

NOSTALGIC NATIONALISM ONLINE: CONSTRUCTING THE IRANIAN
DIASPORA THROUGH VISUAL TEXTS AND AFFECT

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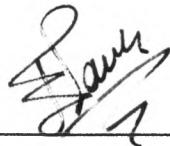
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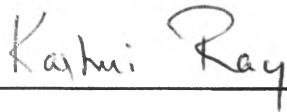
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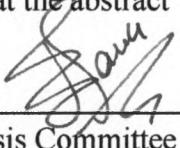
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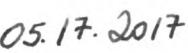
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2017

Through tracing the relationships between gender, sexuality, and race I interrogate the ways in which diasporic Iranian subjects negotiate the conditions that circumscribe their legibility as neoliberal citizen subjects. The ability to present and disburse information on the Internet has shaped the Iranian diaspora's collective identity, thus, I interrogate these relationships through the close readings of visual texts circulated on social media created by diasporic Iranians in protest of the Trump administration's Executive order 13769 and Executive order 13773. I argue that these visual texts, which deploy Qajar and Pre-Islamic images in tandem with model minority politics and the rhetoric of settler colonialism, are informed by Persian-centric readings of Iranian culture and history that in turn construct a seemingly monolithic and homogenous Iranian diaspora.

I certify that the abstract is a correct representation of the content of this thesis.


Chair, Thesis Committee


Date

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INTRODUCTION

A COUNTRY SHAPED LIKE A CAT

“Iran is the country shaped like a cat,” said my mother in response to my question. I had been trying to figure out where exactly her and my father’s, and by extension, my country was located on the cheerfully pastel map hidden within the covers of an encyclopedia for children. I was very curious, as, Iran was rarely¹ mentioned in my children’s books and cassette tapes that, according to their titles, celebrated all the countries in the world and, I wanted to know if the place truly existed. I took my mother’s information very seriously, and searched for the most cat-like country, finding it to be closer to the ocean than I had expected. After my discovery of Iran was confirmed, I grabbed a pencil and carefully drew a mouth, eyes, whiskers, and my best rendition of Hello Kitty’s red hair bow on that tiny but true to scale Iran. What Iran exactly was confused me, yet, this smiling stuffed animal of a nation-state seemed comforting and special.

Despite the cuddliness I had bestowed upon my little map Iran became a conundrum. It seemed to be a place where my parents said things could be better for our family, but,

¹ From what I recollect, the only representation I encountered was a rendition of “Atal Matal Tootoole,” on the cassette and booklet for “Wee Sing: Wee Sing Around the World.” The counting rhyme, which is used similarly to the song “Eenie meenie miney mo,” about a cow owned by a certain Hasan who isn’t doing well as it has no milk and no nipples, and so, the cow is sent to India. This seems quite politically loaded for a children’s nursery song. I suspect it was included in the tape as the sending of a useless cow to India just seemed like a cute fairy tale frivolity, rather than what I assume to be a protest against a British Imperial presence and European control of Iran’s exports. Or, maybe it is a cute fairy tale frivolity pursued for the sake of the sake of ensuring the lines rhyme. Even if it isn’t who says it can’t be felt to be such? I certainly thought so until recently.

also, worse. Iran was a paradise that spat my family out, but, it was a paradise that was already lost before my mother's departure on the last flight to leave Iran for many years. Iran then was not a real place, but the site of a fairytale in which kindly and beautiful monarchs had been replaced by an ominous and unfathomable black cloaked figures. Iran was also a place evoked through decadence, threadbare or genuine, and reproductions of French Rococo furniture, the pompous Europeanness punctuated by unibrow bedecked androgynes painted delicately in bright jewel tones on earthy sheepskins and tiny golden *faravahars* dangling off of their wearer's neck.

I grew up in Fairfield, California in the 1990s, inhabiting a space that had just been shifted and altered by the 1989 Loma Prieta Earthquake². The Great Highway that slithered through San Francisco was gone, and, bemoaned my mother, made the trip to her favorite Persian restaurants inconvenient. The Iranian community in the Bay Area was rather small and spread out, with a significant population in San Jose, Mountain View, Vallejo, and Walnut Creek. Most of our family friends were political and religious refugees, Bahai's and communists who fled Iran during the Islamic Revolution. Many, who identified themselves as refugees, had spent time in Canada and British Columbia

² My mother was pregnant with me during the quake, and, when it hit, was shopping at the local Raley's supermarket when all of the jars of pickles fell to the ground and smashed all over the floor. For some reason, she thought an old lady was just being rude for the hell of it and throwing pickle jars everywhere like a jerk.

before relocating to the Bay Area. Although there were a few doctors and dentists, many worked jobs in the service sector, operating small stores³ or working retail.

The lifetime economic status of the individuals in this community was fluid, fluctuating both in Iran and in the United States. It was rarer for individuals who had been impoverished or lower middle class in Iran to gain cultural and monetary capital once they migrated to the United States. The more common experiences were the maintenance of social and economic status both inside and outside of Iran, or, the loss of elite socio-economic status once they had migrated to North America.

In these private and public spaces, I rarely saw the *faravahar*, save for the trips with my honorary grandparents, practicing Zoroastrians, to the fire temple in San Jose. Rather, imagery from Sufi poetry and Qajar era paintings were the most common symbols, as well as nationalist paintings depicting heroic pre-Islamic maidens that bedecked the back covers of my mother's imported Persian crossword puzzle books, ordered for her by her friends that operated Persian grocery stores in San Jose, Berkeley, Mountain View, and, Vallejo. When I encountered these images, they were usually in my family home,

³ The most impressive employment, in my opinion then and now, was held by the Yavroms, a Baha'i family who manufactured tiny golden charms of Hello Kitty, Pekkel Bekkel, and Pochacco for Sanrio in their home. Everything took place in their garage, and it was magical to just walk in and see hundreds of necklaces hanging from the ceiling of their workshop. Since they were my mother's closest friends, I spent a great deal of time in their modest home, which was decorated with Sanrio merchandise. I thought Sanrio was specifically an Iranian thing for the longest time. To this day, I feel like the Little Star Twins are the true symbol of the Iranian diaspora. Also, in an attempt to bring me and my sister out of our shells, shy because we didn't speak Persian, the Yavroms would gift both of us with the most elaborate Sanrio goodie bags, many of them prototypes. Since they also did product design, I was officially one of the first guinea pigs for the first line of cosmetics released by Sanrio, as, the Yavroms designed the compacts and colorways of the glitter lip glosses and eye shadows.

bedecking the goods crowding the gift counters tucked inside of supermarkets⁴, or punctuating the walls of the elaborately decorated Persian restaurants that mixed fussy gilded furniture with turquoise tiles inspired by those from Isfahan.

My family frequently went on road trips to Los Angeles and Orange county to visit our relatives and pick up Iranian provisions that were hard to come by in the Bay Area, such as Persian translations of Emile Zola's *Nana* and Googoosh cassettes. Within these public and private spaces, depictions of the *faravahar*, *Khorshid Khanoom*, and Qajar androgens were more frequent in Tehrangeles and Irvine compared to the Bay Area. It wasn't until my family moved to Orange County in 2003 that I became inundated with these symbols, especially the *faravahar*, a Zoroastrian symbol indicating divine power (Najmabadi 2003, 89). The *faravahar* was everywhere, rendered into car window decals, logos on boxes of locally made pastries, and, as medallions made of precious metals. A few years later, my mother traveled to Iran in the first time in thirty years to attend my grandfather's funeral. Along with a mosaic of metallic paper depicting *Khorshid Khanoom* picked up at a bazaar by her sister's apartment, my mother brought me a *faravahar* necklace with my name engraved in English on its back. My mother had suspected that something has happened to me when she was gone⁵, and, had gotten it as an instinctual consolation prize. When I would wear the *faravahar* necklace, an interesting phenomenon would occur. A majority of the time I am read as a light skinned

⁴ Cages of songbirds for sale were also common. I remember being surprised that they were not for sale at the markets in Southern California, and, I felt especially homesick.

⁵ She was correct, I had endured my first of what would be a total of eight bouts of food poisoning.

Chicanx or Latinx, occasionally as a white, and, very rarely as Armenian by both Iranians and non-Iranians. However, when I would wear the *faravahar*, I was legible as an legitimate Iranian. Later in my life, within certain Iranian spaces, often queer art spaces, my facial features and light skin would be compared to those in Qajar paintings as a way to position me not as a racially ambiguous subject, but as a true Iranian. How could I possibly be read as a non-Iranian if I looked similar to these authentic portraits of pre-Revolution Persians? Of course, this went straight to my alienated, yearning to feel a sense of belonging head.

These images and symbols constitute a large part of a hyper luxurious aesthetic, where French rococo sensibilities meet L.E.D. lights, gold lamé, and poorly executed photoshop. It is a genuinely loved kitsch that takes the best of “bad” taste as a way to recreate Iran through symbols and affect. Specifically, the androgynes of Qajar art, the *faravahar*, and, *Khorshid Khanoom* figure predominantly as embodiments of Iran and Iranian identity within these spaces. Generally, pre-Islamic and Qajar era visual texts have a specific reading within the Iranian diaspora, where they are deployed as “a statement of opposition to the Islamic Republic” (Najmabadi 2003, 87-88) due to the inferred censorship of these images by the Islamic Republic. This assumption of these visual texts incompatibility with the Islamic state is commodified through their replication onto objects and spaces, into a “fetish of national loss” (Naficy 1993, 131-37), producing a nostalgic affect for a bygone time, be it Pahlavi Era or before the Muslim conquest of Iran in 651 A.D. However, it is important to note that these are widely

available symbols and images that have different meanings in different temporal, spatial, and individual or community contexts. Not everyone using these visual texts is consciously invested in Persian-centric nationalism. Instead, the question is, why are these visual texts widely available to the point they are quotidian, bedecking the walls of grocery store murals and the covers of phone books. Such imagery is so common that the absence of such images, rather than the presence, is oft remarked upon as being unusual. What is the genealogy of these symbols large scale legibility of Iran to Iranians and non-Iranians?

These narratives and visual texts that defined my childhood and young adulthood engagements with Iran and Iranian identity, although unique in some ways, are a part of a larger pattern within the dominant discourses of what we call the Iranian diaspora. Is there actually an Iranian diaspora, and, if so when and where is it? How does the deployment of the term “diaspora” by immigrant populations originating from Iran, and, the prevalence of Qajar Era and pre-Islamic imagery in these communities virtual and physical spaces contribute to the creation of a monolithic and homogeneous “Iranian diaspora?” Why is “diaspora” a desirable signifier, rather than “immigrant,” “refugee,” or “exile,” and, what are the implications of peoples in “diaspora” now claiming the “refugee” as a legitimate subject, and, how is this tied in with an affect of nostalgia and loss, as well as neoliberal citizenship and national belonging?

I argue that these reproductions Qajar androgynes and pre-Islamic artifacts are used to define the perimeters of legibility of the diasporic Iranian subject as they are rooted in

interweaving legacies of Western Imperialism, Persian-centric nationalism and American racism. According to Afsaneh Najmabadi, “Iran was being crafted by imagining a history and inventing a geography” (Najmabadi 2003, 83). Thus, the crafting a national monarchy, in which the monarch embodied the “state,” was reliant upon mytho-histories of enlightened pre-Islamic rule as a way to locate contemporary leaders within a genealogy of fair and even holy rulers. Iran as a nation-state with a national identity is complicated and still emergent, the bourgeoisie and modernist-rational Pahlavian surrogate colonial nation state was subsumed by a populist-subaltern revolution dependent on mytho-religious narratives, resulting a semi-postcolonial position in which there has yet to be the crystallization of a “conceptual presence of a national state.” (Marashi 2015, 14)

Through tracing this popular aesthetic, which blends Qajar androgynes with pre-Islamic artifacts with Pahlavi Era significance, I interrogate how this ever emerging Iranian state shapes the crafting of the Iranian diaspora as an identifiable community and culture, and, informs the specific temporal and spatial locations that Iranians are “stuck” on, looking backwards to the years before 651 A.D. and 1979 as a way to look forward. I specifically situate this thesis in the temporal and spatial location that I am writing, namely, America in 2017. At this moment in time, diasporic Iranian’s ever changing claims to citizenship and whiteness are even more complicated by the political events taking shape as I write this thesis, namely the Trump administration’s Executive Order 13769, titled Protecting the Nation from Foreign Terrorist Entry into the United States,

and, Executive Order 13773, titled Enforcing Federal Law with Respect to Transnational Criminal Organizations and Preventing International Trafficking. Known colloquially as the Muslim ban, and, Muslim Ban 2.0, restricts entry into the U.S. for refugees, lawful permanent residents, and non-U.S. dual nationals from Iran, Iraq, Libya, Somalia, Sudan, Syria, and Yemen. However, it must be note that the second iteration of the ban no longer prohibits the travel of Iraqis.(Ajam Media Collective 2017)

I situate my intervention within larger discourses regarding the intertwining and inter-rootedness of gender, sexuality, modernity, colonialism and the nation and diaspora. Through a queer of color and transnational feminist framework, I will trace the use of nostalgic and melancholic affect and its interweavings with the politics of national belonging and citizenship in order to interrogate the gross generalizations of the Iranian diaspora. I argue that these aesthetics and discourses are rooted in legacies of Western imperialism and scientific racism in Iran, the anxieties of Iranian modernity, legal whiteness and immigration, and, the racialization of gender and sexuality and the sexualization and gendering of race. I argue that these symbols and the affect of nostalgia, melancholy and loss that they produce work as a way for those within the diaspora who can identify with the elite of the Iranian diaspora, namely, those who are Persian, secularized Shi'a Muslims⁶, heterosexual, cisgender and upper class, as a rejection of being racialized as "...the assemblage of the monster-terrorist-fag..."(Puar

⁶Formerly practicing, often stating they left Islam due to the violences of the Iranian revolution and the Islamic theocracy.

2007, 172). I situate these claims through the tracing of the trajectory of the term diaspora within Iranian virtual spaces, as the internet is integral to the formation of the “diaspora” through a lens informed by Ahmed’s affective economies, in which “...emotions do things, and they align individuals with communities...” (Ahmed 2004, 119)

I also trace the entanglements of the Qajar centering of heteronormativity and Pahlavi era Aryanism, logics and projects intertwined with the development of the public sphere. The crystallization of the public sphere, as well as the spread of Iranian nationalism, is interwoven with the Qajar era’s increasing use of visual texts to construct both the Iranian national monarchy and the Iranian subject(Najmabadi 2003, 71) was catalyzed by the circulation of newspapers and printed media in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. (Marashi 2015, 14) The crystallization of a public sphere in Iran was dependant upon the commodification of visual and literary texts, local or otherwise, into national and nationalist literature and symbols. The widespread deployment of these texts which are presented through a lens that confirmed the legitimacy of an Aryan Iran by re-reading or obfuscation, was integral to the spread and acceptance of the logics and projects of Aryanism and heteronormativity.

Envisioned as integral to Iranian modernity and rooted in the Qajar Era’s use of eugenics, linguistic, anthropological, and, Orientalist visual and literary texts, these logics and projects informs both the choice of visual texts that are used to define the Iranian diaspora, and, the correct affective responses to those texts. Aryanism, a form of Persian-centric racism, claims that Persian Iranians are indeed the mythological Aryans

who are the progenitors of Anglo-Saxons, their land and culture now polluted by non-Persian presence, and, non-binary genders, and, queer desires.

“Unlike their modernist counterparts, Iranian nationalists’ solution to Iran’s ills was preponderantly discursive as opposed to the formulation of a program of concrete reforms. Although they did advocate modernization of the political, social or economic order of the country (in rather vague and utopian terms), their nationalist discourse mostly lamented the present state of Iran and engaged in the archaic nostalgia of a long-lost glorious past. They viewed the current state of Iran as an aberration given what they perceived to be the innate superiority of Iranians. This ambitious appraisal of Iranians’ nature was based on the glories of pre-Islamic Iran as attested by Orientalist scholarship and largely unknown in Iran at the time” (Zia-Ebrahami 2011,655)

Thus, these racial, gender, sexual, and, land/class anxieties should not be approached as an additive model, but rather, in a way that centers the intricate interweavings of transnational race formation by illuminating the way these seemingly separate categories inform one another.

Finally, I argue that the deployment of Qajar Era and pre-Islamic visual texts and the accompanying affect of nostalgia and mourning reifies the logics of settler colonial logics of model minority politics, which are rooted in anti-Indigeneity and anti-Blackness, in order to justify Iranian’s occupation of American land. Despite, or, in spite of the shifting legibility of Iranian subjects, many of the same visual texts and rhetorics, such as *Khorshid Khanoom*, used to position Iranians as diasporic Aryans are now being deployed to claim the identity of “immigrant” and “refugee.” These latter figures are crafted through a neoliberal human rights framework, in which the abject other is legible through a binary of good and bad subject. Refugee and immigrant are now being constructed as good subjects, due to the affective pity it produces. This attempt to cull pity and sympathy, to feel for individual people who are innocents is not only a trope of

neoliberal human rights logics, but, a direct attempt to reject the specter of what Ahmed calls the “bogus asylum seeker”(Ahmed 2004, 123) , who is really just an international terrorist in disguise. The fear of another international terrorist attack on American soil drives the logics behind the Trump administration's travel ban as “... the events of September 11 have been used to justify the detention of any bodies suspected of being terrorists.” (Ahmed 2004, 130) The focus on Iranian's professional labor and pre-Islamic revolution existence promise of an increase, rather than a decrease in American prosperity, and thus, safety, is a rejection of “The figure of the bogus asylum seeker...who stalks the nation and haunts its capacity to secure its borders.” (Ahmed 2004, 123) Such discourse works as a way to legitimize diasporic and detained Iranians by distancing themselves from the tropes of the abject, Oriental terrorist that circumscribe their legibility. This is done through claiming the figure of the downtrodden refugee, a “Third world problem” (Malkki 1995, 503), which is then positioned as the foil to the trope of the Oriental terrorist, and, thus, a more worthy subject. Such claims attempt to manifest affective responses of pity and sympathy as a way to counteract affective responses of hatred and fear rooted in xenophobic and racist rejections of refugees and immigrants who are in actuality the false asylum seeker.

In chapter one, I delve into how the structure and the ability to present and disburse information on the Internet has shaped the Iranian diaspora's collective identity as a whole, troubling the seeming divide between the virtual and “real” world. I trace the trajectory of the term diaspora in Iranian virtual spaces, and, why the internet is so

integral to the formation of the “diaspora” through a lens informed by Ahmed’s affective economies with Sherine Hamdy’s assemblages and “cyborgian existence” (Hamdy 2008, 561). I examine Reorient Magazine and Ajam Media Collective, two websites that host a wide variety of articles and images, both invested in disseminating information that is not often discussed in the popular discourses of the Iranian diaspora, or, in the West about Iran. Despite the website’s different mission statements and politics, both websites define the diasporic Iranian subject through whom they write to, what they write about, and, how they position themselves as belonging to the Iranian diaspora. In my conclusion, I turn to two artists who trouble the tropes of diasporic Iranian legibility, Tatyana Fazlalizadeh and Sophy of Ask-Iran, whose art, either through its inclusion or exclusion in the Iranian diaspora, illustrate the limitations of using Qajar and pre-Islamic images as indicative of Iranian identity and culture.

In my second chapter, I trace the emerging changes in discourse of the Iranian diaspora, in response to the Trump administrations Muslim Ban and Muslim Ban 2.0. Diasporic Iranians are creating and disseminating virtual visual texts that deploy Qajar and pre-Islamic symbols as a form of resistance through ethnic pride, and, to claim the figure of the deserving refugee. Like the deployment of the term “diaspora,” the figure of the refugee is legible through model minority politics informed by the trope that Iranians provide skilled professional labor, and, due to their cultural and potentially genealogical

ancestry, are not the black *chador* clad masses protesting *Shaytân-e Bozorg*⁷ and howling “*Marg bar Amrika!*”⁸, but rather, ideal neoliberal citizens. I base this intervention by putting Liisa Malkki’s interrogation of the construction of the refugee as a political form in conversation with Sarah Ahmed’s affective economies that reference the asylum seeker and the international terrorist. Through this lens, I examine two visual texts created by diasporic Iranians as a protest of the Trump administration’s Muslim bans. These images, entitled *RESIST*, and *Trump Got Me Like More Iranian Than Ever* deploy Qajar and pre-Islamic imagery as a way to unite all Iranians through Persian-centric cultural essentialisms. The trope of a culturally and racially homogenous Iran emerges in these texts, as, rather than attempting to unite Iranians despite their differences, works to unify them due to their assumed shared heritage and identity. The first image, depicting *Khorshid Khanoom* holding a protest sign aloft, was intended as a secular and apolitical way to unite Iranians and those sympathizing with Iranians, but is a symbol steeped in politics and religion. The second image, entitled *Trump Got Me Like More Ever*, created by Nasimeh Bahrayni Easton, deploys the *faravahar* as an indicator of Iranian identity. There are multiple versions of the image, due to the placement of the contemporary Iranian flag next to the *faravahar*, two symbols seen as totally incompatible. Through the tracing of the different versions of the image, and, a close reading of the comments, I

⁷ “The Great Satan,” also known as the United States of America. It is also what I call my cat when she is being bad.

⁸ “Death to America”. Both phrases are heavily associated with the Islamic Revolution and Ayatollah Khomeini.

untangle why the *faravahar* is constructed as an authentic representation of diasporic Iranian identity, while the current Iranian flag and the Islamic theocracy it represents are not. In my conclusion, I consider the ways in which historic objects and images are in fact lively due to the contemporary readings and re-contextualization of these visual texts. I illustrate this liveliness through contextualizing the archived comments of support and of disavowal left on both of my case studies. I posit that the ways in which images produce certain types of affect, be it an affect of nostalgia, pride, or shame, are not natural or inherent, but rather, are complicated and nuanced assemblages.

Chapter three explores the ways in which visual texts of contemporary bodies embodying Qajar and pre-Islamic bodies are being deployed as sites of resistance against the Trump administration's Muslim bans, using Jose Esteban Munoz's disidentifications as an extension of Said's Orientalism. I argue that these images are assemblages of complicated entanglements of historic and modern transnational interweavings of race, class, gender, sexuality, citizenship, and national belonging that complicate our understandings of resistance and political action. This approach to archival images indicates the ways in which contemporary individuals understand themselves and their relation to the past, and, their anxieties about race, class, gender, and sexuality. Furthermore, the positioning of certain bodies and lived experiences as the epitome of the diasporic Iranian experience depends on the obfuscation, if not total erasure, of others. I argue that diasporic Iranians seem to seek a unified symbolism and a homogenous diasporic population due to the extreme differences within communities

inside and outside of Iran. Through this lens I examine the comparison of Shepard Fairey's image of a Hijab wearing woman from his *We the People* and how Hushidar Mortezaei's art piece *We Are One* is positioned as a response to the original image. Due to Mortezaei's investment in challenging Orientalist and Occidentalist visual texts through his art work, I will be using the text as a way to interrogate the limitations and possibilities of a queer Iranian diaspora as being able to interrupt Persian-centric Iranian nationalism. Although Mortezaie's work is invested in critiquing neoliberalism and Persian-centrism by through pointed replications and recreations, I posit that these subtleties are obfuscated by the coverage of the image by Ajam Media Collective. As Mortezaei's images features a contemporary Afghani women posing as Qajari woman, and, I consider the implications of contemporary bodies working to embody those of the past, real or imaginary.

I will also interrogate two social media posts from two websites, Ajam Media Collective and Reorient Magazine, that were intended to celebrate International Women's Day on March 8th, 2017. As an act of resistance against the Trump administration, various organizations called for mass protests, often centering the rhetorics and bodies of white heterosexual cisgender women, in major cities across the United States in order to reject the Trump administration's perceived violation of women's rights. Ajam media collective's post features an image from Shadi Ghadrian's *Qajar Series* while Reorient Magazine features an article from slavorium.org illustrated with a watercolor painting entitled *Achaemenid Unit of Persian Female Warriors*, an image taken from

persepolis.nu, a nationalist Iranian website. Both images deploy these visual texts as ways to claim that contemporary Iranian women are the direct cultural and or biological descendants of these “strong women,” thus, they will ultimately triumph over the Trump administration's hatred of women. In my conclusion I posit that interrogating the limitations of contemporary bodies embodying past bodies illuminates the way we understand Middle Eastern bodies and nation states throughout time and place. By positioning the struggles and resistance of Middle eastern subjects as comparable and compatible despite or in spite of the differences of temporal and spatial location, this attempt to evoke affect through ancestry and genealogy humanizes through romanticization. Furthermore, specifically for the Iranian diaspora, evoking affect through embodiment of past bodies is loaded, given the centering of the Aryan myth in the logics and projects of Iranian modernity and Persian-centric Nationalism.

Finally, in my conclusion, I reflect on my own engagements with Qajar era and pre-Islamic images as a way to engage with the affective stickiness of the symbols, and how that stickiness leads to the construction of national belonging outside of the borders of the nation-state. I then situate the protests of the Trump administration's travel ban within a brief history of Iranians engaging in public acts of protest in the United States. Essentially, the protests of the travel ban is the second time that diasporic Iranians have engaged in large scale public protests, the first being protests held in support of the Green Movement in 2009. However, this is the first time that a large group of diasporic Iranians have participated in and spearheaded protests of legislation that affects their community

directly. I contemplate the ways in which Persian-centric nationalism, legal whiteness, model minority politics, and trauma play a role in this seeming inactivity. Finally, I conclude that rather than search for the perfect unifying symbol to unite all diasporic Iranians, and, rather than abandon pre-Islamic and Qajar images, it is more important to embrace a multitude of nuanced and complicated possibilities and ambiguities. Rather, I invite and encourage others to embrace ““a feminism brave enough to fuck with the grays.”” (Durham, Cooper, Morris 2010, 723)

The entanglements of these literary and visual texts are integral to my interventions within diasporic Iranian scholarship, a field often marked by the conflation of national identity, specifically that of Iranian, to racial identity, essentially homogenizing Iran as a monoracial nation-state. I also hope to challenge the reductive binary between the “East” and the “West” that hinders interrogation of the complexities of sexuality, gender and Western Imperialism between the ever fluctuating contact points of unstable assemblages known as nation-states. It is best not to imagine both historic and contemporary gender, sexuality, and race as monolithic and stable entities as it is just the immediate now projecting its desires for legibility and legitimacy onto various temporal and spatial points we deem as other from “here and now.”

I situate my claims within a genealogy interrogating the genesis of the deployment of the term “diasporic” and the rejection of “refugee” and “immigrant to define communities of Iranians existing outside of Iran, namely, those who chose or were forced to flee during the 1979 Islamic Revolution. I argue that the centering of the trauma of the

Islamic revolution, and the subsequent nostalgic affect it produces is a way for Iranian subjects to legitimize their claims to land and space within a settler colonial nation through the rhetoric of being unable to return to the homeland due to the potential of political violence. The use of visual texts that either directly represent or embody modern and contemporary fantasies of an Aryan Iran becomes more intriguing, especially as Iranians were not considered to be legally white until after the influx of migration from Iran to the United States after the Islamic Revolution. (Baghoolizadeh 2014)

These tangled slippages and interweaving begin to become apparent once one begins to trace the genealogy of the deployment of “diaspora” in regards to Iranians living outside of Iran. The use of the term “diaspora” is legitimized through gross generalizations about the movements of Iranians outside of Iran, rooted in the justification of Iranian nationalist state building through exclusionary politics that essentialize ethnic, gender, sexual, ability, and identities and their ties to a static and nostalgia inducing homeland. Furthermore, racialized politics of national belonging and citizenship crop up when Iranians in the United States use the term “diasporic” rather than “immigrant,” these choices rooted in the anxieties of Iranian modernity and U.S. settler colonialism.

