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Publication Date

2016

Peer reviewed|Thesis/dissertation

Performing (Trans)National Iranianness: The Choreographic Cartographies of
Diasporic Iranian Dancers and Performance Artists

by

Heather Danielle Rastovac

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the

requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy in Performance Studies

and the Designated Emphasis

in

Women, Gender, and Sexuality

in the

Graduate Division

of the

University of California, Berkeley

Committee in charge:

Professor SanSan Kwan, Chair

Professor Catherine Cole

Professor Mino Moallem

Professor Munir Jiwa

Summer 2016

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Abstract

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by

Heather Danielle Rastovac

Doctor of Philosophy in Performance Studies

Designated Emphasis in Women, Gender, and Sexuality

University of California, Berkeley

Professor SanSan Kwan, Chair

Since the end of the Cold War, and increasingly since the events of 9/11 and the subsequent global War on Terror, racialized and gendered representations of the Middle East have circulated through Euro-American news channels, political speeches, popular culture, and global art markets. Many of these representations, which typically overemphasize terrorist men and oppressed women, maintain and reconfigure colonial tropes of Middle Eastern subjects as temporally backward and geographically out of step within the forward-moving plot of modernity. For Iranians specifically, Iran's 1979 Revolution, the Iranian hostage crisis (1979–1981), and the current alleged threat of Iranian nuclear weapons code them within the Euro-American imaginary as belonging to a time prior to and a place outside of Western civilization—an imaginary that is particularly fueled by Iran's official ban on many forms of dance performance. This dissertation argues that, in the face of hegemonic representations of racial, ethnic, and geo-temporal otherness, performance becomes a powerful mode for diasporic Iranians to reveal and destabilize dominant (trans)national narratives and to map out emergent forms of belonging in diasporic spaces. The dissertation engages in ethnography, oral history, discourse analysis, and performance analysis in order to examine the lives and artistic works of diasporic Iranian dancers and performance artists in North America and France, in particular.

While there has been an increase in scholarship on diasporic Arab and South Asian cultural production following 9/11 and the global War on Terror, diasporic Iranian cultural production remains undertheorized. This lack persists despite the fact that contemporary Euro-American geopolitics related to the Middle East and Islam similarly impact the production, circulation, and consumption of diasporic Iranian performance. My dissertation subsequently argues that diasporic Iranians use dance and performance to imagine, contest, and (re)invent “Iranianness,” what it means to be Iranian, through movements that literally and metaphorically negotiate the local and global geopolitics that construct and conflate Middle Eastern and Muslim subjects. Through what I call “choreographic cartographies,” my project develops a framework that theorizes the kinesthetic mapping of diasporic Iranian performers as practices that disrupt and/or sustain state and representational regimes of power. In the corporeal making of space, both on and off stage, diasporic Iranian dancers and performance artists reveal themselves as embodied

maps of the racialized, gendered, classed, and aesthetic politics that travel with and (re)shape their performing bodies.

In performances that range from nationalistic and nostalgic to subcultural and subversive, performers in my study draw from, reconstruct, craft, and/or experiment with a wide range of Iranian movement, aesthetics, and social practices. I argue that, as choreographic cartographies, these performances demonstrate that multiple geo-temporalities emerge through embodied memory and kinesthetic relationality to “home” and displacement. This dissertation reveals how these performances destabilize hegemonic national narratives that determine diaspora as a unidirectional, neoliberal space and time of arrival, contributing instead to scholarship that establishes diaspora as an affective, corporeal, and multi-temporal practice of negotiation and becoming.

Acknowledgements

It is perhaps a cliché but nonetheless true that writing does not happen in isolation and is instead the product of a larger community of interlocutors. It has only been through the guidance, support, and generosity of dozens of people across many years that I have been able to accomplish the tremendous task of completing a dissertation. Throughout the trajectory of my academic studies and doctoral research, I have been blessed with incredibly inspiring colleagues, teachers, and mentors, and unwavering care from friends and family. As such, I want to begin my dissertation with an expression of my profound gratitude to all who have made this work possible.

First and foremost, this dissertation would have not been possible without the generosity of the dancers and performers who have shared their time, experiences, histories, and teachings with me. I have been moved—intellectually, kinesthetically, and affectively—by their stories and their performances. I feel honored by the great level of trust my research subjects have had in me and it has been a privilege to write their stories here. Because of the limited scope and time of a dissertation project, I have not been able to include the insights and performances of every artist who generously gave me their time. Yet, my encounters with each of my research subjects have collectively contributed to the words on these pages and will continue to do so in future iterations of this work.

I am tremendously thankful to my dissertation committee for their critical feedback, insightful guidance, and their belief in my project. Firstly, I am immensely grateful to SanSan Kwan, my dissertation chair, for her kind mentorship, unwavering encouragement, and for rigorously pushing my thinking about my research. I cannot thank her enough for being so generous with her time and support. My many conversations with her about dance, writing, teaching, and life have greatly strengthened my scholarship and my sense of belonging in academia. Catherine Cole has been a steadfast source of support from the start of my doctoral studies in UC Berkeley's department of Theater, Dance, and Performance Studies (TDPS). She is an awe-inspiring advisor, teacher, and community leader. I have greatly benefited from being her student and from her incisive comments on my dissertation. I am also grateful to Mino Moallem's guidance and expertise, which have helped strengthen the intellectual rigor of my project. Her exceptional scholarship has been integral to the theoretical framework of my project. I am also indebted to Munir Jiwa, whose feedback on my dissertation has stretched my thinking in refreshingly unpredictable ways and whose amiable nature always put me at ease during some of the more stressful times of graduate school.

I have been fortunate to study with many exceptional professors at UC Berkeley; their seminars have challenged me to think and write more critically and have greatly contributed to my development as a scholar. In TDPS, I have benefited from coursework with Brandi Wilkins Catanese, Catherine Cole, Abigail De Kosnik, Shannon Jackson, SanSan Kwan, Shannon Steen, and Lisa Wymore. In Gender and Women's Studies (GWS), I have been invigorated by coursework with Paola Bacchetta, Mel Chen, and Trinh T. Minh-ha. Also from GWS, I have greatly benefitted from my conversations with Juana María Rodríguez. From Ethnic Studies and Anthropology, I have grown as a critical thinker from my courses with Laura Pérez and Saba

Mahmood, respectively. Outside of UC Berkeley, I am thankful that Marta Savigliano allowed me to audit her Fall 2010 graduate seminar in UC Riverside's department of dance.

As a dancer-scholar, I have been grateful for the opportunities to participate in and produce artistic work within TDPS during my graduate career. Thanks to Brandi Wilkins Catanese as the faculty advisor of the first-year graduate student performance, *Lab Run*. Thanks to Trinh T. Minh-ha for commissioning original work from Karin Shankar and me for the GWS department's twentieth anniversary celebration. Thanks to Amma Ghartey-Tagoe Kootin as the director of Black Theater Workshop's *At Buffalo*. Thanks to artist-in-residence Paloma McGregor as the facilitator and artistic visionary of *From the Field to the Table*. Finally, my profound gratitude goes to Amara Tabor-Smith for her inspiring and powerful artistic direction of *Stand* in the Berkeley Dance Project 2016. All of these opportunities to engage in practice have provided me both a much-needed physical respite from my studies and a deepening of my studies at the same time.

A vast network of brilliant colleagues and interlocutors has greatly contributed to my growth as a scholar while also providing the time and space to commiserate and enjoy beautifully mundane moments. I am particularly indebted to my cohort—Karin Shankar, Iván Ramos, Hentyle Yapp, and Omar Ricks—for fostering some of the most critical learning/unlearning that I experienced during my graduate career and for their valuable insights during the early stages of my project. I have been particularly grateful for Iván and Karin's brilliance and humor, as we've trudged through our last years as graduate students together. Caitlin Marshall and Paige Johnson have been exceptional writing partners, friends, and sources of deep belly laughs. Ashley Ferro-Murray, Sima Belmar, and Martha Herrera-Lasso have also provided much-needed comic relief while simultaneously stunning me with their intellect and compassion. I am fortunate to have worked with fellow graduate students invested in the advancement of dance studies at UC Berkeley—Kate Mattingly, Chiayi Seetoo, and Naomi Bragin—through the co-organization of the Townsend Center for the Humanities Dance Studies Working Group (DSWG). I am especially thankful to Kate for her generous feedback on dissertation chapters I shared with the DSWG writing group. Other TDPS graduate students who have furthered my thinking on dance include: Ashley Ferro-Murray, Sima Belmar, Randi Evans, Natalia Duong, Juan Manuel Aldape, Christian Nagler, Lashon Daley, and Julia Havard. In my early years as a graduate student, I received valuable words of wisdom from advanced graduate students in my department. Thanks to Scott Wallin, Michelle Martin-Baron, Kate Kokontis, Marc Boucai, April Sizemore-Barber, Emine Fisek, Kate Duffly, Kelly Rafferty, Charlotte McIvor, Nilgun Bayraktar, and Joy Crosby. Cohorts below me have also amazed me with their sharp insights and fresh energy. For this, I am thankful to Megan Hoetger, Takeo Rivera, Josh Williams, Kimberly Richards, Thea Gold, and Seán McKeithan.

I have been privileged that my network of colleagues extends beyond my home department and university and I have greatly benefitted from this broad intellectual community. From other UC Berkeley departments, I am fortunate to know and learn from Tala Khanmalek, Ianna Hawkins Owen, Tria Blu Wakpa, Ugo Edo, Natalee Kēhaulani, Julie Thi Underhill, Ina Kelleher, and Manuel Cueller. Marta Savigliano's Fall 2010 graduate seminar at UC Riverside fostered long-lasting friendships with brilliant and inspiring dance scholars Rachel Carrico, Michelle Summers, J Dellecave, and Natalie Zervou. I am especially grateful for the friendship and

intellectual partnership of Meiver de la Cruz, who has reciprocated endless long-distance support and feedback on the full spectrum of academic life, such as dissertation form and content, job search, and the co-organization of conference panels. Ida Meftahi has also been a particularly valuable interlocutor as an incredible scholar and historian of Iranian dance, and I am deeply grateful for her insight and friendship. Also thanks to my favorite “conference buddy,” Erica Ocecueda, whose fun-loving nature reinforces my faith that academia and fun are not mutually exclusive. Hannah Schwadron and Emelie Mahdavian also deserve thanks as two colleagues I admire and whose friendship I appreciate. Finally, I am indebted to my Slack online community of dissertation writers: @cegin, @freewheel, and @alessandraw. These partners in dissertation writing have been the most incredible source of daily support and encouragement through the ups and downs of completing this project and I owe a lot of my sanity and perseverance to this online group.

Thank you to the incredible TDPS staff, past and present, who have ensured that the various logistics of doing graduate work have been taken care of: Robin Davidson, Marni Davis, David Kim, Megan Lowe, Michael Mansfield, Grace Leach, Wil Leggett, Melissa Schultz, Wendy Sparks, and Mary Ajideh. Thanks also to Althea Grannum-Cummings, for her administrative support in the department of Gender and Women’s Studies.

I also want to acknowledge the influence of two of my former mentors at the University of Washington in Seattle, Juliet McMains in Dance and Firoozeh Papan Matin in Iranian Studies, who were instrumental in my education and who encouraged me to apply to graduate school at the doctoral level. I also want to express my gratitude to Rachel Chapman from Anthropology, who, after taking her Critical Ethnography graduate seminar, completely changed my understanding of what academic work can and should be. I have also greatly benefitted from various programs, organizations, and individuals who supported my academic studies and made it possible for me to navigate and thrive in academia. Of these, I am indebted to the University of Washington’s McNair Scholars program and to the TRiO Student Success Services program while I was a student at South Seattle Community College, with special thanks to Marcia Kato and Doug Tompson. I also extend special gratitude to Polly Trout, the founder of Seattle Education Access, from whom I received extensive moral and logistical support in the beginning of my academic trajectory. Finally, Kree Arvanitas, Maya Vajra, and Stan and Michelle Rosen deserve special recognition as individuals whose various forms of support during different stages of my academic journey are profoundly appreciated.

I have been blessed with decades of friendship with many individuals I have known before my time in academia or from outside of the academy. I cannot emphasize enough how much love and respite I have received from these diverse circles of friends, even if I am not able to name them all here. Sonja Hinz deserves special acknowledgement, however, as a dear friend with whom I have shared dance, intellectual conversations, and a deep, meaningful friendship for many years. As my roommate during my time as a community college student, and as one of the few people I knew at the time who had completed a Bachelor’s Degree, I can say with certainty that she was among the earliest sources of inspiration for me to pursue higher education. For that and for her sisterhood, I am eternally grateful.

Thank you to all of the dancers, musicians, and art-makers I have worked with and learned from over the past twenty years. Particular gratitude goes to the members of Shourangeez music ensemble, who took in Sonja and me as family, and to who I owe a great deal for shaping my artistic and academic journey.

With profound gratitude for their love and support, I thank my mother, Karen, twin brother, Justin, and older half-siblings, Lynn and Mark. Specifically, I cannot sufficiently express my appreciation for the blood, sweat, and tears my mother has shed in her loving efforts to provide for her children. It is from her that I have learned the most essential skills needed for the undertaking of a dissertation—a strong work ethic, resilience, tenacity, and passion. Knowing that the completion of my dissertation brings her great pride makes all of the years of hard work completely worth it.

The ultimate recognition goes to my husband and best friend, Amir Akbarzadeh. Amir's unwavering support and great sense of humor has sustained me through the emotional ups and downs of graduate coursework, research, and dissertation writing. While I am so thankful that he encourages me to pursue my lofty goals, I am simultaneously grateful that he has helped me keep a healthy work-life balance by insisting on Friday night dinner dates. I thank him for his stamina and patience throughout this long process, and I thank him for believing in my abilities to succeed, even (and especially) when I had difficulty believing it myself.

In loving memory of Ayla, who most intimately spent the last five and a half months of writing this dissertation with me. I dedicate the labor and the birth of this dissertation to you.

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Introduction

Performing (Trans)National Iranianness

In October 2001, at a small event in my hometown of Seattle, a friend introduced me to Yusef, an Iranian musician who played the stringed instruments *tar* and oud (*barbat*) in the local Iranian music ensemble, Shourangeez. The ensemble consisted of Iranian and Kurdish musicians and vocalists who performed traditional Iranian music for both Iranian American audiences at local cultural events and for diverse audiences within educational settings and “world” music and dance circuits.¹ Upon hearing that I had (albeit very limited) studio training in classical and regional Iranian dances, Yusef immediately recruited me (and eventually my dance partner, Sonja Hinz) into the ensemble as dancers.² As enthusiastic as we were to join, we were slightly confused as to why we were being recruited as two white women who had limited experience with Iranian dances when we felt certain there were plenty more qualified Iranian women in the community. Upon our inquiry, the members of the ensemble responded, “Well, a couple of Iranian women used to dance with us, but they weren’t professional, and, you know, they got married, so...”

After fifteen years performing Iranian dances for a variety of audiences in the United States, I have come to understand the layers of cultural politics that are embedded within this seemingly inconsequential response, and with which the ensemble negotiated. Firstly, the ensemble’s response that “they [the former Iranian dancers] weren’t professional” highlights the framing of those who have been formally trained in a dance studio as “professional,” even if the dancer has no performance experience with the specific dance form or cultural experience among Iranian communities, as was the case with Sonja and me. Because Shourangeez was invested in gaining legitimacy among world music and dance audiences, in part for the ensemble’s sustainability, the recruitment of dancers thus became a site of competition between non-Iranian dancers having been formally trained in Iranian dances and Iranians who grew up socially dancing many of the dances in informal gatherings. A professional presentation of world dance simultaneously expects “authentic” music and costuming and a tightly executed, complex choreography that satiates the world dance audience’s desire for spectacle. Learning world (also sometimes referred to as “ethnic”) dances in the dance studio often prepares students to deliver

¹ The framework of this dissertation, considers world music and dance as genres and cultural industries, drawing from the work of Roshanak Kheshti and Marta Savigliano. Kheshti theorizes the “World music culture industry” as the “commercial doppelgänger” of ethnomusicology. She explains, “World music has been instrumental in the formation of a twentieth-century cosmopolitan subject constituted alongside and through technologies and systems of knowledge production...[and] represents an aurality that is formative of the racialized, gendered, and classed subjectivities of listeners, as well as performers, in the context of an emergent late modernity.” Roshanak Kheshti, *Modernity’s Ear: Listening to Race and Gender in World Music* (New York: New York University Press, 2015), 5-6. In Savigliano’s definition of “World Dance,” it is a globalized dance category and product that, “represents others’ dancing as it designates a specific market for the consumption of particular kinds of dances that work at fascinating with difference as they elicit culturally progressive cosmopolitan values.” Marta Elena Savigliano, “Worlding Dance and Dancing Out There in the World,” in *Worlding Dance*, ed. Susan Leigh Foster (London and New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2009), 165.

² Sonja and I both had eclectic training in dance, including Middle Eastern and Central Asian dances, salsa, ballet, and modern dance, among others. Our initial training in Iranian dances had taken place over a course of several years attending the annual weeklong Middle Eastern Music and Dance Retreat in Mendocino, California. See: Mendocino Middle Eastern Music & Dance Camp website, accessed May 22, 2016, <http://www.middleeastcamp.com/Mendocino.html>. At the retreat, Robyn Friend was our teacher of classical Iranian dance and regional dances from Iran. See: Robyn Friend’s website, accessed May 22, 2016, <http://home.earthlink.net/~rcfriend/>.

this spectacle through an emphasis on virtuosity and spatial configurations oriented for proscenium stages. As such, the paradoxical demand for professionalism and authenticity in world dance circuits can privilege those who have been formally trained in dance studios while remaining inaccessible to dancers who have grown up *dancing* the dance in informal and social settings.

The latter half of Shourangeez members' response—"... and, you know, they [the former Iranian dancers] got married, so..."—initially felt particularly perplexing for Sonja and me. After several months performing with the ensemble, however, we came to find out that as much as many Iranians love social dancing at parties and are delighted to see traditional dance performances at diasporic cultural events, staged dance performance itself can come with a great deal of social stigma for individuals who perform for the spectatorship of audiences outside of family and social gatherings. Sonja and I could only infer that the female Iranian dancers who had formerly danced with Shourangeez struggled with the Iranian community's ambivalence toward dance performers, and that perhaps these pressures increased once the dancers got married. As non-Iranian dancers, we were slightly more, although not completely, immune to these social standards among the Iranian communities in which we performed. Instead, we more often garnered intrigue and amusement among many of our Iranian audiences that two non-Iranian women would be so interested in Persian culture. In an interview with me, Fatameh Borhani, a former dancer with the Mahalli Dancers in Iran in the 1970s, corroborates, explaining, "Most Iranian people, they respect and appreciate an American doing Iranian dance. Really, they love it. But they don't want their daughter to do it because they think *raqqaas* [dancer] is a bad thing."³

As a dancer performing and teaching Iranian dances in the United States, the fact that I am non-Iranian has not only provided me a particular place of exception among diasporic Iranian communities, which Borhani's statement highlights, but my intersectional privilege as a white, American woman has also protected me from the xenophobic racism experienced by many Iranians (and racialized Others) in the U.S. at the same time that I am able to derive multiple forms of pleasure and cultural/financial capital from my participation in the dance forms. After a couple years performing with the Shourangeez ensemble, I began teaching weekly dance classes at a small studio in Seattle. After one of the ensemble's musicians saw a flier in which I advertised my classes as "Dances of the Iranian World," he suggested I change the title to "Dances of the Persian World." According to him, it would eliminate the association of the dance form with the erroneous images of violent and irrational religiosity that the Islamic Republic of Iran has come to embody in contemporary Euro-American mainstream media and global political discourses. The simple change from "Iranian" to "Persian," he explained, would likely result in recruiting a higher number of students. This suggestion reflects the types of discourses with which many Iranians (as well as other Middle Easterners and Muslims) contend on a regular basis, and it illustrates how many diasporic Iranians choose to identify with the designation "Persian" over "Iranian," often with specific identification with the pre-Islamic Persian empire. As Minoo Moallem explains, "Claiming Persia as an ancient civilization and Persianness as a site of cultural belonging strategically dislocates Iranians from a modern history of immigration and displacement, enabling them to deal with anti-Iranian racism and

³ Fatameh Borhani. Skype interview by Heather Rastovac. Tape recording. January 16, 2016. I discuss the Mahalli Dancers at length in chapter one.

xenophobia.”⁴ Additionally, for many non-Iranian dancers interested in world dances, “Persia” (more so than “Iranian”) conjures exotic, Orientalist images of ancient dances that attract many female dance students seeking to deepen their woman-centered spirituality through an exploration of “Eastern” dance practices.⁵

The questions and concerns around racialized Euro-American geopolitics, world dance markets, and diasporic forms of national belonging/unbelonging that arose from these early experiences performing and teaching Iranian dances among diasporic Iranian communities and non-Iranian audiences in the United States form the early seeds of this project. Through examining how Iranianness—what it means to be Iranian—is performed, imagined, (re)invented, and contested in North America and France, this dissertation queries how dance, in particular, becomes a productive mode for diasporic Iranians to reveal, destabilize, and at times reinforce dominant (trans)national geopolitical rhetoric that geographically and temporally frames Iranian identities. Since the end of the Cold War, and increasingly since the events of 9/11 and the subsequent global War on Terror, racialized and gendered representations of the Middle East have circulated through Euro-American news channels, political speeches, and various forms of popular culture. Many of these representations, which typically overemphasize terrorist men and oppressed women, maintain and reconfigure colonial Orientalist tropes of Middle Eastern subjects as temporally backward and geographically out of step within the forward-moving plot of modernity. For Iranians specifically, Iran’s 1979 Revolution (which marks the overthrow of the Pahlavi Monarchy and the instatement of the Islamic Republic), the Iranian hostage crisis (1979–1981), and the current alleged threat of Iranian nuclear weapons code Iranians within the Euro-American imaginary as belonging to a time prior to and a place outside of Western civilization.⁶ In less conspicuous and more consumable ways, static and essentialized images that emphasize a pre-modern Iran circulate in various art markets through exoticized (and auto-exoticized) notions of the timeless pre-Islamic Persian Empire and “ancient” spiritual dances.

This dissertation is specifically staged around Iran’s diasporic community that took shape after Iran’s 1979 Revolution and the eight-year war with Iraq (1980–1988). For many émigré Iranians, diverse experiences of displacement were compounded by xenophobic climates across a variety of Euro-American sites of relocation. By examining the role of dance and performance in shaping the post-Revolution identities of Iranians living in North America and France, in particular, this dissertation reveals how performance simultaneously illuminates the precarious conditions of national belonging for diasporic Iranian subjects while also enabling them to map out diverse forms of belonging within the nation state and within both local and transnational communities. Equipped with a complex geo-temporal history, Iranian dance and performance in the diaspora are especially imbued with reconfigured, transnational, and intertextual

⁴ Mino Moallem, *Between Warrior Brother and Veiled Sister: Islamic Fundamentalism and the Politics of Patriarchy in Iran* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2005), 197.

⁵ In Sunaina Maira’s analysis of American imperialism and the performance of another popular “Eastern” form of belly dance, she queries “what it means for American women to stage Middle Eastern dance at a time when the United States is engaged in war and occupation in the Middle East and there is intensified preoccupation with the figure of the...Muslim ‘other,’ and particularly with the image of oppressed Middle Eastern and Muslim femininity.” Sunaina Maira, “Belly Dancing: Arab Face, Orientalist Feminism, and U.S. Empire,” *American Quarterly* 60, no. 2 (2008): 317-318. Even though this dissertation does not focus on non-Iranian dancers and dance students, I do frame the choreographic work of the Iranian artists in my study against the representations that the conditions of the global War on Terror produce.

⁶ Iran’s 1979 Revolution is also variously described as the Iranian Revolution and the Islamic Revolution. I discuss the 1979 Revolution and its impact later in the dissertation introduction.

significations as they traverse across global stages and interface with both diasporic Iranian audiences and the geopolitical and biopolitical regimes of new locations of domicile. What happens when what Minoo Moallem describes as the Iranian “civic body” is (dis)located in the diaspora?⁷ What new forms of inscriptions does it experience and produce? What traces of the Iranian nation are maintained, rejected, and reformulated? How are constructions and experiences of gender, sexuality, race, class, and religion reconfigured and negotiated within new forms of national masculinities and femininities, and how does diasporic Iranian dance and performance reflect and produce these multifarious subject formations?

By investigating how diasporic Iranian performers and performances negotiate the local and global geopolitics that construct and conflate Middle Eastern and Muslim subjects, this dissertation ultimately explores how, through their performances and self-marketing, diasporic artists mobilize multiple and sometimes contradictory identifications with “Iranianness” that are intimately entwined with the tropes of “freedom” that are themselves entwined with discourses surrounding Iranian dancers and performers residing outside of Iran. Because of Iran’s state-implemented ban on many forms of dance performance (in effect since the 1979 Revolution), dancers, audiences, and media sources often construct diasporic spaces as offering Iranian dancers the freedom to fully realize themselves as artists. As I examine, in this narrative, the Iranian dancer is framed as needing to be saved from the oppressive Iranian state, which is implicitly and explicitly associated with Islam.⁸ The result, however, is a larger rhetoric surrounding Iran and its displaced dancers that actually upholds the (neo)colonial narrative of the “West” as the beacon of exceptionalism, freedom, and benevolence.

Choreographic Cartographies as Embodied Archives

In this dissertation, I understand “choreography” as a conceptual framework that refers to the employment of bodily movement in the creation of performance that is consciously pre-determined and/or improvised and that simultaneously draws upon the movement vocabularies rooted in the body’s multifaceted cultural repertoires. This understanding of choreography moves beyond Pierre Bourdieu’s theory of *habitus* as his limited view of the body, according to Susan Foster, identifies it “as a vehicle for channeling culture rather than creating culture.”⁹ Instead, the framework of choreography that I employ throughout all of my chapters adopts Diana Taylor’s theories on cultural repertoires, which highlight the body’s capacity to produce culture, to store and (re)create memory, to reinvigorate histories repressed by colonial domination, and to network with other repertoires in the construction of new alliances and affiliations. My conception of choreography also adopts Cynthia Novak’s theories on the body’s ability to embody, express, enact, and invert multiple and/or contradictory cultural values.¹⁰

At the same time, however, my dissertation recognizes the hierarchical legacies and power relations within which notions and practices of choreography have emerged and continue

⁷ On the “civic body” see Moallem, *Between Warrior Brother and Veiled Sister*.

⁸ In putting “oppressive” in scare quotes, I do not mean to imply that forms of oppression do not occur in Iran. Rather, I wish to draw attention to how, in political and popular Euro-American discourse, “oppression” becomes an automatic and unquestioned moralistic qualifier affixed to the construction of the Islamic Republic.

⁹ Susan Leigh Foster, “Worlding Dance—An Introduction,” in *Worlding Dance*, ed. Susan Leigh Foster (London and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 7; Diana Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003).

¹⁰ Cynthia J. Novak, *Sharing the Dance: Contact Improvisation and American Culture* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1990).

to operate, as well as the ways in which choreography aesthetically and corporeally disciplines subjects. In this, I work to challenge notions that choreography is a universal rubric for reading/making dances or is a product of individual authorship— notions that are embedded in the legacies of influential ethnologists and anthropologists such as Curt Sachs and Alan Lomax, dancer Rudolf Laban’s systems of movement analysis, and scholar Pegge Vissicaro’s recent work on computer generated ethnochoreological systems of movement comparison.¹¹ Instead, I render choreography as a means of subject formation that brings together iterative performances of cultural repertoires (movement vocabularies as well as performances of gender, race, sexuality, and class) with a performer’s conscious selection of movement in relation to shifting moments and locales, ultimately engaging with the co-presence of witnesses for the co-creation of cultural meaning and co-production of culture. Indeed this expansive definition of choreography generates my final chapter’s examination of the works of Amir Baradaran, as he extends beyond what would typically be categorized as dance and introduces the opportunity to read and examine Iranian performance art choreographically.

Through what I call “choreographic cartographies,” my project ultimately develops a critical framework that theorizes the kinesthetic mapping of diasporic Iranian performers that at once trace and blur the material, corporeal, and affective routes between geographies and temporalities *through* the dancing/performing body. I put forth the theorization of choreographic cartographies to bring the contemporary diasporic cultural productions I discuss in chapters two through four in proximity with the historical legacies of dance, performance, and the body in the Iranian cultural sphere discussed in the first chapter, where I address the role of ballet and “national dance” technique, choreography, and ideology as part of the nation state’s modernization biopolitics, and as a key aesthetic regime through and around which many diasporic dancers situate their own choreographies and subjectivities.¹² In the corporeal making of space, both on and off stage, diasporic Iranian dancers and performance artists reveal themselves as embodied maps of the racialized, gendered, classed, and aesthetic politics that travel with and (re)shape their performing bodies. In performances that range from nationalistic and nostalgic to subcultural and subversive, performers in my study draw from, reconstruct, craft, and/or experiment with a wide range of Iranian movement, aesthetics, and social practices to articulate hybrid identities and aesthetics (discussed in chapter two), to forge cultural and political citizenship in diasporic spaces (discussed in chapter three), and to choreograph participatory performances that destabilize secular and Islamophobic frameworks through new media and queer performance (discussed in chapter four). As choreographic cartographies, these performances demonstrate that multiple geo-temporalities emerge through embodied memory and kinesthetic relationality to “home” and displacement. Particularly as Iranian culture (and Iranian studies) has been predominantly literary and static object focused (i.e. poetry, architecture, etc.), the emphasis of embodiment, memory, and affect in choreographic cartographies becomes all the more crucial in theorizing performance in displacement.

¹¹ Foster, “Worlding Dance,” 3-7.

¹² The concept of biopolitics as theorized by Michel Foucault examines the regulatory and disciplinary strategies and technologies through which authoritative regimes of knowledge and power manage human life processes, such as birth, death, illness, hygiene, and population control. Michel Foucault, *“Society Must Be Defended”: Lectures at the Collège De France 1975–1976*, eds. Mauro Bertani and Alessandro Fontana, trans. David Macey (New York: Picador, 2003).

Methodology and Outline of the Artists in My Study

In this study, I am simultaneously an “insider” as a long-time performer of Iranian dances and an “outsider” as an individual who is not of Iranian heritage. Being a performer of Iranian dances has given me kinesthetic insight into the forms that many of the dancers in my study perform and teach while being a practitioner has also allowed me access to the relatively small (although growing) transnational community of diasporic Iranian dancers and performance artists that spans North America and Europe. Throughout the years before and during my doctoral fieldwork, I have studied with some of these dancers, performed at the same events as several of these dancers, and have had many informal in-person and virtual social interactions with these artists as part of our broader arts communities, all of which wholly shape the words in these pages. More than about particular dances or performances, then, this is a dissertation about diasporic Iranian performers themselves: their stories, experiences, perspectives, and creative work. At the same time, these artists’ performances are integral to their lives, for their artistic work, marketing, and the reception of them provide critical insight into the social, political, and professional contexts within which they forge their lives as Iranians and as artists.

This research expands the limited archive of Iranian dance in the diaspora, a field that has been historically dominated by non-Iranian dancers, artistic directors, and scholars (albeit very committed and well-researched ones). Within this archive, non-Iranian dancers and researchers have had greater access to academic circles, publishing, grants, and performance structures, among other resources. Also, in the history of Iranian dance in the U.S., non-Iranians have often been privileged as choreographers and artistic directors with typically higher visibility among both Iranian and non-Iranian audiences.¹³ While many non-Iranian dancers and choreographers extol dancers of Iranian and Central Asian heritage as “authentic” sources for learning Iranian dances, I have also heard prominent non-Iranian artistic directors on more than one occasion refer to diasporic Iranian artistic directors and their dance ensembles as “community groups,” somehow implying that they are not experienced or “real” artists or choreographers but rather amateurs dancing for the cultural gratification of themselves and their mainly diasporic Iranian audiences. As a non-Iranian researcher with access to the resources of the academy (or, in other words, my position as “outsider” within these communities), I am cognizant of my position of power regarding knowledge production about diasporic Iranians and performance. I am invested, however, in mobilizing my position to expand and even complicate this non-Iranian-dominated archive with the voices, histories, memories, experiences, and artistic visions of Iranian dancers and performance artists themselves.

At the same time, I conceive of my work as a partial auto-ethnography, understanding that an ethnographer’s narrative reveals as much as, if not more than, her own desires, positions, and perceptions than those of her subjects. Many dance scholars reflexively interrogate the embodied status of the researcher and theorize the implications of one’s own body in an encounter and co-presence with the “Other” (both living and historical). Resisting simple notions

¹³ Some prominent non-Iranian dancers, teachers, artistic directors, and researchers of Iranian dances include: Anthony Shay (former artistic director of AVAZ International Dance Theatre); Robyn Friend; Sharlyn Sawyer (artistic director of Ballet Afsaneh); Katherine St. John (artistic director of Eastern Arts International Dance Theatre); Laurel Victoria Gray (artistic director of Silk Road Dance Company); Helene Eriksen (artistic director of Anar Dana); and Miriam Peretz (artistic director of Nava Dance Collective).

of what it means to be “global citizens,”¹⁴ I consider what it means to belong in co-presence, in a collective sense, with others in a differentiated and unevenly globalized world. In doing so, I draw on an important turn in dance studies and dance ethnography, which builds on the work of various feminist, “third world,” and Western ethnographers, researchers, historians, and philosophers who are concerned with ethics and embodiment—particularly Marta Savigliano’s contribution to *Worlding Dance*, where she expresses a desire to immerse world dance debates in the “so-called critical turn, into ethics and the renewed discussions on identity and otherness as challenged under globalism and Empire.”¹⁵ She attempts to do this through introducing the concept of world dance as “neighboring,” the notion of *vecinos* (neighbors) and *vecinidad* (neighborliness) as “instances of proximity—which do not constitute an idyllic relationality, but rather a permanent negotiation based on encounters among others, without (and outside) the ‘same’ as an identitarian foundation.”¹⁶ Savigliano’s claims are akin to SanSan Kwan’s “autoethnographic choreography,” a reflexive examination of her own movement in which she attempts to know space through a sensation of collective movement,¹⁷ and Priya Srinivasan’s method of the “unruly spectator” that doesn’t settle into a passive stance and is instead moved toward embodied action.¹⁸ In thinking about what it means to be “bodies in motion” then, belonging to an ever increasingly and unevenly globalized world where “bodyscapes” and “-scapes” converge,¹⁹ I align the methodological approaches of my dissertation project with feminist and critical ethnographers who engage in ethnographic practice that regards the uneven power relations between ethnographer/subject.²⁰

To this end, a multi-sited, multi-methodological, and interdisciplinary approach has been integral to realizing this project about the social and aesthetic performances of Iranianness that these artists produce. Between 2012 and 2016, I conducted formal in-depth open interviews and oral histories with fifteen artists, which complement the many informal conversations with approximately three dozen performers, students, and audience members over the course of this time. Most of the interviews I conducted were held in person and some interviews were

¹⁴ A notion of “global citizenship” as posed by Hardt and Negri (2000) has become a highly debated concept, one that Sunaina Maira interrogates in her discussion of South Asian youth in post-9/11 America. (2008). Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000); Sunaina Maira, “Flexible Citizenship/Flexible Empire: South Asian Muslim Youth in Post-9/11 America,” *American Quarterly* 60, no. 3 (2008): 697-720.

¹⁵ Savigliano, “Worlding Dance and Dancing Out There in the World,” 183.

¹⁶ *Ibid*, 184.

¹⁷ SanSan Kwan, *Kinesthetic City: Dance and Movement in Chinese Urban Spaces* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

¹⁸ Priya Srinivasan, *Sweating Saris: Indian Dance as Transnational Labor* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2012).

¹⁹ Arjun Appadurai defines “-scapes” (ethnoscapes, mediascapes, technoscapes, financescapes, and ideoscapes) as spheres of life that, through movement, connect people, places, ideas, and capital through complex networks. Paula Saukko views Appadurai’s “-scapes” not as exhaustive but as a heuristic with which to build other notions pertinent to life. For Saukko, she develops the “bodyscape” as a sphere of life that relates specifically to corporeality within globalized or transnational contexts. Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1996); Paula Saukko, *Doing Research in Cultural Studies: An Introduction to Classical and New Methodological Approaches* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2003), 181-183.

²⁰ See: Srinivasan, *Sweating Saris*; Kamala Visweswaran, *Fictions of Feminist Ethnography* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1994); D. Soyini Madison, *Critical Methodology: Method, Ethics, and Performance*, 2nd edition (Los Angeles, CA: Sage, 2012); Trinh T. Minh-ha, *Women, Native, Other: Writing Postcoloniality and Feminism* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1989).

conducted over Skype. I directly approached my research subjects for interviews through either email, social media, or in person. I had personally known some of the artists in my study through taking dance classes with them or performing at the same events; others had never met me previous to my initial contact with them. To do this work, I traveled to the cities of artists' residence in order to conduct interviews, take dance classes and workshops, and attend performances. These sites include the San Francisco Bay Area, Los Angeles, New York City in the U.S.; Vancouver and Toronto in Canada; Paris and Marseille in France; and Istanbul, Turkey.

I also engaged in participant-observation at dance festivals, classes, and workshops, contextualizing these experiences with a broad spectrum of online and hard copy promotional materials, critic reviews, and news media about the artists and Iranian dance/dancers more generally. This includes the biannual Tirgan Iranian Festival in Toronto in 2013 and 2015 and the International Iranian Dance Conference in San Francisco in its inaugural year 2012, and in Boston in 2015.²¹ Above all, I analyzed numerous live and recorded performances to texture these conversations and experiences. As the performers interviewed for my study currently reside in the United States, Canada, and France and their performance works circulate transnationally on You Tube and other virtual social networks, this research was conducted through a variety of real and virtual domains.²² In many cases, the artists in my study perform across North America and/or Europe through small transnational networks of diasporic Iranian communities and world/ethnic dance festivals and performance art circles. However, the circulations of these artists' work on the Internet creates a significant portion of these artists' audience, since these artists tend to have limited resources for travel (especially for those who direct large dance companies) and because many producers are unable or unwilling to cover all of the necessary costs. To this end, while I have personally attended many of my subjects' live performances, all of the performances I analyze in the dissertation are based on digital recordings of performances (with the exception of Amir Baradaran's *Marry Me to the End of Love*, which I organized to bring to University of California, Berkeley in November 2012).

My dissertation's first chapter draws from interviews I've conducted and/or discussions I've had with Iranian dancers and artistic directors based in the U.S. and Canada who had performed in Iran before the 1979 Revolution: Aram Bayat (Canada); Fatameh Borhani (Canada); Indira Mehrpour (U.S.), and Azita Sahebjam (Canada). These dancers—including Sheila Eghbali (U.S.), whose interviews also inform chapter one—perform and/or teach national, classical, and regional Iranian dance forms that are oriented toward the preservation and transmission of Iranian dance for future generations of diasporic Iranians, as well as a means through which to culturally educate general American and Canadian audiences.²³ Since chapter one traces the movement qualities and biopolitics of national Iranian dance (a form developed in

²¹ Inaugurated in 2006, Toronto's Tirgan Iranian Festival is the world's largest Iranian arts and culture festival. Lasting four days, both the 2013 and 2015 festivals attracted over 130,000 visitors. See: Tirgan's website, accessed May 27, 2017, <http://www.tirgan.ca/>. The International Iranian Dance Conference has been organized by Sheila Eghbali and the nonprofit organization, Iranian Performing Arts (based in Boston, MA). At the time of writing, there have been two conferences: San Francisco, CA 2012 and Boston, MA 2015. See: International Iranian Dance Conference website, created by Sheila Eghbali, accessed November 19, 2015, <http://sheilaeghbali.com/IIDCMain.html>.

²² See: Natalie M. Underberg and Elayne Zorn, *Digital Ethnography: Anthropology, Narrative, and New Media* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2013); Christine Hine, *Ethnography for the Internet: Embedded, Embodied and Everyday* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015).

²³ I discuss the genres of national and classical Iranian dance later in the dissertation introduction and at length in chapter one.

Iran during the mid- to late-twentieth century) from Iran to the Iranian diaspora, the chapter also includes a close analysis of the discourses produced by British choreographer Robert de Warren (U.S.), who directed the Mahalli Dancers (Iran's state-supported dance company that performed national and regional Iranian dances) from 1967 to 1978, and who was the featured choreographer of the International Iranian Dance Conference 2012 and 2015 (both of which I attended as a participant observer).

Chapter two focuses on the choreographic works and professional experiences of Iranian dancers who are developing contemporary Iranian dance, an intentionally hybrid form that experiments with Iranian movement and aesthetic traditions in ways that reflect their diasporic subjectivities and experiences, challenge strict notions of authenticity, and that expand the possibility of what Iranian dance is and can be. For this chapter, I interviewed and discuss the work of Sahar Dehghan (France), Shahrzad Khorsandi (U.S.), and Banafsheh Sayyad (U.S.). Chapter three subsequently examines French media representations of Paris-based dancer Afshin Ghaffarian and the American-produced film, *Desert Dancer* (2014), a fictional film that is based on Ghaffarian's life-story as a dancer in Iran. Finally, chapter four examines three performances by new media performance artist, Amir Baradaran (U.S.). Both chapters three and four also draws from interviews with the artists.²⁴

The research subjects that constitute the pages of this dissertation highlight that there is not a single, homogenous experience of diasporic Iranian dancers and performance artists. These artists, their experiences, and their perspectives contribute to a varied Iranian diaspora, which is diverse in often-fluctuating economic standing, political and religious beliefs, as well as in terms of migration histories that are shaped by varying factors such as: the social-political situation in Iran when they left, at what age they emigrated and to where they emigrated, and whether or not they continue to travel back to Iran. Through in-depth interviews with the transnational network of Iranians living in the U.S., Canada, and France, I have attempted to integrate a wide range of personal backgrounds and perspectives on dance and performance in order to at least partially reflect the heterogeneity of diasporic Iranian communities while also not claiming that the archive I have constructed is representative of all diasporic Iranian dancers and performance artists. What emerges is a rich portrait of the choreographic cartographies of diasporic Iranian dance, as well as the complex social and cultural dynamics that inform them and are produced through them.

Dance in the Iranian Cultural Sphere

For those in my study who do define their work as "Iranian" or "Persian" dance, there is a wide range of movement aesthetics and qualifying adjectives, such as classical, contemporary, traditional, folk, mystical, or, as Shahrzad Khorsandi calls her work, "Persian ballet." Some

²⁴ Largely since the space and scope of a dissertation is limited, I was unable to include in my study all of the artists who generously shared with me their stories and their time. As the scope of my dissertation's research questions and arguments developed over the course of my fieldwork, the artists' stories and creative works that I discuss and analyze in the dissertation prompted particular lines of inquiry and/or provide particular insights for the analytical and political questions and concerns that have become central to my project. My choices of whom to include in this dissertation do not imply that those featured here are more significant or more eminent artists than those who are not included in this iteration of my research. Furthermore, I have arranged my interpretations of artists' work and stories according to the theoretical frameworks of my project and, as such, my interpretations may not fully reflect the views or concerns of the artists themselves.

artists use other names for their dance styles, even if one who is familiar with Iranian dance aesthetics would call an individual's work "Iranian" or "Persian." For instance, Banafsheh Sayyad, known among many Iranian dance enthusiasts for her fusion of Flamenco, Iranian dance, and Sufi whirling, calls her work "Dance of Oneness" and "Contemporary Sacred Dance." Other dancers such as Paris-based Afshin Ghaffarian could be more adequately labeled a contemporary dancer whose movement vocabulary is in line with the Euro-American lineage of modern and contemporary dance, yet he engages with and experiments with a wide range of Iranian movement and aesthetic traditions. The artist I write about in my final chapter, Amir Baradaran, is a new media performance artist who, while not a dancer, nonetheless conceives of his participatory performance work as "choreography of the social."

Accounting for the multiple and dynamic definitions and experiences of Iranian and Persian dance forms requires an understanding of the linguistic and geopolitical dimensions of "Persia" and "Persian" in Iran and its diaspora. Indeed, the terms "Iranian" or "Persian" dance are loose ones, as the forms typically labeled as such vary in origin, movements, music, and costuming. Furthermore, these forms have not been codified and the lineages of teachers have not, until very recently, been adequately or prolifically documented.²⁵ Both Persian-speakers and non-Persian-speakers often use the terms "Persian" and "Iranian" interchangeably when describing the dances in English.²⁶ Nonetheless, "Persian dance" still pervades as the term that the majority of performers, teachers, and audiences in North America and Europe, both Iranian and non-Iranian, utilize in order to describe and/or advertise the dances.²⁷ Additionally, "Persian dance" among Iranians, when spoken about in English, has also come to define what Iranians *do* in social events such as parties. For example, upon seeing an individual who is not Iranian but is versed in what dance historian Anthony Shay has described as "solo improvised dance"²⁸ moves appropriate to an Iranian context, many Iranians will exclaim, "Where did she learn to dance *Persian*?"

Despite the popular usage of the term "Persian dance," Shay insists that the term is inaccurate and that "there is no specifically 'Persian' dance, that is, a dance form that is performed exclusively by the Persian-speaking population in contrast to other Iranians."²⁹ For instance, some of the dances often lumped under the umbrella term "Persian dance" include

²⁵ See: Ida Meftahi, *Gender and Dance in Modern Iran: Biopolitics on Stage* (London and New York: Routledge, 2016); Anthony Shay, *Choreophobia: Solo Improvised Dance in the Iranian World* (Costa Mesa, CA: Mazda Publishers, 1999). Dr. Robyn Friend has also contributed to written research on Iranian dances. See: Robyn Friend's website, accessed May 22, 2016, <http://home.earthlink.net/~rcfriend/>. Nima Kiann, former dancer with the Iranian National Ballet Company, has additionally endeavored to document the history of Iranian dance, although he focuses almost exclusively on "ancient," ballet, national, and classical Iranian dance forms. See: Nima Kiann, "Persian Dance and its Forgotten History," 2002, Iran Chamber Society, accessed May 22, 2016, http://www.iranchamber.com/cinema/articles/persian_dance_history01.php.

²⁶ When Persian-speakers of Iranian heritage refer to these dance forms, they either use the general term *raqs* (dance), *raqs-e Iraani* (Iranian dance) when referring to dances from Iran, or will specifically address a regional style, like *raqs-e Kurdi* (Kurdish dance) or *raqs-e Bandari* (dance from the southern Bandar region).

²⁷ Because of the context in which they are working, these dancers tend to use languages other than Persian to describe and advertise their work. Many of the dancers who perform and teach in European countries use English on their websites, such as: Sahar Dehghan (France), Helia Bandeh (Netherlands), and Medea Mahdavi (UK). Others use the language of their country of residence, such as Aram Ghasemy (Italy) and Rana Gorgani (France). Across the majority of these websites, these artists use the term "Persian dance" either in English or in the respective language of the host country where they reside.

²⁸ Shay *Choreophobia*; Anthony Shay, *Choreographic Politics: State Folk Dance Companies, Representation, and Power* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2002).

²⁹ Shay, *Choreophobia*, 97.

dances of minority groups in Iran and the Iranian cultural sphere who are not ethnically Persian, such as those of the Kurds, Qashquai, and Azeri. For this reason, Shay chooses instead to use the term “Iranian” in order to “encompass the cultural and aesthetic expression of the wide Central Asian regions that [are detailed in his study]: the Caucasus, Iran, Afghanistan, and Muslim areas of the former Soviet Union, such as Uzbekistan and Tajikistan.”³⁰ Despite the dominance of the term “Persian dance” among many practitioners and audiences, there are dancers who recognize its inaccuracy and instead use “Iranian” to describe their work. I describe the forms of dance practiced by the performers and artists animating this dissertation as “Iranian” unless in a quote where the speaker has used the term “Persian.”

In the context of the North America and Europe, Iranian dance has come to represent a wide variety of things.³¹ Iranian dance is sometimes used as an umbrella term for the various regional folk dances that come from the current nation state of Iran, such as *Kurdi*, *Qashquai*, *Guilaki*, *Bandari*, and *Baluchi*. Additionally, the improvised movements that have long characterized urban social dance within the Iranian cultural sphere have been adapted to stage performances for centuries, but particularly during the advent of ballet and state dance ensembles in Iran, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan in mid-twentieth century.³² These Iranian dance forms oriented for the stage—formally known as “national dance” (*raqs-e melli*)—traveled to Europe and North America with both professional Iranian dancers who were exiled after the 1979 Iranian Revolution or with non-Iranian dancers who lived in or traveled to Iran before 1979. Many of these “national” dances from pre-Revolutionary Iran continue to circulate via video collections of performances recorded from Iranian state television programs,³³ via recorded dance performances that are distributed by Iranian television programs in various Iranian diasporic communities following the 1979 Revolution,³⁴ or currently through You Tube.

Classical Iranian dance is a form that dance scholar Ida Meftahi and I both argue is a continuation and reconfiguration of national Iranian dance in the Iranian diaspora.³⁵ Like national Iranian dance, classical Iranian dance typically utilizes Persian classical music and

³⁰ Ibid. Although Shay refers to this wide-range of dance forms as “Iranian,” many performers, instructors, and audiences in North America and Europe often specifically use “Iranian” or “Persian” dance in order to distinguish between the dances that are thought to originate from within the borders of modern Iran and those from other Persian speaking nation-states. For instance, dances from Iran are called “Persian” or “Iranian” while Tajik, Afghan, or Uzbek dances are referred to as “Central Asian,” despite the shared historical, cultural and linguistic connections. These dances, among Iranians, would be referred to as *raqs-e Taajiki* (Tajik dance) or *raqs-e Afghaani* (Afghan dance). Conversely, individuals from Tajikistan or Afghanistan would attribute more specific names to dances depending on the genre or region from which the dance form originates.

³¹ In my years of discussions with non-Iranians who are unfamiliar with Iranian dances, I’ve frequently been asked, “Is Iranian dance like belly dance?” Many Iranian dance performers receive this question so frequently that there was, for a long time, a Facebook group called “Iranian dance is not belly dance!” Iranian dances and “belly dance” share small similarities, particularly in undulating arm articulations, but are otherwise vastly different in terms of history, aesthetics, movements, music, etc. However, as belly dance has become globalized (beginning with the Orientalist depictions of dancing girls in early twentieth-century Hollywood films and the popularity of the Egyptian film industry starting in mid-twentieth-century), there has been a blending of the two dance forms among some Iranian and non-Iranian performers and practitioners.

³² Shay, *Choreophobia*; Shay, *Choreographic Politics*.

³³ PARS video is one such distributor of these recordings. See: PARS video website, accessed June 25, 2016, <http://www.parsvideo.tv/>

³⁴ *Iran-e Man TV* (My Iran TV), based in Portland, Oregon is one Iranian television broadcast that films and distributes segments of these performances. See: Iran-E-Man TV website, accessed May 22, 2016, <http://www.iranemantv.net/>.

³⁵ Meftahi, *Gender and Dance in Modern Iran*.

employs themes inspired by classical Persian poetry and miniature paintings. Despite its use of the term “classical,” the form has not been developed into a codified pedagogical or choreographic system in the same ways that classical forms such as ballet or those from South and Southeast Asia have been.³⁶

Regardless of the genre, nearly all of my research subjects have described having to contend with ambivalent and oftentimes-negative views among their diasporic Iranian audiences towards dance performance for the spectatorship of general audiences outside of family and social events (which I highlighted in this introduction’s opening anecdote and discuss further in chapter one).³⁷ On the one hand, many Iranians consider social dance a necessary component of celebratory events and, in the diaspora, dance performance can serve as a symbol of Iranian cultural identity and pride. Nonetheless, as I more thoroughly discuss in chapter one, and as Anthony Shay describes in his multiple publications on Iranian dance, the word for dancer in Persian, *raqqaas*, is often used to denote an individual of ill repute or a prostitute. The challenging experiences the Iranian dancers in my study have had among their Iranian audiences—the associations between dance performance and prostitution—show similarities to those that Shay describes in his theorization of “choreophobia,” a term he uses to describe the ambivalent attitudes towards dance in the Iranian cultural sphere.³⁸ Because of the association between the term *raqqaas* and prostitution, many Iranian dance performers prefer to use the term *raqsande*, a title that works to cleanse dancers from its stigma and to elevate the position of a dancer from its associations with prostitution or mere entertainer to that of an artist. Some dancers in my study, however, insist on using the term *raqqaas* and resist the term *raqsande* as a way to protest the negative connotations with *raqqaas*.³⁹

As I discuss in chapter one, the anxieties surrounding the dancing body among Iranian communities have a long, complex history. Many discussions among dancers, audiences, researchers, and cultural critics often emphasize a religious, particularly Islamic, origin for the negative perceptions of dance and other performance arts in the Iranian cultural sphere. While religious concerns have contributed to perceptions of dancing,⁴⁰ these assertions neglect to recognize the diverse factors that have contributed toward the historical development and contemporary maintenance of these attitudes. As dance scholar Ida Meftahi illustrates in her rigorous historiography on female dancers in twentieth- and twentieth-century Iran (and as I discuss in chapter one), Iranian nationalist modernization movements had a great impact on dance training and performance in Iran, as well as on general perspectives on dance.⁴¹ Since the

³⁶ Dancer Shahrzad Khorsandi is the first among diasporic Iranians to publish her own codification of Iranian dance. Shahrzad Khorsandi, *The Art of Persian Dance: Shahrzad Technique* (Self-published, 2015).

³⁷ It is important to emphasize that dance has often been held in low regard across many societies at various historical junctures, not just among Iranians or among Muslim communities—and not all of the adverse views on dance come from Islamic communities, as is often claimed or assumed.

³⁸ Shay, *Choreophobia*.

³⁹ I discuss the history of the terms *raqqaas* and *raqsande* in chapter one.

