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# Performance, Identity, and Cultural Practices in the Oral Histories of Three Generations of Iranian Women

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PERFORMANCE, IDENTITY, AND CULTURAL PRACTICES IN THE ORAL  
HISTORIES OF THREE GENERATIONS OF IRANIAN WOMEN

A Dissertation

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty  
Louisiana State University and  
Agricultural and Mechanical College  
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in

The Department of Communication Studies

by

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Unconditional Love and Undying Appreciation

Mommy

Mousa

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Jahleh

Shayde

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Truman Capote

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All my colleagues and students at LSU

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## ABSTRACT

This is a dialogic ethnographic study of Jahleh, Shayde, and Ozra, three women living in Iran. Of the numerous approaches available, this study engages performance theory and oral history as its methodology. Viewed as performative acts, the oral histories in this project transposes narratives from a purely constative plane, to a plane whereby the “meaning” of narrative utterances is the very act by which they uttered. Centering on the *process* of meaning making rather than foraging for finite denotations or “Truths,” this research considers stories as constituting that which they represent. As such, in this project Jahleh, Shayde, and Ozra are situated as agents of action, shifting history from a recounting of what happened to an interpretation of what that happening meant. This work locates the women’s stories within their understandings of their life experiences, and their interpretations of how these stories related to collective membership in Iran’s social, political, and historical context.

## **CHAPTER 1 ENTERING IRAN**

### **Punctum**

Built on a valley plain, Tehran is nestled between two large mountainous regions ruthlessly trapping in pollution and debris over the city sky. Thick blankets of smog saturate every molecule of air, tainting the otherwise transparent sweat on my forehead a murky shade of gray. Public offices and schools are closed, and in an attempt to reduce emissions, strict traffic regulations are actively enforced – cars will only be allowed onto the city roads on alternating days, depending on whether the license plate begins with odd or even numbers. The government relentlessly urges us to stay indoors, using the television and radio to make daily public service announcements to the effect that “the heat and the air pollution will inevitably pose health dangers.” Most people switch stations, knowing these health advisories are merely a smoke screen acting as a deterrent from the government’s real agenda – shamelessly piping in political propaganda to every citizen’s home.

A smoldering, gooey summer morning, so hot it is hard to believe it is barely five o’clock in the morning. Ninety minutes ago, I exited an airplane, stepping out onto Islamic soil. Now, sitting in a room with the women who came to greet me at this ungodly arrival hour, drinking tea, I listen to the endless philharmonic concert of automobile horns and bus brakes greeting the rising sun, and I breathe in my surroundings.

Covering the floor of this room are colorful, intricately designed Persian rugs. More than just floor coverings, these textiles are investments. An old rug seller once schooled me on “reading” a Persian rug for its value. In this particular room, I count four. Three display predominantly bright shades of red and blue; woven of thick wool into floral patterns, they reveal themselves as being of average quality. The fourth, a thin rug, favors multiple shades of sage,



lime, and forest green accented with tans. Woven of silk yarn into a delicate paisley design, this one stands out as expensive.

On top these handcrafted splendors stands a haphazard assortment of living room furniture that has been gathered and collected through the years. Set in the shape of a square, the chairs and a couch mark the home's communal area. Standing in the middle of the set, a round glass-top coffee table generously covered with an array of donated traditional Iranian sweets displays itself. While I am not hungry, they catch my eye. Appraising them, I think how the various cookies and cream filled puffs stand as edible representations of personal taste. Carefully placed, the sweets sit next to an antique silver bowl; blackened by years of exposure and a lack of polishing, it overflows with high-priced sugar cubes. Compressed tightly, these sugar cubes are meant to rest in your cheek, slowly melting, sweetening your mouth through an entire cup of tea.

Shifting attention, I listen to the women talking, jumping from dyadic chatter to small group conversations and back again. Voices overlap, forming sounds that reverberate off the walls, surrounding me in a symphony of tunes and tones. Blended with the rich aroma of freshly brewed tea and the colors bouncing off the room's many textiles, their words intoxicate; so much so, I all but forget that the topic consists of anything but a pleasurable matter. Much of this early morning's chatter revolves around the unstoppable smog calamitously, heavily canvassing in Tehran.

"On days when the air is really bad," one woman explains, "those poor people. Who have bad allergies and asthma. Wearing face masks."

In fact, it is not that uncommon to see people with surgical masks walking down the streets of Tehran, Jahleh chimes in. The inescapable car fumes water her eyes and fade her skin. Another woman seconds Jahleh's sentiment, disclosing how her husband's white shirts are always a depressingly dingy tint when he comes home.

While the women continue to talk on this problem, my mind drifts back to a *BBC World News* web article I read. If my memory serves me correctly, the reporter wrote that an estimated 5,000 people a year were dying in Tehran because of the air pollution (“Tehran Schools” 1). As I was trying to recall the news article, an inexplicable sensation introduced itself. Suddenly, the world began shrinking: Pollution, ozone, asthma, modernization. Sadly, many people in cities around the globe are similarly frustrated by these same problems.

“This situation is awful,” I groaned, partly as commentary, partly as complaint.

“There were only two families on this street sixty years ago,” the eldest of the women, Ozra, recalled. “Our family and the Mohammadi family. The men used to fight over whose family name would become the name of the dirt road. The Mohammadis were pushy. They won.”

Some sixty years ago, this area of Tehran consisted of a handful of dwellings whose inhabitants were kin. Men went to work, usually the bazaar or farm, mothers talked and carried out daily chores such as hanging hand-washed clothes to dry, and children frolicked in fields filled with trees bearing large, decadent fruits, Ozra went on to recall; this distant memory fueled more conversation.

Unlike Ozra, Shayde, a woman of thirty-something, grew up with the Islamic Revolution. For her, the streets of Tehran carried a different set of images and recollections. “We lived on a main road. A road where the tanks rolled and fighting took place. Boom, boom, boom all night. People got shot and would come knocking at the door, scratching for help, bleeding. If you opened the door, they would kill you, too. Good people would pull them in. My mother was a nurse. She pulled people into our courtyard. Helped them. Sent them back out,” Shayde says to me.

“It is a mad jungle now,” Jahleh contributes, in a faint drifting voice.

“There was a time when Tehran was *The Paris* of the Eastern world,” another woman adds.

I found their perspectives intriguing. I do not know their Tehran. I do not know a Tehran where angry movements of tanks and generals crack the spirits and sidewalks of the city. Nor do I know a Garden of Eden Tehran.

My Tehran is a long airplane ride away. Time in Tehran is constituted by extended days of jetlag. My Tehran is families graciously hosting me, cooking my favorite indigenous delicacies as welcome gifts, warmly smiling through the security glass at the airport, even at five in the morning. It is a city full of affordable eyeglass frame shops and street vendors peddling skewered roasted chickens and hot roasted beets. For me, Tehran is an overflow of buildings, uncountable masses of them stretching as far as the eyes can see, compressed up against one another, concrete and steel stretching out past the horizon’s edge. It is a confusing city, one difficult for my Western-trained eyes and ears to comprehend.

Iran, a land where small children frolic?

Iran, a place of blossoming fruit trees and grazing fertile land?

Iran, a space of hand-to-hand combat?

Iran, home?

As a communication scholar and performance practitioner, listening to the women share narratives about Tehran and their history with the city created deep impressions. The seemingly simple, leisurely process of sitting with one another, drinking tea on a hot morning in Iran proved extraordinarily revelatory. The sounds of their spoken words melodically run through my mind, reciting personalized songs of a unique, embodied life with and within a cityscape, a culture, and an existence.

On that day, I was drawn in, enveloped with a growing sense of wonderment. I began wondering what life was like in Iran when the population was so small there was no need for big government interventions. Wondering what goes through your heart when looking out a window, only to discover your childhood park, an area of play and youthful imagination, has slowly over time become paved with concrete. Wondering what sensations fall over a soul witnessing the metal vines of urban development slowly strangle and eventually swallow surrounding trees. Wondering what it is like to exit the peacefulness of home and enter into an urban jungle sprawl. I found myself wondering what it was like growing up in Iran, and now given its turbulent state on the geopolitical sphere, I wondered what it was like being in Iran. Loving Iran.

I remember reading somewhere a suggestion that besides government-placed geographic demarcations, at each land-separating divide there are three metaphorical crossings. I remember them being called the borders of wondertale, of transformation within, and of the imagination. These three points are tensions and crossings, negotiated spaces where people through their storytelling are active agents shaping their thoughts, notions, and cultural identities. When the time came in my academic career to make decisions about my research, to answer the questions: What will I discover? How will I find it? I knew I was called to continue listening to the voices of Jahleh, Shayde, and Ozra. I knew I was to continue listening to the narratives they spoke. I knew I was to return to Iran and hear more.

### **Story Time Significance**

Once I had decided what I wanted to research, I had several other decisions to make. First, I needed to decide how to gather and collect the women's narratives. Second, I needed to choose a method to interpret the stories they shared. Third came the task of deciding how I would evaluate and theorize the narratives. Of the numerous narrative based research methods available,

I opted to work with dialogic performance ethnography and oral histories. I chose this method of discovery for several reasons.

### **Politics of Writing Culture**

H. L. Goodall asks, “Who has the right to speak for a culture?” (12). Numerous postcolonial, feminist, and anthropological scholars have argued that ethnographic projects are deeply lodged within the cultural and political agendas of Western academia, resulting in discoveries lacking neutrality (Roth 569; Lewis 581). Falling prey to their own perceptions, researchers end up either “speaking for” subjects, in the sense of political representation, or “speaking about” them, in the sense of turning them into objects of study, rather than treating them as subjects in their own right.

In this usurpation, academic texts resurrect an uncrossable divide of *us* and *them* (Tomaselli 857). Encounters with and representations of “subjects” become deeply entrenched with codes and frames supportive of dichotomies, which in turn create the illusion that somehow *we* the researchers, are *saving* them, the subjects, from their silencing (Kapoor 628). Foucault once suggested omnipresent impersonal discourses so thoroughly pervade society that no room is left for anything that might be regarded as agency (History 93). Together these arguments basically claim that we as researchers *appropriate* our participants by deploying skewed linguistic representations, and we as researchers have no way of preventing this from happening.

In addition to the issues of political academic agendas and researcher voice holding positions of authority, I believe perceptions and preconceived notions influence research configurations. These tainted perceptions are often impossible to avoid. Researchers study their field prior to entering it; this of course means that they get their first impressions from someone else’s impressions. This may be especially problematic when the work is based on research

conducted in countries such as Iran that are labeled “marginalized” and “Third World” even before the researcher hits the field.

Recently Western media coverage on Iran has extensively covered Iran, providing information and images about the country that might not otherwise be shared with the general Western world. Sadly, images remain fragmented, often reinforcing rather than dispels misconceptions. As the late George Gerbner argued, “The television has become a key member of the family, the one who tells most of the stories most of the time. [It] is a cultural arm of the established order serving to maintain, stabilize, and reinforce, rather than alter or threaten conventional beliefs” (3). Gerbner’s work shows us that exposure to media content cultivates attitudes and stories more consistent with the media version of reality than with reality itself.

As a communication scholar, I took the possibility of skewed, erroneously guided research and misrepresentation seriously, especially because I was working with Iranian women, who are commonly represented as silent, veiled, and oppressed by that country’s patriarchal and theocratic culture and political system. My first reason for choosing oral history as a research method was that it might help combat such pitfalls.

In my opinion, oral histories help build bridges across cultural borders. I believe oral histories challenge the discourses encouraging us to think about narratives in isolation from a lived world, and in isolation from the bodies of the narrators creating them. As communicative events, oral histories behave as dialogical encounters. Seeking to understand their lives as women from their own points of view, I felt that via oral history, the women and I could cooperatively and coactively locate their stories within their understandings of their life experiences, and their interpretations of how those stories related to collective membership in Iran’s social, political, and historical context.

## **Ethnographic Method and Action**

Ethnographic research contains the potential to present findings in a manner Homi Bhabha describes as “cultural hybridity that entertains difference without assumed or imposed hierarchy” (4). While research holds the potential for misrepresentation and silencing by dominant discourses, ethnographic approaches present the possibility of meeting and opening a true dialogue (Sharp 304).

Dwight Conquergood suggests there are five “types” of ethnographers:

The custodian collects examples of performance, interested only in acquisition or exploitation. The skeptic, like many traditional ethnographers, stands aloof from and superior to the performance being studied. The enthusiast goes to the opposite extreme, seeking an easy identity in quick generalizations. The curator takes a tourist’s stance, seeking exoticism or spectacle. Against all four of these, Conquergood champions the fifth stance, a “dialogical” performance, which aims to “bring together different voices, world views, value systems, and beliefs so that they can have a conversation with one another.” The result sought is an open-ended performance, resisting conclusions and seeking to keep interrogation open (Carlson 31).

Conquergood goes on to state, “dialogical performance is a way of having intimate conversations with other people and other cultures. Instead of speaking about them, one speaks to and with them” (“Performing” 10). Within the framework, all the questions I asked the women to answer and all the prompts I offered them would behave as starting points for conversation, encouraging question, debate, and challenge.

I believe working from within this methodological framework empowers the women I spoke with by establishing them as co-creators and collaborators in this project. In my opinion, this characteristic holds significance for this project. In her work, Parvin Paidar argued Iranian women have been stripped of authoritative voice and diversity. Marked as oppressed beings, they are totalized and essentialized (Women ch. 1). The skewed Iranian voice does more than just harm the women of that culture, it implicates research methods, exposing two disruptive and

destructive factors: first, the general exclusion of the female voice; second, the complications of authority caught in listening and translating what has been told.

Walter Fisher proposed that the universal mode of communication among human beings is storytelling. Defining narratives as “words or deeds--that have sequence and meaning for those who live, create, or interpret them” (2) he wrote “Narratives are a way in which humans account for and recount their choices and actions; they are a manner of relating the ‘truth’ about human conditions” (6). Fisher argues that narratives are not just imposed upon social life; rather they are constitutive of that which they represent. As such narratives are an instrument by which to develop understandings our own actions as well as the acts of others; in other words, the stories people tell about themselves and their lives both embody and interpret those lives. Stories describe the world as it is lived and understood by the storyteller. These characteristics render narrative a highly productive field of research.

The crucial juncture between narrative as paradigm and a dialogical performance space lies in the belief oral history narratives are of a *constructive* nature. Centering concern on the *process* of meaning making rather than foraging for finite denotations or “Truths,” oral history research considers stories as constituting that which they represent, generating meaning for the lived experience of the storyteller (Fisher 3). As such unlike objective forms of data gathering, narrative research compassionately situates the women of this project as agents of action.

As agents of action, Jahleh, Shayde, and Ozra, the three women on whom I focus in this study, shift *history* from a recounting of *what happened* to an interpretation of what that *happening meant*. Emergent, contingent, and situated, their narratives wove a discourse revealing constant revisions, authorings, and reauthorings, and their storytelling danced freely, adjusting to and meeting the demands of changing circumstances and contexts. Generative and constructive,



they enjoyed the power to shift “from audience to storyteller and storyteller to audience, to shift consciousness to experience and experience to consciousness” (Langellier and Peterson 3).

As a newlywed, Ozra, now the grandmother, romantically settled into a small piece of Tehran’s lush land. Claiming uncharted space, reconstructing it into a place, her life, her home, and her family grew in tandem, in relation with the city. Her words allude to a non-existent city, the narrative of when Tehran was nothing more than trees and fields. In her narrative, Ozra speaks both to a time of a distant past and a time created. It was not until the arrival of living human bodies, of hers, her husband’s, and others like them looking to make a start, that the “city of Tehran” materialized. Their last names gave identity to the streets. Their life movements, decisions where to go, when to stop, what to build, now form today’s city grid.

For Shayde, however, Tehran is a seized, overthrown city, devoid of the romance and promise of Ozra’s Tehran. In her story, the city represents a place where governments, political figures, and armies used guns on one another, hashing out differences. Unlike Ozra’s Tehran, Shayde’s Tehran overflows with terror, danger. Hauntingly chaotic, the pavement is where life is lost, uncultivated; the city is a site of dematerialization. Once a memorialized site, a marker of a family affair, “Mohammadi Street” now collapses into a site of bodily pain, struggle, and emotional moral dilemmas. In her story, a mother does not step outside to call at playing children, but instead opens the front door, dodging hot metal bullets, to save a wounded man’s life.

Jahleh twists Tehran into an organic spirit. Tehran simultaneously grows and deteriorates. It parallels a jungle, an entangled yet beautifully enchanting place where the forces of nature make it generally unwelcoming to its awe-struck human visitors. More than that, Tehran is a *mad* jungle, an emotive land, a responsive land, an angry or perhaps even crazy land. In Jahleh’s brief words, Tehran has the quality of being alive, posing the characteristics of flesh and sensation. For

her, the story of Tehran is not about *that which was*, but rather that which *has become* a mad ecosystem housing uncountable life forms.

### **Creation and Materiality**

The identities of Jahleh, Shayde, and Ozra did not spring to life prior to actions; rather they are created and recreated in storytelling, their narratives becoming, as Clifford Geertz puts it, “structures of signification” (9). And as structures of signification, their narratives derive authority directly from their experiences with Tehran. Within this feature, the women’s narratives repeatedly revealed a relationship connecting their materiality and the city of Tehran. In turn, the stories of their lives become inseparable from their individual agencies, pulling from what Diane Taylor refers to as *the repertoire* or “ephemeral embodied practice/knowledge” ([Archive](#) 19).

In viewing oral histories as directly connected to the ephemeral, yet material being, raw experience transforms into lived understandings. Storytelling, as the name suggests, is inseparable from the body. On the most basic level, it relies on the voice. On a more abstract, immaterial level, storytelling engages memories and recollections. Through storytelling Jahleh, Shayde, and Ozra dispel a bifurcation of a mind and body, favoring instead the body as a site of knowledge making and recording history.

I believe this heightened emphasis on embodiment and a living, knowing materiality holds significance when conducting research with women about women. Anne McClintock has argued that while women, acting as the maternal figures, often function as the principal channels for conveying culture and tradition, they are nonetheless denied any direct relation to historical agency, generally located outside history and historical accounts (“No” 90). These conventional modes of historical discourse are what Julia Kristeva problematizes as a male-centered apparatus, separating representation from a presumed nature, and in turn a sensate desire ([Women’s](#) 20). Due to the active engagement with the living body, enacted life, and ephemeral existence,

narratives have the power to overthrow traditional “man-made” representations of meaning and understanding.

Subverting contractors, masons, and urban developers, the women’s stories spring Tehran into action. Their bodies do not simply construct houses on a street; they *fight* for the street to carry their name. Their bodies do not live on vegetated land; they *play* in green fields that birth sweet, nectarous fruits. Their bodies do not just feel heat, pollution, and ozone, they *survive* them or *die* from them. Their bodies do more than just tell a tale, they *perform* an understanding.

### **Performance and Performative**

While the word *performance* appears several times in the sections above, I have yet to define it. What does it mean to perform an oral history and why is that important? Within ethnographic research methodologies, the working definition of performance varies greatly. For Dell Hymes performance is “the interpretable, the reportable, the repeatable,” and the “do-able” in social action (82-84). On the other hand, Marvin Carlson proposes that performance is the “recognition that our lives are structured according to repeated and socially sanctioned modes of behavior” (4). Erving Goffman defines a performance as “all the activity of a given participant on a given occasion which serves to influence in any way any of the other participants” (26). Richard Schechner designates performance as, “restored behavior” or “twice-behaved behavior” (36-37) while Joseph Roach claims performances are behaviors reinvented a second time, modes of action always subject to revision (3). And for Victor Turner performance is the proper finale of experience (From 13). All these definitions of *performance* contain an agreed upon connotation: performances are coherence making instruments. As such, when interpreted as performance sites, the discourse of oral histories becomes contingent and situated and the sharing of such narratives a means by which Jahleh, Shayde, and Ozra maintain and understand their lives. Rather than be

spoken for, then, the women authored and re-authored their lives, using narrative performances to project images of themselves and their world.

In this sense, the performance of oral history narrative becomes not only an act of reconstruction, but one of creation as well. As Della Pollock writes:

...by creating the impression of reality before words that words reflect back to us, they [storyteller] create that reality itself: they project the terms by which birth is and should be understood...they resist what John Fiske calls the “tyranny of indicative” or *what* is, writing from a referential real into *what might be*, or what I would call from a performance-centered perspective, an impossible real. (Telling 64)

Alongside *performance*, it important to employ the term *performative* as well. J. L. Austin explained the performative as a semiotic gesture that is *being* as well as a *doing* (91). While I feel performance firmly addressed the creative aspect of oral histories quite well, I found the term performative complementary and helpful in interpreting Jahleh, Shayde, and Ozra’s oral histories as constructive.

Feminist and colonial scholars have long noted that a researcher position of privilege has led to skewed and problematic (re)presentations. The process of discovering is often tainted with what Sidonie Smith calls the “myth of bourgeois individualism” – that is to say the belief that an outside researcher can step inside a field and easily and objectively uncover knowledge (Who’s 393).

Viewed as performative acts, oral histories transpose narratives from a purely constative plane, to a plane whereby the “meaning” of their narrative utterances is the very act by which they are uttered (Barthes “Introduction” 285). Jahleh, Shayde, and Ozra do more than just speak about themselves; their bodies return to themselves, touching, feeling, feeling them touching, and recapturing their corporeal existence within the narrated understanding of experience (Langellier and Peterson 10).

By using the term *performative*, I view the women as moving from being simply agents of action to highly complex storytellers free to access that agency in accordance with situation, as well as intentionally to conceptualize, choose, and conceive of acts fitting an individual understanding. I felt it would be important to operationalize each woman as a narrator encompassing reflexive knowledge, contemplating not only her “own actions (reflective), but also able to turn inward to contemplate *how* she contemplated her actions (reflexive)” (Madison “Dialogic” 320). In such light, the women’s words not only construct reality, but affect reality as well (Sedgwick 5).

In such a framework, Jahleh, Shayde, and Ozra’s agency and action are not ontologically prior to context, but arise from the social, political, and cultural dynamics of place, space, and time, as each woman understands them to be. The generative nature of this mobility and fluidity transgresses research agenda and researcher voice.

### **Crossing the Border**

As much as my proposed project generated excitement and intrigue in the United States it generated concern and worry in Iran. The country’s post-revolutionary government insists on privacy and security, and demands dedication and loyalty from its citizenry. Going in I knew I had to be sensitive as to what I asked of the women, avoiding the temptation to probe on political matters allowing them to share what information they felt comfortable sharing.

The regime pays close attention to what information leaves the country. Often there are heavy security checks at Tehran’s airport. At Mehrabad International Airport passengers go through two sets of metal detectors and receive a full-body pat-down. In addition, many are called out for detailed suitcase inspections. Moreover, while it is frowned upon for individuals to record, the government has everybody recorded. Keeping painstaking records of passengers’ comings and goings, everyone is also required to pass through three document verification points: one to

enter the general waiting area, one at check in, and another to enter into the terminal section of the airport. Those deemed inappropriate transmitters of information face intense punishments. Stories of captured and imprisoned Iranian journalists leaving Iran are not uncommon. Perhaps even more intimidating, Iranian officials arrest exiled citizens returning to Iran for a family visit for having spoken critically about Iran to the Western press.

When leaving Iran, I took special care to hide tapes, files, and transcripts. On one journey, I was stopped by luggage inspectors, searched, and carefully questioned. Luckily, the small audiotapes passed undetected, and my student identification card proved helpful in explaining the purpose of a laptop. From that point on, though in an effort to avoid inadvertently documenting possibly sensitive political or social information, I opted for hieroglyphs and sketches to recall interviews rather than relying on recordings and transcripts.

Respecting the politics of Iran, and the women's positions within this climate I contacted Iran months prior to arrival. Explaining oral history and ethnographic work, I assured the women I spoke with that this project was about their life history, as they understood it, and not a social or political critique of Iran. They could share as little or as much as they liked on Iranian politics. I explained to them that this project was about them and their narratives.

The women I contacted are all from upper-middle class, respected families. Although not wealthy like oil dealers or rug exporters, the women have lived comfortably most their lives. All the women's spouses are highly educated men holding prominent positions in the community or are successful, well-to-do businessmen. On an average, they describe themselves as well-traveled, and well-educated. These characteristics (education and financial stability) were passed down to their children, the majority of whom are now medical practitioners in European countries.

Of the women I contacted, five women agreed to participate. Of the five women agreeing to share their oral histories, Jahleh, Shayde, and Ozra formulate the voices of this project; unfortunately, Akram and Vahedeh's narrative accounts were not included.

I made the difficult decision to leave Akram's narratives out because she passed away from breast cancer during the course of this project. At the time I began organizing this work I felt ethically inclined to excuse her. What if she wanted to tell me something that made a difference, or to change something she had already said I repeatedly asked myself? While at the time of her death she had shared more stories than any of the other woman, I felt Akram and I failed to finish our conversation. I hope that in the future I am able to share my experience with Akram. Alongside Akram, I made the decision to not to write a chapter on her daughter Vahedeh. Many of Vahedeh's narratives revolved around her mother Akram, and revisiting her transcripts and tapes proved a highly emotional experience.

During the first few weeks in the field, a typical day's work comprised taking notes focused on the retelling of conditions and experiences, placing particular salience on how the Iranian women lived on a day-to-day basis. For the most part, these hours were spent doing exactly what one would expect an ethnographer to do – observing.

While these hours contributed greatly to this project, reporting fieldwork experience was just one aspect of the research. Journaling was another. Instead of merely using the journal to record information and answers, I used my fieldnotes to raise questions. To retain this space of ambiguity, I often found myself writing in fragmented sentences and poems:

So much culture  
Overwhelming  
Parts of the world influencing others  
Sense of instability  
So interesting, so frightening  
Today looked too beautiful  
But it has not been as open as I thought originally

Private, so much inside  
Watching people experience emotions  
Do they see what they feel?  
Am I the only one looking?  
Same space, different places.  
They are having a ball with me. (27 Dec. 2004)

After growing more intimate with the field and the women, observing and recording impressions of everyday activities shifted to asking the women to tell the stories of their lives. To preserve these spoken narratives, I recorded most of them using a small hand-held recorder, at least until the aforementioned border incident led me to shift tactics.

During my first journey Ozra lent me a large but modest bedroom and was kind enough to allow me to transform the space. To this day she still refers to it as “Oli’s area.” Set back in her apartment the room is both private and quiet with a balcony overlooking a modest garden, rooftops of neighboring one-story homes and in the distance the red clay snow-capped mountains.

Using a small corner of the bedroom, I turned an old, forgotten Persian rug and two large throw pillows into a makeshift interviewing area. My computer sat on a desk constructed by flipping upside-down a hospital-green plastic pail and placing it next to an old cardboard box. Resting my books on the box, I generally sat Indian-style on the ground in front of the pail, and when my legs got tired – and they often did – I stretched them out and wrapped them around the pail. The end of a single-sized bed acted as a backrest, an old pillow wrapped in a faded pink towel as a seat. It was an uncomfortable arrangement. The towel was itchy, the pail wobbly, and ever other day a spider would find its way either in or out of the cardboard box. Despite all the inconveniences, this somehow worked for me.

Running a very tight ship, I adhered to an extremely well-organized plan and held “office hours” between 2 and 5 o’clock in the afternoon. I chose this particular time because it was reserved for the customary afternoon nap, and as such, I felt it would be a good time for the



women to escape or get away, since most businesses were closed and husbands were sleeping. This decision of course overlooked the fact that the women themselves may want to rest or catch a dream. Luckily, the women were so gracious and kind they never highlighted my folly.

Interviews were scheduled like doctor's appointments. A small log was kept listing each woman's name and the time I had requested Jahleh, Shayde, and Ozra come to my "office." Day in and day out, like clockwork machinery, the women came, subjecting themselves to my inquisition.

Perhaps it goes without saying that on this first trip to Iran I successfully managed to make this project all about me. Listening to tapes and reading transcriptions it dawned on me that perhaps my hyper-organized agenda of gathering and recording oral histories in a series of assigned question/answer sessions was a bit rigid, maybe even closed-ended. After all, performing narratives and oral histories was supposed to be about shared intersubjectivity, the "negotiation between a doing (telling and listening to stories) and a thing done (the story of the experience) (Langellier and Peterson 3), not about gathering data. Ultimately, as the "textual" author of this research, my number one priority was resisting the urge to write an ethnographic memoir centering on the *Self* or a standard monograph centering on the *Other*. Instead, I hoped to focus on the process of the ethnographic dialogue, acknowledging my own interactions and subjective interpretations on understanding, enabling "readers to identify the consciousness which selected and shaped experiences within the text" (Tedlock 78).

Fortunately, after reviewing the first round of transcriptions I learned a lesson. In self-assessment, I wrote in my journal:

My participants are strangers again. My questions seem so stock, so rehearsed. Each person getting the same question. Here I am sending them down my research assembly line. I have to go back and start each interview again. I have to begin to spend them with the individual not with the informant/subject/participant. After all, working from ethnographic practices and performance based theory this

project is (at a minimum) suppose to be about interacting bodies moving in space (21 July 2005).

I knew I needed to arrive at the place Arthur Frank speaks of, a space in which storytelling is about making sense of the communal experience (“Illness” 136). In an effort to counteract my errors I began accepting invitations to stay at different women’s homes.

Several wonderful transformations took place after the decision. Overnight trips immersed me deeper into the field. Partaking in small portions of the day, or witnessing a tidbit here and a tidbit there, extended out to larger, more meaningful interactions. Leaving the safety and distance of observation behind, I participated in their day-to-day activities. I lived with them and among them, inhabiting and sharing their homes. The static characteristic often found in methodologies separating and distancing subject from researcher gave way to collaborative relationships and co-active understanding. I began speaking with them, they began speaking with me. With traditional hierarchical constructs favoring researcher over subject dissolving, dialogue and collaboration became the foundation for understanding and knowledge retrieval and creation (Lawless 5). As such, the project began turning into the *making of history* and the *doing of history* rather than simply the recording and transcribing of memories.

At Ozra’s I was able to hide in the back room, staying in control all the way. However, in the women’s homes I was sharing space, their space. A new shower, a new bed, new smells and sights, new sensations all reminding me discovery is “evocative” (Tyler 45), inseparable from the body (Taylor Archive 58). In many ways, I gained more access into the lives of the women when I shared their homes than during interviews. I found in sharing space the formal question and answer sessions finally became transforming into conversations and dialogues.

The focus of our conversations ranged as widely as the lives of Jahleh, Shayde, and Ozra themselves. Some narratives centered on family and personal life experiences, others took from

childhood to the present, while still others candidly concentrated on each woman's understandings of female positionality in the social, political, and global realms of Iran today. Representing three generations, the narratives and anecdotes shared provided a large body of primary source material, forming a rich site of study. We spoke on intimate matters such as courtships, marriages, and childrearing. We also looked at larger social and political topics such as national holidays, relations between men and women, gender roles, and religion.

I then translated and transcribed the women's oral histories into print. The transcripts were done using literal and paraphrased translations. Thirdly, I drew on various interpretative lenses described in the previous section to understand and discuss what I understand to be complex narrative sites. As you move through the chapters, you will find the results of these choices articulated in greater depth and detail.

### **Gatherings**

Drifting back to the moments enticing me into doing this research, I returned to that small gathering in which Jahleh, Shayde, and Ozra spoke about Tehran. Performing small anecdotes from their lives in Tehran, the women simultaneously intersected and converged their understandings of these experiences with one another in dialogue. Sharing embodied tales of asthma, green fields coated with blooming fruit trees and oppressive forces, they undermined any presumed neutrality in storytelling discourses, transforming my vision of Tehran, Iran.

In Iran, private gatherings take two basic forms. The first is a small-scale affair, a dinner party, or luncheon; the second is a larger, more formalized ceremonial gathering such as a wedding, engagement, or graduation. These gatherings are frequent and very much a routine activity in the lives of the women. When I asked about the importance of the gatherings, the women painted a seemingly benign picture. "What else is there to do?" "There is nothing left," "We'd be bored without them," "Oh, gatherings are totally normal," "They are just something we

do” and “We’ve got to eat” were typical reactions that made it seem as if such things were hardly worth mentioning, rather than being worthy sites for sustained scholarly interest. However, after being in Iran for some time I came to guess that this downplaying attitude might be linked to notions of safety and self-preservation.

Over the last two decades, Iran’s political situation has limited, if not barred, most non-religious events promoting congregation or corporate action. The theocratic government’s rationale for this restrictive attitude is woven from a variety of discourses. First, the government of Iran does not separate church and state. Following the Iranian revolution of 1979 and the resulting inauguration of the Islamic Republic, a new government came to power. Running on a system of theocracy, *mullahs* (a status in Islam comparable to that of a high priest or top clergy figure) seized all major leadership seats. Building Iran’s political system on Islamic faith, all political decisions derive their authority from the words of the Quran.

Based on interpretations of the Quran’s text, *mullahs* (who are always male) perceive most forms of social congregation as anti-Islamic. This notion extends to both public (dates, movies, and picnic) and private spaces, the exception being government sanctioned events or mosque services. Limitations on social gatherings extend from an ideology deeming acts such as dancing, drinking, dating, and the sexualizing of bodies as *haram*, a term similar to sin but more appropriately translated as “unclean.” In Iran, there exist no official bars, nightclubs, or casino-type establishments. As a whole “night-life” has been deleted. In addition, spaces such as parks, athletic facilities, cinemas, and concerts are manned by armed police. By prohibiting and restricting people from gathering, congregating, or collecting, the Iranian government’s tactic is to divide and conquer, as it were.

As such, gatherings became “hidden,” sometimes fully underground events. The intensity of keeping gatherings cloaked spans a wide spectrum, being particularly salient in the early years

of the Revolution where men stood guard and women hid party dresses with long black cloaks and wore dirty shoes. As Ozra recalled, “people, families, neighbors sat in basements, around a single candle. We put newspaper and foil on all our windows. This was to black out the city. To avoid raids or bombs being dropped on our heads. . . . When we started going out, we would cover our clothes, wearing old shoes, being careful what taxi cabs we took, so people would not get suspicious we were going to a party and call the police.” To this day, random military-style raids are periodically conducted, mainly on large private events such as weddings or underground dance parties where the youth may be drinking and dancing. During a second trip to Iran, word leaked out of a large underground rave in Tehran, leading to a random raid.

“We were at the party and then suddenly the police stormed in!” Shayde exclaimed.

“Didn’t you have a lookout?” I asked, having heard that large gatherings often employ doormen or lookouts as one of several security measures; other measures include women hiding party clothes under heavy veils to divert attention, making sure home-made alcohol bottles are never in view, and avoiding taking public taxis to events, as the driver may be an informant.

“Having a doorman only works if you can afford to pay off the police. They come and if we have money, if we give them a lot of money they go away.”

“So what happened?”

“The police stormed in and everyone ran. Those who got caught, got punished. The girls got fifteen lashes of the whip and the boys twenty-five. . . . That is why I hardly go to these things. If you get caught they torture you.”

Tortuous punishments, albeit rare, do occur.

“I am told they took all the men they thought were making alcohol and put them in deep hole in the jail. Forty men on top of one another in a space the size of two regular bathrooms and then threw in rats and stale bread!” one woman recalled. Another woman said that once men and

women were lynched and then hung from tall cranes; their bodies left to hover and eventually decay over the streets as witness to the consequences of *haram*. During my own visits, I was warned against wearing make-up, “If they catch you, they will stick your face in a bag of cockroaches while they whip you!” Punishments can be locally and at times even nationally broadcast. Even when not covered by the media, the occurrence spreads quickly through word-of-mouth.

The government legitimizes this practice of policing through pathos driven arguments that draw heavily on a paternalistic “it is for your own good” rhetoric. If *haramous* behavior is discovered, punishments like lynching are handed down, ensuring that the perpetrator is freed from temptation and returned to a healthy relationship with *Allah*. Hence, the government constructs such punishments as celebrations. Most of those I spoke with in Iran did not subscribe to that view. It was a difficult subject to discuss, and many times the women either diverted my questions or answered with such phrases as “beyond words,” “best not to speak of,” or “the topic makes me ill to the core.”