Rather than position these emerging visual texts and narratives as inauthentic, I instead want to trouble the binary of authentic and inauthentic by tracing the ways in which certain visual texts are considered to be authentic due to the affect it produces, or, is assumed to be produced in legitimate Iranian subjects. I am interested in unearthing how

the diasporic Iranian subject is constructed through the assumption of a universal affective response to pre-Islamic and Qajar era texts, namely those of melancholy, nostalgia and loss. I am not searching for the genuine, unadulterated versions of these symbols or an ideal, pre-westernization Iranian past. Nor am I attempting to define the Iranian diaspora through gross generalizations. Instead, I want to interrogate what, when and how contemporary diasporic Iranians project their anxieties onto the past, evident through the Persian-centric readings and deployments of Qajar Era and pre-Islamic visual texts. I argue that the fixation upon these specific texts from the diasporic Iranian community in the United States is rooted in the complicated nature of the racialized gender and sexual anxieties of diasporic Iranian communities and the legacies of Western Imperialism which influence diasporic Iranian modernities.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Although this thesis is interrogating the specific discourses around modernity produced from the complexities and interweavings of the contact points between the West and Iran, it must be noted that the interrogation of sexuality, gender and western imperialism may be hindered by posing these concepts deriving solely from a binary exchange between the Orient and the West. According to Mohammad Tavakoli-Tarvaghi,

“...it can be argued that modernity was not a homemade product of ‘Occidental rationality’...Alternatively, modernity can be viewed as a product of a globalizing network of power and knowledge that informed the heterotopic experiences of crisscrossing peoples and cultures and thus produced multiple scenarios of self-refashioning.” (Tavakoli-Tarvaghi 2004, 4)

For example, the Pahlavian Persian-centric projects of creating a racially, linguistically, culturally homogenous and centrally governed Iran was as informed by historic interactions between nomadic and tribal Iranian minorities and dominant Iranian political forces as it was by Orientalist texts.(Shams 2013) Thus, the anxieties of Iranian modernity were not just ones of sexuality and gender, but of race, place/location, and class. Ethnic minorities who lived in tribal nations or cultures resented the Pahlavi’s efforts to centralize the Iranian government, catalyze detribalization, disrupt class structures such as feudalism, and, promote an Iranian nationalist rhetoric centered on Persian ethnocentrism. (Mann 2015, 116) Furthermore, the movement and political alignments of nomadic tribal nations shaped the physical boundaries of the pre-centralized Iran with clear defined borders and a brotherhood of different but united citizens.

“In this period of border wars and boundary formations, deep national anxiety was displayed over boundary-crossing tribal people, like the Turkomans in the northeast, the Kurds in the northwest, and the Baluchis in the southeast. Before this period, a traveler would mark a particular town as the last town in Iran and his arrival in the first Ottoman town as his entry into the Ottoman domain. The land in between was often populated by nomadic tribes, whose political allegiance to one or the other state proved critical to delineating the borders of Iran and its neighboring countries. Were a tribe to switch allegiance from one monarch or ruler to another, large tracts of territory could be transferred from one sovereign to another.” (Najmabadi 2003, 104-105)

Even during the crystallization of Iran as a centralized and beloved *vatan*, or homeland, Qajar era nationalists used narratives of nostalgia and loss of the authentic Iran to foreign invaders, as, “In order to narrate what was lost to colonial powers in the

nineteenth century, one had to recount a series of Iran's prior losses to the Arabs/Islam, to the Mongols, to the Tatars, and so forth. Terra iranica became *vatan* through the nineteenth-century narration of loss."(Najmabadi 2003, 111) Even queer desire and non-binary genders in Iran, which were targeted as a reason for Iran's belated modernity and backwardness, was attributed to non-Persians and the advent of Islam in 651 A.D. by Qajari nationalists, locating the "vice" in the domain of "Arabo-Islamic backwardness." (Najmabadi 2003, 56)

As such, a heterotopic analysis becomes necessary in order to avoid brushing over differences. To employ utilize multivalent points of analysis with constantly shifting and unstable relationality, would destabilize a West-Oriental binary, working to decenter the West within comparative transnational histories. Such an analysis would also trouble the assumption that all third world bodies are inherently and equally marginalized in the "homeland", as this erases hierarchies of race, class, gender, and sexuality. Furthermore, the material and discursive realities and conditions of Iranian modernity are used to complicate Said's Orientalism, as not only does Iran's transition to nation-state did not center a colonial presence (Aghaei and Marashi 2015, x), but, the Qajars direct engagement with Orientalist texts to determine and shape Iranian modernity interrupts the conceptualization of the West as the sole definer of the East. (Said 1979, 3) In the instance of this paper, by focusing on the interweaving transnational hegemonies of power that inform diasporic Iranian subject formation, I deploy a heterotopic analysis "...organized around difference, the difference between and within racialized, gendered,

sexualized collectivities.” (Hong and Ferguson 2011, 9) works to “...name the material conditions of racial and colonial violence...[revealing] the particularities erased by Western epistemologies.” (Hong and Ferguson 2011, 9) With this in mind, this paper seeks to interrogate the specific discourses of Iranian modernity and its projects of race, gender and sexuality that actively engage with and cite European discourses of the Oriental “other.”

The legacy of these projects of the nationalizing of heteronormativity, binary gender, and Persian ethnicity emerges in the Iranian diaspora sense of modernity and national belonging. The acknowledgments and disavowals of the racialized gender and sexual violences of the Islamic theocracy, and the adherence to the logics of U.S. sexual exceptionalism, such as the forced veiling of women and the execution of queers, is used as a way to claim belonging through deploying tropes of U.S. sexual exceptionalism (Puar 2007, 2), where these violences are due to the regressive nature of Islam. Queer and or transgender⁹ Iranians only emerge as totally abject figures hunted by the theocracy, their existence in Iran understood through the false analogy, succinctly

⁹ It must be noted that both subjects are legible through certain tropes, often transmisogynistic and queerphobic. For example Transgender Iranian women are assumed to be “formerly” queer men who “decided” to get sexual reassignment surgery (as if it is an easy process!!!!!!!!!!) in order to avoid being persecuted by the law for their illicit love. Although it is important and very necessary and important to discuss these lived experience, straight transwomen understood only through this lens are the most predominantly visible, obfuscating the realities of queer and lesbian transwomen. This may be a weird respectability politics thing, or, confusion about the fact that sexual and gender identity, while they inform one another, are not the same thing.

summed by the titled cards of the documentary¹⁰ *Be Like Others* directed and written by Tanaz Eshaghian, “In the Islamic Republic of Iran, sex change operations are legal. Homosexuality is punishable by death.” (Eshaghian 2008) This can be illustrated by Sima Shakhsari’s examination of the constantly shifting occlusion and inclusion of the diasporic queer Iranian subject within the dominant discourses of the Iranian diaspora in order to be legible through a neoliberal human rights framework. The attempts to portray both the homeland as static and the diasporic community as homogenous and the constant chaotic shifts of diasporic queer Iranian subjects from abjectly invisible to hyper visible and hailed by Orientalist tropes are manifestations of the diaspora’s attempt to be positioned as legitimate within white western heteronormativity. According to Shakshari, throughout this process

“...while the modern heteronormative binaries of gender and sexuality are reified, the Iranian homosexual is produced and deployed as the marker of freedom in civilizational discourses and practices that divide the world into binaries of liberated/repressed, free/unfree, and democratic/theocratic.”(Shakshari 2012,27)

Although posed as such, Western conceptualizations of gender and sexuality are not universal monoliths that are equally accessible for all individuals. Speaking to mainstream white western feminism, which produced discourses of gender and sexuality through a white western lens perceived as neutral and natural, in *Feminism Without Borders*, Chandra Mohanty states:

What is problematic about this kind of use of ‘women’ as a group, as a stable category of analysis is that it assumes an ahistorical, universal unity between women based on a generalized notion of their subordination. Instead of analytically demonstrating the production of women as socioeconomic political

¹⁰I dislike this documentary very much. It was and still is super popular and I don’t understand you are all awful.

groups within particular local contexts, this analytical move limits the definition of the female subject to gender identity, completely bypassing social class and ethnic identities."(Mohanty 2003, 31)

This works to erase pasts and presents of Western imperialism, colonialism, racialized violence, and white supremacy in the articulation of both sexism and gender binaries . These analyses of gender and sexuality exclude and erase individuals and communities which fall outside of the boundaries of elite white western femininity, all while reifying the logics of western imperialism. It must be noted that Western imperialism is rooted in the projects and logics of racialized gender and sexuality and sexualized and gendered racialization as a mode of defining the nation, the empire, and, the subjugated. Although couched within scientific language to make it seem inherent and biological, Western conceptualizations of gender and sexuality are deeply rooted in matrixes of power.

"With sustained challenges to European rule in African and Asian colonies in the early 20th century, sexual prescriptions by class, race and gender became increasingly central to the politics of rule and subject to new forms of scrutiny by colonial states...the very categories of 'colonizer' and 'colonized' were increasingly secured through forms of sexual control which defined the common political interests of European colonials and the cultural investments by which they identified themselves. The metropolitan and colonial discourses on health, 'racial degeneracy,' and social reform from this period reveal how sexual sanctions demarcated positions of power by enforcing middle-class conventions of respectability and thus the personal and public boundaries of race." (Stoler 1995, 634)

For example, European conceptualizations and discourses of gender and sexuality were developed in order to justify and reify colonialism, enslavement, and genocide. Bodies are then defined through a lens that assumes that their genders and sexualities are inherently white, cisgender, heterosexual, and able bodied. Sex too is defined through this lens, as cisgender identities and non-intersex or ambiguous bodies are considered to be the normative. As mentioned earlier, the racialization of gender and the gendering of

racialization were both projects and logics of western imperialism. According to Avtar Brah,

“What is at stake then, is not simply a question of some generalized notion of say, masculinity and femininity, but whether or not these representations of masculinity and femininity are racialized...What matters most is how and why, in a given context a specific binary...takes shapes, acquires a seeming coherence and configures with other constructions...In other words how these signifiers slide into each other in the articulation of power.” (Brah 1996, 619)

Proximity to humanity and humanness was tied to white Western concepts gender and the perceived ability to embody and perform those roles. The creation of femininity, specifically, white femininity to define the racialized body by the white hegemony was developed to actualize the status of white womanhood by being the opposite of the realities of colonized and enslaved women. White femininity was, and in many ways, still is, defined by delicacy, heterosexual motherhood, not having to engage in heavy physical labor, and desexualization. (Williams, Patrick, Chrisman 1994, 194) This standard of femininity was pitted against non-Western women through the violences of colonization, Western imperialism, and, the enslavement of Black women in order to dehumanize them and justify their oppression. “...white femininity has been instrumentalized in dominant colonial and imperial discourses to signify the ‘heart,’ or body, of Western civilization.” (Williams, Patrick, Chrisman 1994,193) The categorization of non-Western women as non-human worked to maintain power and contribute to the colonial project by justifying the exploitation of non-Western bodies, resources and land as a way to maintain Western civilization, and, thus, humanity. Through civilization projects, such as missionary expeditions, non-Western women were brought closer in proximity to humanity in order

to be servile subjects of Imperial rule, yet, despite systematic efforts, they would never be fully human due to their racialized bodies. Although they did not embody fragile white Western femininity, instead serving as the oppositional other, non-Western women were integral to the gendered project of Western nation building through the paternalistic and maternalistic civilization projects through the systemic dissemination and forced practices of “proper” Western gender.

Furthermore the imposition of Western gender binaries and sexualities also worked to delegitimize the reality of non-binary, fluid, and transgender people, as well as demonize queer sexualities. However, the attempts of the colonial projects to clearly define the colonized and the colonizer were not solid but porous and ambiguous, full of slippages, and, intertwining and interweaving with existing systems of power. “...if modernity, in all its incompleteness and instability, was made through colonialism, its unstable foundations must be traced to the slippages and ruptures of colonial gender and sexual politics as well as to those of political economy or national policy.” (Burton 1999, 1)

IRANIAN MODERNITY

Qajari¹¹ images of androgynes are complicated sites of gender and sexual constructions, deconstructions, and reconstructions catalyzed by the growing Western

¹¹ The Qajar era was a time period in which Iran was ruled by the Qajar dynasty, spanning from the years 1785 to 1925. (Najambadi 2003, 1)

presence in Iran in the mid-1800s. For example, the presence of the *amrad* was widespread in Iranian cultural productions, such as Sufi poetry and elaborate miniature paintings, until the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. (Najambadi 2003, 3) Through the emergence of Iranian nation-state formation, the *amrad* slowly disappears from representation within Qajar cultural productions to be replaced by images of women, transforming a queer desire into heteroeros. The *amrad* is a figure central to the sexual and gender anxieties of Iranian modernity as the erasure of both the *amrad* and queer desire were critical to the gendered and sexualized projects of Iranian modernity.

Beginning in the nineteenth century, the presence of Western Imperialism in Iran was legitimized through Orientalism. The push for Iranian modernity was catalyzed by the growing influence of Western Imperialism during the Qajar era in which Western Orientalist discourses shaped and influenced Iranian nationalist discourses and Iranian modernity itself. (Tavakoli-Tarvaghi 2004, 133) Orientalism, as defined by Edward Said is, "... the corporate institution for dealing with the Orient -- dealing with it by making statements about it, authorizing views of it, describing it, settling it, ruling over it: in short Orientalism as a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient." (Said 1979, 3) Iranian political leaders and intellectuals were directly involved with Orientalist knowledge productions through the use of Aryanism in the discourses used to construct Iranian modernity. Speaking directly about the realities of the emergence of Iranian modernities due to the influence of Western Imperialism, Mansour Bonakdarian states,

"The recognition of the dialogical Oriental (and other non-Western) agency in Orientalist knowledge production, as well as the manifold self-expedient Oriental (and other) interpretations, adoption, and refutations of Orientalist knowledge, highlights the historical and analytical necessity of incorporating multivalent and heterogeneous Western and Oriental (counter)narratives into our coming to terms with the history of Orientalism." (Bonakdarian 2005, 176)

Within Iran, Western Orientalist discourse, backed by scientific racism, claimed that Iran was once inhabited by the Aryan race, but had now been rendered as a nation of backwards degenerates due to the polluting presence of Islamic and Arabic culture, which deployed

"...a narrative that portrays Iran as intrinsically progressive, yet in a present state of aberrant backwardness. Such a narrative requires an alien 'other' to serve as a scapegoat...In this case, it was Arabs and their religion that came to bear all the blame. Early nationalist texts are replete with harshly racist invectives against Arabs. Kermani describes them as 'naked, bare-ass, savage, hungry, vagabonds.'"(Zia-Ebrahimi 2011, 466)

Despite Iran's brush with the tainted heathenry of Islam and Arabia, a paternalistic Western presence could still lead the "astray" Aryans through the paternalistic implementation of Western customs and control according to late-19th century Western Imperialist policy. (Baghoolizadeh 2013) This emergence of a disavowal of Arabs and anything associated with Arabness was deployed in tandem with Aryanism's focus on

"...the intrinsic virtues of the Aryan race (innovation, civilization, superiority, etc.) Iranian nationalists wholesale blamed Iran's decay on Arabs and Islam, while Aryanism considered the Semitic race as characterized by 'dirtiness, cupidity, its obsequious nature,' and its incapacity to 'grasp the beauties of metaphysics.'(Zia-Ebrahimi 2011, 467)

Through the re-emergence of a European-styled and backed Aryanism, Iran could reclaim its golden past, thus propelling the country into a future on par with Europe's. The use of the word Aryan, and the politics it embodied shifted over time, evident in its transliterations, ranging from *āriyān* by Mirza Aqa Khan Kermani, later into *āriyā* by

Sadeq Rezazadeh Shafaq, who was informed by the ongoing discussions of Aryanism in Europe in the 1930s. (Zia-Ebrahimi 2011, 454-456)

"It was Mirza Aqa Khan Kermani, a radical nationalist author, who in several undated books probably all written in the 1890s came up with the first mention of the term Aryan in modern Iranian writing...It took some time for other Iranian authors to catch up with Kermani's racialist enthusiasm. Slowly, concepts of race and racial purity started to appear in historical commentaries, but no politicization was attempted..." (Zia-Ebrahimi 2011, 455)

This homogenization of a singular coherent Iranian historical narrative, centered on the Ancient Iranians obfuscated and erased the multiple narratives of Iranian history recorded in folklore, tribal histories, and legends. It was during the beginning of the Pahlavi era, founded by Reza Shah Pahlavi in 1925, that the term began to shift from radical nationalist papers to nationalized texts. For example, the "Tàrikh-e Qadim-e Iràn¹²", written by nationalist historian and politician Hasan Pirniya in 1928, was the first textbook to be published by the Ministry of Education. The book, intended for the first three years of highschool (Vedjani 2015, 56) included a chapter that discusses

"... 'Races—the White-skinned Race—the Indo-European People,' the content of which avowedly relies on "the science of race," i.e. "the science of differentiating races, and the shapes and qualities of the people belonging to them." The chapter entirely relies on European racial classifications of mankind into Aryans/Indo-Europeans, Semites, etc. with a terminology borrowed from the common traditions of the Abrahamic faiths, in particular in its reference to the descendants of Noah's sons Japheth, Ham and Shem, as a classificatory device. He also assumed that the ancestors of today's Aryans/Indo-Europeans lived in some ancient proto-homeland, and he imparted another opinion much held in the early twentieth century according to which this proto-homeland was the Scandinavian peninsula (hence the appellation "Nordic Race"). He therefore assumed that Iranians had migrated from Scandinavia!"(Zia-Ebrahimi 2011,456)

However, it must be noted that attending high school, which before the introduction of universities was the highest level of education available, was not possible for every Iranian, as, one would have to have the economic ability to attend school, and, the early

¹²This translates to *History of Ancient Iran*

Pahlavi regime's educational system specifically catered and targeted middle class and wealthy Iranians¹³. (Vedjani 2015, 7)

These initial discourses of Iranian modernity revealed anxieties due to the consciousness of having being rendered into an Oriental “other” and engages with Orientalist tropes to justify the emergence of Iranian nationalism. Political leaders and intellectuals proposed the solution to Iran’s “backwardness” was to eradicate all aspects of Arabic and Islamic influence from Iranian customs and beliefs in order to return to Iran’s Aryan past, thus equalling and even surpassing the West. (Bonakdarian 2005, 115-117) Both Iranian modernities and the work to construct them were legitimized through narratives that are,

“....West-inflected Iranian modernist-nationalist historiographies of an ancient golden age followed by a long period of (presumed) cultural and intellectual backwardness and morass subsequent to the introduction of Islam in Iran in the seventh century and lasting until the Iranian Constitutional Revolution of 1906, which stimulated discourses of secular-nationalist Iranian identity grounded in ostensibly belated (nineteenth-century) intellectual encounters with Western modernity and scientific progress.” (Bonkdarian 2005, 177)

The presence of Western imperialism was further justified through rendering queer desire as deviant, corrupt, and in need of intervention through the rejection, suppression, and

¹³ For example in my own family, during the beginning of the Pahlavi era, my impoverished paternal grandmother and grandfather were not able to attend school past the third grade as their time and labor for their family's cottage industries were too valuable for such distraction. During that same time, my wealthy and aristocratic maternal grandmother was one of the initial members of the first Girl Scout chapters in Iran, Dokhtarān-e Pīshāhang-e Īrān which translates to Angel Scouts of Iran, and, attended French schools, eventually graduating with her high school diploma. My maternal grandfather, who was also wealthy and aristocratic, was one of the students sent to Europe by the early Pahlavian government to gain professionalized education so those skills could be used in the construction of a modern Iranian state, complete with infrastructure. Furthermore, at the time, Iran lacked standardized universities to train such professionals. My grandfather learned about telecommunications and engineering in England, and, was integral in the physical and bureaucratic implementation of that technology in Iran. Yet, due to the emergence in public discourses of Aryanism, even my impoverished grandparents were invested in Persciancentrism to the point of obfuscating my grandfather's Georgian identity out of racial shame.

control of queer desire . Through Western orientalist discourse, the *amrad* and queer desire were reshaped into testaments of the so-called racial degradation of Iranians. The consciousness of being rendered into an abject “other” led to the naturalization and centering of both Western heterosexuality and a gender binary within Iran. Iranian modernity called for a rejection of the *amrad* and queer as well as the imposition of Western heterosexual norms, in order to return to the myth of an imagined utopian Aryan past. “As ‘another gaze’ entered the scene of desire....queer desire had to be covered. One marker of modernity became the transformation of homoeroticism into masqueraded heteroers.” (Najmabadi 2003, 4)

The West’s gaze upon Iran was fixated on unveiling queer desires, even within non-erotic acts of homosociality, in order to define both the West as civilized and heteronormative and the Orient as backwards and homoerotic; the dichotomy between ‘good’ and ‘bad’, ‘civilized’ and ‘uncivilized’ was deeply coded in ideas and attitudes towards sexuality. The imposition of the Western gender binary and the “correct” ways to perform it within non-Western countries, such as Iran, were used to enforce whiteness, reify heteronormativity, and erase non-Western systems of gender and sexuality. Western discourses portrayed Iranian male homoeroticism as a destructive vice that was rampant, and *amrad* as out of control deviants, both causes for Iran’s backwardness. In contrast, Westerners portrayed themselves as in control of their sexuality and incorruptible, untempted by *amrad*, disgusted by homoeroticism, and thoroughly suspicious of homosocial behaviour. This worked to define the West against the Orient, seeking to

define racialized differences and justify the presence of Western imperialism. (Najmabadi 2003, 34-38) As Ann Stoler states, “These discourses on self-mastery were productive of racial distinctions, of clarified notions of ‘whiteness’ and what it meant to be truly European.” (Stoler 1995,8) Iranian intellectuals and political thinkers were aware of these Western discourses and worked to convert homoeroticism into heteronormativity and erase both the physical and psychic presence of the non-binary *amrad*. The discourse justifying this social restructuring self-consciously referred to orientalist tropes, locating homoerotic desire within Iranian culture and presenting it as the abject root of Iran and the Aryan race’s decay. “Europeans characterized Iran by homosocial and homosexual practices, Iranian modernity simultaneously identified itself with and disavowed this abject position....” (Najmabadi 2003, 29) Thus, Iranian modernity is defined through the implementation of a Western gender binary, the naturalization of heteroerotic desire, and the rendering of men as inherently heterosexual. The *amrad*, a testament to the centering of both queer desire and non-binary genders within dominant Iranian culture, was now an unnatural vice that was to be hidden lest it stifled the workings of Iranian modernity. The *amrad* and the male adult desire for the *amrad* rapidly disappeared from the dominant Iranian cultural imagination in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, both rendered as abject and unnatural. (Najmabadi 2003, 282) The *amrad*’s physical and psychic presence as an object of queer desire, present in cultural productions such as poetry, was replaced by a proliferation of cultural productions featuring women in order to heterosexualize eros. (Najmabadi 2003, 36-37) The shifts in the reading and

meaning of these images illustrates the limitations of representing the Iranian community with Qajar Era art. The contemporary diasporic readings of these visual texts as authentically Iranian and embodying stable and timeless Iranian identity obfuscates not only the histories of the images, but, why we contemporary peoples read these images the way we do.

THE IRANIAN DIASPORA

The racial, gender and sexual anxieties of Iranian modernity manifest within Iranian diasporic spaces in the United States, where they are complicated by the ways communities negotiate the racialized queering of Western heteropatriarchy, Persian-centric nationalism and Orientalist discourses around "Muslim" sexualities and bodies. These anxieties are further complicated by the influx of the rhetorics of the refugee and the international terrorists due to the Trump administration's travel bans. These two racialized and gendered figured circumscribe the legibility of diasporic Iranians. Both figures evoke affective responses of fear due to the perceived threats of bodily and psychic harm to good and deserving American citizens, the terrorist through violent mass killings and forced conversions to Islam and hatred, "... immediately identified as agents of extreme fear, that is, those who seek to make others afraid (less mobile or less free to move) as well those who seek to cause death and destruction."(Ahmed 2004, 128) In

contrast, the refugee harms by invading with too many proliferating needy “Third world problem” (Malkki 1995, 503) bodies, imagined as being complete abject and taking away resources from deserving citizens, where “Words like flood and swamped are used, which create associations between asylum and the loss of control, as well as dirt and sewage, and hence work by mobilizing fear, or the anxiety of being “overwhelmed” by the actual or potential proximity of others.” (Ahmed 2004, 122)

These anxieties of being legible as these figures manifest through the deployment of Qajar androgynes and pre-Islamic visual texts, often contingent to Pahlavi era images and sentiments, as a way to define the Iranian diaspora as both a part of, yet separate from the Islamic theocracy of Iran. The emphasis on visual texts may be tied to the preference for the term “diaspora,” rather than refugee, as according to Malkki, “...Exile connotes a readily aestheticizable realm, whereas the label ‘refugees’ connotes a bureaucratic and international humanitarian realm.” (Malkki 1995, 513)

Such use of pre-Islamic symbols contingent to Pahlavian nationalism is common in the Iranian diaspora, evident in the widespread use and commodification of the Pahlavi Era flag, featuring the lion and sun. As Najmabadi states, in her analysis of the popularity of the lion and sun in the Iranian diaspora, “...Marilyn Ivy has argued for contemporary Japanese fetishization and reification of emblems of identity, ‘the process also reveals the presence of a wish: the wish to reanimate, not simply fix, the past at the moment of its apparent vanishing’... Lost at home, the lion-and-sun has been taken over for exilic

citizenship."(Najmabadi 1995, 88) The symbol embodies the traumas of first generation Iranians who left Iran during the revolution, who

"... grapple with "how their country got sold to the Mullahs", as they critique those that participated in the Revolution and willingly handed the country to Khomeini based on their political naiveté, or ponder whether the Pahlavi regime would have been preferable to the theocratic government in Iran. These unresolved discussions, and accounts of political or historical revisionism show up frequently in various Iranian social-cultural and political events; these political discussions, which seamlessly find themselves in many of the first-generation migrants conversations, and can cause strife and separation among Iranians."(Sadeghi 2015,128)

Furthermore, the deployment of such visual texts are used to as a way to navigate and avoid racialized violence, assimilation into American culture, the obfuscation of Iranian identity through the embracing of a white identity, and, the acknowledgement and disavowal of Islam, terrorism, and the Iranian theocracy were deployed by diasporic Iranians and their communities, both publically and privately a way to perform as good citizen subjects.

" Iranians in Iran and elsewhere tend to identify with Whiteness as a result of the history of race formation and ethnicity politics back in Iran, particularly as developed under the Pahlavi regime until 1979. Those Iranians who immigrated to the United States in the late 1970s and onwards, meanwhile, have had this identification with Whiteness drilled into them as a result of the experiences of discrimination they have faced in this country since the 1979 Hostage Crisis." (Shams 2013)

The identification of Iran as a tier of the Axis of Evil produced an affective response of shame within the diasporic Iranian community, dampening acknowledgments of Iranian pride, and, fueling public acknowledgments and disavowals of terrorism and Islam. Such shame shapes the public discourses of the Iranian diaspora, in which the assumed contingency to terrorism and the specter of radical Islam is disavowed through the rejection of the Iranian theocracy, thought to be indirectly supportive of various acts of violence in the United States and Middle East.

Although not as overtly political as the sun and lion, Qajar androgynes have reappeared within Iranian diasporic spaces as a symbol that is shorthand for a nostalgia fixated on an imaginary Iran in which both the pre-Islamic and pre-revolution Iran are romanticized and dehistoricized into an era of progress that must be returned to. These visual texts and their ever shifting temporalities and spatialities are, according to Ahmed, sticky, as

“...emotionality involves movements or associations whereby “feelings” take us across different levels of signification, not all of which can be admitted in the present. This is what I would call the rippling effect of emotions; they move sideways (through “sticky” associations between signs, figures, and objects) as well as backward (repression always leaves its trace in the present—hence “what sticks” is also bound up with the “absent presence” of historicity).”(Ahmed 2004, 120)

Within these spaces, pre-images of Qajar androgynes, especially figures that are presented as a romantic couple, are read as heterosexual and cisgender men and women in order to construct a Iranian heteronormative modernity and futurity within the dominant discourses of diaspora.