⁴⁰ Ida Meftahi’s 2016 study, *Gender and Dance in Modern Iran*, describes both 20th and 21st century Islamic perceptions on dance in Iran. Also see: Zeinab Stellar, “From ‘Evil-Inciting’ Dance to Chaste ‘Rhythmic Movements’: A Genealogy of Modern Islamic Dance-Theatre in Iran,” in *Muslim Rap, Halal Soaps, and Revolutionary Theater*, ed. Karin Van Nieuwkerk (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2011), 231-256. Zeinab Stellar is a pen name that Ida Meftahi used for this particular publication. Meftahi has given me permission to associate the pen name with her real name.

⁴¹ Meftahi, *Gender and Dance in Modern Iran*; Ida Meftahi, “Dancing Angels and Princesses: The Invention of an Ideal Female National Dancer in Twentieth-Century Iran,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Dance and Ethnicity*, eds. Anthony Shay and Barbara Sellers-Young (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

end of the nineteenth-century and the start of Iran's Constitutional Revolution (1905–1911), nation-state building and modernization efforts in Iran have depended upon the construction of what Minoo Moallem calls a “civic body,” a form of corporeal subjecthood that drew upon racial, gendered, and civilizational tropes inherent to European colonial modernity.⁴² The civic body was a properly “modern” national subject devoid of “backward” expressions of gender and sexuality. This modern subject required the disembodiment of homosociality traditional to the Iranian cultural sphere and entailed an embodiment of what Moallem refers to as “hegemonic masculinities” and “emphasized femininities” appropriate for the burgeoning heterosocial and heteronormative public sphere.⁴³

The new forms of embodiment produced through Iran's early modernization movements made way for the advent of Western ballet pedagogy and performance in Iran in the late 1920s and the subsequent national Iranian dance supported by the Pahlavi monarchy (1925–1979), two dance forms that embodied and produced disciplined modern norms of gendered corporeality.⁴⁴ The two state-supported ensembles that exemplify these biopolitics are the Iranian National Ballet Company (*Saazmaan-e Baaleh Melli-ye Iran*), which was in operation from 1956 to 1979, and its sister state-sponsored company, the Iran National Folklore Association (*Saazmaan-e Melli-e Fulklur*—known among English-speaking audiences as the Mahalli Dancers), which was in operation from 1967 to 1978. The Iranian National Ballet Company performed classical Western ballets while periodically incorporating Iranian (often Orientalist) themes. The Mahalli Dancers performed regional Iranian dances and was also a strong figure in the development of national Iranian dance, a form that more fully fuses Iranian movements and aesthetics with ballet techniques and choreographic conventions.

Iranian elites in twentieth century Iran constructed national Iranian dance partly, if not largely, as an attempt to correct the negative image that many social and popular dance forms continued to have among the majority of secular and religious segments of Iranian society.⁴⁵ Meftahi describes national Iranian dance as an ambiguous genre:

Hailed as “ancient” (*bastani*), “authentic” (*asil*), “traditional” (*sunnati*), and “classic” (*kilasik*), the Iranian “national dance” (*raqs-i milli*) emerged in the creative performing arts sphere of Tehran in the early twentieth century. In the decades to follow, this genre became an artistic means to showcase the narratives of the nation through dancing bodies...*raqs-i milli* as an artistic medium whose trajectory encompasses innovative experiments with concepts, nuances, movements, and aesthetics drawn from the “repository of Iranian national culture” throughout the twentieth century.⁴⁶

⁴² Moallem, *Between Warrior Brother and Veiled Sister*. Colonial modernity, as Moallem defines it, is “...an era, a project, a politico-economic formation distinct in its evolutionary historicity and marked by the experience of European colonialism...” (Ibid, 1) Consisting of colonial epistemologies, colonial modernity constructs categories of race, gender, and sexuality based upon modernist notions of civilization and barbarism. Iran's 20th century nationalisms, both secular and Islamic, have both been informed (albeit in different ways) by colonial modernity and by what Moallem calls “civilizational thinking” (Ibid, 28-29).

⁴³ Ibid; For more on embodiment in twentieth-century Iran, see: Afsaneh Najmabadi, *Women with Mustaches and Men without Beards: Gender and Sexual Anxieties of Iranian Modernity* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2005).

⁴⁴ For insight into the shaping of these new forms of embodiment, see, Meftahi, *Gender and Dance in Modern Iran*; Meftahi, “Dancing Angels and Princesses”; and Stellar, “From ‘Evil-Inciting’ Dance.”

⁴⁵ Meftahi, *Gender and Dance in Modern Iran*; Meftahi, “Dancing Angels and Princesses”; and Stellar, “From ‘Evil-Inciting’ Dance.”

⁴⁶ Meftahi, *Gender and Dance in Modern Iran*, 18.

Significantly, the national dancer constructed him/herself as a producer of “high art” through the displacement of and disassociation from the boy dancers of pre-twentieth century Iran (*bacheh raqqaas* or *zan push*) and the cabaret dancer, a popular female entertainer that circulated through cafes, cabarets, and popular cinema—both of whom solidified for many segments of society the negative associations with *raqqaas* (further discussed in chapter one).⁴⁷ Dance ultimately became entangled in new revolutionary discourses critiquing the Pahlavi monarchy’s pandering to and shallow imitation of the West, often referred to as *gharbzadegi* (“Westoxification” or “Weststruckness”).⁴⁸ Secular and Islamic factions who were opposed to the Pahlavi monarchy and who were involved in the 1979 Revolution were allied in their critique of Westoxification and its feminine incarnate of the “*gharbzadeh* woman as the locus of sexual justification, consumerism and imperialism.”⁴⁹ Across the spectrum of national and cabaret dance spectacles, the female dancing body became implicated in the revolutionary discourses that critiqued the ways in which the West-struck nation constructed, presented, and consumed her.

Ultimately, Iran’s 1979 Revolution overthrew the Pahlavi Monarchy and installed the Islamic Republic of Iran, a new government based on rule by Islamic jurists (*velayat-e faqih*) with Ayatollah Khomeini as its Supreme Leader.⁵⁰ Associating dance with moral corruption, the new government officially banned dance performance, a ban that is still in effect in Iran today. Despite state restrictions, however, dance and other movement-based modes of performance continue to be practiced and developed in Iran, particularly since the “cultural thaw” of the 1990s, albeit under highly regulated conditions.⁵¹ Meftahi explains, “Within the three decades after the revolution, the dance scene has grown enormously.”⁵² Many “official” theatrical performances staged in Iran—performances that have been granted official permission by the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance—incorporate a wide array of stylized movement, which function under a variety of names such as physical theatre and “rhythmic movements” (*harakaat-e mozoon*), a form which has produced works in Iran, some of which have been referred to as “Islamic ballet.”⁵³ Female dance performances occur for all-female audiences (often officially approved) and public performances of men’s folk dance for mixed-sex audiences have recently become legal.⁵⁴ Additionally, dance classes of many genres (“Iranian,” ballet, modern, contemporary, salsa, tango, and hip-hop) are popular in affluent parts of Tehran,

⁴⁷ Meftahi, *Gender and Dance in Modern Iran*; Meftahi, “Dancing Angels and Princesses”; Stellar, “From ‘Evil-Inciting’ Dance.”

⁴⁸ Iranian writer and social critic Jalal Al-e Ahmad coined *gharbzadegi* in his 1962 polemic publication by the same name to describe the infatuation with and imitation of the West and its moral laxity. Ahmad argued that the nation’s dependence on the West was at the expense of cultural ties to Islam. See: Jalal Al-e Ahmad, *Gharbzadegi [Weststruckness]*, trans. John Green and Ahmad Alizadeh (Costa Mesa, CA: Mazda Publishers, 2102). *Gharbzadegi* eventually became part of the anti-imperialist ideology of Iran’s 1979 Revolution.

⁴⁹ Moallem, *Between Warrior Brother and Veiled Sister*, 77. Moallem explains that these factions challenged hegemonic gender identities overall, “including westernized and modernized models of femininity and masculinity based on the racialized notion of a pre-Islamic Persian superiority, proximity to the West, and heterosexist class culture of a modernized local elite.” (Ibid)

⁵⁰ Ali Khamenei is the current Supreme Leader of Iran following the death of Ayatollah Khomeini in 1989.

⁵¹ Afshin Ghaffarian, a dancer who emigrated from Iran to Paris in 2009, has stated, “The problem is just this title, to call it dance [*raqs*]...You are not allowed to call it dance, but you can dance.” Afshin Ghaffarian. Interview by Heather Rastovac. Tape recording. Paris, France, July 19, 2012.

⁵² Meftahi, *Gender and Dance in Modern Iran*, 10.

⁵³ On “Islamic ballet,” see, Meftahi, *Gender and Dance in Modern Iran*, and Stellar, “From ‘Evil-Inciting’ Dance.”

⁵⁴ Anthony Shay, “Reviving the Reluctant Art of Iranian Dance in Iran and in the American Diaspora,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Music Revival*, eds. Caroline Bithell and Juniper Hill (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 624.

although they tend to happen either in private or under names that reference more benign exercise, and most classes remain same-sex.⁵⁵ Meftahi explains that many dance classes are advertised in the community press and that videos with male dance instructors are becoming more available for purchase in stores.⁵⁶ In many cases, however, social dance practice and some forms of dance performance, especially among mixed-sex groups, remain regulated or prohibited and thus, instead of occurring in the official public sphere, take place in private homes or in “underground” scenes.⁵⁷

In addition to the practical implications the restrictions on dance continue to produce for dancers in Iran, the ban on dance continues to affectively and discursively circulate among many diasporic Iranian dancers and their audiences. These restrictions have also increasingly become a problematic part of contemporary Euro-American media discourses surrounding many Iranian dancers. For instance, a slew of online articles in English include titles such as: “Ballet dancers tiptoe around Iran dancing ban,”⁵⁸ “The Illegal, Underground Ballerinas of Iran,”⁵⁹ “Defiant Iranian girl breakdances on Tehran subway,”⁶⁰ “Not so secret salsa nights in Tehran,”⁶¹ and “Iran’s Becoming a Footloose Nation as Dance Lessons Spread.”⁶² These sensationalist titles reflect a popular Euro-American discourse that disregards the thriving dance scene in Iran that Meftahi describes and that instead paints a biased view of Iran within a limited framework of “freedom” and “oppression.” Chapter three describes the way this narrative is employed in the fictional film *Desert Dancer*, about dancer Afshin Ghaffarian.

This limited framework of “freedom” and “oppression” was also evident in the 2014 international headlines covered the plight of “Iran’s ‘Happy’ dancers.” These six young adults (men and women) were arrested⁶³ after publishing a Youtube video featuring themselves (in Iran) lip synching and dancing to American pop singer Pharrell Williams’s hit single, “Happy,” to which Williams himself responded, “Iranians should be free to dance.”⁶⁴ In response to the media coverage of this event, and to the ways in which Euro-American media selectively focus on certain human rights issues over others, Sana Saeed expresses in her op-ed:

⁵⁵ About hip-hop specifically, Meftahi explains, “Break dancing, which started as an underground youth culture in the 1980s, has also been renamed “professional aerobics” (ayrubik-i hirfah’i) to appear in public. In fact, its recognition and governmentalization as a sportive field by the Organization of Physical Education (Sazman-i Tarbiyat-i Badani) has paved the way for official break dance classes, as well as dance competitions, in several cities around the country.” Meftahi, *Gender and Dance in Modern Iran*, 11-12.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 11.

⁵⁷ For more on dance and other movement-based theatre in contemporary Iran, see: Meftahi, *Gender and Dance in Modern Iran*; Meftahi, “Dancing Angels and Princesses”; Stellar, “From ‘Evil-Inciting’ Dance.”

⁵⁸ “Ballet dancers tiptoe around Iran dancing ban,” *The Observers*, February 21, 2014, <http://observers.france24.com/en/20140221-ballet-dancers-underground-iran>.

⁵⁹ Beulah Devaney, “The Illegal, Underground Ballerinas of Iran,” *The Vice*, January 11, 2016, https://broadly.vice.com/en_us/article/the-illegal-underground-ballerinas-of-iran?utm_source=tcpfbus.

⁶⁰ “#MyStealthyFreedom: Defiant Iranian girl breakdances on Tehran subway,” *RT*, last modified December 1, 2014, <https://www.rt.com/news/210203-iran-girl-dances-subway/>.

⁶¹ Lana Olinik, “Not so secret salsa nights in Tehran,” *Your Middle East*, last modified April 13, 2014, http://www.yourmiddleeast.com/culture/not-so-secret-salsa-nights-in-tehran_22845.

⁶² “Iran’s Becoming a Footloose Nation as Dance Lessons Spread,” *The Daily Beast*, January 2, 2015, http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2015/01/02/iran-s-becoming-a-footloose-nation-as-dance-lessons-spread.html?source=socialflow&via=twitter_page&account=thedailybeast&medium=twitter.

⁶³ Officials suspended the sentence of ninety-one lashes and released them from jail after one day.

⁶⁴ “Pharrell: ‘Happy’ Iranians should be free to dance,” *Associated Press*, May 27, 2014, <https://www.yahoo.com/music/s/pharrell-happy-iranians-free-dance-140909956.html?nf=1>.

...there's a self-centered quality of our appetite for these stories. We are uncomfortably selective in our interest in which human rights stories from Iran get our attention...our envisioning of Iran and Iranians has been and remains limited to the sorts of issues that redeem our own beliefs and visions of "freedom." The issues and stories that indict us of any complacency and wrongdoing are ignored or justified. When Iranians are denied the apparent basic human right to make a Pharrell video, we are maddened and disappointed. When Iranians are unable to access basic medical supplies as a result of our sanctions, we don't even know.⁶⁵

Within and beyond these texts, many Iranians and non-Iranians alike often formulate the dancing and/or performing body in the Iranian diaspora as a symbol of resistance against the Islamic Republic of Iran.⁶⁶ In this dissertation, however, I suggest that framing dance as inherently resistant is often part and parcel with framing the West as a liberating benefactor of and for Iranians who are fleeing a fundamentalist, religious state. Doing so capitulates to what Munir Jiwa claims: "In the American art worlds, the assumption is that it is because an artist is less religiously committed, she is artistically free and liberated. Nevertheless, the art worlds impose their own fundamentalisms, including limiting artistic genres and styles, gender bias, and racial privileging."⁶⁷

This is not to undermine the potential of dance or other means of cultural production as a means of resistance. Michel Foucault's postulation that "where there is power, there is resistance...[though] never in a position of exteriority in relation to power" invites us to consider the conditions of possibility for contesting power through representations of the self in theatrical and quotidian repertoires that subvert, parody, and reconfigure hegemonic representations.⁶⁸ Dance in Iranian communities (both in and outside of Iran) is and can be a site of transgression, particularly, but not exclusively, for women. However, I am apprehensive of valorizing uncritical notions of resistance, since, as scholars such as Lila Abu-Lughod and Saba Mahmood argue, notions of resistance and agency are often constituted by liberal discourses of freedom/unfreedom and, according to Mahmood, "impose a teleology of progressive politics on the analytics of power."⁶⁹

This project explores how the dancing-performing body demonstrates itself as an embodied and discursive archive that expresses, constructs, and reconstructs the historical and cultural meanings of dance within and beyond Iran as it brings these specific histories and geographies into proximity with each other. In theorizing "proximity" here, I draw from Moallem's understanding of Iran and its diasporic spaces as "proximities, rather than view[ing] them as internal and external space and thus the loci for dichotomies of traditional and modern,

⁶⁵ Sana Saeed. "The West Loves the Story of Iran's Jailed 'Happy' Dancers for all the Wrong Reasons," *Mic.com*, May 22, 2014, <http://mic.com/articles/89827/the-west-loves-the-story-of-iran-s-jailed-happy-dancers-for-all-the-wrong-reasons#.vGvb5UIaz>.

⁶⁶ Shay provides an anecdote in which some of his Iranian American dance students expressed an interest in learning dance as a means of defiance against the official ban, even if they had never even been inside Iran. Shay, *Choreophobia*, 11. See, also: Shay, "Reviving the Reluctant Art of Iranian Dance."

⁶⁷ Munir Jiwa, "Muslim Artists in America," in *The Oxford Handbook of American Islam*, eds. Yvonne Y. Haddad and Jane I. Smith (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 390.

⁶⁸ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (London: Penguin Books, 1990), 95.

⁶⁹ Lila Abu-Lughod, "The Romance of Resistance: Tracing Transformations of Power through Bedouin Women," *American Ethnologist* 17, no. 1 (1990); Saba Mahmood, *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2005), 9.

oppressive and free, fundamentalist and secular.”⁷⁰ In line with Moallem, this dissertation illustrates the ways in which dance and performance are sites that exhibit these proximities between Iran and its diaspora. In doing so, I resist constructing a linear history between what has been politically and affectively deemed as two historical eras of pre- and post-Revolutionary Iran, nor does it conceive of Iran and its diaspora as geographical internal/external spaces. Moreover, I argue that it is through the diasporic dancing-performing Iranian body that the particular dichotomies that Moallem outlines—traditional/modern, oppressive/free, fundamentalist/secular—are negotiated and, at times, reinforced. Ultimately, these performances are means through which these artists enact emerging, embodied modes of being, becoming, and belonging as they negotiate diasporic locales and transnational dance markets. Conceiving of Iranian diasporic performances as embodied archives begins to complicate linear migration paradigms and hegemonic nationalist narratives that establish the diaspora as a static, neoliberal *space* and *time* of arrival and freedom—seeing dancing bodies in motion as simultaneously constructing and reflecting the nuanced, mobile, and constantly transforming ideologies of home that extend beyond geopolitical domains.⁷¹ Alongside and in relation to these dominant narratives, we can understand “diaspora” as an affective and embodied *practice*, and a living, breathing web of relationality.

Framing Iranian Dance in Conversation with Diaspora, Citizenship, and Belonging/Unbelonging

As Paul Scolieri suggests in the 2008 special topics issue of *Dance Research Journal* “Global/Mobile: Re-orienting Dance and Migration Studies,” dance can be a critical site through which to examine the various cultural-political phenomenon that define the current age of globalization, such as citizenship, displacement, and war.⁷² While I am skeptical of liberal notions that extol dance as a means for transcending the uneven power relations that shape these experiences or that conceive of dance in a (neo)liberal framework of human rights and resistance,⁷³ I am aligned with the scholars both in and outside of dance and performance studies that theorize dance and dancing bodies in relation to transnational political economies, postcolonial migration and citizenship, present-day imperial politics (economic and military interventions/occupations) that shape representations and appropriations, and to the colonial legacies and the globalized present that construct hierarchies and categories through which cultural production is measured. As Sara Ahmed et al. insist, “embodiment is crucial to any investigation of the effects of migrations, exiles and displacements on identity and

⁷⁰ Moallem, *Between Warrior Brother and Veiled Sister*, 6.

⁷¹ For more on understanding dance as constituting and reflecting ideology, see: Judith Hamera, *Dancing Communities: Performance, Difference and Connection in the Global City* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007); Andrew Hewitt, *Social Choreography: Ideology as Performance in Dance and Everyday Movement* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005).

⁷² Paul Scolieri, “Introduction—Global/Mobile: Re-Orienting Dance and Migration Studies,” *Dance Research Journal* 40, no. 2 (2008): v-xx.

⁷³ My mention of this skepticism stems from Scolieri’s tendency to fall into these paradigms in his introduction to this special topics issue of *Dance Research Journal* (2008) when he discusses international dance exchange programs in refugee camps, and the persecution and resistances of those who engage in particular dance practices and performances under governmental regimes such as Iran.

community.”⁷⁴ Following this, my research privileges dance and performance as critical sites through which to both articulate and examine migrations and the collective and individual subjectivities, identities, and affiliations that emerge from them.

I argue throughout this dissertation that the performances of Iranianness enacted by the subjects of this dissertation are inextricable from the respective diasporic locales of their enactment. To this end, my dissertation is organized to foreground the continuing role that national Iranian dance has on the ideologies of dance in the diaspora, charting how competing ideologies of gender and citizenship shape diasporic Iranian identities, and examining how the experimentation with traditional Iranian dance forms in Contemporary Iranian dance might shape a new, more radically inclusive conception of what Iranian dance—and therefore Iranianness—is and can be. There are further distinct ways in which Iranianness is performed and negotiated in disparate sites such as France, a nation based on universalist and secular republican principles, and multicultural Anglo-American sites in the U.S. and Canada. As I explore in chapter three, dance is integral to the distinct formations of cultural citizenship in France, providing opportunity to reflect upon the shaping of transnational identities (and transnational modes of dance) within the Iranian diaspora. In all, at the same time that these performers are immersed in particular politics of geographical place, there is a transnational community of artists and audiences that furthers fosters an “imagined community” of Iranians throughout the diaspora, both in and outside of Iran.⁷⁵

In this dissertation I conceive of the notion of “diaspora” as performative: a practice and process of becoming, and an in-between subjective space/experience that troubles modern notions of the nation-state.⁷⁶ While diaspora is part of what can be defined as transnationalism, they are distinct in that transnationalism, according to Jana Evans Braziel and Anita Mannur, “may be defined as the flow of people, ideas, goods, and capital across national territories in a way that undermines nationality and nationalism as discrete categories of identification,

⁷⁴ Sara Ahmed, Claudia Castañeda, Anne-Marie Fortie, and Mimi Sheller, “Introduction,” in *Uprootings/Regroundings: Questions of Home and Migration*, eds. Sara Ahmed, Claudia Castañeda, Anne-Marie Fortie, and Mimi Sheller (Oxford: Berg Publishers, 2003), 11.

⁷⁵ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, Revised Edition (London and New York: Verso, 2006).

⁷⁶ The scholarship on diasporic Iranian communities by Hamid Naficy (1993 & 1999), Mino Moallem (2000a & 2000b), and Farzaneh Hemmasi (2011) have been particularly useful for my dissertation. Hamid Naficy, *The Making of Exile Cultures: Iranian Television in Los Angeles* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1993); Hamid Naficy, ed., *Home, Exile, Homeland: Film, Media, and the Politics of Place* (London and New York: Routledge, 1999); Mino Moallem, “Iranian Immigrants, Exiles and Refugees: From National to Transnational Contexts,” *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 20, nos. 1 & 2 (2000); Mino Moallem, “‘Foreignness’ and Be/longing: Transnationalism and Immigrant Entrepreneurial Spaces,” *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 20, nos. 1 & 2 (2000b); Farzaneh Hemmasi, “Iranian Popular Music in Los Angeles: A Transnational Public beyond the Islamic State,” in *Muslim Rap, Halal Soaps, and Revolutionary Theater*, ed. Karin Van Nieuwkerk (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2011), 85-111. Scholarly work that has informed my dissertation’s theorization of diaspora and migration include: Ahmed et al., “Introduction”; Jana Evans Braziel and Anita Mannur, eds., *Theorizing Diaspora: A Reader* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2003); and Avtar Brah, *Cartographies of Diaspora: Contesting Identities* (New York: Routledge, 1996). Scholarly work that has informed my understanding of performance in relation to notions of home, exile, diaspora, and the “border” include: Silvija Jestrovic and Yana Meerzon, eds. *Performance, Exile, and ‘America’* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009); and Ramón H. Rivera-Servera and Harvey Young, *Performance in the Borderlands* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011).

economic organization, and political constitution.”⁷⁷ Though not entirely severed from these other flows, Braziel and Mannur conceive of diaspora more specifically in terms of a human phenomenon, a movement (forced or voluntary) that is lived, embodied, and affective.⁷⁸ The diasporic subject disrupts discrete notions of temporal-spatial linearity and singularity that construct modern political, economic, and cultural spheres. He/she inhabits, blurs, negotiates, and traverses multivalent histories and geographies; a blurring that reveals how the boundaries and binaries between here/there are fraught and unstable.⁷⁹

Indeed, as Moallem contends, “by challenging the foundational narratives of modernity with its orders and borders, [the diasporic subject] swerves between citizenship and consumerism,” inhabiting a “radically different spatiality and temporality” of belonging located within multiple converging, diverging, and sometimes overlapping spaces of the nation, the state, and/or within “ambiguous social spaces such as borderlands and subjectivities trapped ‘in-between’.”⁸⁰ Avtar Brah develops the concept of “diaspora space” as distinct from a simple notion of diaspora in order to identify the terrain inhabited by both diasporic subjects and peoples constructed as “indigenous” to a particular locale. Brah describes the concept of diaspora space as foregrounding “the entanglement of genealogies of dispersion with those of ‘staying put’ and the site where *diaspora*, *border*, and *politics of location* come together.”⁸¹ With this understanding of “diaspora spaces” as “networks of transnational identifications encompassing ‘imagined’ and ‘encountered’ communities,”⁸² I highlight how the artists in my study draw attention to what is at stake for politicized bodies in one’s “home” of origin, in diasporic displacements, and in the affective spaces in-between. This is especially evident in chapter four’s interest in the work of Amir Baradaran, whose performances with and about Marina Abramović and about dynamic intimacies with Iranian subjects texture stereotypical understandings of Iran (and the Middle East more broadly) as perpetually in the past.

While the concept of diaspora as an embodied practice destabilizes the nation-state as the primary form of belonging, nation-states nonetheless maintain control of the regulation of bodies and borders, whose body does or does not belong, and which bodies can or cannot travel across borders with ease. The diasporic and immigrant experience thus remains entangled in discourses and practices of outside/inside and host-native/guest-foreigner that altogether define the nation-state and delineate its citizenry. For instance, Moallem discusses Euro-American anxieties about the influx of immigrants and refugees from Muslim cultures and insists that, “Far from being utopian sites of hybridity, the cosmopolitan centers of the contemporary global village are marked by the twin traditions of asylum and xenophobia that still compete today...”⁸³ As Inderpal Grewal demonstrates in her analysis of neoliberal citizenship in the U.S., the post-9/11 era has enacted heightened racialized and gendered forms of state-produced surveillance, resulting in self-regulation, new affiliative practices of belonging, and new self-fashioning among individuals, groups, and nations worldwide.⁸⁴ Postcolonial scholar Ali Behdad interrogates notions of the “post-nation” and of diaspora that eclipse neo-imperial relations of

⁷⁷ Braziel and Mannur, *Theorizing Diaspora*, 8.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ Moallem, “Iranian Immigrants, Exiles and Refugees,” 161; Ahmed et al., “Introduction.”

⁸⁰ Moallem, “Iranian Immigrants, Exiles and Refugees,” 161.

⁸¹ Brah, *Cartographies of Diaspora*, 16.

⁸² Ibid, 196.

⁸³ Moallem, *Between Warrior Brother and Veiled Sister*, 17.

⁸⁴ Inderpal Grewal, *Transnational America: Feminisms, Diasporas, Neoliberalisms* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005).

power, writing that an “inattentiveness to the continuing importance of nation and state is particularly problematic at this historical juncture, given the fortification of national borders in spite of the global flows of people across them.”⁸⁵ This is particularly the case in the post-9/11 and global “War on Terror” context, which is marked by increased regulation of the bodies and borders and a strengthening of state apparatuses such as (in the case of the U.S.) the FBI, CIA, and INS (now centrally organized under the new Department of Homeland Security).

The artists in this study both experience the enabling qualities of diaspora, as they are enabled by their socio-political and financial standing to leave Iran at a pivotal time, but remain shaped by the Iranian nation-state. As I explore in chapter two, the mythologizing of twentieth century Iranian modernizing biopolitics continue to circulate through dancers trying to codify Iranian dance, while state-sanctioned violence against artists like Ghaffarian, whom I discuss in chapter three, prompted and continues to direct his movements throughout, and framings in, his exiled home of France. This is to say that diasporas, in their multiple forms, are neither homogenous nor experienced evenly. Mobility and various forms of belonging/unbelonging are experiences contingent upon political-economic power relations of gender, sexuality, race, class, religion, and post/neocolonial geopolitics.⁸⁶ As Ahmed et al. insist, “Processes of homing and migration take shape through the imbrication of affective and bodily experience in broader social processes and institutions where unequal differences of race, class, gender and sexuality, among other relevant categories, are generated.”⁸⁷ Diasporas do not transcend these forms of difference and, as an epistemological or historical object of analysis, it cannot be extracted from these interrelated categories. Central to my dissertation, then, are the ways in which Iranian “bodies in motion”—both on the stage and as diasporic subjects circulating transnationally—contest, negotiate, and affirm experiences of belonging/unbelonging and exclusion/inclusion that are core tenants determining citizenship. While citizenship as a legal category is widely debated within a multitude of disciplines—ranging from legal studies, American studies, anthropology, postcolonial studies, and more—it has only been a more recent object of analysis in dance and performance studies. However, dance and performance has long been theorized as a mode of expressing, constituting, and negotiating various forms of individual and collective belonging on community, national, and transnational levels. My case studies demonstrate how dance and performance enact and enable forms of citizenship that are both legal (as determined by belonging to a nation-state) and cultural (every day experiences of belonging beyond legal citizenship); experiences that align at times, that other times diverge, and that are often times in tension.

Within more recent discussions in dance studies on citizenship and the politics of belonging, the most often cited theorists are invariably Aihwa Ong and Arjun Appadurai for their theorizations on “flexible citizenship” and “-scapes”, respectively.⁸⁸ Ong theorizes notions of “flexible citizenship” as that which describes the ways in which migrants employ new uses of citizenship within transnational conditions, particularly the use of transnational networks, in

⁸⁵ Ali Behdad challenges Arjun Appadurai’s notion of “postnational” (1996). Ali Behdad, *A Forgetful Nation: On Immigration and Cultural Identity in the United States* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005), xi-xii.

⁸⁶ Histories of colonization and decolonization are crucial here, for as Caren Kaplan notes, “the emergence of terms of travel and displacement (as well as their oppositional counterparts, home and location) must be linked to the history of the production of colonial discourses.” Caren Kaplan, *Questions of Travel: Postmodern Discourses of Displacement* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1996), 2.

⁸⁷ Sara Ahmed et al., “Introduction,” 5.

⁸⁸ Aihwa Ong, *Flexible Citizenship: The Cultural Logics of Transnationality* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999); Appadurai, *Modernity at Large*.

order to gain access to resources not available within a single nation state, as demonstrated by affluent Chinese migrants in Ong's study. Dance scholar Yatin Lin considers Ong's concept as useful for thinking through what Lin refers to as "cultural flexibility," a space in which dance performances, such as those of Cloud Gate Dance Theater, have the ability to interpret shifting identities throughout Taiwan's histories of colonization and globalization.⁸⁹ Lin suggests that these flexibilities can be realized through global flows, or what Appadurai refers to as "-scapes" (*ethnoscapes*, *mediascapes*, *technoscapes*, *financescapes*, and *ideoscapes*), which depict the spheres of life that, through movement, connect people, places, ideas, and capital through complex networks. As Susan Foster suggests, "Culture thus configures as the synergistic encounter between 'process geographies' and 'scapes'..."⁹⁰ Lena Hammergren examines both "-scapes" and "process geographies"⁹¹ through the case of Indian dance performance in Sweden, demonstrating how oftentimes fraught transnational encounters between the nation-states of Sweden and India implicate the Indian dancing body. Hammergren draws on sociologist Paula Saukko's expansion of Appadurai's "-scapes," the "bodyscape," in order to "focus on the ways in which Indian dancing is intertwined with local human experiences as well as global socio-cultural structures of power."⁹² Thus, the notion of "bodyscape" can assist dance and performance scholars in further theorizing the ways in which bodies are corporeally implicated by the uneven power relations that characterize the globalized world, as well as how they negotiate these power relations through imaginative self-fashionings and affiliative performances of belonging.

May Joseph theorizes the "staging of citizenship" in which the migratory subjects of her study disrupt the notion of citizenship as natural or granted.⁹³ Joseph suggests that citizenship is a performative act of self-fashioning and a lived practice. These performative acts of citizenship allow for the negotiating and contesting of these official exclusions through modes of cultural citizenship. Joseph theorizes this performed citizenship as a "citizenscape," adding to the expansions upon Appadurai's "-scapes".⁹⁴ As my chapters progress, they build an awareness of how Priya Srinivasan describes "citizenship is in process and is made visible by dance labor."⁹⁵

⁸⁹ Yatin Lin, "Choreographing a Flexible Taiwan: Cloud Gate Dance Theatre and Taiwan's Changing Identity," in *The Routledge Dance Studies Reader*, eds. Alexandra Carter and Janet O'Shea (London and New York: Routledge, 2010)

⁹⁰ Foster, "Worlding Dance," 8.

⁹¹ In her description of "process geographies," also a concept that Appadurai has theorized (1996), Hammergren says: "Appadurai wants to think of areas as in motion, as bringing about actions and interaction. Thus, process geographies regard areas as 'initial contexts for themes that generate variable geographies, rather than fixed geographies marked by pregiven themes...' [instead] highlighting variable assemblages 'of language, history, and material life.'" Lena Hammergren, "The Power of Classification," in *Worlding Dance*, ed. Susan Leigh Foster (London and New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 18.

⁹² *Ibid.*, 18.

⁹³ May Joseph, *Nomadic Identities: The Performance of Citizenship* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1999).

⁹⁴ Joseph elaborates upon the importance of Appadurai's work to her theorizations of citizenship: "Appadurai's critical analysis of movement in the production of social biographies offer a means of reading the stagings of embodied citizenship wherein such inventive cosmopolitanism is often negotiated. Movement dislodges the entrenched categories of nation and state by introducing the workings of capital to the production of cosmopolitan as well as local citizenship. It foregrounds the contradictory tensions of consumption through which citizenship is displayed. Movement as a conceptual tool resists easy notions of community or nation." *Ibid.*, 8.

⁹⁵ Srinivasan, *Sweating Saris*, 14.

Dissertation Overview

Chapter one, “Diasporic Politics of Preservation: (Re)Constructions of Race, Gender, and Sexuality in Iranian Dance,” frames the gendered, raced, and classed histories of dance and performance in Iran, documenting the role of dance before and after the country’s 1979 Revolution. It charts the ways in which dance becomes associated with notions of prostitution, showing the ways that Iran’s efforts at “modernizing” looked to this very negative association in order to “cleanse” its image. As the state began to sponsor dance troupes in an effort to develop a national dance form, dancers became increasingly informed by Europe’s own balletic tradition. I ground this chapter’s interest in the debates surrounding national, classical, and regional Iranian dances in the International Iranian Dance Conferences 2012 and 2015, where the history and future of Iranian dance forms were taken to task. The gendered and classed discourses on the “authenticity” of Iranian dance circulating amongst key organizers and presenters of the conferences both reveal a broader political climate that is hostile toward Middle Eastern and Muslim subjects and highlight how efforts to claim and perform an overt “Iranianness” can be courageous amidst the current climate. At the same time that this chapter traces the outline of debates surrounding the preservation and codification of Iranian dance forms, it queries how the rhetoric of authenticity can itself generate anti-Arab sentiment that corroborates with dominant Euro-American geopolitical discourses on the Middle East.

Chapter two, “Contemporary Iranian Dance: Rhizomatic Choreographies of Transnational Iranianness,” examines the development of Contemporary Iranian dance as evidenced by the choreographic works and professional experiences of Sahar Dehghan, Shahrzad Khorsandi, and Banafsheh Sayyad. I specifically discuss the common movement vocabularies and conceptual frameworks the dancers share, defining and analyzing how Contemporary Iranian dance draws and diverges from “traditional” dance aesthetics as it converses directly with the personal, philosophical, and political investments of these three diasporic Iranian women. In the process, I provide a textured discussion of how the meanings and inflections of Iranianness in the Iranian diaspora take shape through and around dance. I pose the expansive category of Contemporary Iranian dance to challenge the common conflation between “Iranian dance” and the national, classical, and regional dance forms perceived to be the authentic expressions of Iranianness—specifically in the world/ethnic dance community, Western dance academic institutions and art circles, and by diasporic Iranian audiences. The limited conception of what Iranian dance *is* and *can be* marginalizes Iranian dancers like Dehghan, Khorsandi, and Sayyad who practice contemporary Iranian dance as a legitimate hybrid expression of Iranianness that maps and captures the diverse experiences of Iranianness and the diaspora.

Chapter three, “Do Iranian Dancers Really Need Saving? Iranian Dancing Bodies as ‘Objects of Rescue’,” focuses on Iranian dancer Afshin Ghaffarian, who emigrated from Iran to Paris in 2009. I draw from a similar provocation that Lila Abu-Lughod posed in *Do Muslim Women Need Saving?* that interrogates contemporary Euro-American imperialist “saving” enterprises.⁹⁶ The chapter analyzes the ways that mainstream media and art circles in France and the U.S. fix Ghaffarian as an “Iranian dancer in exile” and as the benefactor of France’s benevolence rather than, for example, fixing him within the stereotype of the Middle Eastern male terrorist. I ultimately argue his position as a dancer seeking the ability to simply dance against the Iranian state’s ban invokes human rights frameworks that position him alongside Muslim women and queer subjects as victims. I frame this discussion within a larger

⁹⁶ Lila Abu-Lughod, *Do Muslim Women Need Saving?* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013).

conversation about the ways that French republicanism and secularism are based upon notions of universality that would seemingly preclude Ghaffarian from such labeling. Instead, as I discuss, the practice of what I call “savior spectatorship” and the discourse of what I call “affect of empire” are enacted in order to sustain the West’s own image of itself as exceptional—documenting how this practice and affect of empire circulate transnationally through the American-produced feature-length film *Desert Dancer* (2014), a sensationalized rendition of Ghaffarian’s life as an aspiring dancer in Iran and his harrowing escape to Paris. In Ghaffarian’s life and in its fictionalization through film, dance becomes an important form proving his humanity and thus further marking those who oppress (i.e. the Iranian state) dance as non-human, and ultimately (if even unintentionally) becomes dangerous currency within the global war on racialized Middle Eastern subjects.

In my fourth and final chapter, “Queering Diasporic and Secular Temporalities in Amir Baradaran’s ‘Choreographies of the Social,’” I take up Elizabeth Freeman’s theorization of “temporal drag” to analyze how the performances of US-based queer Iranian new media performance artist Amir Baradaran draw critical attention to Islamophobia across state policies and Euro-American art institutions.⁹⁷ I theorize Baradaran’s temporal drag as engaging in “a countergenealogical practice of archiving culture’s throwaway objects, including the outmoded masculinities and femininities from which usable pasts may be extracted.”⁹⁸ The aesthetics and modes of queer temporal desires of Baradaran’s performances emerge as playfully utilizes cultural repertoires of “undesirable” Iranian subjects to (re)animate the throw away objects of his own embodied archive—enacting countermemories that critique national narratives that construct immigrant subjects as excessively Other. In the process, I suggest his work further interrogates the secular underpinnings of mainstream and avant-garde performance art circuits.

In my epilogue, “Negotiating the Precarity of Enoughness,” I situate the stakes of “Performing (Trans)National Iranianness,” alongside timely U.S. geopolitical discourses and policies that have mobilized around the recent events of the San Bernardino shooting in December 2015, which impelled the U.S. House of Representatives to pass into law the Visa Waiver Program Improvement and Terrorist Travel Prevention Act of 2015 (commonly referred to as H.R. 158), and the Orlando mass shooting at a gay nightclub in June 2016. Showing the relevance between these events and their political consequences for diasporic Iranians, I highlight how the diverse performances of Iranianness enacted by the artists in my study contest the negative constructions of Iranianness as terrorist, oppressed, and/or as perpetual pastness while simultaneously mobilizing Iranianness to generate and strengthen multiple forms of belonging and affiliation across local, national, and transnational sites.

⁹⁷ Elizabeth Freeman, *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010).

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, xxxiii.

Chapter 1

Diasporic Politics of Preservation: (Re)Constructions of Race, Gender, and Sexuality in Iranian Dance

The 1st International Iranian Dance Conference (IIDC) convened for one weekend in September 2012 in the city of San Francisco and drew approximately fifty dancers from across the United States, Canada, and Europe.⁹⁹ Those in attendance were a fairly equal mix of both Iranian and non-Iranian heritage, and consisted of dancers and choreographers who perform as soloists, artistic directors, and as principle dancers of dance companies. What brought this diverse range of dancers together for the first time was their involvement in the dance forms broadly defined as “Iranian” or “Persian.”¹⁰⁰ As I discuss in the dissertation introduction, Iranian dance and Persian dance are umbrella terms that circulate throughout the Iranian diaspora to describe a broad variety of dance styles from Iran and Central Asia, including regional folk dances, choreographed versions of urban social dance, and classical Iranian dance—none of which have been codified into a specific pedagogical or choreographic system.¹⁰¹ For some performers and choreographers of Iranian dance today, the lack of codification or consensus about what defines Iranian dance allows the dancer to develop and experiment with his or her signature style. For instance, in chapter two, I discuss three diasporic Iranian dancers who, through the genre they call contemporary Iranian dance, are developing a hybrid dance aesthetic that expands the notion of what Iranian dance is and can be. Conversely, the lack of codification or consensus about Iranian dance causes other dancers and choreographers (both Iranian and non-Iranian) to be concerned about the loss of so-called authenticity and cultural heritage. These latter concerns are what impelled Sheila Eghbali, a young U.S.-based Iranian émigré dancer, to organize the IIDC, which she pitched to both funders and participants as the first concerted effort toward organizing the “preservation of Iranian dances in their authentic form.”¹⁰²

In the 2012 conference’s opening remarks, Eghbali asserted that, “the authentic [Iranian] dances are becoming lost; we must preserve them.”¹⁰³ According to the IIDC promotional materials, because of the Iran’s ban on dance performance following the 1979 Revolution, the

⁹⁹ The first International Iranian Dance Conference (IIDC) took place in San Francisco, CA Sept. 15-16, 2012 and the second IIDC convened in Boston, MA August 15-18, 2015. Both conferences were organized by dancer Sheila Eghbali and primarily featured dance workshops with Robert de Warren and/or his former dancers, Indira Mehrpour (IIDC 2012 and 2015) and Fatameh Borhani (IIDC 2015). Robert de Warren was the artistic director and choreographer for the Mahalli Dancers of Iran, a state-supported folkloric dance company that operated in Iran from 1967-1978. The second IIDC additionally featured Azeri dance workshops with Namus Zokhrabov, lectures by ethnomusicologists Mansoureh Sabetzadeh, Lloyd Miller, and Parham Haghghi, and dance scholar Ida Meftahi. I attended and participated in both conferences.

¹⁰⁰ These terms are often conflated or used interchangeably within the Iranian diasporic context, not only in terms of dance but also with regards to one’s ethnic identification. As I discuss in the dissertation introduction, I will be using the term “Iranian” to refer to the majority of the dances I discuss unless an artist refers to the form s/he performs in a direct quote as “Persian dance.”

¹⁰¹ As I also footnote in the dissertation introduction, dancer Shahrzad Khorsandi’s *The Art of Persian Dance* (2015) is the first concerted effort to codify classical Iranian dance.

¹⁰² “WePay.com Fundraising Site for International Iranian Dance Conference 2012,” accessed September 14, 2012, https://www.wepay.com/donations/preservation-of-iranian-dances?utm_campaign=donations&utm_medium=link&utm_source=facebook&ref_uid=269930 (site discontinued).

¹⁰³ Sheila Eghbali, opening remarks, 1st International Iranian Dance Conference, San Francisco, CA, Sept. 15-16, 2012.

efforts at preserving Iranian dance become “all the more challenging and urgent.”¹⁰⁴ Eghbali and many other dancers reiterated this sentiment numerous times throughout the 2012 and 2015 IIDC conferences, and, in an interview with me, Eghbali elaborated: “The fact that dance is currently illegal in Iran creates a sense of urgency for preserving it, it makes it all the more important... We need to document these dances and make them available so that the next generation of dancers can draw upon them.”¹⁰⁵ Eghbali’s statements and the formation of IIDC itself reflects larger discourses pertaining to loss and endangerment facing many in the Iranian dance community across North America and Europe, among both émigré Iranian and non-Iranian dancers and connoisseurs.

Yet many dance studies and postcolonial studies scholars argue that, while a search for authentic origins provides colonized and displaced communities with a vital sense of cultural cohesion, continuity, and, in some cases, resistance, the process nonetheless tends to perform new forms of epistemological violence through the fortification of hierarchies, the erasure of various histories, and the marginalization of various minority groups.¹⁰⁶ In other words, efforts toward saving, salvaging, or reviving cultural traditions can both be counter-hegemonic while simultaneously perpetuating or creating new hegemonic relations of power. It is also important to note that efforts at preservation and transmission are just as much about, if not primarily about, the present and future as they are about the past. Simply put, these efforts intimately express contemporary concerns. In the case of the IIDC and for many of the diasporic Iranian dancers in my study, these efforts have to do with enacting a sense of familiarity and belonging as displaced Iranians, for themselves and their diasporic Iranian audiences.

As significant as Eghbali’s efforts are to advocate on behalf of Iranian dance in the Iranian diaspora and to bring together a community of dancers invested in the current state of Iranian dance as artistic and cultural production, such a call to arms nevertheless raises a series of critical questions: *Does* Iranian dance need saving? From what or whom does it need saving? Which or whose version of Iranian dance is deemed “authentic” or worthy enough for saving, and which forms and bodies become erased or marginalized from this archive? How does the Iranian diasporic condition impact and inform the drive to save “authentic” dances? And finally, is it possible that these efforts align, if even unintentionally, with Euro-American neo-colonial discourses that problematically frame the Middle East (specifically Arabs and Islam) as inherently backward, barbaric, and oppressive in the justification for military and economic intervention?

In this chapter, I argue that traces of the ideological frameworks that constructed national Iranian dance prior to Iran’s 1979 Revolution have traveled into the contemporary Iranian diaspora where they act as affective modes of nostalgia and cultural preservation for dancers like Eghbali, as well as strategies of survival for displaced Iranian dancers more broadly. I specifically examine discussion surrounding Iranian national, classical, and regional dance forms staged at the International Iranian Dance Conferences of 2012 and 2015, spotlighting the work of Eghbali and Robert de Warren to illustrate the broader kinesthetic and discursive politics of

¹⁰⁴ Sheila Eghbali’s description of the International Iranian Dance Conference, accessed October 21, 2014, <http://sheilaeghbali.com/SheilaEghbali.html> (content no longer available).

¹⁰⁵ Sheila Eghbali. Skype interview by Heather Rastovac. Tape recording. September 16, 2012.

¹⁰⁶ See: Srinivasan *Sweating Saris*; Ananya Chatterjea, *Butting Out: Reading Resistive Choreographies through Works by Jawole Willa Jo Zollar and Chandralekha* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2004); Ananya Chatterjea, “Red-Stained Feet: Probing the Ground on Which Women Dance in Contemporary Bengal,” in *Worlding Dance*, ed. Susan Leigh Foster (London and New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2009), 119-143; Marta Elena Savigliano, *Tango and the Political Economy of Passion* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2005).

preservation and nationalist diasporic representation of Iranianness in the Iranian diaspora. I pay particular attention to the conferences' emphases on "authenticity" that are premised on proper gender roles and notions of purity that extend from a particular strain of national Iranian dance that is intimately associated with the state.

For many of the dancers in my study, resurrecting or drawing inspiration from the repertoire of national and regional dances of the pre-1979 Revolution Iranian national stage assist in efforts to correct the negative stereotypes that circulate in Euro-American host cultures.¹⁰⁷ As I discuss in this chapter, these include associations of Iran and/or Iranians with violence and terrorism, excessive or deviant sexuality (such as associations with Arabic belly dance and popular Iranian dancers such as Jamileh or Mohammad Khordadian),¹⁰⁸ and with globalized consumer culture emblematic of what some dancers refer to as the "L.A. culture" pervasive in Persian pop music videos produced in Los Angeles and in the American reality television show *Shahs of Sunset*.¹⁰⁹

Even as dancers call upon pre-1979 dance forms in an attempt to correct the misconstruction of Iranian identity, I argue in this chapter that the investment in preserving and performing Iranian national or classical dances and regional folk dances enforces hegemonic constructions of gendered performance in the process. I argue that what Mino Moallem theorizes as "hegemonic masculinities" and "emphasized femininities" continue to have and create new meaning in the Iranian diaspora through Iranian dancing bodies (and non-Iranian dancers performing Iranian dances), yet reconfigured through an interface with global capital and the nationalist politics of dancers' respective host countries.¹¹⁰ Furthermore, I argue in this chapter that the efforts of Iranian dancers (and some advocates of Iranian dance) to secure the cultural preservation of Iranian dance run the risk of generating anti-Arab sentiment. As Iranian dancers work to prove a "refined" and "civilized" Iranianness through performances of classical and regional dances in the contemporary diaspora, it is oftentimes with the subtext of disassociations from negative representations of Arabness that are, for example, conflated with belly dance forms that are sometimes confused as Iranian dance or in the larger contemporary mainstream media.

More than nostalgia, however, I also argue that these dancers' self-representations (aural, textual, and choreographic) become strategies of survival in political climates that are hostile toward Middle Eastern and Muslim subjects. In this context, they face the expectation to perform cultural diplomacy while, at the same time, cultural and official citizenship remains precarious. I argue that claiming and performing an overt "Iranianness" (if even overdetermined and/or hegemonic) in the diaspora amongst the current political climate is a courageous, political act.

Pre-Twentieth Century Dance Performance and Practice in the Iranian Cultural Sphere

The shifting historical positions that dance has inhabited within the Iranian cultural sphere are reflected in the trajectory of the two Persian words for dancer: *raqqaas* and *raqsandeh*. Early documentation of the word *raqqaas* is found in classical Persian Sufi poetry as

¹⁰⁷ Meftahi, *Gender and Dance in Modern Iran*; Stellar, "From 'Evil-Inciting' Dance."

¹⁰⁸ I discuss Jamileh and Mohammad Khordadian toward the end of this chapter.

¹⁰⁹ For more on *Shahs of Sunset*, see: *Shahs of Sunset* website, accessed May 22, 2016, <http://www.bravotv.com/shahs-of-sunset>.

¹¹⁰ Moallem, *Between Warrior Brother and Veiled Sister*.

early as the tenth century, in which the word often has spiritual and virtuous connotations.¹¹¹ However, the general implications imbued in the term *raqqaas* have transformed over the past century; in contemporary vernacular, *raqqaas* is often used to connote a prostitute or a deviant person whereas *raqsandeh* refers more formally to dancers as “artists.”¹¹² Tracing the shifting connotations of gender, sexuality, and sex within the history of Iranian dance contextualizes the contemporary drive to recuperate particular formations of historical, national dance, while also providing opportunities to consider the practice of historiography itself.

According to historians Rudi Matthee and Sasan Fatemi, the Persian dynasty of the Safavid era (1501–1736 CE) often employed prostitutes who entertained as dancers.¹¹³ Matthee asserts, “at the level of court life, the two professions [of dance and prostitution] were intimately linked.”¹¹⁴ In Fatemi’s study, he refers to dancers only as “dancer-prostitutes,” thereby conflating the two.¹¹⁵ The “dancer-prostitutes” employed in both the Safavid and Qajar (1794–1925 CE) dynasties are said to have been both female and male.¹¹⁶ Male dancers were known as *zan push* or *bacheh raqqaas*—young male dancers who wore clothing that some historians describe as women’s clothing and were equated with illicit activities, and *zan push* itself loosely translates to “dressed like a woman” or “transvestite.”¹¹⁷ The alleged sexual activities associated with the *zan push* and *bacheh raqqaas* led to the subsequent banning of this entertainment form intermittently throughout the past few centuries in various Persian courts.¹¹⁸

¹¹¹ The terms *raqsaan* (dance, to dance) and *raqqaas* (dancer) are found in classical Persian poetry as early as the tenth century C.E. *Raqsaan* is the word most frequently used in classical Persian poetry, while *raqs* is used most frequently in colloquial usage. The references to dance in mystical Persian poetry most often held favorable connotations, whether it was through the metaphor of dance used to explain the movements of inanimate objects such as leaves or branches or through the reference to dance as a spiritual practice and method for connecting to the divine. In the latter, Persian Sufi poets sometimes utilized the metaphor of dance and dancing in order to articulate what a lover does when intoxicated with love for his/her Beloved, the Divine. In classical Persian poetry, this intoxication is often heightened when engaged in dance and/or *Sama’* (a Sufi ritual that often includes making music, singing, and/or dancing).

¹¹² For instance, Anthony Shay recalls when, as a Ph.D. student seeking Iranians to provide sources on Iranian dance history, he received the response, “*Raqs!* (Dance!) *Hamash faheshegi-ye!* (It’s all prostitution!)” (*Choreophobia*, 7). Shay shares another anecdote in which a female caller to an Iranian radio station referred to Iranians residing in Southern California as “*raqqaas-bazi*” (acting like dancers). According to Shay, “this is a phrase indicating irresponsibility, a lack of ethics and morals, and out-of-control behavior.” (Ibid, 13.) The association between dance and prostitute has been made worldwide through varying parts of history and thus, these associations are not exclusive to Iranians.

¹¹³ Rudi Matthee, “Prostitutes, Courtesans, and Dancing Girls: Women Entertainers in Safavid Iran,” in *Iran and Beyond: Essays in Middle Eastern History in Honor of Nikki R. Keddie*, ed. Beth Baron (Costa Mesa, CA: Mazda Publishers, 2000), 121-150; Sasan Fatemi, “Music, Festivity, and Gender in Iran from the Qajar to the Early Pahlavi Period,” *Iranian Studies* 38, no. 3 (2005): 399-416.

¹¹⁴ Matthee, “Prostitutes, Courtesans, and Dancing Girls,” 138; Fatemi, “Music, Festivity, and Gender in Iran.”

¹¹⁵ Fatemi, “Music, Festivity, and Gender in Iran.” This is not to say these historical accounts paint exclusively dismal or erotic pictures. For instance, Fatemi contends that many prostitutes in the Safavid-era were often wealthy and held in high regard (399-400).

¹¹⁶ Najmabadi, *Women with Mustaches and Men without Beards*; Fatemi, “Music, Festivity, and Gender in Iran”; Bruce E. H. Koepke, “Covert Dance in Afghanistan” A Metaphor for Crisis?,” in *Asian Dance: Voices of the Millennium*, ed. Mohd Anis Md Nor (Asia Pacific Dance Research Society, Malaysia, 2000).

