary scholars, and so forth. Sometimes I felt that my apparent disdain for "information" unsettled my interlocutors and agonized me as well. Yet, one thing I never understood was how the word "almost" could be used legitimately in the same interlocutors' reference to another organization's sponsorship status; isn't "state-sponsored" something you either are or aren't? It didn't take me long to realize that "almost" was what almost everybody used
almost all the time in my field, and nobody seemed bothered—well, maybe almost bothered. It was only when it came to me, as the one who “studied” them, that I had to take out my scientific tool kit and clear out all the “almost”s once and for all. Instead, I fell in love with this skeptical expression of approximation and realized that it was an integral part of the construction of knowledge for many of my interlocutors and, thus, in my field.

Assuming that total openness and absolute truth were impossible to come by, that communication always occurred within an inch of complete and completely true information, most of my interlocutors saw the value of the “almost” as an expression that gave voice to some quite crucial partial knowledges and partial truths that they had come by through intuition, assumption, rumor, gossip, logical reasoning, and so forth, even if those could not be classified as “information” based on hard proof. I could not totally dismiss their technique and, in fact, I found myself more comfortable with it than I have ever been around something called hard and fast evidence, or worse yet, the truth. When I presented my grand observation to the same interlocutors, however, they said that oh, they would never put their skeptical approximations in an article they wrote or anything like that; they were just saying. Just saying, but when they said it over dinner to the head of an American funding agency, he was alarmed enough to reconsider funding the organization said to be “almost,” “somehow,” supported by the Islamic Republic. How could that possibly be more ethical, just because it was not in writing, than me claiming that this oral inexactitude served, then, some function as some form of knowledge, even when it didn’t have much value as information based on hard and fast evidence?
Still I wondered whether I would become simply the propagator of unfounded claims if I accepted the legitimacy of oral inexactitude as a form of functioning knowledge, though not necessarily the truth. Perhaps in the same way that my other interlocutors felt that my soft and nice attitude wouldn’t lead me to the truth about CEO, CEO was worried that my consideration of my other interlocutors’ claims would hinder the truth about it. So, at the end, I resided somewhere outside the realm of truth, maybe almost there but never quite. Even as such, I never ceased to dread my possible role in escalating the tension between CEO and those suspicious of it through the information I was expected to get, the information I was thought to be spreading, the information that I did get and did spread, according to or despite my wish, knowingly or unknowingly.

That is how I found myself more frequently than I wished in this torturous and solitary place where I had to make up my mind between information and something greater than that, a name, a cause, a principle, a life. The question of fairness and protection always came to me attached to some sort of power I assumed I had over my subjects because at the end I would supposedly get to publish my findings in the form of a thesis, a book, or a few articles, putting my own half-known partial truths in some written form that authorized me as an “expert” of them (my interlocutors). Ironically, my own anxiety about knowledge and power had to do with putting things in writing, and publishing them, thus turning them into proofs and blueprints for action. But then again, isn’t it true that our expert subjects have just as much access and authority, if not more, to enter the same public sphere in which we may publish our findings, if we are lucky, and argue back with us? Aren’t they already there when we arrive to argue back with them?
But as I have said earlier, the image of being tortured because of some information I was believed to have in a solitary confinement back in Tehran was not just a figurative way of understanding my predicament with regards to my knowledge and power (or lack thereof) in my field, but it represented a quite literal fear as well. I was indeed afraid that with the Participation Promoter’s connections with top officials in Iran and politically involved people of all calibers who traveled back and forth, soon my association with HRF would be news amongst those who would no doubt see me implicated in the Historians’ open opposition to the Iranian regime, something that could jeopardize my status as mere researcher, my return to Iran, and my own and my family’s general safety. Left to my own humble devices, of course, I didn’t suspect that any of these organizations were that important for the Iranian government, not enough anyway for my association with them to result in torture and death, either because they themselves were deemed so threatening by the Iranian government or because they had the power to entice the government to take action against others.

It is true, I didn’t think it unlikely that upon return to Iran I would be called in for a healthy (by the Islamic Republic standards) dose of “be ware that we know who you are, where you’ve been, and what you are up to” sort of thing, reaffirming the “we are watching you” that I was raised to expect, or maybe even some clever questions about who I studied and why and an offer to cut me some slack later at some other occasion if I volunteered some useful information. I knew of these kinds of sessions with the Revolutionary Guards, the paramilitary, or whoever happened to be up to the task at the time through academic relatives and acquaintances who had traveled to Iran in the past decade or so. Some had suffered consequences like suspension of their passports
indeterminately, destruction of their electronic and paper research data, and things like that but none quite as horrific as one would fear.

To work at HRF or with HRF, however, was to live in an atmosphere of terror. Horrors that sprang about in the form of vicious mythical beings, laughing and crying in piercing tones and brushing against one, sending a chill down one’s spine. Days were spent documenting deaths by shooting, hanging, stabbing, of individuals guilty of mere association with certain other individuals, holding certain beliefs, having been to certain places, or simply “appearing suspicious” like the guy who was found “suspiciously walking in the neighborhood of the prison as if looking for something” or the Jewish guy who was charged with “most probably working for the Zionists” on the basis that he had property and relatives in Israel. Things that had happened not just in the olden days of the early 1980s but in the golden days of Khatami’s era: Ahmad Miralayi, a major translator and publisher, was found dead in the gutters of my hometown Isfahan in 1995 after hosting a lecture in Iran for V.S. Naipaul who was said to have portrayed Iranian war veterans as disillusioned and manipulated by the mullahs in his then new book, Among the Believers. Mohammad Ja’far Puyandeh, another intellectual, was found strangled to death in the outskirts of Tehran in 1998 shortly after completing his translation of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. What about Zahra Kazemi, the Iranian-Canadian journalist who died in 2003 in Iranian custody after her head “hit a sharp object” during interrogations for taking pictures outside a prison during a student protest in Tehran?

We had little reason, then, to believe that my scholarship in anthropology gave me any kind of immunity. Having nothing to fear did not apply; fear was just there, unless
you had something special through which you were to afford not to fear. In fact, that is exactly
what the Historians believed people affiliated with CEO had, something because of
which they did not fear going back and forth between Iran and the US, to mention the
least. They were deemed guilty not because they appeared to fear something but because
they said they didn't fear anything (coming from the Islamic Republic). Their very call to
openness, the very fact that they could go back and forth with no problem, was an
indication that they had certain deals with the Iranian government. At some point it
occurred to me that fear had become like a holy circle; whoever was in it was “one of us”
and whoever wasn't was to be feared. My fieldnotes on HRF on February 17, 2004, read
as follows:

Second day of work. Our fear is mutual. And that’s good to know. She [one of
the Historians] is as afraid of being known as I am and she keeps telling me that
I’m not supposed to tell people what we are doing because then the Islamic
Republic will make us all pay big time. Not until they go public and gain some
kind of immunity anyway. I told her today that it’s good, as long as our fear is
mutual, everybody’s safe!

Obviously, CEO did not enjoy this sanctity of terror. In fact in my interview with
him, the Participation Promoter classified people like me and my interlocutors at HRF as
having a “bad case of paranoia.” He said that to CEO, they were “lost causes” and he had
no hope of ever losing their bizarrely schizophrenic and accusatory remarks all the time
no matter what CEO did or said. It was in the others that he invested for change. Right
then, I felt embarrassed and absurd to be afraid, but as soon as I left him and went back to
HRF, I got sucked in discussions about safety measures at the Historians’
home/foundation, and those included buying a loud dog, drawing the curtains at all times,
notifying the FBI of the possibility of assault, and getting in not through the main door
but by climbing over the neighbor’s fence and through the backyard. The Historians had
had their share of sheer terror inflicted upon them by the Islamic Republic; and as for me, I had quite a few recollections of meals in my hometown interrupted by armed guards appearing on our balcony and my mother having to flush down her diaries in fear of leaking out information, any kind of information, trivial as it may have seemed. In terms of what could happen and what we had to do to prevent it, it just never could get too bizarre for us. At the end, it seemed, it all came down to what you had experienced not what you would infer logically.

A few minutes after I watched the Participation Promoter and his companion disappear at the corner where the lettered street met the numbered one on that fine early fall day, I called the Historians on my cell-phone to tell them about what had happened, still sitting in front of the restaurant and playing with my bread in my yogurt. Within minutes after hearing that the Participation Promoter knew of our association, one of the Historians started describing me hanging upside down in a solitary confinement in Tehran being lashed for information about HRF. "This is perfect ground for asylum," she said. Upon my protest that this was perhaps too extreme a reaction, the other Historian came on the speaker phone and said that political asylum was not such a taboo; why was I so afraid of being a political refuge? I realized that while I had started the day with fear and shame attached to association with the government (CEO’s kind of politics), I was continuing it with fear and shame attached to dissidence (HRF’s kind of politics). It was either being a political mover and shaker or being a political dissident/refuge, and I abhorred and feared both positions.

I had lost four out of five uncles and too many cousins to politics, in one way or another, and I knew that hearing about my day, that particular day and many others in
Washington DC, would truly disturb my family in Iran who consistently advised me against "getting involved in politics." And yet there I was, sitting in front of an Iranian restaurant, with an innocent tray of food and an irrelevant book by a dead French philosopher about space, more involved in politics than I ever was, wanted, knew. I who had never even followed the news, not even under bombs during the Iran-Iraq war when even toddlers in my hometown knew how to tune in to the BBC or Voice of America or Radio Israel for the "real news" about the latest ceasefire. I who believed reading the paper was a risk and an inconvenience because I couldn't open the paper and finish reading one story before the awkward movement of my arms while trying to turn the page destroyed everything within an unusually wide radius. Sitting there, dipping my bread in my yogurt repeatedly without ever bringing it up to my mouth to eat, I had somehow managed to get involved in politics. I remembered that my father always described politics as being very seductive and as acting like a swamp that pulled you in and submerged you the minute you dipped your toe in it. That was when I truly felt that I wasn't one of either of them, CEO or HRF. I couldn't wait to get out of there.

In the meanwhile, one of the Historians was joking that maybe they had to carry a sign that said "don't touch me, don't talk to me, or you'll share my fate!" for people to know what they were getting into when they got involved with them. Then she took the joke further and said maybe they had to start preparing my halva (a form of pudding prepared usually for funerals and mournful occasions, including the commemoration of the martyrdom of Imam Hussein: Ashura), as it seemed that I had reached the end of the line. I kept wondering what it was that I supposedly knew that could bring about such unfortunate fate for me; what kind of information did I really possess that could make me
a target of such torturous interrogation in the eyes of the Iranian government? After all, the Historians’ political background and views were known to all and their project was at the verge of going public (as I’m writing these lines, theirs is a public site on the internet, and many media outlets, such as the Washington Post, Wall Street Journal, National Public Radio (NPR), and ABC News have covered the going public in February 2006 of HRF); all that remained was maybe the address and the telephone number of their home/foundation and the names of their friends, which after all, couldn’t be that hard to get anyway.

Nonetheless, it seemed that I had witnessed something just by being there that qualified me as a martyr of my field. Maybe it did not even matter what I had witnessed; just that I had been there, observing, that I was a living testimony. Persian speakers use the Arabic words Shaahed for witness and Shaheed for martyr. Obviously, the two words share the same root, Shahaada, which means confession/testimony. Shahaada also refers to the Declaration of Faith, the first of the five main pillars of Islam: “I bear witness that there is no god but Allah, He is alone, no partners has He,” the same verse recited in each of the five daily prayers and at the moment of death when the spirit is leaving the material world to await Judgment. In Persian literature, the word Shaahed also has three other functions: First, it refers to the last couplet in lyrical poems, where the main idea of the poem is often communicated most clearly. When people use the lyrics of the 14th century Iranian poet, Hafiz, to “tell their fortune,” it is the Shaahed couplet that is sought out as the final verdict. Second, Shaahed is a proof of meaning: to prove that a certain

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6 In this practice, called fual in Persian, one opens the book of Hafez’s poetry, or Divan, and reads and interprets whichever poem that starts on the right-side page of the book as one’s fortune.
word can have a certain meaning/function, all a scholar needs to do is to bring an
eexample of its use as such (a Shaahed) in the literary or philosophical canon as proof of
its legitimacy. Third, Shaahed is a euphemism for the male beloved (of a male lover),
one not only admired in terms of physical beauty but as a mirror held to the Almighty,
reflecting His image, the True and Ultimate Love, to the lover.

In this complex cluster of interrelated meanings, to be a martyr is intimately
attached to being a witness, a mirror held to truth in all its beauty, to testify, to declare;
martyrdom shares its finality not with that of death but with that of the verse recited at the
moment of death, with the declaration of a faith, with a proof, a verdict, the last couplet
of a lyrical poem. In Shi’i philosophy, to be a martyr is to witness Good and Evil in
battle, to be present right at that time and place (the contemporary site of an eternal
battle), like an eye-witness, and then to turn, through death, into a living testimony to
what one has observed. A martyr, then, lives on forever as a proof of the existence of
Good and Evil and of their conflict, as a declaration of faith in Good and a verdict against
Evil, as a couplet that holds the main purpose of a verse, an example that gives legitimacy
to a meaning, a verse that marks the divide between life and death, matter and spirit. A
martyr is a verse, a moment, which Shiites memorize, remember, commemorate.
Consistently, like a prayer, a declaration of their faith; to forget a martyr is to be
oblivious to the existence of Good and Evil and their conflict, it is to live as if dead and to
become a mass of matter without a spirit, devoid of meaning and legitimacy. Ali
Shari’ati, the socialist sociologist of Shi’i reform in the 1970s, consistently called upon
young revolutionary Muslims to rekindle their consciousness through the concept of
martyrdom, NOT by becoming martyrs physically but by opening their eyes to the Good
of their time and place (this could be the Third Worldist liberationist movements of the 1960s and 70s), the Evil of their time and place (this could be American and British Imperialism), and their conflict in their time and place, by observing and declaring. Ruhollah Khomeini who won the hearts of the Revolutionary during the same years said:

"The martyr is the beating heart of history."

Not that there was any such thing as Good and Evil in my field. Not a thing nearly as grand. But somehow "being there," this most basic component of the ethnographic enterprise, had come to be associated very intimately with being not just a witness (Shaahed) but also a martyr (Shaheed) of the ethnographic field. Suddenly, it meant that I had died as something and was to be resurrected as something else. I was sitting right at that moment between my life as something and my life as something else; before I even declared anything, I had become the declaration itself, the proof of the existence of a conflict; I, the eye-witness, was the final verdict, the last couplet of the lyrics. I had become the testimony that I thought I had, so smartly, refused to write. An example of the field I studied. A euphemism of some sort to refer to something beyond me. A mirror that reflected my field. It was clear at the end that I was the site of conflict; and I could feel my field beating in my heart. Is this what is meant by "going native?"

As I pondered upon the halva joke and the eerie parallel between my "participant observation" and martyrdom of Hussein, the Historians continued screaming at me that they (the Islamic Revolutionary Guards) do, yes, they sure do, beat people up from the onset, that's what totalitarian regimes do.... And suddenly I didn’t want to hear about totalitarian regimes anymore, so I hung up. I told myself that surely I wouldn’t be
tortured in the ways they described unless things were really crazy and really unfair. But then again life has a reputation to be that way from time to time and in some places more than others. So like a good, rightfully paranoid Iranian, I did, on my way back through the small streets of late summer/early fall afternoon, think about what to tell the Iranian Revolutionary Guards under torture, about fake addresses, and fake stories; I even thought to tell the authorities that my relationship with my interlocutors, including with the Historians, had been solely professional. Somehow, it affected me more strongly to think of faking my sentiments than it did to think of faking the facts; to deny the devastating tenderness and sympathy that I had felt around some of my interlocutors and doing what they did everyday, made me feel surrounded by a certain void that brought no protection, only more vulnerability.

Nevertheless, I had to make sure that I could support the existence of nothing but “professional” give-and-take between me and my interlocutors if need be. Then I remembered what one of the Historians had already told me in an email before I even officially started my fieldwork in Washington DC, that since she and I were seen side by side each other, talking and laughing, in a hotel lobby during an Iranian Studies conference the summer before, there was no hope ever in trying to pretend like we were not somehow “in cahoots.” Okay, I had said, if that’s how you feel things work. Of course I was dismissive of the way she seemed to frequently hang too heavy a thing from too small a pin—grand moral judgments based on common human errs, fatal accusations based on a smile or a sentence, opportunities that were lost forever because of a certain encounter. However, at the end, I realized that was the way a lot of things worked in my field: opportunities were found and lost just like that all the time, due to a common error,
a matter of luck, a smile, a sentence, a certain encounter. For my interlocutors, Washington DC with opportunities (for funding, for publicity, for influencing policy) that constantly flickered in and out of life was a shimmering field of fragile possibility.

The "gaze" has been theorized for at least half a century now in the studies of visual culture and social theory as an expression pregnant with all sorts of power asymmetries and questions of agency; from the examining gaze of the medical professional upon the sick subject (Foucault 1976) to the voyeuristic gaze of the male spectator upon the screen where a female fantasy is playing (Mulvey 1989) to the self-identifying gaze of the child upon his mirror image (Lacan 2004) to the objectifying gaze of the scholar upon his subjects of study (Said 1994), all we see is active/passive, male/female, subject/object, professional/client, spectator/fantasy, ego/ideal-ego, self/other dichotomies along the troubling lines of power and knowledge. And yet in my field it seemed that there was a more egalitarian distribution of gazes from all manner of dispersed positions throughout the scene, from the American government with its new "interest" in the Middle Eastern exile intellectuals and organizations and their advice and "expertise" to the Iranian government which some of my interlocutors and I always feared had agents around that could eavesdrop on us or assassinate individuals, from people inside Iran who were actively following these organizations and their activities through the internet, radio, and satellite TV to the organizations themselves and the Iranian-American community in which everybody was always trying to figure out what others were doing while hiding behind a bush herself. Although the interests and outcomes of these "gazes" were by no means the same (some could get you a job on the Hill while some others could have you murdered; some were out of studied interest, some
out of fear, some out of idle curiosity), still it wasn’t always clear who was objectifying whom, who was whose fantasy, who was actively looking and who was being passively looked at; roles changed, and the positions were far more complicated that mere center and periphery, or the many levels of hierarchy.

Going back to my initial impression of the likeness of my field to the landscape of a Persian manuscript illustration after several months of research on the topic at the Freer and Sackler Galleries in Washington DC, I realized that the key was not just the intense presence of gazes all over the illustrations but how the gaze, or as the notable scholar of Persian art Oleg Grabar calls it, “a circuit of gazes,” (2001) acted as the organizing principle of the composition: This circuit includes gazes amongst the different figures and elements inside the illustration as well as the gaze of the viewer that has to follow these gazes and, through moving from one focal point to the next, arrive at the intended target of the illustration. Because of this, the curator of the Galleries, Massumeh Farhad, repeatedly emphasized to me the importance of watching rather than merely looking at a Persian manuscript illustration. Gazing in the case of the afore-mentioned illustrations is a highly mobile activity as opposed to static and stoic looking.

It resonated in my mind with the active and powerful role ascribed to witnessing in Shi’i philosophy—the same powerful and active role as ascribed to waiting (for the reappearance of the twelfth Shi’i Imam which marks the final victory of the Good against the Evil and the beginning of the Judgment). Just as martyrdom is glorified as an active death instead of a passive life, other concepts such as witnessing and waiting, normally thought of as static and passive, take on new meanings as lively and active. This kind of active waiting (a state of constant readiness) and witnessing are the organizing principles
of the life of a devout Shi’a as they are of the composition of many Persian manuscript illustrations (I am not suggesting that Shi’i philosophy directly informed the illustrations, as some of the most prominent manuscripts were made and commissioned by Sunnis). Both create a form of threshold existence, of being on your toes, breath withheld. Something is always at the threshold of happening; it does not matter if it happens or not or when it happens, it matters only that you watch for it.  