Furthermore, these figures are read as ethnically Persian even though the racial, cultural, and national identities of those who inspired or sat for the portraits are either unknown, or, if documents, are obscured through the decontextualized reproductions of these images. Such Persian-centric rereadings of Iranian historical visual texts is based in the racial homogenization of the Pahlavi era’s nationalist revised history, extend to the whole of the Qajar era itself, as

...both the Qajar and Safavid dynasties preceding the Pahlavi were Azeri Turkish, for example, and historically it was not ethnicity but ethnically neutral imperialism and the use of Persian language as a lingua franca that had brought together the incredibly diverse peoples populating the lands under control of the ‘Persian Empire.’(Shams 2012)

This rereading of the Qajar Era is an act of negotiation, a way to gain legitimacy and intelligibility within the hostland through performing Western heterosexuality, and, by claiming whiteness, or at least, claiming space as the progenitor of contemporary whiteness. It is an attempt to render Iran, and, in extension, Iranians as less threatening and not deserving of racialized violence, as

“The positioning of Iran in the ‘axis of evil’ during the war on terror, and Iran’s renewed status as a ‘threat’ to the ‘global community’, however, has increased the forms of representation that legitimize imperialistic agendas under the cloak of freedom and security.”(Shahsari 2011, 11)

By presenting the Qajar era as a period of Persian heteronormative sexual freedom, the discourse of diasporic Iranian diasporic spaces attempts to un-other the othered body by refuting Orientalist conceptions of “Muslim”/”Oriental” sexualities as both anachronistically repressed and excessively queer.(Puar 2007, 336) This attitude is a way to present the Oriental other, then rendered as a “threat,” as “safe” through both identifying with and disavowing Orientalist tropes (such as sexual repression) in order to proclaim the shared modes and objects of desire as the heteropatriarchal West. This negotiation is bound in the logics of occidentalism, which as defined by Meltem Ahiska is,

“... a field of social imagination through which those in power consume and reproduce the projection of ‘the West’ to negotiate and consolidate their hegemony in line with their pragmatic interests. The hegemony operates by employing the mechanisms of projection that support the fantasy of ‘the West.’”
(Ahiska 2003, 366)

This, as well as presenting the West as a homogenous monolith, attempts to neutralize being rendered and read as a threatening Oriental body by deploying the logics of U.S. sexual exceptionalism, such as progressive national heteronormativity, as a way to

navigate racialized marginalization. (Puar 2007, 2) Projecting concepts of U.S. sexual exceptionalism onto a non-Western past reveals anxieties about confirming "...colonial fantasies about Orientalist sexual excess, perversity, and pedophilia." (Puar 2007,14) This rereading of Qajar androgynes is a way in which those who are rendered as 'Orientals' negotiate the conditions that circumscribe their legibility through engaging directly with Orientalist knowledge productions by reproducing these same Orientalist tropes. This process is a way to gain intelligibility by adopting and recreating the ways in which the "other" is seen through a Western lens as a mode of survival and as a way to accrue cultural capital. Furthermore, such rereadings of Qajar androgynes as desexualized and depoliticized Persian cultural artifacts renders them into a void into which new readings and meanings could be projected, namely, as embodiments of diasporic Iranian pride and resistance against the Trump administration's racist politics.

The rereading of these visual texts manifests the gender and sexual anxieties of these communities and their navigations of the racialized queering of non-white and non-Western individuals within the United States. This racialized queering is a process used to reify the status of white, Western, cisgender heteropatriarchy by rendering the "other" as deviant due to the perceived inability to correctly embody and perform the aforementioned role. This queering also works to dehumanize non-Western and non-white individuals into consumable brown bodies through the erasure of non-Western gender and sexuality spectrums and identities. Rendering communities and individuals into brown bodies instead of human beings works to perpetuate perceptions (or even

realities) of a lack of autonomy, in order to justify past, present, and future violences and marginalization. This process of dehumanization is used to justify stereotypes and marginalization in order to reify the status of those who benefit, directly or indirectly, from these violences. Navigating the hostland is further complicated due to the centering of heteronormative gender and sexual identities within the discourses of nationalistic Iranian modernity in which an Iranian gender and sexual system, read as non-normative to the point of abjection through a Western lens, is being transformed and manipulated - though not necessarily erased - into a Western-influenced heteronormativity.

Perhaps this rereading is the manifestation of an anxiety triggered by the fear of confirming the legitimacy of racial marginalization justified through Orientalist tropes. To read these images, especially those portraying *amrad*, through a white heteropatriarchal Western lens could confirm Orientalist tropes of pederastic sexual excess. Although attempting to refute Orientalist tropes, this rereading does not erase the Orientalist tropes that circumscribe the legibility of diasporic Iranian communities. “The text modifies image, directs our interpretation of it, but cannot fully domesticate the saturation of Orientalist tropes endowed to this body.” (Puar 2007, 21).

To encounter these visual texts within mainstream Iranian diasporic virtual spaces is to witness the active creation and perpetuation of nostalgic and melancholy affect for an Iranian past defined by a freedom of gender and sexuality couched in concepts of modern Western sexuality and gender. This nostalgia or *mythical time*, as defined by Ahiska, decontextualizes and dehistoricizes systems of power and their manifestations.

"However, the *mythical time* of Occidentalism remains to this day without much alteration. Mythical time is the recurrence of the same appearing as new and desirable. The past reappears as the desirable future in the Occidentalist fantasy. It is primarily a lack of historicity, a refusal to know the realm of forces that produce things as they are. It is a mode of representation of social reality reducing its complexity and heterogeneity in a national idiom that is captured in the timeless polarity of West and East." (Ahiska 2003, 367)

Rendered rootless and ripped from time, these images are recontextualized as embodiments of the desires of diasporic and nationalist Iranian modernity to be mapped upon. These resignified texts are being evoked to imagine an Iranian past in which Aryan men were able to openly and publically desire women in a Western and normative heterosexual manner, rooted in the naturalization of heterosexual reproduction. This heterosexualization of desire not only defines the gender and sexual projects of diasporic Iranian modernities, but Iranian futurities, in the ways in which this nostalgia for a golden era is positioned as both the ideal past and the ideal future. In order to be able to return to the homeland, the homeland must return to a time before the Islamic revolution and, even further than that, the advent of Islam in Iran.

This complicated futurity implied by diasporic Iranian modernities speaks to the diasporic desires of Iranian communities, in which the diasporic existence is constantly entrenched in the desire and denial of the possibility of return to both the homeland and the Qajar era. The resignification of visual texts as embodiments of gender, sexual, and racial anxieties illustrated the ways in which cultural production are complicated in order to not only redefine the meaning of the production, but the actual producers of it. In Amy Malek's interrogation of Hamid Naficy's discussions of the cultural productions of the Persian diaspora, Malek states

"Naficy stresses that to be in a state of exile is to be in neither one place nor the other, but to be in-between...It is this oscillating that Naficy argues allows for the potential of exiles...to "continually negotiate or 'haggle' for new positions,'...to create from these positions new modes of expression and cultural production." (Malek 2006,354)

Notwithstanding the limitations of what one can "haggle" for within the Iranian diaspora, the concept of constantly negotiating for new positions is productive in the discussion of the reproduction of Orientalist tropes. The Persian-centric rereading of Iran's past, and, the ways it is deployed in order to claim legibility as a neoliberal citizen is an example of those limitations. I would argue that the way these images are being redefined in order to negotiate the queered racialization of the hostland may complicate Naficy's conceptualization of the cultural productions of diasporic Persian spaces as totally being able to "...of eradicating one set of codes and replacing them with different sets of syncretic inscriptions."(Malek 2006, 356) Even the aforementioned re-reading and commodification of the sun and lion flag by diasporic Iranians is informed by Persian-centric nationalism and American model minority politics. One cannot simply be reborn, contextless and ahistorical. This type of negotiation renders the Iranian diasporic subject and space as perpetually liminal and constantly in crises. The constant shifting, negotiation, and traveling renders diasporic spaces as both dysphoric and productive. In these spaces, the diasporic individual is constantly negotiating the identities, meanings, and desires of both the home and the hostland. As such,

"...diasporic dialogues are never truly equitable, for the politics of transnational exchange are thoroughly embedded in the same material and ideological networks of power from which they emerge. These asymmetrical relations of power structure the dynamics of diaspora not only *externally* through the pressures that produce movement and migration, but also *internally* through the ways they configure complex relations of settlement, and racial and gendered formation within diasporic communities." (Camp and Thomas 2008, 1)

Simply put, the hegemonies and histories of the homeland carry into and echo within the hostland, where they are only complicated further.

CONCLUSION

My project interrogates the ways in which diasporic Iranian subjects within the United States negotiate the conditions that circumscribe their legibility as a way to trace the relationships, slippages and spaces between gender, sexuality, racialization, nationalism, and, imperialism. I trouble both the conceptualization of Iran as a culturally and racially heterogenous nation-state through contextualizing the contemporary use of Qajar and pre-Islamic visual texts by diasporic Iranians within interweaving histories of Iranian nationalism and Western imperialism. I illustrate this through close readings of visual texts circulated on social media created by diasporic Iranians in protest of the Trump administration's Executive order 13769, and, Executive Order 13773.

By putting Sherine Hamdy's deployment of assemblages, Avery Gordon's complex personhood, and Sarah Ahmed's engagement with affect as a way to interrogate the visual texts created and dispersed by the Iranian diaspora in order to untangle the genealogies and limitations of representing the Iranian community with Qajar Era and pre-Islamic symbols. I argue that these visual texts, which deploy Qajar and Pre-Islamic art and symbols in tandem with model minority politics and settler colonial rhetorics,

center nostalgic affect informed by Persiancentric readings of Iranian culture and history in order to claim legibility as good neoliberal citizen subjects. The combining of contemporary American popular culture and politics into Qajar era images is a way for diasporic Iranians to project their contemporary anxieties of race, gender, class, and sexuality onto the past. By claiming a homogenous shared culture and identity diasporic Iranians are attempting to construct a shared universal experience in order to build coalition and perpetuate model minority myths in order to perform and be perceived as good and deserving neoliberal citizens. Such negotiations work to legitimize diasporic Iranian subjectivities as deserving a place within both Iran and the United States.

CHAPTER ONE

DIGITAL DIASPORA, CYBORGIAN EXISTENCES

The structure and the ability to present and disburse information on the Internet has shaped the Iranian diaspora's collective identity as a whole, troubling the seeming divide between the virtual and "real" world. According to Shahram Khosravi, the internet became a favored mode of communication between Iranians in Iran and in diaspora, as it was cheaper¹⁴, more efficient, and, accessible. (Khosravi 2000, 13) Furthermore, according to Amy Malek, the internet was a place in which the term "diaspora" entered the popular discourse of Iranian immigrants, and, the boundaries of the diasporic Iranian identity were crafted, interrogated, reified, and disassembled. (Malek 2015, 25-26) Although Khosravi argues that the cyberspaces of the Iranian diaspora allow for the transcendence of political, religious, physical, and ideological borders, I argue that these borders are not transcended, but rather, define both the content of the internet and the ways in which the spaces are created and accessed. This can be illustrated by Sima Shakhsari's interrogation of the constantly shifting occlusion and inclusion of the diasporic queer Iranian subject in Iranian Weblogistan, which further complicates Khosravi conceptualization of the internet deterritorializing the diaspora. (Shakhsari 2012) These borders circumnavigate what discourses and spaces are read and understood as "authentically" Iranian, and, who and what is read as a legitimate member

¹⁴ I remember how expensive prepaid call cards were for my family, and, how the prohibitive cost was.

or aspect of the Iranian diaspora. To accomplish this intervention, thinking about virtual spaces with Sherine Hamdy's engagement with assemblages and necropolitics proves to be productive. Through using the concept of assemblages and "cyborgian existence" Hamdy does away with essentialisms and binaries of human subject and state, and instead focuses on the ways in which the nation-state and the body are linked together in an unfathomable, nuanced and almost untraceable fusions and diffusions. (Hamdy 2008, 561) Much like Donna Haraway's ever changing cyborgs made up of multiple parts, Hamdy's subjects are not separate and static entities from the nation state, but rather, both are mutable assemblages.

The virtual spaces of the Iranian diaspora deploy pre-Islamic and Qajar imagery, often contingent to Pahlavi era images and sentiments, as a way to define the Iranian diaspora as both a part of, yet separate from the Islamic theocracy of Iran. The promise of free and unfettered democratic speech is assured by the presence of the *faravahar* and *Khorshid Khanoom*, images assumed to be censored, or at least, condoned by the Islamic Republic. Diasporic subjects and spaces claim Iranianness by acknowledging and disavowing the trope of the Orientalist terrorist threat through the use of these images. The diasporic Iranian subject is rendered out of time and place as an embodiment of/bodies shaped by the assumed human rights and freedom of a pre-Islamic Iran and by

the 1980's era control and censorship¹⁵ of the Islamic theocracy. Speaking to the subjectivities of women identified Iranian bloggers, the internet "...is an important site of subject formation where binary discourses of 'freedom' and 'oppression' that use women as their signifiers within a civilizational model are both reproduced and challenged by bloggers in Iran and its diaspora."(Shahsari 2011, 9)

However, this negotiation of subjectivities is made more complex as it is not only understood through the matrix of gender and sexuality, but, race, national belonging/unbelonging, class, and ability. I also trouble the assumption that all third world bodies are inherently and equally marginalized in the "homeland", as this erases hierarchies of race, class, gender, and sexuality. The question turns from "who is the Iranian on the internet," but, "what, when, and where is the Iranian on the Internet?" Diasporic Iranians are constructing identities online through the consumption and curation of images, sound, and text in order for these identities to be consumed by other individuals and communities? Furthermore, lived experiences and identities of race, class, gender, sexuality, and so on influence how individuals are consumed and what they consume.

In this chapter I look at Reorient Magazine and Ajam Media Collective, two websites that host a wide variety of articles and images, both invested in disseminating information that is not often discussed in the popular discourses of the Iranian diaspora,

¹⁵ Although media that comes in and out of Iran is still heavily censored due to whatever political agenda the government has a certain stereotype, that of the orientalist spectacle of burning American flags and black clad women, still remains.

or, in the West about Iran. Although, in many ways, they differ from the cyberspaces outlined by Malek, Khosravi and Shakhsari, due in part to the shaping of the writing and dispersal of the content by contemporary social media, they do belong to the genealogy outlined by Malek, Khosravi and Shakshari. A far cry from the forums of Iranian.com, Ajam Media Collective and Reorient Magazines intercommunity discussions are not solely confined to the comment section of articles, nor to the members of the Iranian diaspora. Rather, a majority of the inter-community discussions occur between readers and editors on the social media accounts dedicated to the websites, and, the writer's personal accounts. Both websites, and their social media profiles, challenge and reify tropes of legibility and authenticity, ranging from civilized Ancient Persians to the abject terrorist, through their use of Qajar and pre-Islamic imagery. Ajam Media Collective, especially in its earlier iterations, celebrates Qajar and pre-Islamic images as historical images, all while critiquing popular conceptions of both time periods through a critical race formation lens informed by Ethnic Studies and Anthropology. In contrast, Reorient Magazine offers contemporary re-readings of not just the Qajar era, but, it's unrecognized contributions to avant-garde and quotidian Western fashion, art, and music, effectively centering the Qajar era as formative for Western culture. Despite their different approaches to these visual texts, these websites define the diasporic Iranian subject through whom they write to, what they write about, and, how they position themselves as belonging to the Iranian diaspora.

Finally, in my conclusion, I will examine the ways in which two artists, Tatyana Fazlalizadeh and Sophy of Ask-Iran, are included and excluded in Reorient Magazine and Ajam Media Collective, and, how this illustrates the limitations of a Persian-centric diasporic Iranian subjectivity. Rather than laud one narrative, or, way of conveying a narrative, as authentic and the other as inauthentic, I examine these virtual texts as negotiations of power, deploying either sympathetic or nostalgic affect as a way for Iranian subjects to legitimize their claims to land and space within a settler colonial nation through the rhetoric of being unable to return to the homeland due to the potential of political violence, or, through that home no longer existing.

THE INTERNET AND THE CRAFTING OF THE IRANIAN DIASPORA

The popular use of the term “diaspora” to describe populations of Iranians residing outside of the borders of the modern Iranian nation-state emerged through online discussions held by Iranians with internet access and the ability to invest time and energy into these spaces. Tracing the emergence of the use of the term “diaspora” from 1980’s era academic discourse to the contemporary dominant discourses of the Iranian diaspora, Amy Malek states,

“Despite the early scholarly-applied nomenclature, community members only began to describe their experiences as one of diaspora in a pronounced way in the late 1990s and early 2000s, as a result of exposure to academic writing, interactions with Iranian scholars (themselves experiencing the shifts in identity they set out to theorize), or through introductions to the term via the growing diasporic Iranian presence online.” (Malek 2015, 26)

As these discourses began to emerge in non-academic virtual spaces, the nature of the internet itself was shifting. In contrast to the modern internet of the mid-2000s to present day, the Internet of the 1990's and early 2000's existed under a different cultural context, further complicated by limited technology and access. The Internet was not yet a tour-de-force of mass communicative interaction for every social class¹⁶, but was instead the realm of a very specific user base that did not esteem images of their actual selves insomuch that they utilized the Internet to hide from their physical selves, such as through online avatars or personas. Khosravi echoes this sentiment, stating

“Cyberspace gives Iranians a chance to enter into and exit from public discussion anonymously. It is a virtual public sphere for Iranians, where they can talk about political issues or taboo subjects such as homosexuality (www.homan.com) and pornography (www.irensex.com) without the risk of persecution. It also offers the only opportunity for harshly split Iranian opposition groups to encounter one another.”
(Khosravi 2000, 13)

However, the supposedly free market model of the internet is self-regulating through the manifestation of transnational power structures, brought to life by the nature and structure of the blogging platform. Within micro and macro internet communities, hegemonies are both consciously and unconsciously created. These hegemonies work to create and maintain identities through the consumption of other identities or virtual symbols. Through the interactions of individuals and communities within virtual spaces, certain structures become apparent through the emergence of what and who are disseminated, cited, and consumed the most.

¹⁶ Access to the internet is not equitable and vast populations still have no, if not limited, internet access.

According to Lisa Nakamura in *Digitizing Race: Visual Cultures of the Internet*, the introduction of Netscape navigator in 1995 transformed the internet from a textual form to a graphic form, catalyzing the growth of the internet from a niche hobby of the elite to a more accessible and pedestrian aspect of everyday life and popular culture due to its increased accessibility. (Nakamura 2008, 1) The emergence of the virtual discourse around this specific point in time may illuminate the identities of those who not only participated in these online spaces, but, created and maintained them. Although the internet could be accessed from public spaces, such as internet cafes and libraries that provided computer, lengthy forays into these virtual spaces often required a private internet connection and computer. However, not every library had internet access, and, internet cafes could be costly and hard to physically access either due to ability and/or lack of access to transportation. The digital divide shaped the digital diaspora, the lack of access interrupting the assumed “democratic” nature of online spaces as assumed by Khosravi in his ethnography of iranian.com.

Even with the barriers to equal access, these virtual spaces hosted infinite articulations of diasporic Iranians feelings about Iran. Tropes, such as yearning for or an ambivalence towards a now lost “home,” and, the eventual return were deployed in order to render these texts legible as diasporic Iranian texts. The prevalence of the personal narrative and declaration of identity were positioned as a more authentic truth, an alternative to the propaganda and censorship of the Iranian theocracy, and, the Orientalist rhetorics of the West. By attempting to lay Iran bare through presenting it as a peaceful land of roses and

nightingales, authors attempted to reject their legibility as terrorist others by diffusing the malevolent Iranian state. How could Iran be evil if its individual people were so inviting and informative?

"In the case of the Iranian diaspora, the ongoing political crisis between the governments of Iran and America has created a literature whose gaze remains steadfastly fixed on Iran. In both autobiography and fiction, the trend in Iranian American literature has been to bypass "domestic" themes and instead act as translators to a culture and, increasingly, a religion that both repels and fascinates western readers." (Darznik 2005, 56)

These attempts to formulate a diasporic Iranian identity through personal narratives, manifested in blogs and in published autobiographies. For example, according to Amy Malek,

"Given the prominent role of cultural production in the declaration of diasporic identities, a 1999 poem by Shafagh Moeel titled 'Sipping lattes in diaspora' offers an appropriate example of this expanding self-proclamation. Perhaps more important, the poem was published on iranian.com, a popular website among Iranians worldwide in the late 1990s and 2000s, and one that anthropologist Shahram Khosravi presciently suggested had the potential to be responsible for an increasing consciousness of the diaspora." (Malek 2015, 13).

Although many texts troubled the nostalgic return narrative, either in ways that deployed self-Orientalism or self-critique, the trope of the homeland as the authentic, and, the hostland as inauthentic remained. Romantic essentialization of Iranian culture, often obfuscated by a Persian-centric lens, deploys nostalgic affect by assuming a universal diasporic Iranian yearning. Conversely, Orientalist essentializations of Iranian culture also depend upon the assumption of a universal diasporic Iranian experience. Such imaginings of the home and one's relation to the home is informed, and, they themselves contain, the anxieties of the heterogeneity and uneasiness of the Iranian diaspora. Texts that fall into either category, or, somewhere in between or outside of that

binary are productive as they embody the slippages and uncertainties of the formulation of the diasporic Iranian subject and community.

“ Her poem inspired reactions on the site in the form of response poems and essays debating the interpretations of diaspora as marked by loneliness and dystopia versus its interpretations as a state of possibility brimming with potential. These debates resonated with (and at points echoed) cultural theorists' writings about hybridity and diaspora in other communities. Moeel's poem is but one example of the untold influence of the internet and cultural production on Iranians' understandings and adoption of *diaspora*.

“(Malek 2015, 13)

Narratives centered around the author's lived experience, often deploying tropes of memory, nostalgia, and return, manifest the complicated negotiations of racial, sexual, gender, and, class identities. Positioning personal narratives as a truth contingent to, but, in opposition towards Western Orientalist anxieties of the Iranian terrorist other attempts to humanize not only the author, but, Iran as a whole, through the use of affect. According to Sarah Ahmed, “In such affective economies, emotions do things, and they align individuals with communities—or bodily space with social space—through the very intensity of their attachments.” (Ahmed 2004, 119)

According to Khosravi's ethnography of wwwiranian.com, the identity of the Iranian diaspora is dependant on a nostalgic gaze fixated on the nationalist rhetorics and images of a just as nostalgic pre-revolutionary Iran. Khosravi also claims that the internet allows for a virtual return to the homeland and allows to the shift from exile to diaspora. According to the article, diaspora is defined by an inability to return to the homeland, and, the subsequent mourning is foregrounded by the nostalgic recreation and revisiting of a timeless home, catalyzing a glamour defined by new possibilities. (Khosravi 2000,

13) Such possibilities, however, are rooted in investments in settler colonial logic and Orientalist rhetorics. With Ahmed's interrogation of "orientation" and the Orient placed in conversation with Shaksari's interrogation of the deployment of the queer Iranian subject/object in Weblogistan, Khosravi's conceptualization of the internet deterritorializing the diaspora is complicated. Neither the homeland, real or imaginary, nor diaspora are stable monoliths outside of time and place. The imagined straight lines from home to hostland and proximity to them, according to Ahmed, are not clear cut as orientation and proximity to objects are neither neutral or natural.

IRANIAN WEBLOGISTAN

This trend of autobiography and confession as contingent to truth carried into the terrains of Iranian Weblogistan, a sea of personal blogs often hosted on sites such as Livejournal.com and Wordpress.com, that grew in popularity in the 1990's and early 2000's. Rooted in the Islamic Republic's efforts to encourage public internet usage, virtual spaces and blogs were allowed to emerge with minimal restrictions from authorities. (Hendelman-Baavur 2007, 82) The emergence of Weblogistan was catalyzed by three personal blogs in late 2001, and, "...in 2003, Iranian Weblogistan was the fastest growing cyber-sphere in the Middle East, and it became a prominent feature in defining the new global phenomenon of online communities. Estimates for 2006 rank Iran ninth in the world for the number of weblogs, and Persian is among the top ten languages in terms

of posting volume." (Hendelman-Baaur 2007, 77) Consisting of blogs both political and personal Weblogistan is further delineated into six broad categories by Hendelman-Baaur. These groups include blogs written by Iranians in Iran, those in diaspora, Iranians writing in languages other than Persian, those written by non-Iranians in Persian, blogs about Iran by multiple writers who may or may not be Iranian, and, non-individual blogs such as corporate and group blogs.

Weblogistan emerged in the Western media due to multiple Iranian bloggers being subject to a series of arrests, mysterious deaths, disappearances, and, being forced to flee Iran. Often, popular media coverage deployed Orientalist tropes of a malevolent Islamic theocracy ruthlessly quashing the tiniest glimmers of free speech, a stereotype often replicated by it's most prominent bloggers located both inside and outside of Iran. Rather than being rejected, these tropes were deployed by diasporic Iranian communities in the United States in order to reify the legitimacy of their citizenship as although read as the terrorist other, were in fact good citizens in need of protection from a violent and inhumane theocracy. This can be illustrated by Shaksari's examination of the constantly shifting occlusion and inclusion of the diasporic queer Iranian subject within the dominant discourses of the Iranian diaspora in order to be legible through a neoliberal human rights framework. The attempts to portray both the homeland as static and the diasporic community as homogenous are manifestations of the diaspora's attempt to be positioned as legitimate within white western heteronormativity. This is made visible through the constant chaotic shifts, informed by Orientalist and Occidentalist tropes,

of diasporic queer Iranian subjects from abjectly invisible to hyper visible. The diasporic Iranian queer and the seemingly static diasporic community the figure is pitted against is both possible and impossible.

AJAM MEDIA COLLECTIVE AND REORIENT MAGAZINE

Reorient Magazine and Ajam Media Collective, two online magazines founded by diasporic Iranians are positioned as oppositional to the popular nationalist rhetorics that shape many of the hubs of the online Iranian diaspora. Reorient, founded by Joobin Bekhrad in 2012, is an arts and cultures magazine that, when engaging with transnational politics, does so through art critique. Ajam Media Collective, which began on a wordpress site in 2011, functions both as an arts and culture magazine as well as a news source. Both websites feature mixtapes, collaborations with artists, podcasts, and, ongoing art and archival projects. Despite the similarities, both websites have different mission statements as Reorient claims to be “non-religious, non-political, non-partisan, and non-ideological” (Reorient 2012) while Ajam Media Collective is political. This is alluded to in both website’s names as Reorient indicates a new perspective and, Ajam is a reclamation of an Arabic pejorative for “others,” specifically, Persians, and deploys otherness as a way to reimagine “monolithic definitions of cultures, people, and civilizations.” (Ajam Media Collective 2013) Such frameworks become apparent in the online magazines engagement with the Trump administration’s Muslim Ban, as, although

Reorient Magazine has not written an official post of their website addressing the matter, their twitter has featured a links to an articles discussing the impact of the ban on Iranian arts and culture often written by Iranian artists who are directly affected by the ban. Ajam Media collective has written multiple articles on their website about the Muslim ban, including a “#MuslimBan Resource Guide” available in Persian, Arabic, Urdu, Somali, Eastern Armenian, Western Armenian and a forthcoming guide in Kurdish.

However, despite the differences in mission statements, there are similarities in the ways both magazines deploy Qajar and Pre-Islamic visual texts in order to define both visual spaces as legible and legitimate parts of the Iranian diaspora. This is especially relevant as both magazines have it as their intention to interrupt the popular conceptualizations of Iran and Iranian identity within the West and the Iranian diaspora. Thus, visual tropes of Iranian culture, such as Persian carpets, Qajar androgynes, amber colored cups of *chai*, pomegranates, and, *ghalamkar* textiles from Isfahan are frequently shown not only the magazines, but, the Instagram, Tumblr, and Twitter accounts linked to the websites and operated by their editors. Such images and objects are common in popular diasporic Iranian virtual and physical spaces in order to manifest idealized, symbol heavy version of their homeland in their spaces and their media. These images and objects are not necessarily exclusive to Persian culture or Iran as a whole as pomegranates are a national symbol in Armenia and many carpets, such as kilims are made by non-Persian tribal nations and racial minorities in Iran. However, when these images are contingent to Persian-centric conceptualizations of Iranian identity in the

Iranian diaspora, the objects become even more complicated assemblages of nationalism, citizenship, race, class, and gender.

The ownership, or at least, appreciation of Persian carpets and kilims are a frequent trope for both Reorient and Ajam Media Collective, perhaps as the textiles are seen as neutral aesthetic apolitical objects of art. For example, Ajam Media Collective's current project *#BannedLiterature* consists of a series of short stories written by authors whose nationalities reflect the countries targeted by the Trump administration's travel ban as a way to humanize detained and diasporic bodies through a celebration of their cultural productions. As a way to draw in readers and allude to the plot of the short story, the texts are accompanied by an image corresponding to an aspect of the story. "The Beauty School," by Siamak Vossough¹⁷, depicts the struggles of a young Iranian couple who use humor and nightly confession to deal with living in the United States. What makes the story unusual is that both Goli and Vahid work in the service and retail sector, attending beauty school and working as a cashier at an uncle's corner store respectively, interrupting the model minority rhetorics used to justify the presence of Iranians as providing highly skilled labor. Both Goli and Vahid hold a complicated view of the Americans they are now in contact with, stemming from the clashing of *taarof*, an Iranian etiquette emphasizing deference and self-abasement, and Americans' aggressive assertiveness and racial microaggressions.

¹⁷ "Siamak Vossoughi was born in Tehran, grew up in Seattle, and lives in San Francisco. He has published in Glimmer Train, Missouri Review, Kenyon Review Online, and several other journals. His collection, *Better Than War*, received a 2014 Flannery O'Connor Award for Short Fiction." (Vossoughi 2017)



Fig.1. A screen capture of the banner image for the short story *The Beauty School* by Siamak Vossough.
Source: Ajam Media Collective

To indicate that this is a story about Iranians written by an Iranian, an image of makeup brushes and a gold Tarte eyeshadow pallet¹⁸ lying upon a *kilim* woven in muted primary colors upon a beige background is used in the header image of the story.