¹¹⁷ For more on *zan push* and *bacheh raqqaas*, see: Meftahi, *Dance and Gender in Modern Iran*; Anthony Shay, “The Male Dancer in the Middle East and Central Asia,” *Dance Research Journal* 28, nos. 1 & 2 (Summer/Winter 2006).

¹¹⁸ Koepke, “Covert Dance in Afghanistan.” Numerous miniature paintings depicting these dancing boys can be found throughout Iran, Afghanistan, and Central Asia. For examples, see: Sheila R. Canby, *The Golden Age of Persian Art: 1501–1722* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1999).

While Matthee and Fatemi assert in their respective studies that dance and prostitution were practiced together in the Iranian world at various historical junctures, I would like to draw attention to the ways in which discursive constructions of identity formations such as gender and sexuality—and the constitution of prostitution—are dynamic and change according to the power relations of any given time, place, and context. The issue with many historical accounts of dance and the subjecthood of dancers outside of the Euro-American cultural sphere is that many historians depend upon descriptions written by (male) European anthropologists, travelers, and writers during the colonial era. Matthee and Fatemi, for instance, depend heavily on European accounts of dance and prostitution in the Safavid courts as sources for the respective studies I cite here. As a result, I suggest that many of the sources upon which many contemporary scholars draw are skewed by puritanical, colonial bias, and xenophilic desire. There is a critical need to interrogate the obscured power relations embedded within historical sources of dancers in Iran (and elsewhere) and, as categories of gender and sexuality change according to time and place, contemporary epistemologies of sexuality and prostitution cannot be so easily applied to historical accounts.

In this, I hope to heed the question posed by Kathryn Babayan and Afsaneh Najmabadi in *Islamicate Sexualities: Translations across Temporal Geographies of Desire*: “In light of differing Anglo-Euro-American notions of reality, representation, and knowledge, how do we go about ‘translating’ Islamicate sexualities, based on their own historically determined notions, to English-speaking and -readings audiences?”¹¹⁹ While I do not attempt to write a revisionist history of Iranian sexualities here, I nonetheless wish to draw attention to how the few historical studies on entertainers in the Iranian cultural sphere construct dancers under categorizations of prostitution that fail to question the temporal framing and problems of “translating” the category itself.¹²⁰ My point is not to dispute or downplay dancers’ potential involvement in sexual activities, whether as part of and/or outside of their position as court dancers. Rather, similar to Babayan et al., I wish to interrogate the classifications of “prostitution” (among other categories related to gender and sexuality) that construct these historical dancers, and question how these categories become translated by a contemporary readership.

To be sure, historical meanings of gender and sexuality embedded in Iranian dance continue to affect present-day diasporic dance practices. The lasting differences and inflections embedded in the terms *raqqaas* and *raqsande* became palpable when a female Iranian friend attended a rehearsal for *Shourangeez*, the Iranian music and dance ensemble of which I was part. During the rehearsal, one of the male Iranian musicians casually referred to us dancers as *raqqaas*. My friend felt the need to jump immediately to our defense and replied, “*Raqaas nistand!*” (“They are not *raqqaas!*”) The musician made a face and responded slowly, “*Pas chi hastand?*” (“Then what are they?”) She responded defiantly: “*Raqsandeh-and! Honarmand hastand!*” (“They are dancers! They are artists!”) The musician rolled his eyes at her sensitivity to what he deemed a trivial differentiation and continued with his conversation. Two years later, while I was studying the Persian language at the University of Washington, my Iranian professor also strongly recommended that I refer to myself as *raqsande*, not *raqqaas*. Though she would not go into details, she urged, “Trust me, it’s a more appropriate term.”

¹¹⁹ Kathryn Babayan and Afsaneh Najmabadi, “Preface,” in *Islamicate Sexualities: Translations across Temporal Geographies of Desire*, eds. Kathryn Babayan and Afsaneh Najmabadi (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008), x.

¹²⁰ An exception is Meftahi’s *Gender and Dance in Modern Iran*.

These anecdotal moments underscore the larger trend amongst nearly all of the dancers in my study who have expressed having to contend with wide-ranging negative or ambivalent attitudes that associate professional dancing (or dancing in public) with prostitution. Dealing with these attitudes from the Iranian communities within which they live and work has often had detrimental impacts on these dancers' material and/or psychological wellbeing. This is especially true for those whose displacement from Iran has meant attempting to financially support themselves through performing and teaching dance. For instance, Azita Sahebjam—who danced with Pars National Ballet in Iran and founded the Vancouver, B.C. branch of the company shortly after immigrating to Canada in 1988—explains that she only had two students for a significant amount of time after starting to teach children's dance classes in Vancouver, emphasizing that these students' parents were close friends who were trying to support her.¹²¹ She explains that, in addition to a general belief among many Iranians that people can “naturally” dance without having to take lessons, the most common reason that parents were apprehensive to put their daughters into dance classes is because of the taboo attached to dancing in front of strangers. Sahebjam explains,

I had a student and she was a perfect dancer. She was five years old when she came to me. When she became thirteen or fourteen years old, the parents said, “That's enough.” I said “Why? She has practiced for over seven years and this is the moment she can really shine.” And they said “No. This is my daughter. I don't want her to be a dancer. Dance is a taboo for our community.” You know, people use the word “dancer” as a cuss word all of the time, because [for some people], dancer means prostitute. Oh, my God. I'm not a prostitute! It's taken at least ten years for Iranians in Vancouver to believe me and trust me. Especially because I have a family, this gives them a little bit of comfort. I say, “Don't be afraid, your wife, your sister, your daughter is not going to be a prostitute; they're going to be an artist, they're going to be a dancer.”¹²²

As Sahebjam's quote gestures toward, negative attitudes towards dance have caused them to feel rejected and alienated from Iranian communities. This can feel especially acute as they settle in their newly locations, a difficult emotional burden to bear for displaced individuals.

This was the case for Fatameh Borhani, who danced with the Mahalli Dancers of Iran. She immigrated to the U.S. in 1978 and then settled in Montreal in 1981 and explains the how the negative associations of her as a dancer affect her position within the broader Iranian diasporic community:

When my husband and I arrived in the U.S....the Iranian community, they started talking behind my back. They said things like, “She is not a good woman.” I am so sad because I know I wasn't bad; I swear I wasn't. But I'm a dancer, it's who I am, and they did not like it. They started gossiping, even in Montreal. Unfortunately, they hated me very much because I am a dancer. Well, that's why I could not do a lot of dance activities in Montreal. I did only two shows [after moving there]. I felt broken. I went into a deep depression and it was very hard to get out of it.¹²³

For Borhani, Sahebjam, and others, the associations of dance with “not [being] a good woman” deeply affect their relationships to the larger Iranian and Muslim communities they are a part of. To be sure, dance has often been held in low regard across many societies at various historical

¹²¹ I discuss Pars National Ballet later in this chapter.

¹²² Azita Sahebjam. Interview by Heather Rastovac. Tape recording. Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada. January 6, 2013.

¹²³ Fatameh Borhani. Skype interview by Heather Rastovac. Tape recording. January 16, 2016.

junctures, not just among Iranians or among Muslim communities—and not all of the adverse views on dance come from Islamic communities, as is often claimed or assumed.¹²⁴

While transgressive sexuality may have characterized the activities in which dancers of the Safavid and Qadjar courts were said to be involved, social dance practices among homosocial spheres also engaged in multiple expressions of sexuality. Iran has a long history of women's theatrical games performed in all-women gatherings called *baazi-haa-ye naameyshi*, in which women would use song, verse, dance, and acting as satire and to entertain each other with sexual humor and exaggerated erotic bodily gestures.¹²⁵ Kaveh Safa-Isfahani explains that the themes of these theatrical games focused on women's erotic feelings, values, and behaviors, as well as sex roles within the institutions of courtship, betrothal, marriage, and family.¹²⁶ Azardokht Ameri suggests that it is likely the court performances of the *motreb*¹²⁷ and *zan push/bacheh raqqaas* influenced the movements practiced in the *baazi-haa-ye naameyshi* of women's private quarters in both the Safavid and Qadjar dynasties.¹²⁸

While Safa-Isfahani poses the women's theatrical games as sources of power and agency that scripted women as sexual agents, the emergence of women's modern written literature during the Constitutionalist era (1906–1911) re-scripted these vernacular activities within women's homosocial spaces as backward vulgarity. At that time, stepping into the heterosocial world of Iranian modernity required that modern national subjects embody distinct corporeal norms suitable for new fields of visible subjecthood. Afsaneh Najmabadi explains that categories of nation, gender, and class in early twentieth century Iran were formed through a process of “grafting” European sensibilities and corporeal norms onto Iranian ones.¹²⁹ This involved the adoption of epistemologies that demarcated deviant sexual and gendered subjects through newly

¹²⁴ Many dancers and dance connoisseurs I have spoken with (both Iranian and non-Iranian) throughout my eighteen-year career as a dancer in the U.S. have blamed Islamic views on dance as the reason for why dance is not more accepted among many segments of Iranian society. While this may be true in terms of the current ban on dance in Iran and among some Muslim Iranians, it is crucial to consider that neither the Quran nor the *Sharia*—Islamic law—directly address whether or not dance is permissible. Therefore, the *hadith*—the interpretations of the words and deeds of the Prophet Muhammad—are the only source available as to what the Prophet Muhammad may have said about the topic of dance practice and performance. There are several contradicting interpretations of *hadith* and thus, historically and today, Muslim's attitudes towards dance vary greatly.

¹²⁵ See: Shay, *Choreophobia*; Anthony Shay, “Bazi-ha-ye Nameyeshi: Iranian Women's Theatrical Plays,” *Dance Research Journal* 27, no. 2 (1995): 16-24; Afsaneh Najmabadi, “Veiled Discourse—Unveiled Bodies,” *Feminist Studies* 19, no. 3 (1993): 487-518; Kaveh Safa-Isfahani, “Female-centered World Views in Iranian Culture: Symbolic Representations of Sexuality in Dramatic Games,” *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 6, no. 1 (1980): 33-53.

¹²⁶ Safa-Isfahani, “Female-centered World Views in Iranian Culture,” 38. Najmabadi further contends that women's language in these primarily homosocial spaces had also been more “openly sexual.” (Najmabadi, “Veiled Discourse,” 488). For a twentieth-century comedic fictional film depicting women's theatrical games, see *Moorcheh Daareh* (“It has ants” or “There are ants”), see: JohnnyBravo2k. “Moorcheh Dareh,” *YouTube* video, 3:41:41, March 15, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sU-TWv8X-oo>.

¹²⁷ According to Meftahi, “Genealogically traceable to those of the Safavid era, the *mutribi* (‘minstrel’) is another major performance form, which involved music, acting, and dancing.” (Meftahi, *Gender and Dance in Modern Iran*, 8)

¹²⁸ Azardokht Ameri also suggests that the performance forms and dance practices of the *motrebi*, *bacheh raqqaas*, and *baazi-haa-ye naameyshi* continue to show traces in the movements and stylization of Iranian social dance today. Azardokht Ameri, “Iranian Urban Popular Social Dance and So-Called Classical Dance: A Comparative Investigation in the District of Tehran,” trans. Anthony Shay, *Dance Research Journal* 38, nos. 1 & 2 (Summer/Winter 2006): 163-179.

¹²⁹ Afsaneh Najmabadi, “The Erotic Vatan [Homeland] as Beloved and Mother: To Love, to Posses, and To Protect,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 39, no. 3 (1997): 443.

formulated understandings of prostitution and homosexuality. It was at this particular juncture that dancing bodies became part of the formulation of these categories, as well as part of the Iranian nationalist discourses that distinguished between “tradition and modernity, backwardness and progress, education and ignorance, middle class and lower classes.”¹³⁰ Through a variety of modernization processes in twentieth-century Iran, there were concerted state efforts to shed or cleanse cultural traditions deemed backwards and sexually vulgar, such as the pre-twentieth century performance styles of the *bacheh raqqaas/zan push* or the homosocial dance practices of women’s theatrical games, and to likewise employ dance as a means of producing modern corporeal norms and “advance and educate the nation.”¹³¹

As a response to the associations of dance and a kind of “vulgar” womanhood, many elite dancers in mid- to late-twentieth century Iran who associated themselves with the “high art” genres of ballet and “national dance” (*raqs-e melli*) began using the term *raqsandeh* in an effort to elevate the position of a dancer from its associations with prostitution or mere entertainment to that of “art.”¹³² By adding the Persian suffix “-andeh” to the Arabic term *raqs*, *raqsandeh* reflects the nationalist ideological shift toward pre-Islamic identification that occurred during the Pahlavi era (1925–1979).¹³³ During this time, the Pahlavi dynasty was invested in a Western modernity and specifically sought to cleanse dance of “vulgar” and “backward” associations according to European heteronormative bodily norms.¹³⁴ This discursive shift to *raqsandeh* embodied an active disassociation from dancers and entertainers that Iran’s modernizing elite classes considered to be low class, vulgar, and/or backward, such as the boy dancers of previous eras (*zan push*), minstrel performers (*motrebi*), and the cabaret dancer who began to widely circulate in the 1950s through the popular FilmFarsi commercial genre of Iranian cinema, through whom the term *raqqaas* itself became a metonym for backwardness, degeneracy, and/or sexual availability.¹³⁵

Ultimately, the shift from *raqqaas* to *raqsandeh* reveals a range of conditions and tensions related to Iranian modernity’s formulation of race, class, gender, and sexuality through which these words for and perceptions of “dancer” have been generated and transformed. As the anecdotes I have shared illustrate, the tensions that form this legacy continue to impact Iranian dancers in the diaspora today, not only in terms of contending with enduring attitudes but also in many of these dancers’ efforts to present and preserve national and classical Iranian dances that continue to disassociate from the cabaret dancer and instead represent dance and Iran as “refined” and “civilized.”

¹³⁰ Safa-Isfahani, “Female-centered World Views in Iranian Culture”; Najmabadi, “Veiled Discourse,” 500.

¹³¹ Meftahi, *Gender and Dance in Modern Iran*, 9.

¹³² Meftahi, *Gender and Dance in Modern Iran*; Shay, *Choreophobia*. The *-andeh* suffix forms an agent noun, whereby it denotes the thing or person that does the action to which it is attached. In this case, *raqsandeh* is the person who does “dance” (*raqs kardan*). Similar examples are *nevistan* (to write)/*nevisandeh* (writer) and *raandan* (to drive)/*raanandeh* (driver).

¹³³ Minoo Moallem describes how Iran’s twentieth century nation-state building efforts mimicked “European civilizational thinking... filtered Islam out of their system of invented tradition... [and invented] a golden pre-Islamic age of racial and cultural superiority” (*Between Warrior Brother and Veiled Sister*, 29).

¹³⁴ Meftahi’s *Gender and Dance in Modern Iran* provides a thorough analysis on Islamic, leftist, Marxist, and monarchist discourses on dance and the dancing body in twentieth and twenty-first century Iran.

¹³⁵ See *Ibid.*

Performances of Iranian Modernity: The Development of “National Dance”

Dance [is] not...a reflection of individual or cultural values, but [is] culture. As culture, dance is in(sinew)ated with power relations. Built bone-deep into the dancing body and permeating its practice and performance, these structurings of power both discipline and pleasure the body. And this cultivation of the corporeal takes place within and as part of the power relations that operate throughout the body politic.¹³⁶

As this quote by Susan Foster asserts, dance does not merely reflect cultural norms and values but essentially produces them through dancing bodies themselves. In Iran for the majority of the twentieth century, modernization processes found a vehicle for disciplining “civic bodies” and producing modern corporealities through dancing bodies presented on state-sponsored stages. Mino Moallem theorizes the “civic body” of early- to late-twentieth century Iran as a form of corporeal subjecthood that drew upon racial, gendered, and civilizational tropes inherent to European colonial modernity.¹³⁷

In twentieth-century Iran, the civic body was a properly “modern” national subject devoid of “backward” expressions of gender and sexuality. This modern subject required the disembodiment of homosociality traditional to the Iranian cultural sphere and entailed an embodiment of what Moallem refers to as “hegemonic masculinities” and “emphasized femininities” appropriate for the burgeoning heterosocial and heteronormative public sphere.¹³⁸ As exceptionally visible and public bodies within newly-formed heterosocial spaces, both female and male dancers adopted and modeled new forms of embodiment that “cleansed” their dancing bodies of the “transgressive” and “vulgar” corporeality associated with raqqaas. The implementation of ballet training and performance in the early twentieth century was instrumental to this transformation of public dancing bodies, as the more “acceptable” dancers adopted and presented European norms deemed appropriate for modern corporeality. For dancers who increasingly began to circulate on elite and national stages, the modern forms of corporeality that had been generated in the public sphere and with the advent of ballet later became part of the formation of Iran’s “national dance” (*raqs-e melli*).¹³⁹ This “invented tradition” was a form that integrated ballet technique and aesthetics with the hegemonic symbols of Persian civilization lauded by the Pahlavi dynasty, namely pre-Islamic symbolism, miniature paintings, and esoteric themes drawn from classical Persian poetry.¹⁴⁰ As I discuss later in the chapter, the genres of ballet and national Iranian dance that developed in Iran at this time later traveled into the Iranian diaspora and reconfigured into what is often referred to as classical Iranian Dance, a form that draws upon similar techniques, aesthetics, and themes, but which I argue generates new meanings in diasporic spaces.¹⁴¹

¹³⁶ Foster, “Worlding Dance,” 7.

¹³⁷ Moallem, *Between Warrior Brother and Veiled Sister*. Colonial modernity, as Moallem defines it, is “...an era, a project, a politico-economic formation distinct in its evolutionary historicity and marked by the experience of European colonialism...” (Ibid, 1) Consisting of colonial epistemologies, colonial modernity constructs categories of race, gender, and sexuality based upon modernist notions of civilization and barbarism. Iran’s 20th century nationalisms, both secular and Islamic, have both been informed (albeit in different ways) by colonial modernity and by what Moallem calls “civilizational thinking” (Ibid, 28-29).

¹³⁸ Ibid.

¹³⁹ I refer to this genre as “national Iranian dance” throughout the dissertation.

¹⁴⁰ Eric Hobsbawm, “Introduction: Inventing Traditions,” in *The Invention of Tradition*, eds. Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 1-14.

¹⁴¹ Meftahi also suggests that “‘national style’ of choreography continues to thrive to this day” in diasporic Iranian communities. (*Gender and Dance in Modern Iran*, 33)

Ballet emerged in Iran in the late 1920s amidst the evolution of Iranian nationalism as an embodied cultural form compatible to the efforts and effects of modernization projects that sought to redefine Iranian citizenship and socio-political participation. According to Nima Kiann and Ida Meftahi, ballet traditions in Iran began when Madame Cornelli, a Russian-trained Armenian ballet dancer, opened a dance studio and began teaching in Tehran in 1928.¹⁴² She and subsequent ballet teachers Sarkis Djanbazian and Madame Yelena began training the children of Tehran's elite classes. As a form that embodied the corporeal norms of Iranian modernization, ballet became part of the discourses between tradition and modernity embodied in issues of class. Considering the preoccupation with material transformation of backwardness that characterized many of Iran's modernization projects during the Pahlavi monarchy (such as modern forms of education, the emphasis on producing healthy bodies through exercise, and the adoption of scientific language in renaming body parts), the practice of ballet presumably played a significant function in the forging of oneself as modern for those who participated in it.¹⁴³



Figure 1: Madame Yelena's ballet class, Tehran, Iran, 1949.

Meftahi cites Nilla Cram Cook's Studio for the Revival of the Iranian Classical Arts as Iran's first national dance project, a studio and performance company that toured nationally and internationally from the mid-1940s until 1953. Cram Cook was an American dancer and theater artist who also worked with the United States Embassy in Tehran and as director of the arts in the Iranian Ministry of Education. The studio's primary objective, according to Meftahi, was reviving the alleged "forgotten ancient art of Iranian dance."¹⁴⁴ Cram Cook's performances were

¹⁴² In the early stages of my research, little scholarly work had been done on the advent of ballet in Iran. Most sources had been directly from those who were ballet dancers during the Pahlavi-era (1925—1979). One such dancer, Nima Kiann, who danced with the Iranian National Ballet Company and who currently directs Le Ballet Persans in Stockholm, has endeavored to provide a comprehensive history of ballet in Iran. See: Nima Kiann, "Persian Dance and its Forgotten History," 2002, Iran Chamber Society, accessed May 22, 2016, http://www.iranchamber.com/cinema/articles/persian_dance_history01.php. Meftahi's 2016 publication of *Dance and Gender in Modern Iran* offers a tremendously valuable contribution to the limited scholarly work on this topic.

¹⁴³ For more on modernizing practices in twentieth-century Iran, see: Najmabadi, *Women with Mustaches and Men without Beards*; Moallem, *Between Warrior Brother and Veiled Sister*; Meftahi, *Gender and Dance in Modern Iran*; Meftahi, "Dancing Angels and Princesses"; Stellar, "From 'Evil-Inciting' Dance."

¹⁴⁴ *Gender and Dance in Modern Iran*, 23. To make this claim, Meftahi cites Fakhri Nazimi, "Namayish-hayi istudio-yi ihyia-yi hunar-hayi bastani-i iran" [Performances of the studio of revival of ancient arts of Iran], *Jahan-i-Naw* (Tir 1327/June 1948): 169-170. Nesta Ramazani refers to Cram Cook's company as a "ballet company" that

ballet-based but were the first of their kind to fuse ballet with Iranian mythological, religious, and folkloric themes, aesthetics, and movements.¹⁴⁵ Cram Cook's company also incorporated into their performances movements from the *Sama'* of the Mevlevi Dervish orders, namely the spinning in place that occurs during Mevlevi rituals (leading to the common English name "whirling dervishes").¹⁴⁶ This history is significant to genres of Iranian dance performed in the Iranian diaspora today, such as classical Iranian dance and what some dancers are calling contemporary Iranian dance (that I discuss in chapter two), in which *Sama'* movements such as whirling have become increasingly popular (and posited as an ancient Iranian practice).

Nesta Ramazani, a former dancer with Cram Cook's dance company, describes Cram Cook's work with the studio as a means of restoring "Iranians' sense of pride in their own culture."¹⁴⁷ Zeinab Stellar further explains, "Cram Cook aimed to break the barrier set up between public dancing and women of 'good families,' a project planned to speed up the modernization process in Iran."¹⁴⁸ Nevertheless, Ramazani attests that, while ballet may have been attractive to the upper classes of Tehran society, belonging to these echelons was not enough to protect one who wished to *perform* ballet in public (rather than merely train as part of a modern education), especially women, from the scandalous reputation associated with public dance performance. According to Ramazani:

Never before had a young girl from a good family danced in public. I was only dimly aware of the waves I was making, of the centuries of tradition and entrenched beliefs I was violating. For me, it was a simple matter: dancing filled me with joy. For Tehran society, it was scandalous. Good girls did not perform in public, baring their legs for all to see, putting themselves in the limelight to attract the lust of strangers...In my case, innocence protected me—somewhat. My father's family's name helped too. A family of such standing and good repute could take the criticism.¹⁴⁹

As Ramazani's testimonial implies, the negative reactions toward dancing in public spaces and dance's association with prostitution were difficult to shake, even among (and partly because of) the immense modernization projects in which dance became part.

Shortly following the dissolution of Cram Cook's company in 1953, Iranian-Armenian Russian-trained ballet dancer Sarkis Djanbazian also contributed toward the development of national dance in Iran through establishing the Folk Dance and Song Ensemble (*goruh-e raqs o aavaaz-e mahalli*) in 1959. Djanbazian's company also incorporated Iranian epic stories into its ballet repertoires and staged Iranian character dance (balletic renditions of Iranian folk dances).¹⁵⁰ Djanbazian viewed himself, according to Meftahi, as "a liberator of the 'national art form of dance' from its vulgar position within the 'cheap entertainment scene,'" and, similar to Cram Cook, "aimed to revive Iranian ancient, national, and folk dances by staging them on

began in 1944, while Meftahi refers to the company as an "Iranian national dance project" that began in 1946. See: Nesta Ramazani, *The Dance of the Rose and the Nightingale* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2002). Nilla Cram Cook published her own article about her experiences in Iran. See: Nilla Cram Cook, "The Theater and Ballet Arts of Iran," *Middle East Journal* 3, no. 4 (1949): 406-420.

¹⁴⁵ Meftahi, *Gender and Dance in Modern Iran*; Stellar, "From 'Evil-Inciting Dance'"; Ramazani, *The Dance of the Rose and the Nightingale*.

¹⁴⁶ Meftahi, *Gender and Dance in Modern Iran*; Stellar, "From 'Evil-Inciting Dance.'"

¹⁴⁷ Ramazani, *The Dance of the Rose and the Nightingale*, 7.

¹⁴⁸ Stellar, "From 'Evil-Inciting Dance,'" 239.

¹⁴⁹ Ramazani, *The Dance of the Rose and the Nightingale*, 1—2.

¹⁵⁰ Maria Sabaye Moghaddam. "Sarkis Djanbazian," in *Encyclopedia Iranica*, July 15, 2009, modified August 18, 2010, <http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/djanbazian-sarkis--ballet-master>.

pointe, thereby depicting them in a manner easily accessible for a wider ‘international audience’.”¹⁵¹

The most significant effort to change public opinion towards dance occurred through the state support of the Pahlavi monarchy, especially through the efforts of Empress Farah and the Ministry of Culture and Art. It was with the state support of dance in Iran that the shift from raqqaas to raqsandeh truly began to take place. According to Shay:

During the regime of the late shah, professional ballet and folk dance companies were established, as they had been in the Soviet-dominated adjacent areas in previous decades. Perhaps as a result of this, the term *raqsandeh*, meaning a dancer of either sex, came into use. It does not seem to carry negative connotations and seems to be a locution of recent province to give respectability to professional dancers such as those in state companies.¹⁵²

Along with the establishment of state-supported dance companies, Stellar explains that

Another important transformation placed upon the dancing body in the 20th century was through the change of the performance venue; a departure from the traditional stage of *hawz* and popular cabaret stage to the Western-style proscenium theatrical space elevated Iranian dance to a high-art form.¹⁵³

Rudaki Hall (*taalaar-e rudaki*), inaugurated by Mohammad Reza Pahlavi and Empress Farah in late 1967, became one of the most well equipped performing arts centers in the region at the time.¹⁵⁴ Most significantly, however, Rudaki Hall became Iran’s “national stage” for opera, ballet, and national Iranian dance.¹⁵⁵ It was the artistic home for both the state-sponsored Iranian National Ballet Company (*Saazmaan-e Baaleh Melli-ye Iran*) and its sister state-sponsored company, the Iran National Folklore Association (*Saazmaan-e Melli-e Fulklur*), both of which were supported by the Ministry of Culture and Arts. Two of Nilla Cram Cook’s students, Haideh Akhundzadeh and Nejad Ahmadzadeh, founded The Iranian National Ballet Company in 1956. During its operation until the 1979 Revolution, the company presented Western and Orientalist ballets based on Persian themes for the court, elite publics, and foreign dignitaries. Nima Kiann, a former dancer with The Iranian National Ballet Company, re-established the company in Sweden with the name Les Ballets Persans twenty-three years following the company’s closure.

¹⁵¹ Meftahi, *Gender and Dance in Modern Iran*, 24.

¹⁵² Shay, *Choreophobia*, 189-190.

¹⁵³ Stellar, “From ‘Evil-Inciting Dance,’” 246. *Hawz* literally translates to “pond” but, in this case, it refers to traditional performances in which performers would put a wooden platform over the small pond in the courtyards of homes to create a stage See: Willem Floor, *The History of Theater in Iran* (Washington D.C.: Mage Publishers, 2005), 45; William O. Beeman, *Iranian Performance Traditions* (Costa Mesa, CA: Mazda Publishers, 2011).

¹⁵⁴ After the 1979 Islamic Revolution, the name of Rudaki Hall changed to Vahdat Hall (*taalaar-e vahdat*).

¹⁵⁵ Meftahi, *Gender and Dance in Modern Iran*.



Figure 2: Iranian National Ballet Company, *Bijan and Manijeh*, Tehran, Iran, 1970s.

The Iran National Folklore Association, referred to in English-language promotional materials as the “Mahalli Dancers,” was established in 1967 and was directed by British ballet-trained choreographer Robert de Warren throughout its year of operation until 1978. The company presented a wide range of regional folk and further developed national Iranian dance by fusing classical ballet techniques with Iranian (oftentimes Orientalist) themes, choreographies such as *Haft Peykar*—which was based on mystical Persian poetry and depicted seven dancers as princesses in miniature paintings—and the staging of a dervish ceremony for the 1975 Asian Olympic Games opening in Tehran. These Orientalist-tinged stagings, which were presented to domestic and international elite, came to represent the Iranian nation domestically and internationally.



Figure 3: Mahalli Dancers of Iran, *Haft Peykar*, Iran, 1970s.

While there were other dance companies that performed folk and national dance at the time, namely Pars National Ballet, the Mahalli Dancers were amply sponsored by the Shah and the Ministry of Art. This support included the opening the College of National and Folk Dance (a three-year program that trained company dancers), extensive trips for de Warren and assistants to research regional music and dances from across Iran, performances in Rudaki Hall for the royal family and foreign dignitaries, and numerous international tours. As such, the Mahalli Dancers became a dominant symbol of national folklore and national dance in Iran during the 1970s. Similar to Cram Cook and Djanbazian, the Iran National Folklore Organization under De Warren's direction viewed themselves as protectors of Iranian heritage and aimed "to safeguard the nation's treasures in ethnic dances, music and ceremonies."¹⁵⁶ Thus, in addition to the technical and aesthetic similarities between the choreographers and companies who developed national Iranian dance from the 1940s to the 1970s, they shared a similar discourse in which the their work and the dance form itself became part of a larger effort to revive, salvage, and safeguard an essentialized Iranian culture. As I discuss later in the chapter, these efforts become reinvigorated in the contemporary Iranian diaspora, particularly through the efforts of the International Iranian Dance Conference.



Figure 4: Robert de Warren, director of Mahalli Dancers, Shah and Empress Farah, Rudaki Hall, Tehran, Iran, 1970s.

The presentation of dancing bodies in Rudaki Hall, which was intimately tied to the monarchy, particularly provided dance a certain amount of legitimacy as a "serious" art form among certain segments of society. Fatameh Borhani, a former principle dancer with the Mahalli Dancers, explained to me, "You know, Rudaki Hall had a specific kind of audience. They were very open minded, very advanced people in art. It was not very cheap to enter the shows. It was an opera house. So, it was kind of special."¹⁵⁷ Among many dancers in the Iranian diaspora today,

¹⁵⁶ Meftahi, *Gender and Dance in Modern Iran*, 27. Meftahi cites "Mahalli dancers of Iran," Tour of the United States of America, Opening at the Kennedy Center for Performing Arts, Washington, DC, 1-2 September, 1976, souvenir program.

¹⁵⁷ Fatameh Borhani. Skype interview by Heather Rastovac. Tape recording. January 16, 2016.

Rudaki Hall continues to carry a certain amount of clout as the artistic home of dance during Iran's "golden era," even among dancers (Iranian and non-Iranian) who have never set foot in Iran or who were born too recently to have seen these performances firsthand. The fetishization of Rudaki Hall among some practitioners of Iranian dances in the diaspora relates to Sara Ahmed's theorization of affective economies in which she analogizes "feelings" to a "commodity fetish." Ahmed explains that "feelings appear in objects, or indeed *as* objects with a life of their own, only by the concealment of how they are shaped by histories."¹⁵⁸ For dancers in the Iranian diaspora who are invested in salvaging regional and national Iranian dances, Rudaki Hall becomes the essential locus of all that has been lost. This was very much at play as organizers, teachers, and attendees of the IIDC in both 2012 and 2015 consistently referenced Rudaki Hall, and I observed the awe in which many participants would reflect on the stories or watch archival video footage of the performances there. As such, Rudaki Hall has taken on a fetish-like quality as its memory circulates among many dancers in the contemporary diaspora who wish to revive Iran's "golden era" of dance and the dances that were performed in Rudaki Hall at the time.

A new heart for Iranian ballet

THE TIMES,
WEDNESDAY FEBRUARY 7 1968

Last July I was watching Iran's National Ballet Company rehearsing in the ramshackle old buildings scattered among the trees next to the shell of a building for years shrouded in scaffolding in the heart of Teheran.

But when I returned from Europe for the Coronation in October, I was astonished to find that the old buildings had disappeared, and in their place, as if by magic, smooth green lawns and terraced gardens with splashing fountains surrounded the magnificent new Rudaki Hall, set like a many-faceted diamond in a crystal jewel-box; floodlit at night, its marble foyers with their traditional mosaics and fabulous crystal chandeliers were thronged with a far more elegantly evening-gowned, tiaraed audience than you'd find in most western capitals.

A few nights ago, with a completely full house, I watched a programme that began with an enchanting and superbly produced folk dance performance, the setting an exquisite Persian miniature, the costumes breath-taking, the lighting and production—all by the company's producer, Nejad Ahmadzadeh—utterly captivating.

The rest of the programme was in the traditional western ballet style, costumed and choreographed by the Company's Maître de Ballet, Robert de Warren, on loan from London's Royal Ballet Company, whose *Love and the Clown* came across with such verve and ardour that the technical deficiencies inevitable with such a young and relatively inexperienced company no longer mattered. The leading roles were taken by extremely talented artists headed by prima ballerina Aida Ahmadzadeh who has often been described as an outstandingly brilliant ballerina who would take top honours in any western ballet company. As the forlorn little clown it is hard to imagine that she could have been bettered.

It is hard to believe that the Academy was founded by Nejad Ahmadzadeh, only in December, 1955, at the suggestion of the Minister of Culture and Arts. "We know we aren't ready yet to dance classical ballet in competition with the best of the western com-

panies", says burly Nejad frankly. "So when we perform before visiting heads of state, or abroad, we keep to our traditional folk themes—we have a long way to go yet, but now that we have a chance to perform regularly, and, we hope, to see visiting companies here, we should progress much faster."

Dame Ninette de Valois has greatly helped the company get established, and Nejad described how, on his way back from a visit to the U.S.A. about 11 years ago, the British Council invited him to stop off in Britain.

"I visited many British ballet companies—Ballet Rambert and the Royal Ballet among them, and there I first met Dame Ninette and invited her to visit us here", he said.

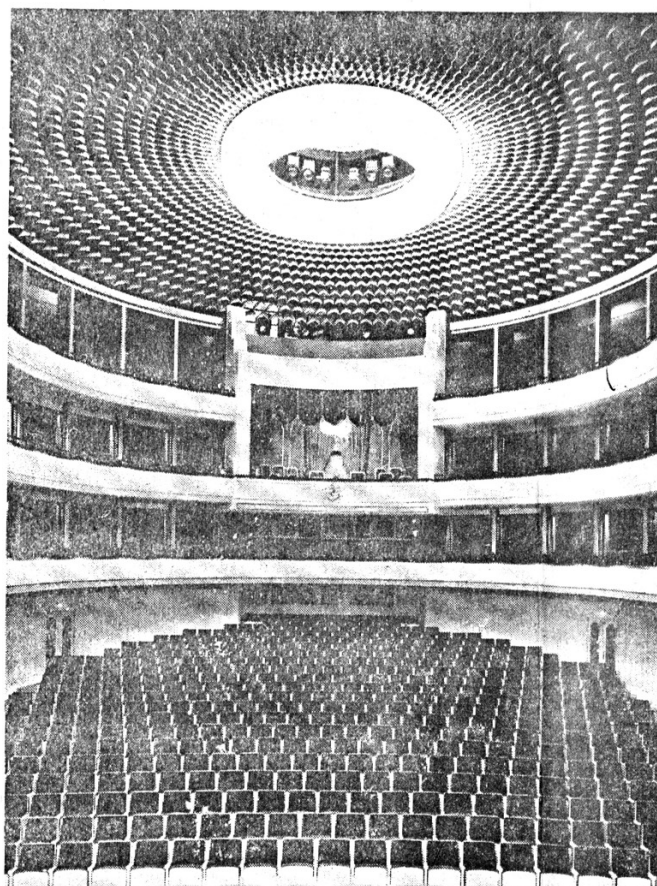
"Dame Ninette first came out in 1958 and at once developed a strong personal interest in the new-born company; she has been back every two or three years since and is hoping to come here this spring."

"She sent us teachers from the Royal Ballet Company; Ann Cook and then the soloists Miro Zolan and his wife Sandra, then Richard Brown and Marion English—they all stayed for two years, and Marion; who married an Iranian and is still with us, teaching in the Academy. For the past 18 months we've been very lucky to have Robert de Warren and his wife Jacqueline. She was a pupil of the great Preobrazhenskaya and not only takes the senior classes but works closely in rehearsals with the soloists of the company."

"When we started the Academy in 1955 we had 80 students between the ages of 8 and 15. In those days they were mainly foreigners but today, out of 250 students only 30 or 40 are foreigners and ballet is no longer regarded as *infra dig*—in fact our Iranian pupils are all from very good families." Like most companies, the difficulty is finding male dancers. There is a chronic shortage of boys and all are liable for national service at 19.

"In fact, four of our dancers are in the Army now, but they are given special leave to dance with the company for Imperial Command performances!"

SYLVIA MATHESON



Rudaki Hall, Teheran's new opera house, has electronically controlled lighting and seats 1,600 people.

Figure 5: *The Times* review of Rudaki Hall, Tehran, Iran, February 7, 1968.

¹⁵⁸ Sara Ahmed, "Affective Economies," *Social Text* 79, 22, no. 2 (Summer 2004).

While some dancers in the Iranian diaspora such as Borhani and many of the dancers at the IIDC laud the state-supported dance companies of the late Pahlavi era, others are critical of the elitism that defined them. Aram Bayat is a dancer who trained in the Iran National Folklore Association's College of National and Folk Dances in the mid-1970s and who opted to teach dance in high schools for the organization rather than perform with the company. She currently teaches dance and directs the Khorshid Khanoom Dance Company in Montreal.¹⁵⁹ Bayat explained to me,

I would have loved to become a dancer [who performed] but I didn't want to become a dancer for the [Mahalli Dancers] because they were hired to dance for the court of the King and other kings from countries like Saudi Arabia...It was in my mind always that this art is worth more than that...I thought these dances belonged to everybody, that they belonged to the people. And the thing is, I was a revolutionary too. That's why it was very hard for me because I was in the streets chanting...I thought that if we overthrow this King, we can bring these dances to more than just Rudaki theater, which only very special people could go to. For the general population, many of them didn't even hear the name of Rudaki *Taalaar* (hall). For me, the revolution was, "Oh, we can bring these dances to the streets, to the freedom square, for the people."¹⁶⁰ But I was young and afterward, many of us [revolutionaries] realized that the 1979 Revolution didn't turn out how we thought it would. Now I realize, okay, what the Shah did was good, but it was not enough. Maybe because this is the nature of kingdom; a king wants everything for himself...but it was progress...but for me, I wanted the beautiful art of dance to be for more people than just the King.¹⁶¹

Bayat's sentiments, which are part of revolutionary discourses that seldom take part in discussions on dance in the Iranian diaspora, offer valuable perspectives on the history of Rudaki Hall that destabilize its fetish-like properties by historicizing its elitist position among Iranian dance histories. While Bayat remains especially critical of the Islamic Republic of Iran and its ban on dance after the Revolution, she nonetheless draws critical attention to the ways in which the "golden era" of dance in Iran was golden for a limited segment of the population.

Another one of my informants, Azita Sahebjam, shares similar sentiments as Bayat about the elitism of Rudaki Hall and the state-sponsored dance companies who were housed there. Sahebjam explains, for instance, that the Iranian National Ballet Company catered to exclusive circles surrounding the Shah, consisted of predominantly foreign dancers, and performed "exclusively classical [Western] ballet with only a few Persian stories included."¹⁶² On the other hand, according to Sahebjam, the Pars National Ballet that was founded by ex-Iranian National Ballet Company dancer Abdollah Nazemi in 1966 more fully incorporated Persian stories, aesthetics, and movement vocabulary into their ballets, and also performed regional and national dances. Additionally, the Pars National Ballet regularly performed on the National Iranian Television in an effort to reach more general audiences outside of Rudaki Hall. Sahebjam explains,

¹⁵⁹ For information on Khorshid Khanoom dance company, see: Khorshid Khanoom dance company's Facebook page, accessed April 3, 2016, <https://www.facebook.com/Khorshid-Khanoom-Dance-Group-407360925943255/>.

¹⁶⁰ Bayat is referring to Meydaani Azaadi (Freedom Square), which, before the 1979 Islamic Revolution was called Meydaani Shahyaad (King Memorial Square), and was the site of many of the demonstrations leading up to the 1979 Revolution.

¹⁶¹ Aram Bayat. Skype interview by Heather Rastovac. Tape recording. April 12, 2016.

¹⁶² Azita Sahebjam. Interview by Heather Rastovac. Tape recording. Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada. January 6, 2013.

[When I go to the ballet,] I want to see more of my people, more Iranians presenting the art form, not the other [foreign] people. Nezami always believed this: *Swan Lake* has a history of 700 years in France; it belongs to them. Iran's history of ballet is very short. So, if we're going to try and emulate them, it's going to be a disaster. Instead, we have to find a way with our art, our music, our culture.¹⁶³

Stellar also confirms Nezami's belief in developing a national dance rather than simply emulating others. She explains, "Abdullah Nazemi...contended in his 1966 interview with *Talash* that the only solution for elevating the art of dance in Iran was to pay attention to national dance and national ballet. He maintained that Iran's rich poetic narratives would be better suited for Iranian ballet productions than the content borrowed from Western countries."¹⁶⁴ Sahebjam continues:

I'm not going to say they [Iranian National Ballet Company] are wrong; they made beautiful work, they were well known because the Queen and King supported them a lot. But for me as an Iranian, I want to see my people understand ballet. I want to see that my grandma could come to a ballet performance and see and learn and enjoy. However, at the time, my grandmother wore *chador* [pious head and body covering] and covered her face. They would have never allowed us to come into Rudaki Hall because she wore that.¹⁶⁵

Like Bayat, Sahebjam complicates hegemonic or idealized representations of Rudaki Hall and state-sponsored dance in Iran by drawing attention, in Sahebjam's case, to the exclusions of these spaces that are not only based on class or political ideology, but are also based on religion and the secularization of official spaces (which did not represent the country's majority population at this time).

Apart from the classed and political ideologies undergirding ballet in sites like Rudaki Hall, the mobilization of the form toward the development of a national dance further embodied and enacted newly formed concepts of femininity and masculinity within the changing landscape of Iranian modernity, which continued into the national Iranian dance genre. In the Iranian context, ballet disciplined and sanitized the Iranian dancing body of specific sexual markers and the sexual innuendo that had previously characterized many Iranian dance practices and performances. Rather than "desexualizing" or "degendering" dancing bodies, ballet and national Iranian dance produced new performances of sexuality and gender. Female performers exuded an innocent affect rather than overt sexuality.¹⁶⁶ The *zan push/bacheh raqqaas* were replaced with men who were choreographed into "hypermasculinity," a tactic that Anthony Shay contends was related to the pressures from Westernized elites and middle classes to offset the negative stereotypes that male dancers have historically embodied within the Iranian world. Shay argues that, in regards to masculinizing male dancing bodies through ballet techniques in Iran,

...these invented traditions demonstrate how populations succumbed to and frequently embraced European attitudes toward sexuality and gender that directly provoked individuals in the field to create these artificial choreographic styles [that sanitized and erased] perceived effeminate elements from past and contemporary dancing practices.¹⁶⁷

¹⁶³ Ibid.

¹⁶⁴ Stellar, "From 'Evil-Inciting' Dance," 241.

¹⁶⁵ Azita Sahebjam. Interview by Heather Rastovac. Tape recording. Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada. January 6, 2013.

¹⁶⁶ Meftahi, *Gender and Dance in Modern Iran*; Stellar, "From 'Evil-Inciting' Dance."

¹⁶⁷ Anthony Shay, "Choreographing Hypermasculinity in Egypt, Iran, and Uzbekistan," *Dance Chronicle* 31, no. 2 (2008): 214-215.

While men and women in the Iranian cultural sphere have historically danced using similar movements, ballet teachers who had been trained in Russia and in other areas outside of Iran felt the need to create separate male and female styles, a practice which began with the advent of ballet in Iran and continued throughout the remainder of the Pahlavi era.¹⁶⁸ These distinctive corporeal expressions of gender aligned with the continued heteronormalization of space within the era's public sphere.

Following this, I argue that the ballet dancer and the subsequent national dancer in pre-Revolutionary Iran was a "civic body" that performed and reified "hegemonic masculinities" and "emphasized femininities."¹⁶⁹ Through their performances, the nation was further inscribed in the disavowal of homosociality and the embodiment of an abstract, visible, heteronormative modern subject. This was often done so in contrast to the hypersexualized imaginary of the FilmFarsi film genre, in particular.

As I have discussed, ballet forms the basis of many of both the physical techniques and ideologies of national Iranian dance, particularly in the ways that ballet disciplined and "cleansed" the national dancer of the "backward" and "vulgar" corporealities associated with the past practices and performances of the *zan push/bacheh raqqaas*, *motreb*, and traditional theatrical women's games. Performers of national dance, according to Azardokht Ameri, also staunchly distinguished the form from the popular urban social dances that were practiced contemporaneous to national dance, particularly the social dance practices of the capital city of Tehran.¹⁷⁰ Most significantly, however, the ballet-trained national dancer could not achieve "high art" status were it not for the construction of her "low art" antagonist, the cabaret dancer featured on musical café stages and on cinema screens in the popular FilmFarsi genre.¹⁷¹ Stellar explains, "the bold presence of the cabaret-dancing body in the films and sites of sociability such as cafes and cabarets, with seemingly uncontrolled sexuality, added to the already existing negative attitudes towards *raqs* (dance) and *raqqas* (dancer)."¹⁷² The ballet-trained national dancer, in contrast, produced modern heterosexual norms while the FilmFarsi cabaret dancer constituted her deviant Other and became the late-twentieth century *raqqaas*. Najmabadi insists that the construction of the modern Iranian woman throughout the twentieth century "could not do away with her complementary/conflicting Other: the sexual woman, seething with appetites and desires, [who], by the time we reach the 1960s and 1970s, becomes the very embodiment of 'Westoxification'," ("intoxication with the West").¹⁷³ As the popular symbol of consumer capitalism, the FilmFarsi cabaret dancer became the national dancer's foil against which her civilized modernity was measured.

¹⁶⁸ Ibid.

¹⁶⁹ Moallem, *Between Warrior Brother and Veiled Sister*.

¹⁷⁰ Ameri, "Iranian Urban Popular Social Dance and So-Called Classical Dance," 164.

¹⁷¹ FilmFarsi is a genre of film produced in Iran during the 1960s and 1970s that often depicted "tough guys" and "scandalous women" perceived as embodying excessive sexuality. See: Meftahi, *Gender and Dance in Modern Iran*; Hamid Naficy, *A Social History of Iranian Cinema: Volume 2* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011); Kamran Talattof, *Modernity, Sexuality, and Ideology in Iran: The Life and Legacy of a Popular Female Artist* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2011).

¹⁷² Stellar, "From 'Evil-Inciting Dance,'" 233.

¹⁷³ Najmabadi, "Veiled Discourse," 511. "Westoxification," or *gharbzadegi* in Persian, was originally coined by Iranian intellectual Jalal Al-e Ahmad in 1962 and became part of the anti-imperialist ideology of the 1979 Iranian Revolution.



Figure 6: Cabaret dancer, Iran, 1970s.

National Iranian dance distinguishes itself from social dance in a variety of ways, but namely in its elimination of circling hip movements (known as *gheir*) and shoulder shimmies. While these movements are common in many urban Iranian social dance practices, the cabaret dancer enacts exaggerated versions of these movements, making their association even more disdainful for the national dancer. Furthermore, national Iranian dance departed from the traditional use of improvisation in Iranian dance practice and performance to instead form a reproducible repertory where dancers moved in precise unison. Instead of the popular urban and folk music of the time, with its 6/8 percussive rhythms and occasional explicit lyrics, “these dancers performed to traditional Persian music, regional folk music, and sometimes contemporary and classical Western art music.”¹⁷⁴ Many of the qualities that define national Iranian dance also define classical Iranian dance in the Iranian diaspora today.



Figure 7: Pars National Ballet Vancouver, classical Iranian dance.

The cabaret dancer of twentieth century Iran still circulates in the contemporary Iranian diaspora as the disavowed figure of Iranian dance. It is against her image that many of the dancers in my study feel they must prove themselves as exceptional through classical and

¹⁷⁴ Stellar, “From ‘Evil-Inciting’ Dance,” 247.

regional dances that present a “civilized” or “authentic” image of Iran. For instance, Sahebjam from Pars National Ballet Vancouver explains,

You know, most of the *raqqaas* in our old movies, it was a very bad presentation honestly. In the movies, people drank and some lady wearing shorts was up on a table and then they dance and all the men clap for her. All of the families hate that and I understand. I hate that too. I don't like the way that they dance.¹⁷⁵

The primary organizer of the International Iranian Dance Conference, Eghbali, also explains,

During the Pahlavi era, there was a woman named Jamileh. She was a cabaret dancer, an entertainer, and while people enjoyed watching her, she gave a bad name to dancers, and made dance and dancing in public seem something associated with cabaret dancing, inappropriate, showing too much skin, not really about culture, more about entertaining men. Certainly in the minds of my parents' generation, it left a mark, they didn't want their children to be dancers. As a kid, I wanted to be a ballerina, and my dad said “my daughter will never be a *raqqaas*” and I was offended he used that word. I knew I wanted to be a dancer but I didn't want to be *raqqaas*. When I went back to Iran 6 years ago, a teacher told me about the shift in words from *raqqaas* to *raqsandeh*.¹⁷⁶

When I asked Eghbali if she ever feels in defense of Jamileh she responded, “No, just like I get offended when people associate belly dance and Iranian dance. People will look back [at Jamileh] and say, ‘this is Iranian dance.’”¹⁷⁷



Figure 8: Jamileh, Iran, 1970s.

The long development of a concept of Iranian dance occurred before and across the 1979 Revolution, whose effects continue to determine how people like Eghbali themselves approach dance. Though the associations of gender and sexuality, especially as they are mapped onto women who dance, came to overdetermine the reception of dance and influence its ban in Iran, covert modes of movement continued to be generated and influence the dispersal of dancers across the Iranian diaspora in the post-Revolution era.

¹⁷⁵ Azita Sahebjam. Interview by Heather Rastovac. Tape recording. Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada. January 6, 2013.

¹⁷⁶ Sheila Eghbali. Skype interview by Heather Rastovac. Tape recording. September 16, 2012.

¹⁷⁷ Ibid.

“Preserving” Iranian Dance in the Contemporary Iranian Diaspora: Questions of Ownership and Authenticity

In the last decade of the Pahlavi dynasty in Iran, notions of “Westoxification” became heightened among various revolutionary factions and eventually inscribed the bodies of specifically female ballet dancers, national dancers, and FilmFarsi cabaret entertainers alike, albeit with divergent significations. Political concerns in Iran shifted from a disavowal of “backwardness” in the first half of the twentieth century to a critique of “decadence” in the 1970s, from the modernization efforts of the Constitutional and Pahlavi eras to new revolutionary concerns for the “moral purification of a corrupt society.”¹⁷⁸ Despite the efforts of the monarchy and state-supported ensembles to promote a positive image of dance and dancers through “refined” performances of modern disciplined bodies, the fact that dance was supported by the monarchy (a regime that became widely viewed as decadent, brutal, and corrupt) ironically worked against a broader acceptance of its performance. The marking of these dancing bodies, particularly the female dancing body, as an emblem of the decadent, West-struck Pahlavi dynasty was one of the significant factors that led to the official ban of public dance performance in Iran with the establishment of the Islamic government following Iran’s 1979 Revolution, a ban that is still in effect today. As I have described in the dissertation introduction, however, dance and other movement-based modes of performance have continued to develop in Iran, albeit under highly regulated conditions.

As I discuss in my dissertation introduction and in chapter three, many dancers, audiences, and media sources in the U.S. and Europe construct exiled and diasporic spaces as integral to the continuation of Iranian dances following the 1979 ban on many forms of dance performance in Iran. The continuation of Iranian dances in the contemporary diaspora has been more than just about the preservation of actual dance forms; Iranian dance in the diaspora, I argue, has also been a site of similar gendered and classed discourses found in pre-1979 Revolution Iran. Many dancers and audiences continue to frame Iranian dance within the binaries of “high art” and authenticity (as embodied in classical or regional dances) versus “inauthentic,” “low,” or “cheap” entertainment (as projected onto many popular exiled Iranian dancers who have danced in cabarets in Los Angeles, such as FilmFarsi dancer Jamileh and the popular dancer Mohammad Khordadian). The International Iranian Dance Conferences of 2012 and 2015—which brought together over a total of seventy dancers from across the U.S., Canada, and Europe—were salient sites for the analysis of how these discoursed and embodied practices continue into the Iranian diaspora and in what ways they have reconfigured around ballet technique and non-Iranian dancers, in particular.

Among some Iranian dancers in the diaspora, ballet technique and training is still considered the most salient route toward elevating Iranian dance. Sahebjam, for instance, uses ballet technique as the basis for her dance company’s warm-ups, explaining that she believes “it’s the root of all the dance in the world; when you are a ballet dancer, you can do everything.”¹⁷⁹ Eghbali explains that, “Ballet brings in discipline and intentionality into the moves. When the ballet influence is lacking, it just looks like party dance, not clean and intentional.” When choosing a studio for the first International Iranian Dance Conference in 2012, Eghbali reserved space in the San Francisco Ballet studios, explaining:

¹⁷⁸ Afsaneh Najmabadi, “Iran’s Turn to Islam: From Modernism to a Moral Order,” *The Middle East Journal* 41, no. 2, (1987): 203.

¹⁷⁹ Sheila Eghbali. Skype interview by Heather Rastovac. Tape recording. September 16, 2012.

