

Intentionally Iranian:

Belonging, the Iranian Monolith, and Solidarities within the Iranian Diaspora in Colorado

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Prologue

When I was a child, I spent a lot of time sitting on the connecting section between the lower and upper part of the stairs in my tiny, North Boulder apartment. Propped up against the wall before me was a long picture frame that exceeded my height, filled with pictures of a family I had far, far away. Upon putting on my finest fancy dress and adorning my hair with Waldorf acquired silks, I would saunter half-way down the carpeted steps to the landing, sitting down for our nightly family gathering. My maman bozorg, Hage khānoom with her lovely blonde hair and fair complexion sat to the right in the picture spread. Her stern yet soft glance reminded me to sit up straight and take pride in the part of me that warranted questioning, both internally and externally. Beside her sat my baba joon: tall and gallant, my grandfather, a well known veterinarian in his community, who passed away many years ago when my father was a child. His relaxed face and dark features felt comforting, his advice notorious for being practical and impassioned and a lot like my dad's... The rest of the collection was filled with aunts, uncles, cousins, sedentary faces with shining eyes and an implicit invitation for me to talk with them for hours about our days, collectively laugh when my mind envisioned one frozen image doing something so characteristically funny of them, and how much we missed each other and couldn't wait until the day we were united in the physical reality beyond the one I had created in that stairwell. It was these photo-informed invisible conversations that traversed the years of my early childhood, informing my understanding of my Iranian connection and embodiment, as imagined and intangible as my family. Confined in perpetuity to the constructs of my devisings.

My name is Rumi Maryam Natanzi—Rumi after the 13th century Persian, Sufi poet, philosopher, and mystic, beloved across the mid-SWANA region and in the last little bit of history, the west. Maryam after my dear great-grandmother, my father's grandmother. Natanzi, my Persian last name, an indication of the town where my great, great-relatives on my grandfather's side originated from: Natanz. I am a white, woman identifying, Boulder living, social justice oriented, questioning, curious, Iranian-American who didn't always include that last bit in the rundown. For the majority of my life, this side of my identity has existed in a nebulous state. This is not to say I wasn't raised to be proud of and in touch with my Persian heritage, to the extent that was possible given the location of my upbringing and parents' capacity. I mean, I was bringing rich, aromatic, mature Persian stews to lunch rooms across Boulder county before it was cool... The soundscapes of Moein's haunting and incomparable voice colors my early memories. My father speaking Farsi into the space of our living room, not always directed at someone in particular, indicated a longing I could never fully understand, a displacement he'd never get over. Reading the Persian version of Cinderella at night, the beautiful tale of a girl with my cousin's name, centering her kindness and resiliency, not steeped in cis-heteropatriarchy like the American version (seriously, let's get a grip). Yup, no cis-heteropatriarchy there...The celebration of Shab-e Yalda or the Winter Solstice, a momentous holiday in Persian culture. Nowruz or the Persian New Year in the spring with small but meaningful gatherings of the various Persian friends my dad had made since coming to Colorado. My American mother would carefully and painstakingly organize the haft seen table, going from store to store weeks in advance to ensure the correct components were present. Despite this, I don't know if I can say I had a true understanding of what this piece of my identity meant outside of my home. Other representations of Iranian culture were sparse if not non-existent within my upbringing, invoking feelings of

ambivalent isolation. Sure, my name was often questioned by the kids I went to school with; shifting inquiries around my dad's melodious accent dotted playdates and surrounded the often accompanying protein pasta dishes of my friends' moms (classic Boulder). My physical characteristics don't really draw on commonly pictured Middle Eastern tropes, but indicate to some an ethnic ambiguity that creates a precarious yet simultaneously bold allure, which perhaps made it easier to simply exist with the knowledge of this side of myself without ever truly understanding its significance and implications for my positionality, both in the present and future.

Living the entirety of my life in Boulder has been an interesting experience. For much of my life, I have existed in this state of ethnic ambiguity: not only is this a verbatim term offered in conversations with white, non-Iranians smirking with pride at identifying difference, regardless of how tiny and peripheral others within my life perceived that very thing to be. Another side of this ambiguity was self imposed perhaps out of confusion, misunderstanding, imposter syndrome...my liminal positioning impacted the ways I interacted with my Iranian identity, interacted with others who held this identity, and censured my overall relationship that at the time felt precarious and nonsensical. But without the ability to decipher the rationality I knew premised my personhood I was self-regulated to an undecipherable status; unintentional relegation that consisted of forethought and questioning, but stopped short of conceivable understanding.

Why am I telling you all this? You've obviously begun this reading process (it's a lot, buckle in) with the hopes of spurring academic arguments, or perhaps a revelation or previously undocumented dynamics within the covert congregation of Iranians in Colorado. I'll get to that, it's just a bit later. Patience is a virtue... I felt it would be wise to open this investigation by

contextualizing myself and the journey I've taken and will continually take for the rest of my life in the pursuit of understanding what my Persian/Iranian-American/Iranian diasporic identity and position looks like in the circumstances of my reality. Said reality has been as ambiguous as my ethnicity is to the white people who, frustrated at their inability to place their previous identification of difference, find solace in their comfortability to ask and say maybe unnecessary things. But additionally, I've felt the need to explain myself, my identity, my reality however abstract for most of my life to the outside world, meaning non-Iranians and Iranians alike. I've been called "too white to be Iranian," I've been fetishized as having aesthetic, ethnic characteristics that are still rooted in Eurocentric understandings of "beauty." I have become palatable for those in my life who don't see me, a palatable acceptance of an inclination I already took to be fact, rather than a relegation of conflicting information.

For a while as I was designing this research process (almost a year in the making), I felt this task was one far beyond my capacity or right to study and engage with in the ways I intended to. I felt like an outsider, unknowing of the experiences of those who were more connected to their identities, more developed within them, and had earned the right to verbally theorize. When it was first proposed that I write about Iranians in Colorado, I felt surprised and almost reluctant. It seemed like an undertaking I didn't feel prepared to perform, that I wasn't worthy of. Even well within my data collection and analysis, despite interviews where things that were said resonated so deeply with my experiences I could have cried, even after each treated me like a member of a special club only we were a part of, I still felt I was an imposter. This was an instance where no amount of external validation could change the internally validated discord.

I was expressing these sentiments to a friend on a walk one chilly December evening. The sun was setting over the mountains painting the sky purple, illuminating the outlines of our

*silhouettes as we quietly strolled around our neighborhood. I looked down at my hands and shared how difficult this process had been for me, how stuck I was, unable to progress at the pace needed to ensure my project was completed on time. I looked at the swaying trees as a slight breeze began to blow—it was difficult to shake this idea that I was doing something wrong in the face of a group I felt adjacent to, kind of in, mostly out. Even despite my many months of cultivating an Iranian community that made me feel more Persian than ever before, I was structurally hesitant. We stepped in silence until my friend looked over and said, “Well, despite your feelings, I would argue you’re the **most** qualified to perform this examination. Your life alone as proof.” My eyebrows furrowed: immediately upon hearing this, I could think of many other people who were much more qualified to complete this study than I was, like ten people off the top of my head.*

The more these words sunk, however, I realized she was right—my experiences rooted in feeling like I wasn’t Persian enough in any space I was in, even my own body, allowed me to become almost a third party, an objective ethnographer in the experiences of my life within the Iranian diaspora in Colorado. When I’m in predominantly or semi-Iranian spaces under the often unassuming embodiment of Iranianness, I find my observational ability to be fairly objective, detached with just the right amount of attachment to inform intimate aspects of lived experience. As I reflect on my past experiences now, both within these spaces and beyond them, moving amongst while not feeling within creates a unique perspective surrounding dynamics of belonging, connection, and sentiments of solidarity within what I perceived to be my pre-determined capacity—rigid, unintentional. It’s also about the impetus, the drive behind wanting to study the diaspora in this particular place. The personal connection I have to the Iranian diaspora in Colorado is arguably the perfect space for this under-recognized, largely

unknown population to come to fruition in the eyes of the up and coming field of Iranian diasporic studies. Quantitative demographic information is misleading and unrepresentative, often omitting the firsthand knowledges inherent to describing populations in question. By focusing on these intimate testimonies, a unique beginning to the necessary further studying of the Iranian community in Colorado is born, setting the tone for a more comprehensive, holistic place for Coloradan Iranians in the discipline of Iranian diasporic studies.

As I've leaned into this process and investigation over the past several months, I've heard poignant stories, spoken with brilliant community members, discovered covert yet similar dynamics, all confounded by the consistency of self-discovery. While I may not have official qualifications other, more esteemed researchers of the Iranian diaspora with cross-national, transnational, international knowledges draw on, the importance of lived experience, regardless of how minimal it appears in my eyes, has slowly become suitable enough. This study is imperfect: there are gaps despite its attempt to minimize them, there are many, many voices and stories and integral perspectives that are not present based on the confines of time and my capacity, which I acknowledge and hope to one day represent with the reverence and attention deserved. But this study is also more robust, more multifaceted, more meaningful than I could have ever imagined, bringing forth considerations within the specific location of Colorado that seek to represent the divergence present within the single-storied narrative (Adichie 2009) often applied to Iranians and individuals from the SWANA region in general. My nervousness in completing this work has never fully dissipated, but the insights I've prepared in the following pages bring me closer to a fully understood self that is not operating solely within a space of isolation and that, I feel, brings infinite possibilities and considerations that an

Iranian-American reality is within my future. And as my previous introduction asserts, it has already arrived.

Introduction

The Iranian diaspora in the so-called United States is a vibrant, multifaceted, and complex community. Their presence vacillates between hyper and prideful visibility through the showcasing of cultural warmth and delicious food, juxtaposed with a hushed reality often in reaction to political precariousness and indifference. While the study of this diaspora is burgeoning both in the US and internationally, many if not all previous studies have focused on larger contingencies of the diaspora, notably those present within dominant US cities like Los Angeles, Washington D.C., and Texas. Some scholars have deliberately focused on performing comparative studies of Iranian diasporic populations and the internal and cross communal dynamics, citing the “shortcomings” of those who study the diaspora in the US with a mainly Southern California orientation (Moghaddari 2020). These can be attributed to a lack of studies that center the localities of these populations both comparatively, but also within the context of the social, political, and economic circumstances that produce distinct and vital realities (Moghaddari).

It’s from this, I assert, that studying the Iranian diaspora in Colorado is essential. In understanding this population more comprehensively and through a multidimensional lens, the impacts of spatiality on the experiences and dynamics of the Iranian diaspora as a whole are amplified. Within Colorado, perspectives and insights distinct to those living outside of the studied Iranian diaspora—and the limitations these entail—are brought to light, along with the accompanying consciousnesses. This exploration, therefore, offers a piece of undocumented knowledge, experience, and conceptualization that will hopefully be a formative beginning to a new field of awareness. As the premiere study on the Iranian diaspora in Colorado, I aim for this

inquiry to serve as a stepping stone towards a more comprehensive, intersectional, and critical analysis of this heterogeneous diasporic group.

The Iranian Diaspora in Colorado

The Iranian diaspora in Colorado is small comparatively, less than 10,000 based on available data, mostly concentrated in larger cities such as Denver (1,589), Colorado Springs (493), and Boulder (458) (ZipAtlas 2024). I found that given the limited numbers and lack of external visual representations of Iranians in Colorado, invisibilized impressions within the non-Iranian community are prevalent. Despite these areas of perceived scarcity, the Iranian collective presence in Colorado is vibrant and dynamic, defying the monoliths produced both intra-communally and by non-Iranians. This study seeks to showcase the lives and lived experiences of some Iranians living within the diaspora in Colorado, mostly in the Boulder area and the surrounding areas. Based on the personal testimonies of 8 self-identified Iranian/Iranian-American/Persian interviewees, I hypothesize discernible sentiments and community formation capabilities tangentially representative of the Iranian diaspora in Colorado. I attend to the logics of spatialization and geographic influence on identity conception, practice, and generation to locate the vibrancy and visibility of an otherwise unknown and marginalized group. It is my hope that these insights, paired with theoretical concepts that address identity paradigms, racialization, and politicization, enable a more robust and all-encompassing discussion both within the Iranian diaspora and beyond.

A key notion underlying this exploration is the difference between internal and external intentionality. Sometimes intentionality can consist of one and not the other, sometimes it's not present in either form, but does intentionality have to be present in a specific way for one's

reality to be labeled as intentional? Is simply exhibiting or acknowledging one's identity enough (oftentimes not a small feat considering the difficulties that accompany it)? What is the impact of moving an additional step forward by being intentional in one's identity—an identity that others don't understand, don't have any interest in understanding, and also don't have to navigate in their own identities? Besides external recognition, what about internal intentionality? What is the impact of understanding something that doesn't necessarily feel like it needs to be reconciled or intentionally approached? Perhaps this is a result of living in the Iranian diaspora in Colorado: we have moments of community where being intentional within our Iranianness exists alongside the overwhelming dispersiveness of the diasporic reality, creating familial qualities and cohesive community in those moments. Maybe this instantaneousness is enough to sustain internal and external recognition, making our intentionality discrete, reserved for those who understand and take part in its viability, instead of marveling at its existence.

I first came across the term “intentionally Iranian” in one of my interviews with a brilliant Iranian-American student at a university in Colorado. As we sat on a green velvet couch in a new, overpriced cafe on Pearl St. in Boulder drinking \$7 cups of chai, she defined “intentionality” as a lacking presence within the Iranian diaspora in general, the repercussions of such seen through disjointedness, strife, and disconnection Iranians in the diaspora, especially in Colorado, experience both within and outside of the community. This term was akin to a lightbulb moment for me, a realization that influenced the trajectory of my exploration in many ways. The pairing of “intentional” and “Iranian” seemed to be the marriage I had searched for my entire life, and particularly in the past year, but was not aware it was a commonly held emotion. These words stuck with me, and as my conversations with Iranians in Colorado continued, I began to piece together more instances where I felt the intentionality of individuals

(or lack thereof) correlated in many ways to their identification as an Iranian-American in Colorado.

Over the course of my study, I explore intentionality in the following ways: within the Iranian diaspora at large, within the subculture of the diaspora in Colorado, within the context of possibility and hope, and within the larger geopolitical context of being a member of an often monolithically understood people, country, and region in an age where intentionality is reserved for very few things, one of them being ignorance. Especially in Boulder, a common denominator among interviewees was the insular nature of the city, along with its elitist, affluent homogeneous, white culture which tends to value performativity that erases diversity. Within this space, intentionality takes many forms as Iranian and Persian identities are projected, utilized, and realized. Whether thought of in terms of processes, phenomena, ideologies, practices, or how someone is relating to a piece of their identity, intentionality requires a relinquishing of dominant discourses that construct “Iranianness.”

What began as the term solely around how Iranians here in Colorado are intentionally Iranian—shifting, remaking, relegating, negotiating, exploring, interacting, and forging connections—widened as I thought more critically about the way intentionality was a two way street. It is unable to be fully realized without the effort, acknowledgement, and presence of constructive reception by both the larger Iranian diaspora in the US and the non-Iranian presence that assumes the rarity of Iranian identity in a space like Boulder. Further, it made me question the ways in which this intentionality transfers between places, and amongst the diasporic community itself.