Under a theocratic rule enforcing separation through military means, gatherings, large and small, remain a cornerstone in the preservation of traditional (pre-revolution) social and cultural identities. Alongside the subversion of forced governmental ideology, gatherings are an important part of interpersonal relationships and community maintenance. Being a collective culture, life in Iran follows a strict code of reciprocity. “Give and take” scenarios build and maintain bonds. Gatherings are a wonderful venue for performing this social ritual. As Victor Turner would suggest, these events serve as “social-glue” (Schism 291), a major method by which “structures of community” are maintained (Arnsberg and Kimball 238); gatherings are central to social and cultural preservation over time and space (Neville 151).

“They invited us over to dinner, and so we will have them over for dinner,” is the ideology churning the gathering cycle. Considered within the realm of the domestic sphere, the women serve as the gatekeepers for these events. Unwritten but socially accepted norms dictate that each host family provide hospitality equal to that of the previous event. It was only in the formal events that families were playfully, and sometimes not so playfully, competitive with one another; “one-upping” a previous dinner party was considered an insult, while failing to match it was looked upon as shameful and could result in being slowly removed from the rotation.

Although the guest list remains relatively stable, comprised of a circle of family members, close friends and the occasional new person, the hostess of each gathering must extend direct invitations in the form of a series of phone calls that begins a week before and continues on to the morning of the gathering.

“We would love to have you over for dinner next Friday night.”

“Please do try to make it in a few days. We couldn’t imagine this without you.”

“We are looking forward to your presence this evening.”

## **Chapters**

On one of my trips to Iran, Jahleh held a sizable dinner party. From all the gatherings I had the fortune of attending, this one I enjoyed the most. A lovely evening filled with great food and endless laughter, the night remains with me: the food, the conversation, the energy. So lovely an evening seemed to represent metonymically the essence of Iranian, and so I decided to utilize this dinner party as the starting point for my own representation of my experiences there and my conversations with Jahleh, Shayde, and Ozra.

While the organizational frame of this project is modeled on Jahleh’s actual dinner party, it is important to note that I attended many similar dinner parties. The party as I describe it in the following chapters is thus a virtual one, combining episodes, information, and details from a

number of such parties I attended while in the field. From Jahleh's dinner party I move to Shayde's luncheon to Ozra's living room and then back to Jahleh's again. I watch the women co-exist, collectively sharing their lives, individually living day-to-day. Then I let the women's voices guide me, twisting and turning me through the labyrinth of their lives. To their voices, I mix my own embodied experiences and impressions.

In order to grant each woman the attention she deserved I chose to avoid thematically driven chapters, instead devoting individualized chapters to Jahleh, Shayde, and Ozra in turn. In each case I diligently tried to avoid rewriting their lives and stories into neat, tidy biographical narratives preferring instead to evoke the more leisurely, but densely layered ongoing and unfolding process by which I got to know them. Although the result is ultimately a textualized representation of the women's stories, I worked to retain the oral, conversational quality of identifying "the forms and codes to which meanings are possible" (Barthes "Myth" 151). Rather than simply use the performed narratives as data, I attempted to embody the form of a performed narrative, whereby each voice might refract "like a light through a prism," creating what James M. Wilce Jr. calls a "kaleidophonic" effect (230). In the writing/reporting process, I made little effort to hide the gaps and ruptures I faced in the field. Exiting the linear plane of objective historical recount, I share a subjective, often fleeting view of Iran. As such, the writing takes a genealogical format, jumping from narrative to narrative, exposing the spaces of unanswered questions.

The chapters' sounds and sights might be compared to Deleuze and Guattari's image of the rhizome, unfixed like the roots of a tree, tuberous –multiplicities, adventitious – and connected in nonlinear assemblages to other things (qtd. in Jackson 694). The choice for this framework extended from its rhetorical and aesthetic qualities. Writing in "rhizomatic parallelism" maintains the women's position as agents of action negotiating and creating meaning



within the space of this research project (Deleuze and Guattari qtd. in Jackson 694). On a pragmatic level, in lieu of an attempt to provide voice for the women, I believe the rhizomatic framework retains the dialogical characteristics of storytelling, in that the work forms a space of “dynamic” multiplicity and imaginable landscapes (Herman and Childs 178). The idea of a singularity gives way, opening a space in which a polyphony of voices arise in the storytelling experiences as well as in individual narrative events. Within this framework, the emergent, shifting, often discontinuous, double focused nature of the narrating voice is celebrated. Aesthetically, I hope this re/presentational decision offers readers the sensation of the ethnographic experiences, of the pleasures, suspense, and surprises embedded in performative and narrative research.

Chapter Two, “Jahleh,” is devoted to learning more about this dynamic woman. The oldest of five children, Jahleh is a tall, stout woman with short brown hair that is always pulled back in a small ponytail using a hair tie. Most days Jahleh speedily dashes around town, taking care of all the family errands, her sharp brown eyes taking in all of her surroundings. She is very well known and respected around town, continuously complimented on her public relation skills.

I characterize Jahleh as a concerned, often exaggerated woman, one some in the West may refer to as “a drama queen.” She worries about people’s perceptions of her, and works very hard at performing the proper role at the proper time. At the same time, she is a very hospitable woman, who in most circumstances is extremely sensitive to how those around her are feeling. Slightly over-hospitable Jahleh is the woman at the party who sees you have enjoyed one of her fruits, and thus sends you home with a pound of the peaches in a bag and then has another pound delivered to you the next day.

Having been the principal of a French-English school prior to the revolution, Jahleh both respects and obeys rules. While regulations on female covering have become less severe over the

past decade, moving from the floor-length dark colored draping revealing only the round of the face to the short, tight colorful jackets that fall almost a foot above the knee paired with bright scarves, Jahleh still opts to wear dark long coats and a heavy head covering that reveals no hair. When asked why, she responds, “Because those are the rules, and while I don’t like them, rules are meant to be followed.” I found out later from my other interviewees that early in the Revolution Jahleh had been detained and questioned by the militant guerillas because her bangs poked out from under her head covering. After being pulled into an interrogation van, soldiers took her footwear as punishment, forcing her to walk the many miles home barefoot, a taboo and embarrassing act in Iranian culture.

Jahleh has lived a self-proclaimed hard life. Her first husband and love of her life, Iraj, was the Shah Reza Pahlavi’s pilot. Iraj, in his mid-twenties, died when his plane was gunned down in an assassination attempt on the Shah. The only part of him that returned for burial was his torso and a recording of his voice asking for help.

Iraj’s murder left Jahleh a widow at the age of twenty-one, with two toddler-aged sons and a host of social issues to confront. Iranian culture of that time did not support a woman living alone or remarrying and bringing the children of another man into another man’s home. While she did remarry, Jahleh’s sons went to live with Ozra, where they remained until college. A few years after remarrying, Jahleh tore up all the pictures she had of her marriage with Iraj.

Jahleh is a highly intelligent woman with a witty passion for practical jokes. At the age of sixty-four she will still switch the salt with the sugar, or stop mid-walk so the poor unsuspecting chap behind her runs headlong into her back. She is also a well-traveled woman. One of only two girls in her family, she was her father’s favorite and often accompanied him on trips to Europe and the United States. However, these travels are not ones she talks about readily, and so little is

known about them. Her general response to my questions about them was a silence, a refusal to speak.

Shayde is the focus of Chapter Three. She is the newest member of the family, having married Jahleh's son, Seyamak, some two years prior to the beginning of my research project. Closest to my age, her interviews granted me an intimacy unlike the others. A modern, educated woman, she trusted me with the aspects of her life that would be considered taboo in Iran, even though they would be acceptable conversation pieces in the United States. She spoke candidly about sex, poor family relationships, her divorce, and spirituality. While she asked that most of our conversations be "off the record," desiring to keep her private life private, she sincerely wanted me to know her, to put aside my research and be her friend.

Raised in Tehran, Shayde is referred to in Iran as a "child raised with the Revolution." A mere child of seven when the Ayatollah Khomeini took power, most of her memories and life intertwine with the rough, disruptive Iran government of today. In fact, more than the other women, Shayde had an "insider's" view of the war and subsequent social and cultural transformation.

Her father is a retired army sergeant who fought during the Iran-Iraq war and Revolution. Although Shayde did not directly come out and say it, in fact avoiding the question altogether, her mentioning that her father "had been in the army when he married mother," told me he had begun his military career in the Shah Pahlavi's Royal Military. This meant of course that when the Ayatollah Khomeini took over in Iran, he transformed the Shah's military into the Iranian Revolutionary Guard, placing Shayde's father in the position of fighting for a cause in which he did not believe. In memory of his favorite base in the Shah's Royal Military, Shayde's father named his eldest daughter *Shereen* or Sweetness.

Shayde's husband is a loving but dominating man. Referring to himself as the *sawheb*, a word translating roughly to “keeper” or “owner,” he has rules as to what she can wear, where she can go, and what she can do. Surprisingly, however, she does not object to Seyamak's system or view herself as oppressed. In fact, she enjoys submitting to her husband's desires and is very forthcoming that he also submits to hers. Seyamak and Shayde spend lots of time working through their relationship, each desiring to make the other one happy.

Moving to Tabriz to live with Seyamak, Shayde left her friends and family behind in Tehran. While admittedly there are bouts of loneliness, she keeps herself busy taking cooking classes, a sewing course, and now tending to her newborn son. She also loves to entertain guests, inviting me over for dinner and lunch on a daily basis, providing me with levels of hospitality and kindness that I cannot repay.

Chapter Four belongs to Ozra. She is the oldest of the three women and was the first person to take me in. I am not sure whether it was her age or her generosity towards me, but in my eyes, Ozra seemed a much softer, gentler woman than she or her children felt her to be. In their eyes, a mother was a mother. No matter their age, recollections of Ozra revolved around discipline, pedagogy, and role modeling. She is described as her family's matriarch, a woman unanimously portrayed as “the glue and power that holds us together – our rock.”

“Mom has always been in charge. There is no joking around with her. She is an iron-fist in the house,” Jahleh reminisces. After she speaks the sentence, she stops and continues thinking. A moment later the corners of her lips turn upward, forming a small smile. “Ozra was not the type of mother you talked back to. If one of us children made a mistake, she would line us all up and whack us on top of our hands. The neighbor, who had eight sons, used to call Ozra over to discipline her children!” she concludes with a roar of nostalgic laughter.

The marked role as matriarch stems from what appears to be two interconnected attributes: the role of elders in Iranian society, and the role of women in the domestic sphere. On a primary level, the role of elder in Iran retains honored and revered sentiment. To respect elders is a point of pride among the Iranian people. Virtually every time I asked the women to describe their relationships with their parents, grandparent, or in-laws they mentioned that “in Iran, unlike other places, we respect and keep our elders with us. . . . We do not send them away when they reach a point of needing care-giving.” I found this tradition comforting not only for the elders but also for the younger generations, who had within the Iranian social and cultural system the promise that in old age they would always have a safe place to retire.

Ozra lives with her middle son, Reza. In the late eighties when Ozra and her husband were no longer able to care for their own needs, Reza moved back to Iran from the United States. This act I found fascinating. Given the structure of gender roles, in particular, women’s close-knit link to domesticity and care giving, I expected one of Ozra’s daughters would attend to her during her homebound years. In my experiences, though, sons outnumbered daughters as caregivers. While a son, playing the role of caregiver, may seem ironic, it is in fact consistent with Iranian social structure. Ozra stated the reason matter-of-factly: “He is the family provider. It is his job to take care of the family.”

Born before birth certificates were issued, Ozra has no idea of her actual birth date, estimating her age to be somewhere around eighty-two. She was born in Istanbul, Turkey, and sometime soon after her birth her father relocated the family to Tabriz, Iran, a medium-sized city bordering Turkey. Based on its geographic placement, the city’s inhabitants speak both Turkish and Farsi, and when asked will identify themselves as Turks before Iranian.

While her body has begun showing the passage of time, her hair short and grayed, her hands shaky, and a slow shuffle to her walk, Ozra is in excellent health for her age. I found

myself continuously impressed with the speed and accuracy with which she summed up a situation or threw an ironic punch line into the conversation mix.

Considered a *hajji*, a title borne by those who have completed the Islamic pilgrimage to Mecca, Ozra is a strong willed woman. Going to Mecca was a physically grueling five-day process, which was made even more difficult when on the first day of pilgrimage Ozra was crushed in the crowds of worshipers, which left her with three fractured ribs. Despite the injury Ozra, then in her late seventies, continued to walk for miles and lived in tent compounds wearing only a white robe and headscarf.

Besides being called *hajji*, Ozra is referred to as “commander in chief” by her sons and daughters. She is a mother, grandmother, and great-grandmother. While I never witnessed her being a domineering woman, when she speaks she is listened to without question and serves as consultant on almost all family issues. I am told that her command reigned even when her husband was still alive. As it was told to me, he would come home from work, give Ozra all the money he had earned and stand back, allowing her to make all household and childrearing decisions.

Similar to Smadar Lavie’s observations of the women of Mzenia of Bedousin, this position Ozra holds as the official matriarch poses an ideational paradox. How could a woman hold such a position in such a male dominated society? (Military 188). Yet this inconsistency I found to be congruent with Ozra’s lived reality. Ozra and her husband married at a very young age; she was fourteen and he was nineteen. During the first twelve years of the marriage Ahgoon, her husband, was in college; he finished with his bachelor’s degree, got his master’s, and went on to receive his doctorate. Each of these degrees was completed in a different country, causing an absence that left Ozra home to deal with the everyday facets of life. As one of her narratives may explain, “He had no idea what was in the basement and only twice did he step foot in the kitchen.

Ahgoon was in Paris, Pennsylvania, or New York, and when he was home he got up, went to work, visited with friends, came home, and read the newspaper; he didn't bother with any of the details or decisions. Those things were entirely my job." In a couple of sentences, Ozra had exposed many of my own Western misconceptions of the Middle East and such Iranian people, an idea I will explore in more depth in the chapters that follow.

Ozra was one of the easier women to interview, eager to talk and share her life story. I was honored by such an offering as Ozra is a rather quiet woman. Part of the rationale for this silence, she explains, is that it is in keeping with the role expectation of women in her culture, while some of it is due to a wisdom she inherited from her father and that she passed on to me: "You have two eyes, two ears, two nostrils, but only one mouth. Listen more than you speak," she told me, quoting her father's words.

## **CHAPTER 2**

### **JAHLEH: THE TOAST OF THE TOWN**

#### **Home Sweet Home**

Three nights prior to having the party that laid the foundational framework of this project Jahleh invited me to come and stay with her and her husband at their apartment. This was not the first overnight invitation I had received from Jahleh. This was, however, the first time I accepted her offer. The first research trip I took to Iran lasted three months, the entirety of which I spent at Jahleh's mother's house.

Jahleh's was a particularly exciting, and surprising invitation. Early in the fieldwork experience, I encountered obstacles in interviewing Jahleh. For each question, Jahleh appeared to me to have a pre-assigned answer; it was as if she had heard it all before, as if I were not going to ask her something she had not anticipated, asked and answered for herself. I felt as if she knew precisely, at every turn, what she was going to tell me and what she was not going to tell me. Responses were short, often fragmented and blended with long pauses and silent gaps. A sharp woman, she memorized many of the questions and subsequent to our interviews she took the gathered information to "warn the other women about their turn." Certainly, as some of the other women claimed, Jahleh's strongest trait may be being in control.

Though she wears thick bi-focal glasses and is of but average height, standing just less than 5'6", Jahleh continuously holds a statuesque position. No matter where she is or what she is doing her body bears intention. Ignoring the two bulging disks, noticeably swollen on the back of her neck, she pushes her full bosom forward, presses her square shoulders back. Postured as intimidating as any military sergeant, it is easy to forget Jahleh is a plump woman, who at 155 pounds physically displays her love of food. She is not obese or fat; had she not suffered a minor stroke two years earlier her weight would be a nominal, unremarkable fact.



Even at rest, Jahleh exudes energy. Her dark brown eyes dance swiftly around every scene, making it nearly impossible to slide anything past her observant nature; this is a trait she inherited from her mother, who at age eighty-two can still split hairs using just the precision and sharpness of her memory as a tool. A mere sixteen years younger than her mother Ozra, Jahleh is the oldest of seven siblings, four of whom are still alive today.

Although not a member of one of Tabriz's political families (her father always advised her to avoid politics and religion) Jahleh is never the less an influential, widely recognized, and respected member of the community. Well connected to most of the town's women and a confidant to many, she knows the daily goings-on and what-nots of most of Tabriz's social cliques and circles. Buzzing from circle to circle, Jahleh holds the important role one of Tabriz's social butterflies, referring to herself as one who is "able to spread the word."

In a culture as collective as Tabriz, social butterflies are highly respected. The fact is, virtually all able bodied Tabrizian women work diligently outside of the home, continuously inside the home, or for the most part conduct a combination of both activities. Jahleh is no exception; her errand list runs as long as any other. As such, her taking of the time and energy to meet with other women, for lunch or for tea, does not pass unappreciated.

In many ways, Jahleh's "spreading the word" constitutes an act of social and community maintenance. On a pragmatic level "spreading the word" collapses barriers by sharing knowledge with the larger group, securing everyone is "in the know."

While her sister calls her a *pour-harf* (full of talk), a term paralleling "big mouth," Jahleh fiercely denies the negative accusation. With an intense commitment to detail and organization, she feels she does a rather brilliant job of not cluttering up a story. A verbatim speaker, she chooses to interject her opinion by manipulating her tones and inflections rather than muddying up text with more text. In her opinion, retaining the original structure of the text maintains its

authority. In using vocal tones and structures over text to indicate her own positionality, Jahleh retains a sense of ambiguity and allusiveness. The relationship between text and the function remains opaque, and the words of the repeated message stand in isolation from Jahleh. As such, Jahleh places her listeners in charge of interpreting and unraveling what is said, avoiding damage to her own reputation.

If a cliché could explain a phenomenon, than Tabriz is Jahleh's town. I have even heard her referred to as the "queen of Tabriz." Prior to the Revolution, she was quite the trailblazer. Beginning as one of the first women to study anthropology (when the university opened up the major to its female student body she "took it right away"), she eventually became the head superintendent of Tabriz's prestigious French-Farsi Academy. Alongside her own success she is the famous "doctor's wife," a title not even the war could strip away.

Jahleh and her husband's apartment sits on higher ground than most of Tabriz, resting part way up the sloping edge of a red clay mountain. This geographic placement is a conventional enactment of Iran's architectural rhetoric, one that uses height to communicate visually inhabitants as members of the wealthy or powerful social class.

Large mountain ranges litter west-central Iran's terrain. With peak elevations exceeding 18,000 feet many of the mountains remain snow-capped year-round. Similar to other mountain regions of the world, parts of the Alborz Mountains are uninhabitable, and unfortunately, those sections that are inhabitable are not well suited for dense populations. Therefore, cities like Tehran and Tabriz develop in the flat-plains or valleys between mountain ranges. As these cities begin to populate, or in the case of Tehran and Tabriz overpopulate, two things happen: (1) they run out of inhabitable flat lands, and (2) the lower level valleys become highly polluted, leaving the "good, clean air" to the higher elevations. Since the demand for the high land is higher than

the supply, the price tag goes up, affording only the wealthy an opportunity to purchase properties.

Interestingly, Jahleh detests her location, which is in more of a suburb of Tabriz than in the city proper. An intensely social being, Jahleh marks loneliness as one of her more overpowering fears. Approaching solitude with apprehension, she will always choose the intoxicating safety of a large crowd over silence. She is “a city girl.”

As she explains, there is calmness in numberless bodies sharing a designated space. Moreover, brimful crowds conjure memories of her childhood in Tehran, and her corporeal growth in its dense urban landscape. When she speaks of Tehran, she does so in a discourse of sensuality. She approaches the city aware of agency, embodiment, practices, and performance, describing the city as more than just a place containing buildings housing docile bodies, but a geographical intensity of social relations and activities (Amin 8).

For Jahleh, the people of an urban city join through the network of space. She shares her viscerally charged memories of “unknown voices floating in through every open window as we went about our daily activities.” She could hear the fast-paced feet of recognizable strangers shuffling through the marked concrete pathways, together creating a murmur of beats. “You could always hear passersby. The similar voices let you know who was coming,” she says. “I like to be close. People can hear each other, tell what was going on. Sometimes my mother would scream so loud at us kids the neighbor would come over to ask if she was okay. You’re never lonely. People are a part of your life. Tehran was the Paris of the Middle East.”

The crowded cityscape guarantees Jahleh a citizenry “in the network of social relations inscribed in the environment” (de Certeau 9). As Jahleh’s words argue, cities offer a dual citizenship, granting membership not only into the microorganism of the surrounding neighborhood sidewalk, but also transporting her into the meta-network of “world city” (Geddes

46-59), a place that is part of the world's most important relationships: business, capital, people, and information (Hall World 7).

As it stands, historically and politically Tehran and Tabriz have served and continue to serve as world cities. Tehran, sister city to Los Angeles, California and Havana, Cuba, has been home to the great rulers of empires. The city remains the leading producer of world famous Persian carpets, houses in its Museum of Contemporary Art the works of Van Gogh, Picasso, and Warhol, and remains the capital city of the world's third largest oil producing nation ("Tehran" sec. 12-14). Tabriz, a city believed to date back to before the Sassanain era (224-651 A.D.), is still the main passageway for trade through the Black Sea, and it was one of Marco Polo's historic stopping places when he traveled the Silk Road ("Tabriz" sec. 1.4). It is also the starting ground of the Iranian Constitutional Revolution.

"The apartment is too far from everything. The clothing stores, the bazaars, my son's dental practice, the public offices. I don't like to be home alone," Jahleh goes on to explain.

So true is her last statement that she hired a woman more to keep her company than to help with household duties. This decision continues to be a point of conflict between her and her husband who argues that the help is both unnecessary and an added expense. "But she is poor, her children depend on our income," Jahleh argues back.

"I like to be out and doing things. Being around people," she repeated. "I don't like being lonely. Having every errand turn into a big hassle."

"But there is a small strip comprised of expensive boutiques, jewelry stores, and perfumeries at the end of you street?" I asked.

"Oh yes, the Champs Eylsees of Tabriz. It is nice but still small."

"Do you like your neighbors?"

“No they are the worst part. The woman on the third floor always talking about her husband’s new car. People being able to see into one another’s windows. I mean if we get home late, someone notices.”

“So why do you live here?” I inquired.

Her first answer was one I anticipated: “It is a safe place for my mother and I want to be close to her.”

Her second response was a surprise.

“This is the best place in Tabriz to live. Solid. Holds up well when bombs come,” Jahleh says.

As the words exit her mouth her neck stiffens, and her head recoils back. I watch her pull her chin lower, closer down to her chest. I recognize these moves. She balls up her body every time she refers back to the Iran-Iraq war. She resembles a fetus, safely in a mother’s womb, and also a body curled up stabbed in the stomach with pain.

“We also have a gate. That way people cannot just come in. We can all watch out for one another. There is warning. There is the ability to see an on-coming raid,” she adds in reference to the Revolution, a time during which raids were common occurrences.

Her home is on the fourth floor of a five-story building, and a seeming contradiction to her need for social connection. One of ten symmetrical buildings, it is in a community that resembles what I would describe as an army barrack or penitentiary dormitory. Warehoused on a football field’s worth of land, barracked on all sides by a tall white metal wall, the only break in this encasement is a single, guarded entryway. Made of pure concrete the building has three rows of parallel, perfectly square windows; the apartments have no porches or verandas. The only access to outside space is a center courtyard; a space created by a series of 15’ x 20’ grass islands placed in a fragmented formation in the center of a wide driveway that runs between the

buildings. These grassy areas, duplicates of islands separating two lanes of traffic, each hold a bench and a handful of scraggly bushes and water-starved trees. While generally uncommon, in fine weather months one might find a member or two of the community utilizing the courtyard. Sitting on the benches, they watch their neighbors and visitors coming and going or the local children playing. Occasionally, one of Iran's many stray cats will stroll in and claim this space as home.

The complex has an inescapable carceral sensation. Individuals in Jahleh's apartment complex stand in isolation from one another watching comings and goings; concurrently they separate and protect their group from "those people." While the term "those people" refers specifically to the Revolution's anarchic and lawless army, the wired walls and metal gate of the community render all the bodies that cannot afford to get in, who are not socially connected enough to get in, "those people" as well. Ironically, the same gates that prevent *every body* from coming in, track *every body* going out. Simultaneously, all the outsiders ("those people") observe the privileged high in the horizon.

I can understand why Jahleh dislikes her location. The place is a panopticon of sorts. Ubiquitous eyes: us watching each other, together them watching, me watching you; a space where political disciplined bodies subject/re-subject themselves to a hybrid form of self-social disciplining. Each body at once enacts the role of subject and object, individual and collective, protected and paranoid.

The fact is Jahleh's apartment building is rich with metaphors of power, relations, and class-consciousness, and Jahleh's neighborhood is rich with stratifications and separations, each with deep sociopolitical communicative value. At the same time it is a dialogical space where inhabitants and interactants "struggle to bring together different voices, world views, value

systems and beliefs so that they can have a conversation with one another” (Conquergood “Performance” 9-10).

Through her narrative on the apartment and community, Jahleh performed her ability to be reflective, conscious of herself, and reflexive, self-conscious of that consciousness. Her existences as at once object and subject, as an agent that both embodies disciplines and enacts them. In her story she speaks of recognizing the (those) panoptic(s) (the eyes and the power) insinuate themselves into the place of life, resisting even the most sophisticated attempts of bypass. She perverts the notion of dichotomies; on the simplest level that of good and bad. A space (this apartment) can be good and bad at the same time; a space and my body in it can be protective and provisional. I can/am be both, and/or, she claims. An “eternal” becoming (Bakhtin Rabelais 252), not an accommodation to totalizing forces as some strands of thought may critique.

When Jahleh explained her distaste for solitude, preferring to be with and among people, I felt certain she would love her apartment community. Tightly packed together in a gated community, neighbors able to see other neighbors, hear neighbors, almost reach out touching other neighbors seemed a perfect location for a woman loving crowds. However, as Jahleh revealed, to be in close proximity also means to be other. Being near and among people means they can and do watch you (just as you watch them). And as Jahleh demonstrated, to be a part of one community (the gated ones) means you are not a part of another community (those outside the gate). Watchful eyes fall over you simultaneously in protection and judgment. You can and do run the risk of being evaluated, both sized up and safe in the crowd. In her words, Jahleh narrated an understanding of being at once self, neighbor, other, and cultural member; each performance drawing into, at once, the other through and in the space of her narratives.

## Running Errands

The first day at Jahleh's began early, a bit too early for my taste in fact. Given that the dinner party was only three days away, Jahleh needed to go to the grocery, butcher, florist, and confectioner (just to name a few), as well as to make final preparations.

I awoke to Jahleh's earnestly shaking my arm repeating, "Get up girl! Hurry! Get up girl! Hurry! We have a list of errands to run. Any hope of getting done means an early start! Who sleeps past 7am? Who?"

"Hurry, hurry, hurry!" Jahleh presses. Her in-control, sergeant-like characteristics were in full swing, a habit left over from her pre-revolutionary occupation as a principal. Besides a hundred students, the high school boasted a myriad of employees: teachers, counselors, and groundskeepers to name just a few, each living under Jahleh's direction. She was a woman used to giving orders, and unabashedly frowned as I lazily rolled out of bed, knowing I was in trouble.

Part of our rush, she began to explain, was that business hours in Iran run on a unique system. Relatively speaking government offices are open from 7:30 am to 2:00 pm, at which time they close giving employees a break for lunch and time to go home for their aforementioned traditional afternoon nap. Some re-open, while others like travel agencies do not. From what I gathered, other businesses like the trading bazaar are only open during the evening hours, 5 till 9 or 10. Still other businesses (e.g., grocery, vegetable, pastry stores) open in the morning, close in the afternoon, and re-open in the early evening. Then there are such places as Doctor's offices, which never close but rather hold "sporadic hours"—Monday 8 am-4 pm or Tuesday 3 pm-10 pm for example.

I must admit, for the life of me, regardless of all my desperate efforts I was unable to grasp a full understanding of Iran's time system. Any effort to explain further would become what Sidonie Smith calls the "myth of bourgeois individualism" (Who's 393); that is to say the



belief that I, an outside researcher, can step inside a field and easily and objectively uncover Iranian business practices and their relationship with time (Sykes 14). I was so confused, frankly, that at one point I just gave up, coming to embrace the ambiguity, and enjoy my new, and slightly confusing relationship with time.

“Let’s GO!” Jahleh said, “Taxi is waiting!”

To accomplish her goals efficiently Jahleh chartered a cab from her favorite taxi *ahjanc* (agency). Like many people I met in Iran Jahleh has never learned to drive. “I never had to learn. In Tehran and Tabriz there are cabs everywhere,” Jahleh tells me in her customarily matter-of-fact tone. “Besides it is not like the United States where three people have five cars. Most families are happy to have just one car. We always only had one car. Our first one was an Opel, then we had a BMW, then a Gilaman, and then my brother Enayat brought back a Peugeot from Germany.”

Despite owning a car, Jahleh’s family did not drive to work or to school, reserving the automobile for special occasions. Some of Jahleh’s fondest childhood memories are leisurely drives. Every weekend Jahleh and her siblings would beg their father for a ride.

“*Ahgoon, Ahgoon!* Take us on a ride!”

No one called him father. “*Ahgoon*” was a nickname Jahleh had given him when she first learned to talk. In Iran it is not abnormal to hear children refer to their fathers as “mister” or “sir.” *Ahgah* is the term for “sir.” Jahleh being only one year of age had difficulty pronouncing *Ahgah*, saying *Ahgoon* instead. Being a cute and well-loved child, no one wanted to hurt Jahleh’s feelings. “So we all just praised her for trying and called him *Ahgoon* too,” Jahleh’s mother explained. From then on, Hyatola Sadreddini became *Ahgoon* to all his friends and family.

“*Ahgoon* would get us so excited,” Jahleh recalls, with laughter in her voice and a smile on her face. “He would always say, ‘Yes, but you have to get cleaned up! Hurry! Hurry!’”

“I see where you get it from,” I chuckled.

“Yes,” Jahleh responds, “ha ha.”

Continuing on with her narrative she explained the children would frantically run upstairs, earnestly yanking pants, shirts, socks from drawers. The two girls would ribbon their hair into braids, as the boys drew perfect parts with their combs. Unable to control their excitement the pleasure-seeking siblings clamored into the car, all the while bouncing up and down in the backseat. When they were all in, Ahgoon would dramatically rev up the engine and in gay spirit pull out of their short driveway.

“‘Here we go!’ father would say to us,” Jahleh continued. “We would all stare out the window so excited. And Ahgoon would drive to the end of the street, turn around, and come back!” Jahleh chuckles. “‘You guys are not ready yet. We will go next week. You will be more quiet and cleaner! A car is special!’ he would say.”

Ahgoon was not a mean man or a trickster. Rather he was notorious for being the type of guy who put in one hundred percent at work, but at home would transform into a “lazy man.” “It was as if laziness took over the minute he hit the front door,” Jahleh recalls. “He would ring the bell. Why reach down into his pocket for keys? And I would rush to greet him. We fell for this every weekend!” she added without transition, concluding the story.

Even today, automobiles in Iran remain primarily luxury or utility items. The economic system in the country is not designed to support financing. All items (homes included) are paid for in full. Banks do offer loans, but at 25% interest, most people try hard to avoid that option and save for long periods of time before large purchases such a car. Once one is bought, parking is about as easy as it is in Manhattan, and gasoline is both expensive and difficult to find; cities like Tabriz have only a handful of stations, each boasting extremely long lines that can last an hour or more to wait through.

In conjunction with these economic tensions, cities like Tehran and Tabriz are densely populated metropolises with intricate systems of narrow, winding, sparsely marked streets. Traffic lights and clearly divided lanes remain reserved for very busy intersections; some have five four-lane streets converging in a single roundabout. Even at these busy intersections, signs and stops often go unnoticed. Horns blow with no rest. Accidents happen all over, every day. These congested bumper-to-bumper, anarchy conditions of the streets turn the taxi system into a very popular and desirable mode of transportation. The system is straightforward and very efficient, and one I found quite intriguing.

Cabs are run out of a centralized agency similar to our system here in the United States. Drivers are insured, bonded, centrally dispatched, and the automobiles standardized: an off-white color clearly marked with the English letters T-A-X-I. Some cabs have an orange “taxi” light on top, others have “taxi” stamped in bold black letters across their sides.

Within the system, cabs can be rented by the leg, hour, or day. The price of service is bargained prior to travel, and while not set the agreed upon amounts fall within a socially acceptable range. A fair wage for a single run is about 50 cents (US), an hour costs around \$2 (US), and a day trip somewhere around \$10 (US).

Once a relationship is established between driver and client rates will decrease slightly, but tips are expected to increase. It is common for frequent clients of a cab company to request a specific driver. Jahleh, a sharp and wise woman, puts in her request based on the task at hand. “*Ahgah* Ali’s cab is very clean and we are in our party clothes,” or “*Ahgah* Mosen is patient and I have to go to the busy bizarre,” or “*Ahgah* Reza is fast and I need to go to an area difficult to reach.”

Besides calling for a cab, one can also catch a ride at one of many designated stops; clearly marked stops are all over the cityscape. While called cabs are usually used for out-bound

journeys (home to location), cabs caught at designated spots are inbound rides and shared. After completing an outbound trip, a driver heading back to dispatch will commonly pick four or five more people up along the way. These in-bound rides are often extremely crowded. I have seen three men share the front seat, one hanging half his body out the open passenger side window. Jahleh, and other “high class” women like herself prefer not to share a taxi. Often these women will pay an extra fare; in return, taxi drivers will bypass waiting passengers.

In the highly populated metropolis of Tehran, stops give way to large outdoor taxi terminals. The city is so large (70 miles across) that cabs work distinct regions. From these terminal areas shared-ride cabs are driven out to a radius of predetermined stops. At these official points, you transfer cabs, catching a local driver who will take you to your exact destination.

The scene at these terminals is quite chaotic, nearly impossible for a tourist to maneuver. In theory people should be forming lines according to region; in practice most people conglomerate into clumps, pushing and stuffing their way haphazardly into a cab. Amongst the masses there are hustlers, who for a dollar tip will pull you ahead of the “line,” and regulators who say, “You, you, you and you into that cab.”

If you are not near a station or a phone, you don’t have to worry. A third way to hail a cab is the old-fashioned drive-by, flag-down method. There is a twist to this approach. In Iran rather than raise your hand to indicate your desire for a ride, you shout your destination at an oncoming cab. If a cabbie is heading your direction, he’ll let you climb aboard.

“Hurry! Hurry!” I hear as I finish brushing my teeth. “The cab is waiting!” As I emerge from the bathroom Jahleh reaches over, roughly pulling my scarf down my forehead. “Pull your scarf tighter around your face!” she orders.

## The Veil

Early in the Revolution, somewhere in the mid-seventies, military militia caught Jahleh, dragging her into a van. Their reason for doing so was that the front portion of her hair was exposed. According to Islamic Scripture, a woman's hair should be completely covered, invisible to everyone around her. Since the new government was theocratic, Jahleh's peeping locks were not only an act of spiritual disobedience, but a legal defiance as well. After interrogating her for half an hour on proper gender roles, they stripped off her shoes, forcing her to return home "at a dead run" barefoot through the crowded, polluted, concrete streets of Tehran.

Along with her hair, by Islamic law a woman in Iran must cover her body fully, with the exception of their hands, feet, and face. This legislative mandate derives from the translation of two of the Quran's scriptures:

O Prophet, tell your wives and daughters and the believing women to draw their outer garments around them (when they go out or are among men). That is better in order that they may be known (to be Muslims) and not annoyed. (Quran: The Final Testament Al-Ahzab 33.59)

And say to the believing women that they should lower their gaze and guard their modesty; and that they should not display their beauty and ornaments except what must ordinarily appear thereof; that they should draw their veils over their bosoms and not display their beauty except to their husbands. (Quran: The Final Testament Al-Nur 24.30-31)

While an in-depth discussion on the larger issue of veiling would deviate from the overall framework of this chapter, I feel it must be acknowledged. In order to understand Jahleh's position and this project's interpretive framework on the matter, it is worthwhile to summarize what I would consider to be the key narratives that emerge from the academic literature around the contemporary debate over the veil.