This kind of threshold positioning and the kinds of knowledges and sentiments that it yields was also prevalent in my field in Washington DC. True to the “trait of witnesses” that Grabar refers to as the organizing principle of Persian manuscript illustrations along with the “circuit of gazes” (2001), people in my field seemed to be constantly on the watch for opportunities to label each other as this or that (either a connection to the Islamic Republic or a connection to the American Intelligence), to get funding and publicity, to somehow get a hold of a policy maker’s ear. The proximity that one felt in Washington not just to the American sources of money and power but to Iran and its fate (as if it could easily be molded or captained into a certain form or destiny only by getting hold of the right people in Washington) created a nervous energy, a sense of mystery, in my field that resembled the landscape of a Persian manuscript illustration with figures lurking from behind half-drawn curtains and half-closed doors, from the balconies and roofs, behind rocks and bushes, everywhere, in the most bizarre places, always looking at something and commenting with their hands in front of their mouths or biting the finger of astonishment; with even birds and animals gazing intensely at each other, at the human figures, or at some mysterious place outside the frame of the

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7 For an interesting discussion of the place of the threshold in Al-Ghazali’s philosophy of the self, see Moosa Ebrahim 2005.
illustration; with even rocks and clouds and trees looking like they are looking with a thousand eyes. Everybody looked like they knew; but what did they know?

As I walked and in my mind trekked the circuit of gazes that ran through my field, looking for things that could potentially be used against me and get me in trouble, I reached an intersection where a few policemen had gathered, a common scene in Washington DC. For a second there, I froze; then I reached for my bright yellow shirt to somehow fix it, make it longer, looser, to have it sack my body and make it unrecognizable, a reflex residue from my years under the Islamic Republic. But, after all, I was not in Tehran and these were not the Morality Police. One of them walked up to me and said: "hey, whatchya reading there?!"

"What am I reading?! Hmm..., I'm reading about space, Officer!"

He took my book, Poetics of Space, and asked me where I was from.

"Iran."

"Oh, so that explains the accent; okay. What page are you on?"

"Oh, I just started." I didn't say, If only my interlocutors let me read.

"You go to GW?"

"No, actually I go to Rice University in Texas; I'm just doing some research here in Washington."

"Hmmm...research. What's your research on?"

I hesitated for a moment and then said: "About Persian manuscript illustrations," fake sweet smile, "...lots of free good museums out here, you know."

I couldn't tell him, of course, that I was doing research on Iranian organizations in Washington DC: With the sudden visibility that the Afghani and Iraqi exiles had gained
following America’s war on their respective countries and considering that Iran could very well be the next in America’s War on Terror, I just didn’t feel like putting Iran, organization, and Washington DC in the same sentence in my casual mid-day conversation with an American cop. He smiled and wished me a good day. Once again, Persian manuscript illustrations had come to my rescue like a magic carpet, like a jinni out of a bottle; I had been able to evoke something sufficiently Persian (read ancient, mysterious, obscure, intriguing but definitely not alarming) even as I was standing right there in my field of Iranian intelligentsia and American Intelligence where alarm was the ruling sentiment. It was only 3:00 when I got home and went to bed for a nap; surely, I had done enough fieldwork for the day.
Hawks, Victims, and Politics of Infiltration
Map

**Opteme:** In Persian, politics is commonly visualized as a bloodsucking creature.

**Theme:** There is a resemblance between the Victorian battle against Dracula and the current War on Terror. There is also a resonance between the early modern technologies of data collection, recording, and representation highlighted in Bram Stoker’s *Dracula* (1897) and the manufacturing and supplying of a “package of knowledge about the trouble spots of the world” in what Hamid Dabashi has referred to as “the flea market of after 9/11” (2006). In both *Dracula* and my field in Washington DC, “life” is the substance in demand, constantly being chronicled, classified, sucked in, sucked out, lost, and salvaged. Focusing on a best-selling memoir about Iranian women, an Iranian human rights organization, and my own fieldwork in DC, I juxtapose the ephemera and epiphanies of the everyday with the strategies of “making sense” to get at the tension between human rights and human lives.

**Dracula:** In Bram Stoker’s *Dracula*, the various Others of the modern man (other cultures, supernatural creatures, psychiatric patients, and women) share a brain-related predisposition to lack freedom and become victims/victimizers. Modernity that predisposes one to freedom and erases the preconditions of victimhood finds expression in a very specific kind of culture, race, nationality, class, gender, cognitive psychology, morality, and sexuality.
Encounters: Is democracy the new modernity? “Normalcy” is defined based on a certain “look” for modernity aka democracy, embodied in women (their attire, profession, sexual expressions). The Other, and the Self through the eyes of the Other, can be seen as abnormal, supernatural, even unreal, mysterious, monstrous, crazy, nonsensical, and so forth.

Politics of Infiltration: There is a tender and turbulent atmosphere in Washington DC in which actors always fear their own or the others’ infiltration and contamination by various creeping elements of evil, such as the Neocons, the Zionists, the Islamist Republic, the businessmen, the cultural relativists, the leftists, the dissidents, the experts, the policy makers, and so forth. This Draculaesque fear of “embedment” and preoccupation with “purity” create a certain erotics and pathology of ethics.

Culture, Mind, Character: According to a certain understanding of my field (I don’t necessarily share this understanding), being undemocratic is more a condition of the mind (internal rot) than of external circumstances, more a result of one’s own culture than of foreign powers’ interventions. To make the leap to democracy, undemocratic peoples have to revolutionaryize their “culture” and liberate themselves of their internal pollution/contamination and mental captivation/occupation. The Savage Mind is the Dracula within, the road block to salvation, the evil to be eliminated.

Hawk: The portrait of an Iranian human rights activist in Washington DC
**The Fight:** Washington is a state of mind, a diamond-shaped grid for perception and representation, organization and distortion. When this ethnographer goes to Washington, this grid becomes the cultural Other and the site of encounter, with the same terrorizing and thrilling erotics of trans (transfiguration, transition, etc., but also state of “trans” as in simply being between universes) that anthropology is used to describing in terms of going native, cultural critique, etc. Questions of violation, union, transformation, death, and rebirth find new meanings in this context.
Opteme

Politics is made up of two words, "poli" which is Greek for "many", and "tics", which are bloodsucking insects (Gore Vidal 1960).

Sorry, there is no way to talk about politics and to speak of beautiful shapes, elegant silhouettes, heroic statues, glorious ideals, radiant futures, transparent information – except if you want to go through, once again, the long list of grandiose ceremonies held by various totalitarianisms which, as we are all painfully aware, lead to the worst abominations. The choice is either to speak of monsters early on with care and caution, or too late and end up as a criminal (Latour 2005: 38).

Use of the adjective “bloodsucking” (khunasham) is very common in Persian with regards to politics (siasat). If you Google khunasham and siasat together, you get close to 2,000 results, the first one right now (February 6, 2007) being Akbar Ganji’s “Second Letter to the Free People of the World” (July 15, 2005) in which he likens the hardliners of the Islamic Republic to Franco Moretti’s Marxist rendering of Dracula as a monopolist. In February 09, 2006, Jerusalem Post reported that the Iranian Vice President Isfandiar Rahim Mashaee had referred to the US Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld’s talk of attacking Iran over its nuclear power as “Dracula showing his teeth.”

Most commonly, khunasham is used by the exile opposition in combination with the name of some animal, such as a vampire, a wolf, a vulture, or a hyena to refer to the clerical regime in Iran. According to Hamid Naficy:

Naturalization” can be an effective political ploy in the semiotic, ideological, and cosmological power struggle in exile; this process has turned the Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini himself into a dangerous mythical beast. The exilic media have called him, among other things, “old hyena” (kaftar-e pir), “vampire bat”

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1 There is an extensive literature on the Shi’i obsession with blood, but that is beyond of the scope of my discussion here.
2 The Iranian journalist who spent 6 years (2000-2006) in the Evin Prison for his “reformist” expressions and was on hunger strike for 80 days during the summer of 2005 to protest his conditions and illegitimate imprisonment.
khoffash-e khun asham), “ominous owl” (joghd-e shum), “anti-Christ” (dajjal), “fire-breathing dragon” (ezhdaha), “Chinese female demon” (efriteh-ye Machin), and “Zahhak” (a king in Persian mythology who grew two snakes on his shoulders, which had to be fed with the brains of young people). The exilic popular press has dubbed Khomeini’s regime “octopus” (okhtapus) and “the plague” (ta’un) (1993: 158).

The second most popular usage is in reference to American Imperialism and Israeli Zionism. In their immensely illuminating chapter on the post-revolutionary Iranian visual projections, Fischer and Abedi (1990) provide several examples of such portrayal: A group of vampires flying out of the American capitol, depicted as a castle in the dark, and dropping bombs on what appears to be the Middle East (Fig 6.1: 336), the reaper of death, a skeleton draped in the American flag, with the Soviet hammer and sickle on his shoulder and the Star of David in flames below, suggesting the conspiracy of the three powers against Islam (Fig 6.7: 351), the powerful hand of Islam choking the serpent of imperialism draped in an American flag (Fig 6.19: 367), and imperialism as a screaming skull with blood dripping from its jaws, draped in the British and Israeli flags and with the flags of the US and the USSR in its eye sockets, again, being chocked by the powerful hand of Islam (Fig. 6.21: 369). In a popular post-revolutionary song, America is referred to as a “world-eating monster from whose claws the blood of our youth drips,” a “yellow scorpion,” and a “cunning fox.”

Then, there come a whole assortment of dictators from Saddam Hussein to Pinochet (who both expired in 2006-2007), and khunasham comes to describe a variety of political vices, from Capitalism to Communism and from Islamism to Zionism.

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3 Also see Beeman 1986 and Beeman 2005
In an interesting WWII-era poster designed by British Intelligence in the style of Persian manuscript illustrations (Fischer & Abedi 1990: Fig 6.11: 358), Hitler is depicted as the mythic serpent-shouldered king/demon, Zahhak, nailed by the forces of Churchill, Stalin and Roosevelt, indicating the use of Perso-Islamic graphic traditions in modern visual projections (1990: 354-349).\footnote{I am, indeed, interested in Persian manuscript illustrations as a graphic tradition, a Persian poesis in transnational circulation today (Fischer 2004). I would like to pursue this depiction of demons, for instance, in the illustrations and through them in Persian mythology and mysticism. In a similar vein, I am fascinated by Fischer & Abedi’s pursuit of the “tulip” as the icon of martyrdom in post-revolutionary Iran but also as a sign with a genealogy that goes far back in history (1990). Naficy takes a similar approach towards the semiotics of exilic television by pursuing the “garden,” “birds and monsters,” “sea” and so forth in the contemporary exilic semiotics back to their mythical and mystical significance (1993). However, that is a project that is beyond the scope of this dissertation and I hope to further investigate it at a later date.} It is a picturesque language, this Persian; like Persian manuscript illustrations, it speaks in optemes\footnote{Oleg Grabar and Mika Nafif define opteme as “a completed compositional unit,” “the smallest visually perceived unit of meaning” (2001).}, pours abstract concepts into concrete visual units that belong in the Persianate aesthetic family through long genealogies and complex ties of kinship. In Persian mystical poetry, the fine stature of the beloved is the cypress, the madness of love the willow tree; love itself is both the candle and the moth that flies too close to it; or else, it is the rose and the nightingale that
complains about its thorns and ephemerality. Devotion is a ray of sun from a hole in the Bazaar ceiling and noticing in it the dust particles that seem to be dancing up to the source of the light. And then, by way of a modern revolutionary opteme, there is a part of politics that is always bloodsucking. It is within this garden of Persianate poesis (Fischer 2004) that I shall speak in this chapter of an otherwise banal animal of politics.
Theme

That Bram Stoker’s Dracula embodies in many ways the spirit of the British Victorian Era is not much of a discovery. But I am going to indulge in a rather lengthy discussion of it, nevertheless, as it sets the stage for this other story I am about to tell of my life and fieldwork in 2004-2005 amongst Iranian NGOs in Washington DC. Already you might see connections between Washington’s current War on Terror and the Victorian battle against Dracula, as both fly with the image of predator birds, the single-minded pursuit of salvation and the campaign to set the world free from an ambiguous element of evil creeping out of an ancient tomb in a forgotten land, talk of victims and blood, and both are informed by a certain erotic politics of infiltration, penetrating the Other and all sorts of transgressions, transformations, transitions, and transfusions that are embedded in transnationalism. But I have more reasons than the mere mundane resemblance between today’s discourse of “liberation” and the 19th century liberalism, between British imperial anxieties at the turn of the century and America’s anxieties of “mass destruction” today, for wanting to revive Dracula in this chapter. This revival is aroused not so much by thematic resemblance (though it is certainly there) as by a kind of tonal and modal resonance. It is even affective if not affectionate.

While still in the field, I received an email from one of my advisors back in Houston who had said that on the train all the way to work, he had had this image of me “setting out every day with a new book--one orthogonal to, or irrelevant to your ostensive purpose, but strangely resonant for some reason--from which you are prevented time reading by chance encounters with your informants.” He had thought of this because I
had told him of my chance encounter with one of my interlocutors and our brief but rather disturbing exchange in front of the Persian House of Kebab that had prevented me from reading my book, Poetics of Space by Gaston Bachelard (1994), and had instead set me on a long reflection track that later became a dissertation chapter by that title, Poetics of Space. The present chapter takes place in a similar space of distraction.

I have always had a certain fascination with the phantom and vampire folk, so when I heard that Count Dracula himself would be performed in a ballet at Roslyn Theatre, just across Potomac River from my field in DC, I decided that going to the ballet was the most appropriate gift I could give myself for my birthday, which happened to be on a Saturday. October was coming to an end and the fall foliage was fantastic, phenomenal, in full bloom. There was even something blood-like, a biting intensity, about it all. Naturally, I decided to take a walk through Georgetown, across Key Bridge, and over to the theatre in Alexandria, Virginia. I was in a contemplative mood. While walking, I received a call on my cellular phone from the Historians (my way of referring in this dissertation to the founders of an organization that I refer to simply as the Human Rights Foundation or HRF) with whom I interned part-time and conducted research. They just wanted to know what my plans were for the day. It appeared to them rather odd that I should be spending the gorgeous fall afternoon of such significant birthday as my thirtieth going to a matinee Dracula ballet all by myself. They suggested that I have lunch with them on the way and then, if it had to be, walk with them across the bridge to the theatre. The lunch was something Italian or French, something with only the most expensive and exquisite tomatoes, olives, cheese, bread, and wine to be found in Georgetown markets. But the ballet, well, we never quite made it there. The walk took
us longer and something that happened while walking made us forget about our
destination, or we simply no longer cared. We had a fight.

The chapter builds towards this argument concerning women, human rights
violations, and hawkish policies in and on Iran (one that took place in place of the
Dracula ballet but also ended up replacing and restating it in many ways). It was no more
than an argument, really, but by the end of it I was feeling so dirty and violated and so
robbed out of my essence that I knew we, my interlocutors and I, had hit yet another true
milestone in my field and that, thank God, I was going to have material for at least one
more dissertation chapter. Not that it has to be that way, but perhaps I suffer from some
kind of writers’ narcissism when I think that the only stories worth telling are those that
have touched me deeply personally. I still aim for my reader’s heart (even though not
necessarily to break it, for I’d like to believe, from my own rather vulnerable position,
that there is still plenty that is worth doing besides Anthropology That Breaks Your
Heart⁶) and I’ve heard you cannot get there lazily or cleverly by circumventing your own.
I think of myself as a site and instrument of fieldwork. But let me be unapologetic about
the way I select which stories from my field to tell; there is only as much selection (and
arbitration) here as there is involved when we form theoretical arguments and outlines of
the topics to address. We write to provoke; to provoke thought, we shall hope, but also to
provoke emotion (what about action?), for what we deal with happens to be a human
field. We also write to find and form coherence, but to “make sense” can also be to make
manifest the striking soul and secret of the everyday, this shock of recognition, this
epiphany in the Joycian sense, that may come as a distraction to our ostensive purpose.

⁶ See Behar 1996.
The resonance between Dracula and this chapter is in line with that kind of epiphanic recognition.

I have talked of ostensive purposes and the epiphanies of the everyday. I might as well break it to you that this chapter is every bit about these mechanisms of "making sense" in that it is about my fight with my interlocutors over Iranian women, human rights violations, and hawkish policies in and on Iran. You see, HRF's mission is to create a database of all the human rights violations in Iran since the Revolution (1979). So far, they have only gotten to summary executions. The period the database chronicles happens to coincide mostly with my life in Iran. There is an affinity and a conflict between my life and the life of the database. During my internship for the HRF, I entered names of relatives and family friends in the database and typed up reports of raids and killings that I vaguely remembered having heard about or had even personally witnessed as a child. For all I know, I may some day end up in the database; you might think it an unreasonable fear, but reason is a clumsy dancer and so is fear; and they frequently slip into the arms of each other. I am no stranger to the life of the database. But the database is also a device for making sense of the life we have shared; it is very literally an open-source software named Analyzer that together with its counterpart, Martus (witness/martyr), is designed by the Human Rights Data Analysis Group (HRDAG) to help human rights advocates build evidence-based arguments.
It is a great technology for the dead and for the sense that they evidently give to our lives. As a living person, however, I can’t help but feel a little self-conscious when my life meets Analyzer and Martus.

In ways that I will describe meticulously throughout this chapter, I felt throughout my fieldwork at the HRF that the ostensive purpose of my presence there was to serve as the living brand of the kind of product HRF presented in the Washington market—what Hamid Dabashi has referred to inelegantly as the “flea market of after 9/11” where the least credible ideas sell (2006). I, of course, in no way see HRF’s project as one such idea or, despite the terminology I have used, as a business. But I do see Washington DC as a political flea market, in which someone like me could easily find opportunities to
"sell herself" (hence my initial reference to a certain erotic politics of transnationalism; and that, too, will be explained further in this chapter). There is a market for Muslim women with violated rights in Washington these days. I will discuss at length the reception of Azar Nafisi's memoir in books, Reading Lolita in Tehran, for example, that remained on the New York Times best-seller list for over a hundred weeks in 2003-2005 and which offers, in unique ways, yet another cover-to-cover, chapter-by-chapter structure to a portion of my life in Iran that can easily be ordered, shipped, and owned now in the US. And then there is, of course, my own life and research in DC, as I was engaged in the same ballets of data collection, recording, and presentation, aspiring, like them, to a certain sense of grace and balance (even when we perhaps had different understandings of what those meant). The culmination of these technologies of making sense has made me ponder upon the obviously very large question of life versus representation, versus witnessing and analysis (Martus and Analyzer), versus narration.

As Aleksander Hemon says:

The hard time in writing a narrative of someone's life is choosing from the abundance of details and microevents, all of them equally significant or equally insignificant. If one elects to include only the important events: the births, the deaths, the loves, the humiliations, the uprisings, the ends and the beginnings, one denies the real substance of life: the ephemera, the nethermoments, much too small to be recorded (the train pulling into the station where there is nobody; a spider sliding down an invisible rope and landing on the floor just in time to be stepped on; a pigeon looking straight into your eyes; a tender hiccup of the person standing in front of you in line for bread; an unintelligible word muttered by a one-night stand, sleeping naked and nameless next to you). But you cannot simply list all the moments when the world tickles your senses, only to seep between your fingers and eyelashes, leaving you alone to tell the story of your life to an audience interested only in the fireworks of universal experiences, the roller coaster rides of sympathy and judgment (2002: 41).
So when you are dealing with lives in demand, what is it that you should supply? If the "real substance of life," as Hemon puts it (2004), is these epiphanies of the ephemera, and if those are too small to record, then what do we do with them? Drawing upon Anne Carson's *Economy of the Unlost* (2002), where do words go when we don't say them? Do we lose them or save them? Obviously, the narrative of loss and salvation is big in both Stoker's *Dracula* and my field in DC, but with all these technologies of recording and presenting life (database, memoir, ethnography), what do we do with the life that seeps between our fingers and eyelashes, leaving us alone to tell (impale) the story? (I just now thought of writing, of recording, as impaling, as a way of pinning down reality that has similar scientific intonations to pinning insects onto cardboard in museums showcases and classificatory albums. Ah the violence of these methods of observation, classification, recording, and representation! Could this be another way in which my ethnography recalls Dracula, or rather its predecessor, Vlad the Impaler? In that sense, what we don't say is what we save.)

