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Journal
Comparative Studies of South Asia Africa and the Middle East, 27(2)

ISSN
1089-201X

Author
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Publication Date
2007-08-01

DOI
10.1215/1089201x-2007-001

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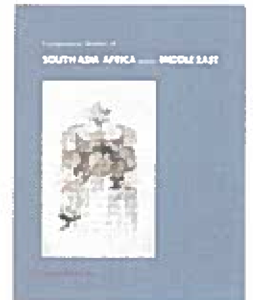
Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East, Volume 27, Number 2, 2007, pp. 225-232 (Article)

Published by Duke University Press



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CONTENTIONS

Border Crossing

Nasrin Rahimieh

> To be unhomed is not to be homeless, nor can the "unhomely" be easily accommodated in that familiar division of social life into private and public spheres. The unhomely moment creeps up on you stealthily as your own shadow and suddenly you find yourself . . . taking the measure of your dwelling in a state of "incredulous terror." And it is at this point that the world first shrinks . . . and then expands enormously. . . . The recesses of the domestic space become sites for most intricate invasions. In that displacement, the borders between home and world become confused: and, uncannily, the private and the public become part of each other, forcing upon us a vision that is as divided as it is disorienting.
> —Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*

The displacement and "unhomeliness" Homi Bhabha describes in his introduction to *The Location of Culture* resonate deeply with my experiences of crossing borders and recently moving from Canada to the United States.[1] Drawing on Bhabha's conceptualization of the "unhomely moment," I would like to chart my trajectory across national boundaries (Iran, Canada, and the United States) as a means of grasping the creative, albeit unsettling, potential in my encounters with the "state of 'incredulous terror.'" Analyzing the different subject positions I have occupied at different moments of crossings has helped me reevaluate my most cherished notions about myself, including my relationship to my work as a scholar of Iranian studies. But this is not a confessional account aimed at uncovering dark recesses of my mind. Instead the personal archives help me lay bare the threads that link certain moments of displacement to phases of my work as a scholar of Iranian origins who, after years of living in Canada, has recently moved to the United States. From the vantage point of national crossroads I have gained glimpses into the different iterations of the self and the accompanying changing boundaries of the self and the world. The question at the heart of my inquiry is, how do we scholars of Iranian studies position our scholarship on these shifting borders? At a time when so much is at stake in the discussions of Iran, there is even more urgency to this question.

The most notable example of the debates concerning the perils of representing Iran in the United States is Hamid Dabashi's article about Azar Nafisi's best-selling memoir, *Reading Lolita in Tehran*.[2] Over against the anxieties that what we, scholars and writers engaged with Iran, say about the country is or might be recuperated by particular political agendas are

Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East
Vol. 27, No. 2, 2007
DOI 10.1215/1089201X-2007-001
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1. Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 9.

2. Dabashi's article "Native Informers and the Making of the American Empire" was published in *Al-Ahram Weekly*, 1–7 June 2006, weekly.ahram.org.eg/2006/797/special.htm. For an analysis of the tenor of this debate, see Richard Byrne's analysis in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, 13 October 2006, chronicle.com/free/v53/i08/08a01201.htm. Azar Nafisi, *Reading Lolita in Tehran: A Memoir in Books* (New York: Random House, 2003).

the realities of censorship, imprisonment, or worse fate faced by our counterparts in Iran.[3] In these troubled times it is incumbent on us to reflect critically on the politics of our location not so much to establish a fixed personal or professional creed but to see how time and place affect our voice and vision and determine the scope of our internationalism. The debates surrounding *Reading Lolita in Tehran*, particularly Dabashi's critique of Nafisi's co-option by neoconservative politics in the United States, and the Iranian government's tightening rein on intellectuals and university professors highlight the problems we face today within and across national boundaries. While these phenomena appear to limit the possibility of traversing borders, they also raise the potential to rethink facile assumptions about our own internationalism. Is it sufficient, for instance, to believe that scholarship on Iran is ipso facto international in focus? What kind of dislocations and jarring juxtapositions might render our awareness of borders into a different paradigm for internationalizing Iranian studies? By putting my own development as a scholar under the microscope I hope to be able to challenge myself and others involved in studying Iran to inscribe the unhomely into our critical practices.