Considering Liminality and Consciousness

What I came to find was a double liminality Iranian-Americans in Colorado navigate in both holding an Iranian identity within a non-Iranian, white-dominant, city and community, but also while engaged in the active cultivation of what it means to hold an Iranian diasporic identity. Double-liminality in this sense seeks to describe the resulting feelings of perpetual periphery—always on the outskirts of the identities you hold because they appear to be incompatible. This term arose based on my experiences of interviewing solely ethnically Persian individuals navigating this pairing with an American addition. Intersectionality is important to consider, as various ethnic, racial, religious, etc. differences within the Iranian diaspora and communities in general produce what I assume to be multi-liminality based on these perceived oppositions. This framework is informed by and builds on theorizations of intersectionality by Black, women scholars such as Kimberlé Crenshaw (1991), Patricia Hill-Collins (2019), and bell hooks (1984), among others.

By using the term liminality, I imply that there is a distinct consciousness discrete to the Iranian diasporic experience that does not fully encompass either or any of the identities their assigned categorizations suggest. Because diasporic existence often exists within these limits, either externally imposed, internally reinforced, or intimately realized, a level of hesitancy and displacement is therefore created that further complicates foundational workings of a double consciousness by expanding the awareness needed to navigate one's identities in society. Working in tandem and by understanding that integral identity considerations are intimately tied to your community and therefore have irrevocable impacts on your sense of identity, I assert that the diasporic consciousness transcends the ability to solely be encompassed within a phenomenon like double consciousness. This, therefore, requires the conceptualization of what I

call a triple-consciousness in order to account for the awareness that many diasporic Iranians have: being Iranian, American, and within the diaspora, a distinct experience that provides another source of consciousness, and an additional layer of societal imposition.

In creating a diasporic subculture, however unintentional its origin, Iranians also navigate mainstream (mis)conceptualizations of their identity, both externally and internally. An additional layer is added in the case of the Iranian diaspora in Colorado, based on the smaller number of Iranians in the state comparatively. White, non-Iranians often misunderstand and generalize Iranian presence, in turn perpetuating labels, identifications, and biases that often go unresolved based on unintentional acknowledgment or unawareness of counter narratives. Second generation Iranian-Americans often experience this “othering” imposed by a non-Iranian society in addition to intimate feelings of separation from Iranian culture, in attempts to actively curate a distinctly diasporic identity, informed by but not limited to their other identities.

The notion of double liminality—from my own experiences and researching the diaspora in Colorado—is informed by W.E.B Du Bois’s concept of double consciousness. The term was first seen in an 1897 essay published in *Atlantic* magazine entitled, “Strivings of the Negro People,” later republished in 1903 in *The Souls of Black Folk*, where Du Bois referred to a “two-ness” of being both an African American and an American within an anti-Black society that seeks to explicitly differentiate between the two identities and construct them as inherently discrete and therefore incompatible (Dickson D. and Bruce Jr., 1992). What this conceptualization of double consciousness showcases is the power constructed stereotypes reinforced by white society have on Black lives, paired with everyday manifestations of anti-Black racism, resulting in skewed and distinct individual conceptions of self (301).

This phenomenon also encapsulates the differences Black individuals felt in their sense of self and ability to contend with their own meanings of Blackness when faced with a very different, arguably more overt and racist projection of this interpretation from white folks. For Du Bois, one of the most consequential aspects of a double consciousness is the cultural competency one can only comprehend from connection to a societally “othered” identity that would therefore allow for a more holistic and distinct understanding of reality, different from general American materialism, implying functionality instead of inferiority (305). This is to say that those who are in these perpetual states of otherness are oftentimes equipped with a greater capacity to comprehend societal nuances because their intimate experiences directly counter the material indifference that is otherwise prevalent in society.

In shifting the mindset from one of deficit and scarcity that often accompanies viewing the complexities of identity conception within systems of oppression, Du Bois urges its reframing as one with transformative potential. Although Du Bois did make a distinction between the types of double consciousness he saw arise within Black folks—one rooted in racialization, the other in conflicting perspectives on life—the two ultimately rest on the merging of a third, new Self that is different from each individual identity, a coming together of knowledges of each other’s objectives. This, however, takes a level of “will,” as Du Bois calls it—an intentionality and commitment that cannot be universally applied in every situation, especially when systemic structures and insidious effects of racialization are at play (307).

Within the scope of my project, I explore the concept of “will” as it pertains to double liminality and the practice of intentionality within Iranians in Colorado. Considering the constant negotiation that comes with actively constructing identity and meaning within the surrounding space I therefore posit, should Iranians in the diaspora view modes of will and intentionality as

two separate processes? One in the same? Or should they be viewed in criticality in order to create distinction within their similarities, while acknowledging the capacity for persistence within convoluted, burgeoning, intergenerationally complex community relationships?

The idea of double consciousness must be understood within a greater socio-political context in which these factors influence the mechanisms of and extent to which an external gaze is imposed. Within the context of the Iranian diaspora in Colorado, I have found this to be especially true. The influence of external reinforcements and biased representations of Iranians and individuals from the larger SWANA region hold significant weight in the recognition of Iranian presence within Colorado. Due to their minimal presence and dispersed demographic, Iranian individuals tend to be less visible than in places where there are more Iranians. While those I interviewed spoke to being prideful in and holding internal recognition for their Iranian identity, externally imposed monolithic images of Iranianness were sporadically interspersed with and sometimes fundamental to how intimate realizations were formed by the participants. I contend that these external conceptions are often internally reinforced within communities, as seen with the acceptance of the “model minority myth,” creating cyclical and sometimes indistinguishable affirmation that disrupts the distinctiveness often assumed within a double consciousness phenomenon.

As such, a complex intentionality is present, both internally and externally. I define intentionally Iranian as it manifests internally through the retention of integral aspects of a culture and tradition one was raised with that represents a part of who you are in a space devoid of physical representation. At the same time, I define intentionality as it is present externally in the navigation of exterior spaces in a society that has monolithic conceptions and limited exposure of what it means to be Iranian. This culmination surfaces in the searching for an Iranian

diasporic identity that is representative of individuals, their experiences, their diasporic culture, and the place they inhabit that perhaps differs from the dominant definitions of the Iranian diaspora based on other examples throughout the United States. How, then, are diasporic Iranians pursuing an intentional Iranian identity in Colorado, while actively pursuing the creation of an intentional subculture within the larger Iranian diaspora? Through intentionality around how Iranian identity is presented, both externally and internally, considerations for meaningful and productive identity discourse arise. These considerations include finding and building an Iranian or other community within Colorado, the language surrounding intentionally realizing and representing Iranianness, the political connotations of pride, and diasporic solidarity both transnationally and domestically.

Spatiality Regarding Iranians in Colorado

In my study, diasporic independence, resulting in more intentional and differing relations to Iranian identity, is a concept that I found to align well with Iranian diaspora specifically in Boulder and surrounding areas. I define diasporic independence in two, overlapping ways: the first requires understanding the Iranian diaspora as a separate entity from the country of Iran with important and distinct differences, especially in thinking about matters of solidarity, cultural and identity connection. The second way that is more applicable to this study specifically is recognizing diasporic independence as the relative autonomy of the Iranian diaspora in Colorado from the rest of the diaspora in the United States. This is not only in regards to physical distance, although I did find geographic separation does enhance the particularities of this population, but also in how diasporic independence in the Coloradan Iranian subculture has resulted in different approaches to thinking, enacting, identifying, and being an Iranian-American in a diasporic setting. In addition to internalization of physical distance amongst those born and raised in

Colorado, I found there to be less of an inclination towards uniformity with the larger Iranian diaspora in the US, in part due to the precariousness of more prevalent external representations, constant community, and an overall sense of belonging within both Iranian and American identities. Reasons for this are varied, but I argue that a major factor in maintaining this cultural individualism is from spatial restraints.

Because of the dispersedness in the Iranian diaspora in Colorado, many interviewees mentioned the difficulties and intentionality required in finding and maintaining an Iranian community here, especially if a prior connection with other Iranians in the area isn't present. Examining the influences of intergenerational connections on this pursuit adds integral consideration. I noticed this search process for an Iranian community to be more prevalent among Iranian immigrants, specifically those who had come to the US in their late teenage years or early twenties and had remained strongly in touch with their Iranian roots through tangible reinforcements. Some examples of these reinforcements include having an Iranian spouse, living in place with a visible Iranian population, or having come to the United States with family members that continued to be a present part of their lives.

I observed that others who came here during that same period of their lives, but were not imbued with the same outward cultural reinforcements engaged in different ways with Iranian identity and culture. For them, ensuring a strong cultural identity was present **internally** was more important in maintaining a conscious relationship with their identity in a way that made the most sense to them. This enabled them to find ways to intentionally assimilate into the new environment they were now in, while not forgetting the key aspects of where they came from and who they were. I found this dual representation between Iranian immigrants and the differing ways they engaged with US born/second generation Iranian-Americans to be a testament to the

multitude of ways to be an Iranian in the diaspora. Regardless of physical removedness and intra-communal differences, this diversity disrupts the myths of an Iranian monolith both nationally and intra-diasporically.

This Exploration

With these orientations in mind, the following examination seeks to analyze the Iranian diaspora in Colorado and the ways identity is intentionally related to based on the physical spaces inhabited, meaning making and contestation of monolithic narratives, intra-diasporic and transnational solidarity, and overall palatability of personhood. This is explored through three key chapters where these considerations and many more are encompassed: **belonging within the Iranian diaspora in Colorado, active countering and disrupting of the Iranian monolith as it arises specifically in the Boulder area, and the connection and solidarity efforts displayed throughout the diaspora in Colorado, both generally and in moments of strife.** While there are a multitude of overlapping commonalities amongst these three themes and the sub-sections they contain, I believe each of these multidimensional and dynamic terms encompass through lines present within each of the many conversations I had.

Through central focus on belonging, countering, and connecting all which reside within the spaciousness of intentionality, I assert that the Iranian diaspora in Colorado is in a burgeoning state of discovery and relation to their identities and others within the community, actively creating an imagination that consciously propels their diasporic meaning. This often leads to a perpetual state of liminality experienced due to the incompatibility of truth beyond monolithic, homogeneous generalizations that shape society and ideology. Despite this, I maintain that the vibrancy, hopefulness, and prosperity of this population is not diminished, rather, there is a certain strength to behold in the perceived periphery emboldening realization, reconciliation, and

renaissance. This realization, however, must also be understood within the tumultuous and disparate experiences often within the realities of those in the diaspora. Due to confounding factors such as intergenerational influences, non-Iranian biases, and inconsistencies in verbiage, interpretation, and perspective, this analysis cannot serve as a representation of all those who identify as being a part of the Iranian diaspora in Colorado. There is no one universal experience of this, although, throughlines within my interviews and personal experience substantiate the probable claims I make.

The section directly following the introduction includes an overview of the methods employed throughout my data collection. I then provide a discussion of the language and terminology used throughout the paper, both in introducing its relevancy and correlating its usage in the particular context I find it to assist. This is followed by a discussion of the limitations of my study, exploration, and claims, that I encourage to be read in a mindset of continuation and growth, rather than a diminishment of the analysis to come. Following this, I provide an overview of the term “diaspora,” how it’s used generally and in direct relation to the Iranian diaspora within the United States. Within this section, I talk about the history of the Iranian diaspora in the US more broadly before delving into the three periods of primary diasporic surges marked by the 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran: Pre-1979, Post-1979, and the Iranian diaspora of the present (21st century).

By providing this overview, there is opportunity for more seamless transitioning into my interview analysis which begins my almost explicit discussion of my findings within the Iranian diaspora in Colorado. In my chapter discussing intentionality, I lay out the throughline present in identity formation, relation, and negotiation present within the entirety of my investigation. Through my chapter on belonging, the reality of performativity is discussed, both in terms of

spatial influence and the normative conforming imposed through self-relegation. By showcasing insights on the process of disrupting the Iranian monolith, this chapter provides the perspectives and impacts of external and internal monoliths as they manifest, diminish, and shift within the Iranian diaspora in Colorado. I end this analysis by discussing solidarity within this diasporic presence in Colorado. With attention paid to the Jin, Jiyan, Azadi/Zan, Zendegi, Azadi/Woman, Life, Freedom revolution currently happening in Iran (beginning in September of 2022), I examine the role of connection within the diaspora as it coincides with disenfranchised grief, shame, guilt, and longing. Similar to the prologue of this exploration, I end with a similar auto-ethnographic note of my own experiences surrounding the topic of solidarity, focusing on the past year and a half especially. While much of my personal experience coincides with what I discuss in the conclusion, there are some areas of difference in my sharing, contending with an implied idea of what the capacity for cohesiveness truly entails.

Notes on Methods, Language, and Limitations

Methods

As stated previously, the objective of this research is to understand the lives, experiences, and positionalities of Iranians in Colorado, specifically in the Boulder and surrounding areas. I explored a multitude of aspects within the Colorado Iranian diasporic community, such as, but not limited to, the effects of the political and social atmosphere and experiences of being a marginalized group in predominantly white spaces isolated from larger Iranian communities in the diaspora. I also focused on both first and second generation Iranians, paying attention to intergenerational considerations this concentration could provide. Having open-ended conversations with the participants allowed room for a multitude of experiences and perspectives to come to light and begin coloring in the place of this population for myself and those who research the Iranian diaspora in the United States that have not previously done work on the community in Colorado.

By centering the qualitative considerations gleaned from the interviews as the main focus of this examination, unique perspectives and experiences were uncovered, impossible within theoretical explanations alone. Since previous studies on the Iranian diaspora have not focused on the Colorado Iranian community, this research will begin to minimize this gap, utilizing the experiences of those in the community first hand to inform new scholarship. Furthermore, as a member of the Iranian diaspora myself, born and raised in Colorado, I also bring my own perspectives and experiences to guide and inform parts of my research through an auto-ethnographic exploration (explored in the prologue and epilogue). Through including my own experience within this examination an intimate quality is provided, grounding my positionality within the scope of this study allowing for reinforcement of the ideas I theorize, as

well as differences. My research centers open-ended interviews with eight Iranian-Americans living in the Boulder/Denver area on their experiences, self-identification and insights, amongst other things. Interviewees ranged in age from early 20s to mid-60s, mostly middle to upper-middle socio-economic class, were Zoroastrian, Muslim, and Atheist, identified as non-binary, female, and male, ranged in migrating to or growing up in the Boulder area, and had differing racial understandings and identifications. Interviewees were gathered by reaching out to those in the community I already knew, as well as utilizing the snowball method to accrue a wider range of participants. This showcases the limited reach and tight knit nature of the Iranian community in Colorado, as many of the interviewees suggested speaking to their friend who was already one of my participants. Interviews spanned 1-2 hours in length, taking place both in person and on Zoom. For the in-person interviews, I recorded the discussions on a voice recorder app on my phone, while also taking brief notes throughout, which were then transferred to a secure harddrive on my computer, not ever saved to my cloud. Similarly with the Zoom interviews, they were recorded in the app and saved to my computer, but only temporarily as I transcribed and coded. After analyzing the data, these were deleted from all my devices.