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7 Remembering my first encounter with the Director of the Middle East and North Africa Division at an American institute for promoting democracy around the world, who pulled me in his office after a talk I had gone to about democracy in Palestine, offered me a seat and a cup of coffee, and asked: "Well, what is it that the youth want in Iran?" And I pulled a blank of course. Being in Washington felt like you could always run into God around the corner and you'd better have your resume or wish-list or whatever in your pocket just in case. It was a mode of existence marked by proximity and impact (or the illusion and anticipation of those) that drove me away but that both the Civic Education Organization (CEO) (my name for another DC-based organization that I studied) and HRF wholeheartedly embraced.

8 Thanks to James Faubion, for reminding me to go back to T.S. Eliot's *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock*, particularly these lines:
"And I have known the eyes already, known them all—
The eyes that fix you in a formulated phrase,
And when I am formulated, sprawling on a pin,
When I am pinned and wriggling on the wall,
Then how should I begin
Dracula

Bram Stoker’s Dracula starts with an account of travel from Britain Eastward (although the East here is not the “Orient” typically trekked by the British in the 19th and early 20th centuries, i.e. the Middle and Far East, but Eastern Europe), told as a narrative of modernity versus tradition. Jonathan Harker the soliciter is on a train from London to Transylvania where he is to close a real estate deal with Count Dracula who is intending to purchase a house in London. Harker’s account reads a lot like those of the actual accounts of Eastward travel by Europeans of the period (in the case of Iran, Chardin 1630, Lady Sheil 1856, Sackville-West 1926, Bell 1928, and others) with an acute sense of transition from one state of being (not just of customs but of mind, not just spatially but temporally, as the East is the Past) into another:

The impression I had was that we were leaving the West and entering the East; the most western of splendid bridges over the Danube, which is here of noble width and depth, took us among the traditions of Turkish rule (Stoker 1970: 1).

It seems to me that the further East you go the more unpunctual are the trains. What ought they be in China? (Stoker 1970: 2)

And with typical detailed descriptions of other “races”:

The strangest figures we saw were the Slovaks, who were more barbarian than the rest, with their big cow-boy hats, great baggy dirty-white trousers, white linen shirts, and enormous heavy leather belts, nearly a foot wide, all studded over with brass nails. They wore high boots, with their trousers tucked into them, and had long black hair and heavy black moustaches. They are very picturesque, but do not look prepossessing. On the stage they would be set down at once as some old Oriental band of brigands. They are, however, I am told, very harmless and rather wanting in natural self-assertion (Stoker 1970: 3).

To spit out all the butt-ends of my days and ways?
And how should I presume?”
After the incomprehensible, superstitious villages who immediately cross themselves and point two fingers at him, beg him not to go to Dracula's castle, offer him garlic, and pray that he stay away from the Evil Eye in their irrational and mysterious fear, Count Dracula himself is Harker's first real native informant who tells the learned traveler:

We are in Transylvania; and Transylvania is not England. Our ways are not your ways, and there shall be to you many strange things. Nay, from what you have told me of your experiences already, you know something of what strange things there may be (Stoker 1970: 20).

As time goes by and his encounters with Count Dracula at the castle become weirder and scarier, Harker begins to experience the same incomprehensible and irrational fears as the lowly villagers.

What manner of man is this, or what manner of creature is it in the semblance of man? I feel the dread of this horrible place overpowering me; I am in fear in awful fear and there is no escape for me; I am encompassed about with terrors that I dare not think of. (P 33)

The "Other" splits into two: one whose difference can still be explained in terms of "culture" (customs, tradition, superstition, ritual) and mental structure (the native is irrational, etc.), and one that has just crossed over from man to a different creature and is to grow more phantasmagoric and horrific as the story progresses. Both belong in this dark, fogged-over, mysterious part of the world, both are alien, both represent the East; at root, they are the same, and yet one part (the ordinary Slovaks and other races and ethnicities Harker chronicles) dreads this nightmarish part of itself (Dracula) that it only instinctively (but not rationally) understands and against which it is mostly helpless (except for the garlic and the crucifix that protect one temporarily against Evil but cannot
permanently take care of the problem). Evil and powerlessness against evil, evil and lack of proper knowledge about evil, both belong in this part of the world. The real horror, though, is that this element of evil can creep up to Britain, and in fact, Dracula’s plan to move to London is an indication, as Harker dreads:

This was the being I was helping to transfer to London, where, perhaps, for centuries to come he might, amongst its teeming millions, satiate his lust for blood, and create a new and ever-widening circle of semi-demons to batten on the helpless (Stoker 1970: 48-49).

Dracula does mysteriously land in Britain on a stormy night, while Harker is still a captive at his castle, later to escape and join the good fight against evil in London. In contrast to the Eastern Other, the Westerners (not just the British nobleman who is engaged to the first fair British lady to be victimized by Dracula, the British psychoanalyst who runs an asylum, and Harker’s wife who is an exceedingly clever and virtuous woman, but the Dutch professor who is invited from Amsterdam to work on the case and the American fellow, a lover and friend of the British, who becomes part of the team against evil) are the possessors of Knowledge and Power. Throughout the novel, these six Westerners (Nobleman, Psychoanalyst, Wife, Professor, American, and Harker himself) employ a variety of modern technologies of the period to communicate their knowledge and exercise their power against the mysterious element of evil. Those include trains (of course, the Victorian railway mania), telegraphs, typewriters, phonograms, newspapers, medical procedures such as blood transfusion, and so forth. All through their battle, they obsessively record and document things, their almost religious faith in scientific method and evidence being in contrast with the superstitious religious beliefs of the commoners in Eastern Europe that were only passed on locally
and orally (different ways of collection, representation, and circulation of
data/knowledge). While the novel starts in the genre of travelogue, it continues in the
form of letters, telegraphs, journals, typewritten transcriptions of phonographed
observations, newspaper clippings, memorandums, etc.; so not just the content but the
form of the novel is indicative of this obsession with modernity and scientificity.

When the Psychoanalyst’s most interesting lunatic, classified as a “zoophagous
(life-eating) maCEO” (Stoker 1970: 67), turns out to be mysteriously related to Dracula,
another one of modernity’s favorite Others joins the club. Now we have the Eastern
cultures/races, the supernatural element of terror and evil, and the mentally abnormal.
All three represent, in the spirit of the period, anomalies of the brain. Advances in
science are to eventually figure out this question of the brain, of why it is that other races,
supernatural creatures, and abnormal individuals share the apparent cognitive inability (as
of yet—but they may evolve) to be rational and make sense. One thing all three
aforementioned entities share is, in fact, a “child-brain.” As the Dutch Professor says
about Count Dracula (but at the same time about those belonging to ancient civilizations
in general, as the Count was discovered to have had a glorious past with many conquests
to his name before he took on the wrong path of living on as the “un-dead” and even
plotting to make a comeback instead of simply dying out at his natural time, thus turning
into an out-of-place, not-suitable-for-this-time entity):

That big child-brain of his is working. Well for us, it is, as yet, a child-brain; for
had he dared, at the first, to attempt certain things he would long ago have been
beyond our power. However, he means to succeed, and a man who has centuries
before him can afford to wait and to go slow (Stoker 1970: 282).

Our man-brains that have been of man so long and that have not lost the grace
of God, will come higher than his child-brain that lie in his tomb for centuries,
that grow not yet to our stature, and that do only work selfish and therefore small (Stoker 1970: 318).

So says the psychoanalyst of his most prized patient:

Why not advance science in its most difficult and vital aspect the knowledge of the brain? Had I even the secret of one such mind did I hold the key to the fancy of even one lunatic I might advance my own branch of science to a pitch compared with which Burdon-Sanderson’s physiology or Ferrier’s brain-knowledge would be as nothing. If only there were a sufficient cause! I must not think too much of this, or I may be tempted; a good cause might turn the scale with me, for may not I too be of an exceptional brain, congenitally? (Stoker 1970: 66-67)

Interestingly, a second feature they all (Slovaks/gypsies/other races, Dracula, and the lunatic) share is lack of freedom. In recounting the history of his race for Mr. Harker (who, to his regret, fails to take precise notes and record everything), Count Dracula refers to the blood that runs in his veins and in those of his ancestors as the blood of the brave leaders who freed their people from the slavery they had to endure back in the Hungarian fatherland (Transylvanians were in fact Hungarian exiles), only to be sold off by less able leaders to the Turks later as slaves. Obviously, Dracula narrates his history (through blood: genealogy) as one of constant battle for freedom, of leaving one’s land or driving the others out of it. Ironically, now Undead and with all his supernatural powers, he is no more free than ever, and the only place in which he can rest is a box filled with the soil of his ancestral land, “his earth-home, his coffin-home, his hell-home” (Stoker 1970: 223) which he keeps in the basement of his castle and drags along with him when he travels. As Hamid Naficy has observed (1993), Dracula is a truly exilic figure in that sense. His free border-crossing and transfiguration is a myth (as it is with most exiles anyway, despite the romanticization of the possibilities for transgression and transformation that it offers), as even “he who is not of nature has yet to obey some of
nature's laws—if why we know not" (Stoker 1970: 223). He still needs to be invited by someone inside a household in order to enter it and he cannot force anyone to enter his castle unless with their own free will (obviously, evil no matter how powerful can only work when there is temptation). He is only free to move about at night and can only change shapes at sunrise, noon, or sunset. He cannot cross running water, and a number of other limitations. And as only death could set his soul free, he is also imprisoned in his undead mortal figure. According to Harker's wife, the poor fellow is to be pitied rather than detested and eliminating him is only going to make him feel better.

[Professor:] He can do all these things, yet he is not free. Nay; he is even more prisoner than the slave of [??] and than the madman in his cell (Stoker 1970: 223).

Speaking of the Madman, well, of course, he cannot but be caged for he is mad, and as the Psychoanalyst says:

When we closed in on him he fought like a tiger. He is immensely strong, for he was more like a wild beast than a man. I never saw a lunatic in such a paroxysm of rage before; and I hope I shall not again. It is a mercy that we have found out his strength and his danger in good time. With strength and determination like his, he might have done wild work before he was caged. He is safe now at any rate. Jack Sheppard himself couldn't get free from the strait-waistcoat that keeps him restrained, and he's chained to the wall in the padded room (Stoker 1970: 96).

But he is also not free in his mind and spirit, because he is a slave to Dracula the Evil, as he himself pleads:

If I were free to speak I should not hesitate a moment; but I am not my own master in the matter (Stoker 1970: 229).

Obviously, the theme of Evil as prison is big in Dracula. Harker writes of Dracula's castle:
[...] doors, doors, doors everywhere, and all locked and bolted. In no place save from the windows in the castle walls is there an available exit. The castle is a veritable prison, and I am a prisoner! (Stoker 1970: 25)

But as was mentioned before, evil and irrationality ride very close to each other in Bram Stoker’s novel: Irrationality itself is a prison for the mind, as it blocks modern advances. The Eastern natives and the lunatic alike are prisoners of their own inferior minds. As for the Western team of Dracula haunters:

[...] but we, too, are not without strength. We have on our side power of combination a power [??] to the vampire kind; we have sources of science; we are free to act and think; and the hours of the day and the night are ours equally (Stoker 1970: 222).

And they are “pledged to set the world free” (Stoker 1970: 300). Freedom, it seems, is a matter of physiology. It is having the right kind of brain. The child-brain is a tyrant brain. Those who have it must be confined (lunatic) or eliminated (Dracula). Just as Evil is irrational, Good is rational. Even when the Good reads too much like an overwhelming Christian expose of God and Faith in the novel, it is clear that not any old Christian belief could be classified as Good. Before the Psychoanalyst knows who the “master” in the lunatic’s prayers really is, he brands his excessive praying pathologically as “religious mania,” for example (Stoker 1970: 94). The religious beliefs of the Eastern villagers are repeatedly referred to as mere superstition and strange traditions. The right kind of faith would still be married to an awareness of social hierarchies and the rational order. In fact, the mark of the lunatic’s behavior being religious mania as opposed to true faith is that he doesn’t seem to recognize the higher status of the Psychoanalyst compared to the asylum attendants and treats him with the same kind of disrespect, as if he were God and the mere mortals were all the same in his mind:
How these madmen give themselves away! The real God taketh heed lest a sparrow fall; but the God created from human vanity sees no difference between an eagle and a sparrow. Oh, if men only knew! (Stoker 1970: 95)

As he sanes up, though, the patient seems more and more aware of the status and significance of the sane saviors and, for instance, says to the American fellow:

Mr. Morris, you should be proud of your great state. Its reception into the Union was a precedent which may have far-reaching effects hereafter, when the Pole and the Tropics may hold alliance to the Stars and Stripes. The power of Treaty may yet prove a vast engine of enlargement, when the Monroe doctrine takes its true place as a political fable (Stoker 1970: 277).

And to them all:

You, gentlemen, who by nationality, by heredity, or by the possession of natural gifts, are fitted to hold your respective places in the moving world, I take to witness that I am as sane as at least the majority of men who are in full possession of their liberties (Stoker 1970: 227).

In his sane moments, the patient grasps that the progressive world belongs to those who by nationality (American), heredity (nobleman), or natural gifts (Professor and Psychoanalyst) are superior to others (Easterners, peasants, and psychopaths). There is no mere priest amongst them.

At the end, it becomes clear, however, that to fight the Evil they face, the Westerners cannot solely rely on their nationality, heredity, and natural gifts that predispose them to science and rational thinking; they are also going to need an open mind, of all things. This is central to the battle that shapes Bram Stoker’s novel. Perhaps wherein lies Stoker’s critique of the 19th century British modernism, that it makes itself vulnerable by rejecting anything that lies outside its realm of reason. Instead, it should
recognize, get to know, and incorporate the apparent non-reason of the Other, if only in
order to eliminate it. The Dutch Professor is the one with such open mind as he says:

I have learned not to think little of any one's belief, no matter how strange it be.
I have tried to keep an open mind; and it is not the ordinary things of life that
could close it, but the strange things, the extraordinary things, the things that
make one doubt if they be mad or sane (Stoker 1970: 173).

And

Tradition and superstition are everything. Does not the belief in vampires rest
for others though not, alas! for us on them? A year ago which of us would have
received such a possibility, in the midst of our scientific, skeptical, matter-of-
fact nineteenth century? (Stoker 1970: 222)

Or perhaps Stoker voices man's real fear, which is of a world without
mysteries, a world without wonder, a world in which everything is already explained. He
wishes to undo the wrapping of what modernity seems to have already packed away.
Maybe he thinks with others of his day and age that if we are done explaining everything
in Britain, now the East contains that lost and past wonder. Count Dracula is, very
literally, a "noble [Count] savage [Dracula]," and there certainly is a romantic and erotic
aspect to his encounters with the West, which make him a perfect candidate for the
Victorian set of sentiments towards the Other: dread and disgust yet attraction and
fascination. So the Dutch Professor goes on criticizing his fellow-scientist, the British
Psychoanalyst, for giving supremacy to understanding and explanation over existence, as
if things were not simply because they could not be scientifically explained:

You are clever man, friend John; you reason well, and your wit is bold; but you
are too prejudiced. You do not let your eyes see nor your ears hear, and that
which is outside your daily life is not of account to you. Do you not think that
there are things which you cannot understand, and yet which are; that some
people see things that others cannot? But there are things old and new which
must not be contemplate by men's eyes, because they know or think they know some things which other men have told them. Ah, it is the fault of our science that it wants to explain all; and if it explain not, then it says there is nothing to explain. But yet we see around us every day the growth of new beliefs, which think themselves new; and which are yet but the old, which pretend to be young like the fine ladies at the opera. I suppose now you do not believe in corporeal transference. No? Nor in materialisation. No? Nor in astral bodies. No? Nor in the reading of thought. No? Nor in hypnotism (Stoker 1970: 178).

Let me tell you, my friend, that there are things done to-day in electrical science which would have been deemed unholy by the very men who discovered electricity who would themselves not so long before have been burned as wizards. There are always mysteries in life (Stoker 1970: 179).

In my favorite exchange, he tells the Psychoanalyst:

-My thesis is this: I want you to believe.
-To believe what?
-To believe in things that you cannot. Let me illustrate. I heard once of an American who so defined faith: 'that faculty which enables us to believe things which we know to be untrue.' For one, I follow that man (Stoker 1970: 180).

Even when the Professor asserts that faith is not dependent on (is, in fact, contrary to) knowledge and that what they need is faith, his own relentlessly scientific mind is still trying to find in nature and culture examples that could make the Dracula phenomenon more plausible and believable. For example, that blood-sucking bats are to be found "in Pampas and elsewhere" and that elephants and turtles don't die for centuries and parrots live on forever and so could perhaps a particular race of men. Or that the "geologic and chemical" features of Transylvania with caverns, fissures, and volcanoes, "some of whose openings still send out waters of strange properties, and gases that kill or make to vivify" could contribute to the making of the Undead: "Doubtless, there is something magnetic or electric in some of these combinations of occult forces which work for physical life in strange way" (Stoker 1980: 298). Or this example from culture:
The Indian fakir can make himself to die and have been buried, and his grave sealed and corn sowed on it, and the corn reaped and be cut and sown and reaped and cut again, and then men come and take away the unbroken seal and that there lie the Indian fakir, not dead, but that rise up and walk amongst them as before (Stoker 1970: 179).

Obviously, for the Victorian, India has the potential to explain the Dracula phenomenon as far as culture could help, it being a mystical and mysterious culture (Edward Browne goes to length about mystical practices in Persia and incidents similar to the above, distinguishing between the dogmatic theology of Islam and the mystically speculative character of the Persians. He also, like the Dutch Professor with regards to Dracula, sees “Persia awakening” from its slumber towards the end of the 19th century, emphasizing that it had never been dead, only dormant; even though he welcomes this awakening unlike Stoker’s Westerners9). But for all we know, Dracula could be Irish or Arab, Ireland and Syria being locations that we are told Stoker had been considering before choosing Transylvania as the location for his novel. Eleni Coundouriotis argues that the choice of Eastern Europe was not random and that Stoker’s narrative was meant to set “in motion an incoherence that aims to blur and repress the cogency of Eastern Europe’s claims on Europe” (1999-2000: 157). Clearly, the defeat of Ottomans by Russia in the region and Russia’s presence as a threat to Britain are at the heart of the anxiety Bram Stoker voices, as the ship in which Dracula finally flees Britain is named Tsarina Catherine after the modernist Russian empress (Catherine II) who defended neutral ships against Britain during the American Revolution and refused to fight in that war on the side of Britain. That Russia could represent a “new order of being” over

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9 Browne 2001
Britain is an obvious anxiety of the Victorian era. What the Professor says of Dracula could very well have been said about Russia:

In some faculties of mind he has been, and is, only a child; but he is growing, and some things that were childish at the first are now of man's stature. He is experimenting, and doing it well; and if it had not been that we have crossed his path he would be yet he may be yet if we fail the father or furtherer of a new order of beings, whose road must lead through Death, not Life (Stoker 1970: 282).

Or:

Nay, in himself he is not one to retire and stay afar. In his life, his living life, he go over the Turkey frontier and attack his enemy on his own ground; he be beaten back, but did he stay? No! He come again, and again, and again. Look at his persistence and endurance. With the child-brain that was to him he have long since conceive the idea of coming to a great city. What does he do? He find out the place of all the world most of promise for him. Then he deliberately set himself down to prepare for the task. He find in patience just how is his strength, and what are his powers. He study new tongues. He learn new social life; new environment of old ways, the politic, the law, the finance, the science, the habit of a new land and a new people who have come to be since he was (Stoker 1970: 299).