I didn't want to pick just any space; I wanted a studio with status. I wanted it to be a place with prestige for dance. Iranian dance is already not respected, among Iranians and just in general...and so if we have the conference in a place that is respected, it could bring respect for the event and the dancers who come...¹⁸⁰

The association of ballet as “civilized” comes hand-in-hand with efforts to legitimize dance as something other than the erotic displays of the FilmFarsi genre and their diasporic predecessors. As dancers (and, at times, the state) worked to craft a national tradition of dance that might launch Iran onto a particular kind of global stage, however, they often chose to look to *non-Iranians*.

Eghbali elaborated upon this when discussing with me that one of her concerns for the preservation of Iranian dance has to do with the ambivalent attitudes that many Iranians have historically had towards dance and the dancing body. She explains:

The Islamic Revolution in Iran changed the legality of dance as a form of training and a form of performance, but my other main concern is the Iranian mentality toward dance; I believe these cultural norms are also responsible for the destruction of Iranian dance because even if it were legal, parents would still not want their children to dance professionally. Even in U.S., where it is legal, I have no Iranian dancers [in my dance company]. I think that speaks loudly for how we as Iranians don't preserve our own culture...Non-Iranian dancers end up being the ones who are preserving our culture for us.¹⁸¹

As previously discussed, negative associations of dance with sex work have long pervaded beliefs surrounding it. As Eghbali suggests, this also impacts who, exactly, takes up Iranian dance in the first place. Alluding to why non-Iranians are positioned to perform and thus “preserve” Iranian dances, Borhani puts it simply: “Most Iranian people, they respect and appreciate an American doing Iranian dance. Really they love it. But they don't want their daughter to do it because they think raqqaas is a bad thing.”

For the organizers and many of the participants of the International Iranian Dance Conference, crediting non-Iranians for preserving traditional Iranian dances and exalting ballet as the best foundation for dance technique situates former artistic director and choreographer of the Mahalli Dancers of Iran, Robert de Warren, in a particular position of authority regarding the “authentic” Iranian dances (i.e. regional and national). de Warren's position as an authority is heightened by the extensive ethnographic research he conducted on regional and mystical dances across Iran, which was amply funded by the Pahlavi government. Despite de Warren's research of regional Iranian dances, Shay asserts that de Warren's folk dance stagings nonetheless “frequently displayed the technical characteristics, aesthetics, and choreographic techniques of balletic character dance.”¹⁸² As Anthony Shay also explains,

...the importance of the influence that the [Mahalli Dancers'] repertoire and the widespread availability of its video recordings for the development of the stagings of Iranian dance in the Iranian diaspora cannot be underestimated: numerous companies outside of Iran slavishly copied de Warren's choreographies, often believing that these were actual village dances that one could view in the countryside.¹⁸³

¹⁸⁰ Ibid.

¹⁸¹ Ibid.

¹⁸² Anthony Shay, “Choreographing Persia: Representation and Orientalism in Staging and Choreographing Iranian Dance,” 2005, accessed May 15, 2015. <http://www.easterndanceforum.com/>.

¹⁸³ Ibid.

This history of taking de Warren's movement vocabulary as a de facto representation of Iranian history writ large is particularly significant given that he and the Mahalli Dancers' repertoires formed the technical and historical focus of both the 2012 and 2015 IIDC. The two-day 2012 conference materialized in a master-class with de Warren, whom Eghbali promoted as the "only authentic source for the authentic Iranian dances," and the former principle dancer of the Mahalli Dancers, Indira Mehrpour.¹⁸⁴ During Eghbali's introduction of de Warren at the 2012 conference, she remarked: "If there is anyone who can teach us the authentic dances, it's him...My goal for the conference is that we all learn his choreographies so that we share the same foundation of this authentic source."¹⁸⁵

For Eghbali, de Warren's position directing the former state-supported Mahalli dancers and his government-funded research trips around Iran during the 1970s trump the work of other dancers and dance companies in Iran, both before the 1979 Revolution and afterwards. Eghbali asserts,

When I last went back to Iran; I thought I'd find dance teachers who are teaching authentic dances, but you really can't find them...If there were others in Iran who had works that were authentic and folk dances that we could recreate, we would do that [at the International Iranian Dance Conference]. The sad thing is that the history of Iran was so short, and there was only one person [Robert de Warren]. There wasn't enough time for his offspring to branch out and specialize.¹⁸⁶

Even as dancers such as Eghbali point to people like de Warren as cultural preservationists, the work of "preserving" history is always fraught with the politics of who and what is "worthy" of preserving. de Warren's efforts to chart a history of Iranian dance in the midst of the 1979 Revolution, in other words, contains many complications surrounding questions of who has the authority to do so—and, in the process, run the risk of obscuring the proliferation of dance that existed in more underground domains. De Warren illustrated his recent positions on the preservation of Iranian dances on his YouTube page, in which he asserts: "SAVE IRANIAN TRADITIONS NOW! It is very important to help save the great treasures of Iranian Culture. Visit IRAN-DAS LLC, a new not-for-profit, to do just this. Iranians, this is your culture!"¹⁸⁷ One user comments: "beautiful iran, beautiful girls and boys in there, sorry for the extremely religious," to which de Warren responds: "Thank you, brother. These are wonderful dances on the way to disappearing forever!"¹⁸⁸ Here, de Warren urgently suggests that Iranian traditions are under threat and must be saved. While he speaks of traditions more broadly, we can infer that, due to his former position as choreographer for the Mahalli Dancers and his YouTube video playlist featuring their repertoire, saving Iranian dances is of particular importance. His quote does not directly name the impending threat, but upon following the thread to the website for Iran-das LLC, one finds that the organization identifies at least one primary culprit:

Since the revolution and the proclamation of an Islamic republic, Iran's cultural development and expression has been deprived of the freedom that characterized its

¹⁸⁴ Sheila Eghbali, opening remarks, 1st International Iranian Dance Conference, San Francisco, CA, Sept. 15-16, 2012.

¹⁸⁵ Ibid.

¹⁸⁶ Sheila Eghbali. Skype interview by Heather Rastovac. Tape recording. September 16, 2012.

¹⁸⁷ Robert de Warren. "Iran Folklore Dances," *YouTube* video, 8:58. July 30, 2009, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rLNMPXQRixs>.

¹⁸⁸ Ibid.

culture. Dance and normal performances with men and women have been prohibited. The institutions that fostered performing arts have all been closed.¹⁸⁹

These claims suggest that Iran's 1979 Islamic Revolution simultaneously destroyed Iran's historical cultural treasures *and* impeded the nation's route to cultural modernity, claiming that dance and "normal" performances in Iran have become extinct. These claims infer that Iran's Revolution itself, which marks the overthrow of the secularist Pahlavi Monarchy and the instatement of the Islamic Republic, was somehow *not* an expression of Iranian culture, despite the fact that a large majority of Iranians across diverse political lines participated in it. This is not to minimize the drastic and tumultuous changes that occurred in the country, and these changes did include the closure of many political and cultural institutions associated with the Pahlavi monarchy or those ultimately considered unsuitable for an Islamist society. However, what I wish to draw attention to are the ways in which de Warren and Iran-das LLC implicitly situate the segments of Iranian society who were aligned with the Pahlavi monarchy and its version of history and modernity as the exclusive essence of Iranian culture.

While it may be true that many performing arts institutions had been shut down during and in the years directly following the Revolution (and the archives created by De Warren and the Mahalli organization were destroyed), dance performance and classes in Iran have nonetheless continued to develop over the past few decades, if clandestinely. As I discuss at length in the dissertation introduction, dance performances of various genres are often held, some underground, others with official permission. Additionally, as Shay explains, the ban on folk dance performance in Iran has more recently been lifted and rural dance traditions are still being practiced.¹⁹⁰ Furthermore, as Meftahi's study on dance in 20th and 21st-century Iran describes, much of the contemporary theatre in Iran today includes performance of bodily movements, often referred to as *harakat-e mozoon*, or "rhythmic movement."¹⁹¹ Thus, as Paris-based Iranian dancer Afshin Ghaffarian, who I discuss in chapter three, insists, "dance is everywhere in Iran; it just has different names than *raqs* (dance)."¹⁹² This is all to say that, De Warren's claims about the precarity of Iranian dance—and by extension, some of the goals of IIDC—run the risk of erasing the work of the dancers in Iran who continue to develop their dance and movement-based forms, oftentimes against challenging odds.

While de Warren certainly remains invested in a particular Pahlavi-era ideology, I also suggest that his recent comments on his YouTube page, his recently published memoir about his time in Iran, and his comments at the IIDC itself simultaneously reflect a very distinctive sociopolitical landscape in the contemporary U.S., where he has now been residing for several decades.¹⁹³ His comments are situated within a larger belief system surrounding Iran and Iranian dance. He is, for example, working within and against the mediatized landscape that Eghbali explains: "I feel like dance is an opportunity to let people know that [Iranians are] not just the "Axis of Evil" or the *Shahs of Sunset*."¹⁹⁴ At the same time that Eghbali points to the restrictive representations of the *Shahs of Sunset*, a reality television show surrounding a community of wealthy Iranians living in Los Angeles, she works to combat stereotypical associations of Arab identity. More than wanting to show the nuances of Iranian (diasporic) identity Eghbali's

¹⁸⁹ Robert de Warren's nonprofit organization Iran-das LLC website, accessed June 3, 2015, <http://www.wyvernprojects.org/iran-das/id1.html>.

¹⁹⁰ Shay, "Reviving the Reluctant Art of Iranian Dance," 624.

¹⁹¹ Meftahi, *Gender and Dance in Modern Iran*.

¹⁹² Afshin Ghaffarian. Interview by Heather Rastovac. Tape recording. Paris, France. July 19, 2012.

¹⁹³ Robert de Warren, *Destiny's Waltz, In Step with Giants* (New York: Eloquent Books, 2009).

¹⁹⁴ Sheila Eghbali. Skype interview by Heather Rastovac. Tape recording. September 16, 2012.

comment illustrates not only why, in her view, it is essential to preserve “authentic” Iranian dances, but elucidates a concern shared by many Iranian dancers about how the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001 and the subsequent American-led “War on Terror” (which interpellated Iran as part of the “Axis of Evil”) impacted much of the mainstream Euro-American views on Iranians. The particular global geopolitical events that have unfolded over the past decade have heightened many diasporic Iranians’ fraught relationships to Islam and Iranian’s long-standing disassociation from Arabs and Arabness (in which Arabness and Islam are conflated).¹⁹⁵

In response to this, many displaced Iranians work toward fortifying model (minority) citizenship in their new locations of domicile, economically and culturally. Within the cultural realm, this often entails performative de-identification from Arabness through recycling the nationalist narrative of pre-Islamic Persia and highlighting certain Iranian cultural traditions over others. These selective and strategic negotiations with Euro-American geopolitical landscapes are evident in present-day performances of Iranian dance more broadly, and at the Iranian Dance Conference more specifically. During the 2012 IIDC, de Warren’s comments about the “essence” of Iranian dances highlight some ways in which dance is positioned vis-à-vis the imaginary of a broader Middle Eastern politic:

I resent how Westerners have treated dances from Iran, thrown together with all Middle Eastern dances...For me, the most important thing is to separate [these dances from those of] Egypt, which is only low-class belly dance for the purposes of enticing men. We don’t have belly dance here; we have subtle, graceful, and civilized movements, while belly dance is outward and aggressive...Like learning the real tango, we have to be able to categorize and purify Persian dance from outside influence. The Qajars were different from the womanizers of the Arabs; they didn’t have hundreds of wives...

The anti-Arab tropes in this statement are evident as de Warren recycles well-established tropes of Arabs as having multiple wives and being excessively sexual. While this discourse may stem from the nationalist Pahlavi-era ideologies from which de Warren came to know Iran, his sentiments gain dangerously new currency in contemporary Euro-American political contexts rife with anti-Arab “structures of feeling.”¹⁹⁶

In addition to negotiating with hostile geopolitical landscapes, some dancers associate globalization and popular consumer culture as threats to the preservation of “authentic” Iranian dance forms. For instance, a dancer and IIDC 2012 conference participant expressed in regards to the “L.A. style” of dance: “It’s not authentic; it is certainly Persian, it has its place. It’s fun and I like it, but it shouldn’t be put onto the stage.”¹⁹⁷ For this dancer, the Iranian national, classical, and regional dance are the only source of authenticity, hence marginalizing dance performances and practices viewed as frivolous and cheap. Rather than the tight or revealing clothing worn by these “L.A. style” dancers, dancers performing classical Iranian or regional dances in the diaspora wear costumes akin to miniature paintings or “authentic” village garb.

¹⁹⁵ Nationalist Persian identity has often been constructed vis-à-vis Islam and Arabs since the 20th century in pre-1979 Revolution Iran, in which the Pahlavi Monarchy promoted Iran’s pre-Islamic heritage as part of its nation state-building ideology. (Moallem, *Between Warrior Brother and Veiled Sister*, 6-7) This nationalist Persian identity vis-à-vis Islam and Arabness, I argue, materializes new forms for many diasporic Iranians as they navigate increasingly Islamophobic landscapes that often doesn’t discern, whether because of ideology or ignorance, between Iranians and Arabs.

¹⁹⁶ Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978).

¹⁹⁷ Personal conversation with an Iranian dancer at International Iranian Dance Conference 2012 who gave me permission to use her quote but wished to remain anonymous.

Like the national dancers of twentieth-century Iran, performances of classical and regional dances in the diaspora convey and embody polite and heteronormative gender norms rather than the perceived excessive or deviant performances of gender and sexuality of “L.A. style” dancers.

For instance, Eghbali lamented in our interview that Iranian dance is “becoming sexualized and people are mixing in other dance forms. I just know it isn’t Iranian,” alluding to Iranian dance’s frequent mistaken association with Arabic belly dance, as well as to the popular diasporic Persian music videos coming out of Los Angeles.¹⁹⁸ As such, the “desexualized” and “civilized” gendered norms constructed through and embodied in national and classical Iranian dance and staged regional forms become the locus of Iranian dance’s authenticity. Similar to the twentieth-century national dancer’s disassociation from the cabaret and FilmFarsi dancer in Iran, the diasporic dancer’s Other is the hyper-sexualized popular dancer in L.A. Persian music videos or other diasporic Iranian dancers performing vernacular Iranian dances like “Baba Karam” and/or drawing from Arabic belly dance, such as Jamileh or Mohammad Khordadian.¹⁹⁹ Jamileh was a cabaret dancer in Iran during the 1960s and 1970s and was featured on Iranian television and film. She incorporated vernacular forms of improvised Iranian dances (such as *jaaheli*) and Arabic belly dance (*raqs-e arabi*) into her performances. While many Iranians loved her, her brazen performances often cast her as a “low class” entertainer. Jamileh immigrated to Los Angeles after the 1979 Revolution and continued to perform at popular Persian cabarets and restaurants during the 1980s and 1990s.²⁰⁰



Figure 9: Jamileh, Los Angeles, CA.

Mohammad Khordadian (b. 1957) is a dancer who, according to his website, had always been inspired by Jamileh. Also according to his website, Khordadian danced for a short while with the “National Folk Company of Iran” (it is unclear if he means the Mahalli Dancers of Iran that I

¹⁹⁸ Sheila Eghbali. Skype interview by Heather Rastovac. Tape recording. September 16, 2012.

¹⁹⁹ Baba Karam is a popular form of Iranian vernacular dance performed by both men and women that imitates the movements of urban working class male characters. The dance typically performs gestures that convey “toughness” such as twisting a mustache, tipping a hat, or patting arm muscles. Sometimes Baba Karam will imitate moves of a baker, such as rolling dough.

²⁰⁰ For more on Jamileh, see: Robyn Friend, “Jamilah: The Goddess of Persian Dance,” 1997, <http://home.earthlink.net/~rcfriend/jamilah.htm>.

discuss in this chapter) before emigrating to Los Angeles, CA in the early 1980s. In Los Angeles, he published dance and work out videos that featured popular forms of Iranian dance such as choreographies inspired by urban social dancing, Baba Karam, and Arabic belly dance.²⁰¹ Khordadian, while a loved figure among many diasporic Iranians, also conjures disdain among some diasporic Iranian dancers whose objectives are to preserve “authentic” dances and elevate dance as an art form. For these dancers, Khordadian disrupts heteronormative forms of gender presentation that national and classical Iranian dance has sought to secure.



Figure 10: Mohammad Khordadian.

One prominent female Iranian dancer expresses her thoughts on Khordadian in comments that reflect upon the gendered discourse and forms of embodiment that were part of Iran’s twentieth century modernization projects:

He dances like a woman! Yes, he’s a good dancer...even some woman cannot do what he does, but this is not Persian style. Even it’s not belly dance, it’s an ugly mix of everything...Have you ever seen your brother, your father, your uncle, your husband, or any of your male friends dancing like him before? We don't have these kinds of things, we have a man as a man...And everybody just laughs, saying what he does is just for fun. So is he a comedian or is he a dancer? For my whole life, I have tried to let people know this is wrong, [Khordadian] is on a wrong path, and anyone who follows him is on the wrong path too. This is not acceptable...Be a man, be comfortable with yourself. But he destroys our community. Well, I suppose it’s not just him honestly, he’s just one person. The media in L.A. just destroyed everything. And [Khordadian] is popular only because the media is hungry.²⁰²

²⁰¹ For more on Khordadian, see: Mohammad Khordadian’s website, accessed May 22, 2016, <http://www.khordadian.com/>.

²⁰² Dancer wishing to remain anonymous. Interviewed by Heather Rastovac. Afshin Ghaffarian, who I discuss in chapter three, also commented on the ways in which many Iranians often think dancing is a banal act because of the negative associations they have with dancers such as Jamileh and Khordadian: “Sometimes people [in Iran] take dance as an insult, like ‘yeah, dance is a banal thing.’ The people who are in the theater in Iran sometimes don’t want to be associated with dance, like, ‘No, I am not dancing.’ It’s a mentality, the only thing they know about dancing is someone like Jamileh or like Mohammad Khordadian. It’s not to judge that this is good, or that is not good. But it’s just the lack of information, that people have about dance, and the lack of the variety of dance aside from Khordadian or Jamileh.” (Afshin Ghaffarian. Interview by Heather Rastovac. Tape recording. Paris, France. July 19, 2012.) Ghaffarian’s comment shows that these discourses about Jamileh and Khordadian are just as prevalent among art circles in Iran as they are in the Iranian diaspora.

Conclusion

The performance of Iranian dance over the past century has embodied and produced complex meanings surrounding race, gender, sexuality, and class within both Iranian state and diasporic Iranian contexts. The forms of Iranianness produced through Iranian dance performances have shifted according to sociopolitical contexts of time, place, and histories of migration. This chapter has shown that, within twentieth-century Pahlavi-era Iran, staged dance performance became a site through which the nation sought to modernize itself. In the process, dancers and state-supported ballet and national Iranian dance companies disassociated themselves from traditional performances of the *bacheh raqqaas/zan push* and women's homosocial forms of dance practice such as the women's theatrical games (*baazi-ha-ye naameyshi*), and disassociated more specifically from the increasingly popular cabaret dancer of the FilmFarsi commercial cinema genre of the 1950s—1970s. As I have shown, this disassociation involved both corporeal and discursive transformation; the adoption of modern, European corporeal norms that “cleansed” and reformulated the gender performativities of public dancers (which also modeled the hegemonic corporeal norms seemingly necessary to modernize the public sphere more broadly), as well as through the discursive shift from *raqqaas* to *raqsandeh*.

As Iranian dancing bodies, especially the public female dancing body across all genres of dance performance, became tied up in the discourses of *gharbzadegi*, dance garnered new meanings in the revolutionary discourses of the 1979 Revolution. Both Iran's ban on many forms of dance performance and the fear of losing “authentic” cultural heritage through the displacement of Iranians from the country have impelled many diasporic Iranian dancers to revive and preserve specifically national, classical, and regional Iranian dance forms. While this preservation has sought to perform “accurate” dance moves with authentic music and costuming, it has also, as this chapter argues, maintained Iran's hegemonic twentieth-century Pahlavi-era nationalist ideologies pertaining to gender, sexuality, and class. At the same time, through presenting Iranians as “civilized” by performing national, classical, and regional dance forms, these ideologies serve as a means for dancers such as Sheila Eghbali to combat the formulations of racialized and xenophobic stereotypes about Iranians as “backward” that are generated in contemporary transnational geopolitical discourses.

The next chapter takes on the discourses of “authenticity” perpetuated in these revivalist and preservationist efforts with specifically national and classical Iranian dances by looking at the development of contemporary Iranian dance that circulates against (though never apart from) them. In my examination of contemporary Iranian dance in relation to national and classical forms and discourses, my intention is not replicate the binaries often established between “traditional” and “contemporary” forms, nor do I intend to pit efforts to preserve against efforts to innovate. Rather, I take heed of postcolonial scholar Ania Loomba's words:

The task...is not simply to pit the themes of migrancy, exile, and hybridity against rootedness, nation, and authenticity, but to locate and evaluate their ideological, political, and emotional valencies, as well as their intersections in the multiple histories of colonialism and postcoloniality.²⁰³

In the next chapter, I mobilize Loomba to theorize contemporary Iranian dance as a rhizomatic form that disrupts and resists linearity and hierarchization of dance forms and histories. In so doing, I document how three women dancers and the work they construct reflect the hybrid

²⁰³ Ania Loomba, *Colonialism/Postcolonialism*, 2nd Edition (New York: Routledge, 2005), 153.

subjectivities and practices of the diasporic Iranian dancers who are critically redefining the presentation of Iranianness and Iranian dance alike.

Chapter 2

Contemporary Iranian Dance: Rhizomatic Choreographies of Transnational Iranianness

The question of “authenticity” in dance was central at the 2nd International Iranian Dance Conference in Boston, which I attended last week. For me, authenticity is not only found in recreating steps and the costumes from the past. I find authenticity first and foremost in being present—[being] embodied in our self and receptive to the environment and to others. From this place, we are poised to explore the movement and context of particular dances and what they mean to us individually and collectively, both in the past and now. What feelings do the dances arouse in the dancer and the audience is another important consideration. Can some artists innovate a tradition and still be considered authentic? Who decides? Where is authenticity found?

— Banafsheh Sayyad, dancer

Beautiful words. I certainly use the word Authenticity when talking about people and their character. To be authentic is to be true to oneself. From our perspective at the Dance conference, authentic is not a term to describe self but to describe the dance (or self from the perspective of people of that region)...To be really able to dance a dance of a region, one has to understand the culture of the people so they can feel those feelings and express them through the dance...As a solo artist, I think one can be authentic to oneself and use dance gestures as a reflection of one’s true self without necessarily fitting any one particular dance style. But when representing the culture of a people, I believe it’s important to be authentic with respect to the culture of those people. It is no longer the self that is being represented but others and their culture.

— Sheila Eghbali,
dancer and organizer of the International Iranian Dance Conference

This exchange between two dancers, Banafsheh Sayyad and Sheila Eghbali, occurred via digital posts onto the Facebook group page for the 2nd International Iranian Dance Conference in 2015, which was created by a conference participant in order to share resources and foster discussion.²⁰⁴ Sayyad explains that, from her perspective, “authenticity is *not only* found in recreating steps and costumes from the past.”²⁰⁵ In this view, authenticity is not a matter of locating a dance’s precise or fixed materialization; it is not a competitive question of what is and is not authentic. Instead, Sayyad questions the binary between authentic and inauthentic. For her, the binary of “this *or* that” becomes “this *and* that.” In other words, authenticity encompasses multiple, if even competing or contradicting, instantiations. For Sayyad, authenticity is most importantly about a performer’s cultivated sense of presence, receptiveness to his/her environment and audience, and about what Sayyad refers to elsewhere as a “radical embodiment”: “where you feel yourself as the marriage of spirit and matter, the marriage of the unknown with the known—your divine self and your shadow, all at once, simply, nakedly,

²⁰⁴ “Dancers of IIDC,” private Facebook page, comments by Sheila Eghbali and Banafsheh Sayyad, accessed September 28, 2015. I have retrieved written permission from Eghbali and Sayyad to use these Facebook comments for this research.

²⁰⁵ Ibid, my emphasis.

presently, right here right now.”²⁰⁶ Rather than performance as a fixed site of representation of times, places, and peoples, Sayyad emphasizes performance as a site for exploration and reflexivity. Radical embodiment embraces the relational “and” and “between” times, places, and peoples. Sayyad’s insights demonstrate some of the concerns and questions surrounding contemporary Iranian dance, particularly questions of whether artists can innovate a tradition and still be considered authentic, and who decides what is authentic.

Eghbali’s response to Sayyad’s comment suggests more categorical, less ambiguous delineations between authentic and inauthentic. She asserts that a dancer should access the self only when performing a dance that is not specific to a “particular dance style,” namely traditional, national, or folk dances of a specific culture or people other than one’s own. In Eghbali’s view, even an ethnically Persian dancer must act responsibly when performing dances from the diverse ethnic groups within Iran, such as Kurdish dances, Azeri dances, and Bandari dances.²⁰⁷ She implies that striving for authenticity requires the dancer to shed the self in order to embody the Other’s cultural “essence” during the duration of a performance. Eghbali’s views on self and authenticity, which partially emerge out of her own identity as an Azeri Iranian minority, acknowledge the ethics of tending to the unique distinctions between the dances that constitute the Iranian nation rather than conflating diverse regions, peoples, and dance forms under a homogenous (and dominant) “Persia.”²⁰⁸ In doing so, however, she suggests that it is possible to separate the relations of power and privilege embedded in the very flesh of the performer and that, with practice and dedication, it is possible to learn how to appropriately and respectfully embody the Other. Furthermore, to “feel” and “express” the culture of a people implies that any given group feels and expresses a singular, homogenous ethos, which ultimately disregards the diverse range of individuals, expressions, investments, affiliations, and ways of being that exist within that group. The “authentic” characteristics of a culture that one is then expected to perform through a national, classical, or regional dance are believed to be inherent and unchanging without accounting for how, as I highlight in chapter one, nationalist and diasporic politics shape the kinesthetic presentations of these forms and produce hegemonic cultural norms.

This online discussion between Sayyad and Eghbali demonstrates the tensions between authenticity, tradition, representation, and personal expressions of embodiment and artistic exploration that concern many dancers performing Iranian dances on diasporic stages. While chapter one analyzes dancers who are invested in presenting traditional Iranian dances as “authentically” as possible in order to preserve and transmit them to future generations, this chapter turns to diasporic Iranian dancers who are interested in producing performance works that are (in both content and form) intentionally subjective, experimental, multiple, and changing. These performances result in what the dancers in this chapter call “contemporary Iranian dance” or “contemporary Persian dance,” a form that is both grounded in and

²⁰⁶ Banafsheh Sayyad, “Alchemy of the Dance,” *The Shift Network*, February 11, 2016, http://theshiftnetwork.com/blog/2016-02-11/alchemy-dance?_ga=1.71338384.2067991543.1455570240.

²⁰⁷ Kurdish, Azeri, and Bandari dances originate from ethnic groups within Iran that are not all ethnically Persian and whose native languages are Kurdish, Azeri, and Bandari (a specific dialect of Persian), respectively.

²⁰⁸ For over the past sixty years, state folk dance companies across Eastern Europe, the former Soviet Union, the Middle East, and Mexico have presented a national repertoire that, while celebrating diversity, tend to conflate the differences between the diverse groups represented in any given repertoire under the umbrella of the “nation.” See: Shay, *Choreographic Politics*.

experiments with Iranian movements, traditions, and aesthetics.²⁰⁹ Contemporary Iranian dance is a specific genre rather than a temporal designation of Iranian dance works performed in present day. As I argue in chapter one, even the performances of national, classical, and regional dances performed in the Iranian diaspora are in fact contemporary, not only temporally but also as reflections of contemporary concerns. It is also important to note that there is a wide range of choreographic works being made inside Iran that engage with and produce contemporary aesthetics and/or that experiment with tradition. The artistic works of Iranian nationals who perform at international theatre and performance art events and/or that upload videos of their work online certainly contribute toward the transnational circulation of contemporary Iranian aesthetics. In my exploration of diasporic Iranian cultural production, however, this chapter focuses exclusively on the contemporary choreographic work that encompasses the myriad experiences, definitions, and forms of Iranian dancers who have been creating and performing in diasporic sites across a sustained period of time. I pay particular attention in this chapter to three women dance artists performing contemporary Iranian repertoires: Sahar Dehghan, a Paris-based dancer and actress who performs what she calls Iranian contemporary dance as a soloist and in collaboration with other dance artists such as Shahrokh Moshkin Ghalam and Cerop Ohanessian;²¹⁰ Banafsheh Sayyad, a Los Angeles-based dance soloist and artistic director of Namah Ensemble who performs what she defines as “contemporary Persian” or “contemporary Sufi” dance (and what her website describes as “Dance of Oneness”);²¹¹ and Shahrzad Khorsandi, a San Francisco-based dancer who performs both classical and contemporary Iranian choreographies and directs Shahrzad Dance Academy and Company.²¹²

Throughout the chapter, I map the tensions between authenticity/tradition and innovation/contemporary embedded in contemporary Iranian dance within diasporic contexts, exploring these dancers’ perspectives on the genre, analyzing their professional experiences, and discussing the common movement vocabularies and conceptual frameworks the dancers share. In the process, I detail the ways that the genre draws and diverges from “traditional” dance aesthetics in order to shed light on these dancers’ personal, philosophical, and/or political investments in the development of the form relate to their positions as diasporic Iranian women.²¹³ Analyzing these artists’ choreographic works allows me to assess the diverse range of what constitutes performances of Iranianness in the Iranian diaspora, particularly those that push against nationalist performances or expand the possibilities of Iranian performance. In doing so, I challenge the common conflation between “Iranian dance” and the national, classical, and regional dance forms that many dancers and audiences in the diaspora perceive as the authentic expressions of Iranianness—particularly as contemporary Iranian dance artists interface with world/ethnic dance audiences, Western dance academic institutions and art circles, and diasporic

²⁰⁹ In keeping with my use of “Iranian” over “Persian” throughout this dissertation, which I discuss in the dissertation introduction, I will henceforth refer to the form as “contemporary Iranian dance” unless referred to differently in a specific dancer’s quote.

²¹⁰ Sahar Dehghan. Interview by Heather Rastovac. Tape recording. Paris, France. July 25, 2012. For more on Dehghan, see: Sahar Dehghan’s website, accessed December 23, 2015, <http://www.sahardehghan.com/>.

²¹¹ Banafsheh Sayyad. Interview by Heather Rastovac. Tape recording. New York, NY. March 8, 2013. For more on Sayyad, see: Banafsheh Sayyad’s website, accessed December 23, 2015, <http://www.banafsheh.org/>.

²¹² For more on Khorsandi, see: Shahrzad Khorsandi’s website, accessed December 23, 2015, <http://dancepersian.org/>.

²¹³ While I compare the movement vocabulary and aesthetics of these artists with the movement vocabulary of national and classical Iranian dance, I do not mean to replicate the binary between traditional and contemporary, or to assess whether the artists are “contemporary” in terms of the Euro-American dance lineage.

Iranian audiences. I argue that this limited conception of what Iranian dance *is* and *can be* marginalizes Iranian dancers who are experimenting with these forms. Rather than adulterated and inauthentic, then, I position contemporary Iranian dance as a legitimate hybrid expression of diasporic Iranianness that maps the routes of particular migratory Iranian bodies. In so doing, I contribute to many dance scholars' arguments that titles adhered to dance forms are not neutral or a simple matter of logistical semantics.²¹⁴

While experimentation or innovation with form may, for some, imply a rejection of tradition, the contemporary Iranian choreographic works of the artists in this chapter in fact recognize and honor Iranian traditions first and foremost, while integrating the diverse range of cultural forms in which they have trained and been immersed while in the diaspora. Whereas national, classical, or regional Iranian dances are often oriented toward establishing and preserving specifically Iranian cultural roots, I argue that, within the ecosystem that forms "Iranian dance" in the diaspora, dancers' contemporary choreographic works are rhizomatically constituted and oriented toward producing hybrid aesthetics of transnational Iranianness. Following Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari theorization, I specifically frame contemporary Iranian dance as a rhizomatic form that privileges heterogeneity and multiplicity.²¹⁵ Deleuze and Guattari contrast rhizomatic epistemological models with arborescent, tree-like hierarchical understandings of knowledge and culture (and knowledge and cultural production) that function on dualism and binaries. Rather than linear or vertical connections of tree-like models, the rhizome functions and flows with planar, horizontal, and infinite connections. They pose rhizomatic versions of history and culture as map-like: without singular origins, entry points, or exist points. As Deleuze and Guattari explain,

The rhizome is altogether different, a map and not a tracing... What distinguishes the map from the tracing is that it is entirely orientated towards an experimentation in contact with the real... The map is open and connectable in all of its dimensions; it is detachable, reversible, susceptible to constant modification. It can be torn, reversed, adapted to any kind of mounting, reworked by an individual, group, or social formation. It can be drawn on a wall, conceived of as a work of art, constructed as political action or meditation.²¹⁶

I suggest that the concept of the rhizome provides a similarly fruitful model for thinking through (trans)national Iranianness and diasporic Iranian cultural production, particularly through the choreographic works of Iranian dance artists' engagement with the contemporary. Through an analysis of contemporary Iranian dance as a rhizomatic practice that maps multiple temporalities and geographies through the Iranian dancing body, this chapter thus builds on the dissertation's theorization of choreographic cartographies, forms of belonging/unbelonging, and performances of (trans)national Iranianness in diasporic spaces. In so doing, my investigation into the construction and experience of contemporary Iranian dance, and contemporary Iranian people's experiences of the diaspora gestures toward Juana María Rodríguez's mobilization of the rhizome in her theorization of *latinidad*. For Rodríguez, a rhizomatic understanding of *latinidad* breaks down fixed, linear, and ultimately biologically-determined understandings identity,

²¹⁴ See: Nicholas Rowe, "Post-Salvagism: Choreography and Its Discontents in the Occupied Palestinian Territories," *Dance Research Journal* 41, no. 1 (2009): 45-68; Ketu Katrak, *Contemporary Indian Dance: New Creative Choreography in India and the Diaspora* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), xxiii-xxvi.

²¹⁵ Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, "Introduction: Rhizome," *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, Trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 3-25.

²¹⁶ Deleuze and Guattari, "Introduction: Rhizome," 12.

revealing how “contested constructions of identity work to constitute one another, emphasizing ‘and’ over ‘is’ as a way to think about differences.”²¹⁷

Thinking about Iranian dance forms, contemporary and otherwise, as rhizomatic practices generates critical inquiries into how dancers, audiences, and dance scholars engage in “historical processes, dance history, and historiography,” encouraging us to question and contest narrations of the past—and of Iran and Iranian dance—that are essentialist and fixed.²¹⁸ The artists’ contemporary choreographic works that I examine in this chapter ultimately make critical contributions to the embodied archive of diasporic Iranian cultural production that I analyze throughout the dissertation. To understand how their performances map the ruptures, connectivities, and multiplicities of diasporic Iranian subjectivities and experiences, I first provide a brief overview of the aesthetic and conceptual scope of contemporary Iranian dance. I then discuss contemporary Iranian dance artists’ negotiations with what I call “enoughness,” the barometer with which many of these artists’ audiences measure their authenticity as Iranian artists, before providing concluding comments.

The Aesthetic and Conceptual Scope of Contemporary Iranian Dance

In contrast to many of the dancers and ensembles I discuss in chapter one who are largely invested in performing dances that “authentically” represent Iranian culture as a whole (often through glorified notions of the past), contemporary Iranian choreographies engage in a range of conceptual explorations that resist and destabilize fixed or homogenous temporal or geographical representations of Iran or Iranianness. Through both form and content, the contemporary Iranian dancers’ choreographic work I analyze in this chapter reflects their subjective experiences as hybrid Iranian subjects residing in and making artistic work in transnational spaces. While resisting the universalizing tendency of some frameworks of hybridity that conflate diverse experiences of colonized, displaced, and migrant subjects,²¹⁹ I draw from Stuart Hall, whose theorizations of ethnicity resist biological and cultural stability and rather “designate identity as a constructed process rather than a given essence.”²²⁰ For Hall, the hybridities of the contemporary black British subjects in his study result from the “cut-and-mix” processes of “cultural *diasporization*” and a “sense of difference which is not pure ‘otherness’.”²²¹ Similarly, I situate both the

²¹⁷ Juana María Rodríguez, *Queer Latinidad: Identity Practices, Discursive Spaces* (New York: New York University Press, 2003), 22.

²¹⁸ Helen Thomas, “Physical Culture, Bodily Practices and Dance in Late Nineteenth-Century and Early Twentieth-Century America,” *Dance Research: The Journal of the Society for Dance Research* 22, no. 2 (Winter, 2004): 190.

²¹⁹ For instance, postcolonial scholars such as Ania Loomba and Benita Parry interrogate Homi Bhabha’s theorization of hybridity as reductive and universalizing. Loomba, *Colonialism/Postcolonialism*, 148-153; Benita Parry, “Signs of Our Times: Discussion of Homi Bhabha’s *The Location of Culture*,” *Third Text* 28/29 (Autumn/Winter 1994): 5-24. Ella Shohat also interrogates the notion of hybridity as a “descriptive catch-all term” that “fails to discriminate between the diverse modalities of hybridity...” Ella Shohat, *Taboo Memories, Diasporic Voices* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006), 246. Further, there are forms of colonial enforced hybridity that have enacted various forms of violence on colonized subjects, a “strategy premised on cultural purity, and aimed at stabilising the status quo.” (Loomba, *Colonialism/Postcolonialism*, 146.) At the same time, hybridity has been used as an anti-colonial tactic in which colonial subjects drew upon, translated, and utilized Western ideologies for the purposes of anti-colonial struggle. (ibid) Also see: Ella Shohat and Robert Stam, *Unthinking Eurocentrism: Multiculturalism and the Media* (London and New York: Routledge, 1994), 41-46.

²²⁰ Loomba, *Colonialism/Postcolonialism*, 148.

²²¹ Ibid. See also Stuart Hall, “New Ethnicities,” in *Stuart Hall: Critical Dialogues in Cultural Studies*, eds. David Morley and Kuan-Hsing Chen (New York: Routledge, 1996), 446-447.

dance form and subjectivities of the dancers in this chapter as in process, consciously “cut and mixed,” and as animating difference (and thus resisting assimilation) in ways that are not overdetermined or static. My intention is not to pit hybridity against authenticity since, as I briefly discuss in chapter one, authenticity through preservation is a legitimate and at times necessary strategy of collective self-fashioning. Rather, I pose the hybridity of the diasporic Iranian dancers in this chapter as expanding the notions of what authenticity and Iranianness are and can be. To borrow from the words of Ella Shohat, I suggest that the dancers in this chapter enact, through contemporary Iranian dance, a notion of the past that “might thus be negotiated differently—not as a static fetishized phase to be literally reproduced, but as fragmented sets of narrated memories and experiences on the basis of which to mobilize contemporary communities.”²²²

Through engaging with a range of personal, spiritual, political, abstract, and/or universal themes, contemporary Iranian dance artists such as Khorsandi, Dehghan, and Sayyad are interested in expressing what they have described to me as “contemporary concerns,” particularly from the vantage point of diasporic Iranians and from their perspectives as Iranian women. Indeed, these dancers have deep respect for the classical and regional Iranian dances; some have previously performed or currently perform them, and all of them draw from and experiment with these traditions in their contemporary work. To this end, for Khorsandi, Dehghan, and Sayyad, contemporary Iranian dance necessarily involves traditional Iranian movement vocabularies even as they constantly innovate their choreographies in order to push the boundaries of Iranian aesthetics and traditions. As Dehghan, for instance, writes on her website:

Demonstration of tradition is important in the learning process and the educational process, but eventually creation is a necessity... We can learn and use these [traditional] elements to express our own personal relation to that past as well as express our emotions and ideas of the present and perhaps inspire a better tomorrow.”²²³

Dehghan explained to me that the choreographic work she has been developing is both “Iranian *and* contemporary, because it’s a creative way of interpreting what has inspired me from the traditional.”²²⁴ Khorsandi similarly emphasizes an intimate relationship between tradition and innovation: “Innovation first comes from really being grounded in tradition, then you can gradually push certain boundaries.”²²⁵

At the same time, however, these dancers often remain ambivalent about the relevance of traditional forms to their current personal and political concerns as displaced Iranians. For Dehghan, many traditional Iranian forms are

...more representative of the past than they are representative of what Iran is today or what the Iranian diaspora is today. I’m not trying to say these representations are right or wrong. It’s important to preserve and show our traditions to the world. But at the same time, is that all we [Iranians] are, just these images from the past? No. It’s important that dance engages with the issues happening today in Iran and outside of Iran, to show the issues that are happening within the Iranian diaspora, like some of the psychological problems that we’re all facing as displaced Iranians. Because we’re alienated, we have to

²²² Shohat, *Taboo Memories*, 245.

²²³ “Biography,” on Sahar Dehghan’s website, accessed April 1, 2016, <http://www.sahardehghan.com/biography.htm>.

²²⁴ Sahar Dehghan. Interview by Heather Rastovac. Tape recording. Paris, France. July 25, 2012.

²²⁵ Shahrzad Khorsandi. Interview by Heather Rastovac. Tape recording. Richmond, CA. September 11, 2012.

assimilate, and we're living through all kinds of different exile situations that are difficult and are therefore affecting our lifestyles and our relationships with everyone... Therefore, in my [choreographic] work, I create movements to express something that to me is contemporary, something relevant to my personal expression and ideas mostly related to Iran or the Iranian diaspora today.²²⁶

Contemporary Iranian dance artists directly engage with present-day events and issues through their choreographic work, whether personal in scope, such as Dehghan's exploration of hypocrisy and façade in *Unmask* (2012), or transnational in scale, such as Khorsandi's reflections on loss after the 9/11 attacks in *Finding Peace* (2003).²²⁷ Through content that explores the diversity of experiences of Iranian-ness in the contemporary moment, these artists' conceptual explorations push against neo-Orientalist Euro-American perceptions that position Iranians as pre-modern and Iranian women as bound to tradition. At the same time, as I discuss in the next section, their choreographies press against static and ahistorical notions of Iran and Iranian dance forms in ways that demand more nuanced understandings of the forms and negotiations of the larger contemporary Iranian diaspora.

Shahzad Khorsandi's Atash (2006)

Iranian-born dancer Shahzad Khorsandi immigrated as a child to California in 1980, a year following Iran's Islamic Revolution, and has since resided in the San Francisco Bay Area. According to Khorsandi, she grew up dancing every day in Iran: "there didn't have to be an occasion; every day that my family came together, there was music and dancing."²²⁸ She began pursuing formal dance classes while in high school and eventually pursued a B.A. in Dance and an M.A. in Creative Arts from San Francisco State University (SFSU). Although Khorsandi focused on modern dance technique and composition during her formal dance training at SFSU, she also complemented her training with a variety of dance forms, including ballet, jazz, West African, Afro-Haitian, Balinese, and Flamenco. She admits in her interview with me that she hadn't considered Iranian dance a technical or artistic form during her academic studies, and it wasn't until she visited Iran in her early twenties (the first time after leaving thirteen years earlier) that her views on the form began to change. She explains,

I had just finished my M.A. and I was trying to find my artistic voice. I had formal background in western dance technique and, even though I was familiar with Persian social dance, I had never thought about it as anything I could develop artistically. But this trip back to Iran opened a door to a part of myself that had to do with my childhood and the culture I was raised in. It really impacted me because I then became greatly interested in Persian dance and looking at it from an academic perspective, not just from a community or social perspective... Shortly after, I dropped the other dance forms and have been performing and teaching Persian dance for the past twenty years.²²⁹

²²⁶ Sahar Dehghan. Interview by Heather Rastovac. Tape recording. Paris, France. July 25, 2012.

²²⁷ For Khorsandi's *Finding Peace*, see: Shahzad Khorsandi, "Contemporary Persian Dance (Shahzad Dance Academy- 'Finding Peace')," *YouTube* video, 2:44, January 25, 2009, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K9XxQjm5WW4>. For Dehghan's *Unmask*, see: sahardehghancom2012, "Sahar Dehghan Vivaldi Four Seasons," *YouTube* video, 6:43, March 1, 2012, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hFjP_6KhCXY.

²²⁸ Shahzad Khorsandi. Interview by Heather Rastovac. Tape recording. Richmond, CA. September 11, 2012.

²²⁹ *Ibid.*

In 1996, Khorsandi founded Shahrzad Dance Academy (SDA) and the Shahrzad Dance Company. She primarily teaches and performs classical Iranian dance and has endeavored to codify the genre in her recently published training handbook, *The Art of Persian Dance* (2015). Khorsandi has also developed a body of contemporary Iranian choreographic work. However, she explained to me that she has had difficulty finding audiences and venues for the genre and has thus mainly oriented her focus on classical Iranian dance, in large part because of her audiences' demands for traditional dances.²³⁰



Figure 11: Shahrzad Khorsandi.

Atash (Fire) is one of her contemporary Iranian choreographic works she developed in 2006. Khorsandi describes the conceptual inspiration for *Atash* as the following: “Fire is worshiped in the ancient Persian religion of Zoroastrianism...SDA Company members perform this fusion of dance that explores the kinetic and visual dynamics of fire.”²³¹ In *Atash*, five dancers momentarily stand motionless in a common national or classical Iranian dance pose, what Khorsandi calls *parastu* (small bird); the dancers' arms are raised above their slightly tilted heads, their elbows are softly bent to create an open circle framing their faces, and the backs of their wrists gently touch while their fingers splay outward like bird wings.²³² Following the instrumental phrases of the classical Persian music of Lian Ensemble, one dancer releases her *parastu* pose, her arms fall to her sides as she peels away from the group in a gentle pedestrian run tracing a half circle toward upstage.

²³⁰ Shahrzad Khorsandi. Interview by Heather Rastovac. Tape recording. Richmond, CA. September 11, 2012.

²³¹ Shahrzad Khorsandi, “Contemporary Persian Dance (Shahrzad Dance Academy- ‘Atash’),” *YouTube* video, 1:26, January 23, 2009, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UNNsBB4uKVc>.

²³² *Parastu* is more specifically a swallow. In *The Art of Persian Dance*, Shahrzad Khorsandi documents what she calls the “Shahrzad technique of Persian dance” and provides descriptions and illustrations of classical Iranian technique principles and the specific names that she has developed for movements. This text is the first of its kind to codify classical Iranian dance technique.

In a canon, another dancer similarly peels away from the group, followed by the remaining three dancers peeling away in unison.²³³ Alternating between the choreographic devices of canon and unison, which highlights the individuality of a flame as part of the larger mass of fire, dancers travel across the floor in fast turns (*charkhesh-e peyvasteh*) on *relevé* with arms curved downward toward their sides, stopping suddenly in syncopated arm and leg gestures.²³⁴ Straight legs and arms sweep like pendulums to their right, left, right before their arms lift into a circle above their heads to propel the dancers into quick barrel turns in-place (*boshkeh, charkhesh-e sotun*), which are followed with sharp alternating lifts of the arms to their sides that end in momentary poses with one arm lifted at their sides, their other arms opposing downward.²³⁵ The dancers then softly jump vertically before finding their way to the floor, rolling horizontally on their knees in different directions, and then momentarily posing in *delrobaa* while remaining on their knees, one arm curved in a half circle above their heads with the opposite arm curved at their waists.²³⁶ Two dancers stand while the three other dancers lay horizontally on their sides. All of the dancers lift and extend one straight leg long to their sides from their respective positions before the three reposed dancers join the others on their feet, moving through earlier choreographic phrases in canon and unison once again.

Throughout *Atash*, dancers transition between movements that are found in classical Iranian dances, such as the moves and poses I have described in Persian, and movements that come from Khorsandi's modern dance training, such as jumps, floor work, and extended leg lifts. At times, the Iranian movements retain the fluidity and circular qualities of classical Iranian dance while at other times they morph into qualities not typical to classical renditions of the form: straight, sharp, and staccato. The dancers' simple red, unornamented costumes (loose gauzy pants and hip-length jackets) and the movements not found in classical Iranian dances deterritorialize overt Iranianness, as highlighted in one viewer's comment on the YouTube video of the performance: "doesn't it look more like ballet? I hear persian music, but the dance?"²³⁷ This comment reflects the conflation between Iranian dance and its traditional forms, the viewer perhaps unaware of the experimentation with Iranian movement as a legitimate manifestation of Iranian dance. While exploring through the dancing body the kinesthetic and visual components of fire, which at once has both universal meaning and profound significance in Persian traditions and mythologies, *Atash* draws upon and reconfigures Iranian movement vocabulary into a choreographic piece that extends the range of possibilities of what Iranian dance can do and can be. This extension of possibilities is, I argue, at the heart of contemporary Iranian dance.

Sahar Dehghan's Unmask (2012)

Sahar Dehghan emigrated from Iran as a young child to Paris in the 1980s, a decade that initiated a massive displacement of hundreds of thousands of Iranians due to the Iran-Iraq war

²³³ A canon is a choreographic device or structure in which a movement is introduced by a dancer or dancers and is repeated in kind by subsequent dancers, often very quickly following each other.

²³⁴ A loose translation of *charkhesh-e peyvasteh* could be "binding turn." It is a turn in which Khorsandi has described as being similar to Western ballet *chainé* turns. (Khorsandi, *The Art of Persian Dance*, 144)

²³⁵ Khorsandi has given the name *boshkeh*, the Persian name for barrel, to barrel turns. *Sotun* means pillar or column, and, according to Khorsandi, in the case of *charkhesh*, it indicates a stationary turn. (Ibid, 145 – 146)

²³⁶ According to Khorsandi, *delrobaa* literally translates to "heart stealing" or more figuratively as "charming." (Ibid, 110)

²³⁷ Shahrzad Khorsandi, "Contemporary Persian Dance (Shahrzad Dance Academy- 'Atash')," *YouTube* video, 1:26, January 23, 2009, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UNNsBB4uKVc>.

(1980–1988). Dehghan explained that settling in France as a refugee was particularly challenging for her, firstly because of her attachment to home and to her Iranian culture, secondly because of the difficulty of learning the French language and corporeal norms, and lastly (yet significantly) because of the various forms of racism she experienced, particularly among her French classmates and teachers.²³⁸ From a young age in France, Dehghan explains that dance and performance became the means through which she could feel a sense of being at home and where she could express herself with the possibility of being understood:

... at that point of my life, the stage was really a place of expression of freedom for me, it was my nation, it was a place where nobody could tell me “You’re not from here.” Nobody could tell me “You’re not French” or vice versa, “You’re not Iranian because now you’re not in Iran anymore.” I always had to deal with that identity problem of being neither here nor there. Also at that time in France, I had so many problems with every day communication. But on the stage, these problems didn’t exist for me.²³⁹

Since most formal dance classes in Paris were very expensive, Dehghan took a variety of small community dance classes within the immigrant *banlieues* (suburbs) where she lived and experimented with her own dance choreographies at home, about which she explains, “I didn’t call it Iranian art at that point, I wasn’t thinking about developing something ‘Iranian.’ All I knew was that I had to do something artistic to express my feelings of *being* Iranian.” Upon immigrating to the U.S. after high school, Dehghan joined Ballet Afsaneh, a San Francisco Bay Area-based dance ensemble that specializes in classical and regional dances of Iran and Central Asia, through which she felt she was able to explore her Iranian identity in a new and concentrated way. For Dehghan, exploring the aesthetics of classical Iranian dance early in her dance career was important for her as a displaced Iranian:

The company didn’t have many Iranian dancers and so I was kind of the representative of the Iranian dancer. It actually felt really good in many ways because I was able to explore my identity in a way that I hadn’t explored before. For example, in the classical pieces, we performed as if we were part of the miniature paintings I had always admired since childhood. It was like I was one of those characters, which felt like it was part of my blood. It was nice to play that role, wear these beautiful dresses, be a character in these miniature paintings, and dance to these beautiful, classical songs that I grew up with. I felt like I was really exploring my identity, my culture, my roots.²⁴⁰

Yet exploring her Iranian identity through classical dances, which were focused on an illustrious Persian past, did not fully satisfy the philosophical and political concerns that were, according to Dehghan, “relevant to today’s issues.”

²³⁸ Sahar Dehghan. Interview by Heather Rastovac. Tape recording. Paris, France. July 25, 2012.

²³⁹ Ibid.

²⁴⁰ Ibid.



Figure 12: Sahar Dehghan.

After several years with Ballet Afsaneh, Dehghan's personal and artistic trajectory eventually led her back to Paris, where she began developing her contemporary Iranian choreographic work that gave rise to *Unmask*, which explores, as she explained to me, her psychological state as a displaced Iranian woman.²⁴¹ The video documentation of *Unmask* begins with Dehghan's own text in French, English, and Persian:

*We shall denude the hypocrisy of the Other
But let us begin by unmasking our own.*²⁴²

Dehghan's choice of music, Italian composer Antonio Vivaldi's *The Four Seasons* (a solo violin piece that gives musical expression to each season of the year), establishes the trajectory of moods through which Dehghan's solo structured improvisation travels. The stage is dark except for a narrow circle of warm light that casts down onto Dehghan. Her black outfit (fitted long sleeves and full skirt) blurs the lines between the dark stage and her silhouette. What remains visually prominent, however, is the Venetian mask that covers the upper half of her face. At the beginning, the music is slow, whimsical, and light; Dehghan's movements and expressions follow suit. Her lower body is stationary as her arms undulate and extend around her, her upper torso and head slightly sway with each arm gesture. Leading with her wrists and articulating gracefully through her fingers (both common classical Iranian techniques), Dehghan gestures from her heart to the sky, and from her lips to her imagined suitors. In addition to the slight nonchalance of her gestures, her raised chest, lifted chin, and slight smirk on her face convey a sense of ostentation.