In the initial stages of making contact with interviewees, I first started with an email introducing myself and thanking them for agreeing to participate within my study (see appendix 2 for my outreach message). In the correspondence, I additionally included the consent form for my study (see appendix 1), as well as the preliminary research questions I planned on asking in the interview (see appendix 3). When we met to conduct the interview, I again described the aims and methods of my exploration, in addition to carefully going through the consent form ensuring any and all questions were attended to before proceeding. This project qualified for a waiver of written consent vis-a-vis a signature, but verbal consent from my interviewees before moving

forward was still necessary. Participants had the option of withdrawing their consent at any time throughout the interview, in addition to after the fact if they were no longer comfortable with their testimony being analyzed. I also made sure to state that the testimonies given throughout the duration of the interview were not set in stone. If interviewees had either additional insights to add based on what arose in our conversation, or the desire to omit part of their testimony, lines of communication were open and willingness to edit was always an option. All interviewees in this analysis are referred to under pseudonyms they chose. This project was reviewed and approved by the Institutional Review Board to ensure compliance with ethical qualitative research.

Terminology and Language

Throughout the following exploration I use the term, SWANA (Southwest Asia and North Africa) as a decolonial and geographically accurate term that represents the many communities within the commonly referred to “Middle East,” in an attempt to “distinguish the region in geographical terms rather than political terms as primarily described by the Western world” (AAPIRC 2022). While the exact delineations are not established indefinitely, as SWANA is a newly conceived term, it is generally in reference to space from Morocco to Afghanistan, not typically including South Asia—SSWANA stands for South and Southwest Asian and North Africa, generally used when including South Asia (2022). This means of categorization was formed by SWANA student activists across University of California campuses forming a “SWANA Campaign Committee” to encourage policy makers at their schools to create a racial demographic category on institutional forms that was more representative of their identity beyond forced grouping within the “White” classification, which individuals from the Middle East are considered to be (Maghbouleh 2017). As detailed in the

brilliant book, *The Limits of Whiteness: Iranian-Americans and the Everyday Politics of Race*, Maghbouleh discusses the long history of this White identification, rooted in conceptions of Iranians and those from the Middle East at large, as being either Aryan themselves or Aryan adjacent (2017). As Maghbouldeh describes, however, these labels rarely align with the de facto racialization standards these individuals experience, especially in the US. This disjointedness provided, in part, the impetus for a SWANA option on these identification forms. Following deliberate and tireless grassroots action from these students in pursuit of a more representative identification for around thirty-two ethno-national communities and identities, the SWANA categorization was finally adopted as an ethno-racial category in 2013 and is now used as a racial identification option on UC applications across the system (107). While this effort was distinct to the UC school system, the general usage of this term has spread in popularity, finding resonance with many around the country who are discontent with the colonial and Orientalist undertones of the term “the Middle East.” Despite this significant achievement in creating the SWANA distinction, its defining limits surely exclude communities across the SWANA region that do not hold recognizable visibility and are societally, culturally, and politically marginalized.

The term “Iranian” is used in this thesis to refer to anyone who is connected or holds Iranian heritage in some way, whether it is through a direct immigration to Colorado, or having one or two Iranian parents. Within my qualitative study, all of the individuals I interviewed fit within this definition vis-a-vis immigrating to a place in the US and then migrating to Colorado at some point in their lives, or through having Iranian immigrant parents who followed that journey, but were born and raised in the US and in many cases Colorado specifically. While I do recognize the limitations of this term, since it refers to a nationality that many feel estranged to, adamantly against, or occupied by (in regards to the Islamic Republic’s take over in 1979 turning

the country into a theocratic state), all of my participants referred to themselves as “Iranian” or “Iranian-American,” despite their feelings towards the regime. For many, the use of “Persian” either in addition to or in replacement of “Iranian” was a tangible solution to this quandary. The justification being that saying “Persian” implied a historic, “rich,” and “refined” alternative, drawing the connection between this identification and the Persian empire, which also increased ambiguity given the often pejorative mentioning of Iran.

I also recognize the exclusion of solely using the term “Persian” as it refers to an ethnicity that not all within the country of Iran share. There are a myriad of ethnic and religious groups dispersed throughout Iran, such as the Kurds, Baluchis, Azeris, Arabs, Zoroastrians, Christians, and those of the Jewish faith to name a few, which are marginalized in significant and brutal ways within the Iranian state and diaspora (Beehner 2006). The continued fight for liberation amongst Kurdish individuals within Iran has seen significant backlash and brutality from the Iranian governments over the years in social, political, and economic ways (Amnesty International 2008). While this level of intersectional analysis is beyond the scope of this examination, as all those I interviewed identified with the term “Persian,” understanding the Iranian diaspora in Colorado through this critical lens is essential for dismantling universalized conceptions of an Iranian identity, and by extent the SWANA region and its people at large. This also leads to, as is discussed in greater depth later in the thesis, an internalization of Persian supremacy within the Iranian diaspora. Often informed by historic and cultural belief systems rooted in the Aryan myth, hierarchical distinctions create a tenuous internal situation in Iran, stoked by the government, which extends to the diaspora where it’s reproduced. Especially since the current Jin, Jiyan, Azadî (Kurdish phrasing)/Zan, Zendegi, Azadi (Farsi phrasing)/Woman, Life, Freedom (English phrasing) revolution in Iran, this certainty is being disrupted and

informed by a necessary intersectional perspective that seeks to complicate this homogeneity of Iranian identity. While these intricacies are discussed preliminarily within this examination, I mention this as it is in alignment with what further iterations of studying Iranians in Colorado must build on in order for intentional, conscious development and construction of the Iranian diaspora to arise.

This leads into another essential consideration I had while attending to my analysis of the qualitative information collected: what is meant when I use the term “non-Iranian.” In saying this I am referring to white, non-Iranian members of the society and community in places where those I interviewed navigated and traversed. I am careful to state “white, non-Iranians” to differentiate how whiteness is distinct from other non-Iranian, non-white individuals in the community. I do so to highlight the symptoms of oppressive and white supremacist systems that hold and shape the lived experiences of those I interviewed. While recognizing the limitations within this claim, since systemic structures utilize numerous mechanisms to approach and execute perpetual subjugation, I can assume these experiences are not distinct to Iranians within the Colorado/Boulder space as a marginalized population. The experiences of other diasporic communities and racially/ethnically marginalized folks within Colorado is outside the scope of my research and project examination, however, so I will not attempt to make any sweeping statements. Holding awareness of this reality is vital, regardless.

In relation to this, I use the term “anti-Iranianness” to refer to actions taken by the white, non-Iranian society and community in Colorado that seek to demean and diminish the presence of—whether intentionally or unintentionally—those who identify as Iranians in Colorado. As I unpacked these thoughts more, however, I began to question the accuracy of this term: is what interviewees detailed experiencing systemically held anti-Iranianness, or is it a symptom of a

much larger and deeper anti-Muslim racism, which often becomes representative of all anti-SWANA sentiments and biases, the two easily conflated as one? This is a massive and critical assertion that has significant literature dissecting its intricacies. Since this became apparent to me further along in my process, I was not able to make any substantial claims within this examination. But based on my exterior knowledge and intimate experiences of being Iranian in a place like Boulder and the peripheral distinction made between individuals with SWANA connections by non-Iranians, I assume this could very well be the case where anti-Iranianness is concerned. Additional patterns of generalization synonymous with foreign policy and public sentiment in the US at large, especially regarding the SWANA region, were also considered as reinforcement for this short-sightedness. Based on Euro-centric and single-storied conditioning (Adichie 2009), it's unlikely to think the surrounding society would engage in an intentional understanding and pursuit of acknowledgement that diverges from Orientalist fantasies complementary to white, American imaginations.

Another notable verbiage is my inclusion of “subculture” when describing the Iranian diasporic presence in Colorado. This term was first used during one of the interviews to describe the Iranian presence in Colorado and upon researching it more, I found it to correlate with what my other interviewees were also expressing. Officially defined, subculture refers to a group within a larger culture that often varies in distinct ways from the larger demographic it is a part of (Merriam-Webster). Given this description, Iranians in Colorado, a group within the larger Iranian diasporic demographic present around the world and within the US, is arguably a subculture of the Iranian diaspora. Through this I contend that based on the differences present within this subculture, which are largely attributable to the influences physical location has on identity expression, formation, and realization, universalizing the Iranian diaspora even within

the US holds the potential for misrepresentation and exclusion of the experiences and perspectives of this diverse demographic.

Statement of Limitation

The impetus behind the thesis was to bring recognition and awareness to a part of the Iranian diaspora that has been neglected in the burgeoning field of Iranian diasporic studies. The following examination, in many ways, accomplishes that intent. However, I am unable to claim that this is a comprehensive or absolute study in fully divulging the experiences of the entire Iranian diaspora within Colorado. The conversations had, stories told, and experiences shared by those who participated are only a sliver of the complex, varied, and diverse perspectives and lived experiences of the Iranian diaspora in Colorado. In an effort to concretely dismantle universalization of the SWANA region and Iranian monoliths, especially Persian supremacy, it was essential that I make this blatantly clear both here and at many times throughout the thesis.

I believe this exploration provides necessary insights and perspectives, especially regarding influences of place and diasporic identity. However, it is also vital to recognize that my positionality as a researcher and my research praxis is shaped invariably through a western lens, as I am a scholar based in a western institution, have lived in the US my entire life, etc. Moreover, many of my readers are similarly located. I recognize that even though I seek to challenge colonial and imperial knowledge systems by studying an under-examined community, I invariably reproduce the academy as a mixed race Iranian with white privilege, cisgendered, tuition paying student at a capitalist, settler-colonial, ableist institution that holds stakes in the continual oppression and subjugation of marginalized peoples, with a western orientation. Many of the theoretical concepts I use are based within western knowledge systems, such as racialization (Fanon 1961; Miles 1989; Webster 1992), Orientalism (Said 1978), and temporality

(Ho 2021) amongst others. It is vital to recognize that these formations reside within a western framework and are not universally held amongst knowledges and scholarship in other places in the world. This has significant limitations in the concrete contributions to disrupting the very monoliths we're in the pursuit of dismantling. At the same time, however, I draw wisdom and critique from Critical Race Theorizations, critical ethnic studies, anti-colonial and anti-imperial paradigms to make room for the considerations and stories not often told to come to fruition. Moreover, given the US imperialism with the SWANA region more broadly, and Iran specifically (Dabashi 2008), I use this thesis in part to question the logic of US imperialism and oppression of Iranians in Iran and the US.

Further, I recognize that a more comprehensive intersectional approach could have been deployed to pay attention to the logics of gender, class, religion, ethnicity, and language within the Iranian diaspora. I was limited by the confines of time and accessibility. For future research, I would seek to adopt a more intersectional approach as that would shed light on the distinct differences within a homogenized population based on critical insights of oppression and domination that are not generally considered when discussing a subjugated population. Iranians and other individuals from the SWANA region are seen as destitute, impoverished, conflict destined, and primitive by those in the west, discussed solely in a perpetual state of necropolitics. With this framing in mind, universalizing the experiences of all becomes common sense, a natural reaction when the stories you've been indoctrinated with silo your imaginative capabilities. Those who seek to counter these pejorative narratives often do so with a similar, western imposed understanding in mind, even if their intimate knowledges tell them differently, attempting to focus on the larger ideological restructuring before addressing the multiple layers. While this study echoes a similar approach as all those I interviewed identified as ethnically

Persian, I would staunchly argue that without the attention paid to the oppression and marginalization of those in the limits of the dominant, liberatory discourse, the actions are in vain and seek only to reproduce a similar supremacy, continuing the cycle of suppression.

The myriad presence of ethnic, linguistic, and religious diversity present within the Iranian diaspora must be understood through their own, distinct experiences of navigating differences from the dominant Persian community, both within Iran and the diaspora. These include all others who do not solely identify with the identity “Iranian” or Persian, such as Kurds, Baluchis, Azeris, and Arabs, among others. This is imperative to discuss, but unfortunately outside the scope of my research capabilities given the time and physical limits. This is, however, important to note and must be considered in more large-scale, complete analyses of the Iranian diaspora as general conceptions of such are complexified in order to deconstruct the biases, tropes, and monoliths that are constructed and perpetuated externally in the non-Iranian society and internally in disrupting Persian hegemony within the diaspora.

Additionally, this thesis is experiential in nature, with the testimonies of those interviewed wholly informing my analysis. Therefore, it is unbeknown if my curation, creation, and analysis, under the guise of representing Colorado Iranian diasporic members, is specialized to this state and the minimal radius in which much of the data was collected. It could very well be possible that the claims I assert are part of a larger experience within the Iranian diaspora across the US and possibly other places as well. With more time and a greater accessibility to the Iranian communities across the US, a more comprehensive analysis of the place based influences and differences accompanying considerations of identity formation and belonging, among other perspectives, could arise.

Conceptualizing Diaspora

In this section, I provide an overview of how the term “diaspora” has been understood both historically and presently, in conjunction with the term “transnationalism.” After establishing a brief summary of what is meant by “diaspora,” I then delve into a brief history of the Iranian diaspora within the United States. This is done in three sections: the first describes the Iranians diaspora before 1979, the year of the Islamic Revolution in Iran and a moment of significant political, economic, and social upheaval globally, which had a significant impact on the Iranian diaspora both in the US and generally. The second section details this post-1979 diaspora and the change in cultural receptiveness of Iranian immigrants. The third section provides an overview of the contemporary Iranian diaspora in the US, along with foreshadowing many of the topics I contend with throughout my analysis of the Iranian diaspora in Colorado. These include identity formation and negotiation, racialization, and navigation as it relates to elements of belonging and connection.

Centuries of oppression, exploitation, colonialism, and devastation have had varied, intricate, and sustained impacts on colonized peoples globally. Resulting coloniality prevents an ability to see beyond the imperial imaginary, contaminating societal and self perceptions confounded by individuals’ displacement from their nations and peoples of origin, as well as fracturing the emotional and physical translation of identity. How, then, is meaning made and remade with regards to cultural retention, growth, instillment, and showcasing of heritage in a new and often disparate space? Is this of immediate or even belated priority in the presence of survival mechanisms, continual negotiation, and self censorship that define the most essential things about you before you have the chance to open your mouth? Furthermore, what is the experience of being removed physically, culturally, spatially from a place that nevertheless

manifests as home in collective memory through constant pain and hope? Are there aspects of collective memory, transmuted intergenerationally, deeply embedded in the DNA of generations to come as distance from the homeland grows farther and farther? When individuals are removed from their place of origin, their families, their culture, their home, a significant loss is felt deep within their personhood, their bodies, and their souls. Loss not only of the life once led, surrounding people, immersion of culture, but loss in the sense of identity—a significant rupture that reverberates throughout families intergenerationally, nations in part or in whole, and communities across the world. The term diaspora aims to describe the realities of communities physically removed from their countries of origin, living, exploring, constructing, defining, celebrating, negotiating, and surviving in these contexts, all the while still somewhat connected, in their minds, bodies, souls, through languages spoken, food shared, memories kept alive, to return to the idealized homeland of their imaginations.