Following the path pinpointed by Arjun Appadurai, we could begin by opening ourselves up to questions about how we view and maintain our field and mode of research. The "deparochialization of the research ethic" that Appadurai sees as a step toward a different form of internationalization and globalization underwrites my attempt at deciphering how national borders, passports, and work authorizations have forged my research profile and, by extension, my very sense of professional existence as a scholar of Persian literature and Iranian studies.[4]

When I first left Iran at age sixteen I dreamt of an eventual return. My notion of home was always mapped onto the Iran of my childhood and youth and even more specifically the house and the city in which I spent my early years. But when the 1979 revolution and the Iran-Iraq war made a permanent return less appealing and tenable I turned my loss of home into a melancholy embrace of a newfound freedom from ties. I discovered a comforting reminder of my own fate in the Iranian writer Taghi Modarressi's insights into his experience of immigration to the United States.

Modarressi had left Iran decades before the revolution to pursue his education. The years he had devoted to establishing himself as a child psychiatrist had distanced him from his work as a writer. The revolution and the arrival of the first wave of Iranian immigrants to the United States reawakened in him the desire to write. He began to write novels in Persian, which he then translated into an "accented" English he believed to be an organic expression of his being an outsider. This accented voice also marked for him his physical and psychological distance from Iran and his mother tongue.[5] In his essay "Writing with an Accent," Modarressi gives this description of his altered relationship to the concept of home: "On the plane returning from Iran to the U.S., a strange idea kept occurring to me. I thought that most immigrants, regardless of the familial, social, or political circumstances causing their exile, have been cultural refugees all their lives. They leave because they feel like outsiders."[6] It is telling that this insight occurs to Modarressi on

3. The most recent case is that of Ramin Jahanbegloo, a noted scholar and public intellectual who was arrested and held in prison until his release on bail at the end of August 2006. The apparent charges against him were spying and siding with counterrevolutionary forces. Jahanbegloo's position as a public intellectual interested in the multifaceted ways in which Iran is conversing with the world was no doubt a cause for concern in a country afraid of the consequences of unfettered questioning of received ideas.

4. In "Grassroots Globalization and the Research Imagination," Appadurai makes a crucial distinction between the knowledge of globalization and the globalization of knowledge and poses a series of questions aimed at opening the U.S. model of area studies to embarking on new means of relating to the world: "Area Studies must deliberate on this aspect of the relationship between regions, as must any discipline that takes subjectivity and ideology as something more than ephemera in the saga of capital and empire. Such deliberation is a vital prerequisite for internationalizing academic research, especially when objects of research themselves have acquired international, transnational, or global dimensions of vital interest to the human sciences." Arjun Appadurai, "Grassroots Globalization and the Research Imagination," in Appadurai, ed., *Globalization* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 15.

5. "The new language of any immigrant writer is obviously accented and, at least initially, inarticulate. [Consider] this 'artifact' language expressive in its own right. Writing with an accented voice is organic to the mind of the immigrant writer. It is not something one can invent. It is frequently buried beneath personal inhibitions and doubts. The accented voice is loaded with hidden messages from our cultural heritage, messages that often reach beyond the capacity of ordinary words of any language. For me, words cluster together not the first step, perhaps necessary to obscure the pain of separation and life in exile. But to be in real contact, I needed to invent my own personal language for both cultures. This is not to say that I am now culturally free from conflict. I, like many others, will continue to live some kind of a life of exile, even in our own country." Taghi Modarressi, "Writing with an Accent," *Chanteh* 1 (1992): 9.

6. Ibid.

the plane traversing the distance between Iran and the United States, when he is physically in neither country. Suspended between these two realms, Modarressi rediscovers that "universal otherness of strangers" Julia Kristeva attributes to the "Freudian discovery of our intrinsic difference."[7] Modarressi, the psychiatrist, turns this difference into an unsettled yet welcome relationship to language and national affiliation.