While "veiling" currently holds a salient space in Western imagery of Iranian or Islamic women, acting as a signifier for the Middle East's political, cultural, and social makeup, the fact

is that it means different things to different women. I find it safe to say the Western world disagrees with the current Islamic order mandating women veil themselves; the West's general argument being any attempt to formulate a judicial framework forcing the disciplinary writings of the Quran (or any other religious text for that matter) onto the individual agent is oppressive (Foucault, Discipline 222-224). Overall, the issue of the veil is approached by Western theories and rhetoric in the form of a series of dichotomies. The veiled woman is a body contingent on (1) public space/religion, (2) freedom/control, and (3) universalism/individualism.

On the other hand, women like Leila Ahmed argue veiling is not a "unique problem," but merely another example of phallogocentric positions oppressing women. While she agrees that veiling is a form of domination, she argues that de veiling would merely be "calling for the transformation of Muslim society along the lines of the Western model and the substitution of Islamic-style male dominance for that of Western-style dominance" (Women 48). On some levels "to veil or not to veil" is simply asking women to pick the lesser of two evils, and ultimately an elaborate masquerade of power (Scott 3).

While I validate Leila Ahmed's perspectives, as I find it problematizes viewing individuals as a lump sum, I must say her strand of thought fails to describe accurately the ideology of the women I interviewed, in particular Jahleh. Clearly, I agree that the forceful imposition of veiling upon women by the Law in Iran is problematic. However, through her narratives, Jahleh demonstrates that wearing the veil is also a counter-rhetorical strategy used by women like herself to fracture the Self, playing with and in individuated spaces of identity and ideological understandings. As a visible object, the veil is not a negative signifier for all women in Iran. Its meaning is fluid, and as such it can rupture the exact political forces it appears to serve.

For Jahleh the veil represents a hybridity of potential for agency and act, one that cannot be narrated in a Cartesian manner pressing “the tremulous private body” (Barker Tremulous 63) “aside to the margins of consciousness” (Smith “Self” 11), essentializing and rationalizing embodiment as a condition of knowledge. As Faegheh Shirazi argues on the “semantic versatility of the veil”: it simultaneously is used in the same historic moment as regressive and progressive (175). Ajay Chaudhary adds that the veil is at once a symbol of modesty, subjectivity, sexuality, values, and freedom from male gaze (352).

In our conversations about her pregnancy, I learned that Jahleh had been embarrassed by her growing body and had strategically used her *chador*, a long, black one-piece veil. While some women embrace the attentive eyes of admirers, supporters, and the curious, Jahleh desired a privacy that an unveiled body, unchadored stomach denies.

When Jahleh told me that her pregnancy was a time of embarrassment for her, especially from her father, I asked her why that was.

**Jahleh:** It was embarrassing. My belly was getting bigger everyday.

**Oli:** Why did you feel that way – embarrassed?

**Jahleh:** Okay, because it shows you have been with a man.

**Oli:** Oh! It is a mark of how you got pregnant.

**Jahleh:** Yeah, because of that. After a person gets pregnant they become *embarrassed*. One continuously wears loose clothes. You pull your chador tightly over yourself.

**Oli:** Can you tell more on the term “embarrassment”—

**Jahleh:** — That is, one’s father knows you’ve slept in the arms of your husband, and when you slept. The child is born nine months after that moment. It is not right. What I mean is if a person’s underarm is to be exposed or let’s

say this lower part of the neck, then God would have put it on their forehead, where everyone could see it. So the stomach is something that is meant to be underneath covering. Everyone is not supposed to see it. A stranger is not supposed to see your stomach. One's mother is not to see it. One's son is not supposed to see it. Okay. That part is only for oneself to see. The only other person is one's husband who can see it.

I have seen the publicizing and segmentation of a pregnant women's body. I have done it myself, in fact. During my second visit to Iran, Jahleh's daughter-in-law was pregnant. I reached out, touching her stomach, asking for quantified measures of time, breaking a mother's bodily existence into segments – How many months? Days? Weeks? When are you due?

Jahleh's story reveals her own transformations and understandings as embodied. In her body once was another body. In her body now grows another body. By her account, Jahleh is corporeally marked as sexually active: her pregnant stomach is an actual and deeply visceral materialization of a sexed identity that is defined in terms of and in opposition to her earlier purity as her father's daughter. So, she went on to tell me, she used her chador as a cover-up, a shield of protection.

I found Jahleh's narrative bold. In an era where feminist rhetoric and performance rhetoric denounce conservative bodily practice, favoring excess and exposure, Jahleh argues for the resurrection of the fourth wall, metaphorically curtaining her audience off from her private, "backstage" life. She carves spaces for herself.

While the pregnancy veil serves a purpose, for Jahleh it is different from the "going shopping veil." One was full coverage, the other partial. The first hid her gendered body, holding the male gaze at bay, fracturing their ability to see her. The second revealed feminine hair, getting



her abducted by the male soldiers – who looked at her so closely they saw a few strands of her hair slipping out.

“Hurry up!” I hear Jahleh calling me again.

Can’t be more than thirty seconds since the last time she called me, I think to myself, but I can hear the frustration in her voice. I hustle on my shoes, pants, long coat, and *rue-sareh* (a head covering worn in conjunction with a trench coat), drew a swig of tea, and ran downstairs pleased to find Ahgah Mosen, the patient cab driver.

As we pull out, I rotate my body to stare out the taxi window. I find Tabriz a mixture, a place where the ancient world and a modern reveal their collision; this rupture appears not only in the architecture, half-broken clay-domed mosques standing alongside glass and metal Holiday Inn erections, but also within the people. Tabriz is a space where the inhabitants have a simultaneous pride about their culture’s influence on the future and a conserving, repetitious attitude for their history and heritage. I can see clear parallels between the locals of Tabriz and “New Yorkers” and “Cajuns.” Just as I was imagining Jahleh standing next to Madison Square Garden, she turns to me and says, “Tabriz is different from other places. The women of Tabriz are something else.”

### **Toast of the/Better Get Outta Town**

As mentioned earlier, it has been said that “Jahleh is the Queen of Tabriz.” Reigning alongside her is her second husband, Dr. Reza Gotsey, who is as much king of the city as his wife is queen. They *are known* in Tabriz.

I was made aware of this celebrity as Jahleh and I combed the city in preparation for the upcoming dinner party. Over the course of our day I heard shopkeepers, the confectioner, fruitstand man, butcher, bazaar keeper, and women who themselves were running errands, echo one another’s greetings: “Hello *Khanoom Dr. Gotsey* [Dr. Gotsey’s lady]. How are you? How is

the doctor? How is he today? It is such a pleasure to have you here.” Their voices intermingled respect and care.

*Khanoom Dr. Gotsey* is an address Jahleh inherited after her marriage to Reza. “People started calling me that after we got married,” she told me. At the time, a young bride of twenty-three, Jahleh found this a fashionable label to wear. To this day there are times Jahleh enjoys the prestige; being a doctor’s wife is a socially and culturally coveted role. At other times the reference proves bothersome. It limits her identity, Jahleh feels, as if it is the only role she is expected/allowed to play: the doctor’s wife. “I am not sure if some of them even know my name,” she says.

For the stretch of time spanning almost thirty-five years, Reza was the most sought after dentist in Tabriz. As the story goes, people lined up for his services down the hall, and appointments with him were nearly impossible to get. In order to supply the demand, the Doctor held hours both day and night.

One woman buzzed, “The Doctor would just bring home money in a bag and hand it to Jahleh.”

Such cash transactions were not uncommon. Banking and bank accounts are not as common in Iran as they are in the West. Cash was and for the most part still is the primary form of exchange: No checks, no credit cards, no paper trails, just old-fashioned hand-to-hand exchange of cold, hard cash.

“A brown paper bag. Every day. Filled with the money all the patients have given him. Put it on the table for Jahleh to do whatever she wanted with it,” another woman revealed.

They had so much money in fact that they felt no urgency to save, nothing pressing them to prepare for a rainy day, Jahleh explained. Spending a great deal of money charitably, Jahleh

often gave it to those less fortunate, and those in need. She also spent a small fortune pampering friends and family with meals and spirits. The doctor always treated, the other women affirmed.

From the sound of it, I gather the couple spent most of their days in a rather celebratory mood, exonerated from the worries of age and time. This lifestyle continued for decades, uninterrupted and protected by Dr. Gotsey's heightening reputation.

Admiration for Dr. Gotsey ran so deep, pleased patients quickly spread the favorable exaggeration: "The Doctor's margin of error was near zero." To this day mothers proudly chew with the golden crowns and metallic fillings the Doctor placed in their mouths when they were young adolescents. "The Doctor can save any tooth, fix any cavity. Your filling will never fall out," was what one woman claimed as she opened her mouth, encouraging me to examine the work for myself. "He was bold. He would always try to save a tooth before extracting it," Jahleh explained in a tone that conveyed her amazement and respect.

When Jahleh was twenty-two, she accompanied her mother to a dental appointment. This appointment just happened to be the very clinic where Dr. Gotsey practiced. Young and freshly out of medical school he looked over at Jahleh, slyly asking, "Lady, your teeth aren't ruined too are they?"

"I think not gentleman, sir. But I do have one tooth that I have been told must be pulled," Jahleh standoffishly responded.

Dr. Gotsey asked to take a look, and after about a minute or two of examination said to Jahleh, "No – this I will fix." His valor in the dental chair so impressed Jahleh that she ultimately accepted an invitation for a date.

Whenever I ask him about this story he merely testifies, "Extracting a rotting tooth used to be the easiest option. But I knew I could fix almost anything."

In the early 1960s when Dr. Gotsey began his practice, modern Western methods and instruments were either quite new or not yet available. Dentistry as we understand it today was relatively new. Before 1979, there were only 2,000 dentists and about 50 specialists practicing in Iran (Pakshir 57). In fact, Dr. Gotsey received the honorable position of valedictorian of the first graduating class of dentistry in Iran.

While it is easy to think that it was his historical accomplishments in the field that led to his success, Jahleh says that it is actually the Doctor's love of aesthetics that made him a great dentist. Dentistry is both a practice of medicine and a genre of architecture – “skeletal architecture,” he calls it. Even though he is now past retirement, the human face and its form continue to draw his attention. I complained once that “my front teeth stick out too much. My orthodontist was bad.” Pulling out a pen and paper and sketching my face, the Doctor taught me how the shape of my chin and curve of my jaw-line would not accept any other form. My orthodontist was not bad; on the contrary, he said, “He had a good eye for design.”

As much as his love for shapes and curves made him a great dentist, it is his good-natured, hard-work ethic that propelled his dental business and his wife's friendly intermingling within the community that kept his reputation alive.

Unfortunately, Dr. Gotsey's position as Tabriz's finest dentist came to an unexpected and premature end. Two massive strokes, one paralyzing the right portion of his face, the other debilitating the use of his hands, forced the Doctor to pass his practice onto his son Seyamak. Jahleh somberly tells of this time. She says, “It had fallen on Seyamak's shoulders to not only take over his father's practice, but to rebuild us financially.”

It would be several hard years before the inheritance would prove fruitful. First, Seyamak was only beginning his studies, and at the time was anything but engaged in the process. To make

matters worse, Seyamak's residence was in the USSR. After failing twice in Germany, Seyamak was forced to transfer to a new institution.

All three of Jahleh's sons spent a great deal of their childhood away from their mother and in foreign lands. When the Iran-Iraq and Revolutionary wars erupted, Jahleh's three young sons faced compulsory military draft. Serving in a war, "dying, being blooded, made to fight," were not options she as a mother would accept. Jahleh drained all the family's money to get the boys out of Iran. And when they made it out of Iran, all the way to Germany, and needed more money, as the oldest was a seventeen and the youngest a mere fourteen, Jahleh went on to sell every possession of value. The list was long, and it included a custom-built house enveloped by acres of fruit trees and grass and a near-flawless five-carat diamond. "The only thing I kept," she confessed, "was a little ring, with a small pink stone my father gave me when I was sixteen." Although she chose not to show the ring, she carefully detailed the story.

"When my father was alive he always remembered my birthday. He always gave me a special gift, a personal gift from him. The gift matched the age: a hat or socks or pen."

"Do you still have any of these gifts?" I asked.

"One pink ring."

When she was turning twelve years old, her father said, "Lets go and buy you whatever you like."

"My father has a friend who owned a small jewelry store. I was wearing a pink shirt and I picked out the ring – for its pink stone. And he bought it for me. I still have that gift." Her voice revealed a sorrow that sometimes comes from remembering.

It was Jahleh's father who encouraged her to get his grandchildren out of Iran. Jahleh never regretted selling off her worldly possessions. Given the conditions from which the boys were emancipated, streets sprayed over with blood and bullets, and the conditions into which they

entered, a Germany divided into East/West and still debating its own understandings of post-Hitler German identity, her three boys had done an exceptional job of reaching “their full potential.” The oldest became a top-rated mechanical engineer; her middle boy Bahbak studied medicine, eventually excelling in the field of pediatric oncology. Jahleh’s youngest son, Seyamak choose to follow in his fathers footsteps, taking up dentistry. To make matters more pleasant, the sons married wonderful, equally successful women, each of whom blessed Jahleh with three healthy grandsons and a beautiful granddaughter.

“I really had nothing to do with any of this,” Jahleh says. “We helped get them out of here. It was a bad place to be. Little chance for growth. But the boys, they did the rest. I didn’t go to school for them. I don’t go to work for them. They were in Germany alone. I came and went, but when the situation here got bad, sometimes I did not get a travel visa. They had to do it, and they did.”

I am touched by her motherly humility and her brave downplaying of the dangers and the threats she faced. It was not unheard of for parents who remained in Iran to serve jail sentences for their children. I heard of one story where the daughter escaped to Canada, and the father was kept in jail for eight years as ransom for her return.

Kouroush, her oldest son, Jahleh explained, “Went door-to-door, business-to-business until a nice man gave him a job washing dishes. Once when I was able to visit we waited ‘til midnight, because he was washing dishes.” The money he made from this small pizza restaurant located in Dusseldorf’s *Altstadt* or “old city” district he used to take German language classes.

“So he could go to college,” Jahleh adds.

### **Blinding Silence**

What I have shared thus far is all that I learned of those times from Jahleh’s stories. When I ask Jahleh, she circumvents a session of time in her life. “Eh, why do you want to talk about

this?” she interrupts in a pained voice. “What good is it? These things happen.” Sometimes to these sentiments she adds the sentence “I don’t remember” – “Why do you want to talk about this? I don’t remember.”

Her responses present an ethical dilemma, tempting me into accusation. I want to write she was noncommittal, monosyllabic, even uncooperative. Questions run through my head.

Do I try to find out more by rewording questions? Do I press on? How do I understand? Translate? Relate towards the unrevealed? What about the tales and details consciously omitted by the narrator? How do moments of silence influence the process of formulating historical text? What role is memory playing in all of this? How does memory work in the space of History, fiction, and subjective understanding?

**Oli:** How did you become acquainted with your husband?

**Jahleh:** I was a patient of his. That is how I met him.

**Oli:** Ah huh! Do tell the story of your courtship and marriage!

**Jahleh:** There is no story.

**Oli:** Why? You went to get your tooth fixed —

**Jahleh:** — Originally not my tooth. My mother’s tooth. We went. We went together to see him. He was the dentist.

**Oli:** How did you choose Dr. Gotsey?

**Jahleh:** —Three sessions or two sessions it took to look at mom’s tooth. And the Doctor said to me, “Lady your teeth aren’t ruined too?” “I think not gentleman, sir. *But* I do have one tooth that I have been told I must be pulled.” He said, “No – this I will fix.” And he fixed my tooth. Then we came to Tehran.

**Oli:** Tehran? From Tabriz?

**Jahleh:** Tehran. We got married.

**Oli:** Come on, you're skipping parts. Up until the marriage *a lot* happens! This way this became?

**Jahleh:** Nothing.

“Come on, you're skipping parts!” I say. I am positive there should be more. I hunger for an excess in description, *supplementary* words, an erotic overflow of her self -- revealing her Self to my Self – first kisses, picking rings, honeymoon nights. I yearned for this ethnography to stem out, to make an intimate connection. I desired those “powerful . . . gains from an encounter with one another” (Geertz 5).

The truth is that much of my understanding of this period in Jahleh's life was obtained from fragments appearing in the narratives of the other women: her mother, cousin, daughter-in-law, the family members who were there, who went through the time alongside her, with her. I would not characterize the structure of these narratives as gossip or nostalgia, rather a performance of family narrative, each woman bringing “uniqueness and adaptation of internal relations as opposed to . . . disturbing features” from an outsider's perspective (Langellier and Peterson 125). In repeating and sharing perspectives on Jahleh's affairs, the women's memories mark a boundary and space of collective knowledge, identification, and activity.

On the surface it would appear that the women's narratives are spreading Jahleh's history. The news is not straight from the horse's mouth, to put it crudely. But interestingly, by refusing to speak, forgetting the narrative, or answering in silences Jahleh calls into meaning the many points of oscillation in performance, those spaces harnessing the individual to the collective, author to authority, perverting the gaps between the real to and the imaginary, remembered to forgotten.



Walter Benjamin observes that “storytelling is always the art of repeating stories, and this art is lost when stories are no longer retained” (91). On the other hand, Minh-ha Trinh writes that “words are manipulated at will. And silence as a refusal to partake in the story does sometimes provide us with a means to gain hearing. It is a voice, a mode of uttering, and a response in its own right” (83).

“Your stories are interesting, but often times without many details. Why is this so?” I inquired. Jahleh eloquently deregulates any attempt to regain authority over the interview. “We never thought that we would have to think about these things another time. It is not in our memory because no one here is going to ask about it again. It isn’t as if we thought we’d ever have to think about it again,” she replied, a touch of irritation present in her voice.

I am taken to Satoshi Nishimura’s discussion on two lines from Thomas Hardy’s Tess of the D’Urbervilles: The clergyman explained that “It quite dies out of knowledge, and could hardly be said to be known at all” (Tess 30). Later Tess says to Angel, “Sometimes I feel I don’t want to know anything more about [history] than I know already. . . . Because what’s the use of learning, that I am one of a long row only finding out that there is set down in some old book somebody just like me” (Tess 137). To these lines, Nishimura responds: “This attitude to history might be compared to Nietzsche’s perspective on the relation of history to life. . . . As Nietzsche observes, ‘Forgetting is essential to action of any kind,’ to the extent that ‘it is altogether impossible to *live* at all without forgetting’” (“Language” 209).

Jahleh’s action of omission undermines my ability to create “fully” a version of her culture, and limits my authority in drawing definitive conclusions. Jahleh remains the *author/narrator* of her oral history. Therefore, Jahleh’s “entry into autobiography, [can be] seen to be an entry into the political authority of self-representation.” (McClintock 198).

In her comments Jahleh fashions an “in group” (them/my era) / “out group” (western researcher/next generation) dichotomy, contrasting the distinction between knowledge itself, and the act of giving it. Jahleh marks me as “not a participant” – absent from the future: “we never thought that we would have to think about these things another time. It is not in our memory because no one here is going to ask about it again.” Her point that the *present* me (listener) was as an *absent* (one she never expected to exist) simultaneously wipes me out of the equation and implicates me. Jahleh is making sure I remember she knows this I am retelling *her* story in *my* words. I was absent, not there, not considered, thus I cannot really tell the story, I can only retell the telling of the story by those who lived the experience.

Within this framework, her narrative marks the discontinuous nature, the double focus, and the contradictions of historical accounts. She argues that her memory does not need to be completed as a condition of understanding self. With these words, Jahleh has taken possession of “history.” Rather than view it as a past experience she can give to me as if it were a completed project, she has argued it continues to be embodied and lived – history is occurring, and therefore cannot be captured or bound. Whether she can recall her courtship with Ahmoo Doctor or not, she is still *wife* and *bride*.

While maybe for me, courtship somehow leads to marriage, for Jahleh her tooth, saved, and still chewed with was the road. She has moved beyond the myth of history into a space of historicity, a difference articulated best when Della Pollock quotes Allen Feldman “the difference between history and historicity as a tension between two temporal places: the atemporal plane of legitimation and domination or ‘myth,’ and the more ephemeral plane of agency and action” (Exceptional 4).

### **Picture of You**

For all her silence, there is a lot said about Jahleh.

“She was beautiful, strong,” the other women alert.

She (who is still alive) “*was*” they say.

“She was always in the latest fashions from Paris. Her body—better than Brigitte Bardot.”

Experience afforded a safe guess as to what was coming next – inevitably following declarations on Jahleh’s beauty was the question, “Have you seen the picture?”

Yes, I have seen The Picture. In circulation among her family and friends is an iconic photograph of Jahleh, a picture that as the women will tell you epitomizes the glamour of Jahleh’s past life. And on the day I was afforded my first peek, the portrait was nearing its fifty-fifth birthday.

Stored in a small wooden box beside her son Bahbak’s fireplace in Germany, the original lies among other trinkets and mementoes commemorating milestones. Although well protected, it certainly is not the sole copy of the photograph. In fact, everyone close to Jahleh seems to possess a copy. Over the years, multiple replicas have been produced and disseminated across the globe, voyaging as far as Chicago, Illinois.

Some own blown up editions, twice the original size. Luckily, because of the medium, light on celluloid, not digital pixilation, the photograph remains beautiful despite its monstrous size. Some have perfect wallet-sized renditions. Contrasted with their larger counterparts these appear miniature, like the tiny golden key Alice turned to enter Wonderland, a place where the tale, the transformation within, and the imagination cross; a place parallel to the space, where the active storytelling agents like Jahleh invent and reinvent their identities.

In this hidden photograph, Jahleh is a youthful eighteen years old. She wears a stunning white Christian Dior haute couture dress bearing a lavish floral print; so audacious is the design that even in a black and white, color-stripped photograph the flowers command the spectator’s attention.

“They were red and orange roses,” Jahleh reminisced.

The calf-length skirt and high waistline confidently held out by a bouffant net petticoat only enhances the drama of the dress, showcasing Jahleh’s 38-26-38 figure. Around her neck is a satin foulard scarf tied into the shape of a bow. It is a photograph smoldering with sex appeal, ripe with a voluptuous flirtation, and cultural history.

The photograph reveals Jahleh standing on her tiptoes, elongating her body beyond its usual proportions. On her feet is a pair of white Mary-Jane style shoes whose two-inch heels she has solidly lifted off the ground. I can tell the shoes are patent leather; they reveal their shine as they permanently reflect the light of the camera’s flash.

“She always does that. When we were little, she competed to be the tallest. In every picture she stands on her toes, stretched out so she looks taller,” Jahleh’s sister said shaking her head in humor.

Jahleh is in her pose. Beside her is Shah Reza Pahlavi in full military regalia. Her hand is resting on his shoulder, chin held high. From the picture, it is difficult to discern who is making the more remarkable impression, the King of Iran or Jahleh.

Fixated, I feel the same as I did when I noticed Elizabeth Taylor for the first time, *The Elizabeth Taylor in Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*. It was 2004, and I asked, “That is Elizabeth Taylor? Wow.” Awestruck, I immediately bought a print of Andy Warhol’s “Liz.”

Something about the mass handling of Jahleh’s photograph gave the sense it freely switched among categories. Moving from an intimate life memory, to more of a token or souvenir of some melancholy nostalgia, to a contained knowledge that unlike reflexive text remains an irreducible icon (Taylor “Iconophobia” 67).

Oscillation between young and old.

Between subjectivity and objectivity.

Unlike the refrigerator magnet, encyclopedia, or childhood finger painting no one had this photograph out, framed, or posted on some mantel or shelf end for easy viewing. Rather it was stashed away somewhere in a small wooden box or between the pages of a favorite book.

Something about this portrait opposed my relationship with family portraits. From my experiences, favorite and particularly flattering family portrait are often featured in homes rather than hidden away. Whether formally positioned in expensive frames or informally piled in some random basket by the bookshelf, these chosen images often provide a sense of intimacy, one welcoming viewers to glimpse into a moment of private life.

Even as archival memories, for me family portraits still carry a sense of repertoire like that embodied by oral history. On the mantel, on the nightstand, or on the study's desk, displayed photos celebrate the presence of the family, even when those pictured are physically absent. The fact is, while the vision of the family history offered in a single portrait is selective and short and sometimes superficial, it is nevertheless there, to be shared, experienced, and often felt by those whose eyes gaze upon it (Halle 220). The placement of the frames, the choosing of the images, and montage clustering of the merging two, becomes a homemade installation piece staging the loved one.

Why does Jahleh not talk about this picture? How did it become so iconic? Why do so many people have this photograph? Why does it remain so hidden? I wanted to ask Jahleh more, but again something stopped me. I decide this portrait is a mystery I may never uncover. A freeze frame, the photograph of Jahleh proves to be more than just an archived, repeatable history.

I am guessing the copies were unauthorized, or at minimum unpromoted. New technologies have made the sharing of photographs as easy as a push of a button. Faded pictures or special pictures (e.g., ones of a parent each sibling wants) can now be scanned, doctored up,

and infinitely reproduced. Although Jahleh herself has copies of originals and copies of copies of her mother and her father in their youth, I do not think Jahleh knows just how many people hold and handle her own captured image. Some of this innocence comes from a lack of awareness of the abilities of new technologies; as she herself has confessed, she has “never put a finger on a computer.” But more than that, I did not get the impression she interpreted herself as an image of pleasure or consumption.

Interestingly the nostalgia arising from the consumption of Jahleh’s image is not necessarily about Jahleh; there appears to be different kind of effect on the spectator. Jahleh’s stunning beauty has become a family anecdote for youth.

“Wasn’t Jahleh beautiful? Those were the days. . . . We were young. Energy,” her cousin Akram somberly recollects. As she says this, she separates herself from the image, allowing it to drop out of her hands, back into some old, worn box long ago reallocated from transporting shoes to storing memories.

The photograph reflects something bigger than just the two people in the shot. It reflects the year it was taken – 1955, the year that the United States of America and Iran signed a treaty of amity in Tehran. Article I of this new alliance read, “There shall be firm and enduring peace and sincere friendship between the United States of America and Iran” (Schwebel sec. International). Historically speaking, this peaceful association lasted till 1979, a year clouded with hostage situations and a bloody governmental overthrow, tore apart the olive branch.

Difficult though it may be to remember in light of current situations, peace did happen between the two countries. There *was a time*, a time allegorically represented by this captured image of Jahleh and the Shah, both living in the prime of their lives. This photograph does not speak of “what no longer is” but rather on “what has been” (Barthes Camera 85).

After this era of prosperity and unity with the West, a time Jahleh refers to as “after the Revolution,” everything in Iran was uprooted. In came a Revolutionary government, whose mission was literally to erase signs, symbols, and images of a previous government and earlier Iranian history. One of the first examples of the Revolutionary government’s attempts at rhetorical erasure/rewriting was the redesigning of the Iranian flag. The flag of course is an ultimate signification of governmental power.

I heard many different stories when in Iran, but most agreed that back in the year 976 CE or so, the Sultan Masoud Gaznavi (an avid hunter) placed onto the flag the image of his favorite game – a fierce lion. As the history continues, some time during the Safavid Dynasty, a time from 1502 to 1736 CE, a golden sun was added, embroidered on the flag behind the lion. Later on in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, Fath Ali Shah Qajar devised two different flags, one suitable for war, the other for peace. A red flag with a sitting lion and the sun on its back served as the war flag, while a green flag with the same figures was used as the peace flag. Ironically, the lion on the peace flag was given a long curved sword (“Flag”, sec 1.14).

While the war flag faded out the lion, sun and sword continued to be permanent fixtures, a trinity displaying the country’s leadership history from 976 CE onwards until the Iranian revolution in 1979. In this year history was replaced by an emblem resembling a tulip, a shape building on the traditional belief associating tulips with patriotism, self-sacrifice, and martyrdom (“Flag”, sec. 1.17). This story is how I came to understand why tulips are not considered favorable flowers. I picked tulips out for the upcoming party, and Jahleh responded with, “No. We only bring tulips to funerals.”

The flag was only the beginning of what I refer to as a “cultural genocide” and Jahleh calls the “destruction of Iran.” Colonized public centers like universities, main streets, town squares and mosques now symbolize exclusionary Revolution politics. Painting, murals, and

photographs of the kingdom have been removed or painted over. Governmental buildings ceased, burned or converted into new military offices. Street names were changed; what was once the “King’s Boulevard” is now “*Enqelab* [Revolution] Street.” Kaveh Ehsani has argued that this “Islamization” of cities like Tehran and Tabriz not only pushes Revolutionary agendas, but also causes “gender segregation and a resulting masculinization of the public sphere” (26). I cannot help but agree with him. As we rode in our taxi down the streets of Tabriz, large edifices of famous Islamic men, murals, statues, billboards of their faces and names, encircled with tulips, littered the streets, which themselves are named after even more Islamic men or terms of war. Jahleh pointed to each of them from inside the taxi window, providing brief histories and explanations.

In his prologue to Mikhail Bakhtin’s *Rabelais and His World*, Michael Holquist suggests revolutions shift cultural systems to such an extent as to bring on crises of identity. He writes, “It the nature of revolutions that no one can be an experienced citizen of the new order they bring into being” (xiv). If applied to Jahleh and the Islamization of Tabriz, the result would be a shifting of Jahleh’s agency. Acting as a centripetal force, the new order revolutionary government would strip Jahleh down, like the walls of the cityscape, and repainting its own singular ideology onto her. But of course, as Bakhtin went on to separate, there is a difference between the centripetal force and the centrifugal force promoting openness and transgression, counter-ideology within ideology (qtd. in Lachmann, Eshleman, and Davis 115).

A very kind-hearted woman never missing an opportunity to lend a hand to a family member, a neighbor, or just a passerby, Jahleh contrasts with the harsh imagery and rhetoric of the landscape. Once when she was only nine she returned home from school without her uniform. “We had this girl who was poor, very poor, in our class. Her shirt was old and stained. I knew she could afford no more. I took off mine and gave it to her. I wore my coat back,” she narrates.



Whenever I travel to Iran Jahleh greets me at the airport. Rain or shine, she first makes the journey from Tabriz to Tehran, then the thirty-minute trip from inner Tehran to Mehrabad airport. Based on the flights systems, most inbound flights from foreign nations arrive between 1:00 and 3:00 am. Jahleh always sets aside the discomfort of this hour and is the first face I see in the sea of people anticipating the arrivals of their loved ones.

Once I gather my luggage and pass customs, we travel by taxi back into Tehran. I began noticing Jahleh would use the streets' post-revolutionary names when giving directions to taxi drivers. "We want to go to the Revolution Center on Imam Street," she might say. If the driver was anti-the current establishment and sensed we were also, he would repeat the directions back using old, pre-revolutionary names. "So you want to go to the Park of the People of Pahlavi Street." In this small way, I found citizens signaled to one another political alignments and allegiances, sharing a collective memory of "before the revolution."

I asked for more pictures.

"I have no pictures," she replied. Her voice had the sound of a warning call, deterring me from challenging this blatant falsehood. Although sparingly used, some photographs do adorn the shelves and end tables of her apartment. In fact, I spent some time dusting their frames, and moving them to different places in an effort to create more space for the hors d'oeuvres, fruits, and sweets we would soon lay out for the party.

As the other women tell the story, some years back Jahleh tore up all the pictures of her past life. While it was a private matter between her and her second husband the dentist, rumor has it he became enraged with jealousies and insecurities when he gazed at Jahleh's life prior to their marriage.

Jahleh's first marriage had been when she was very young; she was eighteen and Iraj was in his mid-twenties. At the time of their marriage, he already held a long and impressive list of

accomplishments. Not only was Iraj the Shah Reza Pahlavi's personal pilot, he was also First Lieutenant of the Imperial Iranian Air Forces, a member of the P-47 Thunder Bolt squadron, an elite group of fourteen pilots who trained the Iranian military's single seat bomber jet pilots, and a member of the IIAF Golden Crown F-84G Air Force Acrobatics Demonstrations team (a team that like Jahleh's photo was created in 1955). Both his accomplishments and his handsome good looks made Iraj a good catch as a husband.

As an ethnographer, I wanted to learn more about this period in Jahleh's life. Once again, she did not want to talk. "There are no pictures left. I threw them away. Who needs them? Move into the future," she explained. The field notes on the interaction read:

A question asked; anticipated answer not received. Rather, silence was the offering. I find this silence ironic. I mean, this project was finally *giving voice* to the disempowered, and here they were not saying a thing. (Re)production refused (7 July 2004).

### **Game of Charades**

We returned from our errands early in the evening hours and there was no rest for the weary. Since I faired poorly in the kitchen my assigned duty was switched to rearranging furniture.

Following a pattern typical of other parties I had attended in Iran, Jahleh was transforming her living room in a party area. Rescued from forgotten places, hidden under a pile of clothes or tightly tucked under some table, Jahleh had grabbed chairs and with them created a cluster of seats. Set in a plain horseshoe design, the chairs looked ready and willing to execute their duties of promoting conversation and encouraging interaction among guests. The heels of this horseshoe, each outer tip, joined one of two dark, ivy green couches. Unlike their counterparts, this duo lacked semi-nomadic qualities; the ability to move in and out, or around as occasion dictated stretched beyond their reach. As a matter of fact, these two couches had been resting in the same spot, sedentary since the day Jahleh welcomed their delivery. From a bird's eye view

the chairs, conjoined with the pair of couches, formed something resembling a sweet cherry red lollipop, or the silhouette of a long Nikko Blue hydrangea: Full round top, supported by a thin but sturdy stem.

At the center of this bouquet, Jahleh has placed a chair whose fabric is at odds with the surrounding chair, whose matching textiles reveal they are counterparts, comrades in the world of furniture design. The chair seemed both securely individualistic, and sadly unaccompanied; I feel an allure, my attention undividedly drawn to this solitary piece. This observation is not shared by Jahleh, who when asked rather emotionlessly avows the furniture piece as some “old thing.”

Jahleh’s dream is that some day, after her youngest son’s dental practice grows as prosperous as her husband’s had once been, all her mismatched, upper-middle class furniture will be donated to the poor, and replaced by newer, trendy modern pieces: “Just like the ones the rich import from Germany. Really chic. High quality material. Hand embroidering.”

There is material pleasure in envisioning fresh colors, redrawing the shape of her body in a new, rich space. It transports her back to good times and better locations. The dream opens ways for her to renegotiate perceptions of her current condition (one without luxury, but only temporarily), while at the same time valorizing her interpretations of her own, intimate agency (luxurious, and soon to be again). She allows herself to indulge, dreaming herself into happier humor every day.

“The chair is nothing. I keep the chair for company,” she says. After a few seconds of thought, she patiently adds more – so as to “help me with my research.”

“It is common in Iran to have extra chairs,” she begins. “Families are large, and gatherings generally have more people than a four or six seat dining room table and couch can hold.”

It is ugly to eat while you stand, she continues. “Imagine a lady that has on a fine silk skirt, and has to hold a plate. Are they to pretend they can sit?” However, instantaneously, before I can conjure up a mental picture of her words, Jahleh draws me into a game of charades.

Squatting down in the middle of her kitchen (as if there were a “real chair”) her legs bent at the knees, full-bodied buttocks almost parallel to the ground, Jahleh balls her hands into two fists, four inches apart, level to her stomach.

I “read” her body’s visual metaphor for my mentally stored text correctly.

“Holding and plate,” I say in a counterbalancing act; my mental image of the English symbolic text appropriating/translating Jahleh’s ephemerally stored representation of *boshgaubo negar dastan* (Haverkamp 258).

Quickly, before her footing is lost, before she slips, Jahleh lifts her fisted hand to her opening mouth, surcharged she swings the other arm frantically down, opening mouth and diverting her eyes from me to the ground in a gaze of horror.

“If there was no chair to sit in, *what* might a guest *do*?”

“Drop plate,” I say slightly shaken.

Jahleh finishes her syllogism: “Extra polite hostesses keep extra chairs as extra seats for extra guests.”