Generally speaking, a diaspora is a group of people that are dispersed for a multitude of reasons from their country of origin across different nations and regions (Mobasher 2018). The first usage was in reference to the historical experiences of displacement and dispersal of the Jewish peoples. Since then the term has now grown to encompass all forms of dispersed people outside their country of origin, without the particular connotations the term migration often holds (2018). Diasporas can also be described as a, “physically dispersed group of people sharing a common religious and cultural heritage, whose members desire to return to their homeland and maintain cultural distinctiveness and ethnic boundaries in their country of settlement” (2018, 1). According to diaspora studies scholars such as Michael Bruneau, Robert Cohen (1997), and Gabriel Sheffer (2003), there are myriad criteria that constitute a diasporic population. There are six, however, that constitute primary aspects of a diaspora: dispersion under pressure, specific

choice of destination, confounding identity awareness, networked spaces, transnational ties and intergenerational transmission, as well as respective independence from the society/culture/country of origin (Mobasher 2018).

Along with these, maintenance of culture also plays a fundamental role within a diasporic population, to whatever extent this is possible. This is often in opposition to assimilationist ploys persistent within pushes for globalization that sometimes result in diasporic groups imposing an internal limit on the terms of their acceptance, under the feeling that they will remain in alienation in perpetuity within the host society (Mobasher 2018). This often results in a troubled relationship with the host society at large, whether internally or externally felt, providing incentive to maintain these strong cultural ties and relationship to the homeland in the event that their current situation is no longer feasible (Cohen 1997). Existing within this space of often strong ethno-national solidarity provides sanctity among community members in “exile” as many in diasporas consider themselves to be (Cohen). Given this realization as the field of diasporic studies continues to grow, scholars have offered another definition encapsulating this phenomenon to understand its correlations with transnationalism: “Any group who can live in two places and play a simultaneous role in two communities is considered as a diaspora while also remaining in connection with host countries blurs the category of ‘diaspora’ and cross border mobility, ultimately creating transnational communities” (Carment and Bercuson 2008). It should also be noted that the phenomenon of “transnationalism” is rooted in globalization, therefore making it a central element of this conceptual framework given that immigrants establish and maintain cultural, social, economic, and political ties in both the home and host societies (Levitt in Mobasher 2018, 13). It is crucial to understand the powerful global forces that shape transnational social, economic, cultural, and political practices of diasporic groups and the

formal and informal means through which diasporic groups create and maintain home-host ties in perpetuity (13). Ultimately, the general correlation between the two terms can be seen as a collaboration of geographically and culturally understood communities that have experienced displacement to some degree and exist in separate but interconnected relationships with their country of origin.

Within the case of the Iranian diaspora, it is interesting to think about the ways in which the conflation between “diaspora” and “transnational communities” is possible or representative. While the term “diaspora” is often used to describe religious and national groups living outside the homeland, and “transnationalism” denotes ties and networks formed by migrants and groups across countries (Faist 2010), the existence of the Iranian diaspora sits in liminality within these two descriptions. Members of this demographic sometimes exist within both of these definitions, amongst the privileges that come with experiencing them as tandem phenomena. Given the dispersed and complicated nature of the Iranian diasporic formation, intricate political considerations are also of paramount importance and must be acknowledged in discussing the relationship between these terms and the experiences of formation and navigation of the Iranian diaspora. The divergent experiences within this population are also not to be dismissed; attempting to generalize these experiences as one in the same when the very reason for existing within this demographic widely varies is an impossible and unrepresentative feat. As I continue to discuss further in the next section, the Iranian diaspora is one partly born of revolution, exile, dissent, and imperialism (paired with the complexities that accompany all populations of people with diverse, supremacist, and contrary personalities and ideologies), the temporality of such extending all the way to the present day.

The Iranian Diaspora in the United States

The history of the Iranian diaspora is deeply rooted in larger social, political, and economic processes of both Iran and the countries of diasporic formation (the majority of which is within Europe, Canada, and the United States). In order to understand the complexities present within formation and reality of the Iranian diaspora specifically in the United States, it is integral to understand the history of Iranian migration before, during, and after the mid-late 20th century. As the political and economic landscape in the United States and its relationship with Iran shifted dramatically during the late 1970s and early 80s (similarly in Iran), dual displacements were created along with a host of problems that proved immensely difficult to navigate and survive.

In focusing specifically on the diaspora within the US, one of the first discernible presences of Iranians within the United States was recorded in a 1909 court case, *In re Najour*, a citizenship case in which an Iranian individual claimed whiteness to justify their entry to the US. In her book, *The Limits of Whiteness: Iranian Americans and the Everyday Politics of Race* (2017), Neda Maghbouleh tells how this was a common occurrence in the early 20th century as many Iranian individuals claimed whiteness in order to survive within a western dominated world, similar to others from the SWANA region. Iranians mobilized their racial liminality and the pervasive Aryan myth to claim prestige, superiority, and Western disposition. In addition, Iranianness was used to claim whiteness in another way too: individuals would justify their white identity by showing how different from the dark, fire worshipping Iranians they were, reifying their own whiteness in the eyes of its conditional makers (24).

The ways in which race is categorized and interpreted between nations is also an interesting consideration given how Iranian and other SWANA peoples are racialized. Particularly, in the way each respective nation uses race and its accompanying implications, in

addition to culture, as a justification for citizenship or national membership based on their coinciding with this created criteria (Sadeghi 2023). Over time, attention has shifted to the more pressing economic, political, and social realities and the diplomatic relationship between Iran and the United States as relationships concerning oil, a strong Middle Eastern presence, and greater regional relationships moved to center stage. But the explicit focus on race and racialization practices, both in legal categorization and societal frameworks still hold significant weight, influencing myriad political, cultural, and interpersonal dynamics between Iranians, Iranian-Americans, and non-Iranians in the US. The imprint this early history and the continual defining of Iranians and other SWANA communities as white by law (*de jure*), categorized and legally procured them for the same standards as American-White individuals, has created a precarious disjointedness. The societal realities (*de facto*) of individuals of SWANA identities cannot (oftentimes) be categorized in a way that is not wholly representative to their experiences within society.

The continued racialization of Iranians in the US in the late 20th, early 21st century can be directly attributed to the Islamic Revolution (1979), the hostage crisis (1979-1981), and severing of Iran-US relations, in addition to the presence of larger imperial projects in the SWANA region that serve to further “othering” campaigns against its inhabitants (Sadeghi 2023, 8). Such racial projects manifest in the commencement and continuation of the war of terror, and the perpetuation of the West's colonial and imperial presence and dominion in the SWANA region at large. This, therefore, requires the stoking of racial ideologies and easily digestible generalizations to vindicate these actions and oppressions, creating palatable and irrefutable visualizations of an easily quantifiable, exploitable “other” (7).

The Iranian diasporic presence within the United States is usually grouped into two periods of time, dictated by both the tumultuous occurrences within the Iranian political landscape, and the broader socio-political, economic, and diplomatic relations between the United States and Iran: migration to the US between 1953 and 1979 (before the Islamic Revolution took place), and the decades following the post 1979 movement. Each time period holds unique yet interrelated histories and overall pervasiveness of Western interference and influence. Between the thrusts of modernization efforts of Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi's reign in Iran (1953-1979), insidious and demeaning media representation and coverage, paired with highly rampant anti-Iranian racism and biases that soon turned universal in nature, seeking to view the Iranian diaspora today in isolation from its longevity, unintentional inception, and active identity curation is an impossible feat. As the Iranian diaspora is still fairly young and constantly developing, this current period of examination seeks to interrogate diasporic formation of an Iranian identity, meaning, and connection to place, in regards both to Iran and the host society, all of which is specific to those in the first generation born in the US and those that follow.

Based on previous diasporic definition, supplementation, and inclusion, there is room for interrogation of the term in relation to the Iranian populace, particularly within the notion of chosen migration as opposed to inopportune political, social, or economic exile. Some scholars, such as Babak Elahi and Persis M. Karim (2011), have pursued the utilizing of terms such as exile, refugee, and immigrant to the term diaspora, given how it allows for examinations of Iranian experiences both outside of Iran and in "mutually transformative" ways. These, they attest, speak to the diaspora's relationship to the both the host country in addition to within the diasporic community itself, as unique inter-community dynamics arise (393). Through the usage

of diaspora in reference to Iranian populations outside of Iran, space for creation and discovery is allowed in the field of Iranian diasporic studies. With this, the field is placed within a larger, global context and consciousness of perpetual shifting, the complexities of geopolitics, and the wages of new imperialistic mechanisms that influence those physically removed from a place, but still intrinsically connected (Babak and Elahi 2011, 384).

Pre-1979

The first large-scale wave of Iranians in the United States occurred during the 1953-1979 period, primarily in the pursuit of higher education as the US in particular was an attractive place for the teaching of western pedagogies and orientation. Many scholars of the Iranian diaspora attribute the first major wave of Iranians to the positive growth of relations between the US and Iran after western meddling by the CIA and the Shah of Iran at the time, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi resulted in the August 1953 coup of Iranian Prime Minister, Mohammad Mossadegh (Dabashi 2007). This was in response to the democratically elected Mossadegh's plans to nationalize Iran's massive oil reserves and to "expel foreign corporate interests," which were being exploited by western powers such as the British, Germans, French, and Russians (Dabashi 2007). Mossadegh's pursuit prompted massive upheaval around the world, prompting encouragement by the British government to boycott Iranian oil, ultimately leading to the collusion with the Americans in "Operation Ajax" to topple the Iranian government in the violent 1953 coup. According to Iranian scholar, Sahar Sadeghi, this was the first time western powers staged a foreign governmental transition to this extent during an "agreed upon peace time" (Sadeghi 2023). The usage of "agreed upon" and "peacetime" are all relative in this situation and it should be considered in terms of who sought to benefit from the exploitation "peace" allowed. This significant moment had irreversible impacts on Iranian society in a multitude of ways, most

notably in the shifting of power to Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi. Pahlavi, continuing his father's post, ruled staunchly as a monarch, essentially allowing the US to play a crucial role in the control and shaping of Iranian economic and political policies (Tarock 1996). As Hamid Dabashi writes in reference to the 1953 coup's reverberations on the minds, souls, and embodiments of the Iranian people: "[the overthrow was] the most traumatic event in modern Iranian history, a trauma from which the people have yet to recover" (Dabashi 2007, 127).

Once in more irrefutable power, the Pahlavi regime began shifting the trajectory of Iranian society, economics, and politics, from the previous emphasis on nationalization, to trade, modernization, and strengthening ties with western nations. Through the means of economic modernization and cultural westernization (Sadeghi 2023), the next few years were spent with massive investments from American business elites, formalizations of banking, and the securing of oil exports, all of which played a critical role in increasing America's economic role in Iran (Fatemi 1980). This played a pivotal role in not only strengthening relations between the two nations through economic means, but created palpable demand for key sections of Iranian society to develop inclinations to western understandings, processes, and dispositions. The other main pillar of a western aligned Iran came to fruition through the formal investment in western education by Pahlavi, an essential part of overall national development and innovation, which many in the western world believed was Iran's primary path to modernization (Shannon 2015). As Iranians began coming to the US in larger and larger numbers, the reception by many institutions and societies was relatively positive, highly supportive, and remarkably well funded. While many who came had no plans of staying in the US once their schooling was complete, some did end up making the US their new home, with many others traveling regularly back and forth from Iran for business, given the leniency granted with an Iranian passport and overall

support of transnational business and education, as well as general travel between the two countries (Bozorgmehr 1998; Hakimzadeh 2006). While there were certainly exceptions to this welcoming reception, Iranians generally found the realities of the US to be opportunity rich, autonomous, and representative, beginning to directly contrast the growing socio-political upheaval in Iran, increasing rapidly in tensions and precarity.

Post 1979

The tides began to significantly turn in 1979 with the occurrence of the Islamic Revolution. Once again, Iranian society was thrown into upheaval with the ousting of Pahlavi, his policies, and his economic leniency and collaboration with the west. His successor was an individual by the name of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, a cleric living in exile who grew to prominence and great acclaim within the disgruntled and angry Iranian peoples who were disillusioned by the Shah's modernization and westernization efforts at the expense of the millions of Iranians within the country who were suffering from economic mismanagement, brutal state repression, and growing levels of poverty. Mere months after Khomeini took power, fifty American staff members from the American embassy in Iran were taken hostage by a group of enraged Iranian students and held for four hundred and forty four days (Sadeghi 2023). After this, diplomatic ties between the US and Iran were severed indefinitely, severe economic sanctions were imposed in addition to suspending the movement of Iranian assets (monetary), halting of visa administering to Iranian nationals, and severing of the economic and professional initiatives that many took advantage of which shaped the primary presence of Iranians in the US (Sadeghi 2023, 25).

Life for those who remained in the US after the revolution and hostage crisis shifted considerably from what it had been just months before. Branded as the “core country of Islamic

fundamentalism,” (Sadeghi 2023, 35) the growing momentum of Islamist movements around the SWANA region and what is now referred to as the “Muslim World,” coupled with the success and absolute defiance of the Iranian Revolution had significant geopolitical implications for the US through challenging “western social and political domination of the third world (Tarock 1996, 163). Media during this period played a pivotal role in constructing and sustaining negative public opinion of Iranians as western hating, American flag burning, hostage taking fundamentalists who were opposed to western ideals, life, and those within the US. Popular television shows such as *Saturday Night Live* had comedy sketches portraying Iranians as backwards, dangerous, and hateful, using white actors to portray Iranians in dehumanizing ways, drawing on desperate racial tropes (Sadeghi 2023).

This was confounded by the US government’s widely accepted statement claiming that Iran was a “core country of Islamic fundamentalism,” creating not only unsustainable and dangerous situations for Iranians already within the US, but anyone trying to immigrate from Iran during this period (Sadeghi 2023). Iranians in the US were under immense surveillance by the government, with many of those in the midst of university being in constant threat of deportation (Sadeghi 2023, 35). Iranians transformed from a discrete group of mostly scholars to an incredibly demonized group, enemies almost overnight. Iranian migration to the US during this time also became very difficult. Many needed to leave Iran because of governmental disagreement or previous allegiances to the Shah, which was criminalized and placed them and their families in danger (Sadeghi 2023, 40). Migration was an extremely difficult process, unless you were very wealthy, or had previous connections with family members or friends outside of Iran who would sponsor you to get a visa. Many of those who have been able to come to the US in this post-revolutionary period, extending to today, do so through H1B1 visas for temporary

work, or the green card lottery. Migration demographics generally consist of students, professionals, and sometimes entire families, in addition to political refugees and exiles (Sadeghi 2023, 40).