However, a closer reading of the image disrupts the deployment of the textile as an indicator of universal Iranian identity and experience. Often, *kilims* that predominantly feature neutrals and low impact colors are woven for the wealthy urbanite Tehrani population who wish to possess tribal textiles that do not clash with their French rococo inspired aesthetic. This aesthetic is associated in large part, to the westernization efforts of the Pahlavi regime, where westruckness was indicative of enlightenment, or, to critics, foolish dandyism.

The production of *kilims* is gendered and aged, made through the labor of tribal and minority women and children, whose bodies have been deployed within the rhetorics and logics of Persian-centric Iranian modernity. However, it must be noted that rugs,

¹⁸ Tartelette 2 In Bloom Clay Eyeshadow Palette by Tarte, to be exact. A good choice.

especially fluffy pile-woven Persian carpets, are also produced by urban laborers in workshops or in their own homes who may or may not be racial minorities. The weaving of carpets within the home for public consumption is a common way for households, whether impoverished or even upper middle class, to make extra money. Not necessarily dependant on class identity, carpets and kilims can also be woven for enjoyment, artistic urges, the recording of lived experiences and political events, autobiographies and, personal use. Despite these nuances, the kilim is often associated with paternalistic notions of pre-modern wandering nomads outside of the jurisdiction of the government who live close to nature and possess an inherent talent for the art. (*Gabbeh* 1996)

Although the exact owner of the carpet is unknown, the images attempt to manifest a universal Iranian experience in the face of the Muslim travel ban is haunted by the interweavings of citizenship, class, race, and, gender in Iran. The politics of the Qajar era haunt the image as well as the mass creation and exportation of Iranian carpets for profit are rooted in the year 1875, when the Iranian carpet weaving industry underwent a revival in order to meet the Western market's demand for Persian carpets. Before, older worn-in carpets that were manufactured in private settings and belonged to Iranian households were sold to Western countries after the textiles began to wear down. Both the manufacture and exportation of Persian carpets designed for European tastes for Western markets were controlled by European corporations, altering a private art as well as the domestic Iranian consumption of carpets. (Maleki 2014) This illuminates the ways

in which objects and images are assumed to be neutral are in fact, complicated assemblages of transnational and domestic politics.

The assumption of a universal Iranian experience, and, the decontextualization of images extends to both Reorient Magazine and Ajam Media Collective's deployment of Qajari images, or, images read as contingent to the Qajar era. For example, ReOrient Magazine's current logo features a pop-art influenced sketch of a Qajar androgynous figure wearing a pair of sunglasses, while Ajam Media Collective's current logo features stylized calligraphy of the word *ajam* in Persian.



Fig.2 Reorient Magazine's current logo.
Source: Facebook

Fig.3. Ajam Media Collective's current logo.
Source: Facebook

However, Ajam Media Collective's initial logo, dating from December 2011 and located on their original but now defunct Wordpress website, featured two *Khorshid Khanoom* figures preparing for Norouz festivities.

Perhaps these images are indicative of the type of content and frameworks once deployed by Ajam Media collective in their earlier incarnation. Currently, Ajam Media Collective's articles, often written by head editor Alex Shams, are invested in interrogating the romanticization of the Qajar era written through a critical race lens. However, although Sham's critiques of race, and occasionally class, do interrupt the homogenizing effect of Persian-centric Nationalism, Sham's work rarely considers gender, sexuality, ability, and deeper analysis of class as a factor in race formation in both Iran and in the Iranian diaspora. Although, at the beginning of the chapter, I mentioned that race and ethnicity are rarely taken into consideration in the diasporic imagination, there are exceptions, such as Sham's work. Yet even these exceptions fail to consider the importance of the interweavings of race, class, gender and sexuality. Instead, it is important to understand these factors as inseparable, as gender is racialized and race is gendered.



Fig.4. A screen capture of Ajam Media Collective's first logo. Source: Instagram

To date, Ajam Media Collective has not published an article that specifically and directly interrupts the Persian-centric conceptualizations of the Qajar era, but, has troubled other manifestations of racism in Iran. For example, two articles that interrogate Anti-Blackness and the erasure of Afro-Iranians offer critiques of the popular conceptualization of the Qajar era as a period of unabashed freedom. For example, “A Review of Tarabnameh, or, Why Are Iranian-Americans Laughing at Blackface in 2016?” by Maziar Shirazi¹⁹ critiques the unabashed use of blackface, and its roots in Iranian anti-Blackness, in the contemporary re-telling of a Qajar Era play that was shown to sold out audiences in at Stanford University. (Shirazi 2016)

Qajar images appear in Ajam Media Collective’s social media profiles as art to be enjoyed. The radical act is not the critique of the deployment of the art, but rather, the appreciation of the art as almost contemporary art, rather than outmoded and embarrassing cultural artifacts. Humorously captioned, the *moues* and glances are presented as cute and relatable expressions of annoyance that encapsulate the feelings, and even appearances (evident with the hashtag, selfie), of the contemporary viewer. Rendering Qajar art as relevant to the identity formation of contemporary diasporic Iranians is often rooted in not on the reclamation of these images, but, in the reclamation of Middle Eastern faces and bodies. Used to indicate that beauty is within the cultural genealogy of modern Iranians attempts

¹⁹ “...a family physician based in Solano County, California.”(Shirazi 2016)



Fig.5. A screen capture of a post featuring Qajar art from Ajam Media Collective's Instagram profile asking followers which figure they personally identify with or like the most. Source: Instagram

to reclaim certain Middle Eastern bodies by supposedly interrupting Western beauty standards. However, without interrogating the ways in which colorism, anti-Blackness, and racism shape the ways in which certain bodies are read both Middle Eastern and reclaimable, these reclamations recreate the rhetorics of racial and cultural homogeneity. Reorient Magazines' engagement with Qajar imagery, in contrast, is frequent on the main website, as head editor and founder Joobin Bekhrad works to center Qajar art and culture as relevant and integral to Western culture, especially, the aesthetics of Rock and Roll. Bekhrad often deploys Persian-centric generalizations of Iran and Iranian culture when lauding the beauty of Qajar art and the ways in which it influenced the Orientalist splendors of 1960's era rock culture. One article entitled "Sex, Drugs, and Gol-o-Bolbol" posits that the Qajar dynasty was a radical, rock and roll dynasty due to its opulent aesthetic, sexual voracity and interruption of gender norms by both men and women.

Interestingly, Bekhrad does not mention the *amrad*, a figure who is featured in many of the historic images, and modern reinterpretation of these images that pepper the text. Instead, Bekhrad reads the figure as a heterosexual male. The *amrad* according to Afsaneh Najmabadi is a potential third gender category within the Iranian gender system, defined as being a young, attractive adolescent boy who is neither masculine or feminine and is desired by adult men. (Najmabadi 2003, 3) According to Najmabadi the *amrad* disappears from the dominant Iranian cultural imagination and discourse due to the influence of Western Imperialism, as the erasure of queer desire and the *amrad* were centered as necessary in the workings of Iranian modernity. (Najmabadi 2003, 4) By presenting the Qajar era as a period of heteronormative sexual freedom and reading the *amrad* as a heterosexual male the article attempts to un-other the othered body by refuting Orientalist conceptions of “Muslim”/“Oriental” sexualities as both anachronistically repressed and excessively queer. (Puar 2013, 336) This attitude is a way to present the Oriental other, then rendered as a “threat,” as “safe” through both identifying with and disavowing Orientalist tropes, such as sexual repression, in order to proclaim the shared modes and objects of desire as the heteropatriarchal West. This negotiation is bound in the logics of Occidentalism, which as defined by Meltem Ahiska is,

“... a field of social imagination through which those in power consume and reproduce the projection of ‘the West’ to negotiate and consolidate their hegemony in line with their pragmatic interests. The hegemony operates by employing the mechanisms of projection that support the fantasy of ‘the West.’” (Ahiska 2003, 366)

This, as well as presenting the West as a homogenous monolith, attempts to neutralize being rendered and read as a threatening Oriental body by mimicking concepts of U.S. sexual exceptionalism, such as progressive national heteronormativity, as a way to navigate racialized marginalization. (Puar 2007, 2) Projecting concepts of U.S. sexual exceptionalism onto a non-Western past reveals anxieties about confirming "...colonial fantasies about Orientalist sexual excess, perversity, and pedophilia." (Puar 2007,14) The rereading of the *amrad* is a way in which those who are rendered as 'Orientals' negotiate the conditions that circumscribe their legibility through engaging directly with Orientalist knowledge productions by reproducing these same Orientalist tropes. This process is a way to gain intelligibility by adopting and recreating the ways in which the "other" is seen through a Western lens as a mode of survival and as a way to accrue cultural capital.

The title of the article, "Sex, Drugs, and Gol-o-Bolbol" made its way onto a tote bag designed by San Francisco based artist Taravat Talepasand, who is also known as TVAT, for Reorient Magazine. The tote bag features a screen print of one of Talepsand's prints, *Islamic Youth*, a riff on the cover art of Sonic Youth's album 1990 album, *Goo*.



Fig.6. The Reorient tote bag designed by Talepasand that I purchased my sister for her Norouz present in 2015. We got each other matching ones. Source: Personal Archive

Outside of Reorient Magazine, Talepasand's art imagines the Iranian state's censorship of popular culture as unrelenting and obsessed with quashing sexual deviancy to the point of hypocrisy. Talepasand deploys Qajar imagery juxtaposed with objects and symbols from both contemporary and 1990s era popular culture and poronography as critiques of the Iranian theocracy.²⁰ Talepasand positions the Qajar era and the assumed sexual and political freedom encapsulated by that era as a form of resistance against the sexually oppressed theocracy. The question then becomes, how do diasporic Iranians imagine the

²⁰ Talepasand has recently begun to use actual drugs and their paraphernalia, such as tabs of acid and crack pipes, in her art.

Iranian state, and, their place inside or outside of it. Perhaps first generation Iranians or those born in Iran but are too young to remember, replicate the previous generation's trauma by using a lens of inherited nationalist rhetorics and Orientalist fears in order to interrogate their own traumas. This may be the case for the prevalence of Qajar imagery and how it is imagined to be a depoliticized and authentic manifestation of Iranian identity. The rendering of the Qajar era as a time of peace and decadence produces an affect of longing and of belonging, in contrast to the assumed stifled alienation under the restrictive Islamic theocracy.

CONCLUSION

The dominant imagination of what diasporic Iranian art, and in extension, artists look like obfuscates those who do not fall within the prescribed boundaries of legibility. Certain subjects and tropes, such as *Khorshid Khanoom*, the *faravahar* and Qajar unibrows are commonly used by artists claiming space within the Iranian diaspora as they are widespread and unchallenged symbols that are understood to indicate Iran and Iranian identity. In this conclusion, I turn to two artists who trouble these tropes, Tatyana Fazlalizadeh and Sophy of Ask-Iran, whose art, either through its inclusion or exclusion in the Iranian diaspora, illustrate the limitations of using Qajar and pre-Islamic images as indicative of Iranian identity and culture. The genealogy of these images, as well as their trajectory within the projects of Iranian modernity and state-building, and, it's roots in

the acknowledgement and disavowal of Orientalist tropes. In order for these projects to be successful, Aryanism was to be implemented through the erasure of racial, gender, class, and sexual identities that were believed to confirm Orientalist tropes of a racially and morally degenerate Iran.

Even if one is not willingly a participant or cognizant of these rhetorics and historical narratives, these genealogies shape the way in which both diasporic Iranians and diasporic Iranian art is recognized, shared, and, consumed. Within this framework, the limited scope of diasporic Iranian art is illustrated through the ways in which racialized, classed, and gendered bodies are recognized as legitimate producers of diasporic Iranian art. Rather than presenting these texts within a binary of authentic and inauthentic, it is more productive to read them as negotiations of power that illuminate transnational entanglements of power, privilege, and oppression. Furthermore, this gives insight into the methods and objectives of neoliberal human rights rhetorics, and, how the binary of good and evil, deserving and undeserving obfuscates complicated assemblages of power. Finally, even if the texts are problematic, for some Iranians in Iran and in diaspora, these tropes and discourses produce affect that they empathize with, finding similarities within their own lived experiences as they identity with the text fully or partially. Even if one responds to their manifestations of systemic power in a way that undermines it, one is still shaped by and legible through these matrixes. The way one is able to negotiate power is dependent on their ever shifting and unfathomable positionality, rendering certain acts of resistance comfortable or uncomfortable due to entanglements of privilege, oppression,

and trauma. After all acts of resistance are just as informed by the same systems of power that inform acts of violence. Rather, we should give space to those read as third world bodies to be complicated and problematic. To assume that third world bodies are the homeland and are inherently politically conscious, or, unconscious²¹, is dehumanizing, forcing the other into the role of the deserving victim in order to be legible as a subject.

ASK IRAN

The aesthetic of Ask-Iran is rooted in contemporary anime-inflected interpretations of Qajar and Safavid era art, the art itself works to challenge Persiancentrism through webcomics and Tumblr posts about race and gender relations in Iran throughout history. Influenced by *Hetalia: Axis Powers* characters, anthropomorphized versions of European nation states, Iran is a woman named Roshanak who interacts with characters representing other gendered and racialized nation-states, Iranian minorities, and different Iranian time periods.

Constantly in flux, the visual representation of racial, tribal, and national identities and how they interact with one another interrupts the cultural essentialisms used to define Iranian modernity. Furthermore, Iran's constant shift between historic temporalities

²¹ This is often the case in neoliberal human rights rhetoric, where third world bodies are unconscious of the existence of or are unable to name the systemic violences that marginalize them.

rejects the Occidentalist logics of Iranian nationalism and diasporic Iranian in U.S. sexual exceptionalism , in which a return to a glorious Aryan past and/or decadent Qajar past is necessary for modernity.

Due to a lack of a personal investment in Persian-centric Iranian nationalism due to her identity as a Salvadoran Indigenous lesbian, Sophy, the artist behind Ask-Iran, is one of the few internet personalities who actively interrogates race, ethnicity, and citizenship in Iran, refusing to generalize Iran as a homogenous monolith. The inclusion of Sophy into diasporic Iranian spaces rarely include her positionality as a queer Indigenous woman living in the United States and how it shapes her art, illustrating the ways in which difference is erased in order to construct a legible and universal diasporic Iranian community. An interview with Ajam Media Collective mentions her identity as an Indigenous Salvadoran, yet, her queerness and her other artwork, which explores the possibilities and realities of Indigenous queer and lesbian bodies, remain unmentioned. This erasure obfuscates not only Sophy's queerness and indigeneity, but, the tension between the art and the settler colonial logics and rhetorics deployed by the dominant diasporic Iranian claims to American citizenship. Furthermore, this erases the complicated interweavings of borders, tribal identity and sovereignty that inform conceptualizations of race in Iran.

Although Persians in modern day Iran are not necessarily settlers, nationalist claims to certain lands and borders render Azeris and Arabs in the south as un-indigenous, despite for example, Arabs in Khuzestan having been there for centuries upon centuries.

These claims are potentially rooted in the myth of the savage Arab invader, whose merciless implementation of Islam and impure blood sullied not only the Aryan empire, but, the bodies of the Aryan themselves. In order to reclaim pure Aryan bodies and minds, Iran would have to be culturally, linguistically, and racially homogenous. According to Nikki Keddie (Keddie 1981) the concept of a singular Iranian is rooted in the presence of Western Imperialism in Iran dating to the 1800s, and, was a way for the Central Iranian government to subjugate ethnic minorities, clans, and tribal federations. This deployment of a unified national identity echoes in the current discontent of ethnic minorities and tribal members due to the refusal to meet the needs of marginalized communities by the Iranian government.

TATYANA FAZLALIZADEH

In the case of Tatyana Fazlalizadeh, an artist of Black and Iranian descent, is most known for her paintings and street murals that interrogate daily instances of racialized and gendered violence. Based in Brooklyn, Fazlalizadeh is a classically trained artist, evident in her preference for oil paint on canvas and her painterly approach to the charcoal sketches central to her street art. Most notable is her mural and wheatpaste poster series *Stop Telling Women To Smile* and *America is Black*, both featuring sensitive gray and white portraits of predominantly, black and brown women and

femmes. Despite Fazlalizadeh's identity as Iranian²² and her lived experiences of being Black and Iranian her art is rarely discussed or given space within the popular websites of the Iranian diaspora. As of the writing of this chapter Fazlalizadeh's art has not been featured in either Reorient Magazine or Ajam Media Collective's webpages or social media profiles. A multivalent manifestation of misogynoir, Fazlalizadeh is pushed outside of the Iranian diaspora due to both her subject matter, Black and brown women and femmes, and her identity as a Black woman. The covert exclusion of Fazlalizadeh, as well as the overt denial of her heritage via claims that she does not look Iranian which she documents in posts on her Twitter and Instagram, gives insight into the ways in which anti-Blackness is used to define not only the Iranian diaspora, but, Iran as a whole.

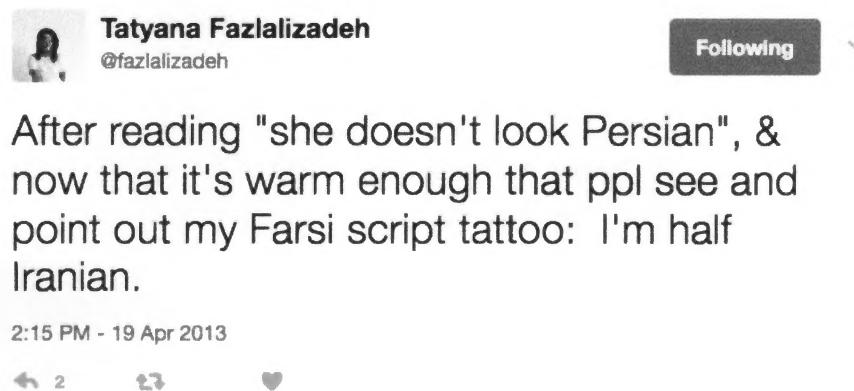


Fig.7. A screen capture of a tweet from Fazlalizadeh's Twitter. Source:Twitter

In many ways, anti-Blackness is a central logic of Iranian modernity, as, the erasure of Black Iranians through the implementation of a singular Iranian language, as well as

²²Fazlalizadeh often interchangeably identifies as Iranian and Persian. Her father, who passed away when she was two years old, remains as an important aspect of her life and her work.

cultural appropriation, and, complete denial of their existence. For example, the celebration of Norouz, a holiday that emerged on a national level during the Pahlavi era, heavily features the blackface minstrelsy of Haji Firouz, an enslaved black man who cracks jokes and sings for his master. Despite the attempts to claim that Haji Firouz is not a blackface character, and is rather, an mythic figure from ancient Mesopotamia, Haji Firouz's similarities to American minstrelsy cannot be explained away. However, it is important to note that

“... not all slaves in Iran were African, and not all Africans came to Iran by way of slavery. Iran also had a large number of slaves from Southern Russia and the Caucuses in the north, while some African sailors came for work in the Persian Gulf. Despite this, the “black slave” image is dominant in Iran. By the nineteenth century, African slaves were prized as domestics or concubines in wealthy households.”(Baghoolizadeh 2012)

What this indicates is that Blackness is a central forces in the construction of Iranian modernity, as is Anti-Blackness central to the claims of belonging and citizenship of the Iranian diaspora. The interrogation of Black subjectivities and Iranian nationalism at home and abroad should not be approached as an additive model, but rather, in a way that centers the intricate interweavings of transnational race formation.

In response to the Trump administration’s Muslim ban, there have been multiple articles written about diasporic Iranian artists and their thoughts and experiences. As of the time of writing this article, no one has reached out to Fazlalizadeh for an interview about how the Muslim ban has or could affect herself and her family and loved ones. However, interracial Iranians have not been excluded from these conversations as a whole, as multiple articles feature Iranian artists who identify as part white. Perhaps those

who believe Sophy of Ask-Iran to be Iranian would assume that the travel ban would directly affect her and her family. Rather, it's the Trump administration's wishes to deport Mexican and Central American immigrants, who may be undocumented or in the more vulnerable stages of the immigration process before getting a greencard, that directly affects her family and her loved ones.

Both Sophy and Fazlalizadeh interrupt the dominant discourses of the Iranian diaspora as they do not fit within the racialized, gendered, and sexualized norms of what an Iranian is. Although Ask-Iran is legible through the framework of diasporic Iranian art and Fazlalizadeh is not, both artists may provide an important intervention in the deployment of Western heteronormativity and Persian-centric nationalism within the dominant discourses of diasporic Iranian spaces. Rather than articulate an ideal queer/queered diasporic Iranian futurity, I call for a multitude of nuanced and complicated possibilities and ambiguities as a way to imagine a queer/queered futurity. In "Theorizing Transnational Feminist Praxis" by Richa Nagar and Amanda Lock Swarr, Swarr and Nagar call for a transnational feminist praxis, that, to use Chandra Mohanty's terminology, is aware of its cartographies, as well as its past, present, future, and, finally, its constraints. (Nagar and Swarr 2010) Although the methods of this praxis have limitations, involves constant interrogation of positionality, self-reflexivity, representational experiments, and, enacting accountability. Transnational feminism should not position itself as stable or attempt to create stability, but rather, it should always be in crises. This crises of representation catalyzes a commitment to constantly

produce self reflection and dialogues, critiquing it's own practices instead of seeking closure. Finally, within its work to decenter feminism, transnational feminism should always engage with it's position within multiple cartographies and overlapping hegemonic power structures.

Such an approach to the Iranian diaspora and diasporic Iranian subjects is vital, especially in the wake of the Trump administration's Muslim Ban. In their protests, diasporic Iranian communities are deploying the symbols of Persian-centric Iranian nationalism in tandem with the rhetorics of model minority politics in order to claim legibility as good neoliberal citizen subjects. I call into question the ways that visual tropes are being deployed in a time of crises, and, the genealogies that lead to them being legible as indicators of Iranian identities and struggles. Even the popular hashtag for the travel ban, "#MuslimBan," assumes that each affected country is culturally, religiously, and racially homogenous, and thus, each person affected by the ban has the same needs. The question becomes, who and what are obfuscated by this legibility in order to gain visibility and legitimacy as human subjects who are either unable to enter or leave the boundaries of the American nation-state. The attempts to hammer out single, unified, monolithic Iranian identity in the face of systemic violence, in effect, reifies rather than challenge that violence.

CHAPTER TWO

THE PRESENT EMBODYING THE PAST

In response to the Trump administration's Muslim bans, the diasporic Iranian community in the United States is creating and dispersing visual texts that deploy Qajar and pre-Islamic symbols as a form of resistance through ethnic pride. At the same time, the figure of the Iranian refugee has begun to emerge, signaling an interruption in the dominant discourses of the Iranian diaspora, which, since the 1990s, has preferred the term diaspora rather than "exile" or "refugee." However, like the deployment of the term "diaspora," the figure of the refugee is legible through model minority politics informed by the trope that Iranians provide skilled professional labor, and, due to their cultural and potentially genealogical ancestry, are not the black *chador* clad masses protesting *Shaytân-e Bozorg*²³ and howling "*Marg bar Amrika!*"²⁴, but rather, ideal neoliberal citizens.

Such discourse works as a way to legitimize diasporic and detained Iranians by distancing themselves from the tropes of the abject, Oriental terrorist that circumscribe their legibility. This is done through claiming the figure of the downtrodden refugee, a "Third world problem" (Malkki 1995, 503), positioned as the foil to the trope of the Oriental terrorist, and, thus, a more worthy subject. Such claims attempt to manifest

²³ "The Great Satan," also known as the United States of America. It is also what I call my cat when she is being bad.

²⁴ "Death to America". Both phrases are heavily associated with the Islamic Revolution and Ayatollah Khomeini.

affective responses of pity and sympathy as a way to counteract affective responses of hatred and fear rooted in xenophobic and racist rejections of refugees and immigrants, or, the false asylum seeker. The focus on Iranian's professional labor and pre-Islamic revolution existence promise of an increase, rather than a decrease in American prosperity, and thus, safety, is a rejection of "The figure of the bogus asylum seeker...who stalks the nation and haunts its capacity to secure its borders." (Ahmed 2004, 123)

This attempt by diasporic Iranians to claim detained Iranians as good neoliberal subjects complicates the ways in which the Iranian diaspora has defined itself since the late 1980s. (Malek 1995, 26) Iranians rejected the terms refugee and immigrant, and rather claimed the terms "diaspora" and "exile" as,

"The word 'refugees' evokes not just any persons who happen to have sought sanctuary or asylum but rather, as was suggested earlier, a "kind" of person...Exile connotes a readily aestheticizable realm, whereas the label 'refugee' connotes a bureaucratic and international humanitarian realm." (Malkki 1995, 513)

Due to the imagining of the refugee as "Third world problem" (Malkki 1995, 503), the term was rejected as it was not seen to sufficiently encapsulate the ideal Iranian subject, constructed through a lens of Persian-centric Iranian exceptionalism. Iranians, due to their cultural heritage and success, were simply too elite to be refugees, and, diaspora was more appealing and glamorous. (Malek 2015, 13) Although they are often perceived as third world and as refugees by Westerners, many Iranians invested in Persian-centric nationalism see themselves as first world citizens who come from a first world nation. However, that first world nation was only first world when it was under Pahlavi rule and

on friendly terms with America and the Britain, and, due to the imposition of an Islamic theocracy in 1979, it has regressed to a backwards and violent third world nation. Furthermore, many privileged Persian Iranians do not consider themselves to be members or embodiments of the third world, but, often imagine neighboring countries and racial minorities within Iran as being such.

However, by attempting to diffuse the specter of the terrorist by claiming status as the downtrodden refugee in order to claim detained Iranians as good subjects, the differences and transnational tensions of the Iranian diaspora are obfuscated in order to build coalition. For example, the figure of the deserving Iranian refugee, often read as Muslim, who simply wants to obtain or has already grasped the American dream is being deployed by diasporic Iranians in order to prevent and reject both detained and established Iranians being read as radical Islamic terrorists who wish only to destroy America. Yet, this claiming of the Muslim refugee as a good subject obfuscates the overwhelming claims of secularism and anti-Islamic rhetorics, often rooted in Pahlavi era Persian-centric nationalism which shapes the dominant discourses of the Iranian diaspora.

Although the rising visibility of Iranian refugees challenges the classed and racialized rejection of the Muslim “refugee” and “exile” by the dominant Iranian diaspora, these materialities and discourses are legible through the politics of neoliberal national belonging and citizenship. Through the creation and distribution of visual texts via social media platforms diasporic Iranians both identify and disidentify with the figure of the downtrodden yet dangerous Muslim refugee through claims of educational and financial

success. In order to signify the safeness of detained and yet to arrive Iranians, diasporic Iranians are deploying Qajar and pre-Islamic visual texts to perform their identities as Iranians who reject the Iranian nation state and its human rights violations.

The use of Qajar and pre-Islamic images are deployed to circumscribe the legibility diasporic and detained Iranians in as ideal neoliberal citizens or soon to be citizens. These are two interweaving modes of the deployment of these images. Firstly, rooted in the politics of the Pahlavi era and the anxieties of the Iranian diaspora, these visual texts are read as apolitical, secular, and simply cultural. Due to the trajectory of these images inside and outside of Iran, they have become generally unchallenged symbols that are understood to indicate Iran and Iranian heritage. Secondly, these symbols are being used specifically as they are also read as indicating a rejection of the Iranian theocracy and its human rights violation, and instead, represent a more enlightened, civilized, and authentic kind of Iranian, signified by the *faravahar*, a Zoroastrian symbol indicating divine power (Najmabadi 2003, 89). Although seemingly different, the contemporary readings of these images is rooted in the Qajar's deployment of scientific racism and Aryanism in order to catalyze and propel Iranian modernity, as well as the Pahlavi era's project of constructing a Persian-centric Iran that was culturally, racially, linguistically, and religiously homogenous. Through the deployment of affect, rooted in discourses of loss and pride, these visual texts attempts to create a universal and relatable Iranian subject. However, this excludes the narratives and presence of Iranians, or those encompassed by Iranian borders, that do not fit into the racial, sexual, cultural, class, and gendered boundaries of

the ideal Iranian subject, diasporic or otherwise. Furthermore, despite the attempts to unify all Iranians through images read as apolitical and secular, these visual texts are marked by hegemonies both in diaspora and within the Iranian nation state.

These recreations create archives of contemporary anxieties, nostalgic affect and disidentifications couched in romanticized generalizations and dreams of the past. Furthermore, these recreations are centered around the contemporary assumption that historical texts and archives are stagnant and objective. Such understandings fuel the ways in which these visual texts are deployed in times of political struggle, namely the deployment of Qajar and pre-Islamic texts as ways to embody resistance against the Trump administration's Muslim bans.