Carefully Jahleh views me, large brown eyes slightly squinted, perfectly arched brows ever so furrowed. I get the feeling she is making sure what she said has completely registered. I nod my head in understanding, as I repeat the lesson back.

“*Good*,” Jahleh says straightening up, wiping her hands a few swift times across her skirt, “I am pleased you have learned things today. Learned to see things different.”

In this utterance, I hear a multiplicity of voices: Jahleh as self-understanding and Jahleh as Iranian culture (Bakhtin Dialogical 259). A performance, as Richard Bauman explains, that is

“situated behavior, situated within, and rendered meaningful with reference to relevant contexts” (298).

My earlier sense of a generic, neutral relationship between chair and seat is abandoned; a seemingly conventional relationship between “chair” (signifier) and “sit” (sign) becomes muddy and complicated. The chair is more than just a seat. The chair remobilized has social usage, a myth that supports community identity (Barthes “Myth” 94). In Jahleh’s performance the chair is a sliding signifier; the word *chair* used to “signify something quite other than” what it generally signifies.

Suddenly there is excess in the chair. More than a seat, the chair is a space of reverence for elders, marked off as a place to respect wisdom and age. The chair prevents spillage. The chair is that old thing. The chair is a distortion of reality, a fantasy of new furniture to come.

In this game of charades, Jahleh’s performative body fuses with a value that “static depiction won’t carry” (Schneemann 234). Her body evokes Austinian performativity, a sense of *productivity*, language that does more than merely describe, but language that affects reality (Sedgwick 5). Jahleh’s body is both the agency of knowing and the site at which agency functions, has form, and is meaningful (Davis 852).

A performative body.

A seduction.

An excess drawing us toward pleasure.

Sometimes succeeding, sometimes failing.

“Hurry, hurry,” she prompts. “Guests will arrive soon. There is more that can be done,” she says in a nervous but energetic voice. I watched her rearrange the fruit tray. Carefully she lifts a cherry by its stem. Holding it straight out in front of her eyes, scrupulously examining its blood red exterior, she says, half to me, half to herself, “Look at these. The smallest of the year and I

have to give them to people.” Setting the cherry down, Jahleh picks up the phone and dials the fruit market. It is across the street and easily viewed from her dining room window.

“Mr. Moesin, are these the *best* cherries you have? None in the back?” I hear her ask. There is a brief pause on our end of the line. As she listens I hear, “Uh huh. Uh huh.” A forward woman and a haggler to her core Jahleh plays her hand again. “Awful cherries. I have just awful cherries. Please, please check in the back. I’m sorry for the trouble. Yes, sorry for the trouble. Go to re-check the back. I will be humiliated in front of my guests.”

I observe her hold the line. Poking at each individual cherry with thin fingers as if it may magically plump, she impatiently holds the receiver of a white cordless phone to her left ear. Jahleh shakes her head in frustration causing the phone’s tall silver antenna to shift from left to right and back again awaiting its next digital signal.

I watch the fruit stand from the bay window. Mr. Moesin returns from the back room and I see him pick up the line. The news must not be good.

“Please, please better cherries next time. Fresh ones, Mr. Moesin. Fresh ones,” Jahleh directs. Although I am a good fifty yards away, I catch Mr. Moesin nodding his head “yes, yes” in the distance.

“Thank you very much. May you not be tired too much today,” she concludes, hanging up the phone. Once she is certain the receiver is safely resting on the off position she lets out an “Eh.” I have come to learn this sound is one of displeasure.

“Why don’t you leave them out?” I helpfully ask.

“Eh,” she repeats, this time directing it my way. Jahleh detests explaining herself and her decisions, making her one of the toughest women to interview; every sentence beginning with “why” on my end began with the prefix “eh” on her end. There were a lot of “eh’s.”

In a low voice that prevents the party just outside the doorway from hearing, she says, “It is important to have an abundance of fruit for the guests. It would be bad to not have cherries. They are here this time of year. People will think I was too cheap to buy them. And it is not the cheap that is the problem. It is the being cheap towards them that earn you a bad reputation. If you want to be cheap, do that on your own time,” she explains, returning her focus back to the three bowls overflowing with all the seasonal fruits. Oranges, cherries, cucumbers, grapes, apples, tangerines, figs, and saturn peaches: each a small representation of Jahleh’s commitment to retain her communitarian ethos (Bennett 67), and small metaphors for the larger, more complex relationship between the market place and social exchange networks (Lévi-Strauss 146).

Like in many other cultures, in Iran food exchange is a primary mode by which individuals and groups and families sustain social relations (Shuman 495; Sacks 275; Mauss 94). Hospitality requires that guests be fed and that individuals establish reputations as generous. Thus, like in dinner parties all around the world, Jahleh is running back and forth between the guests and the back-stage scenery.

She darts into the living room, setting down a platter of pastries. Turning to everyone she says, “I am so sorry.”

“Oh don’t rush yourself. Come relax. Everything is perfect,” the guests respond.

She throws the phrase “I am almost finished!” over her shoulder as she scurries back to her laboratory of delicacies.

No one particularly minds the wait. Known for her prowess in the kitchen, everyone understands that Jahleh needs time to skillfully add and subtract ingredients from her plethora of steaming pots living on her stove. Here, too, patience is a virtue.





### CHAPTER 3 SHAYDE: A WOMAN OF THE REVOLUTION

#### Becoming the Daughter-in-Law

The atmosphere is aridly cool, characteristically Tabrizian. Unlike other regions of Iran where summer temperatures soar well above the eighties, by virtue of its location, nestled between the snowcapped Sahand Mountain ranges and the gentle vapors of the Caspian Sea, Tabriz offers a milder summer. In fact, nights can be so pleasant the citizens are known to pull mattresses out onto porches, rooftops, or backyard spaces to sleep under the blanket of a black but sparkling, starry sky.

Jahleh has opened her windows, taking advantage of the sensational air. The sweet aroma and spice scents of her delicacies greeting each guest with a fragrant welcome.

Jahleh's entire invitation list is in attendance: her husband, son and daughter-in-law Shayde, two brothers, her sister and mother, one neighbor, and a total of four cousins. The room is filled with bodies occupying the many carefully, closely placed chairs. Bundled together in Jahleh's small living room area, materiality pushes past the rules of normative, daily proximities. Busily making small talk with the person sitting to their left or right, the sound waves of the guests' voices form a melody. Possessing a staccato quality to it, I find myself intoxicated by the tones, rhymes, and rhythms floating through the air.

Striving to be a good ethnographer, I listen to the surrounding conversations. Ears bounce between dialogues, straining to catch the rapid exchange of chatter and the clustered discourse. I wonder how I will take notes on conversations compromised of half sentences and laced with interjections, make sense of fragmented plotlines, whose gaps and chronologies are supplemented by years of experience (Bennett "And" 168).

“Big-Uncle’s fifth son is going to Spain with *that* wife of his,” Jahleh’s sister says in a tentative and somewhat apologetic manner. I am surprised to hear such a sentence; normally, Naimeh would not speak unkindly of another human being. Possibly her strongest trait, an ability separating her from her sister Jahleh, derived from both her mother and father, is the well-cultivated ability to avoid gossip.

“After her behavior in Germany, I can’t believe she has the nerve to invite you to her house!” a cousin answers back in a contemptuous voice. After she finished her sentence, I watched her stretch out her arm, reaching for one of Jahleh’s “embarrassing” cherries. To my amazement, her hand hovered over the bowl for a few seconds, as she carefully examined each red ball, finally settling on one of the larger of the choices. Apparently, there is something to this cherry-size thing, I later write in my field notes.

“We told him when he first met her –.”

“Manners are so important if you want to remain a lady!” a third woman interjects.

All agreed with this final statement, each releasing a personalized version of “Uh-huh!”

Across the room, a different, dour discussion between Jahleh’s husband and her brother Reza ensued.

Ten years prior, Jahleh and her husband built a small place in the countryside. The cottage – for the most part designed by the Doctor, who carried his love of facial aesthetics over to architecture – had been built as a getaway from the city. “The noise, traffic, and crowds had grown bothersome,” he explained. Situated on the desolate side of a mountain, about thirty minutes outside Tabriz’s borderline, at the end of a long and rugged dirt road, the simple cottage is surrounded by ample red-clay land, and a small, but impressive orchard of tomato vines, carrots, small fruit trees, and assorted flowers. In the middle of this the Doctor added a shallow wading pond, which he filled with fish, and an area for pigeon coops.

From what I can catch of the conversation, the Doctor's favorite swan, hand-fed as an infant and residing in the cottage pond for three years, flew away earlier that afternoon. As the Doctor explains to Reza, he lets his pet pigeons out "for a daily dose of exercise." Once in awhile the swan joins the pigeons on their flight, and together they fly around the property's perimeter, sometimes even venturing as far as the mountaintop.

"It is beautiful to watch them fly. You know? Peaceful. Free. But this time, when I called the pigeons back, by laying seed down on the ground," the Doctor says.

As the words exit his mouth, I sense a shift come over the Doctor, a turn back to the body. His words *beautiful*, *peaceful*, and *free* behaving *sensationally*, *sensually*, rather than as objective references or simple descriptives. Pausing in the middle of his sentence, he pulls on this embodied memory. Flicking his wrist down at the carpet, he reenacts the daily movement of laying seed. There seems to appear a sudden sense of immediacy between the yard, the food, the birds, and us. Continuing to weave this "body-text" (Pollock Telling 140), he opens his fisted hand, showing us there is no more seed. Slowly, with a wave-like motion he moves the same hand through the air. With eyes focused on his fingertips he evokes the intertwined feelings of both his swan in flight and his own watching.

"He just kept going. Hasn't come back," the Doctor says.

"That's a real shame," Reza responds, taking a sip of his steaming hot black tea.

"My wife loves that the swan is gone." His voice gives the sense that while his wife's pleasure is adding some insult to this injury, it nevertheless may be the brighter side of things. Perhaps it will curb some of their arguments over the cottage – Jahleh sees the getaway as nothing more than "a waste of money we no longer have."

Standing in the kitchen, Jahleh perks as the sound of her personal referent “*my wife*” reaches her ears. Putting down a pot and spices, in her own defense she exclaims, “That’s right! I’m happy. He poops all over the place!”

“The swan or that husband of yours?” her brother slyly asks.

“BOTH!” she responds, and a hearty laughter rolls through the guests.

Chuckling at the joke, I shift my attention to another guest – Jahleh’s daughter-in-law Shayde. She is the newest family member, having married Jahleh’s youngest son approximately two years prior to this project.

Standing at 5’6” or 5’7”, she sits up straight with her shoulders back and her hands folded in her lap when company is present. Her hair, dyed a dark brown with blond undertones, runs the length of her back and she generally wears it pulled back. When she does allow it to flow free, it is wavy, parted down the middle, and tucked behind her ears. Her face is round, plump, and her eyes large and green.

I enjoy being around her, partly because we are the same age, but mostly because she has a knack for making every person around her feel appreciated. She accomplishes this feat by listening attentively and speaking at all the right times, two characteristics that have earned her the reputation of being wise beyond her thirty-five years. Early in the interviewing process I asked her about this reputation, and she laughed, saying, “You have to trick people. Patiently wait for the right time and then push forward your own agenda.”

This was not the answer I expected. In its aftermath, I found myself feeling shocked, an awkward combination of cautious and judgmental. The truth is, no matter how determined I was as an ethnographer to stay open and receptive it was unreasonable to think I would like everyone I met. In my opinion, this situation presented a sizable challenge, and I knew I needed to quickly adjust my attitude. In order to move forward I thought about the recent calling by feminist

scholars, performance practitioners, and anthropologists for researcher “vulnerability,” exposing our own spectatorship and fears (Behar 14). In particular, I pulled on Dwight Conquergood’s encouraging words that stories are not “simply this and that’s” but rather, they are about drawing others into the company, creating a community of shared vulnerability that encompasses difference (“Storied” 337).

While it took some time and effort, I began to realize Shayde’s sincerity and honesty. I learned that Shayde uses her trickster abilities to push an “agenda” that benefits rather than harms the people around her. I learned for example that one of Shayde’s “agendas” was to convince her husband Seyamak to stop drinking and start studying; he had failed his medical board exam eleven times before he married Shayde.

From across Jahleh’s kitchen I watched Shayde remain quiet during the conversation on the cottage. In earlier interviews, she revealed that she “likes the getaway a great deal.” She and her husband Seyamak escaped there often when they were dating; the cottage was a safe place to go, away from the panoptic eye of the government. Shayde explained that Iran’s social-political climate fails to support young couples dating. Historically, she said, marriages were arranged or carefully overseen by the families. Currently, Iran’s government supports a return back to “old-fashioned” Islamic values. Choosing ones own spouse and dating are rather modern concepts.

**Shayde:** There is a thing in Iran called *khastegaree*. A messenger woman is sent by the boy’s family to the girl’s family. This woman tells the family that so-and-so is interested in making their daughter a bride. If the girl’s family agrees, a meeting time is set. For the meeting the women of the boy’s family – his mother, grandmother, sister, and aunts go to the potential bride’s house to meet the women of her family. It is a small gathering –

sweets, fruit, and tea are served. The two families sit, and talk about futures and such things like education.

**Oli:** Do they discuss money?

**Shayde:** Not money, if things work out, later the men discuss money. During this time, the girl brings the women tea, and the boy's family checks her out. Is she pretty? Is she clean? Is she polite?

**Oli:** They ask the girl questions?

**Shayde:** The girl does not say anything, she just serves tea. If both families end up approving and liking further gatherings are arranged.

**Oli:** For the girl and boy to meet? Or the families discuss plans?

**Shayde:** During my grandmother's time, the bride and groom never met. During my mother's the tradition shifted a little bit. The boy and girl did meet, and spend time together. They just did it at the parent's house. There was no "going out." That started to become more modernized during the Shah. And nowadays, in the larger cities like Tehran, couples choose one another and date. Families know they are dating. They just cannot go out. There is nowhere in public to really go, you know? And in Islam you can get in trouble for being with a man that is not your husband.

**Oli:** How do couples spend time together?

**Shayde:** They do the best they can. In Tehran, there are so many people that you can't really get into trouble anymore. Here in Tabriz, couples go to secret parties or sit in their car. The cottage was a lucky place to have for Seyamak and I. Shayde went on to tell that in their dating days her and Seyamak would drive out to the cottage. Often they invited other young

couples. Together they would “drink home-made wine, listen to music, and laugh.”

Although I now love this short narrative, it took some time for me to appreciate it, offended as I was by the thought of arranged marriages and the strict discipline imposed on the bodies of young persons. But in this relatively brief account of *khastegaree* Shayde elucidates some of Iran’s current interplays between history, politics, and the cultural system. Not explicitly stated, she clearly uses the reflexive power of the narrator to jump between time-frames to make salient issues of gender, desire, and escape and her own negotiations of these issues. For me, there appears to be subversion, but not subversion out, subversion within. More importantly, she problematized these issues without denouncing her culture. Shayde does not attempt step outside of Iranian cultural system in criticism. She wisely acknowledges her placement within the system, commingling social norms and personal desires within the culture, celebrating both herself and Iran simultaneously.

### **Taarof**

Alongside her reputation of being a woman wiser than her years, Shayde is known as a polite woman, with well-cultivated social skills. The rules of Iranian social custom oblige a daughter-in law to help her mother-in-law during events such as dinner-parties. The daughter-in-law’s role is to act as a co-host, being there without stealing the show. True to her image of being a woman of social propriety, Shayde arrived before the other guests to take her position behind her husband Seyamak’s mother.

Upon Shayde’s arrival Jahleh, providing the proper social response, says, “You’ve come to help! How wonderful!”

“It is my pleasure to help you,” Shayde reciprocates, later explaining the key is to recognize one another’s acts of giving and reciprocity as if the were not socially mandated norms,

but spontaneous ruptures of kindness. “Jahleh acts surprised I am here, but she is not really surprised. She expects me to be here,” she explains.

“Why?” I inquired.

“It is a taarof,” she adds.

“What is a taarof?” I ask.

“Well it is this, this thing we do in Iran. A taarof,” she searches for the right descriptive words, but can’t find them, “You know? I can’t really explain it.”

I found the concept of taarof presenting itself in most give-take, present-receive interactions in Iranian culture. During a trip to buy shoes, I witnessed Shayde and the cab driver “taarofing” for several minutes over the fare. The driver refused to take the fare, which spawned Shayde’s becoming more insistent that he take it.

“How do you know when to stop taarofing?” I asked Shayde.

“You just know.”

“How?”

“I mean you want to taarof, but you don’t want to waste his time either by turning it into an argument,” she says, “If you insist too much people get frustrated, they feel pushed. Taarof is bad.”

“So why do people always insist I ‘eat, eat, eat’ at parties when I already ate five plates and I am full?”

Shayde responds, “They are being nice.”

“But then when I can’t eat anymore they get insulted,” I respond in confusion.

“Yes taarof is bad,” she says, “They know you can’t eat more, but they are being nice, so you just put a little tiny bit on your plate and eat it.”

“Well what if you don’t pay the cab driver, say thank you, and get out of the cab?”



“He will cuss you out and call the police!” Shayde laughs.

The truth is *taarof* is a complex system of linguistic exchange in Iran’s social system, difficult to explain in a few short paragraphs. *Taarof* is a term which describes the verbal and nonverbal ritual relating to politeness in interaction. As explained by Taleghani-Nikazm Masoomeh, the term has various possible English translations including “compliment,” “ceremony,” “formality,” “good manners,” and “respect” (235). In Iranian monolingual dictionaries, *taarof* appears with such meanings as “to know one another,” “to greet/welcome one another,” and “offer a present” (Masoomeh 14), or as contextualizes “the active, ritualized realization of different status interactions” (Beeman Language 312).

Needless to say, the practice presents itself in a myriad of interactions, and a successful performance (one in which both parties walk away pleased) depends on what I see as an understanding of a situation’s “level of intensity,” a perception gauged by questions such as: What is the relationship between the interactants? Are they social equals? Family members? Strangers? Is the situation formal (e.g. business meeting), or informal (e.g. husband and wife)? Is one person indebted to another (e.g. favor giving situation)? Is the transaction small or large (e.g. offering a drink to a guest or talking with someone whose car you just smashed)? As William O. Beeman, paralleling Farsi to Japanese best explained, “Farsi is a language with a very simple grammatical structure, and a rich set of idiomatic expressions that help individuals to convey accounts of their feelings” (“Emotion” 37).

While the topic deserves more attention of its own than is relevant for this study, I think *taarof* is worth a brief illustration, simplified for general understanding.

Speaker 1: I insist

Speaker 2: No, I could not.

Speaker 1: It is nothing really.

Speaker 2: No, I would not feel right.

Speaker 1: You have to I would feel awful if you didn't.

Speaker 2: I would feel worse.

Or

Speaker 1: Oh what a surprise.

Speaker 2: I would not dream of anything different.

Speaker 1: You should not have.

Speaker 2: I would not dream of doing things any other way.

Speaker 1: I am so embarrassed.

Speaker 2: No, it is I who should be embarrassed, this is surely not enough

Taarof was particularly difficult for me to understand and perform, and each time I encountered it in social interaction only made it more unclear. I had some knowledge of taarof prior to entering the field. While in Iran, I gathered more information about it, and I attempted to taarof myself. Soon, I discovered I could/would never fully grasp the complex interrelational frames embedded within the wide range of interpretive codes. Taarof became an "is-not/is" paradox. Shayde once told me, taarofing is at once an "expected and detested practice."

"I don't believe in taarof," "Taarof is ridiculous," or "I don't taarof," "Taarof is bad," she says on one hand. "Taarof is good," "I was taarofing," "You should taarof in that instance," "You have to taarof," and "You cannot *not* taarof," she says on the other hand.

Interestingly, I continuously witnessed Shayde taarof. Her well-cultivated sense of social propriety results in her constant taarofing, because it is so closely linked to notions of politeness. When it came time to interpret and theorize on transcriptions and field notes, I was unsure of how much of my interactions with Shayde I actually understood. As an ethnographer, I am at best a novice on Iranian culture. Raised in the United States, I am more familiar with American-Iranian

identity and customs, a hybrid of the two cultures blending American individualism with an Iranian sense of collectivity. Speaking personally, this intermingling of cultural identities has raised difficulties in understanding social situations. Overall, I stand out as an American in Iran; I am “oddly bold and amazingly straight forward,” as Shayde puts it. Moreover, in America, my lifetime of being around Iranian’s taarofing has on an occasion earned me the characteristic of “passive-aggressive.” I discovered partaking in high-context exchanges relying heavily on common cultural and social background over words was a struggle (Hall Beyond 106). I was a novice, the women were experts. A bit later in this chapter you will see an example of this struggle, in a section where I detail a luncheon invitation. Was the invitation based on a desire to share a meal? Was she taarofing because in Iran it is polite to invite visitors over for a meal? Alternatively, some combination of both and more?

Luckily, Shayde had wisdom and intuition I realized only after my fieldwork was complete. Reviewing transcripts, I noticed how much of the contents of Shayde’s narratives were pragmatic (for lack of a better term). Her stories began by drawing a map of Iranian social do-and-don’ts, cultural systems, politics, and norms. “Taarof is \_\_\_\_.” “It means \_\_\_\_.” “People do it when \_\_\_\_.” It was only after these instructional narrations that she offered examples from her own life, ones validating or highlighting her lessons. “My opinion on taarof is \_\_\_\_\_.”

Continuing to talk on the value of taarof, Shayde quickly pointed out that the Iran-Iraq war had “changed everything a great deal, like girls and boys schools became separate.” Shayde was a young girl around the age of five during the height of the Iranian Revolution, a time when many of the new government’s disciplinary sanctions were set in place. One of Shayde’s most vivid memories of these years is the bodily disciplining of her small, child materiality.

“Our school uniforms had bows, and we had to start covering our hair in accordance to the laws of Islam. My bow poked my *roosaree* [head covering],” she reminisces with an offbeat

giggle, the kind that comes out when things are not really all that funny. “But,” she went on in a happier tone, much of Iran’s social traditions remained, some in fact “strengthened because the Ayatollah was about remaining Iran, not losing ourselves to the West. Taarof, for example, endured the Revolution and all its mandated social and political changes.” Pausing for a moment, she added, “Some things will always remain in Iran.”

A candor existed in her narratives, one permitting fourth walls to come down. In other words, Shayde’s life was not “just happening” in a vacuum, or some empty stage space. In her performance of her oral history, she contemplates not only her actions, but also how she was coming to those actions and contemplations (Madison “Dialogic” 320). Separating and marking the cultural, social, historical, and political threads weaving in her actions and understandings, Shayde shows the reflexive, reflective, and reversible (Benjamin 85-87) powers of her storytelling voice. Her choices also bear on the generative nature of narratives.

To weave her way toward explaining taarof as a lasting Iranian social/cultural act, Shayde went back to the early 1970s: back to her being five, wearing a bow, a “red bow” that when she looked in the mirror “poked.” I imagine the shape of her head as she tells this story. I was not there, but her narrative transports us back to a time, a time that without her memory would have elapsed, but in her memory continues on. I picture Minnie Mouse, only with her head wrapped in black cloth.

To this childhood memory, Shayde has blended the narratives she has heard from Iranians who were adults at the time of the Revolution. In these storytelling situations, Shayde was not the teller, but an audience member. Because storytelling is dialogical, those narratives joined her own memories and understandings, a larger picture was drawn. In her performance of the value of taarof, an engagement of the dialogue between past/present ensued. In this space, Shayde utilized her memory to create a narrative that is “alive and active,” one that resists producing a “history

for passive consumption” (Frisch 23). Stories that were once told to her became a part of her experience, and her understandings of her own socio-political-personal embodiments; the connecting variables between Islamic laws, a five-year-old girl in a bow, and a segregated school system.

### **Traditional**

All the guests finished pouring into the apartment. Jahleh’s first assignment for Shayde was brewing tea. Remaining within the system of taarofing, she asked rather than told: “Shayde if you have a second do you think you could possibly look after the tea?”

In Iran, tea brewing is an art form. A conical urn-shaped device called a samovar brews the tea. From observations, I believe it is safe to assume every household, rich or poor, has at least one samovar. I saw this appliance virtually everywhere I went: in doctors’ waiting rooms, public offices, and courthouses. I even found the samovar in outdoor, public spaces. Portable samovars, ones that run on coal pieces rather than electricity, regularly turn up at picnics in the park, or on the grassy medians of street-ways. This latter picnic location commonly occurs in Tabriz. As Shayde sees it, “the traffic is heavy and people want to get outside, but they do not want the hassle of driving into a highly regulated park, or they are poor and use the grass plots like small, personal parks.”

The samovar is such a part of everyday life, in fact, that families in the upper socioeconomic classes usually own two or more of them. The first is for everyday use, made from a combination of several plain metals (copper, steel, silver, or aluminum). The second is generally larger, reserved for special occasions, and often plated with gold or engraved. Either way, fancy or everyday, tea made fresh from aromatic black tea leaves, and a delicately balanced tealeaf to water ratio, is an everyday part of life, as ritualistic as an American’s morning cup of coffee.

Lessons in tea service began in quite the informal manner. To be honest, I had not given the social and cultural practice much, if any, consideration; most of my research intentions and pre-field preparations revolved around personal narratives, and oral histories. I was thinking less about social order, and more about “What was your favorite toy?” Obviously, the process was naïve. No matter what question I was to ask, the social, cultural, historical order of Iran was eventually going to come into play.

For a long time I paid no attention to the repetitive appearance of tea. I tuned it out. Ignoring the bubbling sounds of water boiling. Overlooking the invisible aromas lofting from kitchen spaces into rooms I was occupying. Failing to observe the tranquility that washed over bodies stopping their daily laborious movements for a moment to commune, quietly, gently around a table. Sipping slowly a sugared substance serving no biological necessity, but satisfying a spiritual, sensual corporeal impulse. A craving for tea.

I began recognizing tea as a social phenomenon while spending time with Shayde. Whenever we began our interviews, she got tea; whenever she came over to visit Jahleh, she made tea. Day and night, there was tea brewing. Wanting to show appreciation for her hospitality, I always accepted the tea she offered. This was my act of taarof. I liked the tea well enough, but it made me have to run to the bathroom a great deal, and the caffeine kept me up through the long, black hours of virtually every night. I was exhausted from consuming more tea than my body could handle.

On one of these restless nights, I drifted into the living room. It was the third research trip to Iran, and I was staying with Shayde. Sometime close to sunrise, I mistakenly woke Shayde. Confused, but quite pleasantly she came out of her bedroom, walked over to the couch where I was sitting, struggling with a complex remote control device. Seyamak is fluent in several languages, so their satellite dish is perpetually pointing at the German or Russian broadcasting systems. In

order to redirect the satellite reception, you have got to know how to run the little black remote with its bewildering array of buttons.

“Good morning,” she smiled. “Did the sunrise prayer being broadcast from the mosque wake you up? The speakers are pretty loud when the window is open.” Gliding towards the samovar, using a match to ignite the gas, lighting the stove’s burner into a blue-yellow fire, she beamed, “The tea will be ready in just a few minutes.”

As it turned out, Shayde is as famous for her tea, as her mother-in-law is for her cooking, a reputation earned by her knack for pouring tea that is neither too dark nor too light—a talent she desperately tried to pass onto me, whom alas proved a rather poor student. However, brewing tea is only one part of the process. Alongside the task, there is also a full system of etiquette for its service. Tea service, or rather the rotation in tea serving (who is served first, second, or last), is intricately linked to cultural understandings of power and status.

Watching Shayde that evening, I later wrote in my field notes:

Giving out tea is quite ceremonious. Shayde went into the kitchen where Jahleh’s silver samovar stemmed feverously. Something about the hot metal and the fire beneath it made me nervous. The thing felt alive. Less like an appliance, more like a key. Not a guest, but one of *the guests*. One being honored. The party just would not be without that samovar. Jahleh would not have a party if there could not be tea. It would be “rude.” I stand back, nervous about the hot water. I watch Shayde. With an old cloth, transformed into a potholder, she begins lifting the teapot from on top of the samovar. I stare intently at the potholder. An orange square with brown and white lines riding thought it. Very seventies. Very deco. Iran is a country of conservation not consumption. I ask if home-made pot holders are the way to go. “It started as a sheet, then became a table cloth, next a curtain, into a place mat, and now it is a pot holder...soon it will clean the floors,” Jahleh timelines the textile’s occupation. An impressive resume. Shayde and I laugh.

The teapot is filled with tea leaves.

Water has been poured over them.

The samovar below is filled with water.

The water boils.

The heat and steam, causing the teapot sitting on top of it to heat up also.

Tea leaves steep.

Smell them.

Releasing their aroma.  
Hot water darkens.  
Shayde takes the filter.  
A nylon bag on the end of a plastic stick.  
She begins pouring the darkened, flavored water through it.  
The tea leaves are caught. Filtered out. Pour tea into teacup.  
Each glass on the silver tray gets a small amount.  
Less than half an inch worth of the tea. It is dark, bitter, and will be diluted (19 Aug. 2005).

“Light tea is less bitter,” Shayde explains.

How do you know who wants what?

“I know everyone.”

I am amazed. Not only by her memory but also by the fact that tea is drunk out of small glass cups, not mugs. The number of glasses filled should correspond to the number of people in the room. These glasses generally do not have handles. I can never use them. They burn my hand. But “you get used to it,” Shayde assures me, “and in the winter it is nice.” The heat of the tea warms your hands. Then your mouth. Then it glides down into your stomach, and body. Shayde takes the spiket in her hand. It too is hot to the touch. Rotating it ninety degrees to the right, holding each glass under it she dilutes the dark amber.

Golden brown.

The more water you add the “lighter the tea.”

Make sure not to pour dark

Make sure not to pour light

Place all the filled cups onto small platters.

Make sure to have plenty of sugar cubes.

Hold the platter in front of the guest.

Slightly bow, with your body forward,

Invite them to take a glass “Please.”



They will say oh no, no

Offering again

They will accept

Allow them to choose which glass they desire.

Then they will thank you

You will tell them you are not worthy to serve them (taarof).

From what I know, no survival book exists for this practice, no “Tea in Iran for Dummies.” While on the surface a seemingly mundane act (pouring a beverage in a cup and giving it to a guest), tea is actually a highly complex cultural practice; only in-depth knowledge and awareness of each group’s social/political/historical dynamics can “correctly” get one through the act.

There are “general rules of thumb.” However, they fluctuate and shift, interdependent on elements such as the presence and absence of particular individuals, place, and purpose of the gathering. Family affairs, those in which all participants are close kin, commonly function on an informal plane. In the everyday family configuration, the “general rule of thumb” is the eldest receive tea first, then the men, and finally the women. Formalization occurs at parties where non-family members or persons of certain social or political status in the community are in attendance. In these situations, service tends to flow from high status individuals down, favoring men.

For example, one evening while at Ozra’s house, with sons present, I witnessed Ozra receiving the first cup of tea. I later asked Shayde why she was served before the men. “It is because she is an elder, the mother, and a *hajji*, a person who has made the pilgrimage to Mecca,” she explained. This same evening, Jahleh and the Doctor arrived. Upon arrival, dictated by custom, the couple promptly was given tea. As the evening wore on, Shayde went to refresh

everyone's cups; I noted the Doctor, not Ozra, rotated into first position, at which time the Doctor declined, offering his turn as *first* to Ozra.

I found the Doctor's move surprising, given the normative flow of tea service. Decoding the gesture, Shayde explained, "Naturally part of the Doctor's positioning is based on him being a male, and his status as a Doctor." More importantly, she went on to add, "he is our visitor," the only member of the gathering not a blood relative, instead connected by marriage.

"Is this the same with everyone?" I asked.

"It just really depends on who you are and what is going on," Shade responded.

No matter how many times I watched or engaged in the activity of tea service, I committed a series of social faux pas; they ranged from the irritating (making the tea too dark), to humorous (forgetting to bring saucers), to the possibly insulting (forgetting one of the men). This in turn set a writing dilemma: How can I speak on something I cannot understand? Document an act that has no written script? I could easily observe the preparation and serving of tea and describe the process, but interpreting the performance, theorizing on its complex meaning(s) seemed a daunting task.

"It is okay, don't worry. You can talk about this new blend of serving tea you invented. Call it the American-Persian tea service. Just enjoy the party," Shayde said. I was slightly reassured by this, perhaps my "second order interpretation" (Geertz 15) would be okay, and no one would feel slighted.

Having gained this slight bit of confidence, on this particular evening I reached over to help Shayde, who at the time was seven months pregnant. Brushing off my contributions, she graciously continued to serve Jahleh's newly-arrived guests. Feeling awful about her working, I wondered if this was another taarof. Not knowing I asked, "Are you taarofing?" Her answer, as

expected, was, “No, of course not.” After several more attempts, I surrendered, and Shayde remained in full control of the tea.

With little to do but watch and learn, I continued to observe. At first, I was dismayed at standing around, feeling out of place, and in the way. Nevertheless, after a short period of time, my ability to subvert that social norm deeming staring rude and inappropriate, and I came to enjoy the freedom to look without diversion or restriction. The act gave me the chance to observe details I was apt to miss during interviews; my concerns about following the questions, thinking what to say next, and running the recorder superseded the game of detail hunting.

I began looking at Shayde carefully. If forced to choose, I would say Shayde’s eyes are her best feature. Larger than normal, almost cartoonish in manner, they are greener than brown. A sparkle and dance lives within them. While I had noticed the unusual beauty of her eyes when we first met, for some reason they shined with purpose this evening. Happiness burst from her face. She was “extremely happy” to be pregnant. During my first visit to Iran, she had asked me to “pray God would give them a baby.”

“It has been a difficult road,” she said teary-eyed. Seyamak is under a great deal of pressure. His salary, (and his salary alone), runs both his household and his parents’. Jahleh and Amhoo Doctor were “incredible spenders.” They still throw extravagant parties for all their friends, Shayde said disapprovingly.

“After the Revolution things got oppressed. There is little leisure. Freedom is little and the youth have two choices: go to the university or get married and have children.” In fact, rumor in Iran is that over 70% of the current population of the country (which is sixty one million) is under the age of thirty. “Revolution babies,” Shayde refers to hers and the generation after hers.

“Because I don’t go to the university I have nothing to do at home that has for me that dramatic level of growth,” she went on to explain.

Seyamak was hesitant about having a baby, wanting to “give the marriage some time.” He was very careful (“Too careful”) with protection, buying condoms, keeping them where she cannot get to them to “pin a hole,” double-, triple-checking them. Happily, I could see from Shayde’s large, protruding belly that the passage of time had changed Seyamak’s mind. When I asked she chuckled, “I finally convinced him I was 35, and my eggs are not getting any younger! My body was telling me it was time.” I chuckled alongside her, reminded that no matter where a person travels geographically, culturally, socially, there is something about the biological body and its material needs and limitations that can and does unify people.

As a female ethnographer I immediately linked to Shayde’s “my eggs are not getting any younger!” Mine neither, I thought. My biological cock is ticking too.

Panic and politics rush into my understanding of the ethnographic frame.

The undercurrent of scientific rationalism starts flowing.

Stop it I think to myself.

What am I doing?

I do not buy into scientific rationalism. I am on the side of Arthur Frank who argues the body is conceptualized by, represented, and respondent to a multiplicity of texts (institution, discursive, substance) (136). These texts inform our bodies which expectations and social disciplines operate in a given space and/or time. In our case: science says my ovaries lose there capacities with time and age, so I better hurry up and birth a baby, when in fact women can have babies well into their forties, “technically” up to menopause.

Forget about scientific rationalism.

What about feminism?

Seyamak’s obsessive control over the condoms – reproductivity aids literally limiting his bodily capacities, and in turn subjugating Shayde’s gender-given abilities. Without a doubt, I

could (and maybe should) offer a feminist critique on “power happening to” Shayde’s body (Butler Bodies 187), or as Elizabeth Bell may suggest, argue “*contextually* and *critically* disciplinary practices and discourses have operated more powerfully on women’s bodies than those of men” (191 emphasis by author).

But that is how I feel.