This idea of a permanent sense of displacement helped me frame my life in Canada and my relationship to an Iran that would be always just beyond my reach. For years I cherished the aloofness that appeared to free me of a commitment to a fixed national identity. I believed in the inherent and endless possibility offered up by liminality and hybridity, and I celebrated Canada's apparent acceptance of my detachment. Having acquired Canadian citizenship, I drifted away from the sense of the immobility and limitations that accompanied my Iranian citizenship and passport, although all along I was aware that my dual citizenship was not to be openly acknowledged. Iran does not formally permit dual citizenship, but the country chooses to turn a blind eye to the fact that many of its citizens carry two passports on their visits home. Traveling with an Iranian passport would necessitate a transit visa for changing planes in many European countries, and traveling to Iran for natives of the country requires an Iranian passport. Passport control officers in Iran take note of the missing visa in the Iranian passport and request verification that the traveler has valid travel documents for his or her destination(s). At that moment I always produced my Canadian passport, which would afford me easy passage out of Iran. I was always anxious about this moment of departure and I knew that without the Canadian passport I would not have been able to travel through Europe or North America so effortlessly. But I preferred to dwell on fluidity rather than fixity. My Canadian passport recalled and recorded my birthplace in Iran, while my Iranian passport bore a stamp marking my having become a resident of Canada. I saw myself shuttling between the spaces opened up by these two documents. Reveling in my newly acquired mobility, I settled into a sense of self focused on the "possibilities of being constantly other" not without occasionally feeling the pangs of that exquisite depression Kristeva writes about in *Strangers to Ourselves*.[8]

During those years in Canada, I developed a keen eye for spotting "new and revealing paradoxes" of the kind Modarressi describes in his "Writing with an Accent": "Here we have our juxtapositions and our transformation—the graceful and awkward, the beautiful and the ugly, sitting side by side in a perpetual metamorphosis of one into the other. It is like the Hunchback of Notre Dame trying to be Prince Charming for strangers."[9] The notion of performance invoked in Modarressi's essay is not unlike the iterations of the self that Bhabha stipulates: "It is the space of intervention emerging in the cultural interstices that introduces creative invention into existence. And one last time, there is a return to the performance of identity as iteration, the re-creation of the self in the world of travel, the resettlement of borderline community of migration."[10] The "cultural interstices" became the backbone of my work on Persian literature and postrevolutionary Iranian culture. From these in-between spaces I saw emerging the possibility of placing Iranian cultural production in a global context. My work was deeply informed by this internalization of alterity, as was the work of a generation of scholars who helped change the dominant paradigm for studying Iran's history, literature, and culture. To cite one example that captures the shift in paradigm, I draw on Mohamad Tavakoli-Targhi's critique of Iranian historiography.

Taking the nation's history outside its present borders enabled Tavakoli-Targhi to un-

7. Julia Kristeva, *Nations without Nationalism*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 21.

8. "Hard-hearted indifference is perhaps no more than the respectable aspect of nostalgia. We all know the foreigner who survives with a tearful face toward the lost homeland. Melancholy lovers of a vanished space, he cannot, in fact, get over his having abandoned a period of time. The lost paradise is a mirage of the past that he will never be able to recover. . . . And even he who, seemingly, flees the slimy poison of depression, does not hold back, as he lies in bed, during those glaucus moments between waking and sleeping. For in the intervening period of nostalgia, saturate with fragrances and sounds to which he no longer belongs and which, because of that, wound him less than those of the here and now, the foreigner is a dreamer making love with absence, one exquisitely depressed. Happy?" Julia Kristeva, *Strangers to Ourselves*, trans. Leon Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), 9–10.

9. Modarressi, "Writing with an Accent," 9.

10. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 9.

cover what he calls "homeless texts of Persianate modernity," which in turn opened up new vistas on nationalist formations.[11] In the conclusion of his book *Refashioning Iran*, one witnesses the transformative effect of rethinking history outside the confines of the nation:

> By reactivating the homeless texts of Persianate modernity, this book has tried to chart a different account of the making of modern Iranian history, culture, and identity. This account establishes a close connection between homeless Persianate texts and eighteenth-century Orientalist works, a connection that is rarely admitted in the burgeoning scholarship on Orientalism. It also acknowledges the significance of Indian Persianate works in fashioning a historical perspective that informed the nineteenth-century Iranian nationalist historiography. (143)