Iranian Diaspora of the Present

The current Iranian diaspora in the United States is estimated to consist of anywhere between 800,000 and 1,000,000 individuals, although it's hard to gauge a precise number due to the legal categorization of Iranians as "White" on the US census form. This misrepresentation skews the actual number of Iranians present in the country, although there is a write-in option, allowing individuals to identify themselves on their own terms. Despite the racial limitations on official government forms, the Iranian diaspora in the US is a sorely under researched demographic. The field of Iranian Diaspora Studies is slowly coming to fruition with the first center dedicated solely to its examination starting in 2016 at San Francisco State University. Their website states that the commitment of the center is to draw on comprehensive, multidisciplinary perspectives that further describe the experiences and perspectives of the Iranian diaspora and its place within transnational identity. The prioritization of diasporic studies with such comprehensive and analytical intentions provides significant anticipation for the development of this field and the many implications that come with gaining greater insights into this misunderstood and misrepresented population. While of course not explicitly, current research on the Iranian diaspora often falls short of being comprehensive and comparative of the whole of Iranian diasporic issues. Most studies are narrowly limited to a specific aspect of Iranians' experience in either one city, one country, or a single disciplinary process mainly US centered, which discounts the multitude of other cohorts of the diaspora worldwide (Mobasher 2017). With the creation of centers like the one at SF State and the multi-disciplinary works by

social scientists around the world, the dynamic and shifting nature of this fascinating and multifaceted field can grow in capacity, empowering and fostering critical, nuanced discussions that dismantle generalizations that stigmatize and prejudice Iranians.

Generally speaking, the level of integration into host societies and identity negotiation and configuration of the Iranian diaspora of today has been deeply shaped by a combination of the legacy of the '79 revolution and the continuing political tensions between Iran and the US government (Mobasher 2017). Similar stereotypes about Iranians and other SWANA communities (as discussed within the “Terminology” section), continue to draw on racist, anti-Muslim tropes that conflate the entirety of the region with Islamic fundamentalism and perceived “terrorism” (Mahmood 2009). The ensuing politicization of Iranians and SWANA peoples continues to influence public perception, understanding, and awareness of non-Iranians in the US, impacting identity, expression, and solidarity to varying extents with the Iranian community. Donald Trump’s 2017 Muslim ban escalated these socio-political tensions by explicitly banning immigrants from seven Muslim-majority countries: Iran, Iraq, Libya, Somalia, Sudan, Syria and Yemen (Amnesty International 2020). This process, as described by Amnesty International was, “a license to discriminate disguised as a national security measure” (2020). During the months of its existence, the ban served to fracture immediate and extended families, while also ingraining the clear message: you do not, have not, and will never belong in the US. As an article by the American Civil Liberties Union from 2021 details, families continued to witness the ripple effects of this ban even four years after it first went into place (ACLU 2021). This includes family separations, inability to attend significant events, and an overall fracturing of the lives of millions of people (2021).

The Iranian diaspora in the US encompasses a wide range of diversity, both demographically speaking and in political and ideological terms, creating much tension and strife intra-communally. As Maghbouleh suggests, the accompanying identity realization and formation within the Iranian diaspora is always in relation to the external political, economic and social forces within their environment, also often imposed by outsiders (2017). While some of those in the diaspora have been deemed successful in maintaining an Iranian identity and culture within the private sphere of their lives, an entirely different reality exists within the public environments which diasporic individuals are existing within. This “identity confusion” (Maghbouleh 2017) is mostly in reference to second-generation Iranians, whose parents (either one or both) immigrated from Iran, and their experiences exploring American society while holding an Iranian identity. While this is of course a varied and complex experience, this concept has found much resonance within my exploration of the Iranian diasporic population in Colorado.

The following exploration seeks to understand the navigation pursuits of members of the Iranian diaspora in Colorado as it contends with the histories and current realities of the larger Iranian diaspora in the US. This is in addition to misconceptions and generalizations that seek to erase and homogenize their experiences, all the while contending with intra-communal dynamics that impact how their identities are negotiated, constructed, and possessed. While the previous section discussed the Iranian diaspora at large, by locating the Iranian diaspora in Colorado, I intend to provide considerations beyond the generally conceived narratives of the Iranian community in the US, showcasing the impacts and importance of place on historical, cultural, and social relevancies.

Chapter 1: Intentionality within the Iranian Diaspora in Colorado

Throughout the interview process of Iranians in primarily the Boulder areas in Colorado, I focused on discerning the impacts place had on each participants' relationship to their identity. The curiosity of exploring the relationship between these in a largely unknown and under researched population—one that I myself am a part of—propelled my inquiry. Through eight, hour and a half long, qualitative, semi-structured interviews, this topic was broached in the myriad ways it manifested for each individual, varying to accommodate additional factors present within the diversity of identities. Particularly, the concept of intentionally relating to Iranian identity was discussed, sometimes in explicit naming, other times in nuanced discernment. I assert intentionality as the **pre-meditated consciousness of one's identity enactment in a particular situation, often malleable and distinct based on situational and intimate influences**. Throughout this section, I describe the significance of these influences on an overall sense of belonging Iranians in Colorado feel, both within the larger diasporic community and non-Iranian Coloradan communities alike.

These examples, and many more, illustrate what being Intentionally Iranian in the Coloradan diaspora looks like. They show how Iranianness is negotiated, made, un-made, and often trivialized by non-Iranian biases coming from those around them. Despite the constant contradictions to validity and belonging often externally and internally imposed, the capacity for defining the multitude of ways to be Iranian in the diaspora is broadened. Within this, the ability to counter commonly held conceptions of the Iranian monolith and actively devise meaningful diasporic identity in the shadow of intergenerational and intra-communal trauma, pain, discord, and resistance is discovered. It is here that I introduce Fatima. Through our conversations, many integral insights to this are provided. In our interview, Fatima showed how intentionality within

her own Iranian-American life was both different and inter-connected with Iranians throughout the diaspora in the United States and is in an ever present state of becoming.

Political Pressures and the Persian Pursuit

On a sunny day in late October, I met Fatima—an ethno-musicologist in her senior year at a university in Colorado—for chai and conversation in a new, hip cafe/workspace in downtown Boulder. When I walked in, Fatima was sitting on a couch in the back of the space; her curly, dark brown hair pulled into a tight ponytail, and her red earrings striking against the multitude of colors encompassed in the surrounding space. I looked around—tables were filled with an array of people: children, students, those in the midst of business meetings, tall, lanky, white men with beards wearing dress shirts with shorts, wholly capturing the laid back Boulder facade who would soon return to their Tesla parked outside and drive back to their million dollar homes in the hills of Chautauqua. I suddenly became very nervous, not just for what the conversation with Fatima would entail—a surely meaningful and deep dive into the critical questions I hadn't known I'd been seeking answers to my entire life. But also to be surrounded by this new found audience. *What are **they** going to think if they hear the things we're talking about, the questions I plan on asking, and the follow up anecdotes I'm sure will arise?* With a heart filled with courage (sort of), a fresh pen, and Edward Said's *Orientalism* safely tucked in my backpack, I walked past the folks in Lululemon and said, "Salam!"

After greeting each other, *taarofing* (a common Persian practice of overly performing politeness), followed by my purchasing an overpriced slice of dry vegan, gluten-free pumpkin bread (a silly thing to taarof over, in retrospect), Fatima and I settled into the dark green, velvet couch, ready to begin. Fatima and I met in fall of 2022 on the first day of a shared Ethnic Studies course where we had both lost an introductory, name game and were now leaning against the

desks pushed to the outskirts of the room. We began talking and upon learning my name, Fatima immediately asked if I was Persian, which started a longer conversation and exchange of information. I later learned that my father and Fatima's grandfather and dad were old friends from their early days in the US, which prompted more discussion and growing familiarity. When the topic and methods of my thesis exploration were solidified, I immediately thought of asking Fatima for an interview. I felt her insights on this topic would be greatly introspective and crucial to thinking through the various considerations of this population (as they have been, thanks, joon joon).

I began our interview by asking Fatima simple demographic questions: age, racial, ethnic, and gender identifications, and what the term "Iranian" meant to her. After locating herself as a woman identifying, Iranian-American, non-white, member of upper middle-class standing, born and raised in Boulder and the surrounding areas, Fatima began by directly speaking to the politics of pride so intrinsic with the Iranian diaspora regarding identifying as "Iranian":

It's an evolving thing, right? And it's gonna be different depending on who you ask, because there's a lot of politics associated with that specific term. And we've heard in the community of Persian people using other terms to avoid this title [Iranian]. Some folks don't identify with the current government of Iran and so they don't want the term to be in reference to that. But other folks, even if they have the same opinion, still use the term "Iranian." People are gonna look at the term Iranian, Persian, whatever differently. I feel like the community has such mixed opinions on how we identify and how we want to be seen, especially given everything that's been going on the last year.

This was a commonly identified phenomenon within many if not all of the individuals I spoke with: the political pressures that accompany the self-defining act of labeling yourself, one that seeks to connect with your culture, your country, your place of origin, but that has been co-opted and re-created as a term filled with shame, danger, and mistrust. This phenomenon often results in diasporic subconscious negotiations—sometimes in terms of safety, oftentimes because of pure exhaustion—when members experience moments of pride that go against the political prevalence of misinformation and biases, in pursuit of respite from geopolitical representation. All are in direct correlation to the external perceptions that often dictate many aspects of Iranian diasporic life. Specifically in places like Boulder where the visible presence of Iranians is minimal, disregarded, and in some ways inconceivable, due in part to the overall lack of ethnic and racial diversity in the largely white communities. This is in addition to blatant and micro-aggressive forms of racism, anti-Iranian racism, and anti-Muslim racism at large within the city, state, and country at large.

This, in turn, impacts the relationship individuals have within internal thoughts of identity. How these are both reconciled within their intimate experiences, while also holding an identity in the Iranian diasporic context for which most are unequipped and unqualified to discern due to lack of comprehensive formation of diasporic identity and definition. This begs the question: even when individuals are striving for an intentional relationship with their Iranian identity—internally, externally or both—to what extent does this still depend on external environments conditioned to think about this identity synonymous with brutality, extremism, and hatred? What role does the external environment play in the Iranian diaspora in Colorado fully realizing their Iranian identity in all the spaces they negotiate, not just the ones dedicated to Iranian expression and community?

In part because of the myriad generational differences present within the diasporic community, many of my interviewees expressed the demanding nature of navigating Iranian life in the diaspora. Discovering how to meaningfully engage within their place-based communities, while also holding integral parts of their Iranian culture in representative and holistic ways proved difficult while simultaneously negotiating the realities of their own inherent westernization that influence this intentionality. Throughout my interviews, I saw varying levels of intention present within identity considerations that go beyond the tangible, physical ways Iranian identity is related to or showcased. Many times this is because the surrounding society, consisting of both non-Iranians and Iranian individuals, construct distinct conceptions of what Iranian-ness means externally, often contradicting and dismissing the intimate, lived experiences of Iranians themselves.

This also begs the question, is there one way of being intentionally Iranian? Because of the immense amount of diversity within the Iranian diaspora, is it realistic to expect this intentionality to show up the same in every person within a community, despite their similarities, despite their shared location? Isn't this yet another iteration of the Iranian monolith—an internalized definition of externally imposed embodiments? What comes with this especially when considering the generational differences of intentionality?

What Fatima spoke to in the first moments of our conversation encompassed the difficulties, pressures, and inconsistencies of the Iranian identity and the power that the Iranian monolith holds in dominant, non-Iranian spaces. In addition to the deliberations within the Iranian diaspora in the United States, the growing demographic results in the development of sub-cultures that often encompass the diverse and complicated realities of being an Iranian-American. In my conversation with Fatima, I found that regardless of what was

discussed, there was always a connection between identity and the place framing our discussion, as well as the emotional, societal, and psychological intermingling of its impact. Living in Colorado her whole life, Fatima found the particularities of her upbringing, both in the home and in the larger society to be distinct.

I've lived in Colorado my whole life, which has been a very interesting cultural experience, because there is a lack of a cohesive Persian community if you don't have a previous connection. There are a lot of Persians in Colorado, but they're dispersed throughout, you have to work very hard to find that community. Culturally, I also experienced this very strange hybrid type of environment where I was being raised in a certain way and then I was also experiencing the education system here. The socialization of both spaces was so drastically different. That split my brain a little, but I've been able to come to terms with this later in life, because I've found I can represent my duality and be a representation of both the communities, both of these cultures, and I can navigate both of them, which is a blessing.

What Fatima expresses here is something I came to understand as the process of Persian pursuit, a sentiment expressed throughout many of my interviews. Because of the sprinkling of Iranian presence around Boulder, Denver and surrounding areas, a great degree of intention is put into simply finding others in the Persian community, putting yourself out there in ways that can be difficult, both consciously and subconsciously. It requires a reconciliation with yourself, an intentional engagement with your own aspects of identity and how you seek to represent this in a more exterior way. Fatima's reference to the cultural differences between the way she was being raised and the dynamics of the surrounding place she was living in speaks to the

difficulties of forging and holding an identity as an individual in the diaspora when the customs of both are so different. Experiencing this juxtaposition results in far reaching implications, especially when this is felt from a very young age.

Her expression of “coming to terms” with this profound disconnect speaks to the intentionality Fatima has constructed in her pursuit of an Iranian identity in the midst of cultural difference and national (meaning US) disdain. This process is unique as many others in the community may not have the emotional or physical resources to come to this understanding. This is due to the challenges in contending with the contradictions of navigating internal and external differences. Intentional navigation, in the multitude of ways it is present within this community becomes a strenuous actuality not accessible for all to reach. Fatima continued on to state the repercussions this discord had on her early life: “I remember it [culture] being a barrier for me, just in the sense of, you know, my food is strange, and my language is strange, and I don't look like everybody else. As much as I was not thinking about it at that age, these experiences also opened up a lot of elements of my racial identity as well. It's not something you put much thought into until you recognize that there is a fundamental othering happening.”

With this distinct social messaging impacting how one conceptualizes themselves within one's Iranian identity and place within the community, is intentional engagement therefore sought after in ways that are feasible and representative of reality, or are these early, often formative experiences of ostracization enough to discolor this relationship indefinitely? The mechanisms many within the Iranian community in the United States have adopted as a means of necessary survival impacts the ways intentionality manifests itself. In my conversations, I also found there to be numerous ways in which this intentionality was enacted, sometimes in service

of protection, necessity for representation, or strategic passivity—although given the thousands of Iranians in Colorado, these categorizations barely scratch the surface.

The Politics of Pride

I met Hafez on an unusually warm day in late October. A second year business student at a Colorado university, Hafez spends his time playing classical guitar and enjoying the many interesting offerings of his major. Hafez's position within this research is interesting as he immigrated here when he was a pre-teen with his parents. Our conversation provided intriguing insights on many fronts, but particularly on the role strategic passivity plays in how he enacts intentionality regarding his Iranian identity, and the ways it coincides in differing and confusing ways between diasporic existence and the political presence of pride. From a self-described “night and day” difference between Boulder and his home city of Tehran, I was curious to hear about what his reality was like currently, given the cultural, emotional, and physical shift. Hafez emphasized maintaining key Iranian cultural means here in the US by intentionally utilizing media tools, means of communication (primarily in Farsi), and Persian food to bolster connectivity despite the strenuousness created by the physical and emotional distance with his family in Iran. When it came to external expressions of his identity in places like school, however, Hafez uncrossed his legs, leaning his elbow against his thigh, resting his chin on his hand:

I do keep to myself, whether voluntarily or involuntarily. When I have to share where I'm from in class or something, I simply say Boulder, mostly to avoid that explanation of who I am and that despite my Iranian identity, I do not support the Islamic Republic. I feel like my communities here in the US and in Iran are separate from one another. I think it

speaks to the idea of wanting to keep to ourselves because of the ideas and assumptions that go behind saying you're Iranian or Persian.