As mentioned earlier, the ethnographic method I pursue in this project is that which Dwight Conquergood identifies as “dialogic” performance ethnography (“Between” 46-47). This is the idea that storytelling is both a way of knowing, and an embodied act. I move away from theory

I find that hidden within, or perhaps better said – overshadowed by the politics of Shayde’s narrative is the beauty of collaboration, cocreating history, understanding difference. What her body is telling her is at once a uniquely “situated and material” (Langellier and Peterson 8). It is a knowing extending beyond rational explanation, and a collective ephemeral knowledge unique to, only for biologically female, feminine gender/ed bodies.

Empathy, sympathy surged towards Shayde’s ending, “My body is telling me it is time.” I was *feeling* that *feeling* of a deep corporeal desire to extend the body out, form another living breathing body through my own body, out of my own body, another body molded and stretched from my body. I sense *being* womanhood. My female body, her female body. Side by side, *feeling* the tick-tick-tock.

I kept on staring. Shayde was laughing at herself trying to maneuver her baby-filled stomach *and* a brimming tray of scorching tea around the fully occupied semi-circle of chairs. This laughter only increased as she noticed people leaning to see around her and continue their conversations!

“Oh my god, why doesn’t someone help her?!” I quietly said to the man beside me.

“Well, no one wants to miss out on her tea,” he answered, winking at me.

Yes, I know, I thought to myself.

In the midst of my ponderings, I hear Jahleh call out: “Shayde-*june* [dear],” “When you’re done come here.”

“Okay,” Shayde replies. After securing every guest tea, she zips back to the kitchen. I follow close behind.

Jahleh turns to Shayde explaining, “I am about to add some salt to the chicken. You should always add salt last. Chicken dries out if you add salt while it’s cooking.”

Smiling, Jahleh lifts the bubbling pan from the stove, asking Shayde to put out her hand. Politely complying with the request Shayde extends her hand towards Jahleh, because “no matter how naïve she treats me the respectful thing to do is listen,” Shayde says a short time later.

Pouring salt into Shayde’s hand Jahleh says, “Now, flick the salt in like so,” creating a tossing motion with her free hand.

“The rice is almost finished,” Jahleh adds, “Shayde-*june* can you take care of the saffron?”

Shayde walks over to Jahleh’s spice cabinet, which is filled to the brim with aromatic additives carefully placed into matching glass bottles, and finds the saffron for the rice. In Iran, a decorative pattern is drawn across the top of the white mound using liquefied saffron. To release the flavors, the saffron threads are first ground into powder and then steeped in water, a technique I found many people in the West unfamiliar with. I watch Shayde begin this necessary process.

Standing in the far left corner of the kitchen, steering clear of a very frantic and excited Jahleh, Shayde takes a pinch of the thread-like saffron, places it into a small, grey marble mortar, and begins slowly and deliberately to grind the saffron into tiny manageable shards. Tightly gripping the pestle, she raises and lowers it, pressing down on the saffron in a forward pushing

motion. The process looks laborious, this sense of work doubled by Shayde's belly. She cannot simply pound the pestle straight down into the mortar, she needs to throw her elbow out, make it parallel to the ground, curving around the baby, with a slight stretch to reach the counter-top. After a few minutes when all the threads are broken down into smaller pieces, she grinds some more. Without lifting her hand, Shayde spins the pestle in a clockwise circular motion, giving every inch of the bowl a finishing touch. I lean forward to peek in, finding the saffron resembling a bright orange ash.

“Why don't you just use a coffee grinder like I do?” I ask Shayde, thinking her method tedious.

Iran is a culture of tradition, and saffron symbolizes that tradition. For hundreds of years, Shayde explained, women have been grinding saffron into powder using mortars and pestles. Some are made of marble, while others are made of metals like brass and copper, or substances such as agate, porcelain, and granite. “I am proud as a woman to make saffron properly, according to history and tradition,” Shayde says, pouring boiling water over her powdery mixture, covering it and setting it aside to steep. “It is okay. That it takes a long time, or seems an ancient process. Mortaring saffron is part of being a proper woman in the kitchen. The women. Those of long ago. Knew things. How to make food taste good. Modern times don't change those lessons.” From my observations, saffron and mortars appear to be mainstays of every woman's kitchen, just as the samovar is.

### **Mothers-in-Law and Marriage**

As I see it, the most pleasant characteristic of parties is the fact they bring people together. Parties are gatherings. On this particular occasion, it is nice to watch Shayde and Jahleh working alongside one another, for as Shayde confessed in previous interviews, her relationship with Jahleh has been “pretty turbulent.”

When she and Seyamak began seriously dating Jahleh took great opposition. “Once we became serious, Seyamak stopping being with other women. They stopped calling. No girls called him anymore and if they did he would say ‘No! I have a girlfriend – don’t call me anymore.’ Jahleh got upset about that. She liked the fact her son was a good catch, and girls wanted to be with him,” Shayde said. Being a handsome young man in dental school, in combination with his father’s medical success and mother’s social notoriety in town, Seyamak was, as Shayde puts it, “One of the very important boys of Tabriz.” Jahleh preferred to keep all options open, and Seyamak’s decision to settle on one girl was not something she prepared for.

Shayde was not surprised by Jahleh’s reaction to her son’s courtship; the two families had been acquainted for some time, giving Shayde the opportunity to “get to know” Jahleh. Shayde’s family and Jahleh’s family lived in the very same apartment complex. In fact, their two homes faced each other.

I listened to the guests in Jahleh’s living room mingling, smelling cigarette smoke saturate the air. It was almost time to eat, so Shayde and I volunteered to set the table. Jahleh’s cozy dining area, designed for four or five people, quickly became snug as Shayde and I prepared the space for triple that amount of bodies. I wondered how this would work, but Shayde reassured me many guests would take their plates to other areas, including the floor where a *sofreh* was placed. A *sofreh* is simply a tablecloth, but rather than being draped over a table, it lies on the floor. As I had learned from Ozra, furniture pieces such as dining room tables were relatively new in Iran.

“We did not get those until, oh, 1950. Until then we ate on the floor,” she recalled.

Although atypical in the Western world, I could not help but think eating on the floor made perfect sense. From observations, families in Iran are large – larger than the seating arrangement of most dining room tables anyway. More importantly, families were close. As four



children got four husbands or wives, and together they had four children of their own, the family grew, or out-grew the dining room table one could say; too many bodies, not enough chairs.

I found the *sofreh* liberating, a spatial site where interacting, moving bodies sit in privilege over the disciplining, restrictive rule “sit-up straight in your chair” (Bowman 119). The *sofreh* is a creative, imaginative site. The floor transformed into an area where children and adults sit barefoot, unrestrictedly shifting, grooving their bodies in an act of personal comfort and discretion into different shapes and designs. The totalality of our bodies, the excess of buttocks, thighs, and calves, normally hidden under tables was fell into full view. Some diners sat Indian-style, their legs bent with sharp points at each knee. Others were leaning to the side, the soles of their feet exposed, the weight of their body pressing down on one arm. The *sofreh* became a space where individual embodied experiences contested “the relationships between the discursive construction of the [material] body with cultural and historical contexts” of dining manners. (Betterton 85).

I think I will sit at the *sofreh*, I was thinking to myself as Seyamak came over to place a kiss on Shayde’s cheek. She smiled and, realizing we were standing in the perfect location, she set down a spoon and continued her narrative of courtship.

“You can look right into our old dining room right from here. From here. Jahleh’s dining room window. Seyamak and I could watch each other eat,” Shayde said, pointing. With a certain vertiginous quality to her voice, she spins back in time, “Year upon year we were neighbors. I went to school. I was around seventeen, eighteen and Seyamak had returned from Germany. He was not doing well in dental school so he had to come and serve his military duty. He was the handsome type. Our apartments looked right into each other and we shared the same courtyard view. I would watch him come and go in his soldier uniform, and fantasize about him. Him being mine.”

Shayde drifts back into her memory, and I spin off into theory. I look intently at Shayde, but my intensity is in vain. I have no idea what is lurking in Shayde's memory bank, and try as I may, I cannot discern her thoughts.

I think to myself, if I approached this moment from Judith Butler's perspective, I think I could claim it is neither performance nor performativity, as performance shows too much, and performativity is a reiteration of norms (Excitable 33). Shayde's fantasy is a creative, ubiquitous desire elusively her own. It stays that way, until she chooses to narrate it, or portions of it. If not a performance or performativity what is it? What term can we apply for three modes of time colliding: the *doing* (fantasizing), the alluring to *become* (fantasy), the *recalling* (fantasized)? What can we call parts of the fantasy that are now true (he is hers)? The fantasy, a virtual reality something like what Jon McKenzie talks about in his work on virtual reality and telepresence performances where machines unite with man, and metal and wire and electricity shift from instruments to "medium for expression of content" ("Virtual" 88). Jahleh's fantasy of new furniture is like a "perfumace," a disintegration of her current state, her current furniture, a process of in(ter)vention and invention (McKenzie Perform 228) of a new space to inhabit, a space of richer, lusher seats. Expect there is no external machine or shadows of light to play with, only Jahleh's corporeality bringing her to cathartic pleasure, displacing actual reality with material pleasurable. Perhaps a perfurmuosity?

Another small grin emerges on her face. Her teeth are white. She meditates briefly, her body and mind straddling the *now* and the *then*. Taking in a deep breath, Shayde releases a chuckle, her shoulders bouncing lightly up and down in unison with her contracting abdominal muscles. She lowers her eyelids, sets a soup ladle down on the dinner table, and then looks back up through long, black lashes, biting her bottom lip. Her face shifts again, she confesses, "And when he got married to someone else, I watched Seyamak and his wife coming and going."

Seyamak's first wife turned out to be, as Jahleh and Shayde both agree, "a gold-digger." Needless to say, the marriage, after only three years, ended in divorce. And since Seyamak's first marriage was a failure, and since he had chosen this gold-digger of a woman to be his wife, and since the relationship bitterly dissolved leaving him heartbroken, Jahleh in her typical bossy fashion decided that "she, not Seyamak, would choose wife number two."

**Shayde:** My mother told me when we got serious that, "You'll never catch him [Seyamak] because mother and father of his won't allow it." And Seyamak told me this was true. I really found out by myself. I saw what was going on. His mother, when she found out I was with Seyamak, and he was with me ummm... The relationship was bad. She would not even say "hello," or "how are you." She would just turn her face the other way. And his father behind my back would *repeatedly* swear about me saying, "Shayde is bad. Is like this or like that. I will not allow you to marry her. I'll throw you out of the dental office." And their friends would always say to Seyamak "You should remove your hands from that project. She is no good."

**Oli:** Were you worried they would ruin your relationship?

**Shayde:** Okay so when I – when Seyamak would not allow me to marry someone else. Because my family had introduced me to someone else. Seyamak and I had this talk, about our friendship. I said, "There is no sense in what we are doing anymore. I come to Tabriz to see you. You come to Tehran to see me. I want to marry you. If you want to marry me stay [in Tehran]. If you don't want to then good-bye." It was *very* hard. A couple of times we said our goodbyes, but Seyamak returned. A *couple* of times. He *continuously* called, *continuously* he sent his friends to tell me he was a good boy. "No I

want. I want to get married.” I would say “Okay.” *Then* two days later he would say “*Now* if we just stay friends a little while with each other. Maybe my mother and father will become supportive. Then he would say “I must have my mother and father’s blessing give or I can’t marry you.” Then *why* did come you again?! Finally, the last time, I cut off my mobile phone —two months and a half— my mobile was off. And the house telephone I did not answer, *not at all*. Seyamak would have his friends call. But I didn’t talk with any of them.

Soon Shayde’s hair began to fall out, she lost a great deal of weight, and battled perpetual diarrhea. This was “physical torture.” The emotions Shayde shared were base, raw, and so indicative of the connection between the mind, body, spirit. Shayde thinks her body was expunging the pain of her heartbreak: “Heart of mine he broke,” in literal translation. According to Shayde, the sadness of losing Seyamak actually broke the material, corporeal life-force beating in her chest. After this, the rest of her body crumbled. As she tells me this part of her story, she reaches to touch her hair, securing that the “clumps” are back, and I think I detect a small blush on the word “diarrhea.”

Eventually Seyamak came to Tehran, pounding on her door and “crying for forgiveness,” ready for marriage. After some negotiations and discussions and “two days of keeping him hanging,” Shayde accepted his proposal. Jahleh and Amhoo Doctor were displeased, demonstrating their displeasure by forfeiting participation in the wedding preparation process. Unlike in the Unites States, where the bride’s family is traditionally financially responsible for the ceremony and reception, in Iran it is the husband’s family who is in charge. “They did not even talk to me or my family until one week before the wedding,” Shayde recalled. Seyamak did everything himself.

While patrilineal control over the marriage process could be read as another instance of patriarchal hegemony, Shayde understood it differently: “The bride gets her day to be celebrated and pampered.” On her “special day,” at least, a woman should not have stress, work, or worry. Furthermore, I think it is important to note that it is the groom-to-be’s *family*, not the husband’s male relatives, who is responsible for the wedding’s monetary and preparatory responsibilities. Of course, in earlier years the *family*’s financial responsibility fell squarely on the groom-to-be’s father (as women did not generally work outside the home), but now, with many households in which both genders work, the groom-to-be’s mother and father contribute.

Clearly, the concept of female commodification and exchange can be attributed to the syntax of this system (i.e., male kin paying for the wedding as bride-price). But I find the Iranian approach empowering and preserving of the bride’s agency. The idea that she and her family are, as Shayde put it, “given the gift of physical and mental rest” is positive. In taking financial responsibility for the wedding ceremonies and reception, the husband’s family is not lording over, but rather showing gratitude for, the bride’s role in forging familial alliances, as well as her acknowledging her very important role as the bearer of the next generation’s lineage.

Throughout her explanation of her wedding process, Shayde interjected lessons on marriage as a whole. Although arranged marriages are quickly becoming an outdated custom in the larger metropolitan areas of Iran, she said, other traditions continue to play a vital role in the process. The *mehreyeh* was one example.

“In Iran attorneys, not religious figures, preside over the vows. In Arabic, he asks the woman three times, ‘Do you give permission for the two of you to be married under God?’ The first and second times the woman does not give an answer. The third time he asks, ‘Are you happy with this arrangement?’ Then once the girl says yes, the attorney says the amount of the *mehreyeh*”--defined as money put aside as a security measure-- “like a fine in case the boy wants

to ruin the marriage,” Shayde says. “The thing is that whenever I want this money from Seyamak he has to give it to me. If he refuses, I can call the police and he must sit in jail.”

From Shayde’s explanation, I gather a mehreyeh resembles a prenuptial agreement. “Who decides how much the mehreyeh is going to be?” I ask.

While in more traditional, conservative marriages, the male members of the bride and groom’s families decided the mehreyeh, according to Shayde, modern day brides and grooms negotiate their own items and amounts. “Monetary amount can be picked out by, let’s say, a birthday,” Shayde explained. “For example, I was born in one thousand nine hundred seventy-two, so Seyamak would have to give me one thousand nine hundred seventy-two coins if the marriage is ruined or if I demand it. Or, the couple may pick the year of the marriage, or the number of Imams in Islam. Really anything. Normally couples make the amount symbolic.”

Once the couple agrees upon an amount, they respectfully present the figure to both fathers for negotiation and final approval. For the most part, Shayde continues, if couples set their own mehreyeh this step is just a formality, a sign of respect.

“In cases where the fathers still do decide, the father of the bride always wants a high mehreyeh, in case the boy turns out to be bad and a divorce becomes necessary,” Shayde says, releasing a giggle. She adds, “The groom’s father never wants a high mehreyeh because they do not want to pay! And the minute the girl wants the money, they have to give her the money! I could ask Seyamak right now for the money. Could ask him because I am mad he stayed out late, or forgot my birthday. Also, in a divorce, the man must pay before the courts will consider him single and free from further obligations.”

Although Shayde did not know the origins of the mehreyeh, I found the concept quite clever, favoring the matriarchal lineage. Islamic law favors the male, granting him a minimum of two-thirds of the family wealth. Historically, this is a sensible formula, since men earned all the

family's assets. In this situation, a high mehreyeh guaranteed a woman had means from which to move forward with her life after a separation from her husband. The mehreyeh shifts its meaning in modern times, since women work outside the home, often contributing equally to the household wealth. In this light, a high mehreyeh is not an economic safety net for her post-divorce, but rather a balancing out of the two-thirds law. The woman leaves with closer to her share of the marriage's accumulated assets.

In addition to a designated amount of gold, the mehreyeh also contains symbolic or sentimental objects. For her mehreyeh, Shayde requested the family Quran, a mirror, one of two silver candleholders lighted during her marriage ceremony, a single long-stemmed rose, and one gold coin. Collapsing all she had described with the fact Seyamak is a doctor, I found a single gold coin a rather small sum for a mehreyeh.

“The single stem represents love, the mirror and candle a time when we were fortunate and young. And the Quran as a reminder to have faith,” Shayde explained. “And one gold coin, because nothing will ever reach the value of Seyamak. He is worth one million gold coins.”

### **Food and Relationships**

Jahleh has no daughters of her own, only three sons. As she explains it her “son's wives are her daughters.” She is particularly fond of Shayde's openness to improve her cooking skills, always making time to teach Shayde how to cook Seyamak's favorite foods. I wondered if, given Shayde's turbulent history with Jahleh, this collaborative activity in the domestic sphere helped bring them closer.

**Shayde:** Boys were constantly with one another for example wrestling, playing robbers with guns. However, we girls were about cooking.

**Oli:** How exactly did you come to know girls cook?

**Shayde:** No, we were not taught these things were what girls did, like in school.

Like a math lesson. In many ways, we learned because we saw our mothers, aunts, grandmothers cook. We watched and imitated.

**Oli:** Did you feel limited in what you could do?

**Shayde:** No. Families are close in Iran. Women help one another, are around each other. As a young girl I was taught to respect my mother. She was a role model. I wanted to be around her. I related to her. I like to cook. It is a sign of respect to carry on her lessons. To demonstrate I listened and learned her from her lessons.

When this research first began, I viewed Iranian women's emphasis on learning and properly enacting domestic activities (e.g. cooking, sewing, and hostessing) as pernicious, an obvious example of the "cult of womanhood." From this initial vantage point, meal preparation required the female body to stay in the home, binding her agency to domesticity and maintaining a phallogocentric system of binary oppositions (Irigaray 33).

I formed a clear-cut theory: as the women confined themselves to the domestic affairs of the home, their men were outside and in charge of economic and political pursuits; interpreting the kitchen as nothing more than an engendered scene, coded as the only site in which women have any source of influence or power (Bowman 119). This misconception about domesticity arose from Western ideas of gender roles. More accurately, my assumptions were pulling on Betty Friedan, who in *The Feminine Mystique*, suggested that women were forced to stay home because of ideological strangleholds, and this sanction "narrowed woman's world down to the home, cut her role" (7). However, as Shayde performed her oral history, she began to reveal complex relationships and intragroup communal identities.



There proved to be an intimate relationship between food and family identity in Iran, particularly female family identity. So much so that within networks of female relationships parts of a women's social identity were directly linked to the masterful creation of a perfect dinner spread. Shayde once said a woman is considered a lady when "you go to her house and she always has the finest meats and tidiest spread." All three women I discuss in this project took great delight in the small competitions sparked amongst them to top one another's talents in crafting the perfect platter of basmati rice, by tweaking this or that on the recipe, and receiving the coveted expressions of approval afterward from their guests.

Recipes in Iran are not written but inherited. Of course there are cookbooks in Iran, but as Shayde explained an important factor in the "mother-daughter relationships is the passing down" of food preparation techniques. Shayde learned from her mother how to make "the special patties," and her mother learned from her mother and so on. Now that she is a daughter-in-law Jahleh teaches Shayde her tricks.

"After a few months of being married, Jahleh invited me over. She wanted to show me all the foods Seyamak likes, and how to make them all," Shayde explained.

"Is this typical, for a husband's mother to teach cooking?" I asked.

"Sure. If you are a good cook, she'll tell you the favorite foods and her method. I am not a very good cook. I am trying. Seyamak is very nice about it. He never says 'This is bad' or anything. I think Jahleh knew I was not that great of a cook. So she taught me some things," Shayde confessed, "I needed to know."

I was not surprised to hear Jahleh had been helpful. "I love food," she has said to me, while grabbing her plump sides. Considering cooking an art, Jahleh continuously hones her craft, taking classes ranging from cake making to Chinese cuisine at the local women's center. Wishing I were a better cook, I asked Jahleh many questions. I found her a generous teacher,

always willing to share recipes and swap tricks of the trade – something I found many of her contemporaries unwilling to do. They preferred to keep their recipes family secrets, as there is mild, friendly competition among family lines in Tabriz.

Orally transmitted, the passing-on of recipes marks the continuation and transference of female kinship and matrilineage. Sharing the story of how to create a food item privileges family as institution and as agency (Langellier and Peterson 113). Women take up the last generation's performances; special recipes and secret ingredients are recognized by diners as family metatestimonials. As Erving Goffman has argued, in order for groups to know themselves and others, they must “announce” their identities (212-213). And in Iran, one of the important ways women announce their matrilineal identities is through the olfactory and gustatory senses, rather than through words or pictures.

Barbra Kirshenblatt-Gimblett writes “Unlike other material manifestations of social life, which can be built and left to stand, food is perishable, ephemeral, constantly renewed by women in their kitchens” (“Kitchen” 77). She goes on to argue food and all of its interweaving acts are about *doing* (e.g. consumption), *making* (e.g. production), and *staging* (e.g. display) (“Playing” 1). In other words, food is a performance medium.

As much as cooking in Iran is predisposed by social structures, it simultaneously generates a space of embodied experience. A *prise de conscience* (Hanks 70), of being a body, a laboring body creating, slicing, dicing a meal, and a consuming body as the mouth draws in the specially chosen spices and seasoned food, igniting the taste buds, which send a frenzied delighted messages; pushing the warm bites down, muscles contracting sliding them through the throat.

In Shade's narrative, we see the seemingly repetitious nature of food preparation (make another meal), cultural production (body labor), and mimetic qualities (use the recipe) are

inseparable from the body. Recipes are transmitted from mother to daughter. The stage directions in them shifting from hand-to-hand, some spicier than others, some with this ingredient substituted for that ingredient. Food becomes deeply inscribed in and with the very bodies of individuals. As Shayde learns the cornerstones of making a great eggplant dish from Jahleh, she also adds her own touch. Where Jahleh garnishes with sweetly sautéed onions and mint, Shayde tosses on roasted garlic and almond slivers.

If food is a performance medium, then it can be argued Shayde's narrative on food is a performance within a performance. In my opinion, Shayde's narratives on food as well as her food preparation reveal a dialectical relationship between practice and structure. Recipes are linguistic in nature. Knowing how to cook is a social expectation and practice for women. At the same time, recalling a recipe a performance of memory, making a dish an enactment. Alongside, the ultimate consumption of food is both corporeally objective (necessary to survive) and materially suited (enjoyment, pleasure of taking in).

When collapsed, the whole picture (recipe, preparing, consuming, sharing the story) is an embodied communicative action, at once product, produce, and production.

Soyynini D. Madison argues:

... the teller's [cook's] symbolic practice is reflexive. It theorizes itself; it uses its own theories of itself to tell us what it means. Narrative performance [recipe production] is thus not only "doing something in culture," it involves an ongoing self-reflexive analysis and critique of what it is doing" ("Oral" 321).

In comparing her own cooking to and speaking of other women's cooking abilities Shayde used two phrases: "*Daste koob dar eh*" and "*zaboonesh farque dar eh*." The former literally translates "she has a good hand," a statement whose figurative equivalent is "she has a nice touch." This is a compliment given to cooks who have not only mastered a recipe, but enhanced it with their own personal variations. The later is "her tongue has difference," or no two

people taste alike; this statement is the passive, polite method of sharing a constructive critique or negative assessment.

“Lets say the food is too salty,” Shayde tells me, “then you say the food was a little salty, but then *zaboonesh farque dar eh* [her tongue has a way of not being insulting].”

Either way, as compliment or critique, Shayde’s explanation of the statements return us back to the body. The female body kneading, chopping, slicing, mixing, making. Both genders consuming, biting, chewing, swallowing, embodying *taste*.

I watch Shayde and Jahleh in the kitchen, hovering over the rice cooking in a large silver pot. Pinching off a few grains, she pops the rice in her mouth and smiles.

“Hmmm. tastes perfect,” she says.

I am still slightly suspicious. Theoretically, cooking and food are utopic sensual embodiments (for the people who enjoy it anyway). Literally, cooking is laborious. Tonight’s meal has taken Jahleh three days of constant preparation. She has been ‘slaving’ in the kitchen all day. In Iran, there is little “pre-made” food. Most everything is from scratch. Standing back, taking a different look, I see sweat and fatigue on Jahleh’s face as she frantically slides from one pot to another.

**Oli:** Does it make you mad you have to stay at home and cook all day?

**Shayde:** Mad?! No, no, no. I can take naps and pick whatever I want to make. I can practice being a good cook. When everything comes to an end, people still have to eat food to survive. I know how to make the chicken.

**Oli:** Why don’t you work outside of the home? Do you have to stay home and cook?

**Shayde:** I do have a job. It is our job to *create* the home.

It appears Shayde views her home as a creation. Her use of the plural “we” suggests that other Iranian women agree with her perceptions. Shayde speaks for herself, and also for the women of her culture. While the men concerned themselves with financial and logistical affairs, women give rise to the home through imagination and aesthetics.

In her narrative Shayde exiles the male-centered approach, rendering herself an independent rather than interdependent agency. As she suggests, Seyamak is not even considered as part of the scene, “he is always gone out of the home. It’s *our* house, but really *my* house. If Seyamak were living alone, there would be nothing but a couch and a TV.”

Like her mother-in-law, Shayde loves to throw dinner parties. However, more than dinner parties, she “loves to have luncheons.” With the table set, and the food coming to completion, I helped Shayde make the salad dressing for Jahleh’s guests. She turned and said, “You should come to our house for lunch this week.”

As much as I longed to travel across town, a journey that would allow me the opportunity to explore another Tabrizian neighborhood and Shayde and Seyamak’s new apartment, as Jahleh’s helper I learned that preparing for guests is not as carefree or casual a process as this offhand “drop by for lunch” invitation suggested. Hostesses work diligently for several days prior to such events, doing all the shopping, cleaning, setting the table, and food preparation.

As I mentioned earlier, unlike in the United States where frozen goods and ready-made packets transform food preparation into “a quick and easy” job, in Iran cooking remains an arduous task. It seemed everything was made from fresh ingredients, each purchased from its respective location: meat from the butcher, vegetables from the produce stand, fruit from the market, and so forth. Moreover, recipes are multilayered and complex, requiring a great deal of time and superb recollection skills.

One dish, *ghorme sabze* [sauce of greens] has a base created from cups and cups of onions, spinach, parsley, and coriander, each tediously chopped to varying levels of fineness and then individually sautéed. According to Shayde the seasoned cooks not only sauté ingredients and in a specific order, releasing the oils and juices at just the right time while maintaining textures, they also chop in a particular order so as to minimize any wilting or juices escaping.

This creative, thoughtful cooking also produces an abundance of food. Frequently guests arrive at a luncheon presented as “just a small bite, nothing big” to find a full spread of the most flavorful sweets, freshest fruits, and finest teas accompanying a three-course meal of salad, entrée, and desert. From my observations, there is a certain pride for a hostess thoroughly giving “attention to the body” (de Certeau 154) of her guests, a satisfaction in knowing what they fancy tasting, chewing, sipping, being aware of their guests’ delightful cravings, and fulfilling those corporeal desires.

Knowing the amount of time and energy it took to host a meal, early in fieldwork I declined all invitations. Wanting to make the research process as unobtrusive as possible for the women, there was awkwardness in accepting Shayde’s invitation. Worrying she would be placed in a position of physical stress (being pregnant), and quite possibly financial hardship (inflation is a serious issue in Iran, and as mentioned in the previous paragraph, a hostess purchases an abundance of food) declining the invitation seemed the appropriate decision.

“Oh no. I couldn’t,” I said to Shayde.

“It will be no big deal. Very small. Nothing really, I am not going to do anything but throw some food together,” she gently said; an expected response, this disclaimer accompanies most invitations.

Quickly, I found myself in another taarof-driven conversation:

**Shayde:** I insist. It would be joyful to serve you.

- Oli:** No, I can't accept the invitation. It will be too much trouble, and I will feel shameful.
- Shayde:** We will have fun. Really.
- Oli:** I couldn't!
- Shayde:** I am insisting. Do it for me.
- Oli:** How about for me you don't do it.
- Shayde:** Lunch!
- Oli:** I'm not hungry. I am fat and I have taken up a diet.
- Shayde:** Perfect. Me too! I will only make salad. Very brief. Around 2:00?

While speaking for *all* the households of Iran would be presumptuous, from what I observed, luncheon hours generally fell in between the hours when the men were absent from the home. Some luncheons preceded a husband's arrival home for his afternoon nap, others were after his departure back to the office. According to Shayde, she picks these time frames "so Seyamak can rest." The men work all day, in the office, at medical practices, at the bazaar, many having sporadic hours, and need to have their afternoon naps.

Luncheons play an important role in matrilineal kinship and relational development. In the domain of alimentary functions the women come together to form "a circle," as Jahleh calls it, a space and time Shayde operationalizes "to discuss, celebrate, gossip, and support one another." The fact is, gender roles play an important part in the everyday lives of Iranian women and men; the women I spoke with had woman-centered concerns and desires they mark as separate from the men. In Shayde's opinion, "this was very good." While material politics vary culturally, undeniably body practices such as "pregnancy and birth will always remain in the hands of the feminine" domain. As she explained it, luncheons (or circles) are celebratory spaces in which the women are able to "share amongst ourselves matters that are our own."

As Shayde relentlessly contested each of my protestations, I realized that “No, thank you” was an unacceptable answer. “How long can/should this go on?” I thought. Before I was able to finish my thought, and much to my surprise, Shayde looked straight into my eyes, confessing an ulterior agenda. “I want to be able to show you pictures that match my stories, so you can see the things, like my wedding, I am talking about. Besides it is ritual for us to routinely have guests, especially ones from far away,” she said, going on to explain that dinner parties and luncheons are ways in which the people of Iran celebrate one another, get to know each other, and establish and maintain community. “I would feel bad if you don’t gather around my table at least once during your stay and have me cook for you. How else will you become a real Iranian?” Shayde added. Tilting her head to the side, smiling and nodding “yes,” she continued to insist, “Please come over for lunch. Whatever day is easiest for you!”

As her statements hit my ears, registering in my mind, I felt embarrassed. I was re-colliding with my Western vices of control and predetermination. In a very powerful way turning down Shayde’s invitation to share a meal reinforced the exact researcher/“Other” relationship I desperately sought to overcome. I was, as Julia Kristeva puts it, recoiling from “the in-between, the ambiguous” (Power 4). With her invitation, Shayde was not only providing the tangible gift (food), but also a lesson on how to “do research” in Iranian culture, with Iranian women.

### **Framed Imagery**

For our luncheon, Shayde arrived by taxi to pick me up. Although I had insisted on finding my own way, her home is located on the opposite end of Tabriz and, being a kind and generous individual, Shayde would not hear of my journeying alone.

Knowing we would be in the taxi for close to 45 minutes, I brought along my small tape-recorder. I asked Shayde if she would give a driving tour. Luckily, we had a “good taxi driver,” one that was anti-establishment, who did not mind Shayde’s “exposing the culture to an



American.” And so, as we wound our way through the city of Tabriz, Shayde picked out things that stood out for her, offering small narratives.

“This is the same way we come from airport. Where the poor people live.” Reaching her left arm across my chest she points to the right and to the sky, “That house. That small white one in the middle of those metal fences. That is one *mosque*.”

My gaze follows her finger, tracing an imaginary line high up the mountainside. I see a small, round blurb far in the distance. It looks like a cotton ball, I think, or perhaps a marshmallow. Shayde continues on with the architecture’s history, “It is named after Onib de Ali – son of an Imam. I do not know which Imam, but he is buried there.” There is a brief pause. Shifting from archive and history to repertoire and memory she says, “Those mountains are very pretty. When we were kids this whole area below and alongside the mountains were gardens with all kinds of trees. None of the area looked like it does now. There were no houses.”

Sadness falls over her face, an unusual expression for a normally happy and smiling Shayde. Rolling down the dust covered taxi window she asks our driver to stop for a moment, and directs him to a desolate area behind a set of worn apartment buildings. Getting out of the car, cool air hits our faces. It is relatively quiet, except for the hum of the taxi’s engine and the flapping of clothes, sheets, and other assorted items hung on porch clotheslines to dry in the wind coming off the mountain.

“See! There – a garden is left!” she says pointing to some unnamed backyard, “This area was only gardens. My father would bring us here, we would go climb the mountain to the Mosque and play in gardens.”

Shayde gestures, sweeping her hand across the scene. In front of us, the earth pushes high into the air, a massive mound of earth. A large, rich mineral body scarred golden brown and purple from copper oxidization, jolting thousands of feet into the air. Its hefty body quickly

disintegrates as Shayde's hand sweeps across her chest, extending out, and entering into my field of perception. She freezes, in a position similar to a small child reaching with all her might for the cookie on the countertop. Closer than the other objects, her fingers, wrist, skin, and joints appear gigantic, inadvertently dwarfing the backdrop mountain. The Mosque somehow seems even smaller, the white fleck in the distance, not a cotton ball or marshmallow, but an individual snowflake.

We stand on a ledge that scoops down, transforming into a flat area now covered with square, brick houses with black smokestacks. An impoverished neighborhood of Tabriz, the homes are built from salvaged materials, debris left over from larger structures hit by bombs. This recycling gives the homes a dirty look, old and yellowed. Physically, we are far from this neighborhood, both in latitude and in elevation. I figure we must be standing on a neighboring mountainside, looking down into a valley. Like peering from an airplane window, tiny bodies move about miniature primitive roads, littered with tiny toy-like automobiles.

At once Shayde pulls on multiple memories, of her childhood, of her body's relationship to space, of times of play. We stand for a few moments, taking in the transformation. Shayde noted the adjusting details from her memory, replacing grass with concrete, and me imagining variations, blooming trees I had never seen but now knew of from her narrative. I notice the steep climb up the snowcapped mountainside, maybe Shayde sees it is as the sound of crisp, child's feet crumbling leaves, crisp small shoes crunching snow, crisp excited youth on a sky bound mission. While I may notice the steep climb up the cold snow mountainside, Shayde recollects the tasty crystals: "free ice cream," she says.

There was a sense of improvisation. Shayde pointed out typical tourism sights like public monuments, but she also pulled on her personal relationships to the cityscape as her eye caught

things whizzing by. Some parts of Tabriz Shayde knew she was going to talk about, others, like the mountainside, jumped at her along the way.

There is also randomness embedded in Shayde's taxi tour. The roads and streets our automobile traveled, our point A to point B, were predictable and continuous enough, but we could not have predicted the other bodies we would encounter. People coming and going, in motion and movement, on two at least two planes.

That man crossing the street, us in an on coming car.

Him moving on his legs, us hurling through space past him.

Taking out my camera, I shoot a picture of the mountainside. Two girls now walking behind the apartment building nervously glance at us. Their faces look suspicious of the tape recorder and a digital camera. Our cab driver gets nervous. He knows we can get in trouble for recording.

First, there is security issue. As mentioned earlier, Iran's clerical system of government is extremely careful about media exposure, and highly protective of the stories exiting Iran's borders. Alongside government perceived security risks, there are religious implications to photography. In the Quran, there are passages on idolatry, and some interpret those passages to mean that Islamic culture condemns all recreations of human images, including photography. Only Allah is able to create life, Shayde explained. Given this, I was surprised to find that most people did not consider photography sinful. I did meet one old, highly religious woman who refused to be photographed, but this is my only example. I am speaking of course only of the private sphere. In public, I felt as if everyone opposed or presented an image of opposing photography. I believe this reaction was because of the political order, which demands citizens be pro-government and pro-Islam.