I posit that interrogating the limitations of historical images as being able to embody contemporary bodies and struggles illuminates the way we understand historical images as inert objects. Rather, these that archives are in fact lively and have the ability to negotiate power. I argue that the archive's political nature and ability to negotiate power is illustrated through the contemporary reading of Qajari and Pre-Islamic images as apolitical, secular cultural artifacts. However, it is important to note that these are widely available symbols and images that have different meanings in different temporal, spatial, and individual or community contexts. Not everyone using these visual texts is consciously invested in Persian-centric nationalism or Aryanism. Instead, the question is, why are these visual texts widely available, and what makes it legible as a symbol of Iran to Iranians and non-Iranians?

The viral sharing of an image of *Khorshid Khanoom*, for example, in solidarity with detained Iranians is an attempt by diasporic Iranians to be seen as good subjects on an international scale. Although intended to be plainly understood by all individuals, these visual texts are often only legible to other Iranians, or those who understand Persciancentric Iranian culture. The images assume that the average audience of the image, Iranian or otherwise has an innate knowledge of the symbol and, has the same affective response to the visual text. Yet, not all Iranians have the same knowledge, relationship to, affective response, or, ability to physically see these visual texts.

But, this assumption does not take into mind that a great many Americans do not understand the symbols, or, feel that they are indicative of the abject and dangerous Oriental. Perhaps the intended affect of the helpless refugee, or detained Iranian is not produced, or, despite it all, does not sway any convictions that Middle Easterners are inherently terrorists? I argue that, due to the use of such specific images with a specific intention, through the guise of materializing the figure of the Muslim refugee, diasporic Iranians are crafting these visual texts as ways to talk about themselves and their communities. As such, visual texts depicting contemporary Persian Iranians, both diasporic and detained, as the embodiment of Iran's glorious Aryan past are being deployed as an acknowledgement and disavowal of their own longstanding racialization in the West. I argue that, despite their attempt to be understood on a populist level as a plea for human rights, these visual texts are invested in defining bodies that are rendered invisible and unknown due to their detainment between borders of two nation states at

war through both Persian-centric Iranian nationalism and the neoliberal projects of contemporary American settler colonialism. Furthermore, by now claiming the status of “immigrant” and “refugee” through a Persian-centric model minority lens diasporic Iranians are constructing these discourses and visual texts as a reminder and reification of their financial and racial value through the ghostly presence of dehumanized Black, brown, and, Indigenous bodies. I base this intervention in Liisa Malkki’s interrogation of the construction of the refugee as a political form, as

“An obvious problem with the intellectual project of defining “the refugee experience” is that it posits a single, essential, transhistorical refugee condition. The quest for the refugee experience (whether as analytical model, normative standard, or diagnostic tool) reflects a wider tendency, in many disciplines, to seize upon political or historical processes and then to inscribe aspects of those processes in the bodies and psyches of the people who are undergoing them.” (Malkki 1995, 511)

My intervention rejects both the binary of imaginary diasporic space versus a real homeland and authentic versus inauthentic, but, asks, how are certain acts perceived as authentic and legitimate, when, they themselves are as hyperreal as the presumed fakes. It may be more productive to posit the ways in which Orientalist tropes and Persian-centric Iranian nationalism influence not only these visual texts, but how they are read by their audiences as authentic or otherwise, and how these readings are informed by their imagining of what Iranians are and are not.

Emerging from a nexus of Persian-centric nationalism, legal whiteness in the United States, and, Orientalist tropes, these anxieties illuminate the ways in which diasporic Iranians attempt to navigate their positionalities within the United States. I believe that the push for Iranians to be legible within Qajar and pre-Islamic visual texts is rooted in

not only by the racial, gender, sexual, and class anxieties of Iranian modernity, but, also in the ways which diasporic communities attempt to navigate the racialized queering and Orientalist discourses around “Muslim” sexualities.

I will be examining two visual texts created by diasporic Iranians as a protest of the Trump administration's Muslim bans. These images, entitled RESIST, and *Trump Got Me Like More Iranian Than Ever* deploy Qajar and pre-Islamic imagery as a way to unite all Iranians through Persian-centric cultural essentialisms. These trope a culturally and racially homogenous Iran emerges in these texts, as, rather than attempting to unite Iranians despite their differences, works to unify them due to their assumed shared heritage and identity.

The first image, depicting *Khorshid Khanoom* holding a protest sign aloft, was intended as a secular and apolitical way to unite Iranians and those sympathizing with Iranians. Although *Khorshid Khanoom*, or, lady sun, is assumed to be simply a cultural artifact hearkening to a time when Iran was pre-Islamic, and supposedly, peaceful and secular, the figure is in fact highly political in the ways the image is deployed and read. My second image, entitled *Trump Got Me Like More Ever*, created by Nasimeh Bahrayni Easton, deploys the *faravahar* as an indicator of Iranian identity. However, the original image has been revised twice due to public outcries over the proximity of the *faravahar* to the current Iranian flag, symbols assumed to be contradictory to one another. Furthermore, the *faravahar* is constructed as an authentic representation of Iranian identity, while the current Iranian flag and the Islamic theocracy it represents are not.

In my conclusion, I consider the ways in which historic objects and images are in fact lively due to the contemporary readings and re-contextualization of these visual texts. I illustrate this liveliness through contextualizing the archived comments of support and of disavowal left on both of my case studies. I posit that the ways in which images produce certain types of affect, be it an affect of nostalgia, pride, or shame, are not natural or inherent, but rather, are complicated and nuanced assemblages.

RESIST

Posted on January 27th 2017, an image featuring a painting of *Khorshid Khanoom* by artist Mashid Zali entitled *Khatoon Pansy*, was posted on the facebook page of Shiva Sarram. Protesting Executive Order 13769 or "Protecting the Nation from Foreign Terrorist Entry into the United States, "signed by President Donald Trump on January 27th, 2017, Sarram's post was liked 714 times and shared 439 times, and, had received 34 comments before its deletion. Posed against a simple yellow background, the figure of *Khorshid Khanoom* no longer grasps her bouquet of pansies and instead holds a sign that says "RESIST." Although the original Facebook post has been deleted for reasons unknown and it is currently unclear if Sarram is the creator of this meme, the image of a protesting *Khorshid Khanoom* lives on in the social media profiles and twitter accounts of Iranians, or, those in solidarity with them, as profile pictures, captioned or uncaptioned posts, and, as cover photos on Facebook profiles.



Fig.8. A screen capture of Sarram's Facebook post. Source: Facebook

In the original post, as a caption to the photo, Sarram included a brief statement that deploys the rhetorics of neoliberal citizenship, catalyzing sympathy via mournful affect as a way to “diffuse” the specter of the Oriental terrorist, stating

“Iranian-Americans are the most successful minority group in America-at the highest professional and educational level and in every industry.

From chief executives of Silicon Valley firms to Wall Street, to scientists at the forefront of cancer research to educators, doctors, inventors, authors, engineers, artists, philanthropists, etc., we make a contribution to the fabric of this country every day.

We are not terrorists.
#resist”

Model minority politics, evident through the promises of future labor and the memorialization of past and present labor, render detained Iranians as deserving and good victims through a neoliberal human rights framework. This imagining of America is a

vast land of opportunity, bookended by two coastal geopolitical locations, namely, Silicon Valley and Wall Street, which are imagined to be the centers of technological innovation and of wealth, respectively. Intermixed with professional jobs, such as doctors and engineers, are vague categories such as inventors and authors which can encompass a wide variety of individuals and professions, yet is attempting to craft a specific kind of person, namely, young professionals invested in neoliberal citizenship. Some of these categories, although vague, are extremely narrow, such as philanthropist, which, although it is not a profession, is associated with extreme wealth and political power. Furthermore, this trope of unprecedented Iranian exceptionalism and success is a trope deployed within the diasporic Iranian discourses in order to bring together diasporic Iranian communities through the erasure of differences.

“Iranians living in the U.S. can be considered as a very heterogeneous group based on religion, ethnicity and education. However, one thing that often tends to bring this group together is the image of success. Iranians are considered a very successful group of immigrants and have been praised for their activities by various U.S. officials. Iranians find this image of success an essential part of their identity.” (Alinejad and Ghorashi 2015, 65)

By attempting to define all Iranians as holders of elite education and wealth, and of almost magical proportions of potential, those who do not fall into those categories are obfuscated, or, rendered as deviant and potentially reifying negative stereotypes of Middle Eastern immigrants.

By positioning the figure of the good neoliberal subject as contingent to the figure of the refugee, a diasporic Iranian futurity is crafted through the logics of settler colonialism, anti-Blackness, classism, ableism, heteronormativity, and, Western

imperialism. Obfuscating the reality of impoverished and homeless Iranians, the trope that all Iranians are bourgeoisie holders of untold riches and elite status is deployed as a way to be seen as a legitimate model minority whose presence is a gain rather than a strain on the American government. Thus Iranian immigrants and refugees, placed in opposition to the unspoken yet present specters of Black, Indigenous, and, Chicanx bodies, should then be granted humanity as, through their labor, especially their skilled and professional labor, are in closer proximity to whiteness. Those who are not determined to be in proximity of beholders of whiteness are read as undeserving of any aid, or even legibility as subjects. Such rhetorics are deployed by diasporic Iranian communities, as well as communities invested in diasporic Iranians, as a way to render the abject and monstrous Oriental terrorist into something more palatable.

The coupling of these rhetorics with the image of *Khorshid Khanoom* implicates an investment in a secular, or at least, non-Shia Persian-centric Iranian nationalism. *Khorshid Khanoom* iconography often uses a light and untroubled aesthetic sensibility which features women with round faces decked out in Qajar and Safavid era costume, are an extremely popular trope in the dominant visual culture of the Iranian diaspora. Generally associated with Norouz, these images, often found on postcards and greeting cards, are associated with the Aryan's myths romanticization of Zoroastrianism and pre-Islamic Iran. The imagined peacefulness and human rights orientation of ancient Persia is often deployed as a way to "diffuse" the monstrous terrorist, is rooted in Pahlavi era Persian-centric nationalism. By claiming that contemporary Persian, or Aryan, Iranians

are the direct genetic and philosophical descendants of the benevolent Cyrus the Great. Thus, Persian Iranians and those invested in a cohesive and Persian-centric nationalist identity are no longer abject Oriental monsters, but, are humans on par with liberated and modern Westerners. Such claims position that the polluting influences of Arabs and Islam as the sole cause for the contemporary violence of the Islamic Republic of Iran, and, that such grievous human rights violations are not inherently natural to all Iranians, evident through the surprisingly modern human rights inscribed upon the clay surface of the Cyrus Cylinder, which figures heavily in the discourses of the Iranian diaspora. The cylinder, as well as many other aspects of Zoroastrianism, is imagined as "...the embodiment of "true" Persian culture and reminding the Iranian diaspora that this object purportedly bears witness to a democratic and tolerant past." (Baghoolizadeh 2013)

Such an understanding of the Cyrus Cylinder is rooted in Mohammed Reza Pahlavi's re-reading of the artifact as a way to position himself as a modern Cyrus, the rightful inheritor of enlightened, civilized, and non-Muslim shahs. By positioning himself as the embodiment of democratic freedom, the Shah deployed these logics as a way to deflect the internal and external criticisms of his authoritarianism, as well as the and the violences committed by SAVAK, Iran's secret police²⁵. Furthermore, this celebration of the cylinder positioned Iran's human rights as the progenitor of Europe and America's, and thus, on par or even exceeding the quality of theirs.

²⁵ My mothers family, in particular, was targeted by SAVAK, most likely due to their prominence, wealth, and, anti-Shah and pro-communist work. Tales of threats, chemical castration, beatings, and imprisonment, and, mysterious disappearances are spoken of infrequently, and quietly.

"Iran's last shah, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, worked extensively to bring the Cyrus Cylinder to the fore of public attention to create an image that appealed to his people, as well as others worldwide...His campaign to recreate Iran's public image was often linked to a racialist agenda of Persian supremacy at the expense of a more cohesive national identity." (Baghoolizadeh 2013)

Such claims of being the progenitors and embodiments of human rights and unfettered freedom shaped contemporary Iranian readings of pre-Islamic and ancient Persian texts such as the *faravahar*. The legacies of Mohammed Reza Pahlavi Persian-centric nationalism echoes in contemporary understandings of the Cyrus Cylinder, and, the cultural objects and symbols contingent to it, as,

"Since the 1970s, many Iranians have been guilty of exaggerating the contents of the Cyrus Cylinder, claiming that Cyrus freed all slaves, allowed himself to be democratically elected by Babylonians, and promised freedom of religion. These claims, among others, are either entirely fabricated or dramatic deviations from the text." (Baghoolizadeh 2013)

Located within this genealogy, these illustrations of *Khorshid Khanoom* exist within multivalent temporalities and spatialities circumscribed by modern and contemporary Persian-centric nationalism, and diasporic Iranian anxieties rooted in the queering of racialization. The result of contemporary anxieties informed by assumed cultural parallels of the Aryan myth and the romanticization of both the Qajars and Pahlavis, *Khorshid Khanoom* becomes a timeless no-place. Although *Khorshid Khanoom* developed as a figure and symbol semi-independently from Zoroastrianism, the symbol is deployed by religious and secular Iranians invested in Persian-centric Iranian nationalism. An attempt to reclaim Iran's glorious pre-Islamic past, the image presents the past as peaceful due to the uninhibited freedom guaranteed by the ancient yet modern civil rights of women.

In these images women who predominantly populate these images, either solitary, in groups, or accompanied by animals. Engaged in activities such as playing the *tar*, dancing, or posing with bouquets and bowls of pomegranates, the illustrations recall the androgynes populating Qajar art, figures that are assumed to be enjoying uninhibited freedom due to their perceived sexual liberation. Such freedom is alluded to by the absence of adult male figures, although, occasionally, a male figure is locked in a loving, yet, not quite erotic embrace, often as an allusion or illustration to the “beloved” of Iranian Sufi poetry. In the original version of *Khatoon Pansy*, this is referenced through an excerpt of one of Hafiz’s *ghazals*. Graffitied in ornate calligraphy on the walls of *Khorshid Khanoom*’s presumed quarters is written “Your musk scented lock of hair swaying like a pansy/and your exhilarating laugh reminds me of a blossoming flower.”²⁶ *Khatoon Pansy* is not just a beholder of the precious blooms, but, is the embodiments of the beauty and the vernal joys of nature.

The heteronormative re-readings of Sufi poetry as noted earlier, the result of the gender and sexual projects of Iranian modernity, and work to naturalize and historicize Western notions of heterosexuality and cisgenderedness. The assumption that the beloved of Sufi poetry, is allegorical is rooted in the Qajar era’s acknowledgments and disavowal of queer desire and the *amrad*, as

“This assumption produced the drive to reconfigure Sufi male homoeroticism as ‘purely’ allegorical and transcendental—to be enjoyed metaphorically and not confused with the real, much as modern Islamists have argued that wine in that poetry stands for pleasure and ecstasy of communion with the divine.”(Najmabadi 2003, 56)

²⁶ Thanks for the translation Mom and Dad.



Fig.9. Zali, Mashid. *Khatoon Pansy*. 1993. Source: Fineartamerica.com

Despite Sufism being rooted in Islam, many secular and/or Islamophobic Iranians are invested in the erasure of Islam, or at least, the positioning of Islam as secondary to the ghazals and divans of Hafez and Rumi. Generalized as being too “gentle” and spiritual to be the result of Islam, Sufi imagery and poetry, often the mistranslation of Coleman Barks, is deployed to produce nostalgic affect for a land of walled gardens and song now lost due to the heavy censorship and threats of incarceration of the Islamic theocracy.

The erasure of Islam from Sufi poetry and the contemporary re-readings of *Khorshid Khanoom* allows the figure to be deployed in a way that evokes the “true” culture of Persian Iranians, a culture undemarcated by religion or racial identities. *Khorshid Khanoom* is read as not simply an Iranian figure, but, the embodiment of Iran and Iranian futurities, a symbol deployed to unify all Iranians through cultural homogenization. The conceptualization that a Qajar era *Khorshid Khanoom* embodies every body within the borders of Iran both erases the sexual, gender, and racial anxieties that have shaped the symbol, imbuing her with a meaning assumed to be unchanged by time and space. However, these anxieties circumscribe the ways that secularity and apoliticism are integral to contemporary Iranian identity. Rendering her as historically and unwaveringly apolitical and secular, is, by extension, reading her as non-Arab and non-Muslim, due to her association with Zoroastrianism and a pre-Islamic Aryan Iran, working to shape the past as a confirmation of contemporary biases.

According to Afsaneh Najmabadi, the reading of the image, and, its deployment as a symbol has changed throughout time, influenced by the political and cultural norms of the times. The genealogy of the symbol itself is murky, potentially rooted in either Pre-Islamic or central Asian Turkic culture, its significance reified by the sun’s symbolic power in multiple Islamic and Iranian visual and textual fields. (Najmabadi 2003, 65) Although *Khorshid Khanoom* is thought to belong only to Zoroastrianism, the symbol is an amalgamation of multiple cultural and religious symbols and meanings, ranging from

astrological symbols to Jewish wedding documents to Shi'a Islam, catalyzing its national popularity.

" This enormous "traffic in signs between different sites of representation" (Tickner 1988, 94) accounts for the lion-and-sun's unique success as the sign of modern Iranianness. It is hard to find any other modern icon of Iranianness that belongs to as many domains of signification and in which Zoroastrian, Jewish, Shi'ite, Turkish, and Persian symbols have been brought together—a condensation that has produced it as a most powerfully *national* emblem."(Najmabadi 65)

The sun, or *khorshid*, is associated with the Lion and sword, or, specifically, the zulfiqar, a legendary double bladed sword belonging to Ali ibn Abi Talib, a gift from the Prophet Mohammed. Although the emergence of the lion and sun as a national symbol, bedecking medals and flags, is rooted in Mohammad Shah Qajar's reign, the symbol has it's roots in the Safavid era, which ranged from 1501 to 1722, and, was when the twelver school of Shi'a Islam was established as the national religion of Iran. The Safavis, whose political and cultural power was rooted in the Zahediyyeh Sufi order, based in Gilan, Iran, attempted to legitimize their rule and shift the perception of themselves as extremist heretics, interwove religion and nationalism with mythology, rendering the shah as not only a political, but, a spiritual leader. According to Najmabadi,

"This double meaning was underwritten by the articulation of a genealogy of Iranian kings that combined mythohistories and tales such as Firdawsi's Shahnamah, Stories of Prophets, and other Islamic sources. This genealogy became the foundational mythohistory of modern Iranian nationalism. Two male figures were critical to this paternity: Jamshid (mythological king-founder of the ancient Persian kingdom), and 'Ali (Shi'ite first Imam), the first affiliated with the sun, the second with the lion (and Zu'l-faqar). As Babayan explains, the Safavi move from 'Anatolia toward Fars signaled both the Iranianization and Imamification of the empire' (Babayan 2003, 352)." (Najmabadi 2003,67)

This symbol of religion and state was inherited by the Qajars, who chose to obfuscate the Islamic meaning of the symbol, and, emphasize its connection with Iran's glorious

pre-Islamic past. (Najmabadi 2003, 70) This also marked a turn in representation of such a past from literary to visual texts as

“This early Qajar reorientation coincided with European archaeological surveys in Iran 70 / Part II from the early nineteenth century. The archaeological and cartographic results of these surveys provided an “earthly materiality” for the pre Islamic Persian politico-cultural affiliations that formerly were fashioned largely through poetry and prose”(Najmabadi 2003, 71)

The emphasis on the historical material object/symbol as claims to a pre-Islamic past would be echoed by Reza Shah Pahlavi in the mid-20th century, where such symbols reached an international audience, such as the use of the the Homa bird²⁷ as the logo for Iran Air.

The face of the sun, initially associated with male rulers, beginning specifically with Fath’ali Shah, eventually lost it’s significance of aristocracy, and, became a void into which new readings and meanings could be projected. Furthermore, the sun, who encapsulated an ungendered beauty that could be that of a woman or of an *amrad*, became specifically gendered as female and the accompanying lion, now an African lion holding aloft a sword, male. (Najmabadi 2003, 83) Eventually, in visual texts, the sun no longer had a human face, and the focus was on the masculinized lion, the shift in meaning coinciding with the heteronormatization and paternalism of the emerging modern Iranian nation state. “The masculinization of the emblem was particularly suitable for the emerging army-centered state of Riza Shah in the 1920s. If in the gendered construction of modernity the homeland was a female body, the military masculine was the protector

²⁷ I still think that using a giant mythological bird as a symbol for an airplane is the cutest thing ever and I’ll fight anyone who disagrees. I want an Iran Airlines t-shirt, or at least I’ll make one myself.

of the female homeland.” (Najmabadi 2003, 89) The erasure of the sun’s face, brought forth by royal decrees, was couched in an affective response of shame due to the acknowledgement and disavowal of queer desire and the abjection of the *amrad*.



Fig.10. A painted tile depicting the Lion and Sun located in Golestan Palace, a royal Qajar complex located in Tehran, Iran. Source: Wikimedia Commons

Yet *Khorshid Khanoom* is still circulated within high and popular Iranian culture as a beautiful and seductively coy woman, and, rather than being understood as a maternal figure, was rather, an erotic symbol. (Najmabadi 2003, 95)

This historical trajectory of meaning and readings of *Khorshid Khanoom* interrupts the common conception that *Khorshid Khanoom* is a pure, unadulterated and authentic symbol of Iran and its glorious pre-Islamic past. However, rather than claim that this

reading of *Khorshid Khanoom* as a secular yet Zoroastrian symbol as inauthentic this contemporary reading is productive, illuminating the anxieties of the Iranian diaspora. As such, the image of a protesting *Khorshid Khanoom* reappears on Saram's twitter account with the following caption "Dark day for us #resist #iranianamerican#muslimban #imnotmuslim."

Despite the modern and contemporary readings and rereadings of *Khorshid Khanoom* that are interwoven with Shia Islam, *Khorshid Khanoom* is deployed in order to indicate non-Muslimness, and, the "true" Iran. Although *Khorshid Khanoom* is being used in a

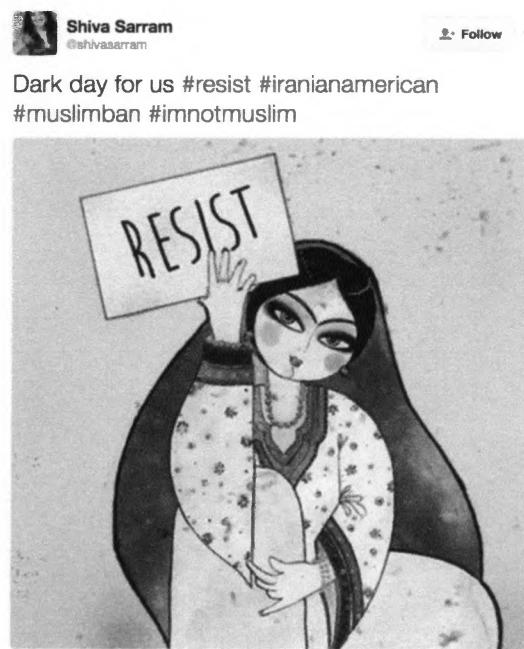


Fig.11. A screen capture of a tweet by Saram featuring *RESIST*. Source: Twitter
way to make space for non-Muslim Iranians, the trope falls within the diasporic struggle to separate Islam from the Iranian diaspora. Yet, *Kohrshid Khanoom*'s appearance as the

embodiment of a culturally and racially homogeneous Iran interwoven with the current reclaiming of the Muslim refugee and immigrants is an attempt to flesh out the invisible detained, or to be detained, bodies. If seeing constitutes the framework that defines both what is unknowable and knowable through a white Western lens, then, offering a preview of the unknown, informed by generalizations and affect, makes it tangible and thus, less fearsome.

TRUMP GOT ME LIKE MORE IRANIAN THAN EVER

In January 2017 Nasimeh Bahrayni Easton²⁸, an Oakland, California based visual artist, poet, and yoga teacher, posted two images to her instagram account, nasimehehe, during the first few days of the enactment of the Muslim ban. Both images were generally the same, consisting of a minimalist self-portrait of Bahrayni Eastwood wearing round sunglasses, a farvahar t-shirt and smoking a hookah pipe. Standing behind a ghalamkar bedecked table groaning under the weight of a ginormous plate of Chelow Kabab and a cup of dark *chai*²⁹ Bahrayni Easton's self-portrait aggressively clutches the current Iranian flag, instituted in 1980 after the Islamic Revolution, in the crook of her arm.

²⁸ "Nasimeh Bahrayni (or Nasimeh B.) is a writer, performer, artist, and yogi based in the California Bay Area. A native of Florida with Persian roots, she spent the years after receiving her B.A. in writing from Guilford College traveling and learning with two roaming sustainability education organizations. Currently, she lives in Oakland, where she frequently writes, creates, collaborates and performs at open mics and storytelling events, teaches yoga, and teaches youth." (Bahrayni Easton 2016)

²⁹ *Chai* served from a samovar comes in different intensities of flavor and caffination, accomplished through finding the right mixture of hot water and highly concentrated tea. Too dark and the tea is bitter

However, it is the *faravahar* that makes the image intriguing, as, it is the center of the image. Positioned directly upon Bahrayni Easton's body is being used as a way to signal that this is an Iranian image depicting an Iranian body, as well as to provoke an affective response of pride, by giving value to the body of the "other," positioning this specific body is then located within a cultural and potentially, biological genealogy of civilized Ancient Iranians who themselves struggled and triumphed over evil. The text of the image, "Trump got me like more Iranian than ever" is a response to the Muslim ban, where, instead of accepting the laws and assimilating into something less foreign and fearsom, they instead celebrate, and, experience an increase in pride for their identity.

Furthermore, the objects chosen by Bahrayni Easton, and, the trendy³⁰ appearance of the self portrait, are used to indicate an Iranian identity that rejects the trope of the monstrous terrorist, and presents Iranian identity as something exciting and desirable. These objects are cultural capital, indicative of being exotic and worldly rather than abject and bizarre. Bahrayni Easton is attempting to reclaim diasporic Iranian identity through the reclamation of the *faravahar*, perhaps as an allusion to past traumas faced by diasporic Iranians due to the Iranian Hostage Crises³¹ and 9/11. As a way to navigate and avoid racialized violence,

and makes you have panic attacks. Too light and it's bleak. I've only known two people who can make the perfect tea, my mom and my friend, Scheherazade Sekanjabin.

³⁰ Baby bangs, a 90's era chokers and round sunglasses are defacto cool right now in the Bay Area, especially in East Bay. I have all three. Sue me.

³¹ "The Iran hostage crisis was a diplomatic standoff between Iran and the United States. Fifty-two American diplomats and citizens were held hostage for 444 days from November 4, 1979, to January 20,



Fig.12. A screen shot of the first version of *Trump Got Me Like More Iranian Than Ever*. Source: Instagram

assimilation into American culture, the obfuscation of Iranian identity through the embracing of a white identity, and, the acknowledgement and disavowal of Islam, terrorism, and the Iranian theocracy were deployed by diasporic Iranians and their communities, both publically and privately a way to perform as good citizen subjects.

“ Iranians in Iran and elsewhere tend to identify with Whiteness as a result of the history of race formation and ethnicity politics back in Iran, particularly as developed under the Pahlavi regime until 1979. Those Iranians who immigrated to the United States in the late 1970s and onwards, meanwhile, have had this identification with Whiteness drilled into them as a result of the experiences of discrimination they have faced in this country since the 1979 Hostage Crisis.” (Shams 2013)

1981 after a group of Iranian students belonging to the Muslim Student Followers of the Imam's Line, who supported the Iranian Revolution, took over the U.S. Embassy in Tehran. It stands as the longest hostage crisis in recorded history.” (“Iranian Hostage Crises”)

Furthermore, identification of Iran as a tier of the Axis of Evil produced an affective response of shame within the diasporic Iranian community, dampening acknowledgments of Iranian pride, and, fueling public acknowledgments and disavowals of terrorism and Islam. Such shame shapes the public discourses of the Iranian diaspora, in which the assumed contingency to terrorism and the specter of radical Islam is disavowed through the rejection of the Iranian theocracy, thought to be indirectly supportive of various acts of violence in the United States and Middle East. An emphasis on the sameness between Iranians and Americans began to emerge as well, as model minority politics were used to justify not only their claim to living within the United States, but, their inclusion within the category of American.