Obviously, Victorian territorial and power anxieties were multiple (from the Russians to the Orientals and from the Indians to the Irish), but whatever the people in question, like most conquests, the question of territory is linked to the question of women: Both can be described as virgin, both can be entered into, both can be corrupted, both can be the ground upon which men are born and raised, and so forth. To love, honor, and protect the land has been paralleled with loving, honoring, and protecting women. It is no wonder, then, that Dracula's victims in Britain are two women, loved literally to death not just by their husbands but by all the men on the Dracula campaign team.
[Dracula]: Your girls that you all love are mine already; and through them you and others shall yet be mine my creatures, to do my bidding and to be my jackals when I want to feed (Stoker 1970: 286).

When Lucy, the first woman, is dying of bloodlessness, each and every one of the men willingly gives his blood for transfusion to her. When the second woman, Harker's wife, gets bitten despite all the preventative measures taken by men, battling Dracula becomes almost a personal matter. If not for the whole humanity and as a moral duty, just for the sake of Madam Mina, the men have to go to war and sacrifice their lives. That the American should be the one who at the end dies for her and whose name the Harkers' child would bear is itself interesting. It is clear that she is not just a woman but all of Britain. The novel ends with the Professor, having the Harkers' child on his lap and trying to reassure the Harkers who think that all their "record" of their battle is nothing more than a bunch of typewritten papers that nobody would believe anyway:

We want no proofs; we ask none to believe us! This boy will some day know what a brave and gallant woman his mother is. Already he knows her sweetness and loving care; later on he will understand how some men so loved her, that they did dare much for her sake (Stoker 1979: 354).

By this point it is clear that Mrs. Harker is not just the mother (the proper role for a woman, as she has been saved from being a lustrous lustful sexual prey/predator and protected from the men's battle) but also the motherland. Why else would the whole point of the book and the battle be that Madam Mina was a much prized woman, loved by so many men?! Dracula, then, voices not just the "Eastern question" but the women's question and all the physical, mental, and spiritual dimensions of their increasing transformation.
If we just look at the booming accounts of Eastward travel by women contemporaneous with Bram Stoker (to Persia alone: Lady Shell in 1856, Gertrude Bell in 1892, Ella Sykes in 1910, and Vita Sackville-West in 1926, for example), it becomes clear that these women at once pitied the Eastern woman for her limitations, ignorance, and absolute subordination to men AND looked Eastward, in a way, for their own liberation and transformation (reference needed). Their literal border-crossing as well as their transfiguration by wearing men’s clothes or Oriental clothes (“cultural transvestites,” as Tavakoli-Tarqi has called them\textsuperscript{10}) provided them with chances for transgression and transformation (note the fascinating example of the French archeologist, Madame Dieulafoy, who traveled in Persia and the rest of the Middle East extensively and who was awarded the Order of the Legion of Honor and the right to wear men’s attire at all times by the French government in the late 1800s for her “discovery of the temple of Darius”) that were not available to them in their Victorian motherland where they were expected to function primarily as wives and mothers and were discouraged, if only by their breath-stopping undergarments and multi-layered skirts, from participating in the men’s adventures for the sake of protection.

\textbf{Madame Dieulafoy on a Set of 1928 Cigarette Cards}
\textit{From the Website of the Coinshop: http://thecoinshop.maltaexpo.com}

\textsuperscript{10} Tavakoli-Targhi 2001
While Stoker portrays Madam Mina as a "modern" woman who knows how to use a typewriter and a phonogram and who memorizes train schedules, he also has his men exclude her, in a loving but most humiliating way, from their adventures against Dracula despite all her proven utility, brains, and commitment\textsuperscript{11}. She, instead, has to fall victim to Dracula and almost become one of his minions. Most of the accounts of Eastward travel written by men contemporaneous with Stoker voice an anxiety about the loose morality and unleashed sexuality of the East, embodied in their preoccupation with the harem. Their mixed desire/disgust towards this matter resonates with the mixed admiration/exclusion that Stoker expresses towards Madam Mina and her transformation into a modern woman but also almost into a monster. It is interesting that the Orient, being the Other of modernity, also becomes for the Victorian women in question the site of encounter with their own modernity—because they define themselves in contrast to the Oriental women, but also because it is in literally going out there that they get to wear men’s clothes, sleep in stables, do men’s work, be more like men\textsuperscript{12} (obviously, this is not to suggest that going Eastward was the only means of transfiguration for these women). For them, being modern connotes being more like men, in a sense; for the men, this is a worrisome case of the Oriental Other corrupting the Woman Other—Dracula kissing her on the neck and sucking her blood.

\textsuperscript{11} This is similar to the way that, according to Hamid Naficy in "Lured by the East" (2006), Merian Cooper and Ernest Schoedsack treated Marguerite Harrison in the making of Grass: A Nation’s Battle for Life in 1925; Schoedsack referred to her as troublesome or at best "cute" on film, even though she was the one who spoke the language, helped immensely with the filming, and certainly made it through the trip just as well as the men did. Interestingly, their next film, King Kong, famously portrays a cute woman in a love-trap by a monster, being rescued by men.

\textsuperscript{12} See Hodgson 2005
The embodiment of territorial, national, cultural, sexual and other anxieties of encounter in women (and their attire, profession, and sexual expression) is, of course, shared by Persian men traveling in Europe around the same time or those writing accounts of their encounters with European women in Persia. For them, too, the European women’s unveiled figure stood for all liberty in Europe, something that was desired but also feared. Europe, too, thanks to its unveiled women, was thought of as a land of loose morality and unleashed sexuality, even when it was dubbed by some as “paradise on earth” (Tavakoli-Tarqi 2001).

Dracula and the actual accounts of encounter contemporaneous with it (by Persians and Europeans alike), then, tie modernity to culture, race, nationality, heredity (class), gender, and physiology (brain structure); but they also tie it to a certain idea of freedom, and of morality, that finds expression in sexuality.13 These accounts embody a certain erotics of encounter, one that finds expression in troubled love affairs, stories of penetration and infatuation, of invasion, violation, and yet the irresistible urge to know and to mimic and to mix with and even to become the Other. The child, the woman, the Oriental, the lunatic, the monster.

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13 For very interesting discussions of how nationality and sexuality (women’s purity and national integrity) were linked in the context of Iran/Persia, see Najmabadi 2005 and Amanat 2000
Encounters

Is democracy just the new modernity? A condition inherently Western in its genealogy (blood), culture, and mind-set (brain); one, again, with women as its site of battle and transformation? In America's current War on Terror, to liberate a nation from its despotic and evil regime has become synonymous with liberating its women from their veils (after all, veil and evil are almost the same even in their spelling) (also with sexuality: the view that sexual liberalization results in political liberation). Images of Burqa-clad women have come to symbolize all that is wrong with these people's "system" of knowledge (world view, mind-set, etc.) and power (authority, governance, etc.). All the cruelty and oppression of Dracula, all the superstition and ignorance and helplessness of the people of Transylvania, all the dangerous nonsense of the life-eating lunatic, all the predisposition of women to become victims is easily translated into the black veils of the Islam-mania. When today's modern technologies fail to find the hiding place of Osama Bin Laden, to prove the existence of Weapons of Mass Destruction in Iraq, to inspect Iran's supposed nuclear bomb plants, to photograph a veiled Muslim woman for an official document or to examine her face for security reasons, then all there is left to do is to have faith in the destructiveness of the Other even if it is still all too hard to make sense of; it is to follow the Professor's thesis and "believe in things that you cannot." The difficult geographies of Afghanistan, Iraq, or Iran with their many mountains, deserts, and hiding places become carbon copies of the difficult geography of Muslim women's veiled bodies, hard to read, hard to navigate, and "hard to communicate with." Again, territorial and cultural anxieties are linked to how much
of themselves women can reveal; their unveiling is the unveiling of a mystery that
today’s modern technologies of inspection and data collection have not been able to
unravel. If to Count Dracula, having the British women was the way through which to
have the British civilization; to those who are pledged against evil today, liberating the
women is the way through which to liberate a nation. The transition and transformation
that the transnational War on Terror is to bring to nations seized by evil is dependent for
its site on women who, like Stoker’s Madam Mina after she was kissed by Dracula, are in
a state of trans; they could become minions of evil or they could be saved, and that is the
primary question, the primary site of battle.

In 1910, Ella Sykes said:

The life of a Persian woman, taken as a whole, cannot be considered a happy one,
and the victims of Islam recognize that their fate is hard when they are brought
into contact with European women. The seclusion of their lives, with so little
outside interest, encourages hysteria and all sorts of nervous complaints; and
though the townswoman despises her unveiled peasant sister, yet the latter has the
best of it, hard though she may have to work for her livelihood. Certainly the
yoke of Mohammedanism presses heavily on the Persian woman, and, through
her, on the entire race, for how a nation make real progress if the mothers of its
men are kept in bondage and ignorance? (208)

The above quote resonates today with Eleana Benador, the head of the conservative PR
firm Benador Associates, who upon seeing Iraqi women participating in the Olympics
games in 2004, said (bolds are mine):

One of the most memorable experiences was to watch the Afghan woman
participating in one of the races, as well as an Iraqi woman. They didn’t go far,
they were among the last ones. But, watching them, I couldn’t avoid thinking: ‘We
are winning!’ Yes, we are winning over extremism, whether religious or secular.
More accurately, we are starting to win. The road ahead is still a long one, but the
beginning is already giving results. We have rescued from the hands of those
extremists these women who have regained their status as human beings\textsuperscript{14}, and who are learning now what it is to be treated with respect and dignity. ("From Elena's Desk" on Benador Associates website)\textsuperscript{15}

A similar trend can be seen in a good-hearted effort to counter the efforts of the likes of Benador’s clients for taking the War on Terror to Iran, a short clip called “Images of Tehran, Iran, You Don’t See Everyday,” that has been making its rounds on the internet in January-February 2007: The clip, with Cat Steven (Yusef Islam)’s Peace Train in the background, shows images of fashionable Tehrani women in tight uniforms, bleached hair, designer sunglasses, and extravagant make-up, talking on cell-phones, playing golf, and catching cabs, together with images of high-rises and highways, fast-food restaurants, and foreign designer boutiques, showcasing a “modern” (a.k.a. democratic) Iran that already looks like Europe or America and must, therefore, be spared the bombs. That is while at the same time one hears of TV commercials in some parts of the US that, after showing a brief barrage of images of Iranian women in black chadors, poor slums, and nuclear power plants, encourage the viewers to pick up their phones and call their representatives in the Congress and urge them to take action against Iran. That in both cases images of women are used side by side images of infrastructures that reassure or threaten Westerners (fashionable, loosely veiled women next to high-rises and highways and designer boutiques; black chador-clad women next to slums and nuclear power plants) is interesting; images of women and how they carry themselves can be a call to war or a call to peace. The two images below belong to the same city and could

\textsuperscript{14} For interesting engagements with Muslim (non-white) women in need of rescue, see Spivak 1988, Mahmood 2005, and Moallem 2005.
\textsuperscript{15} This quote was reprinted in a very interesting article by Negar Mottahede, titled “Off the Grid: Reading Iranian Memoirs in Our Time of Total War”:\http://www.merip.org/mero/interventions/mottahedeh_interv.html
have been taken on the very same day; however, they are rarely used next to each other to convey a sense of life for Iranian women today. The decision about whether or not Iranian women are in need of rescue and liberation becomes harder to make if one takes these image as happening right next to each other, occupying the same time and space. Rather, we are used to seeing images of before and after.

At the end, if nothing else, the chic young women of North Tehran, walking their poppies, driving their porches, and smoking foreign brand cigarettes may be the Islamic Republic’s best allies in that in that they save its face for a Western audience that relies for its measure of “modernity” and “democracy” solely on what it can recognize, read, comprehend, and identify with –therefore, black chadors, Arabic script, animal sacrifice or self-flagellation ceremonies, or any garden variety of poverty stand no chance of being the face of modernity and democracy today. Only by seeing women’s revealing attire, Latin (i.e. readable) script on shops and products, by seeing pets, parks, and porches in the streets of Tehran, may America be convinced that Iran is not in need of imported

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16 See Deeb 2006
democracy; the illegal democracy works just fine as long as there is money and the will to defy. Fortunately, if there is shortage of the first for most, there is no shortage of the latter in Iran.

There is another point of interest here: Whether to call attention to the everyday defiance of ordinary Iranians to counter images of their apparent helplessness (in the Western mainstream media), or to bring to mind the everyday suffering of ordinary Iranians to counter images of their apparent empowerment (by the proponents of Islam as a powerful idiom for identity and agency, including some anthropologists), those on either side similarly employ a mechanism of reviving the ordinary and the everyday against any grand representation of Iranians as backward and evil, as modernizing and democratizing, or even as already modern and democratic in their own way. It seems only fair, but what makes us think that we can circumvent the troubles of representation when we think we are not representing, only simply reviving the everyday? No, there is no reviving; we only invent the everyday, everyday. The lines between ordinary and exceptional are never quite clear. I only say this because, during my fieldwork in Washington DC, I frequently found myself (not without a certain sensation of being trapped) in the position to present a glimpse at the everyday, ordinary Iran to people—and when I say “people” in the context of my field in Washington, it usually refers to journalists, scholars, activists, and policy makers. Posing it to me at bars and parties just as well as in interviews and meetings, they thought it was a simple question; they thought it was small talk (Washington has its own definition of “small talk;” it’s never about the weather). It was a monumental task. In fact, that is what lead to the fight that is the navel of this chapter:
The night before my birthday, I had been invited to have dinner with the Historians and a long-lost relative of theirs who was visiting from out of town. The relative, a young woman around my age, was born to an American mother and an Iranian father, one of the Historians’ cousin or second cousin or something-something twice or triple removed or whatever. Her parents had separated soon after her birth and she was raised by her mother in America while her father had gone back to Iran and then, after the Revolution in 1979, resettled in Europe. The young woman wanted to learn about the beloved mystery that was her father, his family, his country, his religion, anything that could help her know him better. As we sat around the dinner table, chatting away about her father as the Historian remembered him (he had been a funny and resourceful guy if it should matter), about their scattered families and mine, about Iran before and after the Revolution, it came up that I was actually born and raised in Iran and had gone to college there as an English major. This fascinated the aforementioned young lady and prompted her to inquire about what it had been like for me, for Iranian women in general, to go to college, to study English literature of all things under the Islamic Republic. “Because, interestingly,” she said, “I just recently picked up this book, this Lolita in Tehran book that everybody reads and talks about these days, and frankly I find it so boring and so depressing that I don’t think I’m going to be able to finish it.” “Was it really that bad?,” she wanted to know, looking at me as if looking for a more scenic shortcut to understanding life for educated women her age in Iran. One that didn’t pass through James and Austen and Fitzgerald and Nabokov (she didn’t seem very literary) and didn’t, if at all possible, involve little girls raped by dirty old men who posed as their guardian angles.
Well, if you have managed to make it to reading my humble account of being Iranian in Washington DC without having first read or heard about Azar Nafisi’s *Reading Lolita in Tehran*, I have you know that the book revolves around an informal gathering (part private English literature class, part experimental women’s studies workshop) held in 1995-1997 at Nafisi’s house for some of her best female students after she quit her job as Professor of English at one of the top humanities colleges in Tehran due to its repressive policies. The book draws connections between the lives of these young women under the Islamic Republic and the books they discuss: Jane Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice* and woman’s choices, Henry James’ *Daisy Miller* and the fundamental opposition of totalitarian mindsets to ambiguity, Scott Fitzgerald’s *Great Gatsby* and the power of dreams, and of course, Vladimir Nabokov’s *Lolita* and the sobbing of a twelve-year-old who after hearing of her mother’s death came to her forty-some-year-old molester in the middle of the night, because “You see, she had absolutely nowhere else to go” (1989 Ch. 33).

Meanwhile, the book also chronicles the events before, during, and after the Iranian Revolution as they unfold for the author who joins the Confederation of Iranian Students Abroad (Marxist-Leninist opposition to the Shah; 1960-1975) briefly while studying for her Ph.D. in English at the University of Oklahoma in the 1970s, returns to Iran, Ph.D. in hand, on the eve of the Revolution in 1979 to teach at Tehran University, and immigrates to America with her husband and two children in 1997 after eighteen tumultuous years of teaching and not teaching and teaching again, by force or by will. All in all, *Reading Lolita in Tehran* is a story of women, choices, fundamentalism, opposition, totalitarian mindsets, ambiguity, power, dreams, sobbing, death, molesters,
nights, and having absolutely nowhere else to go. Well, actually, it is about a place to go, an otherworld, an Antiterra (a phantasmagoric planet parallel to Earth that is the setting of Nabokov’s other novel, *Ada*), a refuge in literature, about which in a Washington Post article titled “The Republic of Imagination,” Nafisi says:

> We know that fiction does not save us from torture or the brutality of tyrannical regimes, or from the banalities and cruelties of life itself. […] But we do know that, when confronted by utter degradation, by confiscation of all that gives life its individual worth and integrity, many instinctively go to the highest achievements of mankind, to works that appeal to our sense of beauty, memory, harmony -- those that celebrate what is humane, those that we consider original works of the imagination (December 5, 2004).

Which brings us kind of to where I wanted to go when faced with the long-lost relative’s question, was it that bad? I was getting ready to talk about the celebration of what is humane, harmonious, beautiful, and adorned with tender memory in the midst of banalities and cruelties of life (and so in a way implying that, no, I guess it wasn’t that bad; not necessarily depressing, and certainly not boring) when one of the Historians jumped in and informed the guest delightfully that I was indeed not only a relative of Azar Nafisi but also one of “the girls” in her book. The young lady turned a few shades of red before she could stutter: “Oh no, I didn’t mean to suggest that your aunt was depressing or boring…, or her book…. or your life in Tehran…, or you…” I laughed and said it was okay a million times. It was awkward.

With those who knew I was in the book, I had a pact not to mention it to others. I hated the publicity, the involuntary and undeserved attention that I would get for having been a character in somebody else’s book or, worse yet, for having been a mere liver of my own life. I didn’t resent my relative/professor, of course, for having written about me or having, therefore inevitably, written me onto a certain narrative tapestry not of my own
making, and not necessarily to my liking either. After all, I am in this writing business myself and the whole purpose of my being there at all, in Washington DC of all places and hanging out with the Historians, was so I could write about them later, write them onto some kind of social theory or ethnographic narrative, which I have a feeling they won’t like. What had begun to bother me was not that I was written about in Reading Lolita in Tehran but how I was read as part of it in the United States.

People take dramatic license with things in this country, the liberty to ignore the normalcy of some minor, often rather catastrophic conventions such as wars or dictators in the rest of the world, or in the world in general, and to treat them like some terribly odd and novel and incomprehensible situations for heightened dramatic effect. Before you know it, your college life can be synoptically translated as a series of life-risking adventures in a secret deadly love affair with Western literature under Burqa (and you didn’t even wear a Burqa; you wore a headscarf and a tunic with pants, for instance). Your world as a woman, as recounted in horror by a reader (one of the 382 who had found the book “useful” on Amazon.com last time I checked), “a world in which wearing fingernail polish, even under gloves, is a punishable offense. And punishment, as we learn, is typically brutal.”

In reality, all there was to it was that books, Eastern or Western, were censored by the Ministry of Islamic Guidance, resulting in certain amusing unresolved absences, such as the absence of sex from any given Milan Kundera novel, the absence of ballerinas from Degas’ Ballet Rehearsal on the Set, the absence of a magic kiss to break the spell in Sleeping Beauty or Snow White, or even the absence of the third figure (most likely due to immodest attire) from the image next to number three in a foreign language learning
book, which made you think, for instance, “trios” meant “two” in French. But we managed regardless and never seized to want to look at art, read fiction, and learn new languages. As an English major, you would be at a particular disadvantage, not because Western literature was altogether banned in Iran (obviously, it wasn’t), but for at least three rather comprehensible reasons for a country that had just been through a Revolution (no less than changing 2500 years of monarchy for an Islamic Republic), cultural revolution, war, economic sanctions, political repression, and acute unemployment: 1) Most of the qualified faculty had either resigned, left the country, or been fired following the Revolution, 2) students of literature, this least prestigious of all academic majors in the land of poetry and sugar-dripping, rosy, melodic prose, were only the worst in the country and hardly ever did their homework even if they did dignify the class with their presence on days when the protest outside didn’t particularly excite them and there was no soccer game in progress, and 3) everybody, students and faculty alike, feared that their comments on the books would get them in trouble, and they occasionally did with the fervent Islamist students in class, the university authorities, or the “moral committee.” (Iran has experienced a long history of censorship and suppression of opinion and expression under different regimes on one hand and a strong tradition of producing, translating, reading, and discussing “problematic” literature as acts of defiance on the other; to suggest that reading *Lolita* in Tehran was by any means a terribly new and extraordinary act is, of course, false as Dabashi has also mentioned in his Al-Ahram article, 2006.)