I sense the taxi driver's tension. Shayde looks at him, nodding her head in apology. Quickly snapping one last image, a photograph of the back of two girls walking past the mountainside, Shayde, the cab driver, and I clamor back into the safety of the taxi. Tucking the digital camera safely into my purse, turning to Shayde I ask: Why does the government fear photographs of people? Why is photography of people translated as idolatry?

From Shayde's understandings, photography remains an enigma and a Western concept. While the middle and upper class populations of metropolitan areas like Tehran, Tabriz, Esfahan are accustomed to photography, for the lower socioeconomic and more rural areas, she explains photography retains its newly emergent qualities, and is linked to the royal class, the first individuals to have sufficient resources to access photographic technology. Early in Iranian photographic history, most images were of kings and their families. "The people who don't have enough experience with pictures can not understand it is not sinful. They have been taught to hate the West and love Islam. Many are too uneducated to think anything different," she says. After a brief pause she adds, "In pictures you can really pass on the truth, everyone can see you. Not like words. Words lie and everyone can't read them."

Although Shayde is speaking specifically on the government's relationship to photographs and propaganda, I believe Shayde raises an important, wider ranging argument: photographs of people, or more precisely the images of individuals harbored in them, exceed the rhetorical powers of text, and are themselves a performativity. In my opinion, her statement advances a series of interdependent points: (1) photographs have a mobility lacking in text, (2) imagery is a stronger form of persuasion, (3) the visual experience of images provides a truth absent in textual documents, (4) photographic images are a form of proof, and (5) in some way every body can access a picture.

On initial review I was tempted to dismiss Shayde's statement as a "basic statement" – photography is an archival memory or "enduring material" (Taylor Archive 19) that makes visible the "Truth." However, I now find a multifaceted argument, one moving away from photographs as entombed archival memory toward photographs as embodied knowledge. I choose the terms "moving away" and "towards," rather than definitives (i.e., *is* or *becomes*) because I believe Shayde suggests photography is a medium that at once expresses archival and repertoire memory, a duality refusing to resolve the divide between represented bodies and enflashed bodies. As much as I realize the apparatus camera captures or "freezes the body as representation and so – as absence" (Jones 950), I find Shayde's words revive the motions and movements occurring before the shutter snapped. She speaks of a revelation, the revelation of truth, or proof of a person's existence in a particular historical moment.

Drifting back to earlier interviews, I think of Jahleh's decision to destroy past photographs as a method of erasing and forgetting her own embodied history, and the portraits of the deceased, whose faces decorate the graveyards. Yes, Jahleh did press her hand firmly on the shoulders of the king. Yes, she did stand beside him with her head held high with pride.

In her narrative, Shayde revitalizes a sense of movement in photography, one transgressing the sociopolitical boundaries of language and space, of being able to go pass time. It appears to me, the person reflected in the photograph, arms, legs, feet, eyes, mouth carry more authority than the words anyone could write about them, thus in many ways the photograph of some *body* holds authority to represent him or herself, authority denied in textual recounts. In this way, the pictured individual is true, and thus evokes from its spectator a truth, proof they have really happened. Simultaneous to the forward continuation of the true, is variation in translations. Yes, Jahleh loved the king. Yes, that is an act of treason now.

## Reflectivity

Entering into Shayde's apartment for the first time, the floor plan immediately grabbed my attention. This home did not resemble most of the others I had visited. Like Jahleh's and Ozra's it was an apartment, not a house. In Tabriz, apartments are more or less modern structures. As the population grew, and land became scarcer, people began "building up instead of out," as the saying goes. Most apartments are fewer than twenty-five years old. In comparison, many houses are more than a hundred years old.

The general design of these antique homes consists of an intricate system of hallways weaving together a maze of rooms. Resembling a small labyrinth, several houses often shared a plot of land or city block. They joined one another either by doorways resembling conjoined hotel suites, or at the basement level by another system of underground corridors. Burrowing straight through raw, unsheltered ground, or created with clay bricks, these corridors are dark, cold, damp, and of great cultural significance. The architecture permitted generation after generation of dwellers to live under "one" roof while simultaneously safeguarding private life.

Shayde's first homestead memory took her back to age three, where she lived in "crooked and bent house" where "one side was my paternal grandmother, aunts, uncles, and in the middle a door closed. On the other side lived my mother and father." Narrating her role as new bride, Shayde explained the significance of her and Seyamak's decision to live in an apartment across town from his parents. "I know Jahleh does not like we live so far away. She takes it as a control issue. Like I am preventing her from being near Seyamak. That is not the case. We wanted to be close to his practice. It is too much to drive an hour everyday back and forth," she explained. Living far from her mother-in-law is a new practice begun by Shayde's generation. Modern couples, Shayde explains, have abandoned the traditional cultural practice of "living with your husband and also his family."

From my understandings, there are several interconnected ideas embedded in traditional Iranian marriage custom of a woman moving into her husband's community. First is religious. There is a clear hierarchy present in Islam, one granting males the position of "divine realm of light" and females "dark realm of matter." The de facto consequence is a woman is of the material world, considered inferior to the man (Ahmadi 686). As such, the woman goes to the man, not the other way around. There are also political and economic motives behind this patrilineage design. Traditionally arranged Islamic marriages bond not only the two individuals, but their two families as well. Since males are in charge of the economic and political realms of society, patrilineal endogamy operates as strategy.

I found Shayde's narrative on a modern shift in family structure fascinating, just the opposite of what I read on Islamic approaches to social order and the present theocratic government's agenda (to be less Western and more Islamic). Was the new shift Shayde spoke of linked to the Revolution somehow? Has industrialization played a role? Does this new order mark a feminist uprising against patrilineal forces?

After giving careful thought to the questions, Shayde responded, "Not so much feminism. Working for women is still very hard. Available positions first go to men. Only those that must be women [are traditionally positions held by women], like an obstetrician, go to women." For Shayde, shifts in family structure are not intentional feminist processes, but rather a broader sign of the times. She feels the youth of Iran see other countries, "progressive countries" that are not under the tyranny of a theocratic government, and "we see that the people in these countries are doing better than us. More food, more money, more jobs, more freedom. And so we try to be more like them in fashion and attitude."

In many ways, the architecture of metropolises like Tabriz and Tehran complement new forms of social organization. Unlike the homes of the past, Shayde's current apartment is a fifty-

by-fifteen foot rectangle with vaulted ceilings that shelter a free-access kitchen on one end, two bedrooms, and a bathroom off the west latitudinal side. In simple descriptive terms, the area is open and airy. These feelings only increased as I moved my eyes down the apartment's length, discovering one end was comprised of four large bay windows; over each, Shayde had hung transparent eggshell colored curtains, gently diffusing the sunlight.

I feel as if the building's creator chose to forfeit his or her right to formalize this portion of Shayde's home. Rather, there is an emphasis on freedom, a freedom to move, a freedom to create. This open architectural design gives Shayde autonomy and control over her landscape. The apartment, like a blank canvas, the architect put in her hands the power to constitute her scene, the freedom to inhabit the space at will. As I walk around, I note touches Shayde has added to transform and define an empty space into a home. Using rugs, couches, tables, the paintings on the walls – material cultural artifacts -- Shayde performs her identity.

A small wooden end table, dedicated to holding two matching candleholders, stands in one corner. Crafted from delicate silver, each holder houses a snow-white tapered candle. Leaning forward to get a closer look at the detailed etchings, my eyes fall upon an image of myself. Behind the candleholders, Shayde has placed a rectangular mirror. It is also framed from silver. Like the candleholders, it contains an intricate pattern of swirls carefully etched. Shayde has set the mirrors and the candles in such a way that when an admirer stands in front of the objects, the mirror reflects back a curious face framed by the candleholders.

I am mesmerized. The mirror reflects my face, my shoulders, and the top portions of my arms. I gaze at myself for what feels like a long time. The mirror reveals things I cannot see without it. Behind me there is a painting on the wall, a peach colored couch, an end table with a bowl of pistachios. If I turn my head counterclockwise, the image unveils what lies to my right. Shifting clockwise a porthole opens, revealing what is to the left and back. I realize my body is at



once straddling Shayde's living room, dining room, and family room. Regardless of where I stand or which way my head moves, in the mirror I watch my own materiality bleed in the reflection from one part of her apartment into another. I am clearly both in/not-in the family room, in/not-in the living room, in/not-in the dining room. Shayde's mirror reveals where I am standing, and where I am not. Shayde's apartment seems like a threshold between the outside and the inside, modernity and tradition.

Le stade du miroir. I am in Lacan's terms "caught up in the lure of spatial identification, the succession of phantasies that extends from [my] a fragmented body-image to a form of its totality" (5). I am really here; I actually see myself performing Oli, ethnographer, guest. Split/divide/surreal.

A spinning sensation comes over me, and Shayde giggles.

"Pretty interesting how I set that up, huh?" she asks.

"Where did you get them?" I asked

"They are traditional wedding presents," Shayde replied, "I got them from Jahleh."

While Western weddings occur at an altar, with the bride and groom standing taking their vows, an Iranian wedding takes place in the home of the bride's parents, with the bride and groom sitting. In front of the bench on which the bride and groom sit, a decorative and highly symbolic spread resembling a detailed installation piece is placed.

Asking the married women about wedding spreads, I found no one remembered most of the items. Conducting historical research, I found this gap in the women's memories quite understandable. The wedding spread is intricately laced with multiple folklores and religious discourses, as well as rich with symbolic complexity.

The first layer of the wedding spread or *sofreh aghd* is a cloth, traditionally passed from mother to daughter, lay on the ground. According to Shayde, the cloth is either a rich cashmere

or gold embroidered silk. Amongst the mirror and candlesticks seven herbs and spices are placed. Each spice is a protector, breaking the spells of witchcraft (poppy seeds), burning demon spirits (frankincense), and refracting evil eyes (salt). “The *sofreh aghd* also,” Shayde listed, “contains a basket of eggs (fertility), pomegranates (heavenly fruits), apples (divine creation of mankind), gold coins (prosperity), and honey (sweet life).”

Alongside these “still” objects are interactive items. The needle and seven strands of colored thread are my favorite items. “During the ceremony, a cloth is held over the bride and groom’s heads, throughout the ceremony one corner is sewed using the needle and thread,” Shayde explains. She quickly giggles, “Seyamak and I did not do that. Jahleh would not have liked that! The idea is the figurative sewing of a mother-in-law’s lips, so she cannot speak harmfully to or about the bride.”

As I understand it, traditional wedding spread items can be traced back to the Zoroastrian religion. From what I understand “little is known” about the religion historically, but that it possibly links to Western Abrahamic and Eastern Dharmic traditions. Some believe that portions of Judaism originated in Zoroastrianism. The religion’s remaining central sacred text is called the Avesta, a collection of five categories ranging from pray or hymn to the listing of evil sprits and methods by which to combat them.

When I asked Shayde about Zoroastrianism, her response was “it is the first religion in Iran. Back when the sun, moon, earth, fire, water, all the elements were all one.” In fact, many of the women I spoke with did not use most of the spread’s items, or even all the steps of the wedding ritual. Rather they drew on the ones most meaningful for them and their family traditions.

“While my father wanted a big wedding, I wanted a very simple celebration. I did not even wear a wedding dress,” Shayde explained. “I’ll show you.” Jumping from her seat, she grabs

her wedding photos. They are kept in the cabinet space below the mirror and candlesticks. Her wedding portraits reveal a light green dress that “compliments” her eyes.

Shayde’s spread was simple, containing “only a Quran, the mirrors and candlesticks, some fruit, and gold coins. She chose the mirror and candlesticks because they were received as a gift from Jahleh, and because she liked “the myth behind the objects.”

According to Shayde, in a traditional wedding, the bride enters the room; she has her veil covering her face. Once the bride sits, the groom removes her veil. Together they look into the mirror where the groom sees the reflection of his wife-to-be, and as Shayde explained, “the bride sees herself youthful, and at her most beautiful.” Placed on either side of the mirror the candles represent a bright future.

“Did you see yourself in your mirror?” I ask.

“Yes. And it is like they say. I felt the most beautiful I have ever felt,” Shayde replies.

Even now, looking back on this interview, thinking about her words some months later, I am moved by her love. I look across Jahleh’s living room, I watch her husband Seyamak. The dinner party is now in full swing, and he is speaking with his father and his aunt. While Shayde is standing in the kitchen, helping Jahleh with the meal’s final touches, I feel their kindred spirit.

## CHAPTER 4 OZRA: THE MATRIARCH

### Formalities

Drizzling parsley across plates, delicately arranging caramelized onions across roasted chicken breast, and decoratively placing fancy, mint basted potatoes on a silver platter Shayde and Jahleh finalized the evening's feast. In the hot kitchen, they took a step back, pausing for the first time that evening. With the same care a bride uses when gazing at her reflection in a mirror on wedding day, they eyed their handiwork. After a few minutes of deliberation, and a fuss or two later, Jahleh gave her final stamp of approval, and she and Shayde paraded the food out one magnificent delicacy at a time.

The aroma of fluffy basmati rice and saffron stirred in the air. My mouth watered, and my stomach groaned in anticipation. Jahleh is an exceptionally cook, and every fiber of my body longed to leap forward and dig in. However, having been at other dinner parties in Iran, I resisted my bodily impulse, opting rather to stand back cautiously. Leaning back and turning my head slightly away from the table in a downward gaze I marked my hesitation. Ozra had taught me that in Iran, "It is rude to run and be first."

The rest of Jahleh's guests also lingered about in their seats, their bodies poised between go and stop, trapped between yes and no. In direct contrast to this frozen state of animation, a wind of voices circulated compliments across the room.

"Oh, beautiful rice," said Akram, Jahleh's first cousin and Ozra's niece.

"Bah. Bah. Bah," the equivalent of an English "yum, yum, yum," Reza, Jahleh's brother, chimed.

"You guys have really out done it!" Seyamak said, placing a small kiss on his mother's cheek and another on his wife's lips.

It was time to eat, which also meant it was time to *taarof*. Since there were more guests than chairs at the table, some people needed to eat at their chairs. This meant a line had to be formed; that meant someone had to go first, and that meant several minutes of “you go,” “no, no please,” “I insist,” “no, I insist you go.”

“Go on. Go on. It will get cold and then it will be no good,” Jahleh said, prompting the start of the *taarofing*.

At this point in the research process, I had learned food service paralleled tea service. As a general rule of thumb, men went first, with an individual’s power, status, and age determining the exact order. The women went next, ordering themselves as the men did, and then the children were permitted to serve themselves. They simply battled it out, usually earning a reprimand or two from mothers, as the expectation was mannerly, not disorderly behavior.

Just as he had done earlier during Shayde’s ceremonial tea service, Amhoo Doctor, the guest list’s eldest and most powerful man, respectfully declined his rightful turn to go first, insisting rather that Ozra take his position. Nodding downwardly, and taking up a position resembling a small bow, Amhoo Doctor gallantly gestured to the dining table. “Please,” he earnestly said, “Ozra please, you first.”

In her own act of *taarof*, Ozra remained seated, answering back, “No, you please.”

“Please,” the doctor insisted.

“I couldn’t,” Ozra responded.

“Please, I would feel better,” Amhoo Doctor said.

“Come on, Mahman. Things will get cold,” Jahleh said. In a whisper, she added, “Have to end it early. Mahman is very *taroofty*. She doesn’t give in easy.”

“She is a tough lady,” her children all say.

It is difficult to believe Ozra is “tough” by merely looking at her. Born in the early part of the twentieth century in the city of Istanbul, she is the one daughter of a wealthy rug salesman and his beautiful Turkish wife. She dyes her hair a blondish, ash brown, a color slightly lighter than her natural color, which now is completely grey. This new, handpicked shade matches well with her round, large, and unusually colored eyes. “*Sabzeh asa’lee*” or “honey-colored green” she calls them. Knowing her eyes are one of her best features, she meticulously defines them with well-groomed, perfectly shaped eyebrows. Her nose is long, straight, Roman-like, and her lips full. Thanks to years of avoiding the sun her skin is delicate, soft, and porcelain colored.

Standing 5’7”, Ozra’s body is thin and lean, so much so that it is hard to believe she has given birth to eight children. It is a body she keeps as healthy as her age will allow her “by avoiding all alcohol, and refusing to smoke.” It is also a body she keeps smelling notoriously fresh. Her secret is to carry small bottles of perfume in her purse wherever she goes, placing little dabs of the potion behind her ear lobes and inner wrist ever so often.

From interactions with Ozra, I do not know if I would use the descriptive “tough.” I would say “disciplined” and “immaculate.” Ozra is a disciplined and spotless woman. As she explained, her overarching goal in life is to “be *tamez*,” or clean. Contextually, *tamez* is a ritualistic, material practice mandated by the Quran; the Holy text requires women and men alike to wash all exposed body parts in preparation for *salat* or contact prayer, a time of personal communion with God.

Although not as ceremonial an affair as an engagement party or public event such as going to the mosque to worship, in Iran dinner parties are carefully planned, not improvisational, and viewed by all participants as “special,” “important,” or “different,” to use Ozra’s words. Marked as separate from everyday activities, there is a certain level of formality. Dinner parties bring on a heightened level decorum, civility, and etiquette (Calhoun).

As I have discussed in earlier chapters, the hostess, Jahleh in this case, faces certain expectations from her guests. For her role, Jahleh provides hospitality in the form of home-cooked food presented in great abundance, a scene set for group intermingling, and a general atmosphere of relaxation and celebration. For our part as guests, we arrive decked with festive attitudes, gifts such as flowers or a box of chocolates, and our appetites. Alongside attitudes and small tokens of appreciation, another aspect of this performance is the modification of everyday presentations of self.

“You must be *tamez* when you go to other people’s homes,” Ozra explained. “Special clothes for a special occasion,” a surprising social rule I learned very early in my fieldwork when I attempted to go to a dinner-party in jeans, an act that led to a parade of frowns and my stomping back into the bedroom to choose a more appropriate outfit. I write “surprising” because, as I noted earlier, in Iran there are significant governmental and religious prohibitions on public presentations of the body. In this context, I found dressing up for a dinner party to be a strange paradox. Given the guest lists of dinner parties were comprised of close family and friends, I expected a more casual environment, an environment that gave people a reprieve from the daily formalities of dress. However, this was not the case; in the spirit of *tamez*, men sport firmly pressed button-down shirts and slacks, and the women pull from their closets well-tailored skirts and blouses. This dinner party was no exception.

Like all other situations, I found Ozra approaching dinner parties with a firm respect of the scene’s expectations of presentation. She carries with her an air of Audrey Hepburn, a characteristic resulting from her tribute to tidiness and passion for classic design. For this evening at Jahleh’s, she choose a dark blue skirt, falling below the knees, a sweater of a different but complimentary hue, and jacket cut from the same material as the skirt. A delicate gold chain hung around her neck, and a matching bracelet adorned her left wrist. A pair of navy round-toed,

pump-heeled shoes topped of this immaculate outfit. Handcrafted from a mold of her foot, the perfectly fitted shoes were made of ultra-thin leather, a material so soft and supple that Ozra tiptoed when walking.

When asked if the shoes were comfortable, she said, “Yes. But you do have to be careful – too much movement will tear the shoe.”

Holding up her foot, she showed the soles of her navy pumps. In a stark contrast to the delicate top-view, this part was fashioned using a series of thin, rusty nails. Picking up on my surprise, she explained that in her day “this is how shoes were made – until the technique was replaced by superglued shoes.”

“I don’t like glued shoes. They changed the way women walk. In delicate shoes, a woman must take each step with care. Not like in your American tennis shoes, where she can in tennis shoes -- Boom! Boom! Boom! -- like a duck, replacing lady steps with ugly strides,” she said, fiercely pumping her fists in front of her, turning her lips downward in a disapproving fashion. “Messy,” she finished.

Unlike mass-produced wear designed for everybody, Ozra’s tailor-made garments and shoes fell immaculately, molding themselves precisely, perfectly to her shape. Cut and sewn by Mr. Farimahn, each piece of clothing and twist of textile coming from under his hand remains revered by Ozra as a masterpiece.

“An artist. He was an artist,” Ozra declares without hesitation. “A good advisor. Considered it his duty to tell you what looked right and what looked wrong. You could go in with an idea, and he would work with it until it worked.”

Needless to say, Mr. Farimahn’s reputation long succeeds his death, which occurred nearly twenty years ago. When I asked her about what appeared a privilege in custom-made apparel, she simply said, “Most of my life there were no stores with pre-made clothes. You sewed



your own things, and when there was a lot to be sewn, your own, your husband's, all the children's clothes, you got help from a tailor. You picked out the material and the style and the tailor would sew it for you. That was the only way in my time."

Tailor-made clothes, an old-fashioned approach to fashion.

"Today young ladies are different. They wear shirts with thin straps or lay down in front of people. It was not the same. When I was your age, a lady had a quietness to her; a cleanness. Tidy. Poised," she finishes with a slight, knowing nod.

"Mahman, Mahman," Jahleh said, tugging on her mother gently, trying to get her out of her chair. "Please. We all *want* you to go first."

Amhoo Doctor makes a final plea. "Lady, please. Before the food gets cold," he respectfully says.

Like in many situations where taarofing is underway, I felt witness to a verbal tennis match. Turning my head from side to side, I was unsure who the victor would be, or perhaps more appropriately *should* be. This was the part of *taarofing* that got sticky. When to stop?

Near the feast, sternly warding off her two rambunctious sons, stands Vahedeh. She has firmly clamped her fingers around each of their wrists. In a counteraction, the two boys outstretch their free arms, branching out as if to reach infinite. Ages seven and nine, the boys' youthfulness obstructs their ability to seize control of their corporeally driven appetites. Seduced by the smells and material messages, they desperately attempt to sneak off with a stolen handful of rice or slice of bread. Each time they get close to accomplishing their mission, their fingertips centimeters away from landing on the closest item, Vahedeh intently shakes their captive wrists, giving them a tug back.

Wise and well-versed in Iranian custom, Ozra knows that people are waiting and decides, this time anyway, to give in and go first. “I did not want to insult Amhoo Doctor. It is better to listen to him. He is a good doctor. And the children. They were hungry,” she later rationalizes.

Getting up, light footed, Ozra apologetically glides to the dining room. Shayde quickly offers assistance, tucking her arm under Ozra’s they head toward the table. Shayde picks up a plate and, following Ozra’s careful instructions, fills it with food; she then helps Ozra return to her seat.

Ozra was seated in the living room, positioned at the center of the horseshoe chair bouquet forged before the guests had arrived. In fact, she was sitting in the very chair I had found peculiar, the one Jahleh called “old thing,” “nothing,” “extra.” In reality, the chair was an expensive antique; a Classic Louis XV design, with curved lines, cabriole legs and exquisitely carved escargot feet, this chair had a romantic quality.

I had forgotten that conversation with Jahleh and my earlier fascination with the chair until Ozra returned to it. Something about the way Ozra’s manner of sitting drew me back to chair. Her legs were locked at her thin ankles. Knees gently tilted to one side, her arms lay in her lap, firmly on top of one another, each hand holding the opposing elbow. Her torso was like a statue – shoulders square, back straight.

This was Ozra’s customary position, one best described as poised and ready. She never flinches, shifts, or even leans back. Her buttocks balance at the edge of the chair. She holds her body this way even when we sit on the floor with my tape recorder telling stories of childhood days filled with trees, grass, and spontaneous play. Ozra holds herself as if very little of the outside world is affecting her body, entering into her, or disturbing her space. Ozra and the chair demanded affection. Together they collapsed in the dualities of temporality (Butler Gender 140), and stood for timelessness, rather than time worn qualities.

Ironically, given Jahleh's seeming indifference toward the chair, she had chosen to place it in the most coveted position of the semi-circle – the center, and it was by no mistake that Ozra, the oldest guest at the party, was resting in this chair.

In Iran, regardless of the level of formality or size of the gathering, there are general rules to seating. The “best seats” are divided up according to gender and age. In the case of a special occasion, a gathering with a designated theme or a defined purpose (e.g., engagement, birthday, graduation, or a return from Mecca), the honoree or honorees are granted the best seat. In these situations, the individual or individuals being honored general *taarof* the best seat to older, more powerful guests in attendance. In this context, seating hierarchy is not so much a chain of command as a set of honorific performative acts, “situated and material” (Langellier and Peterson 8).

There are several factors operationalizing “best seat.” First, the “best seat” can be the most comfortable seat. For example, if only one chair has padding and all the others are wood, the chair with the padding would be the coveted seat. However, as Ozra explained it, there are times when the “best seat” is not the most comfortable. The most comfortable seat may be on the sofa, whereas the best seat may be an old chair. More important than padding is a chair's positioning. In Iran, the best seat is the one where the fewest number of backs will be turned away from the occupant; in the case of Jahleh's dinner party, this was the center of the hydrangea bouquet.

“It is what we do, as a sign of respect,” Ozra explained. She went on to detail the ritual, “It is inappropriate for the eldest to have their back facing any door. They should clearly see who comes and goes. It is inappropriate to have the eldest to sit where someone's back is facing them. That is very rude. Having your back to someone is a sign you are not listening to them. Not interested in them. In addition, elders, like myself for example, should not have to reach for

anything. First, we are old, making movement difficult and, second, extending your arm across a table is unpolished behavior. The elders and important guests should be nearby to the best, most filled bowls of fruit, sweets, sugars, and the same way at any dinner table.”

Contextually, Ozra’s positionality renders her a symbolic marker of status within the space of the party, and a performer in the larger Iranian etiquette system. Ozra’s is not an autonomous role, there is a sense of a “shared authority” (Frisch xvi). We, the other members of the event, have signaled our recognition of a difference in status. As such, the manifestation of Ozra’s body in the chair is as de Certeau might say a “cultural practice” concentrating ideological and traditional elements together into a socially visible act (9).

I began asking about the history of the seating arrangement, not because honoring the elderly is a particularly new or unique discovery (Rosaldo 524). Rather, as a scholar interested in feminist and gender issues, I was intrigued as to why the men, many with high social positions such as legislative officers, or Amhoo Doctor in this case, relinquished their status to a woman.

Was it because gatherings took place in the domestic sphere, a space typically thought of as belonging to the females? What cultural rules elevated an older woman? Was an “old woman” understood differently from in the West, where post-menopausal women are often viewed as undesirable old crones? Did it have anything to do with Ozra’s being mother and grandmother to eleven men? Where did these rules originate?

Unfortunately for me, the women could not provide me with an elaborate rationale or explanation in response to my questions. Like many other social actions, there was simply no story that “as a statement in words ‘says’ the same thing as ritual regarded as statement in action” (Leach 15). The seating arrangement in regard to Ozra was a material representation comprised of an “articulated mode of action.” The rules required no verbal rationalization and had no known textual backing but would have been recognized if violated (Rosaldo “Metaphors” 524). “What

do you mean *why*? What kind of strange questions are these? About menopause? This is simply what we do,” Jahleh said in a stern, matter of fact voice. “It is disrespectful if you don’t.”

### **Dining Manners**

After a few chaotic minutes, everyone has a plate full of food. Scooped, sliced, and picked apart by a dozen hungry people, Jahleh’s meticulous presentation, her perfect mounds of rice and painstakingly poured dressings, now rest on the dining room table torn apart and half eaten. The leaders of the pack, Jahleh and Shayde, have hunkered down for the moment, eating at a slightly faster rate than the rest of us dinner party guests, so that they will be prepared to clear plates and serve after-dinner tea without missing a beat.

A symphony of clicks moves through the room. Forks hit white china plates with small blue flower etchings, spoons scrape along the bottom of deep soup bowls. Conversations have dwindled to sporadic chatter, partially because the food is great and all our concentration is on enjoying it, and partly because in Iran it is *zeshed* [ugly] to talk while eating. “It is also *zeshed* to reach across the table, place your elbows on the table, pick teeth, or blow your nose. And, if you must spit something out, do so discretely into a napkin,” Ozra teaches.

Holding the fork and knife in the correct hand, in the proper way, is also a virtuous trait. One’s knife must be in the right hand, with fork in the left, both held with the index and middle finger resting on top, thumb gently curled under, ring and pinky finger in the air. It is “unacceptable” to grip a utensil as if it were a baseball bat or axe, or as Ozra’s put it, “hold the utensil like an *ahmale*,” a word best translated as *begging, illiterate laborer*.

When I first arrived in Iran and was residing in her back room, Ozra noted that I held my fork and knife “like an American.” Horrified that I walked such an uncivilized road, she patiently demonstrated the “lady-like way,” encouraging I “sit in the kitchen while everyone took afternoon naps and practice using forks with the left, not right hand.” Out of respect and interest,

I eagerly tried. Unfortunately, I cannot report success (only fatigue from lack of rest); I still catch myself shifting utensils from hand-to-hand. After cutting a piece of food, I set down the knife I am holding in my right hand, reach over and take the fork from my left hand. In my opinion, there is some peculiarity about food entering my mouth from the left. It is offbeat, never feeling quite right; it is not habitual.

“After a while, you won’t have to switch hands,” she cheerfully assured. “Practice makes perfect!” Only an *ahmale* holds a fork and knife like a monkey, she reminded.

*Like a begging illiterate laborer.*

*Like a monkey.*

*Only an ahmale holds a fork and knife like a monkey*

In field notes, I wrote:

This last statement certainly is intriguing. Clearly indicative of Iran’s socio-political realm. This will keep me thinking for sometime. Does eating etiquette differentiate class? Well, yes – it does. That’s not new news. But, what more is there? Is there anything unique to report? (5 June 2005).

To say that manners matter at the dinner table is wholly unsurprising; to discover that manners matter as much, if not more, in the presence of close family was a bit of a shock. Like my assumptions about the dress code, I assumed that close family gatherings equated to a more causal dining environment. However, as Ozra demonstrated, highly standardized movements and a sense of civility marked “respect for others.” In Iran, family is first on the list of others to whom one must show respect.

“For me a proper lady is always well mannered. At the dinner table, or just at home. Manners are a sign of politeness, or respect for the people around you. No one wants to be around *zeshed* or *khaseef* [dirty]. Everyone prefers beauty and grace,” Ozra explained. She went on to

explain that she learned dining manners “from her mother, who learned from her mother, who had learned from her mother.”

**Oli:** How did she teach you?

**Ozra:** She did not speak much. I was a good child. Good children did not need to be told. I watched my mother. I copied what she did.

**Oli:** So she never actually said anything to you?

**Ozra:** That is how we learned, by watching our mothers. Not like today with schools and televisions.

**Oli:** What if you had a question? Wanted to know why?

**Ozra:** It was rude to ask. Asking, questioning an adult. Why? Because I said so, or did so. Mothers do not have to explain themselves.

**Oli:** I’m not sure I understand how you know that without being told? I mean, did you feel like you knew your mother? I mean, if you couldn’t ask questions?

**Ozra:** We learned from watching our mothers. I learned so much from her. I loved my mother very much. I am proud to be like her. To be like her, to move like her, to be able to do the things she could do. I feel her part of me. She is alive.

Although her mother passed away over fifty years ago, she lives on in Ozra’s heart and in her behavior. Above her twin-sized bed, Ozra keeps a portrait of her mother. The photograph, close to 115 years old, is a matte image captured on thick browned and yellowing paper. There are numerous pinholes challenging the otherwise flat, smooth texture of the portrait; some of the penetrations are in the common locations, the top and bottom center and respective corners, while others pierce odd, unexpected regions. Perhaps the image had once been a member of a collage,

or hung on a corkboard, ignored, irrelevant, trapped under the more pertinent pieces of information layered onto it. Some time ago, someone, perhaps in an act of recognition, securely cemented the photograph against an ancient piece of wood. Like the portrait it hugs, this piece of a long lost tree shows signs of age and wear. Dry, splintering, and brittle it requires great care in handling. On the back, a single rusty nail fastens a thin loop of string. It is with this that Ozra hangs her family archive.

Born in Istanbul, Ozra's mother "was four, maybe five years old" when she sat for the photo. With a staging suggestive of a portrait studio, the background is a faint landscape mural of a balcony overlooking a garden space. Shadowed, softly outlined forms of two leafy, tropical trees line the left and right side of the frame, in the center of which is a skyline. For perspective, in front of this scene the artist added a detailed and sharply painted railing, onto which two vases filled with overflowing ferns balance. To this two-dimensional scene, a two-foot high tree stump and three-foot long span of real balcony railing were added.

Ozra's mother rests on the edge of the balcony railing next to a brother close to her age. He is on the tree stump. Both children, supported from behind by two older male siblings, wear calm faces. The girl has tiny little feet, disproportionably small for her size, in ankle high boots. Because the picture is old, somewhat blurry, it is difficult to tell if the boots have laces, but they appear to be soft, comfortable. While her brothers wear matching outfits, standing in splendid, well-tailored dark, cassock coats, buttoned up to just under their collarbones, and white, cuff linked shirts and tight ties, she is in a dress. The color of the dress matches the hue of her brothers' clothing. Light trim adorns the edges of her cuffed, long sleeves, decorative ruffle-like collar, and the bottom of her skirt. A tiny piece of petticoat peers out over her ankles.

It is difficult to discern whether Ozra looks like her mother. The girl in the picture is so young, while Ozra's face, transformed by age, is so unlike its former self, and the two faces side-



by-side span a gap of a century. Nevertheless, like her mother, Ozra is a perpetual, habitual teacher. Watching Ozra was impressive, persuasive. Sitting in perfect form, conquering the challenge of balancing a full plate on her lap, she cut small pieces from a boned chicken thigh as elegantly, and gracefully. A flawless representation of dining manners and expectations, something Marcel Mauss may have suggested is “technique” or a collective representation (96).

“Practice makes perfect” is one mantra I could believe to be true – or at least *fantasize* could possibly be true. I find something soothing in the pretend idea of a reducible body, an agency that can be controlled through practice (Descartes 34). Notions that the thinking substance inherited hierarchal powers over the corporeal substance give me a positive feeling, one that says any desire or want is attainable. From a Cartesian perspective, the argument might be that Ozra’s body is a natural instrument called to and influenced by tradition, and now moving in an autonomous reality outside and above her individual mind (Leacock 61.) While I agree with the functional value of this reading, Ozra interprets her dining manners differently. For Ozra her relationship with dining etiquette is not ambivalent.

According to the Department of Anthropology at the California Academy of Science archives, it is in the 7<sup>th</sup> century CE that the royal courts of the Middle East began to use forks for dining (“Reitz”, sec. Utensils). This historical fact is irrelevant to Ozra, for this is not where her story begins. Like other bodily practices (e.g., sexual, religious worship), dining manners elude their written history. In Ozra’s narrative, the performance of dining etiquette and its bodily practice escape the confines of the archive and its institutionalized, politicized disciplines and discourses. For her, manners are a pleasurable, embodied performance of bodily self-mastery and an ephemeral though ritualized understanding of her family history.

What is it like to know you embody your mother? How does it feel, knowing you have an audience so attentive that they will carry your moves, performing and re-performing them in the

future? I hear the pride in her voice, the pride of being able to follow in her mother's footsteps—literally so; the pride that comes from knowing her mother was a good role model. As before, she explains that emulating mothers was a goal during her time. Even today, in a modern Iranian society where women work and go to school, following in your mother's domestic example remains a sign of respect. "I would watch my mother. Be soft spoken as she was. Wise. Graceful. A great cook, a wonderful seamstress. Able to run a house, the children, and all the help correctly," she said.

Imitation is the greatest form of flattery.

To be able to repeat.

To fully embody your mother's acts.

Youth, a time for rehearsal.

I wonder what Plato would write about that?

Mimesis.

When she holds the fork properly or sits poised and polished, she aesthetically performs her mother's history as teacher and leader. As she performs dining manners, she senses the connection to and with her mother. In this manner, in this *doing* of dining etiquette, Ozra vexes History, opting rather for a moment of historicity. Her narratives trace a subjective and fluid understanding of history as an ongoing, developing process.

At the same time, she experiences her own sensual bodily connection to that history, as daughter and student. Her tone of voice and words reveal the pleasures of being able to control and contrive her own body. Although Ozra does not directly mark dining manners and etiquette to bodily consumption, I cannot help but feel sensuality. As her disciplined body lifts and carries food into her mouth, nourishing her, replenishing her corporeality, it simultaneously arouses feelings of love for her mother, rejuvenating her connection to the flesh that bore her. Dining

manners become a metaphor for the circle of life, of food going in and out, nourishing, of mothers' bodies birthing daughters, who in turn will teach their daughters the lessons of their grandmothers.