“The complex legacies of race politics in the US and Iran as well as the very specific history of Iranian migration to the United States and discrimination against the Iranian-American community have combined to lead us directly into the model minority trap. While “Shahs of Sunset” and the “Persian palaces” of Beverly Hills are celebrated as emblems of Iranian success, the very real struggles faced by Iranians in this country are swept under the proverbial Persian carpet in an effort to give others and ourselves the most perfect, idealized image of Iranians possible.” (Shams 2013)

Distancing themselves from the trope of the backwards Oriental terrorist, Iranians culture was situated as either similar to or the progenitor of the positive aspects of modern American culture, reified by the use of pre-Islamic imagery, such as the *faravahar* and Cyrus Cylinder. Hyphens began to abound, and, American was added to Iranian in the names of organizations, magazines, and, personal identities. For example, NIPOC, or Network of Iranian Professionals at³² Orange County, changed the deployment of their identity politics, where the former “worth” of diasporic Iranians

³² Saying “at” instead of “from” is one of my favorite Pinglish, or, Persian English, things ever.

rooted in their cultural difference to was replaced by a worth measured through their sameness in identity and economic goals with white elite Americans, all while distancing themselves from other Middle Eastern and Muslim groups in the United States. (Alinejad and Ghorashi 2015, 66-68)

"This shift in identity politics meant less focus on the Iranian distinct cultural activities and more emphasis on the closeness of Iranian diaspora with Americans. This closeness with Americans meant strengthening already claiming boundaries with the Iranian Islamic regime, but also constructing new kind of boundaries such as the one with other Islamic communities in the U.S. (as it is mentioned in the quotation: Arabs).
(Alinejad and Ghorashi 2015, 66)

Such acknowledgment and disavowal often manifests in Iranians claiming that Arabs, specifically, Saudi Arabia is directly responsible for terrorism, as a way to decry not only the travel bans, but, the threats of wars and extreme trade sanctions placed on Iran in the name of preventing terrorism. A discursive logic that has emerged in the midst of the travel ban draws a deep distinction between Iranians and Arabs, claiming that since no Iranians have been directly involved in terrorism and Arabs have been, Iranians are being unfairly targeted. Furthermore, an emphasis on Iranian's professional, secular, and logical labor is contrasted as a stark and recognizable difference from the backwards Islamic fundamentalism that fuels Arabic terrorism.

This Iranian exceptionalism and affective shame manifests in the way the original post was read, as the original post and a reposting of the image onto the popular instagram account persianstagrams fielded an outpour of comments decrying the use of the current Iranian flag as inauthentically Iranian, alienating, or problematic posted on the original image. Fights broke out in the comment section of the original instagram post, however,

fragments of the conversation are missing either because some were presumably removed by Bahrayni Eastwood herself, or, commenters deleted their instagram account, erasing their comments. The comments left by Iranians, both in diaspora and residing within Iran manifests a multitude of readings of not only the image. The most common exchanges were expressions of outrage over the assumed incompatibility of the *faravahar* and the current Iranian flag, such as this exchange between Bahrayni Easton and Instagram user iranians_homeland:

iranians_homeland@nasimehehe , are you fucking kidding me a girl with farvahar necklace holding a bullshit Islamic flag , that not our true flag !!

nasimehehe@persia_homeland I made three different versions love, with the lion flag, this one, and a blank one. No need to get angry, you can choose whichever you'd like.

iranians_homeland@nasimehehe I've seen that before , and I'm not mad , I'm just trying to say we can be much more useful than who we think for our societies , with sharing a picture of fucking Islamic republic flag you're supporting their existing , that doesn't matter to you ? (Instagram 2017)

In response to these comments, and, due to her own stated preferences and identification, Bahrayni Easton created a version where the flag was that of the Lion and Sun, a symbol associated with both the Qajar and Pahlavi era. In the comment section of this post, there is this exchange between Bahrayni Easton and instagram user simon.isreali

simon.israeliI personally prefer this flag. It's more accurate anyway, God job with both work

nasimehehe@simon.astafiew yeah I do too. But now people can chooose (Instagram 2017)

Intending to placate those who were upset, this neoliberal logic of choice is a way to disavow what one does not like about Iran, allowing them to construct an Iran that is more pleasing and, unintentionally obfuscating the historical and political reasons why certain aspects of Iran are perceived as either abject or desirable.

However, another argument broke out in the comment sections after one user, iranianalliances, requested a version where the Iranian flag retained its colors, but had no symbol in the middle.



Fig.13. A screen shot of second version of Bahrayni-Easton's image. Source: Instagram

This inevitably drew rancor from many followers, most notably sayyadshirazi, whose comments were deleted, either because they terminated their account, or, it was deleted by Bahrayni Easton.

iranianalliances@sayyadshirazi 1) the Italian flag is sideways, like this: 2) it's a common request that a lot of Iranian student orgs and groups make to avoid the divisiveness of the flag in community/cultural events. 3) We read Persian, whether it's in the English or Persian alphabet. Let's be respectful. Khejalat bekesh.

iranianalliances@sayyadshirazi bro, this has been an argument for decades. It's a fact that many events have dissolved and groups split over the flag issue. We aren't invested in this battle over flags, we're invested in bringing the community together. If you want to change the narrative, create a forum in your community or write an op-ed to your community members. It's not us who can't come together over this and it certainly won't be us getting in the way of your efforts if you want to enlighten everyone.(Instagram 2017)

Later, Bahrayni Easton then deleted the first post, and, two weeks later reposted the original image as an advertisement for a fundraiser she was spearheading. On her etsy, high quality downloads of three versions of the image, featuring a blank flag, the current iranian flag, and, the sun and lion flag were available for six dollars, with twenty five percent of profits going towards the National Iranian American Council. Despite the stated availability of the image with the sun and lion flag, outrage over the proximity of the faravahar and the current Iranian flag was expressed, various individuals still claimed that the use of such a flag indicated political alignment and support for the Iranian theocracy.

The preference and reading of the Lion and sun Flag is unsurprising, due to its popularity in diasporic Iranian communities as a symbol of opposition to the current theocracy, and, as an embodiment of nostalgic affect rooted in a narrative of loss of homeland, in which the 1979 Islamic revolution is positioned as the same as the Muslim conquest of Persia in 651.



Fig.14. A screen shot of the reposting of the first version of the image. Source: Instagram

"Iranian communities in exile have embraced the emblem as a statement of opposition to the Islamic Republic. In fact, having been jettisoned from state artifacts, the lion-and-sun has captured a much larger commodified visual arena. In Los Angeles and other cities with large Iranian communities, Iranian flags, mugs, place mats, and other souvenirs carry the lion-and-sun emblem to an extent that far surpasses its display in the country itself during the years of monarchy. This mass appropriation has changed the lion and-sun from a sign of the state, of national might, into a fetish of national loss (Naficy 1993, 131–37)." (Najmabadi 2003, 87-88)

The flag is still used in Iran, most frequently during Ashura and by the People's Mojahedin Organization of Iran and monarchists. The Lion and Sun serves as a site of nostalgia for pre-Revolution Iran within the dominant visual culture of the Iranian diaspora for its connotations of Qajar aristocracy and Zoroastrianism that are often folded into the Aryan myth. According for Afsaneh Najmabadi,

"Joining the crown to the lion-and-sun on widely circulating objects, such as flags and coins, that simultaneously bore the name of the reigning monarch emphatically linked the royal genealogy of the Qajars to the ancient Persian monarchy. A single sign came to stand for Iran as a state, as a monarchy, and as a nation, providing all with a history going back to pre-Islamic times."(Najmabadi 2003, 82)

Although the sword bearing lion standing in front of a sun thought to be an ancient, unchanging symbol, according to Afsaneh Najmabadi, both the readings of the symbols and the composition of the image itself has changed over time. The sun originally had a face, meant to embody the ideal gender ambiguous Qajar aesthetics, as beauty in Qajar Iran was neither distinctly male, female, or that of an *amrad*. However, due to a political and cultural European presence in Iran and the gendered and sexualized projects of Iranian modernity, the concept of beauty was feminized in a way that affirmed binary genders, as in, only women could be read as beautiful. The Qajar era reshaping and modern reading of the sun's face as female is a way to trace the gender and sexual projects and logics of Iranian Nationalism in which the implementation of a Western gender binary, the naturalization of heteroerotic desire, and the rendering of men as inherently heterosexual were positioned as integral to Iranian Modernity.

However, by the early 20th century the face of the sun has been feminized due to the gendered and sexual projects of Iranian modernity, as the *amrad*'s physical and psychic presence as an object of queer desire, present in cultural productions such as poetry, was replaced by a proliferation of cultural productions featuring women in order to heterosexualize eros. (Najmbadi 2003, 36-37)

The deployment of the *faravahar* within the diasporic Iranian community follows a similar trajectory as the lion and sun, and, it is quite common to find both symbols in the same visual



Fig. 15. An illustration of the faravahar from Brockhaus and Efron Jewish Encyclopedia (1906—1913).
Source:Wikimedia Commons

text, or, contingent to each other. The *faravahar* itself, a Zoroastrian symbol, is a complex site of the creation of national identities and race formation, deeply intertwined with Iranian nationalism and modernity, both informed by the Aryan myth. Associated with ancient aristocracy, the ruins of Persepolis, and Persian ethnocentrism, the *faravahar* is one of the most reproduced pre-Islamic symbols in Iran and the Iranian diaspora and is found embossed, engraved, painted, and molded into various media in a multitude of spaces, ranging from pendant necklaces to phone book covers.

The use of archeological artifacts within Pahlavi era nationalist discourses and imagery is rooted in the rhetorics used to justify the presence of European forces within

Iran in the 1800s, and, both the Qajar and Pahlavi era's push for state formation and nation building. (Aghlani 2016) During the late 1950s and late 1970s, a boom in the excavation and study of Iran's pre-Islamic past was catalyzed by Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi's fixation on validating Iran's supposed Indo-Aryan lineage. This obsession with the Aryan myth, coupled with the desire to be seen as a bridge between ancient Vedic and Greco-Roman cultures, was based in Victorian era European philology and nationalism.

"Aryanism was one of the most influential of these ideologies, and it identified the Indo-European language tree (which includes Sanskrit, Persian, and most European languages) as proof of a migration of an imagined Aryan nation out of India, through Persia, and into Europe."(Rajaram 2014)

Aryanism was deployed by Victorian era Europeans who were attempting to understand their encounters in India and Iran. (Rajaram 2014) After reading both eugenicist and Orientalist texts, and, feeling shame in their portrayal, Qajar era politicians, academics, and aristocrats became convinced that the physical and psychic erasure of any trace of "Arabness" in was necessary to propel Iran to a modernity on par with Europe. (Bonakdarian 2005, 115-117) Inspired by nationalist ideologies taking hold in Europe and Turkey that were informed by colonial scholarship, the push for a singular national language was justified through the concept that ethnicity and language were intrinsically tied to one another and, determined the success of nation-states. (Shams 2012)

Such rhetorics justified the naturalization of Persian as the lingua franca, and, the perpetuation of a Persian centric historical narrative, as well as the erasure of non-Persians from Iranian culture. If Persians, especially, those storied and glorious ancient kings of the past were responsible for Europe's successes, then, modern Persians were

still in close proximity to Europeanness. Thus, multivalent deployment of the Aryan myth was intended to present Iran as homogenous racially and culturally in both the past and present, as, the erasure of non-Aryan Iranians was vital for modernity. According to Alex Shams, the assumed ancient Iranian culture celebrated by the *faravahar* is quite recent, as

“The Pahlavi regime’s definition of Iranianness finds its roots in the construction of an exclusivist Iranian identity in the 1920’s and 30’s. The increasingly centralized and authoritarian state of Reza Shah Pahlavi sought to eliminate linguistic and cultural diversity by crafting a narrative of Persian Iranian history that went back nearly 2500 years that was united by the determination of the Persian people.”(Shams 2012)

Thus, the anxieties of Iranian modernity were not just ones of sexuality and gender, but of race, place/location, and class. Ethnic minorities who lived in tribal nations or cultures resented the Pahlavi’s efforts to centralize the Iranian government, catalyze detribalization, disrupt class structures such as feudalism, and, promote an Iranian nationalist rhetoric centered on Persian ethnocentrism. (Mann 2015, 116)

The *faravahar*’s association with both the Qajar and Pahlavi era, and, a glorious pre-Islamic past led to its deployment by diasporic Iranians invested in Occidentalism and heteronormative and Persian centric Iranian nationalist rhetoric as a way to distance themselves from the terrorist threat of Islamic fundamentalists. Zoroastrianism is posed as a binary opposition to Islam; the gentle religion catalyzing a Persian golden era, cruelly snuffed out by Muslim Arabs, whose invasion brought about a period of cultural decline.(Vejdani 2015, 205) Within contemporary diasporic Iranian discourses, Zoroastrianism has taken on an almost New Age like spirituality, where the three tenets of good thoughts, good deeds, and good acts are centered as the most important aspect of the religion, rather than deities such as Angra Mainyu and Ahura Mazda. Zoroastrianism

is positioned as a dead and gone religion, waiting to be catalyzed in order to allow Iranians, diasporic and otherwise, to return to a democratic utopia.

The *faravahar* is positioned as the embodiment of the ideal Iran, and those who possess or recreate the symbol the ideal Iranian. To wear the *faravahar* can indicate the wearer's proximity to a Iranian identity that, despite their own affiliations³³, is circumscribed by Pahlavi and Qajar era Persian-centric nationalism. However, despite the assumed homogeneity of culture implied by the *faravahar*, there is a multiplicity of other claims to the symbol embedded in their own nexuses of hegemonies and nationalism. Different indigenous and tribal nations and communities both within and inside of contemporary Iranian borders, such as Kurdish peoples in Iraq, are reclaiming the symbol as their own for their own political and cultural reasons, such as a recent influx of conversions of Zoroastrians catalyzed by disillusionment with Islam due to attacks by ISIS upon Kurdistan.(Salloum 2016) The imposition of a singular understanding of the *faravahar* may potentially have been deployed by the Pahlavian government to both reify Aryanism as legitimate and unify the nation into a singular homogenous peoples. This does not mean that the reclamations of the symbols may not

³³ Perhaps one finds themselves in a privileged position within the nationalist rhetoric, or, has internalized the racialized and gendered rhetoric so that, despite their own marginalization, they too are invested in it. Or, one does not approve of the Islamic theocracy and wants to signal their dissent, or, wants to visibly distance themselves from Islam as a whole in a way that is easily legible for certain community members. Or perhaps, none of this applies, and, it is deployed simply a cultural symbol that indicates Iran and Iranian identity. As there are less than two hundred thousand practicing Zoroastrians worldwide, it is rare, but, it is possible that wearers of the symbol themselves practice the faith.

be rooted in similar homogenizing rhetorics and logics, but, they do interrupt contemporary Persian-centric claims to the symbol.

Bahrayni Easton's deployment of the *faravahar* is rooted in this genealogy, due to the use of the symbol as an embodiment of contemporary Iranian identities and their political and cultural struggle under the Trump administration. I am in no way suggesting that Bahrayni Easton is perpetuating Persian-centric nationalism on purpose. Rather the widespread availability of the symbol, and, its deployment and legibility as an indicator of "pure" and "authentic" Iranian identity is circumscribed by these assemblages of power. Through this lens, Bahrayni Easton's use of the *faravahar* as a manifestation of Iranian pride is implicated in the replication of Persian-centric nationalism, as, the image isn't necessarily providing an intervention. Rather, these objects and symbols and being reified as indicators of Iranian identity. For example, the text of the image suggests that the Trump administration's Muslim ban and anti-Iran rhetorics has caused the subject to embody an extremely Iranian identity, indicated by the *faravahar*, as an act of political resistance. Acts of physical body-based consumption, such as inhaling smoke from a hookah, drinking *chai*, wearing *faravahars* and eating Chelow Kabab are also posited as both indicative of ultimate Iranian identity and resistance³⁴.

³⁴ I do wish to push against the conceptualization that bodily consumption of substances is indicative of cultural identity and national belonging. Such reseasoning excluded individuals who are unable to physically consume certain things in the ways an able bodied person can. I have also known Iranians who have depended on feeding tubes placed directly into their stomachs, who do not have the ability to speak nor walk. Through these ableist discourses, these individuals are rendered as invisible and outside the legibility of citizenship and national belonging. For example, it suggests that my maternal grandmother gave up her Iranian citizenship and identity once she entered a thirteen year long coma. But perhaps, it is

However, it must be noted that these acts are not restricted to Iran or born exclusively of Iranian culture and are interwoven with other cultures and nation-states. Furthermore, the trajectory of cultural objects and practices from local to national are often, but not always interwoven with internal power structures and representability. For example, it should be noted that the type of Chelow Kebab featured in the image, koobideh kebab³⁵, is one of the widely known variations on the dish, which is primarily from the northern region of Iran and the Caucus. The emergence of this type of kebab can be traced to the Qajar era as the dish is unmentioned in various culinary texts from the tenth and sixteenth centuries as

“During his tour of Russia, Caucasus and European countries, Naser-e-Din Shah enjoyed three things: the elegant clothing of the Russian Kazak, the Saint Petersburg's and Muscovite ballerinas' pants³⁶, and finally Caucasian chelo-kabab which was different from Iranian kabab mainly prepared from chops of veal, mutton and hunted birds and grilled on skewers. The Caucasian chelo-kabab is what is now known as kabab barg, sultani and luleh or kubideh.”(Iran Chamber Society 2017)

It seems that even kebab and rice are inescapably interwoven with politics and nation formation. Even the tea and hookah are implicated as both sugar and tobacco are the product of transnational histories of the enslavement of Black bodies, the genocide and forced labor of Indigenous peoples, and the dehumanization of East Asians in North and South America, and, the Caribbean. It cannot go without mentioning that samovar originated from Russia, and, both the hookah and wood block printing technique for

indicative of the way ableism influences our thinkings about who is an animated and lively member of society.

³⁵ At the time of writing this section, I asked my partner to take me to mid-east market on san pablo to purchase both fresh and frozen kebab, which, I unfortunately cannot have with either rice or bread, so my kebab is always sans chelow.

³⁶ This inspired the prominent and most recognizable costumes of the Qajar era, which were ballet tutus worn over pants or leggings.

ghalamkar textiles depended on cultural exchanges between India and Iran. Rather than using generalizations of culture and exchange, it is more productive to think about how the conceptualization of “authentic” culture often depends on tropes of purity, originality, and, exclusivity. These objects are not more or less Iranian, but rather, trouble the ways Iranian identity is quantified and recognized, and, is an entry point into thinking about how national identity is formulated and reproduced.

Despite Bahrayni Easton’s attempt to unify the diasporic Iranian community by encapsulating it with seemingly universal cultural objects displayed in the image, her texts speak to a specific diasporic Iranian experience in which the anxieties of neoliberal citizenship are interwoven with Persian-centric Iranian pride. The objects chosen to be reclaimed are indicative of a diasporic Iranian experience where they are read as abject and undesirable within an American context due to its foreignness, and, in terms of the *faravahar*, as dangerous and repressed in the Iranian theocracy.

Both of Bahrayni Easton’s images which emphasize the physical embodiment of identity is rooted in a trope common within, but not necessarily originating from diasporic Iranian communities, in which the Iranian body is constructed as a kind of resistance against the Islamic theocracy. Engaging in behaviors that are assumed to be censored and heavily punished, such as uploading videos of public dancing to YouTube, being named after characters in the *Shahnameh*, and using pre-Islamic³⁷ visual texts in

³⁷ Certain bodily acts, such as queer relationships, rhinoplasty, and gender affirmation surgeries are also legible through this lens, but, produce a different kind of affect and trajectory within transnational politics.

any shape or form is positioned as rebellion against the Islamic Republic. Such acts are assumed to be embodiments of the ideal Iranian past, in which such acts were not only legal, but, the norm, thus, completely incompatible and oppositional to the current Islamic state.

Through this lens, Bahrayni Easton's visual text is a multivalent resistance, against both the Trump administration and the Islamic theocracy. Bahrayni Easton indicates Iranian identity through objects and symbols assumed to be secular, non-Islamic, and simply cultural yet positions them as resistance against the Trump administration's anti-Muslim rhetorics and politics. What makes this more complicated is the Pahlavi era use of the image as a way to promote anti-Islam/Arab rhetorics as a way to create a homogenous and secular Iran.

In terms of Bahrayni Easton's attempt to reclaim the *faravahar* and imbue it with diasporic Iranian pride, the *faravahar* is not an abject symbol in Iran or the diaspora due to its trajectory within Iranian modernity. However, although the *faravahar* can be read as dangerous and abject due to its otherness and association with Iran and thus an object ripe for reclamation, that danger is only tangential. Yet, the Iran represented by the *faravahar* is not the Iran that the United States threatens war against or bans from its borders. In many ways, the *faravahar* and the Pahlavi era flag represents the type of Iran that is ideal for and non-threatening to the contemporary American government, the pre-

Revolution Iran shaped by CIA backed coups³⁸ and British owned oil. Rather, it is the Islamic, post-revolutionary Iran, and, all the Orientalist and Occidentalist tropes produced by and about this specter, represented by the current flag in the first version of the image, that the United States government is created the Muslim ban for. Yet, neither image is genuine or disingenuous, but rather, illustrate some of the tensions of the tropes that circumscribe the legibility of diasporic Iranians, who grapple with the oppositional, yet, interrelated narratives of Persian-centric nationalism and tropes of the terrorist other.

CONCLUSION

Both of the visual texts discussed in this chapter, *RESIST* and *Trump Got Me Like More Iranian Than Ever*, were shared and disseminated on social media platforms that allowed for commenting. Although Bahrayni Easton's posts gathered a range of comments, from anger to thankfulness, the comments for the image *RESIST* had virtually no negative comments, instead accruing messages of support, appreciation of the use of *Khorshid Khanoom* and personal narratives about immigration from diasporic Iranians. However,

³⁸ My father's great uncle was one of the public figures, Shaban Jafari, or, Brainless Shaban, was bribed by the CIA and British to bring down Mossadegh. He was close with my grandfather, thus, would spend time at my father's house constantly. My father, who was a young child at the time, was an enamored fan of Mossadegh to the point he would sign his letters "Prime Minister Mohammad Sadegh Kazimarki" and dream of one day becoming a Prime minister himself, was completely devastated with his relatives role in the downfall of his childhood hero. Jafari is also related by marriage but not by blood, to my mother's family. There is a family story that, during a family get together my mild mannered and cool and a cucumber paternal grandfather lost his temper at Jafari over something political, and, somehow picked up the varzesh-e bastani practitioner who was many times his size and threw him down the stairs of his apartment.

it is these comments, especially the arguments that erupted in the comment section of Bahrayni Easton's posts that provide an interruption to the gross generalizations of diasporic Iranians as being culturally and politically homogenous, each invested in Persian-centric nationalism in equitable ways. Instead of positioning a certain type of comment as proof of difference and assigning it a type of qualitative value, I claim that the act of inter-community arguing itself is indicative of difference and transnational interweavings of power and hierarchy. Although the content of these comments can be problematic, they are still entry points into the interruption of stereotypes by illuminating uncomfortability of coalition within the diverse diasporic Iranian community.

In the reading of these images, the valuation of visual texts through a spectrum from apolitical to political emerges, and, the type of affect produced is contingent to this valuation. Images read as authentically Iranian are understood to be apolitical as they are assumed to be rooted in Ancient Persian produce an affect of nostalgia and pride, rooted not only in the political trajectory of the images, but, in the narratives of loss and return prevalent in diasporic Iranian visual and literary texts. As Najmabadi states, in her analysis of the popularity of the lion and sun in the Iranian diaspora,

“ ...Marilyn Ivy has argued for contemporary Japanese fetishization and reification of emblems of identity, ‘the process also reveals the presence of a wish: the wish to reanimate, not simply fix, the past at the moment of its apparent vanishing’(1995, 245). Lost at home, the lion-and-sun has been taken over for exilic citizenship.”(Najmabadi 2003, 88)

Yet, this longing for a homeland twice lost, to Arab invaders and to the Islamic republic produces not only an affect of melancholy and nostalgia, but, affective responses of anger and shame, illustrated by the repulsion shown towards the current Iranian flag.

Such deployments of affect through nostalgia and situating oneself as apart from the Islamic theocracy is a common trope in the cultural texts of the Iranian diaspora, that often focus on those who left Iran because of the 1979 Islamic Revolution, positioned as a shared tragic event. Visual texts that are assumed to represent the Iran that existed before the revolution. This affect does a certain work, as this shared tragic event and the subsequent nostalgic affect it produces is a way for Iranian subjects to legitimize their claims to land and space within a settler colonial nation through the rhetoric of being unable to return to the homeland due to the potential of political violence. This becomes apparent in the deployment of these visual texts and the affect they produce in order to protest the Trump administration's travel ban, where it is posited that Iranians must have a place to stay, and, deserve their place within the hostland.

These traumas and transnational anxieties inform the way that these historical objects are reread and recontextualized. Yet, although dependent on problematic mythologies, these readings are authentic in their own right, as they materialize sociological ghosts and nuanced, infinite interweaving of traumas. Perhaps, Avery Gordon's complex personhood is integral to interrogating the role of affect and the archive in the construction of the diasporic Iranians subject. Gordon uses the concept of complex personhood, a concept

that acknowledges the complicated nature of humans who exist within complex systems of power, to foreground her method of materializing ghosts.

Complex personhood calls for a reconfiguring of our understanding of structures of power, systematic violence, and, the people who perpetuate and are marginalized by them as things that are always recognizable and nameable. Even the haunting are haunted by the unknowable and the unspoken. This too destabilizes even my readings of these images, as, according to Gordon, even if not intentionally, our ways of knowing and knowledge productions are constantly in crisis due to their limitations when they attempt to capture the elusive and imaginary, or even the visible and knowable. Perhaps, the narratives of loss and return, of constantly navigating unstable time and place that is central to even the most abhorrent Aryan myth renditions of Iranian nationalism can be approached as a matter of the ghostly, rather than a static binary of Occidentalism and Orientalism, East and West. As Gordon states, “To study social life one must confront the ghostly aspects of it. This confrontation requires (or produces) a fundamental change in the way we know and make knowledge, in our mode of production.” (Gordon 1997, 7)

CHAPTER THREE

THE PAST EMBODYING THE PRESENT

Influenced by the works of American artist Cindy Sherman and Iranian artist Shadi Ghadrian, a trope that has risen amongst the cultural productions of diasporic Iranians is the insertion of one's contemporary self into Qajar images as a way to re-creating archives that are assumed to be lost or yet to be emerged. The interrogation of the creation and circulation of such visual texts as a way to protest the Trump administration's Muslim ban, such as Hushidar Mortezaei's art piece *We Are One*, is a potential way to trace the relationships and slippages between gender, sexuality, racialization, and imperialism by engaging with such negotiations of legibility by diasporic Iranian subjects whose intelligibility is bound by Orientalist tropes.