As for the private sessions at Nafisi’s home being “secret,” let me share a little secret about the notion of secrecy in places like Iran: Everything is secret. With my
extended family in Isfahan, for instance, we used to gather on Friday afternoons to recite and discuss the Qur’an, the holly book of Islam, no subversive book of Western literature (well, maybe with just a tad of Marx), and yet we didn’t tell anybody outside the family about it. You are just better off that way. It wasn’t the content but the fact that people had gathered to read and discuss something, anything, that unsettled the authorities. Perhaps they knew only too well that the Revolution itself had come about partly through people gathering to read and discuss things, the unlikeliest things (novels, poetry, holy scripture, and NOT necessarily political manifestos) in the unlikeliest places (homes, mosques, cafeterias, and NOT necessarily convention centers and university halls).

So I had attended the private classes. Then I had applied to a university in America, gotten admission, and come to the United States on a single-entry student visa for graduate study. In anthropology. There was nothing heroic about my life in Iran, nor anything dramatic about my coming to America —where I can, by the way, wear nail polish with or without gloves. If I hadn’t left the United States for the past six years or so, it was not because I feared I’d be arrested, tortured, or executed upon return to Iran (although that increasingly became what I feared after the explosive attention received by Reading Lolita in Tehran and due to my own rather sensitive research amongst Iranian NGOs in Washington DC) but because I was from one of the T7 countries (Iran, Iraq, Syria, Libya, Sudan, Cuba, and North Korea) upon which the United States practiced special restrictions and I was afraid not to be able to secure another visa to get back to America and finish my education if I left.

Judging from a few reluctant encounters with those who did know or find out that I was of the book, however, it seemed that people found it easier to make sense of me as
a bizarre and fantastic assemblage of illegal desires, confiscated memories, secret
gatherings, hidden sentiments, smuggled dreams, punishable polish, and supernatural
braveness than to see me simply as a stubborn woman, an absolute nerd, or whatever else
I could be for having pushed against all odds to leave my country in search of higher and
better education, to see more of the world and of myself—for we happened to see the
connection, however sophisticated, between knowing the self and knowing the world
around it. I was not granted the luxury of wanderlust and this intellectual restlessness,
however. If it had made sense for Lady Shell and Gertrude Bell and Vita Sackville-West
and other respectful ladies of Victorian England to fashion themselves in men's clothes
or, worse yet, Oriental clothes to travel overseas and on horseback and camelback to
Persia and sleep in stables and such to learn about other places and liberate themselves of
the yoke of their own, it obviously didn't work in the same way for Persian ladies such as
myself who had embarked on the journey West. None such romanticism. Apparently,
curiosity is a modern and democratic trait and those who do not have that kind of
freedom (the kind I discussed in my section on Dracula and the kind advertised in
America today as what evil countries don't have) cannot yet afford to be curious. If you
are from a country like mine these days, you never set out on a journey simply in pursuit
of knowledge; you are always escaping from something (most likely, Islamic
fundamentalism) to somewhere (United States).

I am not suggesting that choice and force are ever that distinguishable, or that
leaving and escaping are for that matter, but they were in the eyes of my spectators and
mine was certainly a case of the latter. Somehow, if I wasn't a victim or a superhero, then
I could be just another ambitious woman sitting across the table from them, having
dinner, and that would be too complicated to handle, too overwhelming. Uncomfortable familiarity. Upon learning that I was in the book, some appeared to have a hard time containing their joy and pride for being Americans or being already in America, the country whose literature had showed me the path to freedom and whose institutions now graciously hosted me. (How the fact that a group of women in Tehran took their education in English seriously against all odds ended up making some Americans feel proud of themselves, I do not know.) When not that, I received their sheer shock, followed by an unnecessary, almost offensive, admiration as if I was a wondrous creature that had just escaped a concentration camp or a soccer stadium in Kabul, for that matter, where the Taliban reportedly shot the unruly womenfolk. How now would I escape the self-replicating phantasmagoria of the Other?

It takes a certain kind of courage, I suppose, to see the Other as relevant and knowable, because it can take you on a long and transformative journey of the Self if you do. If there was courage in what we had done back in Tehran, it wasn’t so much that as women we had literally risked our lives through a form of illegal love affair with the West but that we had bared ourselves and sought intimacy with worlds other than our own as serious and committed readers of fiction. Some would say that we had done this to the point that it had made us estranged from the image of ourselves in our own familiar surroundings. Looking at ourselves through the eyes of the Other, we found the everyday conventions and confines of our lives abnormal and ridiculous and we dreamt of being elsewhere. Had we become, as Dabashi suggests, what colonial officer Thomas Macaulay in 1835 called “a class of persons Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinions, words and intellect” (June 2006)? Was it our task, as Dabashi suggests, to
“normalize the imperial centre and cast its peripheral boundaries as odd, abnormal, and
grotesque” (June 2006)? Nafisi did believe, as she told me in many occasions, that
wearing a head scarf and reading Sartre did not go together; she found that, in fact, a
nonsensical combination, therefore suggesting that you had to be of a certain lineage for
your reading of a certain feminist, emancipationist, Western literature to “make sense.”
You had to look like a Westerner—look modern and democratic—before you could
understand that literature. Therefore, she believed, while it made sense for her great
grandmother to wear a headscarf (since it matched unproblematically with everything
else she did or didn’t), it did not make sense for a Sartre-reading woman to wear one.
But we were all Sartre (and Nabokov and James and Austin and so forth)-reading women
with headscarves, and as such we were slightly confused about whose side exactly we
stood on. This estrangement of the Self and intimacy with the Other was to the point that
we found it easier to make sense of Lolita, a very hard book to read and one that has
received, and still does, harsh reactions amongst readers in the US, than to make sense of
our own everyday lives and oppressors. For the women in Reading Lolita in Tehran, it
seems, there would be no way to possibly comprehend the limitations that the Islamic
Republic was imposing on them on political, economic, or historical grounds unless
through the analogy of Humbert Humbert imposing his childhood dream on Lolita and
thus confiscating her childhood (it is clear that Nabakov does not think of rape, early and
fatal pregnancy, murder and those sorts of concrete disasters, but of the absence of
Lolita’s voice from the voices of children in the playground, for instance, as the real
tragedy of his story; it’s not so much about physical loss as it is about the loss of dreams,
innocence, joy, love, etc.). Humbert’s *mind-set* was representative of the mind of the totalitarian tyrant, the “child-brain” (Stoker 1970).

At the end, however, the real monster was not Humbert Humbert or the Islamic Republic but our own image: What we saw in the mirror before we set out everyday was an estranged image, something we did not identify with, a monster. In a sense, we had become Dracula and we could not see ourselves in the mirror. Take note, for instance, of this quote by one of Nafisi’s students with which she ends the book (bolds are mine):

> Five years have passed since the time when the story began in a cloud-lit room where we read Madame Bovary and had chocolate from a wine-red dish on Thursday mornings. Hardly anything has changed in the **nonstop sameness of our everyday life.** But somewhere else I have changed. Each morning with the rising of the routine sun as I wake up and **put on my veil before the mirror** to go out and become a part of what is called reality, I also know of **another "I" that has become naked** on the pages of a book: in a fictional world, **I have become fixed like a Rodin statue.** And so I will remain as long as you **keep me in your eyes,** dear readers (2003: 343).

The “I” that lives is veiled and trapped in a nonstop sameness; the “I” that is recorded and represented is naked and fixed like a Rodin statue. Both are in a sense artificial and unchanging, but while the first is thought of in the harsh terms of fakeness and prison, the latter is thought of in the soft terms of fiction and art. Both carry a certain erotic sense (“to become part of what is called reality”; to “become naked on the pages of a book”), but while the first is an unhappy union with reality, the latter is a love affair with fiction. (I am interested in the case of this particular girl, as she was in fact invited later on by the Historians to leave Iran as sort of a casual casualty of the Islamic Republic in the sense that she hadn’t been arrested or jailed or tortured or lost family members but had nevertheless lived an unhappy life with little or no choice, to work on their project, herself added to their colorful assortment of victims. When, through a series of
unfortunate events, it became clear that her personality crashed impossibly with those of
the Historians and that there was too much resentment to possibly work through, she
quitted tragically and it also became clear that her true essential self—whatever that was—
was not going to come out just by leaving Iran and shedding the veil. She said in so
many words that what the Islamic Republic hadn’t managed to do to her in all her life
there, the Historians did in a few months, i.e. to really “kill” her by their “damn so-called
human rights project.” The abuse that she felt in her personal relationships was not one to
be documented in a human rights database. It was when life under the Islamic Republic—
and this was a qualification that was never dropped to refer to her life before—became
just life, plain old human life, her case became hopeless. Only when she was
emancipated from the grip of the abstract oppressor, she was crushed by life itself. If she
had experienced that moment of identification: Lolita Is Us, in Tehran, then came the
recognition that there was no Antiterra to escape to from the tyrant of the self. I like this
little sad story a lot because it encapsulates a certain tension between human rights and
human lives that has occupied my mind throughout the writing of this chapter."

Of course, Azar Nafisi’s group in Tehran was not just a private class for English
literature. It was also meant as an alternative women’s studies workshop the idea for
which Nafisi had developed in conversation with people like Mahnaz Afkhami, currently
President of Women’s Learning Partnership in Washington DC, and the Moroccan
scholar, Fatima Mernissi, in conferences and seminars abroad, particularly the Fourth
World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995, from which I remember she returned
very excited and shortly after which she launched our group as a cross between women’s
studies and literature, as part of a campaign to empower women in traditional patriarchal
societies. Initially, she invited young women “with potential,” those who were educated and restless and contemplative and willing to change, which included a biologist and an architect. After a session or two, however, the group tipped towards English literature as most of us were English majors and the other two dropped out, finding the English texts too hard to read and the discussions too “lit. crit.” to be of relevance of them. The dominant character of our group, then, became one of English literature, although we did collect newspaper clippings and wrote about our lives, our families, public transportations, university courses, parties, etc. and discussed how culture, society, and government imposed a certain image of who they thought we had to be on who we were in essence. They confiscated our essence. Our essence as individuals.\(^{17}\)

As such, the workshop was in line with the Western liberal projects of individual self-realization. But it was also in line with the spirit of what Behzad Yaghmaian has called a “social movement for joy” (2002) in the late 1990s Iran, the struggle for civil liberties and the right of the individual to lick an ice-cream in public and other such essentials, which was responsible for the landslide election of President Khatami by mostly young people and women in 1997—the year Nafisi and family left Iran for the United States. Even though in our gathering, we mostly mocked the election of President Khatami as such a pitifully small and illusionary gain for all our grand ambitions for freedom, and obviously none of us voted, it is clear that we were not the only enlightened souls who had caught on to the small joys of different attires, public displays of affection, and uncensored arts and literature. That none of us even thought of voting, if not for Khatami at least against the ultra-conservative candidate who would rule over our lives

\(^{17}\) For further reading, see Nafisi’s articles in the two volumes edited by Mahnaz Afkhami and anthropologist Erika Friedl, 1992 and 1997.
with an iron fist if elected, is an indication of how alienated we felt from the political processes of our country, how fake it all seemed, how little we felt we belonged let alone could participate. The genius of Azar Nafisi was in juxtaposing this sense of estrangement and irrelevance (which she insistently recalls throughout her memoir) with the Western literature that we read and asserting that our own real lives in Tehran had become far stranger than foreign fiction (isn’t life always?), much harder to comprehend, much harder to engage with. Reality was fake, fiction real.

Back in 1995, Jackie Lyden of the National Public Radio published an article in the New York Times about watching Azar Nafisi teach English literature in Tehran. She started with an image of Nafisi standing before her class in the university with a bouquet of daffodils in one hand and a bunch of fake red poppies in the other, asking, “What is kitsch?” Back then in 1995, those of us who were better students in that class believed with Nafisi that what we had was the kitsch, of course. Fake, tasteless. (In the same article, Lyden described Azar as creating “shimmering worlds” “inside a revolution that was the apogee of kitsch and cruelty.”) It is a question that is worth asking more than a decade later in a different capitol, Washington DC, in the “flea market of after 9/11” (Dabashi, 2006)—what is kitsch and what is real? Looking back at the images of chador-clad women, looking back at the images of women walking dogs, looking back at her putting on her veil in front of the mirror everyday in Tehran, looking back at her naked and fixed like a Rodin statue on the pages of Azar Nafisi’s shimmering memoir.
Politics of Infiltration

There was another thing: I had come to increasingly fear the political consequences of my association with Reading Lolita in Tehran. One evening early in the fall of 2004, as I was taking a walk with Azar Nafisi through the numbered and lettered streets of the US capitol from the School of Advanced International Studies (SAIS) at Johns Hopkins where she had an office to her apartment by the Potomac, she told me that people had started giving her a hard time for her mention of a certain Paul (which they had by then discovered was Paul Wolfowitz, the Dean of SAIS from 1995 to 2001 and the Deputy Secretary of Defense in 2004 when this conversation was taking place) in her acknowledgements. There was also controversy over what she had meant exactly by thanking, in the same section, the renowned Middle East scholar Bernard Lewis for having “opened the door,” as he was said to have been instrumental in the Bush administration’s formulation of the War on Terror for his theories about the historical demise of the Muslim civilization and the clash of Islam with modernity as the source of Muslim rage against the West.

Nafisi said opening the door simply referred to Lewis’s gentlemanly gesture of introducing or recommending her to his editor, Joy de Menil, who had then taken on Nafisi’s book and played an important role in seeing it all the way through; it had nothing to do with the Bush administration or the War on Terror. Besides, she said she was baffled by why people were making such a big deal out of something so personal as how she had chosen to thank her friends, by first name or pseudonym or nickname or whatever. What did that have to do with anything she had to say in the book, which it
seemed they hadn't even read, enthralled in their intoxicating discovery of names and connections? Could she not be friends with people whose policies she did not agree with? Were we, by way of some cruel and absurd joke, back in the Islamic Republic where censors criticized things they hadn't even seen and people were frequently found guilty by mere association?

She had previously made jokes about how she had left Iran, hoping to leave behind fundamentalism, terror, and the war with Iraq, only to find herself in America back with fundamentalism, terror, and the war with Iraq! That evening, as we walked, a sense of uncomfortably familiar claustrophobia seemed to overcome us, a certain desperate sense of having been found out, of being trapped in the absurd significance of our choices and associations. We never quite got over the surreal nature of our walks together in the streets of Washington DC after having taken so many memorable walks together in the streets of Tehran a decade before. Back then, wearing the veil and the whole thing, amid the Tehran smog and frustrated drivers pressing on their horns and snaking their way through the haphazard traffic, it had seemed so hard and yet so easy to imagine ourselves somewhere else. Now the elsewhere was here, and it didn't matter that it was a clear fall evening in the US capitol, a diamond-shaped city much unlike Tehran, carefully planned on a grid by Major L'Enfant, the French artist and engineer who served in the American Civil War.
The fact that Azar Nafisi was on first-name basis with people like Paul Wolfowitz and Bernard Lewis had, of course, everything to do with her book and what she had to say, according to her critics: The general consensus, endorsed even by the Historians who adored her and found her book the genius masterpiece of modern Iranian-made literature, was that what she had to say about the Islamic Republic and its discontents and the power of Western literature to cultivate democratic change and open-mindedness had the ear of high-ranking people in the American Administration, a bastion of white men whose words could not, in the present political climate, possibly be as effective as those of this passionate, intelligent, and exceedingly articulate woman from the Muslim world about the Muslim world. In the words of one of her most raved critics, the Columbia Professor of Iranian Studies and Comparative Literature, Hamid Dabashi, Reading Lolita in Tehran demonstrated not a “conspiracy of intent” but a “collusion of interests”:

If you put Martin Perez, the New Republic, Bernard Lewis, Azar Nafisi, Benador Associates, Paul Wolfowitz, Fouad Ajami, Amir Taheri, and Leo Strauss’ ideas together, what you get is not a conspiracy to write RLT [Reading Lolita in Tehran] but a collusion of interests that makes the writing of that book beneficial to a whole range of common objectives. You put Martin Perez, Bernard Lewis,
Paul Wolfowitz, and Eleana Benador together, find their common denominator, and ask Azar Nafisi what is she doing in their company (August 04, 2006).

It did not help that the company, as it were, consisted of three Jewish people (Lewis, Wolfowitz, and Martin Perez, owner and editor-in-chief of the New Republic, who is known for having repeatedly referred to the “Arab political culture” as one fundamentally tribal, violent, and alien to the mechanisms of modern nation states) and the head of a PR firm (Benador Associates) that has had amongst its largely “neoconservative” clients such prominent members of the Jewish Institute for National Security Affairs as Richard Perle (Assistant Secretary of Defense during the Reagan administration and Chairman of the Board from 2001 to 2003), James Woolsey (CIA director, 1993-1995), and Michael Ledeen (member of the conservative think tank, American Enterprise Institute, and reportedly a consultant to George W. Bush on international affairs).

And what of Amir Taheri, Nafisi and Dabashi’s fellow controversial Iranian? Well, back then in 2004 when we were talking, he was just a typical (pro-Bush, pro-War-on-Terror) client of the Benador Associates who frequently contributed to well-known media outlets around the globe about the affairs of the Muslim world. In accord with the Jewish connection of the rest of the individuals mentioned by Dabashi above, however, he gained added attention when Benador placed a column of his in Canada’s conservative daily, The National Post, in May 2006 reporting that Iran’s parliament had passed a law requiring all citizens to wear standard Islamic garments and all non-Muslims to wear color-coded badges signifying their religion. According to this article, which turned out to be bogus, Jews would wear yellow, Christians red, Zoroastrians blue (it was, by the
way, accompanied by a photo of a Hungarian Jewish couple in the 1940s with the Nazi-mandated stars sewn onto their coats).

Lastly, Fouad Ajami, the Arab-American director of the Middle East Studies program at SAIS was hailed in a 2001 Wall Street Journal article ("Israel Isn't the Issue: Islamic fanatics hate America in its own right") by Norman Podhoretz, the Editor-in-Chief (1960-1995) of the American Jewish Committee's monthly magazine, Commentary, as virtually the only one “telling the truth about the attitude toward Israel of the people from whom he stems” by criticizing a Muslim culture of blame that does not take responsibility for its self-inflicted wounds.

Nafisi was charged by Dabashi to be part of the aforementioned company, as she was hired in 1997 by Wolfowitz to teach, with a Ph.D. in English from Oklahoma University, at the renowned Foreign Policy Institute at SAIS and later to launch and direct the Dialogue Project: Culture and Democracy in the Muslim World and the West, to combat Islamism as “the biggest threat to the development and survival of democracy in the world today.” She was also a client of Benador Associates, from which she later withdrew upon learning about the controversy around the firm's right-wing and hawkish leanings and switched to a literary agency (Steven Barclay) instead. In addition, she had frequently published in the New Republic, including her cover story, “The Veiled Threat: The Iranian Revolution's Woman Problem” (February 22, 1999) which had been reprinted into several languages.