As the first section of music comes to an end, Dehghan's upward-arm gestures end with her hands rested on her waist, her elbows out to their sides, her upper torso slightly twisted, and her gaze looking downstage over one shoulder before she slowly looks up and to the side, pausing in a confident profile. The violin music becomes dark and staccato and Dehghan's whole body begins to vibrate as she slowly loses balance. As if trying to stabilize herself, her arms tentatively reach out to their sides and she takes heavy, precarious steps until she collapses and contracts several times into a fetal position on the floor. One hand abruptly grasps onto the side of her mask as she comes to her knees. The other arm reaches out long as she stands onto both feet, slowly circling in place. With a sudden thrust of her body, Dehghan begins quickly spinning

²⁴¹ Sahar Dehghan. Interview by Heather Rastovac. Tape recording. Paris, France. July 25, 2012.

²⁴² sahardehghancom2012, "Sahar Dehghan Vivaldi Four Seasons," *YouTube* video, 6:43, March 1, 2012, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hFjP_6KhCXY.

in place, the Sufi-style turning made famous by the “whirling dervishes” of the Mevlevi order of Sufism and found more increasingly in classical Iranian dance.²⁴³

With the varying dramatic accents of the violin, Dehghan undulates gently through her upper body and into her arms, which alternate between reaching upward or outward and covering her mask with her hands as if having gone mad. Still retaining her stationary spinning, she contracts and throws her arms and upper body into a slight fold over, and then throws her chest, neck, and head backwards into a small back bend, again disrupting her sense of balance and support. She then unties her mask and abruptly stops spinning. While facing the audience, she slowly pulls the mask forward from her face, brings it back to her face, and then returns to her quick stationary spinning again. She holds onto the mask with both hands as she moves the mask through various pathways in space. The music then becomes slower and contemplative. Dehghan slows her spinning to a gradual walk while she looks at the mask, which she holds in one of her hands. She puts the mask down onto the ground upstage, and, with her back to the audience; she slowly walks away, periodically looking back at the mask. Finally, with a burst of dramatic musical phrasing, Dehghan bursts into a final spinning sequence. Her head, hair, arms, and hands articulate through space with abandon, conveying her ultimate release from the constraints the mask had imposed on her.

Experimentations with Iranian aesthetics and traditions also allow dancers like Dehghan and Khorsandi the ability to break from the stock female characters that are often replicated in national, classical and regional Iranian dances. As I discuss in chapter one, the presentation of these latter forms tend to overemphasize feminized qualities of coyness and happiness and construct female dancers as “culture bearers.” While all dance *creates* culture rather than merely reflecting it, as many dance scholars argue, I nonetheless find Tria Blu Wakpa’s term “culture creators” as opposed to “culture bearers” as useful in thinking through how female contemporary Iranian dancers destabilize gendered paradigms in Iranian dance. Referring to an Indigenous Contemporary dance choreography by Rulan Tangen and Ann Pesata, Blu Wakpa explains:

Through embodied practices, which take disparate forms, culture creators are drawing on past and working ‘forcefully’ and ‘gently’ with their materials in the present, evoking understandings for the survival and humanity of Native and non-Native peoples and the wellbeing of the planet.”²⁴⁴

In their distinct ways, contemporary Iranian dancers similarly draw upon and reconfigure the past into a timely presence, thus not merely transmitting or bearing culture through their female gendered dancing bodies. Instead, the women in this chapter mobilize and transform traditions historically not available to them as women, such as Sufi spinning, as the means through which to express and produce a wide range of reflection—and thus perhaps action—for both themselves and their audiences.²⁴⁵ For instance, Dehghan’s *Unmask* inspires critical reflection as it employs Sufi spinning to express the psychological state of displacement as an Iranian woman while Sayyad’s *Mirror* inspires spiritual reflection as it employs Sufi spinning as a mode and

²⁴³ The Mevlevi order was founded based on inspiration from the Persian Sufi poet, Jalal-e Din Rumi (1207-1273). For more information, see: The Whirling Dervishes of Rumi website, accessed May 23, 2016. <http://www.whirlingdervishes.org/whirlingdervishes.htm>. Although Sufi turning can be found in some of the national dance presentations in twentieth-century Iran, the employment of Sufi turning is increasingly popular in classical and contemporary Iranian dance performances in the diaspora.

²⁴⁴ Tria Blu Wakpa, “Culture Creators and Interconnected Individualism: Rulan Tangen and Ann Pesata’s Basket Weaving Dance,” *Dance Research Journal* 48, no. 1 (2016): 122.

²⁴⁵ Sufi spinning within the Mevlevi tradition has historically been a spiritual practice exclusively for men.

motif that conveys the relevance of Jalaluddin Rumi's thirteenth-century mystical poetry to contemporary formulations of the self in a modern world.

As contemporary Iranian dance choreographers press against the gendered expectations of women within particular forms of traditional Iranian dance, they also reshape the logics of heterosexuality that undergird them. The concepts and narratives these dancers employ in their choreographic works are not about heteronormative couplings, desire, or subjectivity, like getting a bride ready for marriage or the longing for (while simultaneously denying) a presumed male beloved (as performed in many national and classical Iranian dances). Nor do these dancers' choreographies enact the domestic responsibilities or gendered division of agricultural labor in "village life" as many renditions of Iranian folk dances do. Instead, through their conceptual choreographic work, these dancers explore and express a broader range of emotive qualities and experiences such as pompousness and madness (Dehghan's *Unmask*), loss and confusion (Khorsandi's *Finding Peace*), and alternative forms of femininity and sexuality (such as Sayyad's interest in accessing and cultivating the Divine Feminine and sacred sexuality through her form, *Dance of Oneness*).²⁴⁶ In doing so, these dancers portray Iranian women's affective worlds as complex and contemplative rather than presenting a "mask," as some of these dancers have called it, of feminine contentedness.

Mahtab, a dancer who has moved between Iran, Europe, and the U.S., expresses frustration about the ways in which the performance of classical and regional Iranian genres in the United States inhibits her range of expression.²⁴⁷ Born in Iran in 1984, she danced in underground dance companies in Tehran in the late 1990s and 2000s before obtaining her B.A. in Dance in Europe and immigrating to the U.S. in 2013 to pursue her M.F.A. in Dance and Choreography. Unlike the other dancers in my study, her choreographic work exclusively employs the Western contemporary movement vocabulary in which she trained academically. She does, however, integrate Iranian music, aesthetics, and political themes into her conceptual work and, as she struggles to establish herself as a contemporary dancer-choreographer, she supports herself through dancing with a classical Iranian dance ensemble and teaching "contemporary Persian dance" through the ensemble's academy. After only two years performing and teaching with this ensemble in the U.S., Nazarian has gained salient insight into both world/ethnic dance audiences and diasporic Iranian audiences, upon which she expresses,

I am frustrated by having to be the happy and "beautiful" Persian woman in traditional Persian dance costumes, pretending to be a fairytale that has never been and will never be. I feel I was already wearing an identity mask in Iran that was not me, but was what the society and the government there forced me to be. And now, here I am outside of Iran in the U.S. and I still have to wear a mask when I perform!²⁴⁸

Banafsheh Sayyad also disavows the "masks" of the stock characters found in most classical presentations of Iranian/Persian dance. She asserts, "I'm not going to be a princess and then a dervish and then a bird; I don't do that, that's not who I am."²⁴⁹ In the process, these dancers demonstrate that dance can be a medium for expressing a wide range of difficult and messy emotions, similar to the ways in which much of Persian poetry, music, and films do—

²⁴⁶ For description of Sayyad's work, see: Banafsheh Sayyad's website, accessed June 17, 2016, <http://www.banafsheh.org/banafsheh-sayyad/>.

²⁴⁷ Pseudonym.

²⁴⁸ Mahtab (pseudonym). Personal conversation. April 3, 2016.

²⁴⁹ Banafsheh Sayyad. Interview by Heather Rastovac. Tape recording. New York, NY. March 8, 2013.

challenging many Iranians' views that dance is exclusively celebratory or frivolous rather than capable of addressing serious or deep content.

*Banafsheh Sayyad's Mirror (2010)*²⁵⁰

Los Angeles-based dancer Banafsheh Sayyad moved between Tehran, London, and Detroit as a young girl during the years of Iran's 1979 Revolution and the Iran Hostage Crisis (1979–1981). After a short time back in Tehran, Sayyad and her family permanently immigrated to the United States in 1984, living between Los Angeles and New York, and have not returned to Iran since.²⁵¹ Like Khorsandi and Dehghan, Sayyad had a passion for dance from a young age and though she had never been enrolled in dance classes as a child, she explains that she always created choreographies on her own. Sayyad admits that, as she grew into a young adult and began to formally pursue dance, she did not find herself interested in Iranian dance. She explains that for her,

In one aspect, [Iranian dance] was like cake decoration, and in the other aspect, it was overtly sexual. When I would see dance in [social] gatherings, it just was not something I liked at all. Maybe because I felt like, "Why are they so over the top?" But then the performances that I would see through video—the classical form from the past—it just looked like cake decoration, not addressing anything deep. I was just never drawn to it. So, if you told me when I was doing all my little choreographies that I was just making up from my imagination, "You're going to grow up and be called a Persian dancer," I'd be like, "Are you kidding me? That's ridiculous."²⁵²

As an undergraduate student at University of California, Irvine, Sayyad began studying and performing Flamenco dance, explaining that, "Right away, I was bitten. I thought to myself, 'This is the form I've been looking for!' [It had] the depth, the passion, and the glory that I hadn't seen with Persian dance."²⁵³ Sayyad explains that, "after awhile, Flamenco wasn't my expression anymore," which led her to seek out and study a wide range of somatic and spiritual practices such as Tai Chi, acupuncture, and Gurdjieff work, in addition to deepening her study of the mystical Persian poetry of Mowlana Jalaluddin Rumi (13th century C.E.) and Iranian-Sufi philosophies and rituals.

²⁵⁰ To view *Mirror*, see: Banafsheh Sayyad, "Mirror," *YouTube* video, 13:55, January 4, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=irkOwvaCYIw>.

²⁵¹ Banafsheh Sayyad. Interview by Heather Rastovac. Tape recording. New York, NY. March 8, 2013.

²⁵² *Ibid.*

²⁵³ *Ibid.*



Figure 13: Banafsheh Sayyad.

She further developed her choreographic voice based on these varying somatic and spiritual interests while completing her M.F.A. in dance at the University of California, Los Angeles. Sayyad's diverse studies come together in her choreographic work, which she variously describes as "contemporary Persian dance," "contemporary Sufi dance," or "Dance of Oneness": "a new form, rooted in tradition yet universal."²⁵⁴ Dance of Oneness, according to Sayyad's website, "beckons all to engage, serve, exalt and honor our sexuality as sacred" and aims to cultivate sacred embodiment in the practitioner.²⁵⁵

Mirror begins with a downcast light slowly fading in on a female dancer who remains a constant motif throughout the entire piece, whirling in a slow Sufi turn upstage center with her right arm stretched upward and her left arm extended out to her side. Dressed in a long, red dress with a sheer red cloth over her head and body, she is almost dreamlike or inanimate, like a figment of one's imagination or a passing memory. An audio recording begins; the Persian poet Ahmad Shamloo (1925—2000) recites the Sufi poetry of Jalal-e Din Rumi in Persian and a recording of Sayyad responds as she recites the lines of Rumi's prose in English. This intertextual sonic remix unearths strata of temporalities and geographies as the deceased Shamloo and Sayyad's voices coalesce in the recitation of Rumi's thirteenth century poetry in Persian and English.

Oh, how colorless and formless I am. When will I see myself as I am?

When will my soul be still in its flow, the way I am the inhabitant of flow?

I said, "Friend, you're just like me." She said, "What is likeness to the obviousness that I am?"

I said, "That's it! That's what you are!" She said, "Silence! No tongue has uttered what I am."

²⁵⁴ Banafsheh Sayyad's website, accessed June 12, 2016, <http://www.banafsheh.org/banafsheh-sayyad/>.

²⁵⁵ Ibid.

I said, “Since no tongue has given voice to you, here I am, your unutterable expression.”²⁵⁶

Diffused lights shine down onto two dancers standing on opposite sides of the stage with their arms extended as if holding something in front of them. The poetry recitation initiates their physical response and, within their individual spheres of light, they vacillate between physical expressions of slow suspension and accelerated mobility. Between the circular, extended arms and suspended turns of Iranian and Sufi movement aesthetics, the dancers engage in standing back bends, land on their hands, and propel their lower body fully off the ground. The dancers’ movements fuse and move between slowness/quickness, hardness/softness, verticality/inversions, and circular/straight in physicalizations of the “and” rather than the “or”—embodying Sayyad’s conception of authenticity and radical embodiment referenced at the beginning of the chapter.

Through turns that spiral upward into the circling of their necks and hair, the two dancers travel from their individual spheres of light in a counterclockwise circle around the ever-whirling dancer, who, in that moment, becomes the axis of the ensemble as her whirling swells through the other dancers and into the entire performance space. As the poetry recitation comes to a close, the two dancers eventually return to their respective spheres of light and lay down fully on their backs. The lights fade to black and the live percussive music of Zarbang Persian music ensemble begins. A downcast light fades in on Sayyad, who is downstage center from the whirling dancer. Sayyad enters into a physical conversation with the live percussion; stamping feet, staccato arms, clapping hands, and sudden, accented stops. Her torso is upright and her stance proud and strong, perhaps drawing from and experimenting with the Flamenco technique in which she had trained.

Juxtaposing and complementing this vocabulary, her “movement is [also] comprised in part by the Persian alphabet translated into gestures and movement, which when put together, dances out words and poetic stanzas, mostly taken from the works of the great mystic poet, Rumi...”²⁵⁷ Following this, her movements in this percussive section can also be interpreted as a physicalization of particularly vertical or angular letters in the Persian alphabet, namely *alef* (ا), *laam* (ل), *kaaf* (ك), and *taa* (ط). This is evident as the music then moves to a slower rhythm and a stringed spike fiddle plays a pensive melody. Sayyad transitions into more fluid and more minimalistic movements that emphasize spirals, circles, and swings of the arms, legs, and torso, akin to the Persian letters *sin* (س), *saad* (ص), *ye* (ی), *‘ain* (ع), *he* (ح), and *vaav* (و). Periodically, Sayyad spins in place, joining the whirling dancer, yet weaving seamlessly between being in unison with her and returning to fluid connection with the melody. The two supine dancers begin to slowly move and alternate between gesturing toward Sayyad with their arms and traveling on their knees around their spheres in movements that spiral through the body. As the percussion intensifies, the two dancers gradually find themselves on their feet and join Sayyad in forward and backward releases of their upper torsos, necks, and heads. With a shift to a discernible Sufi rhythm on the daf hand drum, Sayyad and the two dancers then begin to whirl, first in place and then in a counterclockwise circle around the whirling dancer, collectively closing with the physical expansion of the spinning axis that this dancer sustains from the fade in at the beginning of the piece through the performance’s final fade out.

²⁵⁶ Rumi poetry as recited in *Mirror*, translation and recitation in English by Banafsheh Sayyad. See: Banafsheh Sayyad, “Mirror,” *YouTube* video, 13:55, January 4, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=irkOwvaCYIw>.

²⁵⁷ Banafsheh Sayyad’s website, accessed June 23, 2016, <http://www.banafsheh.org/banafsheh-sayyad/>.

The choreography's use of lighting with its beginning fade in and its ending fade out, matched with the dancers' continual movement through these lighting transitions, gesture toward Rumi's philosophical/spiritual principles of flow and infinity-ness around which the choreography coheres. Rather than a delineated temporal arc or chronological narrative, the choreography further establishes a rhizomatic sense of no fixed beginnings or endings—a suspended or in-between place/time assemblage—through the consistent employment of spirals within the dancers' bodies and through the dancers' use of space. As such, *Mirror* compositionally and corporeally embodies Deleuze and Guattari's theorization of the rhizome. For Deleuze and Guattari, the "rhizome has no beginning or end; it is always in the middle, between things, interbeing, *intermezzo*."²⁵⁸ Furthermore, the rhizome resists organizational structures built on chronological lines that seek to trace and locate origins, and is thusly "anti-genealogy."²⁵⁹ Along these lines, *Mirror* does not simply employ Rumi's poetry as a superficial means through which to represent a genealogy of "ancient" or "civilized" Iranianness. Instead, Rumi's philosophies become animated within and through the dancing bodies' engagement with an experiential presence that sees itself in and through the mirror of the past. Also for Deleuze and Guattari, the horizontal movement of the rhizome is a constantly moving system of propagated expansion that seeps into new spaces through gaps and fissures, resists representation and reproduction, and is rather a mode of becoming.²⁶⁰ In *Mirror*, the ever-present whirling dancer becomes this "constantly moving system of propagated expansion"; she is at once the umbilical cord that links temporalities of the past, present, and future *and* the axis around which the other dancers horizontally expand and contract. The dancers' embodied references to the whirling dancer and their repetitions of movement phrases within the piece as a whole enact citations imbued with difference as a "mode of becoming" rather than mere "representation and reproduction."

As one choreographic example of contemporary Iranian dance, *Mirror* effectively employs aesthetics, concepts, and movement vocabulary that experiments with and hybridizes Iranian forms. In some instances, contemporary Iranian dancers push the boundaries of Iranian dance from within its movement vocabularies and aesthetics, such as Sayyad's physical translation of the Persian literary alphabet into her movement vocabulary. In other instances, these dancers draw upon the other diverse somatic forms in which they have trained, as I have discussed. The integration of Western modern/contemporary floor work and straight, extended leg lifts in Khorsandi's *Atash* and the assertive Flamenco-like arms and foot stamps in Sayyad's *Mirror* are such examples. Integrating and employing movement qualities and/or vocabularies outside of traditional Iranian dances allow these artists the ability to kinesthetically express a wider range of content, as in Dehghan's *Unmask*, or to explore traditional Iranian themes in new ways, as with Khorsandi's kinesthetic exploration of fire in *Atash*.

Generally, however, the experimentation of forms from which they produce their choreographic work blend seamlessly, such that it is difficult to ascertain one distinct form from another, thereby producing a new form that remains, to these artists, distinctly Iranian. The expansion of Iranian aesthetics these dancers produce through experimentation and assimilation demonstrate that these dancers are not concerned with enacting a sense of "purity" or definitive authenticity found among some strict notions of Iranian dance. Indeed, some of these dancers' distinct use of the term "fusion" in the description of their work, such as in Khorsandi's

²⁵⁸ Deleuze and Guattari, "Introduction: Rhizome," 25.

²⁵⁹ *Ibid*, 23.

²⁶⁰ *Ibid*, 21.

description of *Atash* as a “fusion of dance that explores the kinetic and visual dynamics of fire,”²⁶¹ or in Sayyad’s description of her form as a “fusion of rigorous dance technique with spiritual embodiment and healing.”²⁶²

Unlike classical and regional Iranian dancers who disavow the notion that their forms are “fusion,” despite the widespread incorporation of ballet and Western dance conventions to alter traditional forms for the visual presentation on a proscenium stage, many contemporary Iranian dancers see the assimilation of additional techniques and aesthetics as integral to their development of contemporary Iranian dance and as a reflection of their work as diasporic Iranian artists. Nonetheless, these artists’ hybrid aesthetics make it such that a diverse range of audiences question the authenticity of their Iranianness, as I discuss in the next section.

Authenticity, Contemporaneity, and Tradition: Negotiations with Enoughness

As contemporary Iranian dance artists straddle the perceived line between “tradition” and “contemporary” and push the boundaries of Iranian aesthetics, they face a variety of challenges from both diasporic Iranian and non-Iranian audiences, particularly those frequenting ethnic dance festivals and in world dance markets. In these sites, audiences—including those within the Iranian diaspora for whom enjoying traditional dances at Iranian cultural events conjures nostalgia, familiarity, and belonging—oftentimes perceive the work of artists like Khorsandi, Dehghan, and Sayyad as not “traditional” or “authentic” enough. At the same time, their work is not spectacular enough for many non-Iranian audiences, particularly at ethnic dance festivals or within world dance markets, for whom “traditional” dances satiate the desire for knowing and enjoying the exotic Other.²⁶³ Further complicating the reception of the work of the artists in this chapter is the perspective of certain contemporary Euro-American dance scenes and academic networks, within which contemporary Iranian dance artists’ works are often perceived as *too* “ethnic” or as not technical or innovative enough. As Khorsandi, Dehghan, and Sayyad negotiate the complicated networks of acceptance and refusal of their unique brands of contemporary Iranian dance, they are frequently required to substantiate their choreographic works against diverse and often contradictory frameworks of “enoughness” that are built upon specific notions of what is unequivocally “traditional,” “authentic,” “technical,” or “universal” for the specific audiences and institutions through which these artists circulate.

Contemporary Iranian dancers’ works are frequently compared to limited and stereotypical notions of Iranian and Middle Eastern dance that mark “authenticity” through a particular rubric of ahistoricity that, for dancers like Khorsandi, renders her use of costuming, gender dynamics, and abstract narrative virtually illegible. Her experiences with The San Francisco Ethnic Dance Festival are especially illustrative of how this is so. The festival occurs annually over four weekends from late-May to early-June and is one of the oldest and largest ethnic dance festivals in the United States. Established in 1978, the festival has “celebrated and

²⁶¹ Shahrzad Khorsandi, “Contemporary Persian Dance (Shahrzad Dance Academy- ‘Atash’),” *YouTube* video, 1:26, January 23, 2009, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UNNsBB4uKvc>.

²⁶² Banafsheh Sayyad’s website, accessed June 23, 2016, <http://www.banafsheh.org/banafsheh-sayyad/>.

²⁶³ Here I draw from Marta Savigliano’s understanding of “world dance” (a rubric under which “ethnic” dance falls) which she defines as, at once, a category, a product, and a market. Savigliano also contends that “World Dance... installs the possibility of creating a market for the consumption of aestheticized moving bodies, both as spectators and as invested, even identified, practitioners... [that] thus expands the market of sanctioned and practiced pleasures, offering disciplined movement techniques of the body, access to the spectatorship and the embodiment of the beautiful and the exotic...” (Savigliano, “Worlding Dance and Dancing Out There in the World,” 165)

fostered appreciation for the diverse cultural communities in the Bay Area and Northern California, through an annual performance season of dance styles that have included traditional classical dance, sacred dance genres, vernacular dance forms, social dance and folk dance presentations.”²⁶⁴ The festival features dance forms from around the globe, such as those defined as Indian dance (particularly Odissi and Bharata Natyam), classical Chinese dance, Mexican Folklorico, Flamenco, various African dance forms, Middle Eastern dances, and Persian or Central Asian dance.²⁶⁵ Over the course of two days, San Francisco Bay area dancers and dance companies audition each year in front of a panel of rotating judges from diverse demographics for the opportunity to perform as part of the festival’s exclusive line up. Khorsandi regularly auditioned for the festival over the course of five years in the early 2000s with what she considers some of her best work, but she was ultimately never selected to perform. Each year she auditioned, the judges would provide her feedback that questioned the authenticity of her costumes and her choreographies. She explains:

I’ve often run into that block where I’ve presented something to a panel of non-Persians and they question the authenticity of what I present. They say, “I don’t know if that’s really Persian.” That’s definitely been an issue with the San Francisco Ethnic Dance festival...Ultimately, the festival judges never liked my work. The reasons they would give were really confusing and ambiguous. A lot of the feedback was about costumes, like, “We weren’t sure of what time period your costume is from,” or “We are not sure if the costume is authentic.” But the piece had nothing to do with any time period; it would be an abstract piece! Another comment was, “It didn’t really look like Persian dance; it looked like a Persian choreographer had choreographed a dance.” What exactly does that mean? How would it have to be different in order to be “Persian” but not necessarily choreographed by a Persian person? After the fifth time auditioning and not getting in, I figured either they have some different kind of image [of what “Persian” is] that I’m not hitting, or there are political things where they just let certain people in and certain people not.²⁶⁶

As Khorsandi’s experience illustrates, the organization’s judges based their evaluations of her dance performances based on a criteria of authenticity that may seem ambiguous but which, I argue, is in fact rooted in the values of ethnic and world dance markets. As I discuss in chapter one, the performance of Iranian dance has historically lacked the codification that many of the “traditional” dance forms typically featured at the festival have (such as classical Indian dance traditions, for instance). Khorsandi’s experiences of repeated rejections therefore underscore the likeliness that the judges worked to determine her “authentic” Iranian dance based on the

²⁶⁴ See: San Francisco Ethnic Dance Festival website, accessed December 1, 2010, <http://worldartswest.org/edf/history/index.html>.

²⁶⁵ According to the festival’s website, the festival has for almost four decades “celebrated and fostered appreciation for the diverse cultural communities in the Bay Area and Northern California, through an annual performance season of dance styles that have included traditional classical dance, sacred dance genres, vernacular dance forms, social dance and folk dance presentations” (Ibid.). In a list of nearly one hundred dance soloists and groups that have performed over the past seventeen years, and whose genres range from world dances from all around the globe, seven dance soloists/groups are listed under a dance genre named “Persian” or “Central Asian” (an umbrella term often used if the repertoire includes dances from the Persian-speaking cultural sphere, such as Afghanistan and Tajikistan). Though Iranian/Persian dance is not as represented in the festival as dance forms such as classical Indian dance, classical Chinese dance, Mexican Folklorico, Flamenco, Belly Dance, and various African dance forms, Iranian/Persian dance has begun to increasingly circulate on world dance stages.

²⁶⁶ Shahrzad Khorsandi. Interview by Heather Rastovac. Tape recording. Richmond, CA. September 11, 2012.

“aestheticized multiculturalism” of ethnic and world dance circuits that valorize overt visual markers of ethnicity for the consumption of their audiences.²⁶⁷

The San Francisco Ethnic Dance Festival judges’ feedback for Khorsandi demonstrates how perceptions of “ethnic dance” more broadly tether it to specific and static temporal designations of pastness, as evidenced in part by the judges’ questioning about the time period of Khorsandi’s costume (“We weren’t sure of what time period your costume is from.”). The judges’ hyper-focus on costuming rather than on bodily technique and conceptual vision is typical of many dance critics’ reviews of non-Euro-American dancers and/or dance forms. June Vail, for instance, evaluates the reviews of various dance critics over the course of twenty years who have written about one Indian dancer performing in the U.S. Her findings reveal the tendencies of critics to convey general impressions (with a particular focus on costuming) but fail to relay what the dancers did with their bodies or how they actually moved.²⁶⁸ While Vail acknowledges the difficulty in evaluating forms when one lacks knowledge of history and dance vocabulary, she warns that, “habitual modes of perceiving and writing, used without self-awareness, tend to reduce the event to a safely exotic novelty.”²⁶⁹ Referring to a *San Francisco Bay Guardian* dance critic’s review of Asian American choreographer Sue Li-Jue’s choreography, Yutian Wong explains that the critic described the costumes (and other visual aspects) in more depth than the dancing itself²⁷⁰ With regards to the circulation of the classical Indian dance Bharata Natyam on world dance stages, Priya Srinivasan explains, “The Bharata Natyam dancing body is...overdetermined by its heavy layers of eye-catching and exotic paraphernalia that distract the dance critic or researcher from focusing on a ‘technique’ that forever remains inaccessible.”²⁷¹ Srinivasan further argues, “This focus on the layers of clothing and the fabric that catches the eye contribute to an overdetermined nationalist, orientalist reading of the Bharata Natyam body.”²⁷²

As I gestured to in my descriptions of Khorsandi’s, Dehghan’s, and Sayyad’s pieces, contemporary Iranian dance costume choices are relatively simple (usually loose pants or long shirts or dresses with minimal design or embellishments) and while they may contain subtle touches of Iranian designs, they often don’t provide the expected visual cues of “Persianness:” sequined appliques on long flowy coats and skirts and ostentatious jewelry. Rather than emphasizing appearances through ornate costuming, or an orientation toward representing Iranian culture through signifying sartorial choices, contemporary Iranian dancers assert through their simple costume choices that the “material layers that cover the dancing body” are secondary to what the body actually does in and through the space and time of the performance.

Ultimately, the San Francisco Ethnic Dance Festival judges’ feedback on Khorsandi’s performance suggests that her work lacked the *right* kind of authenticity, or that her work didn’t signify “ethnic” enough. Apart from costuming cues, this denial is likely related to her

²⁶⁷ Yutian Wong explains, “Lisa Lowe’s (1996) term “aestheticized multiculturalism” speaks to the practice of celebrating cultural difference within the US, such that difference can be channeled through discourses of apoliticized authenticity.” Yutian Wong. *Choreographing Asian America* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2010), 8.

²⁶⁸ June Vail, “What the Words Say: Watching American Critics Watch World Dance,” in *Looking Out: Perspectives on Dance and Criticism in a Multicultural World*, ed. David Gere (NY: Schirmer Books, 1995), 165-179.

²⁶⁹ Vail, “What the Words Say,” 171.

²⁷⁰ Wong, *Choreographing Asian America*, 29.

²⁷¹ Srinivasan, *Sweating Saris*, 53.

²⁷² *Ibid*, 54.

choreography itself, which consists of subtle, internal movement qualities rather than the fast traveling turns in the spectacular use of space found in many presentations of Iranian dance on ethnic/world dance stages. Khorsandi's conceptual visual in her contemporary Iranian choreographies typically includes more abstract or "universal" themes rather than overtly or exclusively "Persian" ones, challenging the expectations of how, as Susan Foster explains, "Ethnic dances [are] envisioned as local rather than transcendent, traditional rather than innovative...[and] a product of the people rather than a genius..."²⁷³ While Khorsandi is a dancer from Iran, and thus embodies a certain authenticity as "Persian," the judges seemed to have nonetheless perceived her choreographic work as expressing personal and individual artistic explorations rather than "Persian dance" or Persian culture as a whole. Folded within the judges' feedback that Khorsandi's piece "didn't really look like Persian dance; it looked like a Persian choreographer had choreographed a dance" are assumptions that suggest Khorsandi's creative work as a *choreographer* had adulterated the authenticity of "Persianness," thus establishing ingenuity and ethnic-ness as mutually exclusive. That Khorsandi's choreographic work was not legible to the San Francisco Ethnic Dance Festival as "Persian dance" highlights the belief that individualistic or innovative expression belongs to the purview of a Western "Us" while the ethnic "Other" is bound to unchanging traditions of the communal whole. The San Francisco Ethnic Dance Festival's rejection of Khorsandi's choreographic work as not authentic enough ultimately illustrates that a legitimized "Iranian" dancer on the ethnic/world dance stage inhabits a subjugated position that insists upon an appropriate display of Otherness.²⁷⁴

Wong describes a somewhat similar scenario in which the aforementioned *San Francisco Bay Guardian* dance critic questions the "identifiable critical edge" of Sue Li-Jue's exploration of Asian American female identity in her choreographic work *The Nature of Nature*. In response to the critic, Wong queries: "If...Li-Jue's danced answer [to the critic's question] is insufficient, then what is such an exploration of Asian American women supposed to look like? What does a critic...see as lacking in Li-Jue's choreographic answer?"²⁷⁵ Wong describes an instance of a dance critic whose critical point of reference comes from Western modern and contemporary dances; thus, the critic was not evaluating Li-Jue's work from the standpoint of ethnic/world dance, as the San Francisco Ethnic Dance Festival judges were with Khorsandi. Nevertheless, both instances related to the evaluation of Khorsandi and Li-Jue's "enoughness" as "ethnic" choreographers highlight the precarious position of non-white choreographers of often needing to prove their authenticity, whether among ethnic/world dance or Western dance audiences.

Khorsandi's encounter highlights the problems of legibility that arise in world or ethnic dance festivals such as the San Francisco Ethnic Dance Festival. While such festivals provide a platform for dance forms marginalized from other large dance venues, they nonetheless require that choreographers and dancers adapt traditional forms to the proscenium stage and to many Euro-American desires for overt visual cues of exotic Otherness. Marta Savigliano contends that

²⁷³ Foster, "Worlding Dance," 2.

²⁷⁴ I put quotations around the designation "Iranian" here since I am referring to any dancer who performs Iranian dance, whether or not they are ethnically Persian. However, it is significant that the dancers and/or dance companies that have historically dominated world dance markets have been non-Iranian. In this market, studio training in a dance form ultimately trumps cultural practice of a form since studio training typically orients the student toward the virtuosity and spectacle favored by this market. Of the seven performance soloists and groups who have performed "Persian" or "Central Asian" for the San Francisco Ethnic Dance Festival over the past seventeen years, only two of the soloists or choreographers have been of Iranian heritage. See: San Francisco Ethnic Dance Festival website, accessed December 1, 2010. <http://worldartswest.org/edf/history/index.html>.

²⁷⁵ Wong, *Choreographing Asian America*, 29.

“World dance operates through disciplinary techniques that reshape the ‘other’ dances’ presentational and pedagogical forms, along with the beliefs and values associated with them, their circulation and purposes, and the bodies and experiences of those who practice them.”²⁷⁶ Through the reshaping to which Savigliano refers, dance forms within the world dance rubric must strike a fine balance between discipline, exoticism, and authenticity in order to be legible to world dance markets by presenting a virtuosic display of difference and Otherness that is translatable into what counts as “Dance” and can be appreciated within the “Dance” field’s parameters.²⁷⁷

As I have been arguing, a professional presentation of ethnic/world dances is typically defined by a particular kind of authenticity usually rooted in the music and costumes accompanying a dance piece and represented in the tightly executed, complex choreography of virtuosic bodies oriented toward satiating world dance audiences’ desire for spectacle. To this end, the styles of Iranian dance that *do* get presented at events such as the San Francisco Ethnic Dance Festival are representations of classical or regional folk dance styles that more overtly signify “Iranianness” or “Persianness” to the judges through particular music and costume choices, while at the same time presenting choreographic conventions of spectacle. As a result, other forms of Iranian cultural expression that do not fit into classical or regional Iranian dance categories, such as contemporary Iranian dance, become marginalized as adulterated and inauthentic, a position that ultimately affects artists’ abilities to gain access to many resources and cultural capital these dance circuits provide and that are necessary to their livelihood.

Contemporary Iranian dancers also face similar challenges of securing legitimacy and access to resources as dance artists within academic dance programs where dance forms from outside of the “Western” contemporary or modern dance spectrum tend not to be seen as technical, “universal,” or contemporary enough. In short, non-Euro-American forms are often deemed as “too ethnic” to be integrated into dance programs invested in canonical, Western, Euro-American dance forms. Khorsandi experienced the conflation of Iranian dance as “ethnic” dance—and the related assumption that dance from the Middle East, Africa, Asia, and elsewhere are not sufficiently technical to be included alongside the Western dance repertoires—in this way:

I have had to deal with what I would refer to as prejudice from the Western [modern and ballet] dance community and academic departments, who are most often like, “Oh, you do ethnic dance, let me refer you to our Ethnomusicology department or our Anthropology department.” No, I am a dancer and I’d like to do a master class in Persian ballet for your students because they could benefit from it. “Well, we already have ethnic dance, we have West African dance!”... There is a big line between world dance or ethnic dance and “legitimate” dance, meaning ballet or modern. For example, I was hired through the dance department of a four-year private college to teach Persian dance...but for over three years I was there, I was not actually let *into* the dance program, I was not allowed to have any dance pieces in the concert, and they never promoted my class to dance majors. It was pitched as strictly a recreational class...I would ask the department if I could choreograph for their concert and they would say, “No thank you, we already have ethnic dance in our concert, an African dance, and that is enough.”²⁷⁸

²⁷⁶ Savigliano, “Worlding Dance and Dancing Out There in the World,” 164.

²⁷⁷ Ibid, 167.

²⁷⁸ Shahrzad Khorsandi. Interview by Heather Rastovac. Tape recording. Richmond, CA. September 11, 2012. I have also personally come across this challenge. Upon proposing to teach Iranian dance within an undergraduate

Khorsandi's quote points toward the ways in which dance forms that fall under the ethnic or world dance umbrella—in this case, “Persian” and “African”—are often conflated into one category, despite hugely contrasting techniques and aesthetics between the forms. Furthermore, that academic dance departments refer Khorsandi to Ethnomusicology and Anthropology departments illustrates a number of commonplace views within many Euro-American dance institutions, many of which are in fact similar to some of those in ethnic/world dance circuits. Assuming the common belief that the fields of Ethnomusicology and Anthropology study cultural forms of racial and cultural Others rather than Euro-American cultures, the dance department's referral to these departments implies that “Persian” is not and cannot be part of a Euro-American or cosmopolitan cultural sphere. Further assuming that the fields of Ethnomusicology and Anthropology study cultures from the past, or at least cultures conceived of “untainted” by the influences of modernity, this referral likewise temporally positions “Persian” in the past and unable of being contemporary.

Similarly, I suggest that Euro-American Orientalist conceptions of “Persia” as a past civilization (from which many academic dance departments are not immune) construct Persian/Iranian bodies through the past, *as* historical and *not as* contemporary. This is not unlike Wong's study on Asian American contemporary performance, where she explains, “the perception of Asians as remnants of past civilization constructs the Asian body through the past.”²⁷⁹ She continues that, “This is not merely a way of thinking that the body produces memory and history,” but rather, “that the Asian body *is* historical rather than contemporary.”²⁸⁰ The restrictions placed upon Khorsandi's contributions to the dance department—referring her instead to departments that have a longer history of, as, and within “Area Studies” programs—further underscore how Iranian and ethnic dance become conflated in ways that suggest that dances with an ethnic or racial qualifier are forms that represent an *entire* ethnic or racial culture. Or, in Foster's terms, many Euro-American dance institutions conceive of these dances as “a product of the people rather than [the individual] genius” that is valorized within Western dance lineages.²⁸¹

While being marginalized within academic dance departments and ethnic/world dance festivals, Iranian dancers who are interested in the experimentation of Iranian dance traditions and aesthetics also face challenges in performing their contemporary works among diasporic Iranian audiences, many of whom are also seeking the traditional classical or regional forms. Khorsandi explains that diasporic Iranian audiences, as a result of their displacement, often desire cultural repertoires that connect them to notions of “home:”

Here [in the U.S.], most Persians are all about traditions. Especially for parents who think, “Oh my God, I got displaced and now I have a child here. I may not be able to go back to Iran and this child doesn't have a connection to my culture.” There is a need to familiarize the child with Persian culture, the language, Persian dance and music. I think a lot of people who came right after the [1979] Revolution didn't necessarily feel like migrating and staying here permanently, so they miss going back home, and Iran is so different now. Also, they've gotten used to staying here, it's been over thirty years, so

dance program, the director of the undergraduate curriculum told me, “We have to teach our undergraduate students the fundamentals of *dance* before they can learn other styles,” as if the foundational spine of all dance *is* modern dance and all other forms are merely an appendage.

²⁷⁹ Wong, *Choreographing Asian America*, 12.

²⁸⁰ *Ibid*, 13.

²⁸¹ Foster, “Worlding Dance,” 2.

there is no question of relocating back to Iran now. But they do miss home and do want that connection to the culture and these traditions make them feel comfortable and grounded, so they definitely desire the traditional dance and music.²⁸²

Dehghan's views on the nostalgic desires of many diasporic Iranian communities coincides in many ways with Khorsandi's:

As far as Iranians are concerned—just from my observations, I don't mean to generalize—but, for many Iranians in the diaspora, being alienated and being far from our homeland has driven many of us to try and recreate Iran for ourselves. Because some of us are not really happy with Iran and the image of Iran today, we want to go back and search for what Iran was like in the past. So I think a lot of us are just trying to recreate that and trying to get into our classical music, dig deeper into the paintings, whatever we can find from the past in order to try and be proud of that.²⁸³

Khorsandi and Dehghan emphasize how the presentation of “traditional” Iranian dance, as well as other artistic forms, becomes a site through which many diasporic Iranians are able to construct a connection to a home they were forced to leave behind and to sustain a sense of belonging for themselves and their children in the diaspora. With this emphasis on a “past,” these audiences often look for nostalgic dances that either represent the folk cultures of Iran or that utilize the classical music or miniature painting motifs to which Dehghan refers.

Dehghan argues that presenting Iranian traditions has the potential of breaking the stereotypes about Iranians that are rampant in mainstream Euro-American media, a similar concern that Sheila Eghbali expressed in chapter one with regards to preserving and presenting particular traditional Iranian dances, explaining:

We're proud of our ancient civilizations and we want to show the world that, especially to break the stereotypes and say, “Hey, we're not what you think we are just by watching what you see in the media today about Iranians. We have so much more. We have this rich culture with beautiful poetry, music, and paintings.” And it is important to claim that because it's a lot easier for people to go to war against people who are kept in the dark, who are unknown. So if you can put some light on your culture and say, “You know what? We also have romantic poetry. We also talk about love and friendship. We also have children, dreaming.” You know, showing the colors of our culture so that people don't just see us as people that they need to erase. It's lot harder to go into war against people if you know a little bit more about them. So yes, it's one of my goals with my dance to do that, to break the stereotypes...In some instances, old Iranian ladies would come up to me after a show and were like, “Oh, you brought me so much nostalgia,” and they would have tears in their eyes. It was like I woke up something in them that was dead for years and were able to live that again. Even if my poetry recital was not perfect, they still felt something and they still felt proud.²⁸⁴

For Dehghan, her dance and poetry performances are capable of creating connections for older people who make up the Iranian diaspora as well as a younger generation who,

aren't necessarily proud of their Iranian identity but yet they have Iranian names, they have Iranian parents, and they're kind of confused...They can see somebody who looks

²⁸² Shahrzad Khorsandi. Interview by Heather Rastovac. Tape recording. Richmond, CA. September 11, 2012.

²⁸³ Sahar Dehghan. Interview by Heather Rastovac. Tape recording. Paris, France. July 25, 2012.

²⁸⁴ Ibid.

like their mom or their cousins or their grandma or themselves. They can connect with that identity...and they can be proud of being from that culture.²⁸⁵

While Dehghan feels that presenting traditional Iranian works for the larger diaspora is a critical component of community-building, she is just as invested in asserting contemporary Iranian dance forms as part of a growing canon of Iranian cultural production, explaining, “I want an Iranian audience to see what I’m doing and I want them to be shocked. I don’t want them to just expect this perfect Persian princess.”²⁸⁶ Dehghan prefers the stripped down minimalism of contemporary dance, stripping away the glitzy glamour of traditional Iranian dance costuming in the hopes that audiences will have to focus more specifically on the meanings and contexts of the themes and movements that are relevant to the Iranian community today “And for the westerners,” she explains, “yes, I want them to see that we Iranians can also be contemporary, that we can also be modern, that we can be innovative as people, as a woman today. And so that also breaks the stereotypes of the way that they see Iranian women today.”²⁸⁷

Conclusion

In associating rhizomes with the principle of “asignifying rupture,” Deleuze and Guattari write against “the oversignifying [of] breaks separating structures or cutting across a single structure.”²⁸⁸ A rhizome, broken at any point, sprouts new growth along established lines or creates new “line[s] of flight.”²⁸⁹ In some of the discourse that circulates among diasporic Iranian dance communities, the 1979 Revolution represents a major moment of rupture in the “evolution” of Iranian dance; many diasporic dance community efforts are oriented toward reviving a cohesive cultural past in order for the evolution of Iranian dance to continue along the same plot. However, a rhizomatic model of Iranian dance, while recognizing the 1979 Revolution as rupture, instead sprouts from that point into many new directions. The rhizome allows for a theorization of contemporary Iranian dance as a form that simultaneously exists alongside, outside of, and part of the national and classical Iranian dance lineages and Euro-American contemporary dance lineages rather than as constructing an ontological difference of contemporary Iranian dance from these forms (as practitioners and audiences of Iranian national/classical dance and Euro-American contemporary dance often do).

Contemporary Iranian dance is neither an adulterated version of Iranian dance nor a rejection of Iranian dance traditions. Instead, it is a rhizomatic practice that maps kinesthetic and affective trajectories of diasporic Iranian bodies and hybrid subjectivities. As a rhizomatic practice, these forms disrupt genealogical or hierarchical architectures of Iranian dance and bring multiple geographies and temporalities together through the dancing body. For dancers like Khorsandi, Dehghan, and Sayyad whose dance practices are informed by but never easily located

²⁸⁵ Ibid. Dehghan’s experience is similar to Priya Srinivasan’s experience training in and performance classical Indian dance: “These theatrical representations of gods, goddesses, and other characters were a vindication of sorts, especially for a young, brown-eyed, brown-skinned girl growing up outside of India in a harsh diasporic environment, where images of blue-eyed blondes saturated the media. Young, brown bodies dancing as beautiful, powerful goddesses offered alternate representations of female beauty, which I knew were important not only for me but also for other young girls. These performances on stage and in the classrooms offered catharsis and empowering alternate visions of oneself...” (Srinivasan, *Sweating Saris*, 27).

²⁸⁶ Sahar Dehghan. Interview by Heather Rastovac. Tape recording. Paris, France. July 25, 2012.

²⁸⁷ Ibid.

²⁸⁸ Deleuze and Guattari, “Introduction: Rhizome,” 9.

²⁸⁹ Ibid.

in Iranian history, the choreographic form at times displaces the nation as primary arbiter of their identity, further allowing them to, as female Iranians, refuse the role of “culture bearers.”

Conceiving of contemporary Iranian dance as a rhizomatic practice presses against nationalist and diasporic claims of authenticity that are expressed in dance through highlighting the gaps and fissures in the definition of authenticity itself, opening space to instead understand the dance form as an authentic form of “radical embodiment,” to borrow Sayyad’s own definition of her practice. The radical embodiment cultivated through subjective explorations of diasporic Iranianness fosters a different sense of cultural cohesion, a messy marriage of multiple selves not *in spite of* the fragmentation resulting from displacement, but *through* and *with* it. As a rhizomatic form, contemporary Iranian dance mobilizes choreographic cartographies less as a map (noun) and more as process (verb), in part by the artists’ intentionality in creating works exploring subjectivity, experimentation, and multiplicity.

These choreographers’ bodies of work reveal that the strict notions of authenticity integral to the work of dancers who seek to preserve national, classical, and regional forms (as discussed in chapter one) limit the scope and potentiality of Iranian dance and Iranianness itself, especially as ideologies of authenticity circulate within world/ethnic dance festivals and markets. I discussed in this chapter, dancers like Khorsandi, Dehghan, and Sayyad find themselves having to prove their “enoughness”—either as sufficiently Iranian, or sufficiently representative for world/ethnic dance audiences. However, they and others look to dance as a site to present Iranians, especially Iranian women, as always-contemporary rather than as historical subjects. This negotiation of national belonging and cultural citizenship within diasporic sites provides the platform for the next chapter’s focus on one émigré dancer, Afshin Ghaffarian. The result is a move from a focus on dances and choreographic works that highlight the debates about Iranian dance as a *form* to a focus on Ghaffarian’s *position* as an Iranian dancer—more specifically, the construction of him as an “Iranian dancer in exile”—within the contemporary French sociopolitical context. The next chapter of the dissertation also marks the movement from theoretical concerns surrounding the notion of “saving” dance *forms* to the theoretical concerns surrounding the efforts of “saving” Iranian *dancers*, the dominant rhetoric, as I argue, that frames Middle Eastern subjects within the Euro-American geo/biopolitics.

Chapter 3

Do Iranian Dancers Need Saving? Iranian Dancing Bodies as ‘Objects of Rescue’²⁹⁰

“*Le danseur iranien a trouvé la liberté à Paris*”

En cette fin d'année 2009, le jeune homme cache mal l'euphorie d'un exil salvateur. À 23 ans, on regarde droit devant. Il a tout quitté, y compris l'écharpe verte, mais qu'importe, puisqu'il est libre et que « chaque parcelle d'air dans Paris sent cette liberté toute neuve ». Il appelle sa famille de temps à autre et continue de vilipender un pays où la dictature contraint les corps et ruine les esprits.

“The Iranian dancer has found freedom in Paris”

It is almost the end of 2009 and the young man [Afshin Ghaffarian] cannot hide the euphoria of an exile that brought his salvation. Already 23 years old, he has set forth and looks straight ahead. He left everything, even the green scarf, but none of that really matters since he is now a free man and that ‘every parcel of air in Paris reminds him of this new-found freedom.’ He calls his family time to time and continues to vilify a country where dictatorship constrains the body and ruins people's spirits.²⁹¹

— Marion Quillard, *Ouest France - Ecole*

The idealisation of movement, or transformation of movement into a fetish, depends upon the exclusion of others who are already positioned as *not free in the same way*.²⁹²

— Sara Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*

Building upon transnational feminist analyses of contemporary Euro-American imperialism, this chapter draws critical parallels between militaristic and moralistic missions to save female and queer Muslim subjects in and beyond the Middle East and the tropes of freedom that are employed in discourses surrounding Iranian dancers residing both in and outside of Iran. As I have explored in the previous two chapters, because of the Iranian state ban on many forms of dance performance (effective since the 1979 Revolution), dancers, audiences, and media often construct diasporic spaces as offering Iranian dancers the unconditional freedom to fully realize

²⁹⁰ My title draws from the work of two feminist texts: Lila Abu Lughod, *Do Muslim Women Need Saving?* (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 2013); and Inderpal Grewal's theorization of “object of rescue” in “On the New Global Feminism and the Family of Nations: Dilemmas of Transnational Feminist Practice,” in *Talking Visions: Multicultural Feminism in a Transnational Age*, ed. Ella Shohat (New York, Cambridge, and London: MIT Press, 1998), 501-530. Grewal suggests that the “object of rescue” is constructed by a human rights framework in which the “First World, imperialist, militaristic, violent, and exploitative, is rarely present in [the] visual evidence of human rights violations [and its] absence constructs the authoritative and objective viewer and rescuer, always outside of history” (Ibid, 502). Although Grewal theorizes and interrogates the construction of “objects of rescue” with regards to imperialist feminist confluences of women's and human's rights, I suggest that the framework of rescue that she puts forth bears relevance to the case of Iranian dancers, whether female or male gendered.

²⁹¹ Marion Quillard, “The Iranian dancer has found freedom in Paris,” *Ouest France—Ecole*, accessed October 24, 2012, translated from French, http://www.ouestfrance-ecole.com/commun/scripts/blocsmetiers/com_frame.asp?lien=/ComprActu3.asp¶m=IdArt=6573%3CET%3EIdThe=%3CET%3EIdCla=4-37-885%3CET%3ENomCla=_International_Les+migrations%3CET%3EPageCour=1%3CET%3EPageTot=1 (content no longer available).

²⁹² Sara Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, 2nd Edition (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014), 152. Emphasis in the original.

themselves as artists. In this pervasive narrative and as illustrated in the chapter's opening media quote about Iranian émigré dancer Afshin Ghaffarian, Iranian dancers gain agential freedom—a dancer's subjecthood—only through non-Iranian spaces. The quote depicts Ghaffarian as achieving this “new-found freedom” in the West in specifically geo-temporal terms: it is the year 2009, he is age 23, he looks straight ahead while leaving everything behind. This geo-temporal framing typical of the French media coverage of Ghaffarian acts as a narrative device that positions Ghaffarian's place of departure (Iran) and his place of arrival and refuge (the West) in a linear plot of progressive modernity.

This chapter examines media representations surrounding Iranian dancer Afshin Ghaffarian, who emigrated from Iran to Paris in 2009, as sites that fix his identity as an “Iranian dancer in exile” and as a recipient of French state benevolence. Specifically, I interrogate mainstream French media sources and the dramatic film about him, *Desert Dancer* (2014), that situate Ghaffarian as a subject who has been granted the “freedom” to dance after having been prohibited from legally performing dance in Iran. I argue that the narratives in French media sources (exemplified by the chapter's opening quote) and in the film *Desert Dancer* construct Ghaffarian and Iranian dancers writ large as what Inderpal Grewal calls “objects of rescue” in need of saving from the “oppressive” Iranian state or family that forbids them to dance (a restriction that is often implicitly or explicitly associated with Islam).²⁹³ Significantly, Ghaffarian's subject position as “Iranian dancer in exile,” particularly within the affective and moralistic frameworks of immigration in France, simultaneously and problematically constructs his place of exile, France, as an unconditional exemplar of freedom. At stake, then, are the ways in which the salvation rhetoric surrounding Iranian dancers situates Iran—specifically, the current Islamic Republic of Iran—in essentialist and temporal terms of “unfreedom” precisely as a means through which to uphold the (neo)colonial narrative of the West as the beacon of freedom.

Over the past two decades, scholars and activists across a variety of disciplines have increasingly interrogated Euro-American missions to “save” specifically female and queer subjects in/from Middle Eastern and Muslim communities.²⁹⁴ These critiques point to racialized modes of scrutiny in which Islam's treatment of women and homosexuals becomes a barometer with which to measure modernity and freedom, and highlights how the colonial “white wo/man's

²⁹³ Grewal, “On the New Global Feminism.” In putting “oppressive” in scare quotes, I do not mean to imply that forms of oppression do not occur in Iran. Rather, I wish to draw attention to how, in political and popular Euro-American discourse, “oppression” becomes an automatic and unquestioned moralistic qualifier affixed to the construction of the Islamic Republic. It is beyond the scope of this chapter to discuss the laws and perspectives regarding dance across the Islamic world, as they have historically been wide-ranging and constantly changing. See: Shay, *Choreophobia*. However, I highlight how the conflation of the Middle East and Islam that often circulates among Euro-American media impacts the production, circulation, and consumption of Iranian performance, regardless of whether or not Iranian performers identify as Muslim. Expectedly, Iranian dancers have varying relationships to Islam. These include identifying as a Muslim (culturally and/or practicing), relative indifference, staunchly secular, or what Reza Gholami refers to as “non-Islamiosity.” For Gholami's theorization of “non-Islamiosity,” see: Reza Gholami, *Secularism and Identity: Non-Islamiosity in the Iranian Diaspora* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing, 2015).

²⁹⁴ See: Abu Lughod, *Do Muslim Women Need Saving?*; Jasbir Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007); Joseph A. Massad, *Desiring Arabs* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007).

burden” has become reconfigured into Islamophobic, (neo)liberal state intervention.²⁹⁵ In a racialized and gendered economy of representation, I argue throughout this dissertation that a wide range of discourses and images have, both historically and currently, constructed Middle Eastern and Muslim subjects as an inherently Othered subject. As Mino Moallem insists, “the barbaric other is there to legitimize and give meaning to the masculinist militarism of the ‘civilized’ and his constant need to ‘protect.’”²⁹⁶ Considering then that the act of protection is a gendered enterprise, as Moallem asserts, I argue that the (neo)colonial formations of the male Middle Eastern body as always already feminized vis-à-vis Euro-American masculinities are enhanced by heteronormative perceptions of the male dancing body as queer or gender deviant.