Ozra looks over, checking to see if I followed her instructions to practice my knife/fork technique. Indeed, I had, and while my moves were far from perfected, I had enough down to indicate the lesson has been etched into my embodied understanding. I smiled at Ozra, holding my two hands in the air. Yes, fork in the left and knife in the right.

In a proud tone she said, "*Mashala!*" Bravo! Congratulations!

"Yes!" eating up the praise and watching Ozra beam I reply, "I got it!"

Gently she returns to her meal. Visibly pleased, and overwhelmingly calm and in the moment, I would have guessed Ozra had no interest in being at this party.

"That was fun!" I exclaimed.

In a feeble voice, whose fragility directly contradicted her statuesque presentation of self, she surprised me, "I am old, and do not have the patience or strength anymore. People make me go. It's rude not to go when you're invited. Rude to turn down an invitation."

"I am sorry people make you come," I respond, sympathetically wondering how they survive taarof. After all, she is over eighty years old and hard of hearing.

"Why do you guys always make Ozra come to dinner parties?" I boldly confront Jahleh. "She does not seem to feel up to them. Is it because you're scared to leave her home alone?"

With a smirk, Jahleh gazes directly into my eyes. In an act of self-defense or clarification, she paints a different picture, "Mahman is ill-natured. She always has been. The neighbor used to call her over to discipline *her* sons. The neighbor had six sons. She was too cheery to yell at anyone. Mahman would go line them and us up and yell. Like sergeant. People could hear her screaming down the street. This has nothing to do with getting old. She never liked to go out.

When father went out or wanted to invite people over, Mahman got upset and complained.” In a sassy, tattletale tone she adds, “She doesn’t like it that she can’t hear. She won’t wear her hearing aid because it is unfashionable and prefers not to go out because she does not feel comfortable chewing with her dentures.”

It was at this point in the research project that I came to see Ozra as spirited and as a stubborn and willful woman. For example, as I already explained, Jahleh visits her father’s grave weekly but refuses to take her mother. It upsets Ozra too much, the children say. However, once Ozra has set a goal, there is no denying her. Her apartment, located in the middle of a San Francisco-like street – steep, narrow, and difficult to maneuver – does not even stop her. Since her stroke, Ozra finds it difficult to walk. She is slow and cannot make quick getaways from under her children’s watchful eye. She waits for the perfect opportunity, a time when all her children are busy doing other errands, than spends a few hours shuffling down the incline to catch the bus to take the hour-long journey to visit her husband’s grave. Once she arrives at the cemetery, she must still trek a portion up the side of the mountain to get to the gravesite.

“Why don’t you take a taxi?!” I exclaimed.

“Jahleh has told the taxi companies not to take me. They tell her. I’m the mother,” Ozra says.

And it is because of her stubborn will that she has absolutely no teeth. You see, while losing her hearing is due to age, losing her teeth — well that is another story. As she tells it, in her youth her husband often teased her about her obsessive dental hygiene.

““You are always going to the dentist about those teeth,”” she imitates him, her hands on her hips. ““Who takes care of the children while you’re at that dentist office?” He would say, “You are always at that dentist. You see the dentist more than you feed the children and me.””

“Although he was kidding,” Ozra continued, “he was also half serious. He never stepped foot in the kitchen. When he watched the kids, he pretty much let them do what they wanted, telling them mahman would be told and tend to their misbehaviors when I got home. I was the boss of everything.”

And so, one day, just like any other day, Ozra left the house only to return with each and every pearly white extracted.

“How do you like this?” she asked her husband, who in response just shook his head and gently called her crazy. “I was only thirty-six years old,” she shakes her head. “But I didn’t have to listen to any more of his complaints or bossiness when it came to my teeth.”

An empty mouth exonerated her from her husband’s mordant comments, but also separated her from both the confines of womanhood (e.g. the expectation of beauty) and made a statement against the larger hierarchical Iranian order, where women, by the spirit of social Islamic law, are considered subservient to men.

Ozra shakes her head, laughing at her youthful decision, and then she adds a footnote about her dentist, “You know, he went crazy, he was put in an institution. A mental institution.”

As the story goes, after a week or so of being toothless, Ozra went and had a full set of dentures made. “But I don’t like wearing them. They make me sound funny when I eat.” From what I observed, most of the time she ate everything without dentures. In her opinion, her toothless mouth is more natural than her dentures, which “click and clack and slide all around” as she chews. “I only wear them to parties because now that I am old, my gums sink in more,” she says. “It makes me look a little older. And I like to look young, too.”

### **Controlling Flesh**

“Getting old is awful,” she confesses. “My mind is still there. I know I like to sew and cook. The desire is still there. I still want to sew and cook. However, the ability. The ability is

gone.” She repeats this idea several times during my stay in Iran; being in an old body, one with limited movement, was a running theme in conversations with Ozra. “I am old. Trapped. My mind is still alive, but I am slower, or I can’t at all. My body has changed. Being young, being beautiful, having a womanly body you can control. Those are the times of your life you should always hold dear. Hard to keep looking like a woman.”

As sad as her words sound and read on this page, Ozra speaks them as facts.

“I know what you mean,” I sincerely respond, because in some ways I do.

Ozra is not alone. Like Ozra, I am a woman. Reflexivity oscillates the story of *looking like a woman* between us; her consciousness and our womanly experiences, between her embodied life and our shared experiences (Geissner 1995). I am also caught in the politics of gender and cultural performances, accountable to “the standards for acceptable display” (Dolan 159) which in the Western world also position youthfulness above age.

My thoughts make a crazy connection between Jahleh’s old chair/antique object, and Ozra’s body/social subject in it. Why does age make a man more beautiful, and women less desirable? Why do some chairs become antiques and others trash? Who wrote these rules of difference anyway?

Away from the party, alone in her bedroom, she lifts up her skirt, revealing her knees. Fair complexioned, delicately wrinkled skin has gathered above each kneecap forming the texture of an elephant’s hide. Some years ago, Ozra injured them both in a fall, and now they “swell and are difficult to bend.”

“But my legs have not lost their shape,” she laughs an ironic laugh, and in disbelief, she pulls the skin an inch into the air. Releasing the mass of flesh, rather than springing back, it slowly droops back. She is right. Her legs are still quite shapely, womanly, tapering softly down to thin ankles, and small size six feet. Her trick, she reveals, is to wear firm stockings, and to

lather her body with lotion on a daily basis. “Moisture keeps skin in check and stockings keep everything tight,” she teaches.

However, like most bodies, no matter what tricks she employs or tactics she uses to combat age, on occasion there creeps in a paradoxical or contradictory act, a break from the well-put-together, polished Ozra. If you pay extremely close attention, you can witness Ozra’s head trembling ever so slightly from side to side, like a buoy far out on a smooth, clear lake. When in the company of others, she exerts great effort to control the tremor, turning it into a mere fluttering mirage. However, when alone, or late in the evening, once she has replaced her armor of tailor-made clothing with a long, satin pink nightgown, the tremor slowly reveals itself.

Although she never admitted it, I think this tremor is another reason she does not like to attend parties. At Jahleh’s she sits shoulders firmly back, her neck elevated, each muscle and nerve stretched as far as it can go. Having spent time with Ozra in private, having witnessed and watched her body move in spaces where she has more freedom to physically relax, I know that the energy Ozra exerts to control her tremors at parties must be immense. Ozra battles the tremor, complaining that nature is flexing its control over “her once beautiful, thinly framed body.” She pushes her “mind,” as she says, “to pay attention and stop her head.”

Ozra despises the tremor. It is a physical movement revealing her body has lived years; ultimately, nature will, and often does, overpower her disciplining efforts. Marking the divide between the naturalized and nature, her tremor is a repetitive motion, gaining more and more force as time passes.

The only exception I found to this rule was during the few times Ozra spoke on heavy, highly emotive subjects, like death and loss. In these times, she loses or perhaps excuses herself from the constant disciplining of her corporeality, absolving instead into a purely ephemeral, visceral, state of being. Controlled tremors give way to unpredictable, uncontrolled shakes. The

buoy sitting atop the lake, now slammed by the waves of a speedboat slicing through the waters, bobs fiercely back and forth. In an intense rush of emotions, Ozra transcends from a woman in the midst of being a woman disciplined into a woman spontaneously reacting.

I asked her about the hardest circumstance she witnessed. Immediately she went back to the assassination of Iraj, Jahleh's assassinated husband. "He was to be back. Three days. Four days and nothing," she moved to the edge of her twin size bed. She placed both hands on her knees and turned to the windows lining her bedroom wall. Staring at the sky she added, "Jahleh sat on the bed like this for days. Every time a plane went by she jumped."

**Oli:** No one knew anything?

**Ozra:** Heard a plan had crashed. Ahgoon said to me, 'you know that plane did not crash.' Iraj was the best pilot. Then they said the plane entered Russian airspace. Was turning around, coming back.

**Oli:** What was Jahleh doing?

**Ozra:** She just sat there. One day she went to school. Teacher yelled at her for staring out the window. Scolded her for daydreaming. She was so upset. Ran home crying. Others explained to the teacher. But then she sat there and stared. Ahgoon said to me, 'You know Iraj did not fly into Russian airspace.' Seasoned pilot would not make a mistake like that.

**Oli:** Were you telling Jahleh this news?

**Ozra:** No. She believed he was coming back. Broke my heart. Young. Just married. Two small children. No. Day and night just sat in front of the window, staring, saying he will come back.

**Oli:** When did you tell her?



**Ozra:** Once Iraj's body was found. We all knew. No one wanted to tell. I told Ahgoon to buy her a black *chador*. For the funeral. I walked in the room. Looking down, crying, said, 'you'll need this.' She took it without a word. Then other soldiers came by the house. Announce officially. Kouroush was five, grabbed their leg crying 'bring my bahbah back.' To have a husband and father die.

**Oli:** Did Jahleh do anything then?

**Ozra:** No. Quiet. Even at funeral. Dropped her head down. Quiet. Naimeh did not do well. Screaming at the top of her lungs at the funeral. Had to be dragged to the back of the cemetery. Far away. Kept screaming, screaming, screaming at the top of her lungs.

**Oli:** Why?

**Ozra:** Iraj was assassinated. Plane blown up. Only his torso was returned – he was small, the size of baby.

Using her hands as two markers, she marks off a length of approximately two feet, "And I think that really scared Naimeh. In Iran there are no coffins. The dead are wrapped in cotton, then in a rug. The rug is carried, the body unrolled out of it into the grave. The rug was small. Not natural. Only his torso. Not natural. Naimeh got scared. Screaming and screaming."

Drawing on her body's memories of the story, Ozra placed her hands on her face. Her mouth hung open, her eyes opened widened. I felt interplay between reality and illusion. In demonstration, Ozra softly let out two or three screams. Yes, softly screamed – we were in the back room of her house, and her son Reza was sleeping. Her voice never rose above a stage whisper. I found it a paradoxical pairing to the narrative.

Scream – HUUUUU

She took a deep breath.

Readied herself for another whispered scream.

Scream– HUUUUU

She took another deep breath.

Readied herself for yet another whispered scream.

Scream– HUUUUU

The sound of terror rang in my ears, becoming more volumous in the back of my mind. I hear the full screams. I can't imagine what it would be like to watch one daughter hysterical, while another daughter buries her young husband in a grave marked with a single piece of stone reading, "Iraj Mokhaberi age twenty-three."

"No one could believe he was assassinated. All they found was his torso. Little, like a child died. However, it was Iraj, but only his torso. I tried to push through that part. Jahleh was okay until the Iranian Military played Iraj's last words from that box on the plane," Ozra said.

Help.

And then there was a big boom.

Help.

BOOM.

HELP!

BOOM!

After this sentence, Ozra purses her lips together, slowly blinking her eyes. Watching her hands clutch the fabric of her dark blue skirt wring the perfectly symmetrical pleats into a disarray of wrinkles, I sense slippage. She falls out from the boundaries of discipline. The pain, the fear, and the horror of the scene are undeniable. In these moments of "excess" emotions,

Ozra is isolated, back into the body; “away from more complex modes of cultural” discourses dichotomizing the natural and nature (Pollock *Telling* 118).

As the narrative concludes, there is an undeniable visceral reaction. I feel her re-feeling. In storytelling, she takes me back, a narrative journey returning us to Iraj’s funeral, Iraj’s death, and the return of Iraj’s body home. Ozra and I jump back in time to then; from there we return back in time to now. I watch her tremors increase, building to climax akin to her developing narrative.

Screams.

*Help.*

Her head shakes, side-to-side

Boom!

Side-to-side.

I stop scribbling notes. The tape recorder runs. We sit in room-tone silence. Slowly, another thought comes to her. Using her reflective ability as a narrator, she takes us to another point.

“Like I was saying, I thought it was all over. I thought I had raised all my children and the house was finally going to be quiet and empty. Iraj died. Jahleh, Kouroush, and Babak came to live with me and Ahgoon. They were so young. Just babies really. Kouroush, five. Babak, two. Found out I was pregnant with Mousa. I was thirty-four years old. And, well, the life of raising children started all over again,” she chuckles, gently shaking her head.

### **Diploma or Domesticity**

Unlike her daughter Jahleh, Ozra loves pictures. She is an avid collector, hiding most of them when company comes from abroad to visit. They steal pictures, she explains. Ozra is also very clever with photos. Whenever an overnight guest comes to stay, she digs out several

photographs of them, placing them in frames scattered about the house. Once the guest leaves, she archives the pictures back into their secret hiding spots.

There are, however, a few lucky portraits, like that of her mother as a child, granted permanent exhibition. Hanging in Ozra's dining room is an enlarged 16 x 16 photograph, humorously described by everyone in the family as "Enahyat when he was a girl."

In the black and white portrait, a young boy, possibly one year of age, quietly, sweetly sits. He is wearing a dress of a dark color, possibly maroon or navy, made of a material that looks to be velvet. Dark golden hair tumbles down over the ruffle of antique creamy lace adorning the collar. The sleeves are short and puffy, cinched at the bottom, accented with a thin trim of ribbon and a small button enclosure. Gazing upward into the camera in a manner quite typical of young children forced by eager parents to sit for portraits, his watery eyes look slightly sad or scared. Chin turned down into his chest, Eni pushes his bottom lip into a pout, perhaps because the camera apparatus is intimidating, or perhaps because it is frustrating to sit still at his age.

**Ozra:** The girls [Naimeh and Jahleh] would dress Eni up like a little toy doll. Put ribbons in his hair and their old dresses on him. They did the same thing to Reza and Mousa.

**Oli:** It did not trouble you, or bother you that your daughters were dressing your sons up as girls? Especially in Iran, where having a boy is considered important.

**Ozra:** Well, no. Not me. I started Eni. He was so pretty. And they all had such pretty hair. Curls. I did not want to cut their hair. It was fun. They were too young. To know. To know the difference. When they went to school, I cut their hair. They had little ponytails. I cut those. Eni did not even want me

to. So I left his. The schoolteachers told him he had to. The other children were confused.

**Oli:** Ahgoon, their father, he did not get mad?

**Ozra:** No. He was a liberal, bright thinker. The girls were playing with their brothers. They would hold them like dolls, feed them, and push them around in the stroller. At that age clothes don't matter. It was just clothes. The boys were so young they did not know 'boy' and 'girl.' No. Ahgoon did not get deeply involved with material things like clothes. He was a very stylish man. Very well dressed, but he did not think clothes made a person. Didn't involve himself with child rearing. Mother takes care of children. He works all day. Probably didn't even notice the boys were wearing dresses. And he would never undermine me and tell me to cut their hair.

**Oli:** What about the boys? Did they care?

**Ozra:** Reza was such a quiet, gentle child. Never complained about anything. Once Eni stuck gum on his eyelids. Stuck them shut. Had to go to the doctor. Reza never even made a noise. Not a cry. Eni is a rascal. Busy, energetic and liked getting into trouble. A little crazy, but good-hearted, good-natured. Only Mousa got mad.

It is hard to imagine Mousa as a child. When he was first born, Ozra let his hair grow long. From the other narratives she and Jahleh told, I gathered this was a rather normal thing for Ozra to do with her boys. She always grew their hair long as children, and in their early years dressed them as girls. Now in his early fifties, Mousa is a very serious man. There is one way, one method, one right, one wrong, one answer to everything – a black and white world. “The manager,” his friends call him. From what I learned, as a child Mousa was just as serious.

Reminiscing Ozra tells, “We used to call him Mr. Mousa. When he was 2. Mr. Mousa. Couldn’t tell him what to do. But he never did anything to make you have to tell him. Controlled Mr. Mousa. He was an adorable child.”

At age four, Mr. Mousa had shoulder length, jet-black hair that turned and twisted into large, full curls. “So beautiful. I couldn’t cut it.” So, Ozra kept Mr. Mousa’s locks tied back in a ponytail, so they “wouldn’t interfere with his playing.” One day, while running around a large shared orchard area, a neighbor grabbed him. Dragging Mousa back to his house, he pulled down his pants, to see “if he was a boy or a girl.”

“The man knew Mousa was a boy,” Ozra said. “He was just playing. Making a point. Saying a boy should not have long hair.”

Rightfully embarrassed and somewhat shaken, Mousa ran home, demanding his hair “be cut like man.” Later that day, when everyone laid down for afternoon naps, Mousa snuck into the old neighbor’s backyard, where a prize winning sour-cherry tree lived. It was a “flawless tree,” the old neighbor man “meticulously, diligently cared for.” Ozra explained that being spring, gorgeous pink blossoms decorated its delicate, sloping branches. Quietly, so as to not wake anyone, Mousa hoisted himself into this tree and feverishly, in bitter vengeance, grabbed each and every blossom, ripping it off the branches, tossing and strewing scarred petals across the yard like a massive blizzard of snow.

“We heard the old man screaming at his wife all the way down the street. ‘I told you to shut the yard door! You left the yard door open! Look! Look!’” Ozra half giggled, half shook her head in embarrassment. “Poor woman. Came over. ‘Ozra who did this? That old man is going to kill me.’”

“Did you tell her it was Mousa?” I asked.

“Can’t recall. No. Maybe. Probably,” Ozra replied.

“Did you punish him?”

“No. I never punished Mr. Mousa. He never gave reason really. And he has my father’s name. Named after my father. Ahgoon said when we named him after my father, we must respect him as one carrying that legacy,” Ozra explained.

That was Mousa’s final time being a girl. It was strictly Mr. Mousa from then on. “I am not a girl! I am a man,” he declared. Now as an adult, Mousa enjoys an all night party now and again. When he lets his serious side fade, he is quite a sparkling joker.

With dinner over, plates cleared, and legs stretched, Jahleh’s guests begin redirecting their full-bellied energies back toward celebration and conversation. Mousa, Reza, Eni, and Amhoo Doctor chain-smoke and drink homemade distilled moonshine, usually in the form of watermelon vodka or raisin rum. Back in Jahleh’s carefully designed seating area, I swap chicken recipes with Akram and her thirty-six year old daughter Vahedeh.

As is often the case during social gatherings, our intimate conversations expand outward into a larger group discussion, and the chatter quickly turns to political affairs and global economics (both very popular and relevant topics in Iran). Moved by the lively spirits of tobacco and drink, Jahleh’s guests enter into well-heated debates.

With one ear in the game, Jahleh and Shayde carry in another round of tea and delectable sweets, occasionally throwing in support, usually in the form of short phrases such as “The truth he speaks!” or “What he said is right!” during the climactic points in these debates.

The British and the Americans are in this together!

Our new President knows nothing!

The inflation rate is bankrupting!

This bantering continued for several hours, long into the night. Although the debate was filled with strong opinions, it was never acrimonious but was carried on in a rather lively and

friendly tone. In Iran, when two people did not see eye-to-eye, I found they more often than not simmered down to a single agreement: “Iran’s situation, regardless of how it got to this point or who is keeping it this way, must change.”

While the other women, Shayde, Jahleh, Akram, Vahedeh, and Naimeh joined in, during most of the late evening’s political and social dialogue Ozra remained quiet – very quiet, choosing instead to observe. I began thinking about this striking difference between Ozra and the other women. Why was Ozra quiet? Was she reluctant to speak? Was it her hearing? Did she not care about politics? Did she not know how to debate?

Mentally I began comparing and contrasting Ozra to the other women.

First, Ozra was oldest woman present at the dinner party. Second, unlike the other women, who all had finished high school and most college as well, Ozra had only attended school through the eighth grade. With these characteristics in mind, I attributed Ozra’s silence to a combination of her gender/age role and what I assumed was a lack of formal understanding of politics or history.

Elderly women (a characteristic I am attributing to women whose age range is over seventy) were young during a time in Iran’s history in which women received little out-of-home schooling. As Ozra explained, most girls of her generation and earlier attended school until the fourth grade, or about the age of nine. After reaching this age girls left formal school, finishing the remainder of their education at home. This final stage of a young girl’s education was not based on textbooks or general education subjects such as history, mathematics, or literature, but rather on the art of domesticity.

“In my time girls did not need to go further than the fourth grade or something around there,” Ozra narrated. “By that age we had learned to read and write the basics, and that was what was important. It was the men that went to work so they needed long educations. At age nine or



so our mothers began teaching us how to sew, cook, clean, and mend so we could be good wives and properly run a house. While the men went to school to learn what they needed to know to do their jobs, the girls learned what they needed to learn to be proper women. We stayed at home so we could watch our mothers and learn to do what they did.”

“Did this bother you? What if you wanted to go to college? What if you didn’t want to cook?” I ask.

“You didn’t. Our mothers did not go to college. We did not know more than what our mothers did, we did not criticize their lives. What did we need a diploma for? Women did not need proof. It was ugly for a girl to be out on the streets. At those times proper women, those with class, remained in the home,” Ozra responds. After a long pause she adds, “I actually kept going to school. Even when I was married.”

At times Ozra’s explanation of her schooling and domestic training appear to uphold the surface characteristics of Iran’s traditional gender roles. At other times, however her performance of “proper women” appears to have been more complicated.

As it would happen, Ozra deviated from the everyday norms and generalities she narrated. Raised by a father she describes as having an “extremely bright thinking mind,” Ozra continued her education beyond the fourth grade. Although her marriage remained within social and traditional boundaries, arranged for her at the age of fourteen, her father’s main stipulation during the pre-marriage negotiations was that Ozra must complete her primary and secondary education. Since women were not encouraged to attend school after the fourth grade, a tutor came to the home and Ozra continued through the eighth grade. Despite the fact that an eighth-grade education does not supply a diploma, this is an accomplishment that appears to command much respect. As Vahedeh explained, “Ozra is a well-educated woman for her era. Back then, not very

many women were able to continue their education. She is special. It is a big deal she is literate. Very big deal.”

One fascinating twist in Ozra’s story is that as a supplement to her “missing out” on her formal domestic training, she was given a young servant girl as a wedding present. Affectionately called Na-neh by the family, a slang term for mother roughly translating into “mama,” she was woman who escaped an abusive man in the countryside. In planning this escape, she vowed never to return or to be under the burden of being cared for by a man. As a result, Na-neh turned to a life of serving, an occupation that secured her financial independence. Her promise “to never need a man again” remained true, and Na-neh remained in Ozra’s home till her death some sixty years later.

Born into an extremely wealthy family, and married into one equally prominent, Ozra held the position of privilege and power necessary to break from social norms. From the narratives I gathered, Ozra’s progressiveness was a celebrated, rather condemned act. Given such a noteworthy accomplishment, I found it interesting that as Ozra narrated this portion of her life, she leaned much closer to her traditional gender role than her “progressive” role. Downplaying her academic accomplishment, she opted instead to emphasize the men’s liberal reassignment of educational meaning for women, using such phrases as “I was allowed” and “the men let me.” At the same time, and perhaps more intriguing, was her determination to make sure I understood her abilities to perform her domestic duties; she wanted me to know her performance of the role of “proper woman” did not suffer because of her education. Was it humility? Was being unique a concern in a collective culture? With imitation being such an important aspect of the mother-daughter relationship, was Ozra worried she may insult her mother?

“But what about a degree or a diploma?” I pressed Ozra, “It appears very valuable today! Why do you think this is?”

“Everyone goes to get a diploma now because life is expensive. Both men and women have to work. For the youth in Iran – there is nothing to do at home, and there is no work outside the home; the youth just turning circles. So children go to school, get more and more degrees because they need something to ease the restlessness. . . . But getting a degree does not make you a woman. Being a woman is being sitting poised, caring for your children, never losing control. Look at what is happening now! No one is at home to discipline, to teach between right and wrong. And the streets are now just chaos. People pressed against people. Fever.”

There is nothing to do at home.

There is no work outside the home.

No one is at home to discipline.

Degree after degree to ease the restlessness.

And the streets are now just chaos.

People pressed against people.

Fever.

I am reminded of Jean Baudrillard’s words:

The public stage, the public place have been replaced by a gigantic circulation, ventilation, and ephemeral connecting space. The private space undergoes the same fate. Its disappearance parallels the diminishing of public space. Both have ceased to be either spectacle or secret. The distinction between interior and exterior, which was just what characterized the domestic stage of objects and that of a symbolic space of object has been blurred in a *double obscenity* (20, emphasis by author).

I press on.

**Oli:** Why was staying at home, being like your mother so valuable?

**Ozra:** Because no one ever knows what is in front of them. Future. You don’t know. Don’t know what will happen. But you do know what has been. And what needs to be.

- Oli:** What do you mean?
- Ozra:** You here in Iran. You did not know you would be here. Planes bringing people around the world. But we know we must eat. Telephones in people's pockets. 'Hello?' No one expected that. But you know you must wear clean clothes or your skin will get a rash.
- Oli:** But what about microwaves and washing machines? Things that make it possible to move beyond domestic traditions?
- Ozra:** Can you read that book over there?
- Oli:** Yes.
- Ozra:** Could you *before* you learned what letters were or meant? In order to understand the things of the future, you have to know the basics, the history of the past. And someone has to teach you. I need to know clean clothes are important for skin for the washing machine to matter.
- Oli:** Do you feel that the women who learned the skills when they were young, and then went to college and worked know twice as much or can do more?
- Ozra:** Ahgoon [her husband] did not know anything about our home. He would come home from work, and I would tell him what we needed. In fact, he had only stepped foot in the kitchen two times our whole marriage. Once looking for me and once because no one was around to get him a glass of water. It is not that someone knows more or someone knows less. Each role has its own purpose. But when you leave the home, you can not be 100% about home. No time. For example you can cook. But not as well as your mother. Your mother worked. Your mother learned from her mother who was home to teach her. We in the home live the home fully.

With modernity's seepage into Iran, the tension created between the Islamic Republic's traditionalistic beliefs and its population growth led to new actualizations in agency. Shifts in the country's economic and cultural structure brought many Iranian women out of the home to engage in the public sphere of commerce, production, and industrialization. According to Ozra, this conversion of women's roles came with a cost. By exiting the domestic sphere, and subsequently rematerializing into the public space, women changed the everyday meanings and lived experiences of home. Houses, once thriving with daily activity, transformed into abandoned spaces. Children who once played in yards were moved to daycare centers. Ovens once filled with delectable smells lay barren.

**Oli:** With Na-neh in the house cooking and cleaning what did you do?

**Ozra:** Stood alongside her. Managed. Cared for the children.

**Oli:** Did Na-neh do most of the domestic work?

**Ozra:** No. No. She *helped*.

**Oli:** With what specifically?

**Ozra:** Meals and cleaning. With the children. Calling them in. Getting their bed ready for sleep.

**Oli:** What did you specifically do?

**Ozra:** Everything else. Ahgoon got up, went to work, came home. Anything with the house. Me. I did. Bills. Clothing purchases. Food. Children going to the doctor. Appliances. I told him we need a refrigerator. Renovations. He just said "my wallet is in my pants." And would bring whatever from outside I told him home. He worked, I built the home.

Ozra understands her actions and the actions of women like herself, women remaining in the domestic sphere, as manifesting tradition through repetition. In choosing the word "we" Ozra

metaphorically links to the other Iranian women of the home. Traveling back to her mother and her mother's mother, she enters history, becoming one with it. Sitting in Jahleh's living room, watching her daughter execute, repeat her own bodily experiences, of mixing ingredients, setting plates, brewing tea, Ozra experiences herself and all the women before her unfold. Their domesticity forms an embodied relationship with the cultural history of Iran, and its intersection with change and time, forming metaphors that as Della Pollock suggests do align the abstract concept with a familiar and sensuous one (*Telling* 167), merging the world of ideas with the world of feeling and action, translating *knowing* into *doing*. In this context, Ozra's corporeal and material experience as *domestic* is a simultaneous performativity of space, identity, and time.

### **Birth Certificates Are like Gold**

Ozra's relationship with time extends across decades and generations. According to Ozra, she and time have had many good moments, co-mingling, creating memories together. Time, she says, helps her "mark milestones and triumphs in her life," acting as a reference point for activities and adventures. For her role, Ozra reflects time's passage. "I remember the time when all this concrete cityscape was a filled with cherry trees and grass," she says, speaking of her childhood. "It was a beautiful time. A wonderful time of peace."

Sadly, like all close relationships, time and Ozra have had their share of contests and ironies, too. "I am old now. Being old is the worst time. My knees. My bones. My ears and years going," Ozra adds. Time continuously lays claim to her materiality. Ozra walks slowly, her bones are brittle, she is wilting away, her muscles are weak. She is entombed in a body enacted upon by time. Now in the later years of her life, Ozra lives in a state of perpetual fatigue. When she enters into a room, holding her cane in her right hand, time forces her to become a spectacle. Senior citizens' bodies are bodies that other bodies must help: to sit, to walk, and even to bathe. Time plays tricks between agent, act, and agency.

Amidst this crisis of the times, Ozra remains a fighter. Ozra's mind retains its sharp edge, filled with wisdom from years of living experiences. Pushing her disappearing body into action, she shares her stories, representing and recalling the world according to her experiences.

“The first time I went to the movies my husband got me a ticket and we went to the theatre. The film was in English and I didn't understand it so I fell asleep. My husband let me sleep through the whole movie. But needless to say it was not something he tried to get us to do very much after that,” Ozra laughs as she answers my question on dating after marriage.

To my question on the influx of new technologies into Iran she answers, “I've only been to the movies twice. I really didn't watch it the first time, and the second time was not much better. At the time cinema first arrived in Iran, the films were in foreign languages and really hard for me to follow.”

A missing link here, a new bridge there, she performs narrativity, simultaneously revealing the gaps in history and rupturing any claim to a consistency in time. A revenge on time – sharing the same stories over again. Although seemingly repetitive, her stories mark her control over time, in memories and remembrances. The stories are never the same – new details are dug up, other ones forgotten.

Having outlived most of her family members, a list that includes four of her nine children, three brothers, and husband, at times slight traces of a long, eventful past flash across her aged face. Ozra nevertheless continues forward with pious determination and a sense of infinity. “God leads me” she says. “I will be here as long as He says I need to be. And after I am here He will take me somewhere else.”

“If you don't mind me asking, how old are you?” I ask, partly out of curiosity, partly to develop a chronological lifeline.

“I don’t exactly know how old I am. I would guess around eighty-two, maybe a little less, possibly a little more,” Ozra replies. While her voice tremors slightly it reveals no desire or drive to know her real age. Not knowing her age for Ozra is not a burden, just a fact.

**Oli:** What do you mean?

**Ozra:** What do *you* mean?

**Oli:** What is written on your birth certificate?”

**Ozra:** That certificate is fake.

**Oli:** Fake?

**Ozra:** When I was born, women gave birth at home. There were no governmental rules. Then sometime, I do not know when, maybe I was four, maybe I was five the government said that all children must have a birth certificate. So my father went down to the court house to get my birth certificate. I remember him leaving. He was going for me and my two brothers. I think it was winter. He wore a hat. When he got to the place they just made up a date.

**Oli:** What was the date they put on it?

**Ozra:** I don’t know. That was lost many years ago.

She readjusts herself on the floor, leaning back against a hand woven cushion. She picks up her glass of tea, and places a small sugar cube in her mouth. Looking at me with slightly widened eyes and discernable upturn of the lips, I hear an imaginary, “Well, okay, that’s that.” Her head begins to bob slightly, left to right and back again. This reaction is not one that reads as discomfort, as if she were asking me to change the subject. Instead, it appeared to suggest that there was simply nothing else to say on the matter. Yet, there is something about not knowing how old one is that made me feel ill at ease with this whimsical relationship with time, as if one



had a bout with amnesia, as if there were missing years for which to account. I am driven to explore deeper.

“How do you know when things happened to you?” I asked.

There is a silence. Ozra’s head trembles gently, rhythmically to a private inner metronome only she can hear.

Perhaps my question offended her; perhaps she thought it naïve and youthful. I had just asked her how she interprets her world without a clearly discernable sense of marked time, thinking of Dwight Conquergood’s words that “performance-centered research takes as both its subject matter and method the experiencing body situated in time, place, and history” (“Rethinking” 187). “Without knowing your age, without a clearly demarcated sense of time, how can you have a sense of your history?” I think silently.

Ozra breaks the ice. “Do you know when you were two?”

“Yes.”

“Can you tell me what happened when you were two?”

“No. Not really.”

“Knowing your age does not mean you can recall your history,” Ozra says. “People knew they existed a long time before birth certificates.”

Age as a timer, a self-timer.

At age five I ...

At age twenty-one I ...

When I was twelve ...

“It is normal for me,” she says. “The idea of certifying my birth is merely a government policy that now is just second nature for people. When I was a child, the government just sent out

a bulletin asking everyone to come register themselves, and we went. Today the document is like a piece of gold.”

Through the cliché “piece of gold” Ozra performs a politicized discourse.

The golden age.

Ozra in her golden years.

Pot of gold at the end of the rainbow.

Historically, gold has been the standard by which the economic value of paper money has been determined and fixed. Behind this surface objectification, gold is the symbolic granting of power and class affiliation to its owner (Foucault Order 139). Gold has direct relationships to the process of human commodification and exchange.

Ozra explains that Iran is a culture with a long history of the pre-nuptial agreement. In fact, a pre-nup is standard in both arranged and free will marriages. The husband-to-be, as testament to his promise to be loving and faithful, puts up money, usually in the form of gold coins. Tradition has it that at any time, if the wife feels scorned, hurt, or betrayed, she can demand the sum be paid in full. Of course, the richer the man, the more he is able to wager. Families of high class take great pride in plunking down exorbitant amounts of gold.

During this research project, I had the privilege of attending several Iranian weddings. While I noted many customs and traditions, one in particular stuck out in my mind. During the wedding’s after-ceremony dinner party thin gold coins called *ser-kehs* were tossed by the groom’s father into the air with great pageantry. He would throw his hands high above his head into the air, and onto us guests would rain gold. Music played loudly, applause roared. While adults grinningly collected the coins that landed on them or on the table in front of them, children could not contain their excitement. Throwing themselves down onto the floor, frantically

scooping up as many gold coins as their hands landed on, they subsequently displayed the fruits of their labors to any adult willing to lend the attention.

“Why do you throw gold into the air at weddings?” I asked Ozra.

In Iran, gold coins or pieces of gold jewelry are standard gifts. While other countries like the United States have moved away from the gold standard, in Iran gold is considered as an investment and an asset more valuable than paper currency. As Ozra put it, “Gold is money! Everyone knows it. Gold stays money no matter where you go!” Imaginatively, gold can be pictured as boundless; no matter where it roams, it grants its holder great economic powers. Gold and not love is the universal language.

However, gold’s pragmatic function is only one thread weaving the tapestry of Ozra’s politicized discourse. Ozra’s explanation of her birth certificate is a wonderful example of the ways in which archived history is imbricated in the formation of identity, or perhaps more appropriately an objectified identity surfacing itself in the form of a chronicled life span or marked citizenship. She went on to add, “Those who hold the right birth certificate are automatically granted privileges those with the wrong birth certificate must fight to get.”