Over against the homeless texts, Tavakoli-Targhi sees the "hegemony of the nationalist discourse" that engendered a "'bordered' historical perspective" (143). Not surprisingly, a similar rethinking of the parameters of national identity is also woven through his essay about growing up in Iran:

> What most confused me while growing up were words like *khain* and *khudfurush*, and people like the Shah and Khomeini, or symbols like *kishvar* [nation] and *parcham* [flag]. These words shifted in value depending on where you were. In school, the Shah was good and Khomeini was bad. But among Baba's friends the Shah was bad and Aga Khomeini was good. But yet, I was never supposed to repeat this in school. Likewise, the flag was raised every day in school, but never in the bazaar. One day, quite unknowingly, I planted the Iranian flag by Baba's shop in the Bazaar of Sayyid Ismail. Baba slapped me hard when he found out that I had done that. I still feel the weight of my father's hand across my face whenever I look at the Iranian flag. After the beating, Baba told me that "we" never raise the flag because that would mean we were *dowlati* [believers in the state].
>
> The distinction between "we" and the *dowlat* was something that I reflected on years later, after the Islamic Revolution, while writing a history dissertation at the University of Chicago on the revolutions of 1906 and 1979.[12]

Tavakoli-Targhi's introduction to conflicting visions of Iranian identity, accompanied with a corporeal reminder of radical unhinging of the firm basis of collective identification, solidifies into a new critical mode of engaging with the borders and boundaries of Iranian national history. The unhomely in his own experiences sensitizes him to that which has been discarded from Iranian historiography and has been rendered homeless.

I do not want to imply an unambiguous causal connection between our work as scholars and our own personal location on the borders, but rather I would like to highlight the contiguity between our personal dislocations and the paradigms of postcolonialism and postmodernism that other scholars located elsewhere have also embraced in their work. This is the "worldliness" Henry Giroux finds typified in Edward W. Said's model of public intellectual: "As a relentless border crosser, Said embraced the idea of the 'traveler' as an important metaphor for engaged intellectuals . . . as a border intellectual and traveler, Said embodied the notion of always 'being not quite right,' evident by his principled critique of all forms of certainties and dogmas and his refusal to be silent in the face of human suffering at home and abroad."[13] Interestingly, Appadurai finds this type of public intellectual more prevalent outside the West or in earlier periods before the turn to "value-free research in the modern research ethics," and he addresses its "important implications for the work of public intellectuals, especially outside the West, who routinely address nonprofessional publics."[14] We, as scholars working on Iran, are obviously caught up in the same dynamics and gravitate toward an ethics and politics necessarily engaged with the broader public. But our own location and that of our audience become inextricably bound with our message. As I continue

11. Mohamad Tavakoli-Targhi, *Refashioning Iran: Orientalism, Occidentalism, and Historiography* (New York: Palgrave, 2001), 143.

12. Mohamad Tavakoli-Targhi, untitled essay in *Exiled Memories: Stories of Iranian Diaspora*, ed. Zohreh T. Sullivan (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2001), 50.

13. Henry Giroux, *Border Crossings: Cultural Workers and the Politics of Education* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 304.

14. Appadurai, "Grassroots Globalization," 13.

to demonstrate in my own example, we might not always be able to disentangle ourselves from the intertwining of professional formation and location.

In my own work, my hyphenated existence, my not being fully at ease either as Canadian or as Iranian, fueled a constructive engagement with questions of language, nation, and culture. I could imagine an elsewhere that was not confined by national boundaries, and I fell into a comfortable sense of living in the space of the hyphen. But that life on the hyphen came to an abrupt end after the tragic events of 9/11. The reality of the actual border crossings I experienced gave new, frightening meanings to being a traveler.