Was this chain of names and associations Dabashi’s longer, fancier way of accusing Nafisi of the age-old Iranian charge of being part of a Zionist and Imperialist project? That is how the Historians, and Nafisi herself, dismissed and ridiculed people
like Dabashi as good old conspiracy theorists. In Ahmad Ashraf’s article, “Conspiracy Theories and the Persian Mind” (Iranian.com, May 1996), Zionists are big amongst the groups that have historically been targets of the Iranian people’s conspiracy theories (the others being the British, the CIA, the Russians, the Freemasons, and the Bahai’s). It is so common, in fact, that most recently the TV cartoon Tom & Jerry, the movie Pirates of the Caribbean, the Pope’s comments on Islam, and the so-called Mohammad Cartoon Row in Denmark have all been classified by Iranian officials as Zionist plots. The fact that this charge must be implied by somebody like Dabashi is even less surprising if we look at his rather interesting history at Columbia: Shortly after our conversation in 2004, a full-fledged drama of Dabashi versus the Jews made its appearance on the cyberspace which we all followed with a certain amusement: In an article called “Hate 101” By Douglas Feiden of Columbia’s Daily News in November 2004, Dabashi was quoted as having referred to supporters of Israel as "warmongers" and "Gestapo apparatchiks," and to Israel itself as "nothing more than a military base for the rising predatory empire of the United States," a capital of "thuggery," and a "ghastly state of racism and apartheid" that "must be dismantled." Then in 2005, Daniel Pipes, another Jewish neoconservative expert on the Middle East, wrote an article about him, titled "Columbia University’s Hysterical Professor," in which he ridiculed Dabashi’s hysterical reaction when upon receiving a mere email of criticism from a Jewish student, he had forwarded the email to Columbia’s President, said that he felt physically threatened, and demanded escort, plus that he would contact NYPD if the University did not somehow protect his person from possible assaults by the Jews.
What is interesting, if you follow Pipes himself back a few articles, is to see that he seems just as unreasonably worried about the Muslims (whom he referred to in 1990 as “brown-skinned peoples cooking strange foods and maintaining different standards of hygiene”\(^{18}\)) as Dabashi about the Jewish people. As the founder of an organization named Campus Watch, created in response to what he perceived as an anti-American and anti-Israel bias in the American academia (particularly in Middle East Studies centers) and to protect the academic freedom of those who happen to be pro-America and pro-Israel, Pipes published in 2002 a list of academics critical of Israel and the US foreign policy, an act similar to those by his well-known friend and ally, David Horowitz. And then in 2003, he said:

There is no escaping the unfortunate fact that Muslim employees in law enforcement, the military, and the diplomatic corps need to be watched for connections to terrorism, as do Muslim chaplains in prisons and the armed forces. Muslim visitors and immigrants must undergo additional background checks. Mosques require a scrutiny beyond that applied to churches, synagogues, and temples. Muslim schools require increased oversight to ascertain what is being taught to children (The Jerusalem Post, January 22, 2003: 9).

The sense of scrutiny and search for evil amongst academics in the discourses of both Dabashi (who thought Azar Nafisi was somehow in cahoots with the Jews and the Neoconservatives) and Pipes (who though Dabashi was somehow in cahoots with the Islamists) is not, of course, dissimilar to the treatment by the Islamic Republic of academics, especially those educated in or hired by American institutions, as traitors and possible culprits in implementing the Imperialist “cultural invasion.” Iranian academics have been consistently scrutinized and persecuted by the Iranian government for their

\(^{18}\) In the same article, titled “The Muslims are Coming! The Muslims are Coming!,” Pipes continued: “All immigrants bring exotic customs and attitudes, but Muslim customs are more troublesome than most” (1990).
academic publications and lectures. Ironically, both Nafisi and her accuser, Dabashi, would have to face such problems upon return to the old country.

Like Pipes, the Historians believed that the US academia was taken over by leftist, Marxist, cultural relativist, and politically correct academics, so was the think tank and NGO scene with agents of the Islamic Republic. But who exactly were these “agents” of the Islamic Republic? This frighteningly large category could include people who had previously served in the Islamic Republic and, having fallen out of favor by the regime for their “reformist” tendencies, were now leaving Iran and being hastily welcomed by US think thanks as dissident “experts” on the Islamic Republic. People such as Mohsen Sazegara, currently a visiting scholar at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, who was a founder of the notorious Revolutionary Guard Corps in Iran in the early 80s and has served several high-ranking positions in the Islamic Republic before falling out of favor and leaving Iran in early 2003. Or like Akbar Atri, the student leader of Iran’s largest reform-minded student organization (Tahkim Vahdat) who fled Iran in 2003 following his conviction of “assault on the Islamic Republic” and is now an activist member of the Committee on Present Danger in Washington DC. The historians had problems not just with these people’s “expertise” but with their branding as “dissidents.” I remember clearly one of the Historians’ almost breaking voice from the other room one day, “If these people, leaving and entering Iran at will and publishing articles and giving speeches in Iran risking merely a few months arrest or the loss of a license, are dissidents, who, then, am I, living in exile year after year, fearing for my life not just upon return to my country but even here, everyday? If these people are

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19 For examples of such treatments, see my second chapter, Poetics of Space.
dissidents, who were the ones stabbed to death in front of their apartments inside Iran and in Europe? Does no one see the difference?” She was afraid that the US in its naïveté did not understand that these were not the true indigenous agents of democracy that the US needed to support. They were only a softer and nicer and more appealing face of the regime and supporting them was “almost” like negotiating with the Islamic Republic.

But of course these “dissident” “experts” were not the only “agents” of the Islamic Republic infiltrating Washington DC. There were also the businessman-turned-political-analysts who pushed “in chorus,” as the Historians put it, for removing the sanctions on Iran as the first step in normalizing relationships. According to the Historians, these business-minded individuals were interested in normalizing the relationships because they were interested in investing in Iran, maybe opening an office in Tehran, traveling back and forth, you know, having the best of both countries. A prime example of that in their minds was the managing director of a business investment firm in Tehran who is currently a fellow at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars where he completes a monograph on the “factions within the Iranian conservative movement.” One afternoon in an Austrian café in Georgetown, an Iranian friend from an American institute for supporting freedom around the world confronted one of the Historians on this issue of business:

- You guys almost sound like having business interests is criminal. So what if some people want to be able to travel easily between Iran and the US, to invest in Iran, have an office there, whatever? I understand your concerns about human rights in Iran and I understand your battle against the regime there, but not everyone is a human rights activist or a political dissident. You sound like you have a moral problem with people
having differing agendas and priorities in life; do you? I mean, do you really expect a business investment firm in Tehran to discourage its potential clients from investing in Iran because they need to not acknowledge the legitimacy of the Iranian regime and, instead of going about business as usual, write exposes in affirming the regime’s human rights violations? Does that even make any sense?

The Historian shrugged her shoulders and said, “Hmm, I guess we are the only ones who are willing to really sacrifice our lives and careers and wealth and everything we have for our cause; because we care.” Then our eyes caught a pair of really expensive jeans at a small backstreet Georgetown boutique, for by this time we had started walking, and the topic was abandoned. Only later, the Historian voiced her alarm at hearing this friend’s criticism, as apparently it indicated that she, too, might have been infiltrated by the business-minded “agents,” i.e. she could very well be on her way to becoming a full-fledged minion if they did not somehow protect her. Proof of contamination came a few weeks later when this friend announced that she was enamored of a certain human rights reporter who had just published a report about human rights violations in the People’s Mujahedin of Iran Organization, the largest exile armed opposition group stationed primarily in Iraq. Now the Historians did not like the Organization either; as a leftist Islamist group, the Organizations members had historical conflicts with the liberal democrats of the National Front to a branch of which the Historians formerly belonged. The Organization is also on the current US list of foreign terrorist organizations. But to have the audacity to criticize the opposition while the regime itself was so deep in human rights violations, this was the crime of this particular reporter and a sign of his contamination by some dubious element that plotted to dignify the regime, or divert
attention from its atrocities, by criticizing the opposition. This guy was an “agent,” and by default this personal love affair was doomed to end in the contamination of the aforementioned US institution for supporting freedom around the world as well. The hysteria over this infiltration got to the point that the Historians decided, half jokingly, half seriously, that the only salvage was in finding a lover “from amongst ourselves” for the above-mentioned friend, even a lover from the CIA, in order to stop the madness: “No joke, it’s an important institution for freedom we are talking about; it’s important who their employees hang out with; we don’t want their support to be channeled to the wrong people.” At the end, the Historians did start inviting her to more dinner parties in order to recruit her back. They were right; I had never met people with such unfailing dedication.

The Historians also kept a close watch on Azar Nafisi, a woman of immense genius and creativity, in their minds, who was not necessarily aware of or very smart about the above-mentioned networks and what her association with each could mean. Since they were acutely and mercilessly aware of the political significance of every word and move and would not let anything go unnoticed, the Historians were able to make the decision that accepting an Iftar (to break the fast that none of them observed in Ramadan) dinner invitation at the White House shed less light on the type of people Nafisi associated with than she giving the introductory speech in the honor of the Peace Nobel Laureate Shirin Ebadi in a gala held by some Iranian-American organization in Washington DC. While accepting the first invitation did not have to be prompted by anything but mere courtesy or curiosity (and therefore was politically void), accepting the latter meant that Nafisi, too, was being used and co-opted by the agents of the Islamic
Republic (again, there was a certain erotics of morality attached to this charge, as the Historians frequently used phrases such as “political one-night stand” and “political adulteress” to refer to people who, despite their disdain for the Islamic Republic, took part in galas such as the above-mentioned—which, by the way, had no provable relation to the Islamic Republic). For after the “dissident experts” and the “businessmen-turned-political-analysts,” these were the other two types of Islamic Republic “agents” in Washington DC: Iranian-Americans who gathered and did anything short of criticizing the Islamic Republic (worse yet if they even celebrated some achievement made by someone living under the Islamic Republic, like some filmmaker, or writer, or Nobel Prize Laureate); and precisely those very filmmakers, writers, and Nobel Prize Laureates. Their flaw was that they had managed to produce work that did less than put them in jail; this either indicated some deal that they had made with the Islamic Republic authorities or their mere ineffectiveness. How did they have the audacity to celebrate people like Ebadi or the world-renowned filmmaker Abbas Kiarostami as part of the Islamic Republic’s reality when the really real reality was people being suffocated to death there literally or figuratively? Was this not, then, saving face for the Islamic Republic? If this was what they aired, where was the dirty laundry?\textsuperscript{20}

If the Historians believed that Washington was infiltrated by the agents of the Islamic Republic, Dabashi believed that it was blooming with “native informers” and

\textsuperscript{20} Of course Ebadi’s problem was that she had referred to the plight of Palestinians and the Guantanamo Bay prison abuses as prime examples of human rights violation in the world today, in her Nobel Prize speech, instead of referring to her own backyard, the Islamic Republic. She could have saved herself from these criticisms if she had used the Prize as an occasion to shame the Islamic Republic instead of the fashionable America-and Israel-bashing.
“Neocon artists’ like Azar Nafisi who furthered the Neocon plan for taking over the world:

The formation of think tanks [...] coincide[s] with [...] the privatization of knowledge production, or the so-called “death of the Professor,” as Lyotard has called it. The principal task of these comprador intellectuals is to manufacture, supply, distribute, advertise, and sell a package of knowledge about the trouble spots of the world. [...] The death of the professor means the birth of the comprador intellectual, or gun for hire (June 2006).

Dabashi added that to him there was no difference between Azar Nafisi and Lynndie England, the American soldier convicted of torture and sexual abuse of Iraqi prisoners. The disturbing images of the disgraced and abused bodies of Iraqi men, in Dabashi’s mind, were not any different from the cover image of Reading Lolita in Tehran, in which two female Iranian teenagers were shown reading something that in the original picture had been a reformist newspaper during the 2001 Iranian elections but that had been cut off from the cover image. The teenagers, based on Dabashi’s long and detailed Barthian analysis, were violently cut out from the democratic process in which they were a part in the original picture and placed on the cover of a book that, Dabashi contended, pictured Iranian women as preys in need of rescue by Western men; hence a certain pedophilia of protection mixed with violation. Such was the erotics of Nafisi’s and England’s neo-Orientalism. The author and the jailor were the same; the book was the prison; the Self that had become naked on the pages of the book (like a Rodin statue) was the same as the Other that had been made naked in the hallways of the prison; to write was to violate.
From Al-Ahram, accompanying Dabashi’s article

For me, as I hung out with Azar Nafisi and occasionally helped her with office chores, in which she in the most charming and quirky way lacked skills, as I sifted through her articles, reviews, interviews, contacts, press kits, books, unpublished materials, papers, papers, and more papers, post cards, old pictures, some Cuban cigars, some dried flowers, family letters, her children’s drawings, coffee-stained notepads, and post-its that no longer adhered, the quintessential absent-minded professor was still very much alive. Every time I went to one of her many talks around town (at the National Press Club, the Folgers Library, the French Embassy, the University of Maryland, the advertising ceremony by Audi), the singular fire in her words and voice, despite the many times I had heard them, mesmerized me and brought tears to my eyes and made me feel like I was a college freshman all over again, sitting in a graduate class, getting goose bumps at how convincingly she made fiction sound so much more relevant and so much more worthy of attention than reality. People come and go, you win and you fail, you lose something and gain something else, but look, look at this word, here, hear it,
how tender, how true, how turbulent it feels; that’s what remains, at once a gift to reality and a revenge against it. In Washington, she would joke that now it was the time for me to write the sequel to *Reading Lolita in Tehran*, or something called “The True Story of Reading Lolita in Tehran” if I had any aspirations to fame and money. Which I didn’t, of course. “But seriously, you gotta be a writer instead of this whole anthropology thing.” Obviously, I was not able to articulate to her just how much my whole anthropology thing had to do with writing; that I was not aspiring to tell any kind of truth through my anthropology other than the tenderness and turbulence of that particular reality in Washington DC.

So tender and turbulent was that reality, in fact, that I found it impossible to conceive of speaking publicly about Iran without being accused of having received either a Neocon Dracula kiss (if you said anything about human rights abuses or limitations imposed on women) or an Islamic Republic Dracula kiss (if you said anything about the achievements of women parliamentarians, lawyers, activists, or filmmakers, for example). Terror, any perception of threat, creates black and white reality, and perhaps there is nothing new and interesting about this garden variety, i.e. being Iranian in Washington DC in the early 21st century. But if you are an intellectual from one of “the trouble spots of the world” living in Washington DC, and your task is, inevitably, “to manufacture, supply, distribute, advertise, and sell a package of knowledge” about where you come from, how do you speak? And what happens to what you remain silent about? And if you reiterate what once sent you to jail in Iran in Washington DC where it may be used to further the cause of coercive and dubious “liberation,” what happens? What
happens to your truth, the truth of your suffering, the truth of your objection, in every act of reiteration?

Can the subaltern speak? This is, but not quite, the question.
Culture, Mind, Character

There is a brand of cultural analysis that sees fundamental character traits as responsible for modern or non-modern, democratic or non-democratic behavior. Based on this view, the Others of modernity and democracy suffer from what, in 1926, Vita Sackville-West called the "internal rot."

For the ruler of Persia, however, half the problem lies precisely in the character of that nation; easy to dominate, because energy meets with no opposition, they are, once dominated, impossible to use; there is no material to build with; like all weak, soft people, they break and discourage the spirit sooner than a more difficult, vigorous race; there may be nothing to fight against, but equally there is nothing that will fight in alliance with the leader. This character leads naturally to the innumerable abuse and corruption from which Persia suffers; the absence of justice, the sale of offices, the corruption, bribery, peculation, and general dishonesty that appalls the beholder, not only from a moral point of view, but also from exasperation with the stupidity and elaboration of such a system. This internal rot, no less than the political pressure from England and Russia, must complicate the position of any energetic ruler; it is the most urgent thing, the thing which must be cleaned out before any other problem is dealt with, such problems as transport, under-population, irrigation, the condition of the peasant, the cultivation of the land (1990: 128).

Internal rot analyses have been fashionable in and about Iran since the first critical encounters between Persians and Europeans. As early as Jean Chardin's very famous 1673-1677 *Travels in Persia*, Persian character traits such as lethargy, jealousy, and so forth were discussed as reasons for the nation's predisposition to despotic rule. The Persian character, as Sackville-West describes above is one that "leads naturally to innumerable abuse and corruption." Acknowledging and correcting this "character" is what a certain type of Iranian intellectuals have since the 19th century consistently called for as first steps towards achieving modernity (and more recently, democracy) in Iran (examples). One could say this is the type of intellectual that is not as preoccupied with
the political pressure and meddling by foreign powers (Britain and Russia back then, America and Israel today) as the typical leftist intellectual of the Islamist or non-Islamist varieties. This is the intellectual that criticizes Iranians not for wrong political moves but for wrong character dispositions (in today’s terminology that can be dubbed as political culture, mindset, or philosophy) that find expression in consistently wrong moves and result in seemingly endless, uncorrectable misery.

One of the most recent examples of such character analysis is a small book called Chera Darmandeim?: Jame’eshenasi-ye Khodemani (Why Are We Stuck?: Self-Sociology [sociology of ourselves by ourselves]) by Hasan Naraqi, which reached the 11th edition in Iran in a span of three years, 2001-2004. The cover shows haphazardly shaped items on a clothes line, connoting, I assume, airing one’s own laundry in public. The back shows a poem by the Poet Laureate of the post-Constitutional era of the early 20th century, Mohammad Taqi Bahar, which says (my translation):

This black smoke that is rising from our roof is of our own doing; these flames that come upon us from left and right are of our own doing. Why complain about the strangers?; the fire that burns us is within us, is of our own doing.

The table of contents carries items such as the following: “We Are Strangers to History,” “Our Aversion to Truth and Our Secrecy,” “Our Hypocrisy,” “Our Predisposition to Despotism,” “Our Self-Centrism and Rivalry,” “Our Aversion to Schedules and Timing,” “Our Opportunism,” “Our Sentimentalism and Love of Slogans,” “Iranians and Perpetual Conspiracy Theories,” “Our Aversion to Law and Tendency to Violate It,” “Our Constant Complains and Expectations,” “Our Honesty,” “Our All-Knowingness,” “And Other Examples of Our Character.” 21 Like Sackville-West in 1926, Naraqi in the early 2000s

21 Other examples inside Iran:

"خلفیات ما ایرانیان", "دارالمجاهین" "ما چگونه ما شدنی", "جامعه‌شناسی نخبه کشی", "سارگرای ایرانی"
believes that the Iranian character is the most urgent problem that must be dealt with before any political or economic problems.

Many of my interlocutors, particularly the Historians, subscribed to similar internal rot analyses. This for them found expression in their emphasis on a “totalitarian mindset” that they attributed to the clerical regime in Iran as well as the Revolutionary left, of both Islamist and non-Islamist varieties. By this definition, both of the Iranian regimes (Pahlavi and Islamic Republic) and all the opposition to them were inherently totalitarian and undemocratic, except, well, in the minds of the Historians, the followers of the last Prime Minister of the Shah, Shapur Bakhtiar, whom they referred to incessantly as “we.” Bakhtiar was the only one who knew that a legitimate sovereign came to power through ballot boxes not streets riots; there was a $2+2=4$ rationality in Bakhtiar’s words and deeds that contradicted the ideological sentimentalism of the Revolutionaries.

A discerned “mindset” like this can be manifested in a variety of cultural rituals and religious practices, arts and literature, attire, kinship and amorous ties, economic decisions, ethical judgments, and legal system of a nation as well as in its political situation. To combat this mindset is to revolutionaryize the way we look and the way we see, the way we relate to our friends and family members, our sexual desires and expressions, our attitude towards religion, the way we mourn and the way we celebrate, our arts and literature, the way we think of money and property, the way we make judgments. In this total combat against the element of evil in ourselves (the internal rot, the destructive fire within), one finds a significant part of my interlocutors’ attitude towards what they understood to be “our culture” (which makes it understandable why
they felt such rage towards advocates of cultural relativism and political correctness, whom they thought of as apologists for the Islamists or Iranians or whoever in question. The rest of what they referred to as "our culture" was singular acts of grandeur such as the great Persian ports (Hafez, Sa'di, Rumi, Ferdowsi, etc.), Persian manuscript paintings and artifacts from the same era (circa. 12th to 18th Centuries AD), or Cyrus the Great's clay cylinder of human rights declaration after the conquest of Babylon in 542 BC. But this part of culture was not linked to a distinctly Persian character (Cyrus's cylinder did not indicate that we were a people inclined to human rights and kindness and justice in our disposition), and the combative element was entirely absent from their attitude towards it.