In other words, while Ghaffarian’s subject position as an Iranian male might position him within contemporary Euro-American geopolitical paradigms as a prototypical terrorist threat, I argue that his position as *dancer* invokes human rights frameworks that position him, like Muslim women and queers, as victim. As dance becomes a form of “proof” of one’s humanity,²⁹⁷ it thus marks those who repress dance as non-human and ultimately (if even unintentionally) becomes dangerous currency within the global war on racialized Middle Eastern and Muslim subjects. However, the dancer = human equation is a precarious one, for if an Iranian (dancer) becomes a “grievable life” (in Judith Butler’s terms), I argue that it is contingent only upon the purview to save.²⁹⁸

Ultimately, this chapter argues that the interdependent tropes of oppression and freedom propagated through the transnational representations of Ghaffarian as an Iranian dancer form “discourses of protection” that intertwine with human rights discourses in problematic ways.²⁹⁹ In the process, I theorize what I call “savior spectatorship,” which asks critical questions about the political limits and paradoxes of spectatorship that shape how minoritarian and Othered performers and performances are viewed. Savior spectatorship is a pervasive form of subject formation, one that is complicit with neoliberal forms of oppression and racism particular to the global War on Terror context. Savior spectatorship operates through a network of media affiliations and representations, a transmedia environment wherein articles and films cooperate on and coordinate the messages put forth. If an active spectator is one who critically identifies ideologies embedded in any given performance—such as Priya Srinivasan’s “unruly spectator,” an observer who notices a performance’s failures or the obscured labor embedded within it—savior spectatorship, in contrast, is produced as audiences are seduced into subscribing to particular forms of ideology.³⁰⁰ Unlike Srinivasan’s unruly spectator, savior spectatorship participates in and furthers relations of power that sustain these ideologies. While narratives and

²⁹⁵ I draw here from postcolonial studies theorizations of the “white man’s burden,” which references colonial moralistic missions to civilize colonial subjects. Here, I expand the concept to include “white woman,” referring to parallel neo-imperial missions of white global feminists to save women within the global south.

²⁹⁶ Mino Moallem, “Whose Fundamentalism?,” *Meridians: feminism, race, transnationalism* 2, no. 2 (2002): 298.

²⁹⁷ Here I draw from Jessica Winegar’s analysis of discourses surrounding Middle Eastern visual artists in the post-9/11 and War on Terror era. Her analysis critiques discourses that construct the artists in her study and their works as “evidence of humanity.” She argues that such narratives actually reinforce stereotypes of Muslims as “un-human.” Jessica Winegar, “The Humanity Game: Art, Islam, and the War on Terror,” *Anthropological Quarterly* 81, no. 3 (2008): 651-681.

²⁹⁸ Judith Butler, *Frames of War: When is Life Grievable?* (London and New York: Verso, 2009). Moallem and others have also offered similar lines of inquiry into the “limits of humanism.” See, for example, Moallem, “Whose Fundamentalism?,” 52.

²⁹⁹ Mino Moallem, “Violence of Protection,” in *Interventions: Activists and Academic Respond to Violence*, eds. Elizabeth Castelli and Janet Jakobsen (London and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 47-51.

³⁰⁰ Srinivasan, *Sweating Saris*.

testimonies of suffering and scenes of rescue position savior spectators surrounding Ghaffarian as affectively *moved* and engaged in a co-performance of compassion, these narratives and the spectators' performative consumption of his story actually work to validate hegemonic political structures rather than question or dismantle them.

The chapter first begins with investigating how French media sources construct Ghaffarian as an "Iranian dancer in exile." Through situating this particular framing of Ghaffarian within a legacy of French colonial civilizing missions, I analyze the discourses of freedom within these media depictions that construct Ghaffarian as an "object of rescue." Also in the first section, I examine the verbal/textual performances of citizenship that Ghaffarian enacts through his engagement with the French media. In reading these performances alongside the increasingly popular "autobiographies of suffering" of Muslim women and NGO theatrical aid work with immigrant subjects in France, I show how Ghaffarian's verbal/textual performances are similar to these forms while also strategically mobilizing the tenets of Republican citizenship as an Othered subject navigating politics of inclusion/exclusion. In the second section of the chapter, I turn to a reading of Ghaffarian's choreographic work *Le Cri Perçant (The Piercing Shout)* (2010) as a form of corporeal performance that I read through the moralistic immigration frameworks in France that construct "suffering subjects" (a subject position akin to "objects of rescue") and "compassionate (French) audiences." It is here that I begin to theorize savior spectatorship before turning to the final section of the chapter where I trace how savior spectatorship is further produced and transnationally circulated through the American-produced film *Desert Dancer* about Ghaffarian's journey from Iran to France.

Afshin Ghaffarian as "Iranian Dancer in Exile" & Performative Modes of French Citizenship

Afshin Ghaffarian (b. 1986) is an Iranian-born dancer and choreographer who has been residing and performing in France since 2009. In Iran, he was active in both underground and "official" theatrical performances approved by the Ministry of Culture and Guidance. As Ghaffarian explains,

It was a style of theater in Iran, we call it "physical theater." It is the way to escape the censor in Iran, you know. So we call it physical theater because dance is not allowed to be presented. It was physical work in the name of theater that was a kind of dance for me...The problem is just this title, to call it dance...You are not allowed to call it dance, but you can dance. That's why in Iran they invented a new term called *harakaate mozoon* [rhythmic movement].³⁰¹

In the October following the 2009 Iranian presidential elections, the Mülheim International Theater Festival invited Ghaffarian and his performance partner, Yaser Khaseb, to present their original work, *Strange but True*.³⁰² Toward the end of that performance, without giving his partner notice, Ghaffarian performed in solidarity with the millions of Iranian protestors (known as the Green Movement) who rallied against what was considered a stolen election by incumbent president Mahmood Ahmadinejad. Breaking from the script, Ghaffarian tied a green ribbon around his wrist, raised his arm to flash a V for victory, and yelled *aazaadi* ("freedom"). More than a mere statement, *aazaadi* becomes a performative utterance as it marks the moment of

³⁰¹ Afshin Ghaffarian. Interview by Heather Rastovac. Tape recording. Paris, France. July 19, 2012.

³⁰² To view a 2009 Tehran performance of *Strange but True*, see: Afshin Ghaffarian, "Strange But True (Excerpt)," *YouTube* video, 10:17, June 1, 2009, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_42woKN4fy4.

rupture for Ghaffarian, one in which he knowingly denounces Iranian citizenship and, although precariously, becomes the means through which to gain access to French asylum.



Figure 14: Afshin Ghaffarian and group, performance outside of Tehran, Iran, 2009.

Although the performance in Germany took place three months following the July 2009 post-Iranian election protests, the Green Movement and the protests remained particularly sensitive for the Iranian government. According to numerous online interviews with Ghaffarian, he received warnings directly following the performance from the governmental officials who chaperoned the trip to Germany that he would be punished once back in Iran for the political statements he made in the performance. This prompted Ghaffarian's decision to remain in Europe through the help of another Iranian dancer in France, Shahrokh Moshkin Ghalam.



Figure 15: Afshin Ghaffarian and Yaser Khaseb, *Strange but True*, Mülheim International Theater Festival, October 2009.

Supported by the association *France Terre d'Asile* after his arrival in Paris shortly after the 2009 performance in Germany, Ghaffarian filed a request for political asylum. He shortly thereafter became an artist-in-residence (2010–2011) at the National Dance Center (Centre

National de la Danse, or CND) Pantin in Paris.³⁰³ During his residency, Ghaffarian founded the interdisciplinary performance ensemble Compagnie Des Réformances, a title that combines notions of reform and performance and that highlights the creative resolve to reform/perform at various sites of internal and external struggle.³⁰⁴ Ghaffarian has announced on his company's website and in interviews with independent media sources that he renounced his political refugee status in 2014, although he still resides in Paris as a student in political science at the Sorbonne.³⁰⁵

In examining Ghaffarian's interpellation as an "Iranian dancer in exile" and his negotiation with both French legal and cultural citizenship, I pay particular attention in this section to Ghaffarian's "performance of citizenship" in which his verbal/textual enactments of self-fashioning engage through and against this interpellation.³⁰⁶ Following Ghaffarian's 2009 defection to France, mainstream French discourse continually constructed Ghaffarian as a particular immigrant subject inextricable from the historical and socio-political context of French republican citizenship within which his case is situated, namely the instantiations of universalism, abstract citizenship, and *laïcité* (a distinct form of French secularism). In light of this, I will discuss Ghaffarian's position as what many feminist and postcolonial scholars and activists have referred to as the paradox, crisis, contradiction, or failure of French republicanism and its tenets that emerge through the state's dealings with its gendered, racialized, and immigrant subjects, historically and today.

French republicanism (*républicanisme*) is the country's contemporary political system with roots in the French Revolution (1789–1799) and the Third Republic (1870–1940), and is premised upon a notion of abstract universalism, whereby an ideal individual subject is autonomous from the constraints of the particularist identities related to race and gender, and from the communal forms of belonging related to family, ethnicity, or religion. The political community of French national identity is, by contrast, the acceptable channel through which a French citizen can (and should) seek affiliation.³⁰⁷ However, postcolonial and feminist scholars and activists have interrogated the terms of universalism and abstract citizenship to which French republicanism claims to adhere. Instead, they argue these claims obscure the gendered and racial exclusions inherent to and constitutive of French republican citizenship. For instance, many feminist scholars argue that, since the French Revolution, the rights-bearing citizen in the French republic, while claiming universality, has masked a male persona and has depended upon the exclusion of women—Joan Wallach Scott has famously referred to this as the "crisis of French

³⁰³ *France Terre d'Asile* is an organization whose main purpose is support for asylum seekers and defending the right of asylum in France. The National Dance Center is an institution sponsored by the French Ministry of Culture.

³⁰⁴ Afshin Ghaffarian. Interview by Heather Rastovac. Tape recording. Paris, France. July 19, 2012.

³⁰⁵ See: "Afshin Ghaffarian Biography," Reformances Dance Company website, accessed January 6, 2016, <http://reformances.com/en/afshin-ghaffarian/>.

³⁰⁶ Joseph, *Nomadic Identities*. Ultimately, I approach the concept of citizenship here both as a legal category (official policies that determine who does/does not legally belong to the nation-state) and as a cultural practice (the every day, embodied experiences and performances of negotiating "nationally defined normative ideal[s]" of citizenship and belonging). These legal and cultural categories align at times, diverge other times, and are oftentimes in tension. Jennifer Fredette, *Constructing Muslims: Discourse, Public Identity, and the Politics of Citizenship* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2014), 12.

³⁰⁷ Emine Fisek, "Incorporating Immigrants: Theatrical Aid Work and the Politics of Witnessing in France" (PhD diss., University of California, Berkeley, 2010), 9.

universalism.”³⁰⁸ Ultimately, French republicanism requires “assimilation into a singular culture, the embrace of a shared language, history, and political ideology” of French secularism, universalism, and individualism.³⁰⁹ Thus, as Scott and others argue, the universal subject in French citizenship is, in fact, particularly French.³¹⁰

These contradictions of so-called universalism in France emerge when assessing the ways in which diverse forms of racial exclusion of (post)colonial subjects and immigrants have simultaneously shaped and troubled French citizenship and the “republican model of immigration and integration.”³¹¹ While most French discourse considers racial exclusions to be outside of (or an anomaly within) the republican tradition, many argue that French republicanism is, on the contrary, constituted by racial exclusions.³¹² Despite claims to a color-blind civic model of abstract citizenship, the nation’s history of colonialism and its postcolonial afterlife (both in France and its former colonies) illustrate that universalism has not been universally available.

Ghaffarian’s framing as an “Iranian dancer in exile” in France is a salient example of these paradoxes and limits of universalism as they relate to race and ethnicity. While identity categories are a persistent frame through which many non-Euro-American and other racialized artists are represented and valued within multicultural Anglo-American art markets, these identity politics do not apply in the sociopolitical context of France. As I discussed above, the French national body claims and asserts a difference-blind and color-blind republican equality that requires its citizens (and those aspiring to become one) to identify with an abstract national community rather than the communalism of racial, ethnic, or religious belonging. Considering the framework of universalism and sameness integral to French citizenship, it begs the question as to why Ghaffarian is bound to labeling that fixes him to the particular subject of “Iranian dancer in exile.” To this end, in my 2012 interview with Ghaffarian, he explains:

There are a lot of people in the French community now who prefer to keep Afshin in the strict category as an “Iranian exile artist: that came to France, that France hosted this...and that’s all. They are thinking, “We don’t want to accept Afshin as a professional dancer. Afshin is just this exiled artist.” But that is what I try to avoid...I am not identifying myself as an “Iranian exile” here in France. I identify myself as who I am, as an artist, as a doer...What is important for me is to protect my existence, my personal experience as a human. Apart from being Iranian, not Iranian, being Muslim, not Muslim...To be, you know, myself and to express myself and to defend this existence. Human existence is very important for me.³¹³

As Ghaffarian infers, his self- and artistic associations do not directly or intentionally revolve around a particular overdetermined sense of “being Iranian,” nor do his choreographic works directly focus on the topics of Iran or on his experience of immigration. In fact, in many ways, Ghaffarian’s discourse aligns with the universal and humanistic tenets of French republicanism, as his claim to “humanness” illustrates.

³⁰⁸ Joan Wallach Scott, *Parité!: Sexual Equality and the Crisis of French Universalism* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2005); Catherine Raissiguier, *Reinventing the Republic: Gender, Migration, and Citizenship in France* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2010), 4; Fredette, *Constructing Muslims*, 42.

³⁰⁹ Joan Wallach Scott, *The Politics of the Veil* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2007), 12.

³¹⁰ Scott, *The Politics of the Veil*; Scott, *Parité!*; Fredette, *Constructing Muslims*.

³¹¹ Raissiguier, *Reinventing the Republic*, 4.

³¹² Raissiguier, *Reinventing the Republic*; Elisa Camiscioli, *Reproducing the French Race: Immigration, Intimacy, and Embodiment in the Early Twentieth Century* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009).

³¹³ Afshin Ghaffarian. Interview by Heather Rastovac. Tape recording. Paris, France. July 19, 2012.



Figure 16: Afshin Ghaffarian, “Iranian Dancer in Exile,” *CNN*.

In Ghaffarian’s choreographic work (one of which I describe later in the chapter), the themes with which engages are relatively universalist, from the “original birth of Man” and the “struggle with symbolic entities such as Earth, Water, Fire and Air” in *Le Cri Perçant* (*The Piercing Shout*) (2010) and his adaptation of the novel *Too Loud a Solitude* by Czech novelist Bohumil Hrabal into a dance project, *Une Trop Bruyante Solitude* (2013), exploring the general topic of censorship and book banning/burning.³¹⁴ Ghaffarian considers his personal lived experiences growing up in Iran and emigrating to France as a subtext only in so far as he believes that bodies register and create memories and experiences of particular times and places. As he explains:

I grew up in Iran and I was an artist in that context...And then I came here [to France], and I saw the situation, a different context, and now I create in this context, and I express myself in this way...This notion of the country, [for me] it’s not clear... my body is my country, you know. I brought my country with my body. The country is not a geographical latitude. It’s my body. I travel with my country. I don’t belong to one geographical latitude or another. I have all the memories, and all that, they are registered in my body. That’s the real country and the real patriot all at once—the body.³¹⁵

In spite of Ghaffarian’s explicit disassociation from the label of “Iranian artist in exile”—and despite the universalist, humanist themes prevalent in both Ghaffarian’s discourse and his choreography—mainstream French and transnational media and the French state-funded dance institutions that have sponsored him remain largely invested in fixing Ghaffarian’s personal and artistic identity as the particular subject of an “Iranian dancer in exile,” consistently narrating Ghaffarian’s biography within the *terms* of his struggle for artistic expression rather than through the *forms* of his artistic expression.

³¹⁴ See: Afshin Ghaffarian, artist statements, accessed November 13, 2015, <http://reformances.com/en/the-shout/> and <http://reformances.com/en/too-loud-a-solitude/>.

³¹⁵ Afshin Ghaffarian. Interview by Heather Rastovac. Tape recording. Paris, France. July 19, 2012.



Figure 17: Afshin Ghaffarian, *Une Trop Bruyante Solitude* (2013), Paris, France.

In other words, a focus on the illegality of dance in the Islamic Republic, Ghaffarian's escape and rescue, and the newfound freedom afforded to him in France are far more prevalent than analyses of Ghaffarian's choreographic works themselves.³¹⁶ Titles of articles about him include: *Le danseur iranien a trouvé la liberté à Paris* ("The Iranian dancer has found freedom in Paris");³¹⁷ *Iranien en exil: la danse est sa liberté* ("Iranian in exile: the dance is his freedom");³¹⁸ *Exilé dansant* ("Exiled dancing");³¹⁹ *Rencontre avec Afshin Ghaffarian: Sur la voie de la liberté* ("Interview with Afshin Ghaffarian: on the road to freedom");³²⁰ *Etre danseur au pays des ayatollahs* ("Being a dancer in the land of the ayatollahs");³²¹ and *En Iran, le corps est un péché* ("In Iran, the body is a sin").³²²

The overdetermined discourses of "freedom" that are mobilized through these news articles and critic reviews about Ghaffarian must be placed within the historical legacy of French colonial constructions of race and religion, particularly as they relate to Middle Eastern and Muslim subjects. Colonial practices employed racial categories as a means through which France

³¹⁶ In the eighteen French web news sources and critic reviews I surveyed (published between 2009 – 2014), the following words (translated from French) surfaced the accordant number of times: free/freedom (40); exile(d) (19); banned/illegal/prohibited/forbidden (17); refugee/asylum (9); torture/beatings (8); protest (8); sin (6); fled/escaped (5); journey/road/odyssey (4); body as a weapon (3); dictatorship (3); prison (3); Ayatollah (3); salvation/saving (2).

³¹⁷ Quillard, "The Iranian dancer has found freedom in Paris."

³¹⁸ Xavier Alexandre, "Iranian in exile: the dance is his freedom," *Ouest France*, modified September 27, 2013, translated from French, <http://www.ouest-france.fr/iranien-en-exil-la-danse-est-sa-liberte-580869>.

³¹⁹ Giuliani Emmanuelle, "Exiled Dancing," *La Croix*, November 29, 2011, translated from French, http://www.la-croix.com/Archives/2011-11-29/Exile-dansant-_NP_-2011-11-29-741752.

³²⁰ "Interview with Afshin Ghaffarian: on the road to freedom," *Tendance Ouest*, April 28, 2010, translated from French, <http://www.tendanceouest.com/actualite-5797-rencontre-avec-afshin-ghaffarian147sur-la-voie-de-la-liberte-148.html>.

³²¹ Fabienne Arvers, "Being a dancer in the land of the ayatollahs," *Les in rocks*, December 19, 2009, translated from French, <http://www.lesinrocks.com/2009/12/19/actualite/societe/etre-danseur-au-pays-des-ayatollahs-1135202/>.

³²² Marion Quillard, "In Iran, the body is a sin," *Le Monde*, modified February 2, 2010, translated from French, http://www.lemonde.fr/culture/article/2010/01/28/afshin-ghaffarian-en-iran-le-corps-est-un-peche_1298069_3246.html#Q5ztgU63MY6jxBgq.99.

began to establish itself as a benevolent entity and colonial rule was justified as a “civilizing mission” with the aim to assimilate colonial subjects to French culture.³²³ Colonial subjects who practiced Islam were particularly seen as a “race apart” and the French largely oriented their “civilizing mission” toward Muslim and Arab colonial subjects (specifically from North Africa).³²⁴ Joan Wallach Scott provides a salient example of the metropolitan discourses circulating in school textbooks that contributed toward the construction of the Arab/Muslim Other and the “generous” French republic: “in 1913,” Scott explains, “French schoolchildren could read that ‘France wants little Arabs to be educated as little French children. This shows how our France is bountiful and generous to the people she has conquered.’”³²⁵ As such, significations of the Muslim “Other” that remain prevalent in French public discourse today are not new. Rather, through the temporal scope that Mayanthi Fernando refers to as the “historicity and the contemporaneity of the Muslim as Other,” these constructions of Muslim and Arab communities living in France today are a “reinstantiation of a much older process of interpellation, categorization, and differentiation... [that] continue to draw on older figurations of alterity.”³²⁶ The French republic, according to Scott, is imagined as the highest, most enduring manifestation of Enlightenment principles, and its mythic power as a republic is, to a large degree, contingent upon the construction of Muslims as its evil counterpart, believed to be the antithesis of Enlightenment ideals and values.³²⁷

The newspaper articles about Ghaffarian that employ titles related to the Islamic Republic of Iran (or to Islam more implicitly)—“Being a dancer in the land of the ayatollahs” and “In Iran, the body is a sin”—fit within a French republican framework in which race and religion (particularly Islam) are seen as antithetical to universalism and abstract citizenship. As Islam has become largely understood in France as an embodied faith with strict corporeal rituals, the very category of “Muslim” within contemporary French discourse is situated “along ethno-racial lines” and is constructed as a racialized identity saturated with innate characteristics determined by Islamic practice (such as the propensity for fundamentalism and an unnatural, aberrant sexuality).³²⁸ Naomi Davidson insists that, “in the minds of many influential French politicians and intellectuals, Muslims had a different kind of personhood than they themselves did as rational individuals, and that irrational personhood was inscribed in their very bodies.”³²⁹ The embodiment associated with those who practice Islam poses a particular challenge to abstract

³²³ Scott, *The Politics of the Veil*, 45-46. Categories of race were furthermore integral to the development of French national identity through the realms of the social sciences and official administration during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The racial categories developed and employed in the colonies extended to “biological” or “racialological” thinking in metropolitan France, where race is still largely understood as a scientific fact and where “racialological thinking is used to describe social facts.” Felicia McCarren, *French Moves: The Cultural Politics of le hip hop* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 83. Hierarchical racial categories were also utilized to assess the quality of foreign labor within France throughout most of the twentieth century and, importantly, continue to shape (post)colonial subjects’ and foreigners’ prospects for citizenship. Camiscioli, *Reproducing the French Race*, 11.

³²⁴ Scott, *The Politics of the Veil*, 46.

³²⁵ Ibid, 50.

³²⁶ Mayanthi L. Fernando, *The Republic Unsettled: Muslim French and the Contradictions of Secularism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014), 18.

³²⁷ Scott, *The Politics of the Veil*, 7.

³²⁸ Naomi Davidson, *Only Muslim: Embodying Islam in Twentieth-Century France* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2012) 188; Fredette, *Constructing Muslims*, 43; Scott, *The Politics of the Veil*; Fernando, *The Republic Unsettled*.

³²⁹ Davidson, *Only Muslim*, 3.

French citizenship and its foundational principle of French secularism,³³⁰ which, as Scott describes it,

is part of the mythology of the specialness and superiority of French republicanism—the same mythology that paradoxically offers French universalism as different from all others...*Laïcité* means the separation of church and state through the state’s protection of individuals from the claims of religion. (In the United States, in contrast, secularism connotes the protection of religions from interference by the state.)³³¹

This distinction between Anglo-American forms of secularism and French secularism is crucial for an analysis on race, for while Anglo-American secularisms incorporate pluralism and multiculturalism,³³² French secularism is an integral part of the French republican values of integration and sameness that are the prerequisites for abstract citizenship.³³³ Increasingly, diverse official and public factions consider Muslims “‘too particular’ ever to become part of the universal model of republican citizenship.”³³⁴ As a result, Muslim (particularly North African) communities in France are often associated with “failed” or incomplete integration and are considered a threat to national unity and underserving of French citizenship.³³⁵

Ghaffarian’s identity as Iranian indeed situates him differently within France than Arab Middle Eastern/North African subjects; Iranians in France often inhabit an elevated social

³³⁰ While *laïcité* has a long history, current policies are based upon the 1905 French law of the Separation of the Churches and the State. *Laïcité* is a core concept in the French constitution; Article 1 establishes France as a secular republic. *Laïcité* originally emerged in relation to the state’s relationship to the Catholic Church, but has become a focal point of French politics over the last two to three decades in relation to France’s Muslim communities. See: Talal Asad, “Trying to Understand French Secularism,” in *Political Theologies: Public Religions in a Post-Secular World*, ed. Hent de Vries (New York: Fordham University Press, 2006), 494-296.

³³¹ Scott, *The Politics of the Veil*, 15.

³³² In France, multiculturalism is largely considered a particularly Anglo-American phenomenon and one that fragments the social body and contributes to the decline or breakdown of French society. Regarding the primarily African and Arab youth in the *banlieues*, multiculturalism is believed to constrain them to “their ghettos” (McCarren, *French Moves*, 56; Fernando, *Constructing Muslims*, 72). In contrast, sameness is believed to beget equality. However, as Scott argues, sameness in French society “is measured in terms of concrete ways of being (as Frenchness)” (Scott, *The Politics of the Veil*, 13).

³³³ Subsequently, visual markers of religion in public spaces are considered an affront to the core principles of French republicanism, and these markers of difference have undergirded recent debates surrounding immigration and citizenship, particularly with regards to Muslim subjects.

³³⁴ Fredette, *Constructing Muslims*, 21.

³³⁵ Scott, *The Politics of the Veil*; Fisek, “Incorporating Immigrants”; Fredette, *Constructing Muslims*. Didier Fassin, “Compassion and Repression: The Moral Economy of Immigration Policies in France,” *Cultural Anthropology* 20 no. 3 (2005). The discourse of “failed” or incomplete integration surrounding Muslim and Middle Eastern subjects has increasingly become part of the official and public discourses in France since the 1980s. The 1980s mark a specific shift in immigration politics from that of labor (Fassin, “Compassion and Repression”) to that of religion (Scott, *The Politics of the Veil*). Within this framework, Muslims and other racialized individuals who were born in France and/or who have “successfully” acculturated are typically not considered fully or simply French, but are rather treated as “integrated” immigrant subjects (Fredette, *Constructing Muslims*, 12). Specifically, women’s Islamic head covering has become the primary representation of “Islam’s resistance to modernity” (Scott, *The Politics of the Veil*, 1) and the “failed” integration of Muslims in France; these concerns formed the basis for the 2004 and 2007 French laws banning the wearing of Islamic headscarves in schools and the full-face covering in public, respectively (Raissiguier, *Reinventing the Republic*, 33). As Scott explains, “Muslim headscarves were taken to be a violation of French secularism and, by implication, a sign of the inherent non-Frenchness of anyone who practiced Islam, in any form” (Scott, *The Politics of the Veil*, 15). Therefore, in official and public discourse, the headscarf has become a symbol larger than itself; specifically, the “‘question of the veil’ is often collapsed with ‘the question of integration’” and has resulted in the increasing development of policies for managing immigrant integration that largely target North African and other Muslim subjects (Fisek, “Incorporating Immigrants,” 2).

position distinct from North and Sub-Saharan African postcolonial subjects who make up the largest demographic of Muslims in France and who tend to be the primary targets of exclusionary discourse and policy. Because of the absence of French colonial intervention in Iran, Franco-Iranian relations had historically been based upon a degree of cultural exchange and economic partnership until Iran's 1979 Islamic Revolution, particularly during the Pahlavi era (1925–1979). Traditional French Orientalist portrayals distinguished Iran (known in Orientalist parlance by its older name, Persia) from Turkish and Semitic civilizations and imagined a degree of cultural proximity between France and Iran based in part on the narrative of a shared Aryan identity (among other forms of cultural exceptionalism, such as advancements in classical literature).³³⁶

However, as Laetitia Nanquette explains, “since Iran’s Islamic Revolution, Iran has held an ambivalent place among French intellectuals; there is a deep dichotomy in their discourse on Iran today, owing to the contrast between the negative fanatical image of Iran with the positive orientalist picture.”³³⁷ Previous to Iran’s Revolution, immigration discourse and policy were primarily attentive to the economic and social impact of immigration; however, Iran’s Revolution significantly contributed toward a shift in focus of immigration discourse toward religion, in which the French grew increasingly concerned about “Islam as a dangerous presence on French soil.”³³⁸ Apart from the Revolution, the rise of Ayatollah Khomeini further heightened concerns about Muslim populations in France;³³⁹ according to Fernando, these events generated new forms of Islamophobic racism within France.³⁴⁰ Mainstream political discourse at the time (and still today) tended to make little distinction between Muslims of North African descent and Iranians involved in the Revolution. Scott explains,

Although the Iranians were Shi’ites and the North African Sunnis, the difference mattered little...The nuances of Islam and the complexities of Iran were lost on television viewers, for whom chanting men and women clad in black chadors [who were participating in the Revolution] came to embody a difference that was not only cultural and religious but political.³⁴¹

From the Left to the Right in France, the veiled woman became the icon of the Iranian Revolution and the oppression of Muslim women.³⁴² French television media linked instances

³³⁶ Laetitia Nanquette, *Orientalism versus Occidentalism: Literary and Cultural Imaging between France and Iran since the Islamic Revolution* (London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 2013), 25. Davidson refers to 18th century French writings by Arthur de Gobineau, which structured racial hierarchies and placed “‘Aryan’ races at the top and the ‘melanin’ variety at the bottom” (Davidson, *Only Muslim*, 3).

³³⁷ Nanquette, *Orientalism versus Occidentalism*, 14.

³³⁸ Scott, *The Politics of the Veil*, 69; Nanquette, *Orientalism versus Occidentalism*.

³³⁹ Scott, *The Politics of the Veil*, 69-70.

³⁴⁰ Fernando, *The Republic Unsettled*, 18. Nanquette argues “that the French doxa on Iranians today is not characterised by Islamophobia but by an inability to distance itself from the heavy interdiscursive presence of an orientalist image of Persians, originating with Montesquieu and perpetuated by orientalist scholars” (*Orientalism versus Occidentalism*, 27). However, considering that Iran’s Islamic Revolution created a new fear of Islamism on French soil, as Scott and Fernando suggest, and that little distinction is made between the diverse groups of Muslims in France, then I am inclined to consider Islamophobia as a viable framework for understanding the position of Iranian immigrants in France, even if their experiences of it are distinct from the experiences of North African Muslims.

³⁴¹ Scott, *The Politics of the Veil*, 70.

³⁴² It is a typical French view that Islam is a system oppressive against women and that French republicanism is a system that liberates them (Ibid, 155). Muslim women are largely cast in media coverage and popular discourse as passive victims of dangerous, pathologically perverse Arab-Muslim men. Fredette and Fernando describe how the *banlieues*—the suburban neighborhoods where many immigrants live—are imagined to have rampant gang rapes

among French Muslim communities, such as forced marriage and honor killings, to the events in Iran. Subsequently, “Iran became for French observers a foil for their own republicanism,” and the “distorted images of Iran...heightened the sense of an impossible divide between France and its immigrants.”³⁴³ Adding to the fraught perspectives on Iran was Ayatollah Khomeini’s 1989 *fatwa* (edict) calling for the death of Salman Rushdie for his 1988 novel *The Satanic Verses*.³⁴⁴ Significantly, media and public discourse in France, across Europe, and in the US began questioning the freedom of speech in Islam. Ultimately, the contemporary French perception of Islamism as an external threat partly draws from the ways in which the French imagine Iranian society as a zealously religious one that oppresses women and from fears that this Islamic society would be imported into France.³⁴⁵ Therefore, despite the distinctions between how Iranians and North Africans are largely perceived and treated in France, I suggest that the larger discursive framework of Muslim Otherness implicates Iranians such as Ghaffarian nonetheless (albeit in distinct ways that simultaneously draw from the Orientalist romanticization of Persian civilization, as Nanquette suggests).³⁴⁶

and sexual violence toward women by Arab and African neighbors and relatives (Fernando refers to the French semantic pun that makes a parallel between the veil and rape *voile-viol*) (Fredette, *Constructing Muslims*; Fernando, *The Republic Unsettled*, 196; Raissiguier, *Reinventing the Republic*). Raissiguier also explains, “Interestingly, the much touted success of young women of North African descent operates in a similar way. The dominant narrative of the young women’s social and professional success upholds at one and the same time the integrative power of the French Republic and the inability of their brothers to yield that power. Unlike their sisters, these young men, we are told, resist the call of integration” (*Reinventing the Republic*, 34).

³⁴³ Scott, *The Politics of the Veil*, 70.

³⁴⁴ The term *fatwa*, in most Euro-American media, has become increasingly associated with Islamic death threats and acts of terrorism. Clearly, Khomeini’s *fatwa* against Rushdie is an example of this association. However, according to the Islamic Supreme Council of America, “a *fatwā* is not by definition a pronouncement of death or a declaration of war. A *fatwā* is an Islamic legal pronouncement, issued by an expert in religious law (*mufti*), pertaining to a specific issue, usually at the request of an individual or judge to resolve an issue where Islamic jurisprudence (*fiqh*), is unclear. Typically, such uncertainty arises as Muslim society works to address new issues – issues that develop as technology and society advance.” See: Islamic Supreme Council, “Understanding Islam,” Islamic Supreme Council website, accessed December 29, 2015, <http://www.islamicsupremecouncil.org/understanding-islam/legal-rulings/44-what-is-a-fatwa.html>. Scott, *The Politics of the Veil*, 22.

³⁴⁵ Scott, *The Politics of the Veil*, 176. Now there are questions about an “internal threat,” those who are born and raised in France but are radicalized elsewhere (namely, Syria).

³⁴⁶ Despite an increase in studies on Muslims in France, little scholarly work has been done on Iranian immigrants in France. This seems to suggest the unique position of Iranians in France as perhaps appropriately integrated subjects vis-à-vis North and Sub-Saharan African Muslims, perhaps enabled by some Iranians’ ability to “pass” as racially ambiguous, and also by many Iranians’ secular beliefs or “non-Islamiosity” (Gholami, *Secularism and Identity*). Thus, intersectionality is important to consider, in the sense that gender, skin color, class, colonialism, and immigration histories have a bearing on the experiences of immigrants in France and on how they are perceived (Fredette, *Constructing Muslims*, 9). Although intersectionality has been historically theorized within North American women of color feminist activism and scholarship (and coined by critical race and legal theorist Kimberlé Crenshaw), Fredette uses the framework to determine the disparate forms of treatment based on the gender, class, and colonial histories of Muslims in France. I suggest that the case of émigré Iranians in France (and elsewhere) show that intersectionality is a relevant theory for thinking through Muslim and Middle Eastern racialization in the French context. For more on intersectionality, see: Patrick R. Grzanka, ed., *Intersectionality: A Foundations and Frontiers Reader* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2014).

Verbal Testimony in the Performance of French Citizenship

In a French sociopolitical context where Muslims and other minoritarian subjects can appear (and become expected) to speak for themselves as part of their performance of French integration, testimony, “self-narration,” and/or autobiography play a crucial role as a form of governmentality.³⁴⁷ Describing these practices of inclusion in France as a “disciplinary project,” Muriam Haleh Davis explains, “The French state cannot ‘speak for’ these individuals [French Muslims]; rather, it finds acceptable channels (and individuals) through which this group can appear to speak for itself.”³⁴⁸ This “speaking for oneself” within a French sociopolitical context demonstrates a number of things. Namely, the self-representation through speech proves to the French state and its dominant publics that an immigrant or racialized Other is willing and able to shed communitarian allegiances by transforming themselves as individuals compatible with French citizenship. At the same time, the so-called platforms provided for these voices reinforce the exceptionalism of French abstract citizenship vis-à-vis these immigrant/Other’s “communitarian” origins. While testimony can be a crucial process of healing for individuals and communities (including the testimony’s witnesses), a crucial question emerges: under what conditions can testimony and witnessing-spectatorship become a means for constructing “objects of rescue” in ways that produce and sustain, rather than transform, relations of power?

Muslim (or ex-Muslim or secular Muslim) women’s self-narration of the pain and suffering they’ve experienced as part of Muslim societies and families have become a particularly popular genre of autobiographical literature since 9/11 in France, in Europe, and in the U.S (within both neoconservative and liberal circles).³⁴⁹ Nanquette refers to these forms of enunciation as “autobiographies of suffering” and Saba Mahmood refers to them as “native testimonials.”³⁵⁰ Both Nanquette and Mahmood place this autobiographical literature within a neo-Orientalist framework that reproduces and confirms the stereotypes that Euro-American readers have come to know about Islam and the Middle East. Mahmood explains that “this vastly popular autobiographical genre has played a pivotal role in securing the judgment that is Islam’s mistreatment of women is a symptom of a much larger pathology that haunts Islam—namely, its propensity to violence.”³⁵¹ Also prevalent in these self-narratives are the constructions of the “West,” whether directly or indirectly, as a refuge and/or within the frame of progressive

³⁴⁷ Fisek, “Incorporating Immigrants.”

³⁴⁸ Muriam Haleh Davis, “‘A Distinctly French Universalism’: Translating Laïcité After Charlie.”

Jadaliyya. Jan. 26, 2015. <http://www.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/20626/%E2%80%98a-distinctly-french-universalism%E2%80%99-translating-la%C3%AF>.

³⁴⁹ Popular titles include Azar Nafisi’s *Reading Lolita in Tehran* (2003), Irshad Manji’s *The Trouble with Islam Today: A Muslim’s Call for Reform in Her Faith* (2005), Carmen bin Laden’s *Inside the Kingdom: My Life in Saudi Arabia* (2010), Ayaan Hirsi Ali’s *The Caged Virgin: An Emancipation Proclamation for Women and Islam*, Chahdortt Djavann *Bas les voiles* (2003), and Fadela Amara’s *Ni putes ni soumises* [Neither Whores or Doormats] (2004). Many of these types of nonfiction works have ended up on the *New York Times* bestsellers list. Even more significant, however, is the fact that some of these authors’ activist work has garnered them positions in government or the public sector where they hold/have held positions that impact national and foreign policy. For instance: Nafisi holds a prestigious position at the John Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies; Ali is actively involved in Dutch politics; and Djavann and Amara had provided testimonies to the Stasi commission in France in 2003, who called for the ban on religious symbols in public schools (also known as the “headscarf affair”).

³⁵⁰ Nanquette, *Orientalism versus Occidentalism*; Saba Mahmood, “Feminism, Democracy, and Empire: Islam and the War on Terror,” in *Gendering Religion and Politics: Untangling Modernities*, eds. Hanna Herzog and Ann Braude (London and New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2009), 193-215.

³⁵¹ Mahmood, “Feminism, Democracy, and Empire,” 194.

modernity. The publics who read these texts connect what they read in them about Islam and the Middle East to what they see in the news and other media. Furthermore, many of these authors appear in other public forums such as television and radio shows, illustrating that these narratives are not confined to the pages of a book or to a small readership, but that they circulate through a multitude of media across larger publics.³⁵²

These autobiographies of suffering/native testimonials gain embodied form in non-governmental theatre programs that work with immigrant and refugee populations. Emine Fisek's research demonstrates that community programs of "theatrical aid work" are productive sites through which public performances by immigrants, refugees, and asylum seekers verbally and corporeally perform "affective attachment to French culture" while creating compassionate French audiences.³⁵³ These organizations view immigrant engagement in theatrical rehearsal and performance as a viable way for participants to begin what will be a continual practice of integration, an embodied practice that the immigrant subject must ceaselessly engage. In the theatrical programs, participants are expected to engage in the "self-work" of "autonomization, self-empowerment and emancipation" through writing workshops, rehearsals, and ultimately in performance.³⁵⁴ The culminating performances are instances through which participants perform testimonial "self-narrations" for French publics that articulate narratives of arrival (for more recent immigrants), disavowal of communal particularities, and the desire to become French citizens (or, for those born in France, to convey commitment to French republican ideals). Together, the verbal and embodied acts of immigrant testimony and French spectator witnessing work as a rite of passage into French cultural citizenship for the immigrant subject, a process that often functions for participants alongside official processes of acquiring residency or gaining legal citizenship.³⁵⁵ Ultimately, these enactments are not merely presentational but also *performative*; standing before a culturally French audience, immigrants performatively shed cultural difference and become rendered as adequately acculturated (if even provisionally).

While Ghaffarian did not participate in such theatre programs, I argue that Ghaffarian has effectively and strategically utilized the platforms, or "stages," of French print, television, and radio media to indicate his emancipatory "self-work" and to perform discursive acts of belonging in France that attempt to show himself as a subject willing and able to "become French" in ways comparable to the immigrant subjects in Fisek's study.³⁵⁶ French language acquisition is a particularly significant mode for immigrants to prove "themselves to the host country as individuals who belong."³⁵⁷ In Ghaffarian's case, the rate through which he gained French language fluency after his arrival—and the means through which he was able to provide his testimonies to French media—were both a mode of survival and a performative form that afford him similar access to French cultural citizenship as the immigrant actors in theatrical aid work do. Four of the articles I surveyed comment upon his French language abilities. For instance:

³⁵² One of these authors, Chahdortt Djavann, an Iranian dissident, is particularly well known in the French public, not only because her autobiographical novel *Bas les voiles* sold well over 25,000 copies, but also because of her appearances on television and in radio shows (Nanquette, *Orientalism versus Occidentalism*, 66–67).

³⁵³ Fisek, "Incorporating Immigrants," 1.

³⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 3.

³⁵⁵ Fisek explains that many of the workers in these theatrical programs write letters of recommendation for asylum and citizenship applications, attesting to the participant's investment in France (*Ibid.*, 72).

³⁵⁶ Arguably, because of the medium of print, radio, and television through which these narratives circulated, Ghaffarian's performances were more far-reaching than those in theatre community programs, reaching French publics who may not be theatregoers.

³⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 7.

...the testimony of Afshin Ghaffarian particularly excited and interested the audience. This young 23-year old dancer has lived in France for six months and practices his art banned by the clerical [Iranian] regime. Arrested and tortured before leaving Iran, he explained how he had learned the dance from the video and the Internet. *Speaking in impeccable French*, he reacts to Sabrina Goldman's comments on the legislative law penalizing racist media, [who said] it was a limitation of the freedom of expression necessary for living together, [to which Ghaffarian responded]: "I do not agree with you, but I would fight to the end so that you have the right to say that."³⁵⁸

In another example, a reporter opens a 2011 radio interview with Ghaffarian commenting: "Since 2009, you are in France in political exile; since, you have learned French, *you speak it perfectly*. It was a year ago you were in another [radio program], you needed an interpreter, this is no longer the case."³⁵⁹ Finally, Monique Barbaroux, the National Dance Center in Paris where Ghaffarian was an artist-in-residence from 2010-2011, also commented on Ghaffarian's exceptionalism with regards to his language acquisition:

Afshin Ghaffarian is one of [our] residents and we see how, in a year and a half, Afshin has not only awakened to freedom through dance, and how [much] he likes it in France, [but also how he has] an almost perfect command of French [that he has] acquired in such a short time."³⁶⁰

Considering that language acquisition is a key component of francocentric national belonging, Ghaffarian gaining fluency in the French language provides legitimation and legibility in the cultural sphere and demonstrates his willingness to engage in the "self-work" necessary to transform from a particular subject to a universal (French) citizen.

As "native" authentic voices narrating lived experiences, the performances of testimony that take place in theatrical aid work, in written "autobiographies of suffering," and in Ghaffarian's media engagements, are often "received in the western context as representative of a condition, and not as accounts of a singular life."³⁶¹ At the same time that these narratives become broad stroke representations of Middle Easterners and Muslims for many readers, Nanquette also contends these forms of autobiography and testimony "generally lead to the construction of an exceptional individualised character, standing proudly in front of the undistinguished mass."³⁶² It is against a backdrop of normalized popular narratives about Islam and the Middle East, perpetuated through various "mediascapes,"³⁶³ that Ghaffarian emerges as an "exceptional individualised character" in France, a construction co-created by the French media coverage of Ghaffarian along with Ghaffarian himself.

As an "exceptional individualised character," Ghaffarian's self-constructions in media interviews has enacted a performative mode of individuation, the process of establishing a person

³⁵⁸ Licra culture festival website, accessed May 24, 2014, translated from French, my emphasis, <http://www.licra.org/commission/culture-festival-imaginez-maintenant> (content no longer available).

³⁵⁹ France Culture radio station website, transcription of interview with Afshin Ghaffarian, accessed October 24, 2014, translated from French, my emphasis, <http://www.franceculture.fr/emission-la-vignette-la-vignette-afshin-ghaffarian-dancer-and-choreographer-2011-10-18.html> (content no longer available).

³⁶⁰ "I dreamed dance. Free now, I saw the dance." Meeting at the National Center of Dance with the Iranian choreographer, a refugee in Paris, Afshin Ghaffarian," *Opinion Internationale*, March 28, 2013, translated from French, http://www.opinion-internationale.com/2013/03/28/%C2%AB-j%E2%80%99ai-reve-la-danse-libre-desormais-je-vis-la-danse-%C2%BB-rencontre-au-centre-national-de-la-danse-avec-le-choregraphe-iranien-refugie-a-paris-afshin-ghaffarian_712.html.

³⁶¹ Nanquette, *Orientalism versus Occidentalism*, 66.

³⁶² *Ibid*, 75.

³⁶³ On mediascapes and other "—scapes," see: Appadurai, *Modernity at Large*.

as an individual vis-à-vis something/someone who s/he is not; a process whereby a person becomes distinct from another. In order for an immigrant subject to transform into the framework of sameness required of abstract French citizenship, a distinction must be made between the “other” from which s/he endeavors *away*, the community s/he leaves behind in order to join the French national community. Indeed, more than a few of the articles about Ghaffarian that I analyzed utilized the language of transformative long-distance travel, such as “journey,” “road,” and “odyssey.” To be a rational “individual” in the French Republican model of personhood means to be autonomous from communal ties and commitments and to rather establish responsibility solely for oneself.³⁶⁴ The enactment of individuality is a marker of modernity, or, as Fernando puts it, “to be modern is to say ‘I.’”³⁶⁵ In the media coverage of Ghaffarian, he is positioned—and positions himself—as an agential, paradigmatically modern, individual “I” against the “undistinguished mass” (to refer back to Nanquette’s articulation) of the Islamic Republic (to which these articles broadly refer as “Iranian regime” or as the “land of the Ayatollahs”). These media narratives about Ghaffarian, facilitated in part by his own testimony, highlight and laud the moments of his agential individuation; for instance, teaching himself to dance through YouTube videos, doing a “secret” performance in the desert on the outskirts of Tehran away from the censor, and acting on his own behalf when he broke away from his performance partner in Germany and came to France alone. More significantly, however, I argue that these discursive depictions of Ghaffarian performatively establish him as exceptional individual worthy of French citizenship. At the same time, however, Ghaffarian’s discursive and corporeal performances of belonging and integration in France demonstrate how minoritarian artists (and communities in general) must often navigate limited and hegemonically predetermined platforms of visibility and “voice.” To be sure, Ghaffarian’s engagements and negotiations with his self-presentation of “self-work” in French media are strategic and tactical when situated within the discursive and corporeal frameworks of French citizenship. Ghaffarian’s case demonstrates how minoritarian subjects must, in Jon McKenzie’s term, “perform or else.”³⁶⁶

Suffering and Transformation in *Le Cri Perçant* & *Desert Dancer*: The Savior Spectatorship of Compassionate Publics

Le Cri Perçant (2010)

A male body walks slowly through a darkened space into a circle of scattered light that is cast upon a dirt-covered floor by a single hanging light bulb. The sphere of light encircles and exposes him, clothed only in shorts and covered in traces of red and brown dust. He appears wearied and fatigued, dirty and bloodied, and as if confined to a cramped, dark chamber. He falls onto the ground multiple times and quickly lifts himself to standing again, yet he eventually accedes to his precarious balance. As if he is acceding to forceful blows, he drops into a fetal position, abruptly clutches onto various parts of his body in sudden and arched movements, and unleashes loud breaths, gasps, and cries.

³⁶⁴ Scott, *The Politics of the Veil*; Fisek, “Incorporating Immigrants.”

³⁶⁵ Fernando, *The Republic Unsettled*, 149.

³⁶⁶ Jon McKenzie, *Perform or Else: From Discipline to Performance* (London and New York: Routledge, 2001).



Figure 18: Afshin Ghaffarian, *Le Cri Perçant* (2010), Paris, France.

At different times, his hand creeps up a single hanging rope that is connected to suspended buckets containing water and burning candles. With a sudden pull of the rope, the elements cascade onto his collapsed body, initiating more gasps and agonized utterances. Physical pain seems to be afflicted upon his collapsed body from an unspecified source external to the boundaries of his own flesh, but it is difficult to ascertain whether the torment is inflicted externally or internally—the “suffering body” remains alone in the space. I am left wondering under what conditions this male body, Afshin Ghaffarian, experiences such anguish or perhaps even torture.



Figure 19: Afshin Ghaffarian, *Le Cri Perçant* (2010), Paris, France.

Eventually back on his feet, Ghaffarian’s affect shifts. He reorients his focus and directs his energy outward, his gaze steadfast and his face unyielding. He gains an increasing rate and range of movement and rhythm, at times cadenced, other times syncopated, sometimes suspended. His body acquires momentum with a wide range of arm and leg articulations and rapid turns in place. He periodically slaps his open palms against his chest and the backs of his shoulders. Finally, after a climactic sequence of spins, Ghaffarian brings himself to a standing

microphone. His breath is heavy. For the first time, he orients his gaze toward the audience. His mouth slowly stretches open to full capacity, his hands form a circle in front of his mouth, and his upper torso leans slightly toward the microphone. It is a scream the audience isn't granted the opportunity to hear. Silence fills the room until his hands drop and the single word, *aazaadi* ("freedom"), releases somewhat reluctantly from his lips. He backs away beyond the upstage boundary between the light and the dark, and eventually exits through an open backlit door.

First performed in October 2010 as part of Ghaffarian's artist residency at the National Dance Center (NDC) in Paris, *Le Cri Perçant (The Piercing Shout)* was Ghaffarian's first choreographic work in France.³⁶⁷ Ghaffarian explained in interviews with me and online that the conceptual intention for *Le Cri Perçant* was to address universal themes of the four elements (earth, fire, water, and air), the original birth of Man, and human's acquisition of language. For instance, Ghaffarian's artistic statement for *Le Cri Perçant* states,

The choreographer dancer Afshin Ghaffarian invites us to a trip through time and space, in a world of conflict where his struggle with symbolic entities such as Earth, Water, Fire and Air expresses the origin of the being and its loss, the vital breathing and its dashing, the forming of language and its dissolution. In the form of an initiatic story, the danced world of Afshin reveals the original birth of Man in the mists of time.³⁶⁸

Yet, in the context of France, where Ghaffarian created and performed this work shortly after emigrating from Iran in 2009, NDC promotional materials and other online reviews exclusively frame the performance within the context of his specific immigration story and not as a universal journey that transcends time and space. For Paris-based dramaturge Leyli Daryoush, for instance, *Le Cri Perçant* becomes a proclamation of Ghaffarian's freedom to dance, which, according to her, is enabled only through exile in France:

Afshin Ghaffarian is an Iranian choreographer. It sounds simple, but it is not. Just to be convinced, take a look at his career: protests, prison, torture, exile...He was exiled in France since 2009 following his position against the Iranian regime...For his first creation in France, *The Piercing Shout*, Afshin Ghaffarian...wanted to create a dance around the four elements, but it is also the announcement of exile, coming to the free world in which Afshin can finally dance.³⁶⁹

Another online preview of *Le Cri Perçant* explains,

The dancer and choreographer Iranian Afshin Ghaffarian, a refugee in France since 2009 and supported by the Centre National de la Danse, was prohibited [to dance] in his country, [and so] learned to dance [through] watching videos of Pina Bausch and Merce Cunningham on Internet. After founding the first underground company in 2006 in Tehran, he was forced into exile for political reasons. Four years later, he mounted a new

³⁶⁷ To view *Le Cri Perçant*, see: Afshin Ghaffarian, "Le Cri Perçant / Afshin Ghaffarian," *YouTube* video, 3:54, November 14, 2010, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Iao7eXOOV6Y>. Ghaffarian changed the title of his choreography from *Le Cri Persan* ("The Persian Shout") to *Le Cri Perçant* ("The Piercing Shout") at some point shortly after the original 2010 performance. The change to *Le Cri Perçant* speaks to how Ghaffarian has increasingly sought to universalize or demark his work from overt Iranian-ness, while French and transnational depictions of him still impose the particularity of his exiled Iranian subject position upon him.

³⁶⁸ Afshin Ghaffarian's artist statement, Reformances Dance Company website, accessed November 5, 2015, <http://reformances.com/en/the-shout/>.

³⁶⁹ Layli Daryoush, "The Persian Scream, Afshin Ghaffarian," modified June 6, 2015, accessed October 24, 2012, translated from French, http://liveweb.arte.tv/fr/video/Le_Cri_Persan/. As of 9/7/2014, Daryoush has revised the last sentence, which now reads: "but it is also the story of a man who goes to a door, which crosses a threshold and that overcomes" (translated from French).

troupe, called the company of Réformances and he presents his first performance in France, “The Persian Cry.” In this solo, Afshin Ghaffarian seized the four elements - water, earth, air and fire - to better scream for his need to be himself freely.³⁷⁰

While the narratives surrounding *Le Cri Perçant* sustain a hyper focus on Ghaffarian’s particularity as a censored artist journeying from Iran to France, and not about his universalist story of the four elements (or about the form of the dancing itself), this focus on particularity does not disregard universality altogether. In other words, in the French sociopolitical context, particularities are needed in an immigrant’s verbal and/or embodied testimony as part of the process of becoming French. As Isabelle Barker and Jasbir Puar explain: “for universality to have any meaning in the first place, it must stand in relation to its ‘exception.’”³⁷¹ The production of meaning for universality in the French case thereby depends upon the “particular.” To achieve universality, one must perform the transformation from the particular to the universal. As I describe below, immigrant subjects are particularly framed within a moralistic framework of the “suffering subject” whose transformation depends upon the movement from an injured particularity to universal suffering. Within this framework, Ghaffarian’s *Le Cri Perçant* becomes an embodied testimony through which Ghaffarian’s subject position enacts this transformation from the particularity of an injured life (being an oppressed artists in Iran) to the universality of human suffering (from which he transcends through his exile in France), ultimately reinforcing his performance for and of French citizenship.