Although Edward Said's work on Orientalism both named and interrogated western imperialist power, Said's engagement with the gendering of imperialism and the gendering of orientalism is minimal. (Hasan 2005, 28) The complicated nature of the negotiation of legibility of Iranian diasporic subjects calls for Muñoz's disidentification as a tool of analysis in tandem with Said's Orientalism. Disidentification is defined as "...the ways in which identity is enacted by minority subjects who must work with/resist the conditions of (im)possibility that dominant culture generates...[they]must negotiate

between a fixed identity disposition and the socially encoded roles that are available for such subjects." (Muñoz 1999, 6)

Furthermore, this use of disidentification may work as an extension of Said's conceptualization of Orientalism which does not engage with diasporic communities and cultural productions. With cultural productions that work to interrupt Orientalism, one can engage with Orientalist tropes either by refusing to engage with them or by using them explicitly. Either response to this Orientalist hailing works to both reify these tropes by illuminating how they bind and define bodies. As Muñoz discussed in the call/response nature of disidentification, "The utmost precision is needed to rework that song, that story, that fiction, that mastering plot. It is needed to make a self -- to disidentify despite the ear-splitting hostility that the song first proposed for the singer. (Muñoz 1999, 21)

Regardless, neither of these acts erase the boundaries of Orientalist tropes as they still haunt the production. These interweavings become apparent when analyzing the ways in which diasporic Iranians create visual texts in which contemporary Iranians perform as embodiments of Qajar and pre-Islamic female bodies as ways to protest Orientalist rhetorics. I argue that the prominence of these texts in the current protests surrounding the Trump administration's Muslim Ban and Muslim Ban 2.0³⁹ are rooted in the

³⁹ Executive Order 13769, titled Protecting the Nation from Foreign Terrorist Entry into the United States, and, Executive Order 13773, titled Enforcing Federal Law with Respect to Transnational Criminal Organizations and Preventing International Trafficking. Known colloquially as the Muslim ban, and, Muslim Ban 2.0, restricts entry into the U.S. for refugees, lawful permanent residents, and non-U.S. dual

scopophilic fixation upon the veiled and hidden Oriental women. This manifests not only in contemporary Orientalist, Occidentalist, and homonationalist discourses, but seeps into the very visual texts used in an attempt to counter these deep rooted tropes. Although these visual texts attempt to interrupt tropes of oppressed and depressed women, the deployment of neoliberal human rights frameworks to justify and contextualize these images reinforces Orientalist stereotypes. By positioning the figure of the historic woman, who is assumed to have been unveiled, as oppositional to the veiled women, assumed to be oppressed, is a projection of contemporary anxieties onto the past. Relying upon elies upon gross generalizations of Irania, the creation of the authentic pre-Islamic Iranian woman subject implies that contemporary women are inauthentic. Furthermore, this binary assumes that the contemporary Iranian state is the same as it was in the past. This is amplified by the use of neoliberal human rights rhetorics, such as pleas that deploy concepts of Western human rights and humanity as a way to illuminate inequity. These specific concepts of the human, human nature, and liveliness were constructed to be in opposition to the lived experiences and sociological presences of colonized, exploited, and enslaved peoples. (Chen 2012, 16-20)

I wish to trouble the use of bodies as ways to represent the whole of non-Western communities. Rather than suggest a “better” and more “authentic” body to represent communities and nation-states, I am more interested in how certain bodies are positioned

nationals from Iran, Iraq, Libya, Somalia, Sudan, Syria, and Yemen. However, it must be note that the second iteration of the ban no longer prohibits the travel of Iraqis. (Ajam Media Collective 2017)

as authentic representations, and, the ways in which they are used to propel political action, or, as embodiments of previous and potential actions. The use of physical bodies, especially bodies read as female, to serve as a symbol for a nation-state is not unusual or exclusive to Iran or the Iranian diaspora. I am more interested in the affective work that visual texts depicting contemporary embodiments Qajar and pre-Islamic women do, especially within claiming citizenship and rights. I am also interested in the ways these images are reclaimed and what logics are used to justify the protests against the Trump administration, and, how the reading of these images as reclaimable or otherwise illuminate the positionality of those invested in rereading and reusing these visual texts. These contemporary performances of Qajar and pre-Islamic bodies are claims to worth, circumscribing not only the performers and producers of the texts, but, the populations associated with the text. The bodies performing as these images, and those populations circumscribed by these texts, are ascribed value as, they are no longer ordinary abject bodies, but, ones with some value due to their assumed cultural and biological ancestry, a genealogy positioned as superior due to the Persian-centric Aryan myth.

What emerges in these embodiments is the positioning of the autobiographical and of the physical body as a kind of radical truth that undermines the dominant narratives and stereotypes about bodies and nation-states. This is rooted in understandings of the body and the experiences of the body, such as deeply felt affective responses, as natural and inherent, rather than something socialized and learned. However, this understanding of lived experiences and the body often essentializes and romanticizes third world and non-

Western bodies as unsullied native informers who are totally oppressed. Such readings erase both the diasporic Iranian subject's ability to negotiate power due to both their privileges and oppressions, reifying the power structures and hegemonies of non-Western countries, obfuscating the interweaving of racial, gendered, class, and sexualized violences.

Furthermore, the positioning of certain bodies and lived experiences as the epitome of the diasporic Iranian experience depends on the obfuscation, if not total erasure, of others. I argue that diasporic Iranians seem to seek a unified symbolism and a homogenous diasporic population due to the extreme differences within communities inside and outside of Iran. What makes this attempt of symbolism intriguing is the use of the feminine Qajar and pre-Islamic body as an embodiment of contemporary anxiety and identity politics. The merging of the autobiographical and the feminine body as alternative truths and knowledges has its roots in the interweavings of both Iranian and Western written and visual texts that fixate on the bodies of Oriental women as ways to justify colonial presences and reify the status of white Western women. This is especially relevant to both Persian and minority Iranian women, whose assumed lived experiences were used by Western academics, travelers, and artists to define not only the depravity of the Orient, but, the civilized West. However, elite Iranian women, who benefitted from their racial and or class identities also perpetuated the tropes of the oppressed Iranian woman, often imagined to be an impoverished, and often tribal racial minorities as a way

to claim space as good subjects within the projects and logics of Iranian modernity. For example,

“Privileged Iranian women in the nineteenth century … participated in the discursive subjugation of their working-class Persian counterparts. By positioning the Persian woman as the embodiment of oppressed womanhood, Western and elite Iranian women represented themselves as epitomical of modernity and progress. “(Naghibi 2007, p. xvii)

This historical anxiety around women, and, feminine bodies read as women carried into the 1990s, when an explosion of written and visual texts, often autobiographical and focusing on diasporic experiences, emerged from first and second generation Iranians living in the West. The cockroach infested Tehran of Betty Mahmoody’s book *Not Without My Daughter*, published in 1987, was now being voraciously supplanted by longings for a sepia toned and jasmine scented lost world, now veiled behind harsh black *chadors*. Simultaneously, the use of the term “diaspora” as opposed to “immigrant” by academics and Iranian community members gained cultural cache through virtual spaces, although scholars had been using the term “diaspora” to refer to Iranians living abroad since the 1980s. (Malek 2015, 26)

Such autobiographical embodiments are integral to the production and consumption of these visual texts as they set a precedent for the legibility of diasporic Iranians and their cultural productions. As such, contemporary embodiments of Qajar and pre-Islamic bodies are being deployed as sites of resistance against the Trump administration’s Muslim bans. I argue that these sites are extremely complicated entanglements of historic and modern transnational interweaving of race, class, gender, sexuality, citizenship, and national belonging that complicate our understandings of resistance and

political action. Furthermore, the ahistorical approach to archival images indicates the ways in which contemporary individuals understand themselves and their relation to the past. What makes the specific political deployment of these images so intriguing is the specific reading that these images, based in Pahlavi era Persian-centric nationalism, as apolitical, irreligious, and, contingent to a pre-Islamic Iran, and thus, authentic. Rooted in the Pahlavi era's logics and projects of Persian-centric Iranian nationalism, an attempt to centralize and consolidate power, and, in disavowals of the Islamic state

“...many diaspora groups today continue to valorize an ancient Persian past as evidence of a valuable Iranian American culture in the present and thereby diminish connections to the current regime and events that followed the 1979 revolution. These selective processes reflect the extent to which both Iranian and American representations have worked to erase contemporary Iranian history in the public sphere, albeit with different motivations and intended consequences.” (Malek 2011, 392)

Images and symbols that hearken to a Zoroastrian and non-Arab past is imagined as “...the embodiment of “true” Persian culture and reminding the Iranian diaspora that this object purportedly bears witness to a democratic and tolerant past.” (Baghoolizadeh 2013) Pre-Islamic and Qajar era visual texts have a specific reading within the Iranian diaspora, where they are deployed as “a statement of opposition to the Islamic Republic”(Najmabadi 2003, 87-88) due to the inferred censorship of these images by the Islamic republic. This assumption of these visual texts incompatibility with the Islamic state is commodified through their replication onto objects and spaces, into a “fetish of national loss” (Naficy 1993, 131-37) Thus, these images could be read as not just a protest of the Trump administration, but a rejection of the Islamic theocracy, whose anti-American rhetorics results in innocent Iranians being banned from entering the United

States. The specter of the terrorist emerges in these discourses through the disavowal of terrorism by claiming that, of all the terrorist acts committed in the United States, none of them were perpetrated by Iranians. However, this anxiety is due to the stereotype that all Middle Easterners are the same, and, that every one is a potential terrorist, their inherent violence hailed by Islam. By attempting to differentiate themselves by embodying their more worthy and non-Islamic past, Iranians distance themselves from both the specter of the terrorist, but, from the Middle East as a whole. The use of these images in order to claim human rights for Iranians and to serve as politicized symbols of deserving subjects complicates the general reading of these visual texts as secular cultural artifacts. Perhaps, the re-reading of these embodiments are indicative of changing discourses around identity and citizenship by Iranians in the United States.

Through this lens I will be examining a comparison of Shepard Fairey's image of a Hijab wearing woman from his *We the People* and how Hushidar Mortezaei's art piece *We Are One* is positioned as a response to the original image. Due to Mortezaei's investment in challenging Orientalist and Occidentalist visual texts through his art work, I will be using the text as a way to interrogate the limitations and possibilities of a queer Iranian diaspora as being able to interrupt Persian-centric Iranian nationalism. Although Mortezaie work is invested in critiquing neoliberalism and Iranian nationalism by through pointed replications and recreations, I posit that these subtleties are obfuscated by the coverage of the image by Ajam Media Collective. As Mortezaei's images features

a contemporary Afghani women posing as Qajari woman, and, I consider the implications of contemporary bodies working to embody those of the past, real or imaginary.

I will also interrogate two social media posts from two websites, Ajam Media Collective and Reorient Magazine, that were intended to celebrate International Women's Day on March 8th, 2017. Reorient magazine, which was founded by Joobin Bekhrad in 2012, is an arts and cultures magazine that, when engaging with transnational politics, does so through art critique. Ajam Media Collective, which began on a wordpress site in 2011, functions both as an arts and culture magazine as well as a news source. Both websites feature mixtapes, collaborations with artists, podcasts, and, ongoing art and archival projects. Despite the similarities, both websites have different mission statements, as, Reorient claims to be "non-religious, non-political, non-partisan, and non-ideological" (Reorient 2012) while Ajam Media Collective is political. This is alluded to in both website's names, as Reorient indicates a new perspective and, Ajam is a reclamation of an Arabic pejorative for "others," specifically, Persians, and deploys otherness as a way to reimagine "monolithic definitions of cultures, people, and civilizations." (Ajam Media Collective 2013)

As an act of resistance against the Trump administration various organizations have called for mass protests, the logics and rhetorics often centering the feminism and bodies of white heterosexual cisgender women, in major cities across the United States in order to reject the Trump administration's perceived violation of women's rights. Although Reorient Magazine did not post any political articles related to the protests and Ajam

Media Collective did, both websites posted lighthearted content in order to signify their alignment with the protests. Ajam Media Collective's post features an image from Shadi Ghadrian's *Qajar Series* while Reorient Magazine features an article from slavorium.org illustrated with a watercolor painting entitled *Achaemenid Unit of Persian Female Warriors*, an image taken from persepolis.nu, a nationalist Iranian website. Both images deploy these visual texts as ways to claim that contemporary Iranian women are the direct cultural and or biological descendants of these "strong women," thus, they will ultimately triumph over the Trump administration's hatred of women. In my conclusion, I posit that interrogating the limitations of contemporary bodies embodying past bodies illuminates the way we understand Middle Eastern bodies and nation states throughout time and place. By positioning the struggles and resistance of Middle eastern subjects as comparable and compatible despite or in spite of the differences of temporal and spatial location, this attempt to evoke affect through ancestry and genealogy humanizes through romanticization. Furthermore, specifically for the Iranian diaspora, evoking affect through embodiment of past bodies is loaded, given the centering of the Aryan myth in the logics and projects of Iranian modernity and Persian-centric Nationalism.

SHEPARD FAIREY AND HUSHIDAR MORTEZAIE

In January of 2017, Shepard Fairey released a series of five images of Black, Chicanx, and Indigenous women to be used in protest of the inauguration of Donald Trump.

Fairey, the founder and illustrator of OBEY, is most notable for their 2008 poster of Barack Obama entitled “Hope,” which was widely distributed and emulated during and after the 2008 presidential campaign. Fairey’s street art is known for its confident minimalist lines, owing to its use as street art which demands a style that can be easily replicated and distributed through printing, copying, rendering into stickers, and stenciling with spray paint.

Of the five images in the series, the one that received the most criticism and praise was of a Muslim woman wearing an American flag as a hijab. Based on a photograph taken by Ridwan Adhami,⁴⁰ in 2007 of Munira Ahmed⁴¹ wearing an American flag as a hijab at the World Trade Center site in New York, the image has been criticised as inauthentic and problematic, as Ahmed, who is Muslim, does not regularly wear the hijab. Furthermore, compared to the other images rendered into posters by Fairey, the portrait of Ahmed is the only one that explicitly deploys the American flag, implicating that Muslim women, or, women circumscribed by the trope of the “Muslim woman” are constantly having to prove the legitimacy of their citizenship as they are perpetual “others.” However, it must be noted that Ahmed’s portrait is not the only one that featured political symbols, as t-shirts emblazoned with the Mexican flag and⁴² slogans

⁴⁰ A Syrian photographer who was raised in Queens, New York.

⁴¹ A Bangladeshi freelancer who was also raised in Queens, New York.

⁴² Mexico itself is a settler colonial nation-state with its own issues of anti-Indigeneity, anti-Blackness, and, white supremacy. Mexico has the most border patrol stops of any nation in the world, intended to prohibit the migration of peoples, often Indigenous, from the rest of Central America into its, and, by extension, America’s borders.

against the Dakota Access Pipeline⁴³ are visible. Although, these symbols and rhetorics have their own complicated histories of settler colonialism, gender, race, and sexuality, they are often read as universal



Fig.16. Fairey, Shepard. *Greater Than Fear* from the *We The People* Series. 2017. Source: Obey Giant emblazoned with the Mexican flag and ⁴⁴ slogans against the Dakota Access Pipeline⁴⁵

⁴³ Sovereignty and Pan-Indian Identity/Politics has its own issues, ranging from blood quantum laws excluding those who are Black and Indigenous to deploying homonormative rhetorics as ways to gain legitimacy as sovereign nations. Furthermore, a lot of the rhetorics used to frame the protests of the pipeline often deployed tropes of Indigenous peoples being part of nature, all Indigenous cultures are the same and assumed to be that of Plains Indians, and it is assumed that they all live on reservations/not in homes in Bismarck, Illinois, and, so on.

are visible. Although, these symbols and rhetorics have their own complicated histories of settler colonialism, gender, race, and sexuality, they are often read as universal symbols of the struggles of the utter abject third-world and Indigenous, erasing the nuances of power inherent to the visual texts.

The positing of the image as an inauthentic representation of the Muslim and Middle Eastern experience has been used by many Iranians as a way to reject the use of the image in the physical and virtual protests of the Muslim ban. When contextualized, the rejection of the image, and, the replacing of that visual text with others that seem more appropriate reveals the anxieties around the legibility of diasporic Iranians subjects. Rather than attempting to replace one image with the other, tracing the fluctuating readings of the images as inauthentic or authentic is more productive. Although the critiques of Fairey's image often focus on the adulation of the text by white American liberals, they rarely mention the Black and brown women and femme identified people who identify with the image and the affect it produces. Although feeling a connection to the image does not erase its implications, I believe a more nuanced interrogation of

⁴⁴ Mexico itself is a settler colonial nation-state with its own issues of anti-Indigeneity, anti-Blackness, and, white supremacy. Mexico has the most border patrol stops of any nation in the world, intended to prohibit the migration of peoples, often Indigenous, from the rest of Central America into its, and, by extension, America's borders.

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identifications and disidentifications with this visual text is necessary as a way to trouble the expectations of third world bodies and subjectivities.

Furthermore, the draping the American flag on a Muslim South Asian woman at the World Trade Center site by a Middle Eastern and male-identified photographer could be a deeply nuanced manifestation of contemporary and historical traumas. If the original image is an attempt to claim Americanness and citizenship and is produced by two diasporic subjects, potentially out of or connected to post-9/11 trauma, this is complicated further by the co-option of the image by a prominent white artist is attempting to prove that Muslims/those read as Muslim “others” are in fact, American citizens.

The call for the rejection of non-authentic texts, and, the embrace of authentic diasporic cultural and knowledge productions reifies the binary of East and West. However, by deeming a text problematic than demonizing and abandoning it inhibits certain kinds of interrogations that can be extremely productive. As Darznik posits that, although texts deemed as problematic and precarious, their issues are rooted in historical genealogies of imperialism and state formation. According to Darznik, these articulations of diasporic Iranian identities and lived experiences ask “What is the place of Middle Eastern women in contemporary western society?” (Darznik 2008, 70) Although Darznik’s analysis does not account for the different experiences of Iranian women due to race, class, and sexuality, Darznik does speak to the overwhelming tropes and stereotypes that circumscribe the legibility of female and femme identified Middle Eastern bodies. Furthermore, these tropes can be replicated in one’s readings of one’s

self, despite one's intentions. I argue that erasing genealogies and hiding away problematics renders knowledge timeless and spaceless, an amorphous thing inhabiting a vacuum.

Thus, it is integral to avoid perpetuating a binary of authentic and inauthentic in the reading of Fairey and Mortezaei visual texts. It is more productive to approach these images as complicated sites that do certain work, from perpetuating the legitimacy of neoliberal citizenship to justifying wars, the effects of which are unfathomable and beyond the binary of good versus bad. This is not to excuse the actual damage that these visual and written texts have upon actual lives, but rather, a push to reconsider the act of reading visual texts. Dominant forms of knowledge and knowledge acquisition are not an unbiased just-so-story, but a culmination of erasure, distortion, things obscured and misunderstood by lens and frameworks, and limitations that are both physically and psychically real.

Through this lens, Hushidar Robot Mortezaie's poster *We Are One* and the media coverage it received becomes even more intriguing. An article written by Alex Shams and published on International Woman's Day entitled "On Women's Day, Thinking Beyond American Flag Hijabs" positions *We Are One* as a direct and timely response to *We The People*. (Shams 2017) The image, a portrait of an Afghani woman who bears a resemblance to the late actress, Audrey Hepburn⁴⁶, is dressed in Qajar era style veil, is

⁴⁶ Mortezaei is a fan of the late actress, and, cites her and her films, introduced to him by his mother, as an integral aspect of his childhood and aesthetics.

superimposed upon a background of the word peace written in multiple languages, and, fighter jets reminiscent of the opening credits of the 1986 film *Bashu, The Little Stranger*. Although the poster is positioned as a direct response to Fairey's *We The People* series, the *We Are One* was originally a design for Trash & Luxury, a line of graphic t-shirts that was based in Los Angeles from the years 2007 to 2011.

This image is often repurposed and re-printed by Mortezaei onto a multiplicity of surfaces, textures, and textiles, both to create an archival genealogy of the image, and, to reiterate the meaning and purpose of the image. The reprinting also serves Mortezaei's overall aesthetic, as, their work is invested in interrogating the reproduction of images, official and bootleg, and how they transmit knowledge between Iran and the West. Mortezaei emulates the aesthetics of unlicensed reproduction of images, especially Iranian bootlegs of Western media and Western Orientalist kitsch. Mortezaei also deploys the aesthetics of diasporic Iranian sites of commerce, such as the grand and gaudy supermarkets of Southern California, as well as the Pahlavi era's Francophile pop culture, such as Chic gum, which still enjoys extreme popularity in Iran.

Poor quality bootlegs made, or at least enjoyed, in earnest are a direct influence upon Mortezaei's work as the off-colors, blurry printing, and inclusion of non-canon characters or scenery creates a dreamily surreal quality. Bootlegs often take liberties with the overall aesthetics of the original image, either because they are contraband, inaccessible, or, are popular to the point of infinite copies being made, as through their attempts to evade copyright infringement. This is apparent in the bricolage of text,

pattern and images in *We Are One*, and, the multiple unstandardized printings of the image, turning it into a bootleg of its own right.

As Mortezaei is invested in directly engaging with Orientalist and Occidentalist stereotypes and cultural texts, the image itself engages with multiple tropes of Oriental women in order to critique them. The medium of wearable textiles is symbolic of “wearing stereotypes like a suit of armor.” (Bekhrad and Mortezaei 2016) The multivalent identifications and disidentifications within the image is complicated to the point of near untraceability. The model for the image, surely one of Mortezaei’s personal friends, although Afghani, is embodying both the Orientalist tropes and the lived reality of past and contemporary Iranian women through the donning of an antique veil. The figure of the Iranian woman is inextricable from contemporary Western understandings of veiled women are, as

“While images of veiled women have become ubiquitous in the wake of 9/11 and are part of a much longer history of Orientalist art and literature in the West, veiling as a predominant way of “reading” modern-day Middle Eastern women surged with media coverage surrounding the 1979 Iranian Revolution and the 1979-1981 Hostage Crisis.” (Darznik 2008, 57)

Perhaps Mortezaei is also pushing for a different understanding of the boundaries and borders of modern Middle Eastern nation-states through a critique of the British Empire. To have an Afghani woman who strongly resembles Hepburn, a Belgian born actress who came to encapsulate British aristocracy and elite white femininity, calls into question legacies of British influence upon the politics and culture of Iran. After all, multiple wars

with the British led to the division between Iran and Afghanistan, and, the British control of the latter nation during the Qajar era.

Furthermore, although Mortezaei's work provides many important interventions into Orientalism and Occidentalism, it too has its own limitations. For example, the deployment of neoliberal human rights rhetorics, the titular "we are one" as a way to evoke sympathetic affect erases the material and discursive violences that ensure that all people are not one. For example, in an interview with Ajam Media Collective, Hushidar intends for the contemporary image to be the embodiment of all Middle Eastern women throughout time and history. According to Alex Shams and Mortezaei, the poster "... does not shy away from the reality of war in modern American history; instead, it embraces that history, highlighting the strength and resilience of women across the Middle East in the face of decades of American and Western invasion, bombing, sanctions, and Islamophobia." (Shams 2017)

By having a contemporary Afghani woman embody the real and imagined struggles and resistance of Middle Eastern women throughout time essentializes their experiences as one and the same, of trauma due solely to Western imperialism. Mortezei's positioning of the Middle Eastern woman as the ultimate key to quashing patriarchal violence by both engendering and embodying an alternate modernity, has its implications. To position bodies in this matter in a way, humanizes them through romanticization and essentialization.



Fig.17. A screen capture of Mortezaei protesting with a sign bedecked with his print We Are One at Civic Center Plaza in San Francisco, California. Source: Facebook

This essentialization assumes that not only are past and present women one and the same, but, every Middle Eastern country was colonized, or, had an imperial presence along a similar trajectory. To deploy an Occidentalist trope, that is, of the West being a singular and monolithic entity reinforces similar Orientalist tropes, erasing the multiple and heterotopic systems of power within the boundaries of East and West. Furthermore, the erasure of difference in order to build unity centered around a universal humanity is problematic as, according Chandra Mohanty in her critique of white Western feminism's universal sisterhood,

“What is problematic about this kind of use of ‘women’ as a group, as a stable category of analysis is that it assumes an ahistorical, universal unity between women based on a generalized notion of their

subordination. Instead of analytically demonstrating the production of women as socioeconomic political groups within particular local contexts, this analytical move limits the definition of the female subject to gender identity, completely bypassing social class and ethnic identities."(Mohanty 1984, 31)

However, despite these limitations, the image itself is productive and intriguing, especially, as it was originally intended to be printed on a high end designer t-shirt. Mortezaei's fashion line, Trash & Luxury became quite popular when still in production, wooing fashion critics and picked up by major fashion retailers such as Nordstrom. *We Are One* was one of the few shirts created by Mortezaei to explicitly depict Middle Eastern themes and bodies, rather than the 1950's and 60's era white Western fashion magazines and models that were more prevalent in their designs. The image itself is a critique of the necropolitics and biopolitics deployed through colonialism and Western imperialism, violences that still affect the contemporary Middle East. The reverberations of these past violences shape the contemporary ones, from the rhetorics and logics of anti-terrorism, to, the reasons cited for terrorist attacks.

What would it mean then, for Mortezaei's customers who are specifically positioned as elite within the hegemonies of the United States to be wearing a shirt that, although assumed to be a plea for peace out of love and rhetorics of American exceptionalism, is instead a half-truce forged by exhaustion from centuries of war, violence, and death? Perhaps, if the wearers of the shirt were white Americans they would be essentially implicating themselves as the perpetrators ad benefactors of the Middle Eastern women's struggles. They then become an embodiment of pain. If the wearers were Middle Eastern,

they then would be hailed both as a resilient survivor of the violence embodied by the shirt, and, as a third world body circumscribed by Orientalist tropes.

What is lost in the current coverage of the image and its comparison to Fairey's image is the temporal and spatial realities of the production of the original image. Previous to the engendering of the line Trash & Luxury, Mortezaei and his partner⁴⁷ Michael Sears had operated many fashion enterprises in New York, most notably, the fashion labels Sears and Robot⁴⁸ and Michael and Hushi. There, Mortezaei created "...outlandish, psychedelic, robot-chic clothing and was getting the coolest of the East Village cool kids to wear his strategically slashed and torn Farsi-graffitied shirts, though none of them had any idea that in some cases they were bearing post-Iranian Revolution political slogans." (Khakpour 2010)

However, after September 11th, 2001, Mortezaei's engagement with art and the ways in which it shapes physical space changed, resulting in a different approach to Iranian cultural texts. From this arose the genesis of the *We Are One* image, created in part due to Mortezaei's lived experiences, and, as an act of resistance in an era shaped by violence against individuals who were read as Middle Eastern and Muslim, America's wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, threats of war with Iran, and, fear of terrorist attacks. Thus, Mortezaei image speaks to a specific political climate that lead to the engendering of

⁴⁷ Some articles and personal posts indicate that Sears was Mortezaei's life and business partner, others make it seem as if they were just business partners. Because of taarof and the general fact that I am awkward, I have been unable to directly ask Mortezaei on even a personal level, and rather, would like to position Mortezaei as a slippery and queer subject without it being dependant on their sexual and gender identity.

⁴⁸ Like Sears and Roebuck, get it?

Fairey's image. Rather than a response, it is in fact a part of the genealogy of *We The People*.

By positioning Mortezaei's image as a direct response to Fairey's image, the complicated context of the original image is lost, rendering Mortezaei and their image out of time and place. Although Mortezaei's legibility as a subject is circumscribed by Orientalist tropes, their positionality as an upper-middle class Iranian artist raised in Marin who possesses a queer femme sensibility has quietly influenced a vast swath of American pop culture does not conform to the expectations of non-Western brown bodies. In this context, Mortezaei is not a good subject, but rather, a slippery, unfathomable subject. Perhaps this embodiment of a Qajar woman by a contemporary Afghani woman gives insight into the complex assemblages that make up the dominant discourses of both elite and marginalized diasporic Iranian communities where being invested in the logics of both Iranian and American exceptionalism is a way to perform as a good minority subject. Attempting to gain legibility through disidentifications, such investments work to separate the diasporic community as a whole from the specter of the lurking terrorist and the archaic backwardness of Iran that is aching to go to war with America. The question then is, what is and at stake when certain individuals and communities presenting and consuming Iranian identity that is legible in a certain way in order to do certain political work?

INTERNATIONAL WOMAN'S DAY

These stakes become visible in the attempts to build coalition within and outside of diasporic Iranian communities through the sharing of visual texts. This becomes apparent when interrogating the social media posts shared by Ajam Media collective and Reorient Magazine in honor of International Woman's Day. In comparison to previous years, the observation of International Women's day was embraced with a fervor unlike the previous year, where mass protests were helped as acts of resistance against the Trump's administration. In observation of the day, Ajam Media Collective posted a few political articles related to International Woman's Day, including the article that positioned Hushidar Mortezaei's *We Are One* poster against Shepard Fairey's *We the People Series*. Although Reorient Magazine did not post any political articles related to the protests, both websites posted lighthearted content on their Facebook pages in order to signify their alignment with the protests. Ajam Media Collective's post features an image from Shadi Ghadirian's *Qajar Series* while Reorient Magazine features an article from slavorium.org illustrated with a watercolor painting entitled *Achaemenid Unit of Persian Female Warriors*, an image taken from persepolis.nu, a nationalist Iranian website. Despite the differences, both social media websites deployed visual texts that intended to serve as embodiments of contemporary diasporic Iranian women's struggles in America.