The intrinsic associations between the Iranian government, US-Iran tensions post-1979 Islamic revolution, and the Iranian people (by relation those in the diaspora as well) create the inability for many non-Iranians in the United States to make the crucial distinction between the Islamic Republic's government and the Iranian people. Many of those I spoke to remarked upon the role of misinformation amongst the people that surrounded them, which limits the ways they feel comfortable to divulge this aspect of their identity. Fundamental misunderstandings in mainstream US society—many of which are a result of life-long indoctrinations by western media, political rhetoric, and lack of critical thinking—prevents the establishment of productive counter narratives. This results in representational fatigue, either already present or imminent. This, however, is different from what may be present within the community intergenerationally, where the intentional withholding of the misconstrued identity was often in avoidance of a very real threat of danger. What I first noticed here later arising in a few of my other conversations, is what I call strategic passivity: the acquiescence of particular aspects of one's identity, in part or in full, as a result of assumed or previously experienced misgivings within a particular population, in order to avoid microaggressive scrutiny out of detachment or exhaustion. The fallout of this phenomenon, however, can have unwelcome impacts. As Hafez reflects:

I prefer using the term “Persian” to refer to myself, because when you say that people are like, ‘Well, what does that exactly mean?’ Otherwise, it just creates an unnecessary level of confusion when you express yourself, an unnecessary layer of explanation that shouldn't be there in the first place, right? I think it more comes from an intent of wanting

to create ambiguity rather than a direct fear of a negative reaction or a dangerous situation. But I do feel like every time I could say I'm Persian and I don't, it's a small tick on my overall sense of identity.

This act of relegation, common amongst those I spoke with, showcases one of the most difficult parts of being intentionally Iranian in a place, community, and circumstance that is perceived to be unreceptive. As much as it's an individual act, a great deal of the curation and traversing of an Iranian identity in an internal diasporic reality rests on the collective reception and general atmosphere in which individuals are located. Hafez references not only the intergenerational impacts and lasting traumas of the foundational Iranian diaspora after the 1979 Islamic Revolution, but the additional layer of explanation that comes along with proving your identity is safe. The resulting exhaustion and the accompanying feelings of uncertainty can feel isolating, especially when your experiences seem to be an anomaly. Without the existence of a visibly prevalent Iranian community, exacerbated the farther you get from Denver, connections become more dismal. While it's important to recognize the inability to universalize experiences of all Iranians in the diaspora in Colorado, the need for a culturally relevant space where members who identify with this community can share culture, perspectives, and meet others in the active pursuit of cultivating an intentional Iranian diasporic identity, is crucial.

One fascinating factor in addition to the influences of place is age. As I found in my interview with Leila—a twenty-two year old student at a university in California—significant shifts took place within her identity as she grew older and began seeking a greater sense of autonomy from her tight knit Persian community in Superior, Colorado, and in nearby cities:

I always felt very supported in the Iranian community growing up. I had really strong friendships, like kind of forced friendships, because my parents were friends with their parents. I remember how hard it was for my parents to adjust to life here, so it was great they had that community. But at the same time, I did really, really want to fit in at school, have the popularity that comes with whitewashing, internal whitewashing. I wanted to present myself as looking like my peers, whether that was wearing a certain type of clothing or eating certain kinds of food. I really suppressed my Iranian heritage in a way which is painful to look back on...I just wanted to fit in so badly and my two realities seemed conflicting. I ended up separating myself from the community a little bit throughout the end of high school because I was forced to come to all these things and be around this Iranian culture, and while I was close with them as a kid, I wasn't so much as I grew older. I found my own sense of identity with my friends at the high school, who were mostly white.

What Leila describes here is indicative of the constructs that accompany liminality; the persistence of periphery within your identities and communities. The perceived incompatibility between Leila's Iranian and American identities and showcasing this within her external environment speaks to Du Bois' idea of a double consciousness. Through tangibly enacting the internal discourse determined by feelings of double liminality, the impact of the external inevitably influencing internal understandings of "conditional belonging" (Sadeghi 2023) are displayed. This provides an example of intentionally relating to one's identity through the purview of societally defined "otherness," resulting in a code-switching that sometimes requires relinquishment, a mechanism of strategic passivity.

Additionally, this notion of a forced community, almost, of other Persians can be understood as a particular kind of intentionality Iranians here in Colorado are partaking in. This shows the consideration that goes into ensuring the physical presence of Iranian/Persian culture within this population. Despite this seemingly being imposed on members of the second-generation (at least in the beginning), the importance of cultivating this cultural community by Iranian immigrant parents is recognized. But as some of the other individuals I spoke to recounted, however, this is not always the case. Because of the severe nature of the discrimination, hatred, and fundamental othering that took place directly following the 1979 revolution, ensuing 1979-81 hostage crisis, and the Iran-Iraq War (1980-1988), the internalized trauma many Iranians had manifested itself in assimilationist practices that were often crucial for survival. Holding these experiences with cultural connection and self-identification is immensely difficult, oftentimes creating a gap between the ways cultural traditions and practices are held not only within your own life, but the lives of the generations to come. This can be indicative of an intergenerational trauma gap in the way conversations are had, meaning is made, and community is cultivated and continued.

These cultural impositions, as they can perhaps be seen, sometimes result in the relinquishing of an identity seen as enforced rather than fully understood or chosen. This idea is slightly contradictory, since regardless of how individuals in the diaspora choose to interact with their Iranian heritage, they still hold the reality that they are Iranian. For some, however, the ways in which that identity is reinforced through physical, emotional, and mental demonstrations is integral to ultimately gaining an internal sense of pride, acceptance, and reclamation of what being Iranian has been defined as in the United States. For Leila, this constructed Persian community resulted in her attempts at relinquishing parts of her identity that were not visible in

places outside these cultivated spaces. Her experiences of “internal whitewashing” came from a cultural separateness and previous generations’ self-identification with an Aryan lineage, as Hafez spoke to, and a form of strategic passivity that altered not simply the withholding and avoidance of disclosing particular information, but the entirety of her internal disposition toward fundamental aspects of her identity.

I found this speaks to the power external spaces have on internal perceptions and processes of intimate meaning making that younger diasporic members in physical environments, like those present in Boulder, are particularly susceptible to. Primarily through instances at school, on the street and in professional spaces, many interviewees remarked at the particular role race and ethnic ambiguity played within a resigned sense of self. While both the influences of place and the occurrence of racialization and phenotypic othering will be discussed more in subsequent sections, its direct correlation with intentional relation to identity and community within diasporic experience is noteworthy. Leila spoke explicitly to the connection she had made between accepting a “white” identity in an effort to fit in and finding a sense of “individual autonomy.” This speaks to the burgeoning nature of an Iranian diasporic identity within CO that is able to find middle ground between the two extremes of the internal and the external to ensure one is not neglected in service of cultivating the other. Leila later spoke about how her relationship to her Iranian identity shifted when she went to college, in part due to the physical and emotional independence of a new place. She also reflected on making a more intentional choice to showcase her cultural identity, not only in meaningful and relevant ways internally, but also externally with her friends and new community.

External and Internal Intentionality

Throughout my interviews, I saw intentionality playing out through the words individuals chose to use, the interactions they chose to make, and the newfound expressions they were actively navigating. Through the reclamation of universalized terms, monolithic projections, and internal disjointedness, the individuals I spoke with showcased a meaningful range of engagement with their Iranian identity, thoroughly utilizing the range possible within this process, from different enactments of strategic passivity to deliberate shifting in internal dialogues. What I ultimately came to understand was just how unintentional so much of being an Iranian in Colorado was. For many, enacting Iranian identity and contending with the myriad reactions that came with this was simply part of who they are, part of their experience growing up with this identity in this area. Of course, intentionality within a place where there isn't a tangible, external presence that serves to familiarize Iranian identity and offer material counter narrative to deep societal foundations of anti-Iranian racism and prejudices is of great importance. But despite feelings of confusion, hesitancy, and sometimes secrecy, this has always been a necessary part of who we are, whether fully comprehended or not.

Being Iranian in a place like Colorado, holding that identity sometimes only as far as your front steps, is in itself being intentionally Iranian. To not shy away from this part of your identity—when there's so much trauma, so much pain, such a history of erasure externally and internally imposed—to speak of its existence even if it's simply in your own mind is a significant act of intention and reclamation. How would the notion of intentionality as it pertains to one's existence and identity be framed if instead of implicating intention as an individual act, oftentimes the result of consistent negotiation and socialization, the reasons intentionality is required in the first place is examined? As we've seen thus far, the physical environment has

significant impact on how identity is realized and related to within the Iranian community in Colorado, influencing the extent to which they engage with an intentional Iranianness on a day to day basis.

To delve a bit deeper, why is it that in a place like Colorado, there is a lacking visible presence of Iranians? Given the significant, be it dispersed, population of Iranians within Colorado, why aren't there more physical representations of Iranian culture and presence within the state, and especially in larger cities like Denver? These might include a greater presence of Iranian restaurants, grocery stores, or larger community wide spaces and invitation for Iranian gatherings. Furthermore, are there inclinations to cultivate community spaces where a more complete camaraderie can arise? Perhaps this is not the intention of the Iranians living in Colorado. Perhaps the independence of the Iranian diaspora in Colorado from the Iranian diaspora in the US at large also translates to the Iranian presence in Colorado marked by the newer generations, becoming a greater part of the Iranian community.

Based on the conversations I've had, there seems to be less of a push for overwhelming physical visibility of Iranian presence and more for a greater development of internal recognition of one's Iranian identity. Coming to terms with what an Iranian identity means and how it's enacted personally in distinction from imposed or expected iterations. While this process is in part based on external experiences that reify internal discourses, there is a general push for the normalization of this as a part of an individual's existence and less as something that needs to be showcased in overt ways. Assumptions of what reactions from non-Iranians will be upon naming an Iranian identity dictate how one navigates and negotiates many explicit instances of their Iranian identity internally; such assumptions are emblematic of hegemonic, societal misgivings. These societies and communities hinge on media conceived orientalist, white supremacist

narratives that position western imperial pursuits in Iran and the SWANA region as justified and necessary and gallant. This, therefore, creates a culture in which identifying as Iranian becomes an anomaly, especially in a place like Boulder where the only conceivable reality of being Iranian is not often what is present within these communities.

There are many ways those I spoke with found intentionality within their Iranian identities. As one interviewee remarked, your Iranian identity and parts of Iranian culture are always with you. They may be lacking in a physical sense, emotional understanding, or spiritual connections, but for many, it's always there. An identity is just a label until meaning is connected to it, suddenly infusing actions, expressions, interpretations that were previously unknown. This identification cannot always be externally imposed, either by other members of one's cultural community, or by those outside of it. Intention comes when you realize how to hold your intimate reality within the greater noise of expectation, producing an identity that holds the entirety of your words, thoughts, and feelings.

Conclusion

Throughout this section, I assert that Iranians in the diaspora in Colorado possess an innate intentionality by simply existing as Iranians in the Boulder and surrounding areas. While this action is different depending on physical, emotional, and social factors, there is an overall effort for an intentional relationship to their Iranian identity, both in its showcasing and discretion. In the next section, I draw on insights found through my examination of intentionality to show how this impacts aspects of belonging within the Iranian diaspora in Colorado. I pay distinct attention to how this dynamic is often adjacent to agreeableness of Iranians within the larger, non-Iranian culture they're steeped within. This shapeshifting ability, paired with the politics attributed with being confident in one's self correlates with place specific and externally

present factors, similar to what was found in this section. As the subsequent sections will reveal, the findings professed in discussing intentionality within the Iranian diaspora in Colorado are implicated within each distinct yet similar topic within this examination as a whole. By discussing the significance of this framework here, I have provided a foundational throughline, the likes of which provide meaningful deliberation and opportunity for continuing deep thought and novel discovery.

Chapter 2: Belonging Within the Iranian Diaspora in Colorado

The purpose of this section is to illustrate how belonging within the Iranian diaspora in Colorado is influenced by both internal and external motivators, contributing to sentiments of belonging and connection within the diasporic community and outside. Through the lens of intentionality, belonging's multifaceted nature emerges in a distinct tangibility, one that showcases the apparent determination of both internal and external elements. Through considering the impact of exterior influences, paired with political consciousness, I contend that belonging is a complex and multifaceted process, amplified by resulting internal discourse and meaning making.

As stated in the introduction, the field of Iranian diaspora studies is burgeoning with some of the foremost scholars, many themselves part of the diaspora, paving the way in beginning to study this fascinating and noteworthy community. However, most of these studies focus on places with already established and visibly substantial diasporic populations such as Iranians present in Southern California, Germany, and Canada (Mostofi 2003; Sadeghi 2023; Dastjerdi 2012). Little is known about populations of Iranians dispersed around the rest of the country, such as those present in Colorado, which is one of the reasons I sought to embark on this inquiry. And as one of my interviewees remarked, because the Iranian diaspora is so vast, so complicated, and so opinionated, analyses like the one I'm attempting to complete are necessary in order to better understand the realities of this subculture. How are Iranians in Colorado engaging with their Iranian culture? Where is this taking place (ie public vs private spaces)? Is it deemed specialized in ways viewed differently in other diasporic settings? I assert that because the physical and social space of Colorado and the Boulder area specifically, are devoid of material representations of Iranian presence and Iranian culture, this in turn impacts the

comfortability and normalization of corporeal Iranian identity that both Iranians and non-Iranians experience. The influences of place on Iranian identity in the diaspora should be recognized in both the assets it provides and the preclusions it creates. As seen in places like LA, the tangibility of Persian presence surrounds you wherever you go, from the architecture, to the restaurants, people speaking Farsi on the streets, and store after store available to acquire traditional Persian essentials. However, it is also important to recognize that a “Persian” presence as an ethnic consideration is different from an “Iranian” presence, with the myriad ethnicities and language a space like this would encompass. This forms an almost unspoken sense of solidarity, of shared cultural recognition, amongst those born and raised in the diaspora and those that immigrated to the diaspora, both encompassing very different experiences. A feeling of home amongst those holding onto memories of the past, actively trying to reconstruct their future, but doing so as a supposed “we” rather than simply an “I.”

Whether it was an intentional shift in language when asked a specific question by someone on the street, or the code switch that resulted in having to negotiate parts of their identity, Iranians in the Coloradan diaspora, specifically in Boulder, are consistently confronted with the fully loaded question of belonging. Belonging in and to a place. Belonging within a community. Belonging to a people. What does it mean to belong as an Iranian/Iranian-American individual in the diaspora in Colorado? **Furthermore, how do these realities of belonging, whether physical, emotional, and/or social, impact the ability for acts or feelings of intentionality to arise within the CO diaspora?** Or, is it precisely that intentionality that creates a more difficult, conditional relation to belonging seen through internal dialogues as a result of the external perception of a situation or place?