I must say here, in parenthesis, that my research about Persian manuscript paintings, or what it was back then and how my interlocutors understood it, brought these paintings from the realm of grand innocent culture to the realm of criminal character for them to some extent. My argument, following art historians like Sheila Canby, that these paintings embodied a certain Persian design or melody sounded dangerously close to saying that they could be used as sites of discerning the "Persian character." Therefore, the depiction of figures, male or female, child or adult, all in the same unrealistic iconic manner could be attributed to the Persian lack of regard for individuality; or as one of the Historians, after a long period of utter confusion and incomprehension regarding my very dubious research in the cracks of social science and art history and everything else, explained to an American trying to understand Iranian-American participation in politics: "Well, it's like a Persian miniature; you hardly see people in the center acting; you see all these figures in the margins looking and commenting with their hands in front of their
mouths.” I knew that day that I had committed the common fieldwork crime of altering my field by, precisely, introducing a new way of perception and articulation of reality to the very people whose reality and whose ways of perception and articulation I was supposedly studying. This was not the way they had thought of using Persian paintings before. While I felt victorious for having finally awakened my interlocutor to the way in which my connecting art to sociality was not entirely devoid of sense and poignancy, I realized that I was uneasy with the manner in which she was making that connection. It can very well be that back then that was how I was myself making the connection and only later, and upon hearing things like this from the very people who had heard me talk about the paintings, I decided that that was not the road on which I wished to be traveling. Still to this day, it feels like walking on a very fine line to be talking about a Persian design or poesis without at the same time falling trap to the same kinds of essentialist and combative character analyses.

There is also an evolutionary aspect to the sort of internal rot analyses that my interlocutors engaged in: We have not yet developed this or that characteristic; we have never had our Renaissance, we are, in the words of Daryush Shayegan, “on holiday from history” (1992). This particular Paris-resident former professor of comparative philosophy and former director of the Center for the Study of Civilizations in Tehran was, in fact, one of the few enlightened philosophers that the Historians believed we had, one of the only few who understood the core of our problem as our own inability to catch up with history (thus a cultural and philosophical problem) rather than as a result of systematic intervention by the great foreign powers or other political and economic circumstances. Shayegan’s understanding of the “Muslim civilization” (resonant with the
civilizational language of Bernard Lewis and Samuel Huntington) bears an uncanny resemblance to Professor's Van Helsing's analysis of Dracula as Undead, i.e. belonging to a civilization that is past its prime but has not naturally ended for something new to begin; it has continued living with no life. Those alive with no life, the Undead, are, indeed, dangerous creatures. With their brains that are reminiscent of bygone times, their child-brains, yet their immense power as giant creatures as old as history itself, they may decide to revive their most "deranged hallucinations" (Shayegan 1992: 14) and take a stab at the modern present (like Dracula, and like Muslims today). They may not achieve peace for themselves or leave the rest of the world in peace unless their unnatural lives as the Undead are ended. Therein lies Shayegan's characterization of the "Muslim problem." In the half-a-page foreword to his book, *Cultural Schizophrenia: Islamic Societies Confronting the West*, Shayegan says:

*Cultural Schizophrenia* is an essay on the mental distortions afflicting those civilizations that have remained on the sidelines of history and played no part in the festival of changes. Although this book owes its existence to my personal existence in the world of Iranian Islam, I believe that its scope extends beyond this world and applies (to some extent at least) to most of the civilizations whose mental structures are still rooted in Tradition and have difficulty in adapting to modernity. (1992: vii)

We are back at the question of physiology again. To be modern is to have a certain kind of brain or mental structure. In the same foreword, Shayegan also characterizes the conflict of Islam and the West (capital-T Tradition with small-M modernity) as one between "two different blocs of knowledge" and "two antagonistic modes of being" (1992: vii). His solution? For Islam to stop postponing the end, so that it may be able to begin. In his first chapter, "Postponing the End, Unable to Begin," Shayegan contends that contemporary responses to the West (therefore modernity),
“whatever their apparent differences,” are “symptoms of the same profound malaise” (1992: 3). This malaise, in his opinion, results from a “non-comprehension” of modernity “in terms of its philosophic content, but always in terms of its traumatic impact on our traditions, our ways of living and thinking” (1992: 3). The West has not been understood by Muslims as “a new paradigm to break with the past” (1992: 4). What Muslim civilizations still have not embraced is this shift of paradigm, so while the outside reality has been changing, their mental projections still function in terms of the old modes of perception and representation. Since they played no part in the succession of crises and means of production that resulted in the new paradigm in the West, the Muslims cannot trace the genealogy of modernity and to them it remains a rupture. Just as Jacques Berque said of the Arabic language (it “has been designed to conceal reality, not to grasp it”)22, Shayegan believes that the “logic” of the Muslims works in such a way as to veil concrete reality (after all, veiling, too, is not just a form of attire or a symbol of a faith but part of a whole system of perceiving and representing reality –okay, well, maybe that IS faith; faith is mentality).

It is this “configuration” of consciousness that needs to change. It is a consciousness that does not understand history sequentially; it tends to “scramble the order of centuries” (Shayegan 1992: 6); therefore, it cannot comprehend that the era of classicism is over, for example, or that the Middle Ages are over, and it is time to let go of that past and enter this new era. It is a consciousness that continues to grapple with the same themes, the same questions, the same myths, the same slogans, and not the changing reality; “a Manichaean struggle between Shades and Light in the relentless

22 Janabi 1983: 48-50
repetition of cycles” (Shayegan 1992: 8). It is a mystical consciousness that has learnt to absent itself from the material world, fundamentally opposed to a rational consciousness that teaches not to accept anything unless verified through material means.²³ Recall that Stoker’s wise Professor invites the very scientific-minded psychoanalyst to have faith in the reality of things that cannot yet be verified through material means. Dracula is plausible in the Professor’s analysis because he works with a totally different perception of time, history, space, reality, etc. So if we imagine ourselves out of our present sequential and rational reason, we will see that it could be possible for a creature to live thousands of years, to travel long distances in seconds, to turn itself from one form to another, to gain and lose certain powers with the changes in light and climate, etc. In this case, it seems that it is the rational mind that is the prison, not irrationality.²⁴

In Shayegan’s analysis, “multinational capitalism” or “the devastating aftermath of colonialism” are only excuses and scapegoats for a consciousness that resists to shift its configuration from its “casual untruths” and “deformed concepts” to modernity (1992: 10). The cultural Other becomes one with the monster and the lunatic yet again:

I am blocked somehow. A blockage as old as my soul, as tenacious as my idées fixes, as pathological as my obsessions, as neurotic as this cumbersome religion I do not know what to do with (1992: 11).

The cultural Other becomes one with the child yet again:

²³ Here, Shayegan sounds a lot like Lévy-Bruhl in his 1910 How Natives Think and the collective mystical speculations that sees concrete reality as blended with abstract reality: shadows, images, dreams, names, animal parts, the dead, all are, for the Native, just as alive and real and capable of meddling with present concrete reality as the components of the present concrete reality itself.

²⁴ For very interesting treatments of “irrationality” in anthropology, see Levi-Straus 1966 and Faubion 2001
[…] not only am I unaware of my own contradictions; I am even shocked and hurt when more experienced minds point them out to me (1992: 11).

Like the Historians, Shayegan believes that it doesn’t matter if we (Muslims, Iranians) are materialists, Marxists, infidels, or atheists; it is the “totalizing mind” that is the problem.

Besides the problem of the mindset, there were a variety of character traits that my interlocutors believed Iranians suffered from. Important among these was the Shi‘i concept of ketman (concealment, denial) that had not escaped the eyes of even the early travelers to Persia. As a prominent Persian character trait, ketman gained utmost authority in my field when, in his article about intellectuals in totalitarian regimes, Christopher Hitchens called attention to Czeslaw Milosz’s use of the concept (as an “ancient Persian” practice) in The Captive Mind:

There are occasions when silence no longer suffices, when it may pass as an avowal. Then one must not hesitate. Not only must one deny one’s true opinion, but one is commanded to resort to all ruses in order to deceive one’s adversary. One makes all the protestations of faith than can please him, one performs all the rites one recognizes to be the most vain, one falsifies one’s own books, one exhausts all possible means of deceit. (Hitchens 2004)

Since then, ketman came to explain many things that were wrong with Iranians and their political concepts and practices. At a dinner party with the Historians, the President of a major American institution for supporting pro-democracy movements around the world took an interest in my then-very-undeveloped research about Iranians,

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25 It might interest you to know that it was in the same article that Hitchens “discovered” and announced to the public the true identity of the mysterious “Paul” of Nafisi’s acknowledgements. She had thanked Paul (Wolfowitz) there for introducing her to “Persecution and the Art of Writing, among many other things.” The mention of this essay by Leo Strauss later became Dabashi’s other proof for Nafisi’s loyalty to the neo-conservative cause.
Washington DC, and politics, and asked what in my opinion could be the reason why they got so few applications from Iranian activists inside OR outside Iran. Predicting my response, he added that they got many applications from activists inside Palestine, Libya, and Eastern Europe back during Socialism; they, too, had similar, if not more intense, problems of association with the United States, you would think, but that didn’t stop them from applying. It was only Iranians who shied away from applying for money from the United States, be it from the government or non-governmental organizations such as his. Before I could say anything (granted I did not have much to say), Azar Nafisi emerged with her ketman theory and said that it was due to a culture of concealment, denial, and multiple personalities that Iranian activists could not bring themselves to directly ask for support from the United States. The “captivity” that Iranians suffered from, you see, was clearly a condition of the mind not of circumstances.

Another example of Persian internal rot was jealousy. Any and all criticism to Azar Nafisi’s book coming from fellow Iranians, for instance, was immediately attributed to their jealousy, that “we cannot see the success of others.” Another was the tendency to save face before strangers and an automatic defensiveness in the face of criticism. Again, any and all criticism to Azar Nafisi’s book by fellow Iranians could be for this reason when not for mere jealousy. If someone inside Iran said that Nafisi’s book described the pre-Khatami era and things had changed after Khatami, if an ex-member of the Confederation for Iranian Students said that Nafisi’s book overlooked the positive aspects of the organization altogether, it was all because they did not want to look bad. This was similar to the arguments of Farid Zakaria and Fouad Ajami and Bernard Lewis about how it is time for Muslims to look at themselves for causes of their backwardness
instead of always blaming the Zionists or the West (culture of self-criticism vs. culture of blame).\textsuperscript{26}

Another example of this culture of self-criticism vs. culture of blame is Irshad Manji’s \textit{The Trouble with Islam Today} (2005) that has received explosive attention around the globe. In an open letter on her website\textsuperscript{27}, Manji says (bolds are mine):

I’m asking Muslims in the West a very basic question: \textbf{Will we remain spiritually infantile}, caving to cultural pressures to clam up and conform, or will we mature into full-fledged citizens, defending the very pluralism that allows us to be in this part of the world in the first place?

Hers, too, is a battle against the ideology that occupies Muslim minds (somewhere in her open letter, Manji argues that as Muslims protest the occupation of Muslim lands by Zionists, they should protest the occupation of their own mind by Islam). To the Historians, only courageous individuals like Nafisi and Manji were able to break away from this face-saving veil (again, the analogy between the internal rot and the veil. The veil conceals. The veil is intended to save face. The veil separates the public display from the private essence. What we don’t see becomes the truth, what we see the show. To liberate oneself from the internal rot always connotes tearing away the veil). Another related trait that Persians shared with other Muslims in my interlocutors’ opinion was the lack of a culture of confession, a tradition with a Western genealogy from St. Augustine to Rousseau all the way up; therefore, Iranians did not know how to make sense of Nafisi’s self-critical book—or Muslims of Manji’s (hence the covered mouth in all, except one, of the pictures below—there is another one, but that one is not a living human, just a sketch).

\textsuperscript{26} For a host of such arguments, see Miller & Kenedi’s edited volume, \textit{Inside Islam}, 2002
\textsuperscript{27} \url{www.muslim-refusenik.com}
Infantilism and the need to achieve (through education and training) maturity as full-fledged modern and democratic citizens characterizes a common way of looking at Iranians in America by the Iranians in America who were my interlocutors. In another chapter, Poetics of Space, I discuss the mechanisms of subject-formation employed by an organization that I refer to as the Civic Education Organization (CEO), another one of the organizations that I studied in Washington DC, to transform Iranians from the rather skittish individuals that they supposedly were with regards to American politics to full-fledged citizens of this country who vote, call up their representatives, and sign petitions to voice their opinions (like any “normal” citizen, indeed like a “naturalized” citizen).
"Community Impact on Decision Making - The Dynamic Model" from CEO Website

CEO's efforts were meant to complete the process of naturalization that Iranian-Americans had completed on paper for a while but had not quite started in practice, to fill in the gap between nominal and practical citizenship. Their pedagogy entailed “demystifying democracy” through teaching Iranians the everyday and very tangible methods of democratic participation. HRF had a similar pedagogical goal of subject-formation, but it took a more symbolic and philosophical, rather than practical and methodological (and mathematical as the chart above), route to producing democratic citizenry. While CEO emphasized the everyday reality of Iranians living in the US today (how to pay less taxes, how to benefit from Small Business Status, how to secure a visa for a visiting relative, how to protest discrimination at the workplace), HRF thought of something like the Persian mind, one shall say, as its site of transformation. If this mind, belonging to any Iranian anywhere, could only perceive itself and the world around it
differently, or if it could even imagine a different world in which "value" itself would be defined and placed differently (awakening to the value of life rather than value of ideology), then a new democratic citizenry would emerge, one that didn't need to be in Iran or in the West, didn't even need to be alive today, for this was a meta-circumstantial transformation, one that citizens of this imagined new polity could even enjoy "posthumously" through the appearance of their names in a database that did not discriminate based on ideology, gender, sexuality, nationality, class, religion, or anything else and demanded fair and open trials for everyone, criminal or not.

I don't believe that HRF's strategy to revive life and dignity through memory is that different from what has been done widely in other contexts (prominently in the case of Holocaust memorials, for instance, that the Historians consciously looked up to as models), neither is their strategy to call for truth and reconciliation through documenting victimization with ample precision without prominent parallels and predecessors (South Africa is a case at hand). What I think is important here is that HRF addressed the individual's conscience and opted to transform consciousness whereas CEO addressed the community's common sense (everyone wants to have a more convenient, effective, and productive life and get the most out of their citizenship) and opted to transform practice. By citizenship in a democratic polity, CEO very literally meant American citizenship while HRF meant an imagined citizenship in an imaginary Iran.

HRF was founded on the belief that once we change the way we imagine an ideal state, the reality follows. The Historians' thesis was that, with all their historical struggle and hype for democracy, the Iranian opposition is still mostly undemocratic in its imaginative faculty; the Iran that the opposition aspires to is an Iran ruled by them,
according to a certain ideology, and not an Iran that in it people, regardless of ideology and all else, enjoy the right to live, to pursue their happiness, to express their opinion, to practice their faith. Their claim was evident in the way that a lot of Iranian political activists or ex-activists cringed when they saw the names of their executed friends side by side the names of chain murderers and rapists and thieves and drug cartel smugglers in HRF’s human rights database. To them, this was not the way you restored “dignity,” to put a noble person who had sacrificed his/her life for the cause of communal good next to a lowly person who had brutally violated other people. To the Historians, this meant that the opposition had not yet learnt that it wasn’t about what you had done or why but about the importance of the “due process” (they incessantly referred to those who wouldn’t get this as “not smart enough” if not outright “idiots;” in short, with the Historians, it was always a question of intelligence). So if this was how the opposition still thought, this was going to be how they would act when in power: giving primacy to the “right cause” over life. If they couldn’t tolerate sitting next to a person that they didn’t like as dead people on a website, how were they going to be tolerant in life? So the web-polis of the dead was the stage for the living to rehearse being democratic citizens.

Both organizations strived to revive a sense of dignity (CEO for Iranians living in America today, HRF for Iranians whose right to live was violated), but they thought of their projects differently and this was manifested in the aesthetics of their representations. While CEO portrays young Iranians in professional suits, on the marble stairs of some “democratic institution” (white, Greco-Roman, gigantic buildings of the National Mall), laughing, discussing, looking confident, productive, proactive, optimistic, good in groups, etc., HRF dedicates a page to each executed individual with as much information,
categorical and personal, that might be available on him/her, and in the absence of a real photo, which is most of the cases, a generic male or female sketch. What kind of "subjects" are the Iranians embodied in the two male and female HRF sketches? It was interesting to watch the Historians go back and forth with their artist (whose identity was never revealed to me) about these sketches. They wanted a "generic" Iranian look, one that didn't suggest any particular profession, class, ethnicity, age, or belief. As it was hard to come up with a sketch that looked old and young at once, they settled for young as most of the executed individuals were between the ages of twenty and forty anyway. For the female sketch, they came up with one that is between veiled and unveiled; the lines around her face could be a headscarf or hair. They wanted the portraits to be realistic but also whimsical, as the citizenry here were imaginary and posthumous. To create a generic individual is quite an interesting undertaking for a human rights foundation whose central claim is to treat each person as a specific individual. The irony, of course, was by no means lost on the Historians; it was their conscious decision at the end, after much back and forth, that having the sketches helped more with giving life, albeit a not too specific one, to the citizens than not having them. With pensive gazes that do not land quite anywhere, the male and female sketches above represent life taken away. Life in its most generic form, life of the human rights.

All in all, culture was not a favorite concept in my field (as of this chapter). It was often understood as a nuisance on the face of the good fight for democracy and human rights. It connoted a blockage, at best a road hump. Most of the times an excuse for not getting to democracy and human rights as fast as one should to avoid further harm; at best an unnecessary complication. Since rights do not bend, one either has them
or doesn’t, culture had to follow the implementation of rights and make the necessary adjustments. “If you prick us do we not bleed? If you tickle us do we not laugh? If you poison us do we not die?,” Nafisi would recite passionately from Shakespeare’s *Merchant of Venice*, addressing the apologists who said Iranians or Muslims needed to be left alone to make their own judgments about what constituted rights or happiness *for them*. Did the apologists not see that life was a matter of physiological reflex (pricking causes bleeding, tickling causes laughter, poison causes death) and not a matter of judgment? Can you judge yourself happy when you are crying with pain? Can you judge your son alive when he is killed for a cause? Can you survive the pricks and poisons of experience?

People do, in fact, everyday. Thanks to our Savage Minds, we bask in the thrill of horror, we glorify loss, we offer the best of ourselves and what/who we love to what we decide needs to be done, we are happy and content with sacrifice, we stay with what/who eats at us, jabs at us, every minute of every day and night, we suffer and we think that is the best we can get, we desire pain, we go with utterly convincing determination about what we know deeply to be utterly absurd, we self-flagellate, we have no problem with fooling ourselves, we survive by transporting ourselves to different states of mind, we are perfectly capable of taking our own lives if we judge them absolutely worthless, no matter what all we have going for us; our arrangements for life, our comforts, our nuisances, our loves, our decisions, the associations that we make, our thought processes, the spirits and demons that we battle and nurture within ourselves, the way we dive into things sometimes and the way we sometimes spend a lifetime by the pool dreading and contemplating to jump, we are all pretty wild when you think about it. (this is hardly a
Muslim problem or an Eastern question; the West can think of its own thought processes as "rational" only in so far as it systematically excludes the question of affects, so bluntly as it has.) Culture is the closest one can get to understanding the Savage Mind, this terrifying power in all of us to assign meanings other than the imperial to phenomena, the perfectly comfortable discomfort with which we operate on multiple levels of reality at once, the concrete reality always blended with what we hope, what we fear, what we believe, what we have learnt to see, and we are always inevitably unable to see. Even for Bram Stoker’s Professor, culture was the closest he could get to understanding the Dracula phenomenon:

The Indian fakir can make himself to die and have been buried, and his grave sealed and corn sowed on it, and the corn reaped and be cut and sown and reaped and cut again, and then men come and take away the unbroken seal and that there lie the Indian fakir, not dead, but that rise up and walk amongst them as before (Stoker 1897: 179).