When new Homeland Security measures were adopted and when Iran's newly acquired status as part of the "axis of evil" coalesced, I found myself among the ranks of individuals of Middle Eastern ancestry who were routinely stopped and interrogated on the border between Canada and the United States. As I discovered on many occasions, my having been born in Iran trumped my Canadian citizenship. These experiences eradicated the possibility of occupying a position of indeterminacy and contingency. As the border became a site of fixed identity I witnessed the transformation of my own attitude toward my erstwhile hyphenated existence. To quote Ali Behdad, I realized that the border "is not a metaphor of subversive transgression and radical hybridity . . . but rather a site of policing and discipline, control and violence."[15]

The border encounters were scripted around my place of birth and my travels to Iran. I was subjected to repeated and lengthy interviews that through their mere repetition belied their link to genuine security measures intended to prevent "terrorists" from entering the United States. No matter how much time I built into my travel plans for the long wait, the interviews, and the fingerprinting process, I would end up missing flights. During these interviews, I was asked to recall my parents' dates of birth, even though one of them is long deceased, and I was asked why I traveled to Iran and how frequently. There was always an implied skepticism in my interrogators' responses to my questions. This might well explain why the interrogation had to be repeated every time I attempted to cross the border. On certain occasions I was told to rebook tickets in order to fly in and out of designated ports of entry and exit. In those instances, I would be summarily dismissed and sent back to the airline counter. Part of this process, more specifically the fingerprinting, was to be repeated before I was to board a flight leaving the United States. At the end of the successful interrogations, to my Canadian passport would be stapled a visa that I was to surrender to the Immigration and Naturalization Service just before boarding the plane for Canada.

The visa, not required for Canadian citizens traveling to the United States, acted as a reminder that in the eyes of the American authorities I was not like other Canadian citizens, but I was also not being treated as a citizen of Iran who would have had to apply for a visa months before planning her trip. Suddenly in that space between Canada and the United States, my hybrid identity took on a disturbing meaning. I became an Iranian whose status as a Canadian citizen obviated a need for an advance visa application. As the traces of open-endedness grew faint, I found myself performing a notion of the self rooted in narratives of origin.

What terrified me throughout these experiences was not that I was subject to profiling and arbitrary power, erasing any vestige of my rights as a Canadian citizen. My fear stemmed from the cold recognition of the rage the experiences incited in me. During those moments of interrogation, I realized how easy it was to erect barriers and to think in terms of binaries I have worked hard to eradicate in my imagination and in scholarship.

Through the turmoil preceding the Iranian revolution and despite my own very strong feelings about American intervention in Iran I had never acquired a visceral grasp of the infamous "Death to America" slogans. I had always reasoned that because I had lived in the United

15. Ali Behdad, *A Forgetful Nation: On Immigration and Cultural Identity in the United States* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005), 144.

States and had many American friends, family members, and colleagues I could not relate to the hatred betrayed by the slogan. But faced with the new techniques of Homeland Security, I was beginning to tap into shocking emotions. Despite my attempts to remain detached and calm, I would make declarations about the United States and reaffirm for the interrogator my status as an enemy. The process appeared to be intended to make me and the officer questioning me conform to a perilous and inescapable typecasting. Surrounded by symbols and insignia of American power, I could feel myself losing all remnants of my personal history, my particular experiences, and my own ambivalences toward the United States and Iran. My interrogator and I both lost something of our humanity in an encounter intended to pit us against each other as representatives of two national entities with a history of enmity. In those sessions behind closed doors I could feel an unquestioning sense of Iranian nationalism mingle with my rage. Shaking with fury at the deliberate acts of humiliations, I clung to my Iranian identity. More than that, celebrating my Iranian nationality became a form of defiance. On one occasion when the officer asked to see my Iranian passport I quipped that it was expired, but I would be sure to renew it for my next trip to the United States.

These encounters did more than anger me against American security practices; they also left me with profound misgivings about Canada and the country's implicit and seemingly serene acceptance of the treatment of some its citizens. Although my Canadian passport did not bear visible marks of my difference it did not entitle me to the same rights and privileges as Canadians of non-Iranian heritage. While fellow Canadians were waved through the immigration checkpoints at Canadian airports, I was hauled away for an extended screening. For days after the most degrading experiences at the American border, I did not want to talk to my Canadian friends and colleagues. I felt shunned, so I wanted distance from all that reminded me of the sense of belonging to Canada. The narrative of a Canada celebrating its cultural mosaic rang hollow, and I began to retreat into an inner space filled with grief and recognition of my utter homelessness. The Canadian passport, the very document that had first introduced me to the possibility of becoming a cultural traveler, now bore indelible marks of my being trapped on one side or another of physical borders. My travel documents were harsh reminders of a life in exile and "the exile's material existence in a world that requires visas, passports . . . a world, that is, where the exile is forbidden to cross particular geographical boundaries," and the accompanying "painful state of being."[16] I wondered if I had not heeded the "etymology and the variegated connotations and denotations of *ghorbat*, the common Persian word for exile," which, Abbas Milani argues, "eloquently conveys the culture's troubled relationship with the exilic experience."[17] Milani points to Iranian culture's privileging of the "sedentary over the mobile" and a "traditional architecture [that] eschews windows to the outside world in favor of enclosed, high-walled gardens and yards" and finds it "not surprising that ghorbati is used as a derogatory word, synonymous with a Gypsy, barbarian, or even a harlot."[18]