In placing the concept and practice of belonging within proximity of these questions, particularly as it pertains to an intentional relation and identity practice, I saw three interrelated connections. I first begin by pondering how belonging, whether real or imagined, was felt in stronger ways when there was **external support from the surrounding society in the Coloradan community, greater US, or world**. While enactments of support varied based on the drastically different nature of the three forums mentioned, I generally came to define support in this instance as an external show of solidarity with the Iranian people, however performative or rooted in ulterior motives this was. Often taken as indication that public perceptions and pejorative narratives were shifting, this created a prideful relation within my interviewees in their Iranian identity not otherwise felt. This notion, I assert, rests heavily on the second practice observed: mutating nature of **political relations between Iran and the United States creating a political layer to pride inherent in many Iranians' relationships to their identities**, especially in a place like Colorado where this identity is even more marginal. Additionally, a semblance of belonging within those I interviewed always seemed contingent to some extent on their abilities to be a palatable representation of this unknown they were adding into the communal/conversational equation. Finally, I also sought to understand the notion of belonging **within the Iranian diaspora in Colorado and how these external experiences influenced the ways they were relating to aspects of fellowship in their surrounding communities**.

Conditional Belonging within Iranians in Colorado

From this, I maintain the term “**palatable Persians**” to describe the processes of negotiation, relegation, code switching, and dismissal many of my interviewees reported contending with in order to create conditional belonging within the non-Iranian communities in Colorado (Sadeghi 2023). Conditional belonging, specifically in regards to Iranians in the

diaspora, can be understood as the “partaking in the cultures, norms, practices and state institutions of their host society, but not feeling like full, unconditional social membership is attainable” (17). This process also rests on the experiences of being racially othered by non-Iranians within the host society, oftentimes through means of racialization and what is referred to as being a “perpetual foreigner” (Tuan 1998 in Sadeghi 2023, 17). In the Iranian diaspora, these processes of racialization and otherness are often confounded with geopolitical stigmas that amplify feelings of being an outsider, resulting in various coping mechanisms and self-relegations (Sadeghi 2023, 18). Within this, ideas of what Sadeghi calls “racial flexibility”—within a US specific context—arise to inform how belonging is often determined through what strategies for conforming are available and adopted (Sadeghi 2023, 7). I therefore posit that due to various signals of seemingly overwhelming and “irreconcilable” differences present within Iranians in Boulder specifically, belonging often cannot be achieved. Furthermore, I contend that these perceived differences and the resulting conditional belonging produced is fundamental for non-Iranians in Boulder to uphold because it amplifies the performative nature of this city, so commonly understood in ways of passive acceptance, while maintaining that same passive process when it comes to accountability and education.

Through the labeling of Iranians in Boulder, by means of identity questioning, comments on appearance, or compulsory assimilationist impositions, there is allowance to continually uphold societal biases, which in turn disavows Iranians in the diaspora the opportunities to begin constructing intentional diasporic identities because they are being held to the same binaries and misconceptions a monolithic identity synonymous with negative political and social presences produces. Centering the question of what belonging looks like, how it’s constructed and by whom is essential to thinking about how your identity relates in public settings. Addressing these

considerations while actively attempting to navigate how your own experience deviates in ways have a significant impact on belonging. As discussed above, these aspects of palatability and the distinct performance it produces are examples of conditional belonging. The processes of “conforming” Sadeghi mentions within their definition of conditional belonging manifests within my research through the practice of palatability for non-Iranian audiences not only externally, but a self-relegation internally that produces an intimate discourse of detachment not always understood as such within the Iranian diaspora in Colorado. While this experience is probably neither universal to Iranians in Colorado, nor specific to this demographic, I assert a layer is added to the experiences of conditional belonging based on influences from the external environment, which create a distinction in how belonging is viewed, negotiated, and navigated.

Iranians in the diaspora are in a unique position; they can be thought of as, in many ways, an extension of the country of Iran. Key aspects of Iranian culture are maintained such as food, music, traditions, customs, and languages, in addition to many members of the Iranians diaspora across the world having immigrated from Iran, due to the novelty of the Iranian diaspora. In addition, these members grow up with aspects of Iranian culture in the home, but a very different culture and society surrounding them in almost all other ways. This then creates the requirement of dual cultural competency enacted through a double consciousness, one which might not be thoroughly understood or acknowledged due to the precarious relationship between Iran and western countries where many diasporas have formed, creating a situation in which large numbers of those born in the diaspora have never physically been to Iran. I say “physically” here, because despite the geographic preclusions, many in the diaspora feel an emotional attachment to this place we’ve never been. We’ve heard stories our entire childhoods about the beauty of the mountains, the magic of the bazaars, and the richness of the people. Many of us still have

extended family in Iran, spoken to only through WhatsApp and Facetime, following each other on Instagram, communicating through broken Farsi or English. Even though many of us have never been to Iran, we've been there in our dreams, in the smell of Ghormeh Sabszi in our Boulder kitchens, through the "Dooset darams," "Deltangetams," I love you, I miss you, even though we've never met.

In Colorado, these exterior opportunities for relationality are not as readily available. As many of those interviewed shared, gathering for a meal with other Persians required driving for long stretches, an experience heightened for those living in Boulder and farther away from many of these points of communal contact. While some are still able to find this community through particular acts of relationality and community building, generally speaking, this dispersion impacts the levels of intra-communal solidarity within the Iranian diaspora in Colorado. Relationality, I found, connects greatly to belonging in the sense that the more connected with other Iranians, the greater sense of belonging within that identity you feel. However, this is generally only true within the mesocosm of these spaces. Once contended within the greater, non-Iranian society and culture present in the surrounding area, this meaning connection to belonging changes. The lack of visible reinforcements of Iranian culture, which many feel would lead to an increased normalization and greater acceptance of Iranian individuals, along with necessary spaces of gathering, healing, and growing, all culminate in a reality where some Iranians in Colorado are able and willing to move more freely and more securely in their identities. It is important, however, to keep the limitations of this attempt to almost replace one monolithic conception with another in mind when envisioning this future. By creating a Persian centric space, who would be left out of this identity, creating another layer of rigid identity formation? This consideration, in turn, impacts both the ways belonging is felt within Colorado

and how it is intentionally created and developed alongside identity deliberations. Despite these potential drawbacks for those that hold these identities, the limited external presence of the Iranian and/or Persian community creates opportunities for a more intentional reclamation and development. These opportunities are in contrast to the often assigned meaning by others in the world, in this country, throughout history, throughout politics, without meaningful recognition of how being an Iranian in the diaspora is experienced by those actually living it. Particularly in the case of second generation Iranians who have experienced various performances, realities, and makings of belonging, I was interested to learn the multitude of meanings belonging held within their perspectives of **social culture, intra-diasporic communal commonalities, and Iranian-American identity.**

Place and Space's Influence on Belonging within Iranian Individuals in CO

My father first met Roshan's parents in the early 2000s at a recreational center in Boulder, Colorado. After striking up a friendship, our families began meeting for leisurely activities, Persian cultural events at the university in Boulder, and shared meals. Seeing that I was a young child, my memories of this time are cloudy. One that remains present, however, is of Roshan and I dancing together at a Nowruz celebration in Boulder, my small self reaching up to hold Roshan's hands as they stood tall beside me. When Roshan logged into our scheduled Zoom meeting from their home in Erie, Colorado more than ten years after we had last seen each other, their shining eyes, curly black hair, and full faced smile immediately took me back to that moment many years ago. We reminisced on our younger years and our shared experiences of Persian cultural presence in Boulder as Roshan wrapped a patterned shawl around their shoulders and sipped from a small, blue mug of chai. In between reflecting on her parents' influence on her cultural identity, truly setting a positive and inquisitive tone for Roshan's Iranian-American

personhood and their early experiences of growing up in student housing surrounded by many other children of immigrants who were also othered in the grand scheme of Boulder, they reflected on the environmental reality in which they grew up. Particularly, Roshan spoke to a lack of physical representation, not just in terms of Iranianness, but diversity in general in Boulder, which created difficult internal identity reckonings, as they described it, despite their newfound community of neighborhood kids that provided a respite from the white, homogenous, “normal” encountered daily.

When I was growing up, I was always very comfortable and defiant in claiming my Iranian-American identity and making that known from day one. Maybe exactly opposite to how you and others grew up, which was to read people and try to gauge what the reactions would be. But the people in Boulder are very close minded and lack a real understanding of the world and the people in it. Now I feel like I've come to that point where I'm not always open with people about my Iranian identity, because I don't know what I'm going to get. I think it was perhaps a bit naive of me to think that in Boulder, everyone would be accepting of my identity and of me being proud of that identity. It's made me more cautious as a person as opposed to more open. I started to see the cracks in it, in the bubble.

A crucial difference asserted here is the honest and full acceptance Roshan embodied when it came to showcasing their Iranian-Identity in public spaces. Especially as it was something that occurred in their younger years, as opposed to many of the other people I spoke with who remembered feeling confusion, shame, and resistance during this time, some of which Roshan

also spoke to here. In reflecting on why this might have been the case, they told me that their parents' attitudes towards their Iranian identity and how they moved through Boulder spaces despite the struggles they endured upon first arriving and living in the US, showed Roshan a way to authentically navigate this in their eyes without performative or degrading attempts. This, in turn, created a sense of security and allowance of self-disclosed pride within a dominantly non-Iranian space where a blatant counter narrative did not exist in the same ways it did for others. What I find to be notable here is the intergenerational impact of existing in and claiming of identity had on second generation children of Iranian immigrants. As I saw in some of my other conversations, the experiences and memories of the past fully colored the lives of those who immigrated, their new lives, and the subsequent lives of their children, many in carefully curated ways, focusing on internal stagnation and preservation and little external exhibition. But regardless of these curated practices, the perceived otherness of Iranians by non-Iranian society was pervasive, quickly consuming their lives and the lives of their children in confusing, ambiguous ways.

Roshan reflects on this as they speak to how this external pride shifted as they grew older and realized the performative nature of the place and its people that were consuming their identity. The performative liberalism of Boulder is something viscerally present within the interactions, local politics, and general culture that exists regarding any number of inclusivity, diversity, or justice discussions and enactments (lack thereof). This performativity was showcased in the experiences of my interviewees by way of microaggressive curiosity, questioning, and ignorance regarding their "different" appearances, names, etc. Many of my interviews mentioned—by way of explicitly mentioning the performativity of Boulder or not—encountering these instances of "interest" throughout their lives. As Roshan shared,

however, this is ultimately rooted in a wariness for the “other” stoked within a significant portion of Boulder’s population that seek to live their lives within close mindedness and uniformity. It is this surrounding performativity that assumingly necessitates the use of code switching and self-relegation so many of my interviewees spoke to, also enhancing their doubly-liminal status internally. Understanding performativity as a place-based, social identity given the correlation between the political undertones and social informing of the term can enable its viewing as an ever present action, reproduced externally and internally.

This begs the question: is it better to have fully felt a sense of an authentic Iranianness by one’s own definitions and then lost it, or to never have felt it at all? Is an external showcasing—in the intra-communal, monolithically constructed definitions of this process—required for “feeling Iranian” in Colorado, or is part of this subculture in Colorado moving into an acceptance of different, less visible, but no less potent expressions of an Iranian identity? Where is the line between this more subtle, intentional reality and coercive relegation? For those I interviewed, there was no consensus on these fronts. For others, finding a distinction between the only way they’ve ever known this identity to exist in the public sphere was difficult. For Roshan, this lack of constant reinforcement provided an opportunity to move further into their own reality.

I feel like really leaning into being Iranian-American and being proud of that, being proud of the heritage is important especially here because it's hard to live in that identity in Boulder. It's not really accepted. I don't know if I would feel as strongly about it if I lived somewhere where it was always around me. I do wish there was a greater Iranian presence here sometime, though, because I have my own interpretations of the culture

and my own experiences, but I think it's really valuable to talk to people who are from a similar social group. There's something universal in that experience that connects you with people who are like you.

Although the lack of a publicly known presence of Iranians in Colorado is difficult in many significant ways, it also provides those like Roshan the impetus to fully engage within their Iranian identity, accounting for their physical location, as well as other identities they hold, in ways that visibly make sense to them. Without external reinforcement of particular cultural stereotypes or internalized monoliths, a kind of internal recognition and cultivation can take place, the building blocks of which come from an inner dialogue occurring from intentional identity engagement and negotiation. While not to diminish the role a greater Iranian populace in the state of Colorado would play on public perception, normalization and increased comfortability for many Iranians living here, sometimes moments of discomfort result in profound realizations and deliberate movement that may not otherwise occur.

What Roshan speaks to in the second part of this quote is a sense of diasporic solidarity in Colorado that many others echoed. This intra-cultural communication and sharing is often thwarted by the lack of a shared space, recognition, or some sort of general cohesiveness where this integral diasporic communication can occur. Others spoke of having these spaces (physical or metaphorical), that centered around a shared Iranian/Persian identity, but it not being the sole focus. It would instead be on the myriad other life occurrences and friendly sharings that, in their own way, normalize experiences of difference that often serve to re-create abnormality outside of these common understandings. As Roshan discovered, even in the absence of a greater shared

Persian community, there were still ways to intentionally engage in their Iranian-American identity with non-Iranians they encountered through shared values and mutual respect.

I felt a lot of anger growing up in Boulder that my Iranian identity was not seen or understood in comprehensive ways. But there was also a lot of desire for change, I wouldn't say it was all necessarily negative. Nowhere is perfect, everywhere has its problems. What's really important about where you are is what you make of it, how you connect to others, how you find community. No matter where you are, you have to build your community. It can be harder or easier, depending on what your values are. Finding groups within communities that you have common interests with, that you can share a human to human understanding with, is crucial.

This experience of building a community based on shared cultures that both see beyond and within the identities you bring with you in your full personhood speaks to a level of adaptability I have found to be prevalent to the Iranian diaspora in Colorado. While the line between adaptation and assimilation can sometimes blur, at no fault of the individuals, the baseline uncertainties that connote many second generations' experiences divulge important occurrences of self-realization. Whether this is in the form of a more intentional relationship with what Iranian identity means to you and the surrounding community, or a receptive social culture that accounts for your existence in ways that don't require the "necessary" explanation, negotiation, or insistence. As Reza, a 30 year old mechanical engineer who's lived and worked in the Boulder area since he graduated from college shared on a peaceful walk through the foothills in town: "You can see shows of Iranian culture here but not to the same extent as in other places. It

doesn't even necessarily mean in terms of numbers. I think numbers help, but I think the bigger issue at hand is the social culture, and no one's to blame for that not being there. I just think we're all **exhausted**, right?"