As I continued to speak with her, I learn that her observation is directly tied to Iran’s current global relationships. Social and economic sanctions from the world community render an Iranian passport virtually worthless; those holding only Iranian passports face literal geopolitical entrapment. An Iranian passport is a mark of subjugated, subordinate identity. While my US passport, with the Golden Eagle stamped proudly on the cover, allows me to freely move my body through space, forward in time on my eastbound flight, Ozra’s Iranian passport immobilizes her.

“I want to come and visit my children and my grandchildren. They are in Europe and America,” she tells me. “But I am old and it is too hard. I have to travel to Tehran. Wait all day in

a line. When I get up there, they will tell me if I maybe can get an exit visa. One out of every twenty people may get one. And you have to spend a fortune.”

“So if the government requires a birth certificate, what happens to you now that it is lost?” I ask Ozra.

“Nothing,” she replies. “People see I am an old woman. People can see I am not from another place. They hear my accent, and look at my clothes. It all says I am from here. After a brief pause, she adds that it did matter during the Revolution, but “I survived without it.”

Ozra’s words “People can see I am not from another place...hear...see” lingered hauntingly. The role of “old woman” is a trope that registers in various discursive terrains, and can be deployed for various aims. Some performances of “old woman” afford the gazer, the “not old,” an opportunity to momentarily detach themselves from the horror of their own on-going corporeal diminishment, while others remind them of their own mortality and fate.

At the same time, by playing the role of “old woman,” Ozra subverts this objectifying gaze and its attendant social and political coding. In discussions, she explained that during the Iranian Revolution and the subsequent Iran-Iraq War staple goods necessary for survival (i.e. milk, sugar, flour, fresh water, and eggs) were sparingly rationed. A standardized formula based on family size and age determined the quantities of food the government granted individuals. In order to minimize contamination to this formula, each person produced a birth certificate.

In essence, the birth certificate served a dual purpose. First, no birth certificate, no rations: a system that ironically made the birth certificate a matter of life or possible death. Second, not only did the certificate authenticate bodily existence, but also quantified it by showing how long one had been in existence. Were you young or old? How much time have you spent on earth?

During this period, Ozra went on to explain, families cheated: made-up birth certificates, falsifying existences, or revamped birth certificates, resurrecting the dead in order to obtain more

rations. As mentioned earlier, Ozra circumvented her lack of birth certificate by using her status as “old woman” to her advantage. Subsequent to the war, Iran instilled a strict policy on birth certificates. Each and every citizen must have on them an original or an official replica of their birth certificate. All individuals who did not have these documents were summoned to come and collect them. All citizens who already held documents were required to come renew them, and receive more modern, laminated versions. This passion on the government’s part had less to do with wartime rations and more to do with population control, Ozra told me. In the early years of the Revolution, birth certificates acted as the main form of identification. Roadblocks and barricades stopped vehicles for mandatory birth certificate checks. While the frequency of such checks has diminished over the years, they still remain.

Given that military duty is compulsory in Iran, it is in the government’s best interest to have a careful, closely regulated head count of the country’s men. Random stops insure that the male subjects have either completed their military requirements or have paid the hefty black market price that excused them from necessary duties. Women face a different issue. In Iran, it is against the law for a female to travel with a male who is not her husband, father, or brother. While young girls under nine, the age deemed for sexual maturity, are not persecuted for being with an uncle or cousin, women who have reached the age of sexual maturity face punishments as severe as death. This thinking falls in line with traditional Islamic ideology. In a classic Foucaultian manner, fearful random checks insure the government’s message of Islamic piety retains saliency in the female subject’s mind, and in turn her bodily manifestations of Islamic female subjectivity.

**Oli:** Do the random checks frighten you?

**Ozra:** Me? No.

**Oli:** Why not?

**Ozra:** These situations. Government things. Politics. They do not change my life. Luckily, no sons have died in wars. In the house, nothing has changed. Mothers love children. Meals get cooked. It doesn't bother me because what is there to fear? A paper? Ahgoon, God rest his soul, always said avoid religion and politics and you'll always be happy.

The hour is late, and we are all getting a bit tired. Jahleh and I have been working for several days, and pregnant Shayde is beginning to feel the strain. One by one, conversations dwindle, the tea samovar simmers off, and guests begin plotting their exit maneuvers. However, like most group situations in Iran, leaving a party induces another round of taarof. The rules in this situation are similar to those of seating arrangements, and tea and food service. No one leaves until Amhoo Doctor heads to bed, or Ozra (depending on how the two work it out amongst themselves) leaves the gathering.

Knowing that one of their exiting bodies will be our cue, we linger, watching the taarof unfold. Amhoo Doctor, in his courteous, gentlemanly way offers Ozra the lead. We all understand that had it not been for Ozra's presence at the party Amhoo Doctor would have long excused himself; recovering from his stroke he is often plagued with fatigue and must rest. Ozra, with all lady-like politeness declines Amhoo Doctor's offer to leave before he retires, insisting rather that the Amhoo Doctor head to bed and not fuss over her. Resting his hand gently on Ozra's back, he extends his left hand out towards the door. Ozra shakes her head no. They go on for a few minutes. On this occasion, Amhoo Doctor listens to Ozra; bidding his goodbyes, he heads to the bedroom.

Ozra continues insisting other guests leave before her. All taarofing aside, it is simply easier for the other guests to leave first. Not too long ago Ozra faced an ordeal in Jahleh's hallway, one slowing her walk down more than usual.

Jahleh's apartment is located on the third and top floor of the building. The entrance to the building has a secure door. When a person wants to enter into the building, he or she must call up, and the corresponding apartment buzzes them in. Once in the building, a person has two choices – stairs, or a small two-person elevator that finds itself trapped between floors several times a week.

A short time prior to this evening's event, Ozra had come to visit her daughter. Following routine, she rang up, entered the building, and despite her age opted for the stairs. "The elevator sticks too much," she explained. A young boy followed Ozra into the building. "I did not think much. Very clean. Nice blue shirt. Buttons. And his hair combed, short," detailed Ozra.

Ozra began slowly making her way up the stairs. Half-way up, almost to Jahleh's apartment, Ozra felt a knife on her back and a forceful tug on her purse. It was the boy, and he was robbing her. "A big knife. The kind the men cut carrots with. He kept screaming, 'Give me the purse! The purse!' And I screamed. Screamed. No one heard," Ozra recalled.

Ozra's stubborn nature held strong. Rolled into a ball, lying over her purse, she clutched it tightly. The young boy began kicking her repeatedly in the back and legs. "'Old lady, just give me the purse!' He was screaming at me. But I won't. No. I wouldn't. I begged him to think about his mother. Looked him in the eyes. Told him he was a good boy. Finally," Ozra said, "he leaned down. Cut the purse handle. Ran."

The ordeal bruised three of Ozra's ribs and fractured her wrist. When asked why she allowed the boy to follow her in she kindly responded, "In Iran we don't act suspicious like that. I don't assume bad. Anyway, times are hard. He was desperate. He did not want to hurt me. He could have hurt him. He did not. If I had given him the purse he would have ran. You could tell from his cloths and hair he had a mother. Money is short in Iran. With no work, times are hard."

## CHAPTER 5 CONCUSSION

### In New Light

While her face and shoulders bore the signs of creeping fatigue, Jahleh hummed goodbye to her guests with almost the same vitality and energy as she had greeted the cab driver nearly nineteen hours prior.

“Goodbye!” she said. “No, no, it was my pleasure. Don’t mention it. It was nothing. Not worthy of you,” she taarofed, praising each guest as they made their way toward the door.

“Ciao,” I waved, revealing my customary confusion; as usual, I had no clue as to my role in this game of Iranian reciprocity.

“Ciao!” they replied with hearty laughter and kindness, kissing me once on either cheek as they moved towards the door.

“Ciao!” I said again delighted by their response, “Ciao!”

It was nearing two in morning when Jahleh’s house finally emptied out. For the departing guests the party had reached its end, exhausted and well-fed they clamored into cars and taxis heading home; on the other hand, for Jahleh the clicking sound of the dead bolt falling into place door merely marked the halfway point; part three of being a good hostess was still ahead.

Looking around I knew hours of cleaning would consume tomorrow.

“It’s late,” Jahleh stated in her matter of fact tone. “Time for bed.”

With that she headed off into her room, and I sat down on the couch with plans of journaling. Looking around I was mesmerized and taken by the day’s events. I did not know where to begin my writing, so I sat for some time just taking in the space.

Mingling with Jahleh’s apartment, traces of the party lingered on. Orange rinds carefully peeled and cherry stems meticulously plucked by Jahleh decorated an appetizer dish. Aromatic



tea long cooled half-filled a glass gently marked by Shayde's pinkish-red hued lipstick. And in the dining room Ozra's knife and fork lay perfectly parallel across a polished off plate.

Forcing Jahleh's living room into a state of disarray, in fact glaringly marking tomorrow's clean-up mission, I nonetheless felt a mystical allure emanating from each item; an ability to invoke the presence of each person even in their absence, maintaining the energy recently transferred between them. Thinking back, I pictured the bodies of Jahleh, Shayde, and Ozra indulging, biting, sipping, enjoying the party. And while the next morning the items would disappear, falling into the trash or getting dropped into the dish washer, I knew that in the future when I saw one of those pastries, plump cherries, or a hot cup of tea I could very well be reminded of Jahleh, Shayde, and Ozra. Poetically the plate, stems, and tea proved the power and authority of the oral histories the women shared within the space of this ethnographic project.

In Jahleh's story, cherries became more than just cherries; they transformed into delicious symbols of generosity offered by a hostess to her guest, and items of exchange on which relationships between neighborhood inhabitants and local merchants developed. Shayde's narrative proved there is more to tea than meets the eye. For her tea intricately fuses to matrilineage and womanhood. In the ritual of *khastegaree*, young girls silently serve tea to the women of the prospective groom-to-be's family. These women in turn evaluate the young girl on her moves, carrying hot amber liquid, bending down slowly to place it on a table. In her oral history, Ozra reconstructed a fork and a knife into pleasurable tools with which to maneuver acts of decorum that repeated motherhood lessons.

Exhilarated by the passing day, and filled with caffeinated drink, I sat on Jahleh's couch for some time reflecting. Listening to the sounds of traffic dwindle to nothing more than an occasional passing truck, and watching the night sky through the living room window darken to starry black, I wondered about everything I learned.

This project began with great intentions. Trying to offer a new view of Iranian women, one counteracting the homogenizing images so popular in Western research and media, I set off full force into “The Field.” From the various ways I could have approached this journey I choose dialogic ethnography, grounded in oral histories. I believed that while research inherently held the potential for misrepresentation, an ethnographic approach presented the possibility of meeting and opening a true dialogue between Jahleh, Shayde, Ozra and I (Sharp 306). I felt dialogic ethnography held the potential to present my findings in a manner Homi Bhabha describes as “cultural hybridity that entertains difference without assumed or imposed hierarchy” (4).

From a broad perspective there were several reasons why I felt research built on dialogic ethnography would entertain difference. Oral histories, and in turn, research based on oral histories, develops spaces by which storytellers actively author and reauthor their lives. Rather than fixed, Jahleh, Shayde, and Ozra’s memories and recollections would shift *history* from a simple recounting of *what happened* to a making of what that *happening meant*. Equally as important, meaning making would happen collaboratively; there would be a transgression in the research process and subsequent ethnographic text, one displacing my authoritative position as researcher, favoring instead a space much like the dinner party, a space of reciprocity and shared experience.

That late night/early morning at Jahleh’s I wondered, what does all this mean now? How much collaboration really happened? What do “cultural hybridity” and “dialogic ethnography” mean after months in the field? After hours of narratives have been shared? What does this research mean now that the women have transformed cherries, tea, and forks? How have I changed? Now that consciousness has been shifted? What happens when just yesterday becomes history, and the words of narratives and the findings of research carry on in the dawn of new

days? How do Jahleh, Shayde, and Ozra's narratives fit into the contours of our understandings of Iran and research at large?

### **Subversions**

With a slight squinting of her eyes, Ozra half-rhetorically, half-teasingly posed the question: "So you're going back to America to tell these stories of my life. I only told you what I know. At school, in America, you get degree for telling them what I know? American schools do that? You get a doctor degree talking about what I do every day?"

I am not sure if it was her age or her generosity towards me, but, as I've said before, Ozra seemed a much softer, gentler woman than her children felt her to be. But even my firm belief in her downy nature could not soften the jaggedness of her question. Mortified, I silently froze in thought. A grandfather clock, intent on dramatizing the pause, hit the fourth hour.

Bong!

Bong!

Bong!

Bong!

Staring at Ozra, a flood of recollection swept over me. Stale beer nights at the Chimes or Slinkys, inducing platonic conversations, romantic weepings, and idealized promises of ethical intellectualisms passed among colleagues and peers swept over me in blurs, resembling a circus viewed from the spinning teacup ride or from the top story of a Ferris wheel that instant it rounds you back down to the festivities (Ginsberg, sec.1). Embarking on my first dialogic-performative-ethnographic adventure, I simply, without question, assumed the methodology magically created *and* sustained points from which the women and I would rupture cultural limitations, seamlessly substituting the colonizing power relations of "old ethnography" with "true dialogue" and "shared understanding."

I believe my jaw dropped open. Feeling I owed Ozra an elegant, appreciative explanation, I stuttered, “Yes, I guess in many ways they do give me degree based on what you know.”

Ozra’s jarring statement got me thinking about my dialogic ethnographic experience. Her words hauntingly highlighting the thin, often invisible line of paradoxes and absurdities encircling research.

I had (or at least thought I had) credibility in Iran. My college degrees, modes of theorizing, coupled with financial independence and traveling savvy would raise me above the established Iranian culture performances and identity roles. I am researcher, and as such my expectations were that while the women would embody their cultural understandings and we would collaboratively dialogue, I somehow would be classified as a total persona, allowed to perform ambiguities, exempt from the everyday practices of Iranian culture. If you were to ask me, I’d share with you my opinion that it is in the *nature* of storytelling and performance ethnographic practices to *naturally* create spaces of dialogue and shared experience. I was of the opinion researchers lacked the capability to create or extinguish these *natural, inherent abilities*. As it turned out, this scenario did not play out. I was not the advanced intellectual, pining diligently on a priceless project I thought I was. In point of fact, I had very little ethos in the eyes of Jahleh, Shayde, and Ozra.

Truthfully speaking an ethnographer entering into the field is an “*other*,” and sometimes even a “*savage*” in the eyes of the “*natives*.” As an American in Iran, I was very much an outsider. For Jahleh, Shayde, and Ozra I embodied alien, exterior to cultural understanding, and in today’s political system, my very being, my very essence was a performative representation of an evil, mistrusted West.

“So you think America has culture and awareness? What culture?! You’re living like animals,” Jahleh once incisively critiqued after my suggestion Tabriz’s lack of handicap accessible establishments reflected a cultural unawareness for the physically disabled.

“*Eh*,” she finished with a wave of her hand.

Entering into Iran, I felt with a large degree of certainty, I would be greeted by a country whose female citizens were ideologically either devoted to, or ultimately incapable of understanding, discourses and institutions forcing and maintaining traditional female gender roles.

Faces pressed against the protective glass-dividing travelers from inhabitants. Each female face shrouded by a headscarf or long, black chador. Reaching my arm into the air, I waved at Jahleh in the distance. She shakes her head no! no! a lady is not supposed to lift up her arm in public and wave. I forgot. They had warned me last time.

But why not? If we all do it how can they stop us? If we all keep listening to the rules they will not change? Viva revolution! I feel like the women *do woman* without much conscious awareness of the socio-political institutions pressing upon them, rather blindly serving these “oppressive” roles. I stop waving, pissed, accomplice to retarded rules of gender.

Determined to ultimately present a critical cultural and feminist conclusion to this adventure, I intentionally wove the thematic thread of “*being a lady*” through the fabric of my interviews. Presenting each woman with the questions: “In Iran, what does it mean to be a lady?” and “How do you know someone is a lady?” received a series of rather uniform responses. In compilation, Jahleh, Shayde, and Ozra’s narratives agreed on the major cultural and social characteristics of *being a lady*. In answering questions, the women put forth to *be a lady*, one must carry on traditional gender roles – embodying the generations of women preceding her –

mastering the art of domesticity, remaining in a position of subordination to men, birthing, nursing, raising children, and doing so with the air and grace of a truly pious Islamic female.

Clifford Geertz once claimed in his work a “country’s politics reflect the design of its culture,” and the prescribing behavior must be attended to because it is through the flow of behavior – or, more precisely, social action cultural forms find articulation (310, 17). In watching Jahleh, Shayde, and Ozra from a distance, much of their acts and actions appeared to match the “being a lady” mantra. However, in light Geertz’s statement, and given Iran’s historical grounding and current hyperemphasis on the Quran, my perception of the women as master domestics and graceful subordinates proves to be a rather dull and predictable anti/discovery. We should find Jahleh playing the role of *The Doctor’s Wife*. Shayde pregnant, belly protruding, should be balancing a tray of hot tea in her arms, serving each man as he sits admiring her womanly display of brewing tea. Ozra should be maintaining a statuesque stance of seen, not heard, quietly, conservatively dressed.

Grounded in a traditional, Islamic faith-based approach to life, the Quran delegates the broader everyday social patterns of Iranian gender performances. The dominant interpretation of the Quran’s discourse translates gender as God’s creation; as such gender is depicted as natural, biological, and hence a fixed, rather than fluid entity (Torab 236). In current times, Iran’s post-revolutionary theocratic government enforces this rather standardized image of female materiality, and the allowed movements and activities of the female body. The Islamic Republic of Iran’s permissible performance of gender is based on the *shari’a* (the Quran’s code governing Islamic laws and behaviors). The clearest visible sign of this religiopolitical code of gender performance reveals itself in the relationship between veils and women.

Slowly tracing a circle around the edges of her face, Ozra recites, “Not a place on our bodies is supposed to be found. In Islam, only the roundness of our faces, without hair.” Lifting

both hands into the air, holding them like a surgeon entering into the operating room, she chants, “Our feet, and hands from the wrist up can show. This is the *hijab* [dress code]. You must wear it whenever men are around. Only your father, brother, and son are to see you without the *hijab*. ”

Looking around Jahleh’s dinner party, I noticed none of the women wore Islamic covering. I mean, they had to on the taxi on the ride over, but as soon as a foot landed on the private space of Jahleh’s warm, aromatic apartment, the head coverings flew off, quickly forgotten. As mentioned earlier, Ozra chose a dashingly elegant outfit, adorned with lustrous pieces of gold jewelry. From what I had observed and heard, this evening’s accessories were not new or unusual for Ozra. Fashionable dress defined her younger years. She was, she admits, a little “*gehrty*” [sassy]. And in our taxi rides, Jahleh often times screamed “stupid” through a rolled down window at women choosing to wear the long, black chadors so popular in Western media. When asked, she told me “those are the crazy fundamentals.”

In and through narrating voices, Jahleh, Shayde, and Ozra performed clever transmutations of traditional gender roles at opportune times, in their everyday experiences. Demonstrated in the veil anecdote, actions, and subsequent stories on these actions, generated substantial amounts of improvised subversions to the status quo. While direct answers to the research question: “What does it mean to be a woman?” provided static, unidirectional responses, their individual oral histories betrayed the social system’s official position that wives, daughters, and mothers domesticate and subordinate to men.

In Jahleh, Shayde, and Ozra’s oral histories, husbands Amhoo Doctor, Seyamak, and Ahgoon work long, hard days. Laboring through most of the day’s business hours, many times straight into the night, these men *rely* and *depend* on their wives to pay bills, purchase food, order airlines tickets, and keep car insurance updated. In essence, the household, all of its functioning,

as well as every piece of paperwork and errand necessary to sustain everyday life, falls into the hands of the women.

By making particular events into stories, each woman conveys to herself, and to the audience in the actual here-and-now, that her lifestyle falls far from stereotypical “traditional and oppressed” role that Western “others” may think her to be living. In the “intensive, reflexive, cogenerative dynamics of dialogic performance,” the women not only recognize the gap between the official text of Islamist gender identity and its performance, but embrace its validity (Pollock Telling 89). Effectively, the women encourage a reassessment of the authority and habitual assumptions of stereotypical discourses documenting singular, authoritative truth (Carpenter 188). As their stories inform about their histories and collective nature, Jahleh, Shayde, and Ozra directly demonstrate that, as Iranian women, they are able to reclaim, redesign, and invert the ideologies in which they are embedded.

Narrative knowing refigures the world “as a coding trickster with whom we must learn to converse” (Haraway 201). In many ways, it can be said that Jahleh, Shayde, and Ozra performed as tricksters in the space of this research project. In highly complex narratives of womanhood, Jahleh, Shayde, and Ozra position themselves as mediators between *being Iranian* and *being women* and *being oneself*. What transpires then is a repositioning of my authority as researcher and re/narrator/ing of *their history*. In place of trapping themselves into what can easily become a unilateral “conversation,” a space from which I might critically approach womanhood in Iran, Jahleh, Shayde, and Ozra, elicit my interpretive presumptions, confronting my potential for misunderstanding, only to reprimand me, however gently, for my presumptuousness.

As the women performed their oral histories, narrating on such corporeal social and cultural practices as taarof, chair rotation, and tea service, one thing became shockingly clear – more than engaging in dialogue I was being *schooled* and *disciplined* on the absolute basics of an



embodied understanding of Iran culture. Situating me as student, the women crippled my ability to discursively duplicate or replicate their understandings without first experiencing them.

Reworking my position, they argued that in order to understand them as Iranian women, I must first be willing to materially empathize with them by learning to “be” an Iranian lady myself.

As I briefly touched upon a few paragraphs earlier, in Iran particular practices are culturally and socially designated as belonging to the sphere of female materiality (e.g. sewing, cooking, tea service, care-giving). Although it is tempting from feminist, postmodern Western perspectives to critique these enactments as oppressive, as manifested in Jahleh, Shayde, and Ozra’s narratives, these acts and actions are celebrated by women. Domesticity is fully their domain. As Shayde eloquently pointed out, it is in the domestic sphere that basic human needs are fulfilled (e.g. food, shelter, comfort). It is she, not her husband Seyamak, who knows how to cook a chicken; if there were ever an emergency, he would be dependent on her for survival.

In the domestic sphere women are powerful agents, with great agency. Practice, precision and artistic execution of domestic practices grants women respect and powerful positions within Iran’s system, which is rich with symbolic markers of status and collectivity. Passed through the matrilineal line, Jahleh, Shayde, and Ozra do not enact an autonomous role; they are performers in the larger Iranian social system, collaborating with a sense of a “shared authority” (Frisch xvi).

Revisiting transcriptions I realized that Jahleh, Shayde, and Ozra subverted many questions dealing with these ritual passages into womanhood, especially those that were particularly private (e.g. wedding night, falling in love, birthing). My initial reaction was that those topics must resonate with taboo, culturally inappropriate areas for conversation; their silence bound to renewing given political structures prohibiting “body *knowing*” (Pollock Birth 193, emphasis by author).

Paying closer attention, however, a different pattern began to emerge. Preceding their silences or fragmented, phatic responses were terms and phrases such as “girl,” “child,” and “these were not topics for young.”

“Eh, girl. What kinds of questions are these? What I did to prepare for my wedding. Eh, when it’s your turn, you’ll find out,” Jahleh replied, clearly irritated.

“Child, when the time comes you will have your answers,” Ozra would say in a tone of wisdom.

Slowly, it began to dawn on me that perhaps my age and marital status were playing an active role in my interview process. I am younger than the women, in the case of Jahleh and Ozra younger by more than forty years, I was unmarried and without children. My lack of a husband and offspring meant that in addition to a generational gap, there was also “rite of passage gap” between me and Jahleh, Shayde, and Ozra.

Within Iranian culture, my lack of a husband coupled with my younger age placed me firmly me into the social category of *girl*, possibly (if people felt particularly generous or formally respectful) *young lady*. Regardless, both of titles *girl* and *young lady* positioned me dangerously close to the grouping of *child*. I learned female social standing, and role expectations intricately connect with marital status and age. In their understanding of Iran, the terms “girl” and “women” are not interchangeable. A girl remains a girl until she is married; once married a girl blooms into a young woman, a status she retains until she has children; it is after the birth of her first child that a young woman lives as woman.

Of course, this is not something unique to Iran. Cultures all over the world integrate rituals and other symbolic practices to help boys and girls become men and women, and many are linked to age and marriage. Thus, as I performed the role of adult/independent/researcher, Jahleh,

Shayde, and Ozra refused to set aside their own cultural understandings and standards of my status to grant me the space from which to perform being adult.

By intertwining basic cultural lessons into many of their oral history performances, Jahleh, Shayde, and Ozra made salient issues of research authority. In promoting traditional Iranian and Islamic systems, they cagily negotiated the power relations present in the context of our interviews, preserving and constructing cultural differences through the generative powers of their narratives. In essence, the women were telling me to learn just as they had, by watching and doing. There was discursive collapse.

### **Future Studies**

I enjoy limitlessness, while accepting it as improbable. I embrace multiperspectival approaches to understanding, even though I face constraints. Like all other projects, only so much could be done. And in the following section I mold two bricks from which to build future studies.

### **Identity and Islam**

Under perpetually fluctuating Islamic influence, and torn by years of Revolutionary occupancy the women's narratives on womanhood and religion mirrored the paradoxical and highly complex fractures of tradition and modernity, war and peace in Iran.

Like most parts of Islamic Iranian culture, gender extends from the text of the Quran. Being Islamic (a term I am using as a general marker of those who follow the Quran or consider themselves Muslim) in Iran is, for the most part, not a choice. Unlike Protestant understandings of Christianity, one does not come to Muhammad or Allah. It is understood that those born on Islamic soil to Islamic parents are Islamic; in other words, like dining manners, which are handed down from one generation of woman to another, being Islamic is inherited. As far as Jahleh, Shayde, and Ozra were concerned, spiritual deviation from Islam, such as religious conversion to another faith, would be at once an act of treason toward both Iran and one's family.

By governmental mandate, the basic foundations of the Quran are taught in all school systems, private or public. During these lessons, the text of the Quran is not actually read by students. The original text is in Arabic, and any translation of the text is considered erroneous, and (depending on whom you speak to) sinful. Translations cannot capture “Truths,” and as the general population of Iran (including teachers) is not fluent in Arabic, the classroom lessons focus on fragmented portions, or governmentally determined key points of the text.

Interestingly, while the Quran’s *literal* discourse gives greater status to men, Muhammad’s words *subsume* the text’s prescriptions. Ironically, Muhammad, like Jesus in the Bible, never actually wrote any portion of the Quran; he only spoke the revelation. As Jahleh, Shayde, and Ozra explained, according to Muhammad, men and women are to be treated equally, as they were spiritual equals under the loving eye of God. In fact, it was Muhammad who ended the slaying of female babies. In essence, then, there are two distinct discourses running through Iran, one grounded in text, the other in orality. There is a pronounced gap between the functionality and performance of the faith, and the fundamentals and reading of the Holy Quran, between Allah (God) and Muhammad (Prophet).

As their oral histories revealed, the woman in *action*, the women *performing* womanhood, were actually much “closer” to men than the *Quranic text* would deem appropriate. While the women cited the Quran repeatedly as their basis for understanding culture identity, great ruptures occurred between *reading womanhood* and *living womanhood*.

Identity formation through performative acts such as narration is one way to revise textualized images of Islamic womanhood. Given the *inherited* qualities of understanding and contextualizing lived experience, I think it is safe to argue narratives are a master trope in cultural expression. In many ways, Jahleh, Shayde, and Ozra’s performances of oral history deformed rather than reproduced Quranic discourses.

Kristin Langellier and Eric Peterson wrote that the transmission of culture is facilitated by the generality of knowledge that diffuses content among multiple participants, those who take their own experience or that of others to create significant stories, providing safeguards against both loss and distortion (47). While their narratives of womanhood make salient issues of gender, as well as problematize the issues, they do so without denouncing the Iranian or the Islamic systems. As such, the women's subversion of the status quo exists, not out of, but within their collective cultural system. Suavely negotiating the power relations present in the context of our interviews, they both preserve and construct their cultural differences through the generative powers of narrative.

Valuable approaches for future studies may include such questions as – How can the women of this project feel that Islam grounds gender equality? How do we understand the complex combination of contradictory trends? Why is it that the agent Muhammad's oral transmission of the Islam overrides the exact text that provides his very agency? How is it that these inconsistencies are congruent with the women's living reality?

### **City as Text**

**Historian:** On the outskirts of Tabriz there is a mountain region named the Alborzi Mountains. The highest of the mountains reaches an elevation of 15,000 feet. This height is greater than the mountains of Utah and Colorado. On one of the mountains the people of Tabriz have built a Mosque. The building follows traditional rules of Islamic architecture. It is round shaped and bears on it scripture from the Quran. An Islamic mosque functions similarly to a Christian church; it is a space of worship. This Mosque is located on the mountaintop to commemorate the spot where Muslims believe Onib de Ali was born, and now is buried. Onib de Ali was a son of

an Imam. An Imam is the highest religious position attainable by a human in Islam. Always a male he functions similarly to a high priest or pope. To get to the mosque worshippers must climb pathways carved into the mountainside.

**Woman:** One time we went to the mountain. All children together. *There*, in a mosque. I was praying. Saw something from behind my head, a sound of a foot came. I said “Ali” silently to myself. *Suddenly* I saw a person’s hand! It was put on this *shoulder*. Like this, I turned around, looked, saw. . . . Like a *mirror*, like a light was on. A man with a ring on. Breath of his heard I. Warmth of breath of his sensed. Beautiful was. Then I *understood nothing*. The spot where his hand was placed smelled of perfume. On my shoulder. Smell of flower water. That mosque on the mountain.

Bourdieu’s notion of habitus, addressed the relationship between cultural structure, the ways in which spaces are laid out, and the self (Bourdieu qtd. in Low 13). The idea of habitus suggests that although the production and reproduction of social spaces are the results of people’s practices, social personae and identities are influenced by the spaces in which they have been socialized. There is a dialectic between person and place: since places are frames of social relations, they become imbued with the values of those relations; places are charged with histories through which people conceive of their relations with one another.

From the introduction to this study through the rivers of each chapter swam the theme of space. In floating, fleeting voices Jahleh, Shayde, and Ozra manifested a relationship between their narrative accounts and their matter of place. The city, the homes, the streets, the parks, and their place in the geopolitical landscape – all bear meaning on their bodies as sites where cultural values are exhibited, endorsed, defied, mediated, and transformed..

In their narratives, we learned drastic shifts in politics, alongside pressures of modernity significantly restructured Iran's landscape. In the ratification of a Revolutionary Government, and an incalculable religious victory for the Islamic Mullahs women's freedoms of expression and embodiment fell under siege. Forcefully reorganized, the female body served, and continues to serve, as the site where *new* culture is displayed and negotiated. Literally, in public spaces the Iranian woman's body is a dramatic, open, hyper-visual inscription of the effects of war, virtual dialectic sites of lived politics.

Arguably, the Revolution and ensuing Islamic government exiled Jahleh, Shayde, and Ozra: Exiled them from a cityscape they once knew, forcing street names be altered, monuments to be torn down, and buildings demolished to name a few examples. But it also exiled them from their public bodies: A diaspora from the flesh.

In her essay "Identity: Skin Blood Heart," Minnie Bruce Pratt introduced the geographical features of the cities and towns in which she lives and has lived. Emerging from the narrative was a mapping of streets, buildings, and distances which recognized the dividing lines of racial and communal identifications. For Pratt, "home" is a question of imagined dimensions, meanings, limits; it is a particular interpretation of the times in which one lives. Yearning to transgress a conventional visual/spatial *fixing* of the Other and the Self, Pratt practiced new ways of seeing. The panorama of her point of view did not reveal the spread of free space, the expansion of being-at-home, exposing division, concealments, hidden narratives of identity and heritage – overlapping, coinciding, contradicting.

While the space of this project prevents extensive discussion, spatial metaphors enact a poetry of place where desire and understanding continually delineate embodied space. Although this project evolved in the realm of private space, both for pragmatic and safety purpose, future, perhaps more renegade studies, may benefit from further exploring the women's oral histories in

relation to public space, ideology, and identity. Is culture simply a rational adaptation to economic and political forces in the regional system of Iran? In what ways do actions resist conforming to a new post-revolutionary space? What is the cultural repertoire of Iran? How does public space frame communication within and between various political and spiritual identities? In what spaces do social boundaries between women and men, fundamentalist-Islamic and western-friendly citizens break down?

### **Post Processing**

Clearly, I have reached a threshold. If I cross this threshold, I move to *conclude*, leaving you with the memories of links drawn between narratives, performance, and the body and a small set of chapter abstracts. I stroll down a pathway, ending with a recap of the value and productivity of oral histories and dialogic ethnography; I surrender to the temptation of endowing a tidy summary.

However, a small voice, not so deep within my heart, but upfront – sitting in the center of my consciousness -- whispers into my ear, advising that a re/summation would be merely redundant, perhaps even anti-dialogical. The joy of listening to oral histories and conducting ethnographic work arises out of a collaborative dance between participant-partners, the process not the product. Anything moving away from that space of play, vulnerability, and contingency would inoculate the process with the dis/ease of conventionalism, the comforts of “method.”

Thankfully, life gives many of us choices, and next to the low road is the high road. A second charting is to move through the *undiscussed* discoveries and *missed* lessons of this journey. At this point, you know a great many things were shared, a vast array of topics narrated, and a variety of theories and findings discussed throughout the chapters.

Jahleh  
Shayde  
Ozra

Really surprised me at the end of the day.



The utopian promises of Chapter One flowed from my mind and heart, onto fingertips gingerly hitting laptop keys, spinning human ideas through a matrix of “0s” and “1s,” informing a machine to place letters on a screen, which at the push of a button foil onto clean sheets of recycled white paper, get bounded, stapled together with a thin, bent wire, placed into a large yellow-orange envelope, and float into your hands to read.

Yes, that was a romantic, dreamy time.  
Milky chapters, illuminating illusion that on the inside,  
I had everything to do with anything,  
and anything to do with everything.  
voice and narrative  
collaboration and collectivity  
embodiment and materiality  
In fact, I had nothing to do with a thing.

As you moved along this work, I am certain you stumbled across recurring themes: narrations on public/private gender roles, social actions such as taarofing, photographs and memories, and general educations of domesticity. The insurgence of parallel topics and ideas did not derive from coincidence, and their prominence in this study is not an indicator that these matters hold particular salience in the lives of Jahleh, Shayde, and Ozra. Uniformities in narrative topics across the women’s oral histories transpired from the mistake no researcher expects or desires to make.

The fact is, while “I had designed” a collaborative and idealistic project, I did not go into Iran with an open mind or with ears prepared to listen. I went into Iran to get *my questions answered*, list in hand. Repeatedly, I asked Jahleh, Shayde, and Ozra to explain the basic structure of Iranian culture, and the impact of political and social institutions and discourses on their everyday lives. Repeatedly, I forgot to just stop and let them tell me whatever they wanted to tell me, what they thought I needed to know to understand them, in the manner of “telling” with which they were most comfortable.

Old diary excerpts and transcriptions exposed my tendency to design leading and highly strategic questions—given my aims and desires. Conversations oscillated between pre-designed question/answer sessions and agenda-peddling interrogations. Sadly, as the research shows, these questions broke down the women’s lived experiences into grouped ideas and analyzable parts.

Clearly, in retrospect, I maintained the exact “reductionist” strategies I abhorred.

I went into Iran to listen to stories.

I saw the Iran you saw on TV.

I pretended not to, but I did.

One dimensional

Univocally-oppressed

Eastern, Third World Country.

Luckily, a researcher lacks the capabilities to extinguish the *natural abilities* of storytelling. While gathering narratives that blended cleanly with my academic and political agenda, the women confronted me with stories and experiences I did not expect.

*Field notes:* Watching Ozra – so well disciplined, so settled, and so steady in her traditional role as a wife, mother, and woman – it is hard to believe she dressed her boys like girls.

That’s odd, a muddy rupture.

A gap space.

Iran is living bodies, breathing bodies.

Creating, knowing, transforming bodies.

Moving back and forth, in and out of a complex cultural space.

Contradicting, playing along, subverting, resisting,

In a knowing fashion. (8 Jan. 2004)

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## VITA

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