To avoid being reminded of the pain of exile, I curtailed my travel to conferences in the United States, and gradually I lost my appetite for travel. I also felt I had lost the language and the voice that had allowed me to express my comings and goings between the Iranian and the Canadian selves. The ensuing silence reminded me of a passage from one of Taghi Modarressi's novels in which the Iranian protagonist, Hadi Besharat, dismisses his American colleague's invitation to move to the United States.[19] This is how he formulates his belief in the futility of attempting to forge a new form of identity in the United States: "To be sure, there are common features between the Easterner and the Westerner, and in certain respects each can

16. Sophia A. McClennen, *The Dialectics of Exile: Nation, Time, Language, and Space in Hispanic Literatures* (West Lafayette, IN: Purdue University Press, 2004), 1.

17. Abbas Milani, "The Purgatory of Exile: Persian Intellectuals in America," in *The Lost Wisdom: Rethinking Modernity in Iran* (Washington, DC: Mage, 2004), 156.

18. Ibid.

19. In his essay "The Purgatory of Exile," Milani points out that "one of the secondary meanings of the Persian word for exile is 'silent weeping.'" Ibid.

benefit the other. But in the end their encounters remain barren. It's like the quince-orange tree, which is a graft between a quince and an orange, or the mule, which is the result of horse and donkey copulation. Of course each has some use. But they themselves are barren and fruitless."[20] The derogatory connotations Milani finds in the Persian language's relationship to the word *exile* are here extended to the possibility of transplantation. These harsh resonances notwithstanding I continued to sink into the enclosed and walled interiors seemingly offered to me by the repertoire of Iranian culture.

As I settled into my own barrenness and silence, I could not have imagined that I would be faced with yet another displacement. The challenge came in the form of the opportunity to work in the United States. The nature of the employment was meant to bring me even closer to questions of Iranian culture and identity. To my surprise I suspended my misgivings and accepted the offer, perhaps because I was desperate to dig my way out of insularity and to rediscover the nomadic practices I knew were also part of the Iranian cultural landscape. Immobility and stillness would change nothing, but having a presence within a nation determined to close off its borders to unwelcome outsiders could at least force me to speak again. In short, I longed to shed the homelessness for the unhomely.

The journey required more forms and quests for documents, this time authorization to work in the United States. Ironically the work visa I eventually obtained was stapled to the same Canadian passport that had earlier raised questions about my "true" nationality. Now when I cross the border between Canada and the United States I must record that although a citizen of Canada I am a resident of the United States. I have not attempted to travel to Iran with my new array of documents. Iranian authorities will be required to check my documentation before I board a plane to the United States and they will want to make sure that I have the appropriate and valid authorizations. Why should the agents of a regime so apparently hostile to the United States care whether I, an Iranian citizen, have the necessary visa? Could it be that behind the slogans and the taunts, the Iranian government is adhering to the same international protocols for travel across borders? I wonder how I will be treated when I arrive back in the United States after a journey to Iran. Will I become a personification of the axis of evil again, or will I be regarded as an authorized alien worker? I imagine the plane bringing me back to the United States will be filled with fellow Iranians carrying American passports, and again I will experience that same sense of otherness I felt when I was separated from others with whom I believed I shared an identity, at least as registered in our passports.