The moral economies within which immigration and asylum are situated in France, and in Europe more broadly, produces a biopolitical framework through which immigrant subjects and asylum seekers become what Didier Fassin calls “objects of repression and compassion,”³⁷² as they navigate “between a politics of pity and policies of control.”³⁷³ Mino Moallem argues too that, in contemporary cosmopolitan centers, asylum and xenophobia co-exist in order to “construct the foreigner as forever alien and tragic.”³⁷⁴ Through this framework, the image of a generous national community is solidified when the state extends refugee status to a “suffering stranger.”³⁷⁵

On a smaller scale, French publics across cosmopolitan centers engage in affective forms of compassion for “suffering strangers” as spectators of the theatrical performances of immigrants in Fisek’s study on theatrical aid work, performances that place “the immigrant’s body at the center of national morality.”³⁷⁶ Fisek explains that, across a wide spectrum of theatre performance venues in Paris, there is “a tendency to treat performance as an event that transition[s] the actor from the particularity of an injured life to the universality of human suffering.”³⁷⁷ This emphasis on a suffering subject and the compassionate response, according to Fisek, is central to the enactment of abstract individuality required by French citizenship:

³⁷⁰ Rosita Boisseau, “Afshin Ghaffarian, the Persian Cry,” *Telerama.fr*, accessed November 4, 2015, translated from French, <http://sortir.telerama.fr/evenements/spectacles/afshin-ghaffarian-le-cri-persan,61643.php>.

³⁷¹ Isabelle Barker and Jasbir Puar, “Feminist Problematizations of Rights Language and Universal Conceptualizations of Human Rights,” in *Women, Culture, and Society*, 4th edition, ed. Barbara J. Balliet (Dubuque, IA: Kendall Hunt Publishing, 2005), 609.

³⁷² Fassin, “Compassion and Repression,” 376.

³⁷³ *Ibid*, 365-366.

³⁷⁴ Moallem, “Whose Fundamentalism?,” 299.

³⁷⁵ Fassin, “Compassions and Repression,” 376.

³⁷⁶ Fisek, “Incorporating Immigrants,” 16.

³⁷⁷ *Ibid*, 8.

What emerges throughout this brief foray into contemporary Parisian performance practices is the pivotal relationship between compassion and notions of abstract citizenship. Compassion, as well as its object, another's suffering, appears at the heart of how abstract individuality is to be secured in the non-abstract citizen.³⁷⁸

Projected onto the stage is “an irresolvable yearning to have these ‘individuals’ both transform radically into ‘integrated’ citizens and yet remain ‘other’ for the duration of that transformation, most crucially at moments when the transformation is to be shared with an appreciative, compassionate public.”³⁷⁹ Fostering a space for these particularities to be highlighted, in turn, allows French audiences attending them to collectively imagine themselves as an inclusive, compassionate citizen-spectator. Didier Fassin asserts, “Expressing sympathy for the asylum seeker or the undesirable immigrant holds fewer benefits for that figure than it has for us, as we show how humane we finally are.”³⁸⁰

Transnational Circulations of Savior Spectatorship in the film Desert Dancer (2014)



Figure 20: *Desert Dancer* (2014) poster.

The media representations that surround Ghaffarian's story, and in particular the film *Desert Dancer*, exemplify how this narrative and relation of sympathy for Fassin's asylum seeker or undesirable immigrant is used to foster affective relations with audiences in what I call “savior spectatorship.” The savior spectatorship of and around Ghaffarian becomes enacted transnationally through the American-produced feature-length film based on Ghaffarian's life and directed by Richard Raymond, *Desert Dancer* (2014), which was produced by the American company, Relativity. US-based journalist Bin Nguyen describes the film's narrative in sensationalist terms:

³⁷⁸ Ibid, 100.

³⁷⁹ Ibid, 72.

³⁸⁰ Fassin, “Compassion and Repression,” 382.

...as Afshin becomes increasingly targeted [in Iran] for his desire to dance, he realizes that the only option to fulfill his dream is to flee to Paris and leave his friends behind. He is liberated from his oppressive state and finds a new home in France, where he is granted political asylum and allowed to accomplish his greatest dream: to dance in front of an audience.³⁸¹

Desert Dancer provides a site to examine how what I call “affects of empire” circulate transnationally through this filmic representation of Iranian dancing bodies. Interwoven with beautiful dance scenes choreographed by Akram Khan, the film paints a dark story of oppression and victimization in which an artist has been tortured and jailed by an Islamic regime. In these narratives, he has no option but to flee his homeland and make great sacrifices in his pursuit to shed the chains of despotism and become liberated by the “enlightened” West. France, as the narratives imply, embodies quintessential benevolence through affording Ghaffarian the freedoms that he had been deprived in his home country, namely his human right to “finally dance.” The film implicates its viewers as savior spectators through the strategic use of camera angles and framing that are carefully choreographed to highlight close ups of Ghaffarian’s body, in particular when he is beaten by the *basij* (volunteer militia). This enhances a sense of kinesthetic empathy through which spectators viscerally experience sensations similar to what the characters they are watching are feeling.³⁸²

The film begins with text unfolding on the screen:

Iran

The birthplace of great poetry.

And the first charter of human rights.

Yet today the regime denies freedom of expression.

Now on the streets and behind closed doors, the youth are defiant.

Bar ehsas yek dastan-e vaqaei [in Persian script]

Based on a true story³⁸³

It is nighttime and a car’s headlights provide the only backlight in the scene. Shown from the waist up, Afshin is laying on the ground with his face planted into the sandy dirt. His hands are tied together at the wrists and are lying in front of his chest. Within a mere second into the scene, a man’s leg shown from behind kicks Afshin’s face and then his stomach. A voiceover in Persian speaks and a voiceover in English follows, all while the man continues to kick Afshin:

Man Afshin-e Ghaffarian hastam.

My name is Afshin Ghaffarian.

Moqueame Iran.

I am a citizen of Iran.

Va yek raqqaas hastam.

And I’m a dancer.

Although Persian script and verbal language are seldom employed throughout the majority of the film (except as novel backdrop), using the Persian language in this initial scene generates a sense of authenticity and authority.

³⁸¹ Bin Nguyen, “SBIFF: “Desert Dancer” Premieres on Opening Night Plus Exclusive Interviews with Star Reece Ritchie and Director Richard Raymond,” *Daily Nexus*, January 29, 2015, <http://daily-nexus.com/2015-01-29/sbiff-desert-dancer-premieres-on-opening-night-plus-exclusive-interviews-with-star-reece-ritchie-and-director-richard-raymond/>.

³⁸² Susan Leigh Foster, *Choreographing Empathy: Kinesthesia in Performance* (New York: Routledge, 2011).

³⁸³ *Desert Dancer*, directed by Richard Raymond (Relativity Media, 2014).

While the *basiji* continues to beat Afshin (and his voiceover declares “I am...”) Afshin is established from the start of the film as the defiant youth to which the film’s opening quote refers. Announcing “I am a citizen of Iran” while the *basiji* continues to beat him conflates the violence his character is experiencing with the state to which he holds citizenship. He is not simply Iranian, but a citizen of Iran. While this implicitly recognizes Iran as a modern nation state—perhaps surprisingly so, considering the ways in which Euro-American rhetoric typically places Iran in a time prior to modernity—this further interpellates the Iranian state as the perpetrator of violence rather than the protector of its citizenry. As such, there is an implicit human rights framing that is tied to this specific act of violence and that sets the tone for the remainder of the film. Finally, the film’s initial scene closes with Afshin’s most significant defiant declaration, “And I’m a dancer.”



Figure 21: *Desert Dancer* (2014) film still, Frieda Pinto and Reece Ritchie.

The conjunction “and” implies a paradox: being a citizen of Iran *and* a dancer are in tension with each other or perhaps are in contradiction with each other. This tension between two subject positions introduces the film, and is also part of promotional materials. In a behind-the-scenes trailer on the film’s official website, director Richard Raymond explains: “In Iran, it’s in most cases illegal to dance. *Desert Dancer* is the true story of Afshin Ghaffarian, a young man who used dance as a narrative device and as a weapon to fight for freedom.”³⁸⁴ This synopsis by *Variety* magazine is typical: “Set in Iran, where most forms of dancing are banned, against the backdrop of the 2009 election protests. Despite the dangers, Ghaffarian is willing to risk his life to fight for his dream to become a dancer.”³⁸⁵ The linking of Afshin’s beating and the declaration, “And I’m a dancer,” conflates the punishment and the statement. In fact, as the viewers learn later in the film, and as Ghaffarian has explained in interviews with me and others, his arrest and subsequent beating were the unjust consequences of his filming the contentious post-presidential election protests, and nothing to do with dancing.³⁸⁶

³⁸⁴ Richard Raymond, Relativity Media, accessed January 21, 2016, <http://relativitymedia.com/film-detail/desert-dancer/>.

³⁸⁵ Diana Lodderhose, “Pinto, Molina, Ritchie sign on for ‘Dancer,’” *Variety*, May 17, 2013, <http://variety.com/2012/film/news/pinto-molina-ritchie-sign-on-for-dancer-1118054207/>.

³⁸⁶ Although, according to Ghaffarian, he was told they would beat him “artistically” after seeing on his identification that he was a student at the art university in Tehran (Afshin Ghaffarian. Interview by Heather Rastovac. Tape recording. Paris, France. July 19, 2012).



Figure 22: *Desert Dancer* (2014) film still, Tom Cullen and Reece Ritchie.

The film's conflation of fact and fiction is a lens through which to view the media's construction of a fictional artist. The film ends with Afshin's character theatrically reenacting the scene with which the film opens, this time on a Parisian stage in front of a French audience, which coincidentally includes Afshin's encouraging teacher from the underground arts center he attended as a child. Suddenly, Afshin breaks away from the play's script, unbeknownst to the remainder of the cast, and begins to enact a performance all of his own. This drew from actual events in which the real Ghaffarian broke away from his performance group in Germany, and that I discussed early in this chapter. In the film, confusion ensues among the cast, the audience, and the stern Iranian official chaperones who traveled with the group. Afshin faces the audience within the film and breaks the fourth wall with both his gaze and his performative utterance: "My name is Afshin Ghaffarian. I am a citizen of Iran. I'm a dancer. And my government won't let its people be free. In my country, even dance is forbidden. I want my rights. I want my freedom." He pauses for a moment and declares once again, shouting, "My name is Afshin Ghaffarian!"

He then looks at his hand; his palm is open and he suddenly and violently covers his mouth, gripping onto his face. He takes the other hand and exerts force to peel the gripping hand from his face. As the hand reluctantly releases, he declares once again, "My name is Afshin Ghaffarian, and I'm a dan..." The other palm violently clasps over his mouth once again, interrupting his declaration, causing Afshin to struggle to pull the clasped hand from off his mouth with his other hand. The audience grows concerned, as do the chaperones who are growing irritable and uncomfortable from the wings of the stage. Afshin's gripped hand slowly releases from his mouth as he looks toward the side of the stage, presumably at the chaperones: "I am a dancer!" Afshin looks back at the audience, "But my government won't let its people be fr..." Again, his own hand strangles his words and clasps over his mouth, causing him to slowly struggle into a small backbend, his gaze toward the ceiling. The clasping hand softens its grip as his pointer finger and thumb reach deep into his mouth, then slowly lifting away from his open mouth, as if holding into something thick and stretchy; his breath sounds as if he is choking. With his arm still raised above his head, the frame focuses on Afshin's two fingers, which part as if dropping whatever was pulled from deep within his throat. The camera pans down his arm to his face and torso, which straighten to face the audience once again. With a bit of a whisper, Afshin completes his declaration, "free..."

Afshin breathes heavily for a moment and then breaks into an improvised dance. He starts with what appears to be some of the choreography from Afshin's underground dance

group's earlier performance in a desert location outside of Tehran, which is based on a real-life performance Ghaffarian had done in Iran and from which the film's title *Desert Dancer* draws.³⁸⁷ The movements from the desert dance scene that Ghaffarian cites in the film's final performance scene in Paris are percussive, angular, hard, and sharp, presumably expressing his frustration with and defiance to his censored position as an artist in Iran. Afshin then shifts into tracing buoyant circles with his arms and his body, a smile comes to his face, as he seems to forget the audience is there at all; he has found transcendence and freedom. Finally, Afshin's character brings the film full circle as he begins his reenactment of the film's opening scene, where he is beaten. His circling, buoyant arms suddenly get caught at the wrists. He pulls them apart, only for them to become bound again. He falls to the ground and pulls himself up with his fist in the air in suspension, only for him to fall again. Then, as if trying to escape from someone, he begins crawling away, contracting and crying, as if being beaten. Ghaffarian's body undulates intensely and suddenly he stands fully upright, staring madly at the audience.

The frame switches suddenly and Afshin is back on the floor of the stage, contracting as if being kicked and begging "please." Periodically throughout the dance, the camera pans to show the chaperones fidgeting from the wings. The scene also retroactively returns to the beginning of the film, where Afshin is on the dusty ground outside of the city being kicked by the *basiji*. The frame alternates between these two temporal moments three to four times, drawing a through-line between them. One of Afshin's hands grip onto the front of his shirt and pulls him up to his feet. Once again, he struggles with his other hand to pull the hand from its grip. It is at this point that the chaperones attempt to stop the show. "Shut it down!" one of them says to the other, who then diligently demands the tech to shut the curtains. With Afshin now behind closed curtains, the two chaperones rush over to him in order to forcefully restrain him; the audience grows visibly concerned upon hearing the commotion. Afshin breaks free from their restraint and falls onto the ground downstage from the closed curtain, remaining on the ground, now in sight of the spectators. The chaperones abruptly leave, accepting defeat.

In essence, the presence of the live audience watching literally saves Afshin from an unknown but presumably dire fate. Slightly confused but also exhilarated by the spectacle, the audience begins to clap. Afshin looks up from his place on the floor; the camera pans from behind him so that the film spectator can see the same faces that Afshin sees. The audience is a nodding and smiling, encouraging and compassionate. Afshin brings himself to his feet with a look of disbelief on his own face. His gaze scans the breadth of the audience up into the balcony seating and back down again (and again, the camera provides the film's spectators his own view). Ghaffarian is finally receiving what journalist Bin Nguyen claims in her aforementioned review of the film that he had always dreamt of—validation from a "public audience."

He then pulls a narrow green scarf from his pocket, looks at it with urgency in his eyes, wraps it around his palm and raises two fingers into a "V" for victory, the gestural sign that the Green Movement utilized during pro-Mousavi rallies leading up to the 2009 elections and in the demonstrations following the elections. One by one, members of the audience (which is visibly primarily or entirely non-Iranian) stand up to flash the V gesture (one wonders whether they do so with knowledge of its signification, or are just mimicking in solidarity, or if they confuse it for the classic, universal gesture of peace). The camera pans focusing on the sea of hands gesturing the V, focuses one last time on Afshin's smiling, teary-eyed face, and then fades to the words:

Afshin Ghaffarian was granted asylum by the French government.

³⁸⁷ The film is referencing actual events in which Ghaffarian and a few dancers presented a performance outside of Tehran for a select group of invited guests.

After hearing his story the National Dance Centre in Paris awarded him free admission to their school.

He graduated and formed his own dance company.

They perform regularly across Europe.

His friends continue to follow his artistic journey.³⁸⁸

To suggest a touch of authenticity, the frame opens up to one last moving image. It is a view of the River Seine in Paris. A young man walks up a set of concrete stairs in the distance and walks directly toward the camera, his eyes cast toward the ground. Upon arrival at the camera, only his face remains in frame, his eyes still downcast. He looks up and the film's spectators are confronted with the real Afshin Ghaffarian. He stares at us for what feels like minutes.

The film portrays Iran as an oppressive society where “dance is forbidden,” and where Ghaffarian has been targeted and jailed by the Islamic regime for his involvement in dance and protest. Ghaffarian is portrayed as thus having no option but to flee his homeland in order to save his life, shedding the chains of despotism, and becoming liberated by the West. As the narrative implies, France embodies quintessential benevolence through affording Ghaffarian asylum and the freedoms that he had been deprived, namely his right to “finally dance.” In the process, the film conveys some redundant, racialized tropes fundamental to the neocolonial constructions of Middle Eastern and Muslim subjects that continue to gain currency in the American-led global War on Terror. To be sure, English-language films about an “oppressive” Iran have nearly become a genre of its own, with films such as *Not Without My Daughter* (1991), *The Stoning of Soraya M* (2008), and *Argo* (2012), among others.

The discourse surrounding *Desert Dancer* ultimately exemplifies the indoctrination of savior spectatorship: spectators are invited to see themselves in Afshin, and to see Afshin in themselves. In the film's final scene of Afshin's Paris performance, audiences witness Afshin's liberatory performance; “liberatory” in that this performance marks the act that he feels prohibits his ability to return to Iran, and “liberatory” in that it marks the inaugural moment when he becomes a dancer-subject, enabled by the presence and validation of the compassionate spectators. Gradually aware of their active roles in his liberation, their spectatorship becomes complicit. They move to their feet, they perform his hand gesture of victory, they nod in acceptance, as if to convey, “you're safe here, you're (now) one of us, welcome to the civilized world.”

Conclusion

In my critique of representations that frame the Iranian dancer as an “object of rescue,” I do not wish to minimize the lived experiences of Iranians who have been materially or affectively impacted by various forms of Iranian state restriction and punishment, nor of those who have actively struggled to develop a sustained and supported dance practice within Iran. Nor do I mean to appear as an apologist for any particular governmental regime. As I describe in the dissertation introduction, there are indeed vast restrictions on dance practice and performance in Iran. However, it is important to note that restrictions on dance in Euro-American contexts, colonial and contemporary, and/or in Christian contexts receive much less attention within Euro-American popular discourse than instances of restrictions in cultures and geographical locations

³⁸⁸ *Desert Dancer*.

outside of the Anglo-Christian “West.”³⁸⁹ This chapter explores what ultimately concerns the larger dissertation, which are the way in which Iranian dancers’ lived experiences become appropriated for Euro-American neo-imperial means, often becoming translated into racialized rhetoric that supports Islamophobic views and that becomes a potential alibi for racist domestic and foreign policies and, in some cases, military intervention.³⁹⁰ Whereas the image of and ideas surrounding Ghaffarian’s exile in France support a “savior spectatorship” mentality whereby Iranianness fits neatly within a discourse of a backwards, pre-modern Iran—and Middle East writ large—the fourth and final chapter’s interest in the queer artist Amir Baradaran highlights how contemporary art practices that redefine “Iranianness” with an eye to gender, sexuality, space, and time dismantle such discourses.

³⁸⁹ For instance, examples of contexts where dance is prohibited or regulated include certain dances associated with (black) gangs in U.S. high schools, dance in Christian contexts, and indigenous dances in U.S. and elsewhere. For more, see: Naomi M. Jackson, ed., *Right to Dance: Dancing for Rights* (Banff, AB: Banff Centre Press, 2004).

³⁹⁰ Winegar critiques how Euro-American rhetoric surrounding Middle Eastern visual art actually corroborates with War on Terror discourses. Winegar, “The Humanity Game.”

Chapter 4

Queering Diasporic and Secular Temporalities in Amir Baradaran's 'Choreographies of the Social'



Figure 23: Amir Baradaran, *The Other Artist is Present*, Act 3: *Other Trance*, NY MoMA, 2010.

Act 3: *Other Trance*³⁹¹

Amir Baradaran sits at a small table across from the self-proclaimed “godmother of performance art,” Marina Abramović, in the vast atrium of the New York Museum of Modern Art. Single lines of spectators contour the perimeter of the space, waiting for their turn to sit opposite Abramović in her 2010 performance installation *The Artist is Present*. Baradaran takes a deep breath and begins to slowly sway back and forth while repetitively chanting in Arabic, “Inna Allahu jamil wa yuhibu al-jamal” (“God is beautiful and He loves beauty”).³⁹² Baradaran’s chanting eventually turns into singing. His volume increases and his vocalization becomes more ornate before he reaches a crescendo and then returns to silence once again. He continues to silently sway as he stares at Abramović, who retains her own silent, yet motionless, stare. Baradaran’s breath is heavy as tears roll down his face. Finally, he leaves the table he shares with Abramović but (intentionally) leaves behind his wallet. A security guard hastily enters the scene, grabs the “unattended baggage,” and follows after Baradaran.³⁹³

³⁹¹ Amir Baradaran, “Amir Baradaran, Act III: Other Trance, On Marina Abramovic’s The artist is present,” *YouTube* video, 2:42, March 17, 2010, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A172FAOQdbw>.

³⁹² In an interview with me, Baradaran described this as a “Sufi saying that I learned from my grandfather.” However, it is from a hadith of the Prophet Muhammad. (Amir Baradaran. Skype interview by Heather Rastovac. Tape recording. June 11, 2013).

³⁹³ My reference to “unattended baggage” references the Transportation Security Administration’s security guidelines in airports and other transportation centers.



Figure 24: Amir Baradaran, *The Other Artist is Present*, Act 4: *Reflections*, NY MoMA, 2010.

Act 4: *Reflections*³⁹⁴

Baradaran is chanting again: “huwa jamil wa yuhibu jamil...huwa jamil wa yuhibu jamil...huwa jamil wa yuhibu jamil...” This time the chanting is even more passionate, with resonances of mourning. The video documenting Baradaran’s performance comes into focus and it becomes clear from the rain-soaked concrete and passing cars that he is now outside. The camera pans the outside space, focuses for a moment on the “Museum of Modern Art” sign on the doorway entrance, and then stops to focus on Baradaran. He is sitting on a chair at a table, just as Abramović is sitting on a chair at a table inside the museum. However, instead of sitting across from her, or across from anyone else, Baradaran sits across from his own reflection in the window of the museum. As the final act of the four that make up Baradaran’s performance *The Other Artist is Present*, he has been formally escorted from the museum and is no longer able to gain entry.³⁹⁵ Baradaran is literally and figuratively on the outside looking in.

Abramović prompts spectators to ask of *The Artist is Present*, “Why is this art?” Baradaran, on the other hand, critically questions Abramović and the MoMA: “To whom does this art belong?”³⁹⁶ Baradaran’s performance intervention in *The Other Artist is Present* brings attention to the ways in which Abramović and the institutions within which her works circulate simultaneously extract value from participants’ presence while ultimately estranging them from their bodily and affective labor. For instance, Baradaran’s performance at once becomes part of the official archive of *The Artist is Present* just as his presence is deemed a nuisance or perhaps a threat, which ultimately leads to his expulsion.³⁹⁷ While it is difficult to determine the precise reasons for Baradaran’s removal from the MoMA, I pose similar questions as Sandra D’Urso’s analysis on *The Other Artist is Present*, which queries the ways in which Baradaran’s

³⁹⁴ Amir Baradaran, “Amir Baradaran, Act IV: Reflections, On Marina Abramović’s The artist is present,” *YouTube* video, 2:39, March 17, 2010, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BsZcnzfiNuQ>.

³⁹⁵ Baradaran’s guerilla performance *The Other Artist is Present* includes four acts - Act 1: *Bodies and Wedding*; Act 2: *Behind the Canvas*; Act 3: *Other Trance*, and; Act 4: *Reflections*.

³⁹⁶ Jose Solis, “So... Why is this Art? Marina Abramović: The Artist is Present,” *Pop Matters*, October 24, 2012, <http://www.popmatters.com/review/164718-marina-abramovi-the-artist-is-present/>. Personal interview with Baradaran: June 11, 2013.

³⁹⁷ Images and video documentation of him sitting across from Abramović abound in web, text, and video publications of the performance. For instance, see: Arthur Danto et al., *Marina Abramovic: The Artist is Present* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2010) and the 2012 film by the same title.

performance—with its visual and performative signifiers of “Middle Eastern-ness” or “Muslim-ness” that mark and emerge from his performing body—becomes incompatible with the secular space of Western contemporary performance art.³⁹⁸ In other words, is the dominant paradigm of contemporary performance art secular?³⁹⁹ What religiosities are and are not sanctioned in contemporary performance art praxis and contemporary art institutions? How might these sanctions be racialized? Can Islamic cultural practices, which are often deemed “backwards” within dominant Western representations, find a place within the progressive politics of Euro-American performance art praxis?⁴⁰⁰

Baradaran’s intersectional subject positions as Iranian, diasporic, Muslim, *and* queer further complicate these questions. Not only are the progressive politics undergirding Euro-American performance art praxis assumed to be incompatible with Islamic practices, but so are the forms of progressive politics heralded by many assimilated queer subjects in U.S. and Western Europe today. Transnational feminists and queer theorists, among others, contend that pre- and post-9/11 and “War on Terror” American nationalisms and homonationalisms⁴⁰¹ have (re)configured Orientalist tropes into a transnational antagonist: the Middle Eastern, Muslim male “terrorist” (who is also conflated with the “Islamic fundamentalist”).⁴⁰² He is anachronistic, temporally and geographically from a prior time, and lagging behind along the linear forward-moving plot of modernity. As the political import of progressive queer politics becomes subsumed by neoliberal state politics, the Middle Eastern, Muslim male subject becomes further constructed as what Jasbir Puar calls *racially* queer, a threat to liberal values (particularly those related to women’s and gay rights), and a barometer with which to measure neoliberal notions of freedom.⁴⁰³ Rebecca Schneider explains that, in Puar’s critique of homonationalism, she insists upon a “reexamination of ‘queer’ that takes into account U.S. neoliberal deployments of ‘terror’ that sexualize the racialized, Islamic other as both homophobic and perverse.”⁴⁰⁴ That is, as proper, modern gay subjects become incorporated into the U.S. nation-state through white racial privilege and legislated kinship normativity, Muslim male sexualities have concomitantly

³⁹⁸ Sandra D’Urso, “Reading Islamic Identity in Contemporary Performance Art and Reconsidering the Secular Lens of Western Performance Praxis,” in *Embodying Transformation: Transcultural Performance*, ed. Maryrose Casey (Clayton, Victoria, Australia: Monash University Publishing, 2015), 166-181.

³⁹⁹ This question builds upon a 2009 panel discussion at UC Berkeley between scholars concerned with the question, “is critique secular?” See: Talal Asad, Wendy Brown, Judith Butler, and Saba Mahmood, *Is Critique Secular? Blasphemy, Injury, and Free Speech* (UC Berkeley: Townsend Center for the Humanities, 2009).

⁴⁰⁰ D’Urso, “Reading Islamic Identity.”

⁴⁰¹ Jasbir Puar has formulated the concept of “homonationalism” to describe the political processes that produce gay and lesbian American citizens as normative over the racialized and sexualized Muslim/Middle Eastern male subjects who have become produced through (and targeted by) the biopolitics of the U.S. War on Terror (Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages*).

⁴⁰² Euro-American geopolitics construct Islamic fundamentalism as a trope that interpellates Muslims as a monolithic group of “Others,” characterized through irrational, barbaric masculinity and passive femininity. However, as Moallem argues, fundamentalism is, in fact, a “modern discursive formation (no less than ‘progress’ or ‘development’) with a genealogy and history of representation” both informed by and responding to modernity. Moallem interrogates notions of fundamentalism that define themselves exclusively in relation to religion, particularly to Islam, and instead, she suggests, fundamentalism consists of both religious and secularist forms. While Western secularism is often positioned in opposition to religion, and to fundamentalism particularly, secularism is discursively defined through its relation to religion, which Moallem also conceives as a Western hegemonic discursive formation (*Between Warrior Brother and Veiled Sister*, 10-11).

⁴⁰³ Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages*.

⁴⁰⁴ Rebecca Schneider, *Performing Remains: Art and War in Times of Theatrical Reenactment* (New York: Routledge, 2011), 173.

become scripted as deviant and monstrous. These subject formations have not simply emerged alongside each other coincidentally but, as Jasbir Puar argues, rather have been contingent upon each other.⁴⁰⁵

This chapter considers the ways in which three performance works by diasporic Iranian performance artist Amir Baradaran utilize the seemingly contradictory constructions of his racialized and sexualized body to interrogate the liberal, secular politics embedded in much of contemporary performance arts praxis and homonationalist projects. Born in Iran and raised in Montreal, Canada, Amir Baradaran is a new media and performance artist currently based in New York City. Working in a variety of mediums, Baradaran dwells in the realm of speculative, participatory public experiences that offer a performative space for critical inquiry into the body, curatorial authorship, technology, and the gendered racialization of national and diasporic identities.⁴⁰⁶ Throughout the three performances I examine, I also trace how Baradaran draws upon Islamic and Iranian cultural repertoires as critical means for addressing some of our most pressing present-day concerns, ranging from immigration and Islamophobia to questions of technology, presence, and relationality. I argue that these cultural repertoires are the means through which Baradaran performs “critically contingent” queer genealogies of past and present that, along with performance participants, create “circuits of being-with, in difference and discord” that disrupt hegemonic representational regimes, both aesthetic and identitarian.⁴⁰⁷

Three Works by Amir Baradaran

Frenchising Mona Lisa (2011)

Abigail Esman, contributor to *Forbes* magazine and author of the book entitled *Radical State: How Jihad is Winning Over Democracy in the West* begins her review of Amir Baradaran’s new media performance installation, *Frenchising Mona Lisa*, with a provocative question: “Mona Lisa, a Muslim?”⁴⁰⁸ On January 27, 2011, Baradaran infiltrated the Louvre Museum in Paris to permanently install a 52-second Augmented Reality (AR) performance streaming live over Leonardo da Vinci’s *Mona Lisa*. In Esman’s review, entitled “The Rape of the Mona Lisa,” she elaborates,

This Thursday, before your very eyes, the beloved La Jaconde will replace her exquisite gossamer veil for an Islamic headscarf, or *hijab*. Simply...train your Junaio-loaded smartphone camera at any image of the painting...and watch as Leonardo’s lovely sitter places a scarf made from a French flag around her head....⁴⁰⁹

⁴⁰⁵ Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages*.

⁴⁰⁶ For more about Baradaran, see: Amir Baradaran’s website, accessed January 4, 2016, www.amirbaradaran.com.

⁴⁰⁷ I borrow from Mike Sell’s notion of the avant-garde as a “critical contingency rather than a substantive agent...” Mike Sell, “Resisting the Question: ‘What is an Avant-Garde?’,” *New Literary History* 41, no. 4 (Autumn 2010): 764. José Esteban Muñoz, “Gimme Gimme This...Gimme Gimme That” Annihilation and Innovation in the Punk Rock Commons,” *Social Text* 116, no. 3 (2013): 96.

⁴⁰⁸ Abigail R. Esman, *Radical State: How Jihad is Winning Over Democracy in the West* (Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger, 2010).

⁴⁰⁹ Abigail R. Esman, “The Rape of the Mona Lisa,” *Forbes*, January 24, 2011, <http://www.forbes.com/sites/abigailesman/2011/01/24/the-rape-of-the-mona-lisa/>.

By means of AR technology and the mediation of a smartphone or tablet, the viewer witnesses in real time Mona Lisa's transformation into a "Muslim woman,"⁴¹⁰ which is enabled through the digital splicing of Baradaran's animate performing body and the inanimate representation of hers.



Figure 25: Amir Baradaran, *Frenchising Mona Lisa* (2011).

At once, Baradaran thereby utilizes the famous art object, new media technology, and his racialized performing body to instigate critical speculation about liveness in performance, national identities, immigration politics, Islamophobia, and curatorial practices within museums.

In *Frenchising Mona Lisa*, Baradaran draws parallels between Da Vinci's *Mona Lisa* and the *hijab* (Islamic headscarf) as "site[s] of cultural projection" disconnected from their own stories.⁴¹¹ He draws attention to Mona Lisa's historical process of naturalization that transforms her from an Italian noblewoman to an icon of France. In doing so, he questions the contemporary racialized debates in France surrounding the hijab as "a lightning rod about Frenchness, a visual threat to the ideals of the so-called secular state."⁴¹² In other words, *Frenchising Mona Lisa* demonstrates how "Frenchness," rather than a fixed category, has historically been and continues to be an unstable category, yet one that is persistently contingent upon its determined "Other." Furthermore, while time has passed between Mona Lisa's naturalization and the plight of the Muslim woman in France today, female-bodied subjects remain the state's site of cultural projection in its efforts to sustain its cultural and legal stronghold. In response to Baradaran's critical intervention, Esman disapprovingly exclaims:

Poor bella Gioconda, it would seem she has been hijacked...Baradaran aims to see the hijab become as much a symbol of La France as is the Mona Lisa...he wants a France defined as much by Islam as by *pain chocolat*. Yet when I asked him whether he was suggesting that France should embrace Islam, Baradaran replied in convoluted terms: Islam, he answered, 'is the fastest growing and second-biggest religion in France...A fact

⁴¹⁰ I don't mean to suggest that Mona Lisa becomes a Muslim woman merely through the act of wearing a headscarf, nor do I believe this to be Baradaran's assumption or intent. To suggest this would further replicate a problematic discourse within which the veil stands in as a metonym for Muslim woman. Instead, I use scare quotes to highlight the discursive construction enacted in Esman's opening question "Mona Lisa, a Muslim?"

⁴¹¹ Amir Baradaran, artist statement for *Futurism*, accessed March 14, 2014, http://amirbaradaran.com/ab_futarism_monalisa.php.

⁴¹² Amir Baradaran, artist statement for *Frenchising Mona Lisa*, accessed March 14, 2014, www.amirbaradaran.com/ab_monalisa.php.

which...is changing the notion of Frenchness.’...And that, it seems is exactly what Baradaran desires: that France (and most likely, all of Europe) redefine itself based on the mores and cultures of its Muslim immigrants. Not for him the notion, as others might prefer, that French Muslims redefine themselves—and Islam—to conform, instead to France and the mores and culture of the West. His project is not, after all, an enactment of the French flag surrounding Mecca *a la* Christo and Jeanne-Claude. It is not Mahmoud Ahmadinejad succumbing to Chanel. No: untie the knots of Baradaran’s speech, and the true implication of his art seem clear enough: a call for the Islamization of the West—of its nations and the magnificent achievements of Western culture.⁴¹³

For Esman, Baradaran’s AR performance is nothing less than a “rape of the Mona Lisa,” as the title of her review proclaims. The review’s inflammatory title together with Esman’s opening question—“Mona Lisa, a Muslim?”—lays bare the operating framework through which Esman perceives Baradaran’s work: one that conflates Muslim masculinity with violent and perverse sexual tendencies. In this case, the rape of Mona Lisa by a Muslim man (Baradaran, more specifically) does not merely violate any Western woman, but violates the woman who has come to represent France itself, thereby becoming an assault on the nation and its “magnificent achievements.” Esman’s review of *Frenchising Mona Lisa* exemplifies the very civilizational discourses that Baradaran’s performance attempts to question; those that place Muslim subjects within an Enlightenment frame as temporally and geographically distant, unchanging, unassimilable, and a threat to the fabric of Western civilization.

Instead of a violent invasion of Mona Lisa’s body, as Esman suggests, I argue that Baradaran performs a particular type of queer intimacy with Mona Lisa through which he animates both her body and her iconography in the enactment of “temporal drag.” Elizabeth Freeman views temporal drag as a mode of archiving, which “lovingly, sadistically, even masochistically brings back dominant culture’s junk”⁴¹⁴ and “might be seen as a kind of historicist *jouissance*, a *frisson* of dead bodies on live ones, fading constructs on emergent ones.”⁴¹⁵ Temporal drag thus intervenes into dominant notions that conceive of the archive as an essentialized realm of the dead, the inanimate, the past, and the object.⁴¹⁶ Rather, temporal drag renders the temporal, the corporeal, and the object as compound, contingent, and emergent. Through the AR technology in *Frenchising Mona Lisa*, Baradaran grafts his live body onto that of the image of Mona Lisa’s body, whose animacy is thought to exist perhaps only in her “aura” (in Benjaminian terms) or through the consumption of her.⁴¹⁷ Through Baradaran’s temporal drag performance, however, her body becomes animated for and through entirely different means, causing object history and liveness to blur. This temporal drag, as Freeman describes, reincarnates and derives pleasure (even if masochistically) from historical surplus, playfully performing multiple temporalities through the transference of difference. In the case of *Frenchising Mona Lisa*, and all AR performances for that matter, spectators are a prerequisite to the *jouissance*, requiring a *ménage à trois* of performers and performances for the consummation of the performance work to be achieved.

⁴¹³ Esman, “The Rape of the Mona Lisa.”

⁴¹⁴ Freeman, *Time Binds*, 68.

⁴¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 120.

⁴¹⁶ Srinivasan also offers an astute critique of this static notion of the archive in her ethnographic work of archives of transnational Indian dancers-laborers. See: Srinivasan, *Sweating Saris*.

⁴¹⁷ Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. by Harry Zohn, from the 1935 essay (New York: Schocken Books, 1969).

The experience of *Frenchising Mona Lisa* first requires the viewer with a smartphone or tablet to download the Junaio application (an AR browser for mobile devices) and search for the title of the performance.⁴¹⁸ Once an individual is using the application, s/he sees the typical view that one sees through a smartphone or tablet camera: the landscape of the real-world environment. The performance activates, however, once the Junaio application's computer vision technology recognizes the image of the *Mona Lisa*.⁴¹⁹ At first, the viewer sees the same static image of Mona Lisa in her iconic pose, just as the viewer would without the technology.⁴²⁰ After looking through the camera view for a moment, however, Mona Lisa's image begins to subtly blur and gradually take the form of an animate, moving, breathing object/subject. Mona Lisa's face softens while retaining her distinct features. Her body enlivens as she retrieves a textile from her lap and wraps it broadly across her shoulders. It quickly becomes evident that this textile is, in fact, the tricolor French flag, exhibiting its broad block lines of blue, white, and red. She then draws the flag around the top of her head and along the sides of her face, throws one edge of the flag over her shoulder, and adjusts it around her face, transforming the French flag into a hijab. Resting her hands back at her side, Mona Lisa's transformation into a Muslim woman ends with the lasting impression of her iconic, demure smile. The performance then begins again with the opening still image of the *Mona Lisa* and repeats itself in 52-second interval loops. All the while, the viewer's real world environment surrounding the now animate object retains its integrity within the camera's frame.

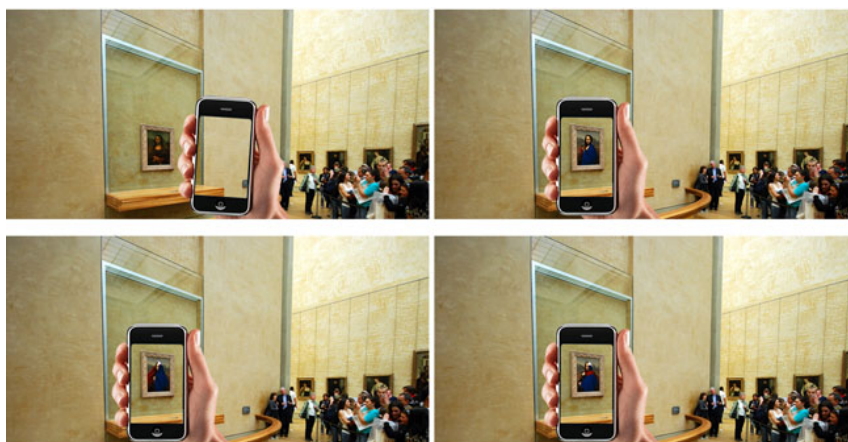


Figure 26: Amir Baradaran, *Frenchising Mona Lisa* (2011).

AR has the ability to modify any given view of real-world environments by overlaying computer-generated input with video, sound, and other graphics. Unlike virtual reality, which

⁴¹⁸ Apple acquired Metaio, the company that developed the Junaio application, in May 2015, which resulted in the deactivation of all Junaio channels in December 2015. Therefore, *Frenchising Mona Lisa* is no longer available as an original performance. However, the video documentation of *Frenchising Mona Lisa* is available on YouTube. See: Amir Baradaran, "Frenchising Mona Lisa," *YouTube* video, 0:59, September 27, 2011, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qFSjXlvOKrI>.

⁴¹⁹ While both Baradaran and Esman describe the performance as infiltrating the original representation of *Mona Lisa* in the Louvre museum in Paris, the performance could be enacted with any rendition of the painting—either the original painting or any suitable digital or printed replication.

⁴²⁰ Throughout this chapter, I intentionally refrain from using italics when I am referring to Mona Lisa as a subject (her as a woman who Da Vinci painted or the embodied animation of her through Baradaran's performance). This is in contrast to my use of italics for Da Vinci's painting, the *Mona Lisa*, which is typically and formally conceived of as an object.

completely replaces the “real” world with a simulated one, AR is in semantic context with physical environments in real-time, thereby enhancing one’s perception of and interactive experience with their own physical world. In *Frenchising Mona Lisa*, the augmentation of the *Mona Lisa* is enabled by a 2 Dimensional (2D) video recording of Baradaran’s body dressed in garb resembling that of *Mona Lisa*’s performing in front of a green screen.⁴²¹ He embodies *Mona Lisa*’s seated posture: his torso is positioned toward downstage right, his hands rest on the left arm of the chair, his face is positioned such that he looks directly downstage at the viewer. It is at this point that the donning of the headscarf initially takes place. This event constitutes the inaugural (and, by conventional standards, the “original”) layer of performance of *Frenchising Mona Lisa*—Baradaran physically dressed in drag as *Mona Lisa*, sitting in front of a green screen, and engaged in the act of veiling.

Through the green screen technology and subsequent digital video retouching, *Mona Lisa*’s environment and face are then respectively superimposed around and onto Baradaran’s performing body, incorporating the textile object that becomes the French flag hijab. Baradaran and *Mona Lisa* subsequently become, to borrow from Amit Rai, an “embodied composite”⁴²² rendered into a 2D video recording that constitutes the content of the AR augmentation and that which is enacted once the appropriate smartphone or tablet application recognizes the *Mona Lisa*. Here I draw upon Rai’s theory of racial becoming, which he argues is a feedback process of “racialization as intensive variation, continuous, qualitative duration, and vectors of embodied habituation immanent to historically specific media assemblages.”⁴²³ Through crafting an embodied composite of himself and *Mona Lisa* for the purposes of social critique, Baradaran subverts the use of the technological apparatus that have developed for purposes of surveilling, constructing, and even eliminating racialized subjects.⁴²⁴

The intermediate performance of the smartphone/tablet user whose participation is required for its enactment is key to the success of *Frenchising Mona Lisa*. The user must engage in a set of steps, or choreography, for Baradaran-*Mona Lisa*’s performance to occur, interpellating the user of this technology as a performance participant. As Baradaran explains, AR

alters spatial understanding and relational fields while leaving the physical space untouched, presupposing a change in the choreography of the social. One will no longer be able to rely solely on first-hand sensory data to make sense of any given space. Rather, the knowledge of the co-existence of (potentially contextually contradictory) AR content must be accounted for in our quotidian phenomenology.⁴²⁵

The choreography of the social Baradaran calls forth in this quote, and in the piece itself, underscores the ways that the piece generates new modes of interacting with and around the AR content. Once a user has accessed the Junaio application on their mobile device, the fundamental

⁴²¹ The use of green or blue screens is a special effect or post-production technique, also known as chroma key compositing or chroma keying, which enables the layering or compositing of two images or video streams. It effectively removes the background of a photo or video in order to add another background. This technique is commonly used in news casting, motion picture, and video gaming industries.

⁴²² Amit S. Rai, “Race Racing: Four Theses on Race and Intensity,” *Women’s Studies Quarterly* 40, no. 1/2 (2012): 71.

⁴²³ *Ibid.*, 64.

⁴²⁴ For instance, Rai describes how queer feminists such as Donna Haraway and Jasbir Puar “have shown that contemporary war machine-bodies have emerged as infomatic technologies for mapping and policing exceptionalized battle spaces in Iraq, Afghanistan, Abu Ghraib, Guantanamo Bay, Gaza, and so on” (“Race Racing,” 70).

⁴²⁵ Amir Baradaran, artist statement for *Futurism*, accessed March 14, 2014, http://amirbaradaran.com/ab_futarism_monalisa.php.

score that this participant is invited to perform includes orienting themselves in a position of viewing any image of the *Mona Lisa* and holding up the mobile device in any typical gesture of taking a photo or video of the image. This choreography interpellates the user as what Rai describes a “human-mobile assemblage,” an embodied mode of becoming that mutates bodily comportment and affective disposition in (public) space in relation to mobile technologies.⁴²⁶ In *Frenchising Mona Lisa*, this interim layer of performance of the human-mobile assemblage enacts the tertiary, or what could be considered the “final,” act within the series of performances, that of Mona Lisa performatively becoming “Muslim.”



Figure 27: Amir Baradaran, *Frenchising Mona Lisa* (2011).

As a performance experience that is contingent upon video documentation and mobile mediation, *Frenchising Mona Lisa* and its use of AR troubles conventional (and influential) definitions of performance that have been predicated upon a particular ontology of bodily liveness and presence.⁴²⁷ Within this established paradigm of performance, forms of reproduction such as video recording and other modes of archiving “betray” and “lessen” the ontological promise of performance.⁴²⁸ According to Peggy Phelan, for instance, once performance participates in the economy of repetition and the circulation of representations, “it becomes something *other* than performance.”⁴²⁹ Philip Auslander, on the other hand, draws from the Baudrillardian paradigm of simulation in order to argue “against ontology.” He instead insists on the “mutual dependence of the live and mediatized”⁴³⁰ and further suggests that,

It may be that we are at a point at which liveness can no longer be defined in terms of either the presence of living beings before each other in physical or temporal relationships. The emerging definition of liveness may be built primarily around the audience’s *affective* experience.⁴³¹

Auslander’s framework then theorizes live performance not as inevitably or ontologically contingent upon bodily co-presence in time and space, but rather as defined by its affective impact and its reception *as* liveness.

⁴²⁶ Rai, “Race Racing,” 72.

⁴²⁷ I motion here toward the much-debated theorization of liveness and performance in Peggy Phelan’s *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance* (New York: Routledge, 1993).

⁴²⁸ Phelan, *Unmarked*, 146.

⁴²⁹ Phelan, *Unmarked*, 146. My emphasis added.

⁴³⁰ Philip Auslander, *Liveness: Performance in a Mediatized Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2008), 11.

⁴³¹ Auslander, *Liveness*, 62. My emphasis added.

Baradaran's performance of *Frenchising Mona Lisa* pushes against Phelan's definitions of performance in part because it doesn't even pretend to be a live enactment. In doing so, Baradaran simultaneously gets around potential legal intervention were he to have, for example, showed up to the Louvre in drag. His performance raises contemporary questions about the modes and effectiveness of performance. Auslander's emerging definition of liveness focuses on an "audience's affective experience" rather than on bodily co-presence alone; Baradaran's generative, live drag performance as Mona Lisa veiling in front of a green screen would result in an affective failure for spectators. In other words, while Baradaran's drag performance would impart a particular political statement about the politics of the hijab in the secularized public sphere in France, it would likely fail to garner the same affective response as the AR performance would. That is to say, instead of the perception that it is "really" Mona Lisa actively veiling in our spatial and temporal midst, the audience would more likely affectively perceive the performance as Baradaran himself actively veiling (albeit in drag as Mona Lisa). I further contend that this "original" performance would then also lack the performative quality of Mona Lisa *becoming* a Muslim woman and would instead remain at the level of presentation.

In Phelan's framework, performance only remains in memory and so is understood to be "exempt from control by the forces that govern [a cultural] economy, including the law."⁴³² *Frenchising Mona Lisa* ultimately complicates Phelan's claims that performance depends upon bodily presence and is lessened by forms of reproduction such as video recording. Another premise of Phelan's understanding of performance that Auslander interrogates and that *Frenchising Mona Lisa* complicates is the claim that performance's ontological character is contingent upon disappearance. As I mentioned above, Phelan's framework of performance is understood to be "exempt from control by the forces that govern [a cultural] economy, including the law. With regards to legal ownership of space, however, AR as a performance art medium currently provides the means to perform in spaces otherwise inaccessible to the practitioner. This is to say that the performances and affective remains of *Frenchising Mona Lisa* could not legally materialize in the institutional space of the Louvre if it were not for the AR technology and the 2D video archiving that constructs it. Referring to *Frenchising Mona Lisa* as a form of graffiti, Baradaran explains that AR as art installation "confounds current definitions of physical property ownership, rupturing the relationship between the ownership of a space and the agency of its alteration."⁴³³ Along similar lines, Baradaran refers to graffiti artist Banksy, who is known for placing subverted artworks in institutional spaces such as MoMA and the Metropolitan Museum of Art, which were predictably quickly removed.

In *Frenchising Mona Lisa*, however, it is precisely the performance's lack of material and bodily presence that enables the performance to infiltrate the institutional space of the Louvre, circumvent removal from that space, and to sustain itself as a performance, therefore establishing it as part of the museum's "permanent" collection. In Baradaran's artist statements and personal interviews with me, he refers to *Frenchising Mona Lisa* as part of the "permanent collection at the Louvre." Although it is partially a playful statement, it also speaks to the fact that there is currently no legal way of removing Baradaran's AR performance artwork from the Louvre. It is

⁴³² Ibid, 128.

⁴³³ Amir Baradaran, artist statement for *Frenchising Mona Lisa*, accessed March 14, 2014, www.amirbaradaran.com/ab_monalisa.php.

expected that, at some point in the near future, lawmakers will convene to legally define this new technology, what it can do, and how one can use it to alter a space.⁴³⁴

It is questionable whether or not Baradaran would have been able to successfully infiltrate the Louvre museum with his “original” drag performance as Mona Lisa engaged in the act of veiling. Yet, if one is to consider the choreography of space that museum institutions such as the Louvre typically sanction, it is perhaps safe to assume that the museum’s security would have prevented or quickly halted Baradaran’s “live” performance. And, while it may be argued that this hypothetical live performance between Baradaran and the security guards could have had a particular affective impact on the viewers that AR could not—conjuring, perhaps, a spectacle of injustice or even simply an annoying spectacle that disrupts visitors’ experiences at the Louvre—this is not the performance that Baradaran intended. Rather, the performance that Baradaran wished to enact, Mona Lisa actively veiling herself in the institutional and national space of the Louvre, could only be actualized affectively, performatively, and legally through the use of AR and its concomitant video archiving. As such, the lack of the “live” performance as conventionally defined is actually what is needed to circumvent the legal parameters of the institutional space such as the Louvre.

Instead of a static ontological notion of liveness that circumscribes an original performance event, I suggest then that *Frenchising Mona Lisa* is rather what I would call a performance assemblage: layers of live and recorded-archived performances, performers, and objects that come together in an ecology of performance events and performative-affective experiences. The inaugural layer of performance is that of Baradaran’s own (conventionally) live, embodied drag enactment as Mona Lisa putting on the French flag hijab. While it is a recorded/documented performance, its replay is not merely about an act of watching in the present a performance performed in the past. On the contrary, this performance is reanimated through computer vision technology recognizing the material object of the *Mona Lisa* in a given space and the participants’ engagement necessary for the performance of Mona Lisa veiling. The interim layer of performance produced in *Frenchising Mona Lisa* is that of the technology user as s/he follows the choreography required to enact the tertiary layer of performance, which comes to life upon the recognition of Baradaran’s *Mona Lisa* in “real” time and space—Baradaran’s “original” live performance, now rendered in 2D, becomes part of the user-participant’s phenomenological-sensory time-space within the Louvre. I intentionally avoid the term “ultimate” to describe this stage of the performance assemblage since this implies some sort of “final” or “arrival” when what this performance actually does, I suggest, is blur beginnings and endings, and disrupts linear temporal plots. The assemblage of these performances results in an affective perceptual experience different than merely watching a video documentation of a performance. Instead, both Mona Lisa and Baradaran produce an embodied composite that, through the temporal and spatial merging facilitated by AR, becomes present and “(a)live,” if even just affectively, in the “real” time and space of the spectator-participant.

⁴³⁴ For research on AR and the law, see: Brian D. Wassam, *Augmented Reality: Law, Privacy, and Ethics* (Waltham, MA: Syngress, 2015).

Marry Me to the End of Love (2012)



Figure 28: Amir Baradaran, *Marry Me to the End of Love*, Paris, France, 2012.

I got temporarily married to Amir Baradaran last night and left with a sincere emptiness... I signed up [to get married] driven by the desire of *getting* something—I did not *get* what I hoped but I got that moment of intriguing “with” that’s at once public and private, and you’ll never know what went on in my body and mind—I still couldn’t completely make sense of it myself—and I will never know what he was thinking and feeling. We part our ways and the performance art goes on; transaction done and closed. Yes, it speaks to the sincere truth and contradiction between economies and desires—the logic of capitalism, if you will. It’s everything suggested by the program but also something private that goes way beyond the written notes. My physical contract and photo are left in the artist’s album, and my sincere and empty words in the virtual realm will end here...⁴³⁵

Baradaran first performed *Marry Me to the End of Love*, reflected upon in the above quote, in Paris at Cité Internationale des Artistes in August 2012 as part of the Iranian Arts Now Exposition. He then performed it in Berkeley, CA in November 2012 as part of an artist residency I organized through the University of California, Berkeley. Through the interactive performance *Marry Me to the End of Love*, Baradaran critically questions the double standards of American exceptionalism, particularly the recent U.S. political project of incorporating same-sex couples into the state-sanctioned institution of marriage, a project that seeks to include him as a proper gay citizen-subject, and the racialized constructions of the Middle Eastern “Other” that seek to exclude him from the nation-state. As one participant reflected:

I loved how each of the marriages I witnessed seemed to suggest its own cliché of marriage. But seemed to struggle to make a connection, and so [one marriage] brought in a third [person]; another [marriage] was all talk and psychoanalysis and process; another about the fun of sharing secrets and laughter and music; and my own [marriage] was all about corporeal passion and connection. Amir seemed so genuine in his ability to inhabit each of these – perhaps including [one participant’s] “desire” of “getting something”

⁴³⁵ *Marry Me to the End of Love* (Berkeley, CA) Facebook event page, accessed July 9, 2015, https://www.facebook.com/events/541242342559151/?active_tab=posts.

beyond the dowry paid. Rarely is marriage (or performance art) that intimate, satisfying and magically transformative.⁴³⁶

As gestured to in this comment, Iranian and Islamic cultural repertoires (perceived in the quote in the figure of the dowry) are the means through which *Marry Me to the End of Love* playfully utilizes the contradictory discursive constructions of Baradaran's diasporic body (both sexually queer and racially queered in the contemporary U.S. nation state) in order to probe the temporal politics and homonationalist narratives that construct Middle Eastern and Muslim subjects as out of step with modernity and as adversaries of freedom.