The images chosen by both websites are quite popular within the virtual and physical spaces of the Iranian diaspora. Nationalist paintings depicting beautiful, heroic, and free pre-Islamic Iranian women are everywhere both in Iran, and, in the Iranian diaspora,

existing not only as images on walls, but plastered onto murals, advertisements, books, food packaging, websites, magazines, and, in Italy, on the back of semi-trucks. Shadi Ghadirian's *Qajar Series* is quite popular in the Iranian diaspora, appearing in virtual and physical spaces as both objects of art and political commentary. By using visual texts that are easily identifiable by many members of the Iranian diaspora, the texts intend to unify all Iranians who are assumed to identify with the image. Yet, this conceptualization of Iranian women obfuscates those who do not fall within these boundaries of legibility. Furthermore, both images are entrenched in sticky and nuanced entanglements of Persian-centric Iranian modernity and Western imperialism, the Qajar being an era in which modern Iranian state formation was catalyzed, and, the pre-Islamic the logic deployed in order to justify the logics and projects of Iranian modernity. Both websites deploy these visual texts as ways to claim that contemporary Iranian women are the direct cultural and or biological descendants of these strong and resilient women, and, like their foremothers, they will ultimately triumph over evil. Although the idea of ancestry produces a comforting and inspiring affect, these essentialisms about genealogy, either cultural or blood inheritance, are rooted in the racial, gender, and, sexual anxieties of Iranian modernity, which was informed in part by Western scientific racism. Thus, despite the positioning of both websites as alternatives to the dominant discourses of the Iranian diaspora, the deployment of these images and the affect they produce is part of a broader genealogy of visual texts and subject formation, as

“..for many Iranian diaspora organizations in the United States, putting forward a public identity that is positive and explicitly counter to the representations of Iranians in various American media has been an urgent goal. These public efforts have been theorized by Halleh Ghorashi as creating a transnational identity that distances diaspora members from the current Iranian homeland by focusing on ancient, pre-Islamic Iranian history, culture, and traditions.” (Malek 2011, 392)

Ajam Media Collective’s post features an image from Shadi Ghadirian’s *Qajar Series*, “Untitled,” created in 1998 while Ghadirian was a student at the University of Azad. The subject of the image, most likely a personal friend or relative of Ghadirian, holds a large boombox while dressed in Qajar era costume and bedecked with a unibrow drawn in with cosmetics. Standing on top of a flat woven kilim positioned in front of a Qajar era photography studio depicting a European style interior, Ghadirian subject looks directly at the viewer, their stare and pose confident and open. Although Ghadirian’s photography series spoke specifically to the role of gender in Iranian modernity and state formation, and, the experience of Iranian women living in the Iranian Islamic state in the 1990’s, the images have become extremely popular in diasporic Iranian virtual and physical spaces. Diasporic Iranians project their own readings and understandings onto the image, seeing the image as representative of the diasporic experience, where the Qajar garb indicated their cultural heritage and, the boomboxes or bottles of coca-cola represent assimilation into American culture. Such a reading is not incorrect or inauthentic, but, rather, a clue into illuminating the nuances of diasporic Iranian



Fig.18. A screen capture of Ajam Media Collective's International Women's Day post. Source:Facebook subjectivities. Within the context of International Women's Day in 2017, the boom box and posture are read as indicative of a playful rebelliousness, of “nasty women⁴⁹” who will take joy in both the ending of the Muslim ban and the seemingly unrelated task of dismantling patriarchy. Ghadrian’s embodiment then becomes an embodiment of contemporary diasporic Iranians anxiety about the validity of their belonging within America, both before and during the Trump administration. Positioned as the resilient

⁴⁹ A reference to an insult lobbed at Hilary Clinton by Donald Trump during the presidential debates.

women who encapsulate the best of when the East meets the West, the image produces an affect of hope through coalition and ancestral powers.

In comparison, Reorient Magazine features an article from slavorium.org illustrated with a watercolor painting entitled *Achaemenid Unit of Persian Female Warriors*, an image taken from persepolis.nu, a nationalist Iranian website. Persepolis.nu's mission statement includes the memorialization of the contributions of ancient Persian women, actualized through their freedom afforded to them by their Zoroastrian faith. However, this freedom and ability to negotiate power was impacted by Islam, as, according to the webmaster of the site,

“Women enjoyed a high level of gender equality before the imposition of the dark, backward, and pernicious Abrahamic ideologies (*Judaism, Christianity*, and especially *Islam*) after the barbaric Arab invasion upon Persia which destroyed our Equal rights, Freedom of speech and Freedom of religion and replaced those factors with central primitive brutal government, prejudice and slavery.”(persepolis.nu 2014)

The image in question belongs to a blog post entitled “The Amazons” which discusses the roles of women warriors in ancient Persia, and, claims that Scythian women were not merely an inspiration for the Amazons of Greek Mythology, but, are the actual Amazons themselves. Furthermore, the article claims the Scythians as ancient Persians despite both being separate cultures. This is done in order to claim the figure of the Amazon, assumed to have been considered the equal of men and imagined to be extremely heroic and courageous, as a result he gender equality and freedom of ancient Persia. Such claims are deployed as a way to position Islam and non-Persian racial and ethnic identities as inauthentic and detrimental to the progress of Iranian modernity. Rather than using

images of archaeological artifacts and sites, these paintings are modern interpretations of ancient cultures and their material remains. Images such as the watercolor painting of Scythian women, often created through archaeological and scientific research, are assumed to be wholly objective. However, they in fact reflect the anxieties and agendas of contemporary human beings. Anthropological reconstructions of ancient peoples can either purposefully or accidentally project either the rejection or reification



Fig.19. A screen capture of Reorient Magazine's International Women's Day post. Source: Facebook
of contemporary norms and stereotypes, such as understandings of race, gender and sexuality, and project it onto the past in order to render it as legible and thus, tangible and

relatable. Such images deploy a certain liveliness, rooted in relatability and personal recognition, as a way to make the past more “real” by implying that these ancient peoples still exist in the ways that contemporary individuals embody and perform their cultures, moral codes, and, racial identities.

Like Ajam Media Collective, through their social media post, Reorient Magazine posits that contemporary Iranian women are the embodiments of historical women as a way to claim their legitimacy as deserving subjects and to build coalition in order to challenge the racism and sexism of the Trump administration. However, the deployment of such images are entrenched in the ways these virtual texts are used in order to construct a monolithic and homogeneous Iranian diaspora. By using contemporary bodies embodying the past as a way to embody the present, these visual texts create assumptions about what Iranian women's bodies are, or should be. The images are used uncritically, as celebrations of Iranian culture and the resilience inherent to it. Yet, if some of the critiques of International Women's Day was the centering of heterosexual, cisgender, straight white women then, flattening out difference by using visual texts in order to build political and symbolic coalition with complicated entanglements in Persian-centric Iranian nationalism enacts many of the same violences. To position race as additive to gender, rather than an interwoven and complicated assemblage, is not enough to address the limitations of International Women's Day and to recenter the struggles of the Trump administration/s Muslim Ban. Race cannot be separated from gender or sexuality, but

rather, all three are entangled within one another, as race is gendered and gender is racialized.

CONCLUSION

Rather than reject these attempts to build coalition as problematic and simply that, interrogating the limitations of contemporary bodies embodying past bodies is much more productive, as it illuminates the way we understand Middle Eastern bodies and nation states throughout time and place. Such embodiments assume that the struggles and resistance of Middle eastern subjects as comparable and compatible despite or in spite of the differences of temporal and spatial location, this attempt to evoke affect through ancestry and genealogy dehumanizes through romanticization. Furthermore, the assumption that past bodies shared the same concepts of racial, gender, sexual, and national identity as contemporary peoples, when, in fact, these are incomparable and often unknowable. This renders both the past and present conceptualizations of Iran and Iranians as culturally, racially, and religiously homogenous.

Such actions are loaded within the context of the Iranian diaspora, as the evocation of sympathetic and empowered affect through the performative embodiment of past bodies is tricky given the centering of the Aryan in the logics and projects of Iranian modernity and Persian-centric nationalism. Historical material, whether or not it is in a physical archive, or, if its existence is postulated about, is understood through a contemporary lens. The question then becomes, what are contemporary diasporic Iranians trying to see in the past, and, invested in others reading the same visual texts same way? In the case of

the protests of the Trump administration's Muslim ban, these embodiments attempt to construct a universal diasporic Iranian experience as a way to form a coalition amongst Iranians despite their religious, ethnic, or class backgrounds. This assumption that these specific images are apolitical and secular cultural artifacts is due to the genealogy of these images, as well as their trajectory within the projects of Iranian modernity and state-building, and, their roots in the acknowledgement and disavowal of Orientalist tropes.

Yet, most likely, Scythians roaming the steppes of Central Asia in 500 BC nor did Qajar era Iranians visualize their positionality in the Iranian nation state, and, the state itself as modern peoples do. Even Persian-centric Iranian nationalism, and the way it is deployed and understood is variable and nuanced, rather than a standard and monolithic concept that does the same work for everyone at every point in time and every location. For example my father, born some time in the 1940s⁵⁰, came of age in the 1950s and remembers well the emergence of the term nationalism in Iranian popular discourse on the radio in an attempt to convince Western powers their human rights were on par with theirs. As there was not a word for the concept in Persian, and, the Pahlavi regime believed that the ancient Iranian Aryans were in fact French, the French word *nationalisme* was used. My grandfather, a poor dairy farmer descended from enslaved Georgians who did not complete school past the second grade, did not understand the

⁵⁰ No one really knows my father's actual age, but, we estimate he was born sometime during World War Two. He remembers throwing a tantrum out of boredom and exhaustion while in line for some sort of rations.

word, and misheard it as “Nasrullah Naviz,” or “Nasrullah the Raisin.” After weeks of enthusiastically listening to and agreeing with the radio broadcasts, arguing with anyone who didn’t care for Nasrullah the Raisin, my grandfather⁵¹, while tucking my father into bed, asked my father why the Shah was talking about anthropomorphized dried fruit and why this specific raisin was important for Iran. These concepts were in many ways inaccessible to those they were supposed to enlighten and uplift, and, in many ways, were performed for the benefit of the Iranian, American and European elite. Then, what does it mean when contemporary bodies assume that past bodies that are rendered into be good subjects due to their assumed positionality within structures of power are able to succinctly encapsulate modern political struggles?

⁵¹ We apparently had/have the same bubbly, excitable, happy go lucky personality where we get EXCITED ABOUT EVERYTHING!!!! Then question it way later. We also share an extreme hatred for seafood, a deeply rooted love for animals and children, incorrigible naivety, and, a weird sense of humor.

CONCLUSION

POSSIBLE IMPOSSIBILITIES, IMPOSSIBLE POSSIBILITIES

In 2009 I witnessed and participated in the posting of Qajar images to social media profiles, such as Tumblr and Facebook, as an passive aggressive act of resistance to the Islamic theocracy. Although it is hard to admit, I myself partook in an online fight, where I and other Iranians claimed that Iran's peaceful pre-Islamic past was being shamed by the violent actions of the Islamic Republic. Yet at the same time, I felt the investment in individual votes and choice and the positioning of American democracy as a superior voting method where every voice was heard was ridiculous and conflated the Iranian government as the same as the America's. Regardless, after being shamed by another Iranian, I began to question my position which in all honesty, I had not genuinely felt invested in. It was just the de rigueur understanding of Iran that I and the other young queer Iranians I knew online and in reality knew. My own family, who, in an attempt to protect me from the traumas of racism, refused to teach me Persian, or, have me engage in anything culturally Persian asides from food and celebrating Norouz, otherwise known as Persian New Year. Yet I wanted something beyond the dry Kabab-e Barg⁵² and time

⁵² Unpopular opinion: I generally don't like Kabab-e Barg because everyone overcooks it and it's a nightmare. Usually this happens mostly at actual restaurants, but food courts inside of Persian supermarkets tend to be pretty legit. Also, always choose the place that uses charcoal some way or the other, and, even though my real dad Hank Hill would be offended, avoid places that only use propane at all costs. But, honestly, the food at even the most ok Persian place is really good, because they know that we are all a bunch of cheap nerds who love bargains, but, we still expect the creme de la creme. On that note, always

immortal containers of sumac languishing on white tablecloths, and, feeling nervous and scared when I couldn't participate in conversations held in Persian.

Because of this, I felt a personal investment in these images, as I believed I held a striking resemblance to the Qajar androgynes, who were eternally coquettishly reclining and strumming *tars*. Such a comparison made by myself and people in my friend group made me feel at home, an interruption of the alienation I felt for not speaking Persian and for being told that I do not look "Iranian" at all. Most Iranians read me as a light skinned Chicanx, and, after I reveal my true identity, the most frequent question I receive is "who did your nose⁵³?" However, due to my Persian-centric reading of these images, and, the affect they provided, I was able to see myself represented visually. Thus, there was a place for myself within not only the Iranian diaspora, but, Iran as a whole.

Through the process of writing this thesis, I have realized that the things that we feel are authentic or pleasant are contingent on our positionality within interweaving transnational hegemonies of power. This, coupled with nostalgic affect centered around feelings of loss of country and identity made it hard for me to take a critical approach to these images for quite some time. The affective stickiness of these images influenced the initial phases of this thesis, which led me to initially approach the replication and

get your produce at Iranian markets because the prices are amazing and you get the best produce. If Crown Valley Market ever charged one dollar for five pounds of organic tomatoes, there would be a third diasporic Iranian political uprising with actual bloody rioting and I would have to write a fourth body chapter.

⁵³ No one did my nose.

embodiment of these images as a form of queer, or at least, queered resistance, even though this position also felt disingenuous.

Although these images can be seen as frivolous and unimportant, the wide availability of these images and the hold they have on the collective imagination of the Iranian diaspora speaks to the power of these visual texts. These images and the nostalgic affect they produce articulate a form of political contribution in the face of conflict. The power of these images become more apparent when interrogating their contemporary deployment by diasporic Iranians negotiating power. As of the writing of this conclusion, both of the Trump administration's travel bans and halting of the granting of visas are on hold, waiting to be tried in court in Maryland and Hawaii to determine whether or not they are discriminatory.

As they wait, the diasporic Iranian community buzzes with anxiety and dread. Many Iranians, both first and second generation are spearheading and participating in protests held at airports where detained Iranians and other Middle Easterners wait, or, are heading to the streets to take part in general anti-Trump action. Decades of threats of war between the United States seem to have become more tangible, especially after the GBU-43/B Massive Ordnance Air Blast in Afghanistan on April 13th, 2017. It is a fear rooted not only in the relative geographical nearness of Iran and Afghanistan, but, in the cultural and ethnic nearness of the dominant cultures of the countries. With threats of even more powerful trade sanctions and a stricter nuclear deal come hushed conversation held in Persian, Pinglish and sometimes Dari are similar to those I overheard as a child in 2001

in the days after September 11th. Despite the fact that I have grown two inches taller and sixteen years older these conversations and worries about Iranian concentration camps and mass deportations seem frozen in time.

After being directly hailed and impacted by racialized legislation targeting Iranians, the first generation diasporic Iranian community, generally assumed to be apolitical and uninvolved as they prefer to exist under the radar, is beginning to manifest political visibility. This urge to be invisible, and Iranian instead of Iranian, was lampooned by comedian Maz Jobrani in 2010 with a series of public service announcements urging Iranians to no longer check the box for white, but to write in Iranian. However, this outreach campaign did not produce the intended results. According to Alex Shams,

“Awkwardly, the campaign somehow backfired, and the number of Iranian-Americans who wrote in “Iranian,” “Persian,” or “Iranian-American” in the census was 289,465, significantly less than 10 years before. Given that unofficial estimates of the current Iranian-American population run between 1 and 1.5 million, the vast majority of Iranians probably identified themselves as “White,” or else didn’t bother turning their forms in. The Iranian-American voting campaigns of 2010 US Census speak volumes about the complexities of race and racial politics, not only in the Iranian-American community but also of Iranians more broadly.” (Shams 2013)

The root of this apolitical nature is complicated as it is a manifestation of the interweavings of political privilege, race formation, and generational traumas. For example, many first Iranians who lived through the Pahlavi era and the Iranian revolution have witnessed the imprisonment, torture, deaths, suspicious suicides, and sudden disappearances of their family and loved ones. Other bear physical and psychological scars from imprisonment and torture. For some, regardless if they experienced political and carceral violence or not, the traumas of fleeing from Iran, whether or not they

experienced displays of anti-Iran sentiment, is enough of itself. Then, there are others who are anxious about confirming the trope of the angry Arab and the violent Oriental terrorist through political action and prefer to lay low.

There is privilege inherent to laying low and believing that one's body is not on the line and, if it is, it can be safely removed. This isn't to say that there aren't Iranian whose bodies aren't already on the line in both America and Iran, such as Black Iranians and Afro-Iranians, disabled, gender and sexual non-conforming or otherwise dissident bodies who may be circumscribed by one or a combination of these identities and experiences, but, through a Persian-centric homogenization of the Iranian diaspora, they are obfuscated. Regardless, these experiences of trauma and pain are often used to justify political uninvolvedness as it seen as a way to protect oneself, family, and community from further bodily and psychic harm.⁵⁴

Despite the overwhelming tendency to avoid political participation, the diasporic Iranian community does emerge as a coalition for political aims, but, the when, where, and why is often unpredictable. For example, diasporic Iranians engaged in large scale protests in 2009 in solidarity with the Green Movement in Iran. These acts of solidarity were the largest public political action partaken in by Iranians outside of Iran. The reasons for individuals protesting ranged from moral support rooted in solidarity and remembrance to monarchist and Mohajidens denouncing the Islamic republic. (Nejad

⁵⁴ Even my own family, with it's mixed racial and economic background, has experienced the violences of the Pahlavi Era and the days of the Iranian Revolution prefers to lay low, and, advises me to do the same.

Muslim ban. I remember witnessing the protests in the Westwood neighborhood of Los Angeles, California⁵⁵ from afar, seeing protest signs that asked where their votes were, and boundless American Apparel shirts⁵⁶ emblazoned in Persian and English with “Free Iran.” Even if they were not used in ways similar to the memes that I interrogate in the previous chapter, images of Qajar era art and pre-Islamic artifacts were also deployed, but not in a directly political way. They served more as a sort of proof of Iranian’s true, yet repressed nature.

These diasporic protests, catalyzed by conversations on social media between Iranians at home and abroad, were credited as being an integral aspect of bringing the political struggles of Iran into a larger trans-national audience. (Nejad 2015, 172-174) However, the aims of each protest were different due to their geo-political locations. Both local hegemonies of power and histories of political interaction with Iran shaped the dominant discourses of the Iranian diaspora. For example, due to class discrimination, Iranians in Germany tend to be leftists, those in Los Angeles conservative, and, those in London a mix of both. (Nejad 2015, 175) Furthermore, where diasporic Iranians live, and, how they got to that location is contingent on their race, class, gender, and, whether or not they had

⁵⁵ Los Angeles is home to the largest population of Iranians outside of Iran, who are found most often in the Westwood, or, more accurately, Vestwood neighborhood. Many of the shop owners remember me as a child, especially the carpet store owner whose front window I walked into, then, promptly got a nosebleed because I was too engrossed in my Baby Spice doll to care about the rest of the world. There are also Iranians, and, Iranian Armenians in Glendale but I don’t think I’ve spent too much time there.

⁵⁶ Before American Apparel’s official bankruptcy in 2017 (which has devastated me), the company was inspired by/attempting to cash in on the large scale protests in Los Angeles. The shirts, a rare overtly political statement from the company, languished unloved and unbought in their sale section for years. I regret not getting something just for the heck of it.

established familial networks in those locations. Thus, gross generalizations of the Iranian diaspora used to claim human rights obfuscates difference, and, position a certain kind of lived experience and subjectivity as encapsulating that of every Iranian. In fact, there are diasporic Iranians in California who voted for Trump who closely aligned with his politics and feel betrayed, or there are those who, regardless if they voted for the president, are supportive of detaining and extreme vetting of Iranians entering Iran. (Tchekmedyian, Mather, Smith 2017)

However the current actions of the Iranian diaspora, such as protesting at airports in solidarity with detained Iranians or participating in general anti-Trump action, is different in the ways in which coalition is being built with non-Iranian groups, largely due to the changing demographics of the participants, and, their engagements with American politics.

“Yet, as the second generation comes of age in a post-9/11 context, it becomes increasingly clear that it is not so much culture that is at stake here but racial difference. While the first generation has remained relatively silent about the racial discussions in the US, the second generation takes a clear stand in that regard (Alinejad, forthcoming). Rather, racialization as Middle Eastern, non-white, and Muslim, is a process that draws new boundaries of inclusion and exclusion that are being negotiated through new discursive strategies in young intellectual pockets of the diaspora.”(Alinejad and Ghorashi 2015, 72)

Such differences are rooted in the second generation’s specific trauma, that of a post 9/11 world, yet, the way that trauma is navigated is informed and informed and interwoven with the previous generation’s experiences with Persian-centric nationalism and American racism.

Lived experiences of post-9/11 racism, such as being grouped in with other Middle Eastern groups as “Arabs, “or being seen as embodiments of tropes of the queer Oriental

terrorist monster, who, was personally responsible for, or, benefitted from 9/11 informed these changing perceptions of race. This contrasted with tales of Iranian exceptionalism and their elder's nostalgia for Iran. (Baghoolizadeh and Magbouleh 2014) However, according to Magbouleh, younger Iranians are more invested in and engaging with American identity politics and building coalition with other racial groups.

"From their parents, they get a message that Iran is quite exceptional and we are quite exceptional, but then they grow up in the US, where politics is completely infused by pan-ethnic movements, that the way that groups are able to seek redress is through banding together with other groups, and very often this is a pan-ethnic coalition" (Baghoolizadeh and Magbouleh 2014)

This shift in identity and identity politics becomes apparent in the broad coalitions being built by diasporic Iranians in their protests of the Trump administration, ranging from Black Lives Matter, to Syrians and white liberals. This coalition may be due to the multiple countries affected by the ban, what makes this unification unusual is the prominence of Iran and Iranians in the media coverage of the ban and the protests. Perhaps, this is due to the threat of war between Iran and the United States, where the detainment and denial of visas could be seen as a catalyst for a nuclear holocaust, or, that detained and denied Iranians are fleeing a cruel and merciless theocracy. Regardless, difference is glossed over as a way to build coalition through essentialization. Assuming that the countries affected by the ban are culturally, racially and linguistically homogenous not only obfuscates those who do not fall within these prescribed limits of legibility, but, erases the complicated weavings of transnational and internal structures of power that define not only these countries, but, the bodies within its borders.

With this in mind, the conundrum of the legibility of Iranians becomes a little more visible. Depending on their geo-political location, Iranians are either abject third world brown bodies or, they are elite professionals who possess or, are in close proximity to whiteness. Furthermore, Iranian's relationship with the model minority myth is complicated and ever shifting due to their proximity to the trope of the backwards terrorist, and, the political relationships between Iran and the United States. Perhaps this is one of the roots for the emphasis on the elite skilled labor⁵⁷ of Iranians in the protests of the Muslim ban, a way to claim that these are not "cave dwelling" Muslim fanatics out of time and place, but rather, civilized and educated people who will contribute to America culturally and economically.

However, such claims are complicated further by the claiming of the figure of the refugee, as, due to the racialization of the term indicating that a refugee is a "Third world problem" (Malkki 1995, 503), being read as and claiming the identification of "refugee" also claims an imagining of abject brownness. However, it must be noted that each

⁵⁷ Another trope at play could be that of the fallen elite Iranian, who, despite his high economic status, ties with the Pahlavi government and successful professional career, is unable to find that same success in America due to poor currency exchange rates, degrees not being recognized as legitimate, and, being racialized and gendered in a way that drops him from the top to the lower levels of racial hierarchies. Instead, he plunges into poverty, works blue collar jobs in an attempt to have some semblance of his former respectability, and, is often depressed or mentally ill. This trope emerges in popular American culture, from Mad TV's sketch Depressed Persian Tow Truck Man, to the novel *House of Sand and Fog* and the subsequent film adaptation. This trope has some roots in reality, as the shifting economic status and loss of racial privilege manifests a range of repercussions, such high levels of domestic abuse in diasporic heterosexual Iranian households. However, I think this trope is more common amongst Iranians and within communities with large Iranian population.

country affected by the travel ban is legally white in the United States, a conundrum for those from these countries who do not identify as or are read as white. Legal whiteness, based in Enlightenment and Victorian era scientific racism, is political, granted to racial groups who advocate for it successfully, and, whose inclusion into the category in some way beneficial to whiteness. These legacies of scientific racism color the terms used to describe white Americans, or, those determined to be legally white as Caucasians. Rooted in the research of German anthropologist Friedrich Blumenbach, it was widely believed that modern Anglo Saxons emerged from the Caucasus mountains. (Harris 2001, 85)

However, it must be noted that the racialization of Iranian bodies through an American lens, whether they are in diaspora or Iran, is contingent upon the political relationship between Iran and America, and, the physical presence of Iranians and how it impacts America's demographics. According to Neda Maghbouleh, Iranians were not considered legally white until large populations of Iranians immigrated to the United States during and after the Iranian revolution. Before the influx of diasporic Iranians, they has been considered to be non-white, a status used as a foil by Arabs and Armenians in their campaigns to be recognized as white in the 20th century. (Baghoolizadeh and Maghbouleh 2014)

Often, this legal whiteness is claimed as proof that Iranians are white and have an Aryan heritage, and are not brown, Arab, or even a part of the Middle East. These claims of whiteness are in turn used for political and cultural capital justified through the

deployment of Persian-centric imaginings of Iranian exceptionalism, which, according to Maghbouleh, are a defining aspect of the dominant discourses of first generation diasporic Iranians, which is transmitted inter-generationally.

“...I noticed a generational divide... first-generation parents who would sometimes imbue the family with this sense of Iranian exceptionalism. For example, they would say ‘our history is something unique, something special, the Persian language had the ability to live on’ and that’s supposed to be exceptional about our ‘people.’”(Baghoolizadeh and Maghbouleh 2014)

However, the understanding that Iranians are white is not held by all non-Iranian Americans. These claims to whiteness are both contested and reified by non-Iranians due to the class, skin color, location inside or outside of Iran, and, personal racial identifications of Iranians. This status of legal whiteness is complicated further by the prevalence of the Aryan myth in Persian-centric nationalism, where, the status of legal whiteness is believed to confirm and reify their ancestral whiteness. This claim to whiteness also seems to be generational, as, second generation Iranians negotiate race and racialization differently than the first generation. The first generation claims whiteness and elite model minority status, as,

“The fact that first generation Iranian Americans are categorized and mostly claim to be white Caucasians have given them some racial privilege in the US. Also the level of education and social background gives this group a plus within a society in which success is essential.” (Alinejad and Ghorashi 2015, 72)

Although the use of model minority politics and Persian-centric Iranian nationalism as a way to claim political legibility is problematic, in a way, the visual texts and discourses being produced are extremely productive in the ways that they manifest the slippages and sociological ghosts that haunt the legibility of Iranians as subjects. Rather than suggesting a non-problematic symbol to define all diasporic Iranians, or, outline a

way for Iranians to create visual text I argue that it is more productive to constantly critique and engage with these images despite the stickiness of their affect which centers them as normal and inherently Iranian. Rather than personally attempting to mesh out a single, or series of, unifying symbols for the Iranian diaspora, I argue that it is more productive to untangle the reasons why Qajar androgynes and Pre-Islamic symbols are so prevalent.

My own analysis has its limitations as my conceptualizations of what is problematic or not is contingent to my shifting positionality within multivalent and interweaving power structures. I cannot provide an answer, and perhaps there is no concrete answer, but rather, a multitude of nuanced and complicated possibilities and ambiguities. Rather, I invite and encourage others to embrace, as stated in “The Stage Hip-Hop Feminism Built: A New Directions Essay, ““a feminism brave enough to fuck with the grays.”” (Durham, Cooper, Morris 2010, 723)

I am not calling for the mass abandonment of Qajar and pre-Islamic images and symbols, but rather, an interrogation of how these images are read and how contemporary identities, expectations and anxieties are projected onto the past. Furthermore, I wish to trouble the binary between authentic and inauthentic and question the ways in which both nationalist rhetorics and affect play a role in determining what is authentic and inauthentic. Even the seemingly inauthentic is authentic in its own right, it too born of the same anxieties and hegemonies that shape what is thought of as authentic. Whether or not they were once obscure or already widely visible, the trajectory of these commodified

symbols is rooted in the expectations and realities of these texts producing affect, namely that of nostalgia, in order to indicate national belonging.

Troubling these productions of affect is tricky, as it feels too personal. Perhaps it is understandable that every minute thing, from the ways knowledge is produced to how it is consumed, is inextricable from interweaving and infinite structures of power. Yet, we want something that belongs to us and only us, and, since affective responses are often understood to be natural and inherent, rather than something socialized and learned, affect is felt to be something pure and untouched by violence or by humans as a whole. If something “feels” as if it is an unquantifiable, unspeakable, and deeply spiritual connection to an imagined ancestry, it is hard to trouble those feelings. It seems to real and inherent to be anything but our own. The fact of the matter is that there are those who feel deep connections to Persian-centric and nationalist readings of Qajar and pre-Islamic images. The ways in which diaspora is thought of, as inauthentic and rootless makes an affective connection to ancestry even more appealing. We want to see ourselves in the past so that the presence makes sense, feels less disoriented and lonely, and purposeful. Our desires to be authentic and to belong shape our perceptions of the past, recent and ancient, imagined and real, reflecting back darkly like a hazy mirror shrouded in an unfathomable and infinitely intricate gauze.

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