My new life in Southern California, where I am surrounded by a sizable Iranian community, has helped me overcome the paralysis that made me focus only on the material realities of my travel documents and their limitations. Being in close proximity with so many Iranians and hearing Persian on the streets and in stores has been a significant factor in my resettlement. My experience, although far more limited in depth and scope, echoes Ali Behdad's move to Los Angeles. In a conversation with Zohreh Sullivan, he says, "Here I am sort of proud of my Iranianness. Yes, it's a kind of arrival. It's also an identity. . . . Los Angeles has given me a way of reconciling with my sense of homelessness. . . . In L.A. you see Iranians all over. And people know about Iranians. You don't have to explain anymore, something that I had to do even in an accepting place like Ann Arbor."[21] Immersed in the familiar sights and sounds of Iranian cultural identity, I can now observe the United States from the vantage point of being inside its borders. If I discern multiple layers of anxieties about immigrants, sometimes expressed in disturbingly racist language, I also witness counter-attempts at erecting walls around the country. The nation from which I believed myself barred is now giving me a glimpse of its own interior fissures. As it exercises control over its borders, the nation is also resisting the creation of "fortress America." Even if the borders are tightly guarded and Homeland Security successfully screens every passenger traveling to the United States, no policy can flush out American citi-

20. Taghi Modarressi, *The Pilgrim's Rules of Etiquette* (New York: Doubleday, 1989), 8.

21. Sullivan, *Exiled Memories*, 249–50.

zens' own sense of multiple belongings. The nation is so permanently "unhomed" that it cannot attend to the inner and less visible borders that tug at its very core. It is in these fissures and ruptures that I can now place my work on Iranian culture.

I can now write about Iranian cultural phenomena, Iranian history, and Persian literature from a new space of interiority. This space is no longer delimited by the high walls my exile erected around me, nor is it safe from unexpected and unsettling incursions. As I contend with the multiplicity of voices and identities that make up one of the largest Iranian diaspora communities, I am once again at ease with uncertainties that accompany movement. This is a far cry from believing that I will ever be free of the constraints imposed on me by legal documents, be they Iranian, Canadian, or American. My travel documents place me in a privileged position to which my counterparts elsewhere are not entitled. More than ever I am now conscious of the barriers that prevent colleagues living in Iran or other parts of the globe from traveling to the United States. These realities necessarily shape the nature of my work, how it is produced, and whether it can reach beyond the borders of the scholarly community in which I am located. I could imagine myself in conversation with my counterparts in Iran and elsewhere, but in reality our exchanges are limited both because travel is far more complicated and because the virtual exchange of ideas is no less constrained by our differences in location. Our preoccupations are affected by our positions within, outside, or across borders. This might well make it impossible to believe in what Nafisi calls the "Republic of the Imagination" as a virtual realm in which differences can be suspended.[22] Even this republic requires rights of access. Our best hope might lie not in finding a safe haven, or a neutral meeting ground, but rather in safe passage through the difficult terrains that make up the vast territory separating us from realities just beyond our reach and comprehension. It is the passage itself that could instill in us the constant need to question the sanctity of our beliefs. For our ideas to travel, we must take on difficult journeys and remain open to being unhomed.

The call to travel, as captured in the poem "The Primal Call" by the modern Iranian poet Sohrab Sepehri, is perhaps all that keeps us from believing that the firm ground beneath our feet is the only place we can find home:

> I must go tonight
> I must pack the suitcase
> which has enough room for my robe of solitude
> And must go where
> I can see epical trees
> towards that wordless enormity which keeps
> calling me.
> Somebody again called Sohrab
> where are my shoes.[23]

As scholars, we too must heed this call and venture toward the "wordless enormity." ↯

22. In her essay "The Stuff That Dreams Are Made Of," Nafisi writes: "Too often we conclude that we are practical creatures, essentially political animals. But in us, there is a far greater impulse—a longing for what I will bluntly call the universal. And it is in this leap toward middle ground that we move closer to what effectively binds us: culture, stories, language. For it is here, in what I like to call the Republic of the Imagination, that we are most humane." In *My Sister, Guard Your Veil; My Brother, Guard Your Eyes*, ed. Lila Azam Zanganeh (Boston: Beacon, 2006), 11.

23. Sohrab Sepehri, "The Primal Call," in *An Anthology of Modern Persian Prose Poetry*, trans. Ahmad Karimi-Hakkak, Modern Persian Literature Series, 1 (Boulder, CO: Westview, 1978), 97.