In *Marry Me to the End of Love*, Baradaran engages in multiple, temporary marriages with spectator-participants, through which he draws from the Shi'a Islamic institution of temporary marriage called *mut'a* or "pleasure marriage," also known as *sigheh* in contemporary Iran at the same time that he queers them.⁴³⁷ Temporary marriage in the Shi'a tradition, according to Shahla Haeri, "is a contract between a man and an unmarried woman, be she a virgin, divorced, or widowed, in which both the period that the marriage shall last and the amount of money to be exchanged must be specified."⁴³⁸ Haeri further describes the ideological distinctions between permanent marriage (*nikah*) and *mut'a*; within Shi'a doctrine, the primary objective of *nikah* is procreation while *mut'a* is for sexual pleasure.⁴³⁹ While *sigheh* remains a fairly marginal practice in Iran, largely because of concern for jeopardizing women's prospects for permanent marriage and because of its popular association with prostitution,⁴⁴⁰ the practice among Shiite communities is diverse in form, purpose, and duration. In some cases, a temporary marriage lasts one hour while other temporary marriages last several years.⁴⁴¹ Historically, temporary marriages primarily occurred under extenuating circumstances. For instance, *sigheh* has sanctioned, within an Islamic framework, the allowance for traveling males (such as pilgrims and soldiers) to fulfill their sexual needs while away from their permanent wives. *Sigheh* has also provided opportunities for women "considered undesirable candidates for permanent marriage—widows, divorcees, victims of sexual violence, and other nonvirgins—to be integrated or reintegrated into male-led households."⁴⁴²

In contemporary Iran, temporary marriages continue to range in practice and purpose, from various forms of exploitation or abuse of the law to strategic and subversive use of the practice's fluidity as a means to enact various forms of agency. Despite its popular association with prostitution, instances of *sigheh* also include long-term monogamous relationships and non-sexual relations between unrelated males and females courting each other before moving forward with a permanent marriage proposal, among a wide range of other instantiations. Views on temporary marriage are as diverse as the practice itself. As Juliet Williams explains,

⁴³⁶ Ibid.

⁴³⁷ See: Shahla Haeri, *Law of Desire: Temporary Marriage in Shi'i Iran* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2014); Juliet A. Williams, "Unholy Matrimony? Feminism, Orientalism, and the Possibility of Double Critique," *Signs* 34, no. 3 (2009): 611-632.

⁴³⁸ Haeri, *Law of Desire*, 2.

⁴³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁴⁰ Because of the legal complexities of temporary marriage, Haeri insists "it would be a mistake to dismiss *mut'a* as merely another variation of prostitution, or to discuss it primarily from that perspective." (Ibid.) Emphasizing the contractual components required for both permanent and temporary marriages, Haeri analogously refers to them respectively as contracts of sale and lease, respectively. (Ibid, 4)

⁴⁴¹ At the conclusion of the predetermined duration, the couple parts ways without conducting a divorce ceremony (Ibid, 2).

⁴⁴² Williams, "Unholy Matrimony," 613.

...while temporary marriage continues to be disparaged by some as a thinly veiled excuse for the sexual opportunism of pious men, for others it stands as a proud example of Islam's ingenuity in adapting to changing times by reconciling the demands of tradition with the realities of contemporary social life. It is perhaps not surprising, then, that today neither Shiite clerics nor Iranian feminists can be said to speak in a unified voice regarding temporary marriage. Instead, the issue has produced sharp divisions within these communities and created cross-cutting alliances that have brought together clerics with those secular progressives, including some self-described feminists, who see the potential to appropriate the practice for liberatory ends against a diverse array of both religious and secular opponents united in the view that temporary marriage degrades Shiites everywhere and most especially those women who participate in it.⁴⁴³

In Williams' short, reflexive study on *sigheh*, she describes her initial ambivalence when her future mother-in-law, a pious Iranian woman, suggested she and her then boyfriend enter into a temporary marriage before becoming domestic partners. She explains,

...as a self-proclaimed feminist and a professor of women's studies trained in the tradition of Western liberal egalitarianism, I felt almost obliged to condemn a social institution so clearly enmeshed in practices of gender subordination and exploitation ranging from the maintenance of virginity norms to prostitution.⁴⁴⁴

Interrogating her own liberal-secular bias and her Western feminist academic training, Williams analyzes U.S.-based media representations of temporary marriage and the orientalist assumptions through which *sigheh* becomes symbolic of Islam's backward treatment of women, which thus creates the foil for and reinforcement of an image of the U.S. as exceptional with regards to women's rights.⁴⁴⁵

In *Marry Me to the End of Love*, Baradaran appropriates both mainstream American and Iranian discourses surrounding temporary marriage (and Islam in general). He suggests that,

...although Sigheh may not be egalitarian at its core—for example, women must either be widowed or divorced to seek partners for pleasure—introducing *sigheh* into conversations about marriage and sexuality throws the paradigm off kilter, just enough to open up new understandings and lines of inquiry.⁴⁴⁶

As a cultural and religious practice that both “conventional nationalist and diasporic scripts” often deem backward,⁴⁴⁷ Baradaran recuperates the performative impact of *sigheh* as a radically queer counterpoint to the U.S. institutions of domestic intimacy that have recently begun to incorporate properly assimilated queer subjects.

I curated the U.S. premiere of *Marry Me to the End of Love* at the Subterranean Arthouse in Berkeley, CA.⁴⁴⁸ A small, enclosed curtain partition placed in front of the venue's entrance served as a liminal space through which attendees became more than merely spectators of the performance event; through witnessing the multiple temporary marriages in which Baradaran

⁴⁴³ Ibid, 614.

⁴⁴⁴ Ibid, 615.

⁴⁴⁵ Ibid, 618.

⁴⁴⁶ Amir Baradaran, artist statement, accessed October 16, 2013, http://www.amirbaradaran.com/amir_baradaran_paris_FINAL_6-13.pdf.

⁴⁴⁷ Gayatri Gopinath, *Impossible Desires: Queer Diasporas and South Asian Public Cultures* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005).

⁴⁴⁸ Previous to this Berkeley performance, Baradaran had performed *Marry Me to the End of Love* in July 2012 as part of the festival “Iranian Arts Now” in Paris, France. The description of the performance that I include here is based upon my observation of and participation in the Berkeley performance.

would engage, attendees became implicated as participants, witnesses, and members in an ephemeral, transient queer community.⁴⁴⁹ After one traverses through the partition, the art house entrance opens into a single, rectangular room that extends lengthwise from the entrance. Each attendee is immediately greeted by the first of four performer-ushers who welcome and orient the spectator-participants. S/he then draws their attention to the wall text from which attendees learn that, in this interactive performance, Amir Baradaran would enter into temporary marriages with partners from all genders, ages, and orientations. The text reads:

This playful, live marriage sculpture draws from the Shi'a Islamic tradition of temporary marriage (*Sigheh*) and attempts to introduce these traditions into the performance art lexicon. *Sigheh* sheds light on the transactional aspect of any relationship. Baradaran's play with temporary marriage recognizes that love and desire are temporal, shifting, and always changing. It provides a space for multiple temporalities and territories to converge and suggest new ways of understanding desire and body. This performance attempts to interject in existing debates which seek to disarticulate desire from power and individual pleasure from collective corporal control over the body—a body that can be understood here as both the physical body that humans inhabit and the artist's own body of work.⁴⁵⁰

With a few exceptions, Baradaran sits on a cushioned loveseat against a wall at the edge of a large, rectangular Persian rug in the center of the room. Approximately twenty-five small, wooden chairs line the remaining three edges of the rug and spectators, who come and go over the course of the three-hour performance, are able to sit or stand at any of these three vantage points. In the center of the rug and at the foot of the loveseat are two short, round, wooden tables upon which both symbolic and mundane objects are assembled: fresh tangerines, strawberries, grapes, and cucumbers, dried figs and dates, coins, a small bowl of honey, fresh flowers, and candles.



Figure 29: Amir Baradaran, *Marry Me to the End of Love*, Berkeley, CA, 2012.

These objects constitute the *sofreh aghd*, an elaborate spread of symbolic and decorative items traditionally placed in front of a seated couple in Persian wedding ceremonies. The performance's particular *sofreh* contains a few unique items, however, namely three small

⁴⁴⁹ Borrowing from Gopinath: "I use 'queer' to refer to a range of dissident and non-heteronormative practices and desires that may very well be incommensurate with the identity categories of 'gay' and 'lesbian.'" (*Impossible Desires*, 11)

⁴⁵⁰ *Marry Me to the End of Love*, Berkeley, CA, November 15, 2012, poster.

hourglass timers that determine the duration of each of the temporary marriages in which Baradaran will engage: 1 minute, 3 minutes, or 5 minutes.



Figure 30: Amir Baradaran, *Marry Me to the End of Love*, Berkeley, CA, 2012.

On the opposite side of the rug from Baradaran is a television webcam that both live-streams and records each encounter; all parties engaged in a marriage with Baradaran would see their mediated, streaming images simultaneous to the live event. This delineated space determines where public becomes a blur of public and private, not just in terms of the intimate encounters that occur in that space, but also in terms of the contingency involved in participating. If entering this space, each participant grants Baradaran the propriety over all images and video, as a disclaimer reads: “By entering this space, the participant hereby agrees to the release, and use, of all written, photographic and audio-visual material to the artist for exhibition or publication purposes now and in the future.”⁴⁵¹



Figure 31: Amir Baradaran, *Marry Me to the End of Love*, Berkeley, CA, 2012.

Together, the relatively small room, the arrangement of seating and other objects, the hushed sound quality, and the ambient lighting creates an intimate space that simultaneously feels like both a museum exhibition *and* a space for ritual or ceremony. The performance and its space implicates spectators as voyeurs (both of the art piece and of the intimate encounters). At

⁴⁵¹ Ibid.

the same time, however, spectators are implicated as participants, as intimate witnesses, a queer community, for the contractual negotiations between Baradaran and his counterparts would be null and void without us. Before willing participants enter into a marriage with Baradaran, a second performer-usher quietly informs him/her/them⁴⁵² of what is involved in participating in the temporary marriage. The usher then provides him/her/them with the marriage contract to bring to Baradaran, which outlines a list of suggested possibilities for the marriage's duration, activities, and payment upon which Baradaran and the performer-participants will negotiate and mutually agree.

MARRY ME TO THE END OF LOVE

This document represents the oral agreement between the artist (groom) and the participant (spouse) for the initialization and termination of their temporary marriage. Both parties are bound to perform the stipulated duties and agree to an economic, bodily, and/or emotional exchange for the specified period of time. By signing this document the participant hereby agrees to the release, and use, of all written, photographic and audio-visual material to the artist for exhibition or publication purposes now and in the future.

For the Eternal Duration of
1 min 3 min 5 min other--

Groom	For the Fulfillment of the Following Duties as Agreed by Both Parties	Spouse
	<p>---Touch Your Feet With My Feet--- ---Move Furniture With You--- ---Tell You a Secret--- ---Hold Hands--- ---Kiss--- ---Other--- ---Pinch You--- ---Play With Your Hair--- ---Touch Your Funny Bone--- ---Stare Deeply Into Your Eyes--- ---Lick Honey From My Finger---</p>	
	<p>Through the Simple Process of ---Paying--- ---Being Paid---</p>	
	<p>For the Momentous Amount of 1 penny other---</p>	
	<p>Amir First Name</p> <p>Baradaran Last Name</p> <p>..... Signature</p>	
Date _____	Escape Clause	_____ Lieu

Only a self-identified female party is entitled to terminate the marriage at any time. She is also entitled to keep whatever monies or dowry exchange that has been agreed upon.

Figure 32: Amir Baradaran, *Marry Me to the End of Love*, Berkeley, CA, 2012.

When ready, Baradaran invites and greets the participant(s), who then join him to sit on the loveseat. Baradaran then retrieves the contract, verbally reiterates the range of conditions upon which to agree, and begins to solicit and negotiate with the participant(s)' responses.

(Sitting side-by-side on the loveseat, approximately six inches from each other, facing the audience-guests while slightly turned toward each other)

Amir: So you want to get married?

Ellen: Yeah.

Amir: Oh, really? Is this your first marriage?

Ellen: Yes.

Amir: It is! Ok, fantastic.

⁴⁵² My use of "them" firstly alludes to the fact that, at various times in *Marry Me to the End of Love*, Baradaran enters into temporary marriages with more than one other participant. My use of "them" also attempts to recognize other gender designations outside of the male/female binary.

Ellen: How about yourself?

Amir: *(He smiles, suddenly seeming a little shy)* Uh, I've been in about 351 [marriages] up until tonight. *(The audience responds with quiet laughter, Ellen smiles)* Not in the U.S. though, only in Europe. You'll be the first [marriage] in the U.S.

Ellen: Oh, wow. I'm honored.

Amir: So, for how long would you like to get married?

Ellen: I saw that my choices were 1, 3, and 5 [minutes].

Amir: That's correct.

Ellen: So I'll go with 5 minutes.

Amir: 5 minutes it is... *(Writes on contract)* And what would you like to do during this marriage? We have a list of choices: I could touch your foot with my foot; we could move furniture together; I could tell you a secret... *(Ellen smiles a little upon hearing the last option)* Do you want me to go further or have you made your choice?

Ellen: Yeah, I think I like the secret option.

Amir: Ok, so you want me to tell you a secret?

Ellen: Yeah.

Amir: Ok. So, I'm going to tell you a secret...*(Writes on contract)*. And then you need to decide what you're going to do for me.

Ellen: Oh, ok.

Amir: *(Reads from contract)* We could hold hands; we could kiss; I could pinch you; you could play with my hair; we could touch each other's funny bones; I could stare deeply into each other's eyes, or we could do it mutually; or you could lick honey from my finger.

Ellen: I think, um, I would like to play with your hair.

Amir: Alright. We could do that, but I am not too much interested in that. What else could we do?

Ellen: Um, what are you more interested in?

Amir: I would love for you to give me some honey and let me lick honey off of your finger.

Ellen: Ok.

Amir: And since we're going for 5 minutes, I would also like to stare very deeply into your eyes and you do the same. How's that?

Ellen: Ok, that sounds great.

Some of the performative components from *sigheh* that Baradaran wishes to engage (non-reproductive pleasure) are co-performed by him and performer-participants during their temporary marriage in mutually agreed upon ways and durations that also allow for the unpredictable and unscripted. While some of the things Baradaran and his consorts enact are chosen from a list of suggested activities outlined in the contract, other activities are spontaneously decided upon either while initially negotiating the contract or are added to the contract at some point during the duration of the marriage. Some of these unscripted, spontaneous activities include brainstorming baby names, reciting poetry, sifting through each other's personal belongings, sewing objects onto each other's clothing, staring out of the window and ignoring each other, and having an intellectual debate over candle light.



Figure 33: Amir Baradaran, *Marry Me to the End of Love*, Berkeley, CA, 2012.



Figure 34: Amir Baradaran, *Marry Me to the End of Love*, Berkeley, CA, 2012.

For Baradaran, *sigheh* also sheds light on the transactional aspect of relationships:

Amir: (*Writes on contract*) Alright, so as we said, you will give me honey and we're going to look into each other's eyes, both of us. Alright, for the completion of this process, would you like to get paid or would you like for me to get paid?

Ellen: Oh, um, I would like to get paid.

Amir: Ok, so, you get paid. (*Writes on contract*) And how much would you like to get paid? There's a bank here. What are the number of pennies you are interested in? Or you could decide another sum.

Ellen: I will go with, um, two pennies.

Amir: Two pennies, ok, I will write this. Ok, and you wanted to be paid, right? (*Ellen nods her head yes*) So I will be paying you. (*Continues to write*) The date is November 15th, 2012. Here is my signature. If you could put your first and last name here. (*She signs*)

Amir: Fantastic. Ok, so I will give you these 2 cents. (*He draws two pennies from the bowl on the sofreh and places them in her hand*)

Timekeeper: Ladies and gentlemen, I'd like to announce that this marriage is now official. Let's applause for the newlyweds!⁴⁵³ (*Audience applauds*)

(*Amir turns over the 5-minute sand hourglass and the marriage begins.*)

Once both (or all) parties agree upon the conditions of the marriage, they both/all sign the contract. Baradaran then flips over the appropriate hourglass and the timekeeper declares the beginning of the nuptials.

Amir: Alright, so let us start. So, you wanted me to tell you a secret.

Ellen: Yeah.

(*Amir leans in toward her, rests his hand on her arm, and begins whispering into her ear. Over the course of approximately 10 – 20 seconds, Ellen smiles periodically. After about 20 seconds, Ellen nods her head emphatically, smiling even bigger than before. Amir pulls away.*)

Amir: You'll keep it as a secret, yeah?

Ellen: I will.

Amir: Fantastic...ok, so we said that I wanted to have honey and that I wanted to stare deeply into your eyes. So. (*Waiting impatiently*) I can't wait to lick.

Ellen: Oh yeah! (*She reaches toward the honey bowl and hesitantly dips her forefinger.*)

Amir: Have you ever done this before?

Ellen: No, I haven't. So you just swirl it around?

Amir: Yes, just like that (*Encouraging her to continue swirling her finger in the air so as to wrap the dripping honey around her finger. Amir then takes her finger into his mouth. She keeps it there for him to continue lightly suckling.*)

Amir: Mmmm, the forefinger is always the best.

Ellen: Do we also stare?

Amir: (*Amir turns toward her, her finger still in his mouth.*) Ok, for the rest of the time, we will be looking into each other's eyes.

Amir eventually lets her finger go from his mouth and they remain seated facing toward each other, staring into each other eyes for a total of two minutes. The audience remains quiet, as if with bated breath, waiting to see what might happen, and perhaps also too from the discomfort of watching an encounter that feels so intimate. Aside from a few small silent smiles coming from Ellen's mouth, Amir and she remain motionless, not letting go of each other's gaze until the disruption of a ringing hand bell.

Timekeeper: Ladies and gentlemen, this marriage contract is now terminated. (*The 5-minute hourglass has run out. The audience seems to sigh a breath of relief and applauds.*)

Amir: (*Any quality of intimacy instantly dissipates and Amir shakes Ellen's hand in an almost totally platonic, business-like manner.*) In guise of appreciation for your participation, I want to give you a sealed envelope, which holds our secrets. (*Amir hands Ellen an envelope approximately 12" X 15" in size, with a bright red wax seal.*)

Once the hourglass has completely emptied, I, as the timekeeper, announce the termination of the contract. Whatever has been happening at that moment ends immediately; participants and

⁴⁵³ In addition to my organizational role in the curation of the performance installation, my participation in the performance itself entailed undertaking the dual role of officiate and time-keeper; upon the signing of each wedding contract and the exchange of payment/dowry, I verbally declared the marriage official. When the allotted hourglass ran empty, I verbally declared the end of each marriage contract.

spectators are left hanging in longing and/or are perhaps secretly relieved that the encounter was terminated. Baradaran then hands the participant their parting gift (a sealed and signed envelope) and another usher-performer, dressed in formal black clothes and white gloves, takes a photo of the “coupling” with a polaroid. The participant then joins the photographer to view the photo as it is placed into a big photo album as a trace/object, available for display to other spectators.

Among the many “lines of inquiry” that *Marry Me to the End of Love* enacts, the performance explores how the Islamic practice of temporary marriage might permit desire for desire’s sake rather than solely for purposes of procreation. It further retains the radical politics of the queer encounter in spite of the Islamophobic, homonational rhetoric that could potentially counter such a claim. Through extemporaneous and temporary encounters with participants lasting only 1, 3, or 5 minutes (a “being-with that forms a provisional and temporary commons through the encounter”),⁴⁵⁴ Baradaran and his multiple consorts create “ecologies of sensation” that produces queered intimacies.⁴⁵⁵ In doing so, the performance unravels heteronormative, privatized constructions of intimacy and desire, as well as the neoliberal divisions of public and private, which have increasingly become the foundation of the so-called progressive politics of proper modern queer subjects in the U.S. nation state. The intimate and transient encounters that Baradaran and spectator-participants craft, negotiate, and improvisationally perform together throughout the short span of their temporary marriages mobilizes “the contingencies and vulnerabilities of the flesh”⁴⁵⁶ and queer speech acts in order to enact Jose Estaban Muñoz’s notion of “queerness as a mode of ‘being-with’ that defies social conventions...yet still desirous for the world.”⁴⁵⁷

The Other Artist is Present (2010)

Baradaran first introduced performances of *sigheh* into the Western performance art lexicon when he infiltrated Marina Abramović’s 2010 performance of *The Artist is Present*, as I explored at the outset of this chapter. As a tribute to performance Abramović’s forty-year artistic career, MoMA exhibited a retrospective installation for nearly three months that featured re-presentations and live re-performances of approximately fifty of her ephemeral, time-based, and media-based works. The MoMA installation also featured Abramović herself in her latest performance, *The Artist is Present*; a 736-hour and 30-minute silent performance piece in which Abramović sat immobile in the museum’s atrium every day the museum was open while

⁴⁵⁴ Muñoz, “Gimme Gimme This...”, 102.

⁴⁵⁵ Rai, “Race Racing.”

⁴⁵⁶ Mathias Detamore describes Elizabeth Povinelli’s theorization of carnality: “[Povinelli] interrogates the assumptions of liberal governmentality by placing the ‘flesh’ of the body under a critical spotlight to distinguish ‘corporeality’ as the ‘juridical and political maneuver of the flesh’ from carnality as the ‘physical mattering forth of these maneuvers’ (2006). In this way,” Detamore explains, “[Povinelli] leverages a critique against liberal assumptions about intimacy through the contingencies and vulnerabilities of the flesh, to open up a space for other kinds of intimacies.” Mathias J. Detamore, “Queer Appalachia: Geographies of Possibility,” PhD diss. (University of Kentucky, 2010), 171.

⁴⁵⁷ Muñoz, “Gimme Gimme This...”, 96. I suggest that these modes of performance perform much in the same way as Deleuze and Guattari’s “minor languages”; Baradaran doesn’t imagine himself an agential subject outside of structures of power but rather, through *Marry Me to the End of Love*, he attempts to highlight and performatively deterritorialize U.S. homonationalism and the neoliberal, secularist, and racialized logics that underwrite both American narratives of national exceptionalism and contemporary global art markets (both of which demand that difference be made legible and consumable). Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*, trans. Dana Polan (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1986).

spectators were invited to participate by taking turns sitting opposite her. Featuring both the chronological re-creation of Abramović's past works performed by other young artists in concert with featuring Abramović herself in the commencement of an original performance, MoMA proclaimed itself as providing visitors the once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to experience the timelessness of Abramović's works in one place. Nearly half a million Abramović fans stood in long lines for several hours over the course of the exhibit and by the exhibit's end, over 1,400 visitors silently sat across from and within the artist's presence, assimilating her gaze.

During Abramović's performance installation, Baradaran accepts Abramović's silent invitation to experience the artist's presence. However, unlike other spectators, he refuses to accept Abramović's objectifying gaze in assimilative silence (not to mention, the gaze of other spectators as well as that of various technological apparatuses such as official photo and video cameras). Instead, Baradaran appropriates her performance through enacting one of his own, entitled *The Other Artist Is Present*; a guerilla performance in four acts wherein Baradaran both pays homage to and critically questions Abramović's prolific career as both she and MoMA as an institution represent it. MoMA and Abramović together framed the exhibit within often contradicting chronological terms, as produced and understood through heteronormative modernity: preservation, timelessness, authenticity, and presence. While hired young artists reenact Abramović's original works in other parts of the museum, Baradaran's performance instead cites her past works in an accented queer translation. For instance, Baradaran's Arabic recitation of "God is beautiful and He loves beauty" employs his own cultural reference in order to reference Abramović's 1975 performance, *Art Must Be Beautiful, Artist Must Be Beautiful*.

The Artist is Present and *The Other Artist is Present* take place in a large, open, sterile, industrial-looking atrium of MoMA: cement floors, white walls, and extraordinarily tall ceilings. Single lines of people line the perimeter of the delineated space in which Abramović sits silently, wearing a long navy blue dress that reaches to the floor on a light wood chair at a table. An empty seat at the table waits opposite from her. Her hands rest together in her lap as she stares forward, off to a distance, not exactly making eye contact with her participants yet not looking away or down. In Baradaran's first act, entitled "Bodies and Wedding," Baradaran proposes to wed Abramović and utilizes choreographies of *sigheh* to bring attention not only to his difference as racially "Other" but to his position (as well as those of all participants in her piece) as an artist in the desired consummation of the work.⁴⁵⁸ Baradaran walks from the line of people toward Abramović. He is donned in a bright red dress that matches Abramović's in design, yet contrasts in color. He lifts the skirt of the dress up in order to sit across from Abramović, brings his hands together at his lap (like Abramović) and draws his eyes downward for a few moments until he finally meets Abramović's gaze.

⁴⁵⁸ Amir Baradaran, "Amir Baradaran, Act I: Bodies and Wedding, On Marina Abramovic's The artist is present," *YouTube* video, 2:40, March 17, 2010, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9qRJI6hZ_Zs.



Figure 35: Amir Baradaran, *The Other Artist is Present*, Act 1: *Bodies and Wedding*, NY MoMA, 2010.

He begins to speak to her as she gazes across at him with little expression:

It's an honor to be sitting across from an artist that I love so much. Dear Marina, I love you. I love your bodies of work. I love this particular body. And I would love to be wedded to this body today. So I ask for your hand today, in this very moment. Dear Marina, do you accept this marriage?

Baradaran looks down again, this time his posture slouches more and his head is heavier. Finally, he looks up at her again and continues speaking: "I see you're not answering. In my culture, when the bride does not answer for the first time, they say she went to pick flowers. So, beloved Marina, I ask you again. Would you accept this marriage, here and now?" This time, Baradaran does not lower his gaze and pauses very quickly before continuing: "I see you're not answering. In my culture, when the bride does not answer for the second time, they say she went to make rose water from the flowers. So, I ask you again. Dear Marina, would you accept this marriage, here and now?" Baradaran's repetition of "in my culture..." references Abramović's *How We in the Balkans Kill Rats* (1997) in which she stoically and didactically describes how they kill rats in her culture. When Abramović refuses to answer for the third time, he keeps her gaze for a moment more until suddenly a warbled sound comes into the sterile, open space from an undetermined location. It is then that Baradaran finds solace in the sonic archive of a Farsi song that pleads, "Bebinam, mano doost dari? Baleh!" ("Look, do you love me? [Say] yes!") The sound reminiscent of an old record plays on a small boom box from within his dress, as a husky voice sings:

"Mano doost daari?" (Do you love me?)

A small chorus responds: "Baleh!" (Yes!)

Baradaran begins to raise his arms out to his sides at shoulder height, alternating between snapping his fingers to the 6/8 rhythm and circling his hands from the wrists. He smiles for just a moment, almost awkwardly, as his shoulders begin to shimmy ever so slightly. His face returns to a more serious demeanor as he slowly alternates bringing one hand at a time to the sides of his face, gesturing toward his hand with his eyes. He looks forward again as he begins to slide his head side-to-side, arms outstretched, slowly rising from his chair to standing, now with more pronounced shoulder shimmies.



Figure 36: Amir Baradaran, *The Other Artist is Present*, Act 1: *Bodies and Wedding*, NY MoMA, 2010.

Just as he stands, the rhythm ends, but the singer's verbal expression returns, which prompts Baradaran to stand still, with his hands together in front of him, his head and gaze down, as if humbled and shy.

“Bebinam! Mano doost dari?” (Look! Do you love me?)

A small chorus responds: “Baleh!” (Yes!)

The song ends and the room returns to silence as Baradaran continues to stand across from Abramović, who has not moved from her initial posture.

Through this song and dance, Baradaran again references Abramović's *How We in the Balkans Kill Rats*, in which Abramović transitions from her didactic lecture into a lively folk dance. In Baradaran's queer translation of this scene, he conjures his sensory memories of another iconographic woman, Parivash, the Iranian 1960s FilmFarsi cabaret singer of the song to which Baradaran performs. Baradaran describes Parivash as “voluptuously yummy,” who “could almost pass as a chubby man,”⁴⁵⁹ and whose deviant sexuality was framed temporally in the past against the backdrop of modernizing, forward-oriented Iran.⁴⁶⁰ Baradaran performs the popular social dance style associated with the urban working classes to which Parivash and her audiences belonged. He adopts the facial expressions that many of these cabaret dancers and singers were known for, shifting eyes and eyebrows and mischievous smiles with sometimes quivering lips. Through this camp performance, Baradaran brings to life Parivash's bracketed, queer femininity through his impossible embodied archive in a performance with Abramović in which he knows the marriage he proposes will never become consummated.

Rebecca Schneider suggests that drag, camp aesthetic, and the “essential threat of the double (the feared category of the mimetic) seem a queer interruption to modernity's thrall to the new, to the original, to the aim for the ‘pure’ aesthetic act.”⁴⁶¹ Through his performance, Baradaran appropriates Abramović's genealogy through grafting his “Othered” bodily archive

⁴⁵⁹ Amir Baradaran, personal conversation.

⁴⁶⁰ FilmFarsi is a genre of film that was produced in Iran during the 1960s and 1970s that often depicted “bad/tough guys” and “scandalous women.”

⁴⁶¹ Schneider, *Performing Remains*, 112.

and cultural repertoire onto hers, highlighting the slips and fissures in repeatability, as well as the impossibility of Abramović's universal claim of the authentic "here and now," with its unspoken reference to a universal place and time. Schneider asks, "To what degree is a live act *then* as well as now?"⁴⁶² Through bringing together Parivash and Abramović (differently located geographically and temporally), Baradaran's body becomes the conduit exposing the instabilities of "here and now" and performs archival assemblages of geo-temporal proximities of the here/not here, the now/not now, and the affective places in between.

Through his ultimate expulsion from *The Artist is Present*, MoMA provided Baradaran with a very literal and emblematic answer to the pressing questions Baradaran faces as an Othered artist within the global art market. More gravely, however, his expulsion also points to an all too familiar experience as a racialized subject in the U.S. nation-state, where Baradaran persistently faces risks of deportation and exclusion, realized through his fourth and final act in *The Other Artist is Present* entitled "Reflections," as described at the opening of the chapter. Baradaran chants more passionately and despondently as he had while sitting across Abramović: "huwa jamil wa yuhibu jamil...huwa jamil wa yuhibu jamil...huwa jamil wa yuhibu jamil..." Forced out of MoMA, looking through the lobby glass windows from the outside, contending with his own reflection, and consoling his rejection with an inarticulate utterance only partially reminiscent of this Islamic chant he learned from his grandfather as a child in Iran. In describing her own performance works, Abramović insists that "the public watching has to be here and now."⁴⁶³ I imagine Baradaran's response to Abramović as akin to José Esteban Muñoz's interpretation of Darby Crash's famous punk song "gimme, gimme," about which Muñoz states: "'Gimme, gimme' [is] as an open call for having and needing more. It is the relevant complaint that this 'here and now is not enough,' that we must demand more and more from the world and we should not be content to settle." Similarly, I envision Baradaran exclaiming, "Dear Marina, I love you. I love your bodies of work...[But] the here and now is not enough."⁴⁶⁴

Conclusion

Baradaran's performances lend themselves to and extend upon my theorization of "choreographic cartographies" and diasporic Iranianness through a framework of queer performativity, which Freeman suggests "might be to construct and circulate something like an embodied temporal map, a fleshly warehouse for contingent forms of being and belonging, a closet full of gendered possibilities."⁴⁶⁵ Rather than recuperating hegemonic national iconography of Iranianness to engage with geopolitical constructions of Baradaran's queer, Iranian, Muslim body, his performances unearth the gendered "throw away" objects of Iranian cultural repertoires that tend to get marginalized within both dominant Iranian nationalist and Euro-American geopolitical constructions and archives. In *Frenchising Mona Lisa*, Baradaran creates a performance assemblage enabled by Augmented Reality technology through which his body enacts and becomes the *Mona Lisa* as a Muslim woman veiling herself with the French flag in the institutional space of the Louvre. At once, Baradaran mobilizes his veiling body in "temporal drag" to critically question the xenophobic political landscape of contemporary France, to

⁴⁶² Ibid, 37.

⁴⁶³ "The Life and Death of Marina Abramovic In Manchester," *Artlyst*, March 7, 2011, <http://www.artlyst.com/articles/the-life-and-death-of-marina-abramovic-in-manchester>.

⁴⁶⁴ Muñoz, "Gimme Gimme This..." 107.

⁴⁶⁵ Freeman, *Time Binds*, 71.

complicate conventional ontologies of performance as embodied liveness, and to create the relational mapping of participants' bodies in a process he refers to as "choreographing the social." At the same time that Baradaran is positioned as an outsider within the nation state and secular performance arts circles, *Marry Me to the End of Love* generates queer relationality of intimate encounters produced through the enactment of *sigheh*, a Shi'a Islamic institution of temporary marriage. Through entering into temporary marriages with performance participants, Baradaran and his consorts reveal relationality and desire as transactional and performatively disrupt heteronormative constructions of belonging. At the same time that *Marry Me to the End of Love* enacts micro-relations of queer intimacy between Baradaran, his consorts, and the audience members/witnesses, the performance interrogates contemporary homonationalist U.S. politics that incorporate him as a queer subject while simultaneously marginalizing his Muslim body. Finally, Baradaran draws upon the cultural repertoire of *sigheh* in his guerrilla performance, *The Other Artist is Present*, during which he sits across Marina Abramović in her MoMA performance of *The Artist is Present* and proposes to marry her and her body of work. While hired artists re-enact Abramović's vast body of work throughout the MoMA, Baradaran animates his "embodied temporal map" of Iranianness to cite Abramović's works in queer translation. In this process, he draws from archives of Iranianness that range from the sacred to the profane, such as his grandfather's Sufi prayer and the repertoires of the 1960s FilmFarsi cabaret singer Parivash. Across all of Baradaran's performances, the "throw away" objects and "backward" repertoires of Iranianness become the means through which to recuperate and construct queer diasporic Iranian archives, to interrogate transnational geopolitics constructing Muslim subjects, and to generate new forms of belonging.

Epilogue

Negotiating the Precarity of Enoughness

As I begin to write this epilogue, it is three days after the deadliest mass shooting in modern U.S. history, which took place on June 12, 2016 at a popular gay nightclub, Pulse, in Orlando, Florida during their Latinx-themed dance night. Fifty people were killed—including the assailant, twenty-nine-year-old Afghan-American Omar Mateen—and fifty-three others were injured, many of who currently remain in critical condition. The tragic event, which has been named the deadliest terrorist attack in the U.S. since the events of 9/11, has initiated an array of responses from across the nation. There has been an outpouring of condolences from diverse communities—including from the political left, the political right, LGBTQ groups, and American Muslim organizations—for the shooting victims and their families. At the same time, the events have prompted politicians, political commenters, and media sources to question the internal and external threats of (Muslim) terrorism, U.S. gun laws, and foreign policy. As we lead up to the November 2016 U.S. presidential elections, the Orlando shooting has become part of the rhetoric and debates between the presumptive Democrat and Republican nominees, Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump, respectively. Significantly, because Mateen had allegedly pledged allegiance to the Islamic State in a 911 call during the shooting, Trump has referred to the Orlando shooting as another justification for his proposed “total and complete” ban on all Muslims entering the U.S. (which he had initially proposed six months earlier after the mass shooting in San Bernardino, California that occurred on December 2, 2015).⁴⁶⁶ He further called to expand upon his earlier proposition by “suspend[ing] immigration from areas of the world where there’s a proven history of terrorism against the United States.”⁴⁶⁷ Although Mateen had been born in New York State to Afghan immigrant parents, Trump has framed the Orlando shooting as a result of the U.S.’s “dysfunctional immigration system,” arguing: “The bottom line is that the only reason the killer was in America in the first place was because we allowed his family to come here.”⁴⁶⁸ Leaders from both the Democratic and Republican parties have condemned Trump’s response to the Orlando shooting and President Obama has since addressed the nation denouncing Trump’s anti-Muslim rhetoric, calling Trump’s proposed ban on Muslim immigration “dangerous,” and against the American nation’s democratic ideals.

However, while Obama has criticized Trump’s proposed ban on Muslims as unconstitutional, a few months prior and in response to the San Bernardino shooting, the U.S. House of Representatives covertly passed a bill on December 16, 2015 that discriminates against dual nationals from four countries that the U.S. has considered state sponsors of terrorism: Iran, Iraq, Syria, and Sudan. This Visa Waiver Program Improvement and Terrorist Travel Prevention Act of 2015 is commonly referred to as H.R. 158 and reforms the Visa Waiver program, which had allowed citizens of thirty-eight countries to travel without a visa to particular countries in

⁴⁶⁶ The 2015 San Bernardino mass shooting, which occurred on December 2, 2016, resulted in fourteen deaths by married couple, Syed Rizwan Faruk and Tashfeen Malik.

⁴⁶⁷ Jonathan Martin and Alexander Burns, “Blaming Muslims After Attack, Donald Trump Tosses Pluralism Aside,” *The New York Times*, June 13, 2016, http://www.nytimes.com/2016/06/14/us/politics/donald-trump-hillary-clinton-speeches.html?_r=0.

⁴⁶⁸ Donald J. Trump, “Donald J. Trump Addresses Terrorism, Immigration, and National Security,” Trump’s official website, June 13, 2016, <https://www.donaldjtrump.com/press-releases/donald-j.-trump-addresses-terrorism-immigration-and-national-security>.

Europe and Asia, as well as the U.S.⁴⁶⁹ As part of the reform, H.R. 158 banned dual citizens of Iran, Iraq, Syria, and Sudan and those who have traveled to these countries within the past five years from visa-free travel to the U.S. Since the Visa Waiver program is based on reciprocity with a consortium of these thirty-eight countries, these countries can choose to respond to the H.R. 158 bill by imposing similar restrictions on U.S. citizens who also hold these dual nationalities.⁴⁷⁰ Many civil rights organizations and activists within the U.S. have accused H.R. 158 of “effectively render[ing] dual citizens and those who have traveled to Iran, Iraq, Sudan, and Syria second-class citizens by creating a two-tiered system of citizenship.”⁴⁷¹ Meanwhile, U.S. House members are currently voting upon a new discriminatory immigration bill against these same dual citizens, the H.R. 5303 VISA Act, that would require advanced security measures for these dual nationals seeking visas to the U.S., such as DNA testing to prove familial relationships to American family members and other “burden of proof” requirements.⁴⁷²

Between Donald Trump’s anti-Muslim stance *and* the H.R. 158 Visa Waiver that President Obama recently signed, questions arise surrounding who counts as an American citizen and who constitutes a threat to the citizenry. In these two cases, Muslimness continues to be conflated with terrorism, a conflation that frames Muslims as unworthy of citizenship and/or as a threat to those who are deemed worthy of citizenship. Furthermore, through the establishment of the H.R. 158 Visa Waiver—which is targeted at enhancing security measures against potential terrorism from a short list of dual nationalities that includes dual Iranian nationals—Iranianness itself becomes a significant part of these layers of conflation.⁴⁷³ The Iranian American response to H.R. 158 across social media and op-ed pieces has decried the ways in which the bill demotes them to second-class citizens and scapegoats Iranians, who, as many Iranian Americans point out, had never been accused of terrorist attacks in the U.S. and instead are “professionals who have helped build America.”⁴⁷⁴ Across this discourse, some Iranian Americans have positioned Iranians as dissimilar to the other dual nationals on the list from Iraq, Syria, and Sudan and have

⁴⁶⁹ The bill passed with a 407–19 vote and had support from both Democrat and Republican House members and officials. “Tea Party supporter Congresswoman Candice Miller slid the H.R. 158 rider into the must-pass budget bill, the Omnibus Appropriations Bill 2015. Despite widespread public denunciations of Trump’s hate speech by both Democrats and Republicans, policymakers from across the political spectrum voted in favor of the discriminatory bill. Although more than 200 non-governmental organizations - including the American Civil Liberty Union, the Leadership Conference, and the National Iranian American Council - raised numerous objections to the ways H.R. 158 curtails the most basic of rights, this bill was passed almost unanimously in the House and signed into law by President Obama.” Azita Ranjbar and Morteza Karimzadeh, “When Rhetoric Becomes Reality: Changes to Visa Waiver Program Create Second-Class Citizens,” *The Huffington Post*, modified January 8, 2016, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/azita-ranjbar/when-rhetoric-becomes-rea_b_8934832.html.

⁴⁷⁰ Since the Visa Waiver program is based on reciprocity with a consortium of these thirty-eight countries, these countries can choose to respond to the H.R. 158 bill by imposing similar restrictions on U.S. citizens who also hold these dual nationalities.

⁴⁷¹ Ranjbar and Karimzadeh, “When Rhetoric Becomes Reality.”

⁴⁷² The H.R. 5303 VISA Act is also called the Visa Integrity and Security Act. In addition to dual nationals from Iran, Iraq, Syria, and Sudan (like the H.R. 158 Visa Waiver,) H.R. 5303 VISA Act would include dual nationals from Yemen.

⁴⁷³ “According to the *Los Angeles Times*, *Los Angeles Times*, the bill intends to ‘eliminate the risk of terrorists with ties to the Islamic State or other militant groups from entering the United States,’ and Speaker of the House Paul Ryan (R-WI) stated, ‘this will help neutralize the threat from foreign terrorists entering the country.’ This bill’s language will enable broad discrimination of citizens based on country of origin or loose ties to one of the four countries.” Samira Damavandi, “Am I Not American Enough?,” *The Huffington Post*, modified December 14, 2015, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/Samira-Damavandi/visa-waiver-program_b_8790096.html.

⁴⁷⁴ Farshad Farahat, “Iranian Americans Are Not Second Class Citizens,” *The Huffington Post*, modified December 16, 2015, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/farshad-farahat/iranian-americans-are-not_b_8799192.html.

called for appeals that would specifically remove Iranian dual nationals from the bill. Other Iranian Americans have cautioned against this narrative of exceptionalism, emphasizing the ways in which the bill unfairly discriminates against all of the dual nationals on the list, not just Iranians. From either side of this perspective, dual nationals who are immediately or potentially affected by H.R. 158 are prompted to prove their “enoughness” as citizens, as illustrated by the title of Samira Damavandi’s *Huffington Post* blog post about H.R. 158, “Am I not American enough?”⁴⁷⁵

Across the transnational sites of my dissertation, diasporic Iranian artists have similarly had to substantiate multiple forms of “enoughness” vis-à-vis Euro-American geopolitical landscapes, world/ethnic dance markets, Western (modern and contemporary) dance institutions and scenes, performance art markets, and diasporic Iranian communities and audiences. For instance, dancers in chapter one mobilize specifically national and classical Iranian dances as evidence of Iranians’ abilities to be “civilized.” I argue that these discourses perpetuate problematic classed and gendered hierarchies inherited from Pahlavi-era Iranian tropes of modernity, marginalize past and present Iranian dancers that engender other corporeal forms of expression (such as the cabaret dance of mid- to late-twentieth century Iran or the present-day “L.A.-style” dancer), and run the risk of unintentionally corroborating with Euro-American anti-Arab sentiment. At the same time, I also frame this impulse to promote the Iranian dances that, for these dancers, reflect “civilized” Iranianness within the Euro-American geopolitical contexts that construct Iranian subjects as geo-temporally “backward,” “barbaric,” and associated with violent religiosity. Thus I argue these representations of overt Iranianness, while perhaps hegemonic, are nonetheless courageous acts of identification—of securing the intelligibility of “enoughness”—within contexts where obscuring Iranianness is also a viable strategy of survival.

I examine in chapter two how diasporic Iranian dancers who are developing contemporary Iranian dance must negotiate various demands to substantiate their “enoughness.” Since contemporary Iranian dance is an intentionally hybrid dance form that draws from and experiments with traditional Iranian movements and aesthetics, these dancers often find the “authenticity” of their form particularly questioned and challenged by world/ethnic dance aesthetic regimes that base notions of authenticity on specific significations of ethnicity represented through costuming and music common to national, classical, and regional dances forms. Paradoxically not Iranian enough for world/ethnic dance markets nor for nostalgic, diasporic Iranian audiences seeking “authentic” representations of Iranian dance forms, these contemporary Iranian dance artists find that claiming Iranianness as part of their contemporary experimental choreographic work often works against them among Western dance institutions who define them simply as “ethnic” dancers who are not technical, experimental, or universal enough to be part of academic dance curricula or (Euro-American) contemporary/modern dance circuits. The resistance toward or the dismissal of the hybridity of these artists’ choreographic works reveals the aesthetic regimes of these contexts, as well as the politics of belonging/unbelonging that these various groups and institutions produce.

In chapter three, I interrogate how dance, which is often conceived of as a “universal” and quintessentially “human” form of expression, problematically works to substantiate the humanness of Muslim/Middle Eastern subjects who are often constructed as non-human within Euro-American geo/biopolitical constructs. Looking to the émigré Iranian dancer Afshin Ghaffarian, I explore how the conflation of dance with humanity enables cultural and political citizenship for him in secular France. Ghaffarian’s political asylum in the French republic has

⁴⁷⁵ Samira Damavandi, “Am I Not American Enough?”

produced mainstream French media discourses that designate Ghaffarian as an “Iranian dancer in exile” despite republican principles of universalism and sameness that might eschew such designations. The chapter demonstrates how the reinforcement and enforcement of French universalism depends upon the public displays of Others exhibiting their transformation from “particular” to “universal” through social and theatrical performances. As much as Ghaffarian aesthetically and socially performs French republican ideals, however, he remains bound to this label of “Iranian dancer in exile” common to among media sources and art circles since, as I argue, it upholds the (neo)colonial image of France as the benevolent beacon of freedom. In my theorization of “savior spectatorship,” the chapter also analyzes the American-produced film, *Desert Dancer* (2014), which depicts Ghaffarian’s life-story as a dancer in Iran before his exile in France, showing the distinct ways these “savior” narratives circulate transnationally and create distinct yet shared “affects of empire.” Across both Ghaffarian’s lived experiences in France and the representations of him in *Desert Dancer*, I argue that the dance as proof of one’s humanity is a precarious position that depends upon the purview to “save.”

Amir Baradaran’s performance art, which constitutes the focus of my final and fourth chapter, critically questions the double standards of American exceptionalism, particularly the recent U.S. political project of incorporating same-sex couples into the state-sanctioned institution of marriage, a project that seeks to include him as a proper gay citizen-subject, and the racialized constructions of the Middle Eastern “Other” that seek to exclude him from the nation-state. As I describe in the chapter, Jasbir Puar has formulated the concept of “homonationalism” to account for the political processes that produce gay and lesbian American citizens as normative over the racialized and sexualized Muslim/Middle Eastern male subjects who have become produced through (and targeted by) the biopolitics of the U.S. War on Terror.⁴⁷⁶ A significant framing device that forms homonationalism is the narrative that Muslims are exceptionally homophobic as dictated by their Islamic faith and, in contrast, the (neo)liberal inclusion of gay subjects into the nation state proves Euro-American exceptionalism as progressive and free. This narrative further constructs Muslim and Middle Eastern subjects (who are frequently conflated with each other) as incompatible with the “freedom” and democracy of the West.

The politics of homonationalism have become evident in particular political responses following the recent Orlando shootings. For instance, Republican Ohio governor, John Kasich, who has voted against efforts to prohibit discrimination based on sexual orientation and opposed marriage equality and same-sex adoption, tweeted, “Take time to mourn those lost in #Orlando & pray for their families. Terror & violence have no place in our world. We must fight it together.”⁴⁷⁷ Presumptive Democrat presidential nominee, Hillary Clinton, presumably more progressive than her Republican counterparts, has simultaneously declared solidarity with LGBTQ communities following the Orlando shooting while sustaining the war on terrorism narrative as part of her rhetoric:

On Sunday, Americans woke up to a nightmare that’s become mind-numbingly familiar: Another act of terrorism...A madman filled with hate...apparently consumed by rage against LGBT Americans—and by extension, the openness and diversity that defines our American way of life...We know that he pledged allegiance to ISIS, that they are now

⁴⁷⁶ Jasbir Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages*.

⁴⁷⁷ See: Human Rights Campaign website, accessed June 14, 2016, <http://www.hrc.org/2016RepublicanFacts/john-kasich>; John Kasich, Twitter post, June 12, 2016, 10:39 a.m. <https://twitter.com/johnkasich/status/742018486134702080>.

taking credit, and that part of their strategy is to radicalize individuals and encourage attacks against the United States...The Orlando terrorist may be dead, but the virus that poisoned his mind remains very much alive. We must attack it with clear eyes, steady hands, unwavering determination and pride in our country and our values...From Stonewall to Laremy [sic] and now Orlando. We've seen too many examples of how the struggle to live freely, openly, and without fear has been met by violence. We have to stand together. Be proud together. There is no better rebuke to the terrorists, to all those who hate. Our open diverse society is an asset in the struggle against terrorism, not a liability. It makes us stronger and more resistant to radicalization.⁴⁷⁸

As Clinton's text suggests, in the political rhetoric that spans political party lines, Muslimness/Middle Easternness and homosexuality are mutually exclusive, pitted against each other as politicized pawns in the fortification of Euro-American empire. Baradaran's performances, through Muslim and Iranian cultural repertoires often deemed "backward" within both diasporic Iranian and Euro-American nationalist rhetoric, draw attention to the constructions of his allegedly contradictory identities—queer, Iranian, Muslim. In doing so, Baradaran's performances critique national narratives that construct immigrant subjects as excessively Other while simultaneously building queer community with and among the spectators who participate in his performances, thereby forming new affiliations of belonging beyond the nation.

Ultimately, this dissertation has highlighted that, through dance and performance, diasporic Iranian artists continue to contest the negative constructions of Iranianness as terrorist and/or as perpetual pastness while simultaneously mobilizing Iranianness to generate and strengthen multiple forms of belonging and affiliation across local, national, and transnational sites. In doing so, the artists in my study have animated choreographic cartographies, or rather, their performing bodies as embodied archives that carry and reconfigure social and aesthetic memories and histories as they adaptively map out and negotiate new forms of belonging in their respective diasporic spaces. In this, and while this dissertation has examined the ways in which diasporic Iranian performers cultivate diverse forms of cultural citizenship locally, nationally, and transnationally, my attention to how dance enables pathways to political citizenship for some Iranians can be greatly expanded beyond my analysis of Afshin Ghaffarian's asylum in France in chapter three. For instance, many dancers who are Iranian nationals are increasingly applying for and being granted asylum in Europe and North America based on claims of human rights abuses for being prohibited from pursuing a professional dance career in Iran. What appears central to the experiences of many Iranian dancers (both in and beyond my study) is the relationship between the legal avenues of immigration and the illegality of dance in Iran.

Euro-American discourses of human rights abuses also cross aesthetic and hierarchical (gendered and classed) boundaries between "high" and "low" forms of Iranian dance. While this dissertation has focused primarily on national, classical, and contemporary dance forms, future instantiations of the project will disrupt such hierarchies and rights discourses through further consideration of artists such as Mohammad Khordadian. Openly queer and a practitioner of the popular "LA-style" of Tehrangeles, Khordadian is an Iranian American symbol of Iranianness and, for some, a symbol of resistance against the Islamic Republic of Iran. Under Euro-American rights discourses and in transnational contexts his "out of the closet" identity reconfigures his body and movement as a homonationalist emblem of the transgressive potential of dance,

⁴⁷⁸ Hillary Clinton, "Remarks on the terrorist attacks in Orlando, Florida," Hillary Clinton website, June 13, 2016, <https://www.hillaryclinton.com/speeches/remarks-terrorist-attacks-orlando-florida/>.

particularly in light of his arrest upon his visit to Iran in 2002.⁴⁷⁹ Ghaffarian and Khordadian's case studies provide key insights as to how, in transnational contexts, diasporic bodies become "civic bodies" as they are squared against rhetorics of Iranian human rights abuses.⁴⁸⁰ As this dissertation transforms into a monograph, a more invested analysis of how dance is ontologically constructed in human rights discourses, and more specifically, how discourses about dance in Iran are produced for and through the legal avenues to asylum and citizenship, will add important layers of complexity to this project.

That said, as an understudied population and subject of analysis, a sustained inquiry into the lives and choreographic works of diasporic Iranian dancers and performance artists firstly provides critical insight into diasporic Iranian subjectivities by expanding the dominant archive of object- or text-oriented Iranian cultural production, such as film, visual art, autobiographical and fictional literature, and poetry. For dance and performance studies, this dissertation not only provides a general history and analysis of this understudied demographic, but it also draws attention to the legacies and relations of power that continue to construct, marginalize, and/or consume Othered artists within world/ethnic dance markets, Western dance institutions, and performance art circles. Furthermore, my dissertation prompts dance and performance studies scholars to question the ways in which our liberal or progressive politics might unintentionally contribute to problematic paradigms of "saving," and to what Lila Abu-Lughod has called the "romance of resistance," that might perhaps unwittingly corroborate with discourses and practices that serve to uphold Euro-American war and empire.⁴⁸¹

⁴⁷⁹ See: Firoozeh Papan-Matin, "The Case of Mohammad Khordadian, an Iranian Male Dancer," *Iranian Studies* 42, no. 1 (2009): 127-138.

⁴⁸⁰ Moallem, *Between Warrior Brother and Veiled Sister*.

⁴⁸¹ Abu-Lughod, "The Romance of Resistance."

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