I bet the aforementioned Indian could also make himself not bleed when pricked, not laugh when tickled, and not die when poisoned. The question is not whether life and death, happiness and pain, right and wrong can be matters of culture as well as reflex (now if the respectable ladies of my field would excuse me, I would like to ask them to make room for culture in their grand formulation of what it means to be human). Culture creates parallel realities; I am, of course, by no means oblivious to the finality and inflexibility of death and therefore of the right to life in this very concrete reality; I myself wouldn’t want to die and wouldn’t want that for anybody, no matter what kinds of other lives one may believe in; but I wonder about how one could protect and defend and improve this admittedly very dear concrete real life (and I believe one should) without rendering those parallel realities nonexistent, nonsensical, irrelevant, decorative, blocking
our way to salvation, and in need of urgent elimination. Dracula, the Savage Mind, the

"internal rot," culture.
Hawk

Taking into consideration the awkwardness of the encounter, the dubious politics of infiltration, and the statements on culture and character that came with association with Reading Lolita in Tehran, I did my best to avoid such association. Despite my wish to remain anonymous, however, there were moments when those who knew about my presence in the book felt that they could no longer resist the urge to present me, for the sheer excitement that it could produce or the added urgency or poignancy to whatever case they were making. For one of the Historians whom I refer to from here on as Shirin, the one at the dinner party was one of those moments. Shirin was a woman with a singular unbending sense of mission, of course, and she was always making a case. Frequently, close friends and relatives and admirers, of which there were quite a few, brought to her attention that her tone was a bit too much like that of a prosecutor at a court of law and they were exhausted by her application of the “due process” to all aspects of their lives, being constantly questioned by her and asked for proof and evidence like they were criminals. Accountability, she said, that’s all I’m asking for. If you said you loved her, which came naturally as she was exceedingly lovable, she would look straight into your eyes like you were out of your mind and enumerate, in a most charming way, your deeds and words in the past twenty or forty-five or eighty or however many days (for some this would be years, but I didn’t know her that long) that in her mind contradicted your claim, leaving you seriously pondering upon, even, the morality of your emotions. You felt you needed a better-prepared file, and perhaps the

28 I do not use this word to mean a warmonger, just a person with a very strong and straight sense of unbending and singular mission.
right to an attorney, next time you had to appeal to her with a case of the above proportions. We, friends and relatives and admirers (for there were no such middle categories of simply co-workers, interns, or acquaintances; if you could not be adopted as family and loved like a friend, you had no chance of sticking around under any label) were all in a way taken and taken aback by her agility and vigilance and strived for a certain precision around her that is normally alien to emotions. Or to life outside the human rights database, whatever that was.

At forty-five, Shirin saw her life as the database for which she missed vacations and sleep and received no salary, and she often joked that she would one day end up in it as a victim. She felt abused by all the demands that the database imposed on her time, her finances, her home which hosted the entire Foundation, her relationships, her nerves, her health and her safety; and yet every bit of her was drawn to keep on going, documenting abuse, hoping that it would all pay off one day. As she said, she had a “worm” inside her that ate at her and forced her to pursue what she was doing despite its toll on her. In my mind, she was one of those extraordinary individuals who have what it takes to make a life (I’m not saying a living) out of taking care of the dead, making sure that they each had a page in the database, a picture (if available, and a sketch if not), a story, a list of rights that were denied them, and a personal touch (like how one loved soccer and the other was a chain-smoker, based on what their cellmates or relatives had said) that made them human and alive in the eyes of the reader. Obviously, she cared.

The other Historian repeatedly remarked, this Shirin, she is a born litigator, now only if she stopped litigating on me! There were, of course, movies and museums and brief love affairs and walks and talks (you could always count on talks around DC about
some conflict in one part of the world or another) in Shirin’s life outside the database, and then there were dinner parties, but as I hope I have shown, the nature of these dinner parties was such that they were hard to distinguish from the life of the database and Shirin’s unbending mission to make a case. “This is about shaming the Islamic Republic,” she said, “you guys don’t see me get that way about a Pannacotta recipe, do you?” She was a great cook, and, no, we didn’t see her “get that way” about recipes or other things she was passionate about, except that things had a way of always inevitably being about the Islamic Republic at the end. In the life of a person with a mission, there is no such thing as a casual conversation.

Whatever the case, I didn’t particularly care for the sensations of being encased, even if inside a trophy as was the case in that particular dinner party the night before my birthday, and I tried to squirm out of that burdensome position. I told the young guest that I couldn’t think of anything extraordinary to report about our lives in Iran. We were English majors, we read novels, we wore something at home and something else outside, we were unhappy with our bosses and sometimes with our siblings, and especially had problems with whoever they married, we thought our parents had no clue what we were all about, oh, and that my family was kind of quirky and we had our own home-run chemistry labs and pottery courses and summer festivals and we read manifestos at weddings, and there were plenty of people who found us odd, plenty who were better

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29 Personally, I attended dinner parties at her house with the director of the National Endowment for Democracy, the head of the Middle East and North Africa section of the National Endowment for Democracy, the Senior Program Manager of the Middle East and North Africa division at Freedom House, the staff of Voice of America Persian Service, Francis Fukuyama, the co-editor of the Journal of Democracy, Anne Applebaum of Washington Post, Jackie Lyden of National Public Radio, John Donovan of ABC Nightline, Quil Lawrence of BBC, the staff of Human Rights Watch, and others whose names or posts I have forgotten.
integrated within the society and plenty who felt much more miserable about their lives in the Islamic Republic than we ever did; that I had always wanted to get out somehow, but there were others who felt just fine where they were, I mean, not just fine, but fine with the struggle; called it life, called it their share, called it home and family and love despite all the limitations and frustrations; you know? Our guest gave me a smile of recognition in return and that "at the end, I guess it is our common humanity that matters." Perhaps this all got too sweet for Shirin’s taste, for she urged me to recount those other stories that I had told her, of aunts and uncles and relatives and family friends being executed, of cousins being born in prison and hiding and exile; not even of the eight-year Iran-Iraq war (1980-1988) and the city bombings and the closing of schools and losing of classmates and living on rationed goods, for that would divert attention from the atrocities of the Islamic Republic and sound too much like any other war anywhere else. As if Iran was like anywhere else.

I said fine, and I gave my wide-eyed audience a chance at those other stories I tell every once a while, of this well-lit room full of bloodied, bruised dead people somewhere on the second floor of some raided political organization where, some time between the ages of four and five, I remembered having clutched my mother’s hand as she went silently from one body to the next, putting holy dirt out of a pouch under their tongues and tying their big toes together. For my audience’s pleasure, I recalled a midday conversation about age with my cousin Salman over pasta, about me being five and him being six, my mother being thirty five and his being thirty seven, when my uncle came by on a bicycle to take me to my grandparents’ where my crying mother and older sister had taken refuge after my father was arrested. I told them of the Revolutionary Guards that
popped up on our walls like cats and walked on our carpets with their boots and searched my mother's books and journals with their Kalashnikovs as if they were dirty to the touch. I told them of the patrol truck that took my mother away and of my little sister screaming and running barefoot on the asphalt after her; then of my mother coming back one day when my cousin Salman and I were playing in the backyard, and of her hugging me for several minutes with no words and no tears; of a fountain of tears opening up like a wound in my heart since then that is kind of hard to explain. Then of being stopped, at age ten, by the morality committee patrol for wearing a yellow dress under my uniform on the way to a friend's birthday party, and of the black dress that my grandmother changed into every time she heard of a relative's or family friend's execution and how one day it was her own son and daughter-in-law, then a son-in-law, then another daughter-in-law, and she didn't bother change from black to anything else for years. I told them of this giant grey stuffed elephant that I had received as a present from my mother's best friend before she was executed, and the real but out-of-work pistol that I received from another one of them, and the very interesting gifts that I always received from relatives in prison, pen cases made out of shampoo bottles, little coin purses knitted from dental floss with straightened safety pins, hair clips made out of chicken bones, and such.

I was clearly on the right track to horror and nobody interrupted me. I must have stopped at some point by myself to take a bite or a sip of my wine and we never picked up that topic again. In fact, I have no recollection of how the rest of the evening went. Maybe I had too much to drink.
The Fight

I was informed only the day after, on our walk to the Dracula ballet, that I had had the audacity to go on by saying that I had left Iran not because of the horror stories I had just so elaborately recounted but because of a certain existential restlessness, some wanderlust or whatever, and that there were still plenty of women in Iran who were not willing to trade off what they had back home for my position as a forlorn foreigner. Apparently, I had sounded pissed for some reason and as though I wanted to somehow protect the Islamic Republic’s reputation by saying that the decision to leave had been due to my own personal dispositions and not our impossible living conditions. Apparently, I had also added that the point of the Lolita in Tehran book was not for American women like her (the poor guest) to feel depressed for us but to get inspired by our courageous criticism of ourselves and maybe do the same with their own damned demons. I was told that our guest had been made pretty flabbergasted and found at loss for how to react to this encounter.

So what was it with me, Shirin wanted to know on the way to the Dracula ballet – why was I so defensive, so reactionary, so snobbish even? Was I by any chance, like most other Iranians she knew, concerned about looking bad in the eyes of the foreigner and had therefore resorted to such obscure musings about why I had left? “I mean, how could you be so blasé about the whole thing, acting like, eh, it was a mixture, like everywhere else; as if there was anything like here?” After all that I had been doing with them at HRF and all the many tragic stories that we had exchanged, how come I sounded like I almost intentionally tried to hinder the fact that Iran needed to change?
- But why do you think I was supposed to make sure she understood that Iran needed to change?! Who was she, anyway?! Was this a press conference?! Was I giving policy recommendation?! No, the woman was asking me about my personal life in Iran and I was telling her about me, my personal life. I don’t understand why you get so passionate and possessive about this. I mean, how is this your business?

- How is this my business? This is exactly my business. The woman is a reporter in Wisconsin; her best friend works for the Associated Press. I’m hoping to have them cover the story of the database once we go public. Do you know how hard we have to try to convince these reporters that the question of human rights in Iran is urgent and relevant, that the personal lives of ordinary people there are such a mess and that’s what they need to pay attention to instead of the damn nuclear power and which of the baboons is currently the president? It takes just someone like you to ruin it, an educated, smart, young woman to come out here and say that eh, it wasn’t so bad, it isn’t so bad for everybody. And you get this woman smiling and saying that, yeah, at the end it is our common humanity that matters?!

- Oh, I get it. Of course you had a mission; what was I thinking? That this was just some innocent dinner party with me and your cousin? No, it’s never just some dinner party. It’s always some reporter or some funder or some policy maker or some aspiring senator and you want me to boost your case so that everyone sees how nonsensical and idiotic and brutal ordinary lives are in Iran and why America should do something about it. But you can’t stand what my personal life has been about. What is my life is your damn project. My personal life is shit to you.
-Honey, it isn’t about your personal life, don’t you get it? When these Americans ask you about life in Iran, they are not looking for your existential problems and quirky family traditions and how you stole cookies out of your grandmother’s jar. Your life, sweetheart, does not represent the problem that is Iran today; that’s not what they are looking for when they ask you these questions.

-Well, then, I don’t care what they are looking for. I happen to think that I am part of what makes Iran today, and so is my life, and my family, and so are the stories that I choose to tell. I don’t care how typical I am or my life is, or how ordinary or extraordinary, or what action my life story prompts, or whether it matches the other stories that other people with other lives have told these people. It’s their job to put all these different things together and form an opinion; if they are too lazy or dumb to do that, I mean if they get confused by the fact that people in other places do not all live the same reality, that’s not my problem. You are telling me that I can’t afford to have a personal life that is odd and interesting and confusing like everybody else’s; that I’m sentenced to have this box life, this case life that you can present. Well, I don’t like that.

-What makes you think that people in Washington want to spend all this time hearing about how odd and quirky your family is, or how interesting you are, or how confusing reality is, or whatever? What makes you think there is ever that much time on Capitol Hill? Is there not one practical bone in your body?

- But I’m not talking on Capitol Hill! See, here’s the difference between us: I don’t want to be on Capital Hill, but you are there! You are always there! You don’t say one word unless for its impact on policy; I turn pale when I hear policy. That’s true, Washington needs people like you and probably any change in the present condition of
Iran also takes people like you. That's why I shut up every time you guys have guests; because I don't want to come between your cause and these guys' ears. I just didn't think this was one of those occasions, because you said she was your cousin. Anyway, it seems that being me ruins your project; so maybe we shouldn't hang out anymore or maybe I should never speak, because obviously my life annoys you.

-Oh no, you can speak, of course you should speak, but you should make sure you contextualize your experience so people know that you are not talking about the people of Iran as a whole.

-Don't worry, I leave that to you guys to do, to talk about the people of Iran as a whole. I have no interest in the category. You think my life is irrelevant, fine. You go represent the life in Iran since you haven't been there even once since the Revolution....

- Oh I see what you are doing. You all do this; people who come out of Iran and think they know everything just because they lived there; like their experience is some kind of capital or something. Because we are in exile, you think we have no idea what is going on inside Iran. Well, for your information, we have spent the last twenty years, thirty years, while you kids were busy nursing and potty training, following the news on Iran. I hurt in my guts when I hear that people in Iran have gone to the polls and voted for these guys yet again, and you didn't even know who your president was, because you know why, because your family provided you with this enclave where you didn't need to be bothered with the president, because you had your own labs and classes and festivals and your own alternative reality. You didn't live in Iran; you lived in the Naficy family. You don't get to come here and talk about what those people over there need.
I didn’t talk about what those people over there needed. I don’t know what people over there or anywhere need. You grew up in a millionaire family, you spent every summer in the South of France; I’m sure you are much better qualified to say what people over there need. I’ve lived in Iran for twenty-four years, but my experience is irrelevant; actually my experience is not, because I did experience a lot of shit, a lot of painful stuff, but my narrative of it is somehow wrong, I just don’t sound as tragic as I should for your project to work; I recall all the wrong memories. I’m just not as miserable. Not enough of a victim.

-Aha! And what is wrong with being a victim? See, here it is, this arrogant attitude again, this false pride, that for some reason you don’t want to admit that you have been a victim. Somehow that’s beneath you. But, sweetheart, you are a victim, you kids all are, we all are victims. I admit it; yes, they slaughtered our friends, they shattered our lives and families, they confiscated and destroyed our property, they ruined our friendships; for God’s sake, you have had to see dead people at four, and what do you gain by denying that you were a victim? We cannot heal unless we acknowledge that we’ve been victims. We cannot set it right unless we admit that we’ve done wrong, and we’ve been done wrong to as well. But you are all for some reason trying to cover up for the Islamic Republic; just go ahead, love your oppressor, save your murderer’s face, very typical Iranian thing, very typical Iranian thing.

Back when I was between the ages of four and twenty-four, my father thought I was irrational and my arguments bore no logic because invariably I would start crying in the middle of any intense conversation (aka fight). He would become absolutely silent and
refuse to continue the conversation with me unless I did away with the tears. That is why
on my thirtieth birthday, in the middle of an argument about who I was supposed to be
and what my life was supposed to mean, I became preemptively silent when I felt the
tears coming. We had walked all across the bridge, descended to the riverside on the
other end, and were now walking on a bed of dead leaves, bending every once in a while
to avoid the tree branches, faces flushed with the heat of the argument and the chill of
October air. The other Historian, who had not said a word yet (not that she could get any
in edgewise even) and had remained amazingly patient, attracted our attention to the
migrant ducks on the river. They were nice, alright. Then I said: “You want me to get to
my knees now and say that I’ve been a victim? Is that going to make it all better?”

Shirin said I was being melodramatic. She then put her hand on my shoulder and
we started descending towards the end of our fight in the way that the best-intentioned
fights end, by saying things like “I didn’t mean to…” and “all I meant was…” and such.
All I had meant, for my part, was that Washington was a state of mind, a diamond-shaped
grid that organized every expression in a certain way according to what impact it could
have on what was always already being made; it was an organization that my mind
perceived as distortion, like if you were to rearrange a watercolor landscape painting
according to its colors, all the whites in this square, all the blues over there, or according
to its lines, all the straight lines in this square, all the curves over there. So I had lost my
ability or desire to express.

As we climbed from the riverside up to the streets of Georgetown, I thought
about how it all seemed like I had gone to the field only to discover my own ailment,
going there only to find my own internal rot. It did not escape me that that was what
good ethnographic fieldwork was *expected* to do since Anthropology as Cultural Critique; but this cultural encounter was not so much between me as an Iranian and Washington as an American field, between me as an Iranian student in America and Iranian-Americans, but between different modes of perception and representation of reality (what one could call culture, I suppose) that were not divided by nationality. In other words, the category of “native anthropologist” was somewhat redundant, as the Natives obviously Thought very differently from each other. Ours was an encounter between different mechanisms of making sense, one with similar terrorizing and thrilling erotics of trans (transfiguration, transition, etc., but also a state of “trans” as simply being in between two universes) as in any transformative encounter. As my “I” mixed with and tore itself apart from “I-ran” and “I-slam;” I realized there was no Republic of the I that stood in absolute distinction from the Islamic Republic of Iran that violated me and housed me, owned me and disowned me, at once. Ironically, this all had to happen on my birthday, the day you celebrate your singular existence.

I had feared throughout my fieldwork becoming too much like my interlocutors. I loved them for they treated me as one does friends and family, I whole-heartedly embraced their defense of life instead of a certain ideology, and I admired them for their vision, passion, and hard work; yet, I had nightmares of waking up one day and not being able to recognize myself (Dracula: no image in the mirror): What if I, too, found President Bush a simple honest man with an adorable sense of humor one day? What if I, too, thought of economic sanctions as furthering the cause of democracy in Iran? What if I, too, felt that regime change in Iran was more likely to come through people’s consistent non-participation than their active participation? Already, I had heard Francis
Fukuyama start a talk by “I am a Neocon and I stand for the values of the Bush Administration” and continue by saying that we should teach the Muslims how to fish instead of importing democracy, and I had emerged smiling, with a notebook full of Fukuyama’s words that I had found insightful and inspiring, with, to my horror, no trace of my usual cynicism and smirk at all the Neocon plans for fishing courses in the Middle East. What was happening to me? Was I kissed in my sleep by the hawks of Washington DC and was losing my cynical anti-establishment blood and turning into a minion of the bloodsucking god of policy? Already, an ex-classmate of mine from Iran with whom I had maintained an amorously mildly suggestive relationship (he had asked for my permission to address me by my first name in his emails) had ended a wildly heated online chat series by calling me an amour of the Imperialists for my research which they could, indeed they would, use to further imbue the Muslim world with suffering. Was I a vampire already and didn’t know it? Was I “one of them?” My fight with my interlocutor on that fall evening was a rather reassuring proof to the contrary, but then I had been accused of having become one of another equally frightening “them:” the “agents” of the Islamic Republic, the apologists who, even if they didn’t know it, saved face for the Islamic Republic.

We walked in an antique furniture store in Georgetown, one of the Historians’ favorite places to hang out and pass time. We walked around it aimlessly and pointed at this and that item. Shirin said I had good taste, which was surprising considering that I had grown up in the Islamic Republic. She rested her arm on my shoulder. Then we went to an Austrian café, as we were starved and exhausted, and they ordered me something very expensive whose name I could not even pronounce and I don’t now
remember. Then when I went to the bathroom and came back, they surprised me for my birthday with candles and a deadly cake called Death by Chocolate.

I died that evening, needless to say; and when the respectable ladies called me in mid morning the next day to see if I was planning to go to work on that day, I opened my eyes to an ended life that had just begun; my life with the Islamic Republic, this time in Washington DC.
Bibliography