I asked Reza what he meant by a "social culture," and how he saw its lacking presence relating to a collective exhaustion felt by the diaspora in Colorado. He defined "social culture" as the sentiments and expressions both internally within the diaspora in Colorado and within spaces of predominantly non-Iranians that dictate how this identity is navigated and communicated. He shared how its lacking presence was often in response to perpetually shifting and conforming one's identity into a palatable enactment for the surrounding, dominant society, in addition to the performing of self that accompanies code-switching. Existing within a doubly-liminal state also increases this exhaustion; to constantly navigate these two realities you feel privy to but fundamentally different from creates a restless state of constantly searching for an answer that doesn't exist. Particularly in a place like Boulder, this exhaustion is heightened because of the hyper-focused aspect that comes along with a space being white dominant. Each and every difference is immediately perceived, questioned, and commented on, which places these individuals in a constant loop of performances. He elaborates:

There's an exhaustion that comes with constantly getting told you're exotic looking, there's an exhaustion with code switching, there's an exhaustion with a lot of things that are survival mechanisms. You're only thinking about how to get to the next step so we're not living super intentionally or consciously all the time. I spent a lot of my time, especially in my younger years, defending Iranians and defending being Iranian and it really sucks being in that position of defense all the time.

In this quote, Reza is sharing a commonly expressed sentiment across almost all of those I spoke with. Being within this incessant state of defense, hyper-awareness, and negotiation creates a particular mode of belonging seemingly achieved by conforming but never truly realized in both your interactions with others and within yourself. This speaks to two important things: the first is a reminder that this chronic exhaustion is a symptom of anti-Iranian/anti-Muslim racism, rooted in systemic processes of racialization and white supremacy. The internal impacts of these multi-layered, racialization processes go beyond external interactions, creating deep and often intimate irreconcilable differences that are difficult to contend with. Second, this perpetual fatigue is yet another reminder that belonging within the Iranian diaspora in Colorado is conditional. This exclusivity rests on the ability for individuals to conform to societal norms and expectations through the performance of palatability, a foundational, internal conversion process to external impositions.

Navigating, Negotiating, and Countering

Throughout my analysis, I've come to recognize the multitude of ways intentionality within the Coloradan Iranian diaspora functions, much of which centers around some aspect of code switching and navigating the political assumptions synonymous with an Iranian identity. Often, this is found in becoming palatable through any means necessary to avoid the microaggressive curiosities laden with otherness and estrangement, placing individuals in a perpetual displacement. Much of what I've discovered has been through intentionally curating a telling of assumptions already blatantly stated, such as what Reza mentions here with the act of code switching. Within my interviewees, this process entailed shifting and carefully choosing language when disclosing the Iranian aspect of their identities. While most of my interviewees referred to this process in benign terms, not characterizing it as code switching explicitly and

rather just another part of being Iranian in Boulder/Colorado, others did mention this experience and the multiple layers of emotions—guilt, shame, anger, resentment—this engagement produced.

Going against what is already pre-supposed, a mystery of difference where the impetus for revealing the truth is not always genuine but rooted in a collective understanding of difference, reinforces societal and self-imposed ostracization. This language of “getting to the next step” Reza uses to describe moving through a space like Boulder implies that there’s something propelling movement forward, a futurist imagining from a stagnant reality. The chronic exhaustion, often persisting since childhood, places Iranians in Colorado in a difficult position to pursue a diasporic identity in their own right when the messaging they receive is towards only one aspect of their identity they believe to exist within the limits of. What is the impact of this on feelings of belonging within the Iranian and Boulder communities and at what point is a necessary shift required to break through these repetitive and destructive cycles?

Delving further into the political considerations of pride and its place in identity and personhood, I’ve come to recognize the ways this influences claiming, living, and existing as an Iranian in Colorado. This is both in how strongly external perceptions influence internal negotiations of pride across and within generations, while also providing some with opportunities to attempt shifting narratives of an Iranian monolith. While the conversations I had spanned these considerations and more, there were a few common denominators shared across all of their testimonies. Many I spoke with recounted how this awareness began at a young age and influenced, however significantly, their relationship to their Iranian identity with multiple interviewees remarking: “I didn't know what my peers would think of me when I said I was Iranian.” As often the sole Iranian representative in most or all external social experiences, this

uncertainty was in part reinforced by experiences of non-Iranians in the Boulder community, but additionally in the rehearsing of intentional speech by those within the Iranian community, especially parents. One interviewee spoke to this phenomena within her family, including mention of intergenerational experiences that proved to hold weight in how these discussions were approached and their substance:

The shadow of the revolution has always been prevalent and present in my life, in the ways my parents act, and in turn, and the way my sister and I were raised. We were told to watch our tongues, be careful what we say, and don't talk too much about it [being Iranian], don't spew crazy stories, nobody wants to hear. Be careful about what you're saying, be careful what you're talking about, because they already have a bad image of it in their mind, so they'll take your smallest distaste and dislike, and they'll turn it into a horror story. My sister and I were raised very carefully.

This notion of “carefulness,” a precarity in the way one showcases themselves, the language used, the discussions engaged within, speaks to a greater awareness of monolithic conception and harmful universalization. To contextualize the experiences of Iranians in the diaspora in the US within the larger geopolitical reality of US-Iran relations and history is necessary to understand the impacts on the intimate experiences of those living within these tensions. The distinct usage of this process of cautiousness within the US specifically, based on the massive tumult between the US and Iran, is perhaps different than attitudes of care in other places within the Iranian diaspora, especially in the Global North. While this cross-diasporic analysis is outside of the scope of this current examination, it is important to

hold this possibility within thinking about particular attitudes towards an Iranian identity cross-nationally, its perceived meanings, and generational influences.

Viewing intentionality within the conscious engagement, dissemination, and procuring of identity Iranians in Colorado engage in must include the ways language is leveraged in order to purposefully represent Iranian identities in this environment. Including an intergenerational aspect adds intrigue, as it points to the ways not only are actions from some of the first members of the Iranian diaspora informing the present, but that they remain applicable because of the inherent correlation between an Iranian identity and the precarious relationship between the US and Iran. This then limits the ability for members of the Iranian diaspora to offer counter narratives or differing perspectives on this association or their sentiments regarding the regime in Iran, as their positions are already presumed to be known by non-Iranians. Within a space like Boulder, the overwhelming niceties and political correctness often thwart any substantial attempts at recognizing biased conceptions and harmful behaviors, because their covert nature allows them to slip under descriptors like “curiosity” instead of understanding them as microaggressions. By placing those in the diaspora in a position of defense and accountability for the continuation and growth of these misconceptions, censorship of their language in conceivable ways and in turn aspects of their identities occurs.

This was additionally noted in the public naming of ethnic and cultural heritage—the interchangeable nature of “Persian vs Iranian” identification. Almost every interviewee, when asked about how they identify themselves, said they use the term “Persian” to some extent when they are first introducing themselves, because of the ambiguity the label allows them and the exemption of continued curiosity, questioning, and assumed distaste. Many who stated this at

first continued on to describe how other times they also use the term “Iranian-American” in reference to themselves, naming the converse nature these terms hold in their vocabulary. Some interviewees identified as Iranian-American right off the bat, both in our interview and in their day to day interactions, while also holding similar reservations to those who identified predominantly as “Persian” most of the time with one of the interviewees stating, “Identifying as Iranian is something that always makes me nervous when I have to tell somebody for the first time, just because you never know how somebody's gonna react.” This sentiment was emblematic of the attention paid to exterior representations of Iranianness. Many participants are hyper-aware of potential threats when a curiosity can easily become an instance of violence. Being outside the predetermined marginal “others,” already deemed palatable within the city limits was cause for microaggressive concern. Especially in a place like Boulder, with its limited demographic scope, pseudo educated, progressive engagement, and overtly shielded nature from cities 50 miles away.

As Yalda, a 22 year old Iranian-American recently relocated to Denver maintains, this perception repositioned as she grew older and her understanding of her politicized identity grew:

It shifts based on who people feel like supporting and who people feel like condemning. This also shifts depending on whether people separate the Iranian government from the Iranian people. I think that definitely changes their perception of the world, of the word [Iranian], and how they treat people from Iran. Growing my understanding that the people around me really do love that I'm Iranian and are very receptive and very positive about it, that has made me more prideful versus when I was younger I was like, “I don't know how **people are going to perceive me being very proud of being Iranian.**”

She continued on to state:

My pride in being Iranian is a lot stronger than it was before. I think a lot of that was getting older and traveling to different cities, and seeing just how diverse the US really is and just how many different ethnic, religious, racial groups of people there are and seeing how they take pride in it. It's a lot easier and it requires less courage to take pride in your part of your identity when you have people around the world supporting you.

Born and raised in Boulder, Yalda was able to speak to the surrounding culture and her experiences of the shifting nature of identity politics within the Boulder community. Growing up, she was surrounded by a vibrant and rich community of Persians, many of whom lived in Denver or the surrounding cities. As a child, she and her siblings would travel to the home of a Persian friend in the neighborhood where they would engage in a makeshift Farsi school, learning how to read, write, and speak alongside other first/second generation children whose lives also differed drastically outside their homes. Smiling, she recounted the overwhelming feelings of comfort and effortlessness of being Iranian within these spaces. “When we would be at Persian parties or at different Persian events, it was a lot easier to take pride in my identity then, because I was surrounded by people that were also Iranian and were just joyous and full of life and food and celebration. And I was like, “Oh, yeah, it's actually so rad to be Iranian.”

While Yalda notes these Farsi class sessions didn't last for long due to collective busyness and it becoming less of a priority, having those Persian family friends outside of school was vital in identity development and the growth of internalized Iranian pride, especially as she reflected on the in-between, liminality members of the second generation in the diaspora often

exist within. Liminal in the sense of being American, but not being super white (in reference to looks and culture), being Iranian but often lacking “fundamental” aspects of what that identity should contain (language, westernized Iranian culture, etc). She stated that despite there being a decent Iranian community in Colorado, the demographics of Boulder were not reflective of that at all. This impacted the ways she interacted with non-Iranians in her community, specifically how she felt preconceived notions and misunderstandings about Iran and the SWANA region at large and what was happening over there transferred to the lived experiences of the diasporas globally. In addition, because of the lack of visible representation of those who hold SWANA identities in Boulder, the full complexity of events and happenings are often simplified based on what is most readily assumed and easily digestible. Here, Yalda also speaks to a commonly held conception of external influence and visibility and the amount of courage it takes in being publicly Iranian when the former is missing, but remains intrinsically linked with the latter. Additionally, Yalda spoke to the direct correlation between this and expressions and feelings of pride within the Iranian diaspora in Colorado.

Race and Whiteness

As our conversation continued, Yalda brought up the presence of racial and ethnic considerations throughout her experiences specifically living in Boulder, and the ways this influenced how she related to pride in her identity:

It's that kind of subtle experience of knowing that you're ethnically, racially different. I was hyper aware of being one of the only brown kids in the room. Growing up in Boulder, it took me a very long time to take pride in being Iranian and understand that

Boulder is not a very diverse place, and you go to a lot of other different cities and there's a vast mix of people from different cultures and religions and backgrounds. Although I really do love Boulder, and I think the demographic is changing a little bit, diversity is not its strong suit. At all.

In describing experiences of difference as “subtle” speaks both to the convoluted understanding of political, historical, and social processes that are present in the making of the Iranian diasporic identity, but the sweet, microaggressive realities of being Iranian (and a person of color) in Boulder. Diversity within the non-Iranian population of Boulder, in addition to inter-diasporically, arose a few other times in my interviews, mostly in discussions surrounding the lack of diversity Yalda speaks to, not just demographically, but also in terms of thought. The variance of diversity within a community as a whole has implications on the sub-communities as well, influencing their inter-cultural dynamics, as it's done within the Iranian diaspora in CO. Because of the dispersed nature of the diaspora not just within Colorado, but from other parts of the Iranian demographic in the US, cross-cultural/communal building is not seen as a priority, or something within the feasibility of the diaspora in its current emotional, political, and representational existence. With this external disposition comes a sense of internal hesitancy towards the mixed messages received from the surrounding society, one's community, and ultimately oneself. Yalda spoke to feelings of prolonged and misplaced identity understanding and development within her own right as an Iranian-American: “I always had close friends that loved the fact that I was Iranian, mostly because of the food, but I think my identity was something I didn't really know how to approach for the longest time, because you were constantly summarizing and synthesizing it for others who didn't have to take pride in their

identity/ethnicity because they were largely white.”

The subsequent reality that is achieved when diversity of thought, physicality, ethnicity, etc. is not present, along with performative aims at establishing more variance, is a Eurocentric normalization of homogeneity. As far as Iranian presence in Boulder goes, being in a perpetual state of otherness, belonging can never truly be achieved, not for lack of trying on the part of either party, but because the foundational culture was built and is sustained by existing in categorical terms in which “White including those with Middle Eastern descent” are not included. Yalda’s sentiments here express a larger lack of ability to have and be in the many spaces she occupies in the same way. By advocating for greater multi-dimensionality and resisting the temptation to simplify individuals in attempts at palatability for a white, non-Iranian audience, opportunities to authentically navigate identities and their intimate meanings are provided.

Palatability within the Iranian diaspora in Colorado arose many times in the conversations I had. Whether it was through physical appearances as described through my interview with Leila and her internal white-washing attempts she felt were necessary in forming communities within her predominantly white schools, or other means such as relegation of identity due to the political associations of pride. All of these rest upon the fundamental othering that takes place within non-Iranian society, in addition to within the diaspora as the intergenerational gap persists and intentionality within forming a diasporic identity that is often informed by, yet separate from their Iranian roots, has not yet occurred. Within both, a power dynamic is present between those that feel they can leverage aspects of identity, personhood, and belonging in distinct ways against those deemed the “other.” Within the non-Iranian community

we see this arise in mechanisms such as criminalization associated with simply “looking Middle Eastern,” heightened by particular gender expression (men).

One interviewee shared her Iranian, male, cousin's experiences of having an Iranian name and dark features in the US after 9/11 and the discrimination that came with that. Based on the societal atmosphere and various forms of harassment, he changed his name and was ultimately pushed towards a more assimilated reality in attempts of survival. Within the diasporic community, this can be viewed through the monitoring and enforcing of particular politics or ways of life, creating an internal meaning to the Iranian monolith that alienates anyone who differs. As one interviewee remarked, drawing similarities and creating a community based on cultural and ethnic commonality can be such a beautiful and unifying force, while also creating such divisions within a community. This sentiment is present within the Iranian diaspora to varying degrees, mainly in the way the diaspora in the US has broken into so many different subcultures, but are still beholden to a uniform conception of Iranianness that is not representative of all that hold this identity. In many ways this can be understood as different individuals adapting and living in their own realities while still holding close aspects of their culture and heritage. But with the disjointed history of the Iranian diaspora and presence of immense amounts of trauma and collective strife that has transferred intergenerationally, the current generation of Iranian-Americans are finding uncertainty within a lack of external cohesion. The resulting internal disarray has many symptoms, one of which is the palatability Iranians in Colorado seek to adhere to throughout their lives. I saw this arise in the hyperawareness of exterior perception through usage of language, negotiation and relegation of identity, and in some cases concessions, creating a version of Iranianness palatable to a western, more specifically Boulder, audience. Through this performance, how is a sense of belonging

impacted? And when this becomes almost a way of life, something compatible with how aspects of your identity are related to outside your family or a particular community, what is its impact then? When does the external become internal? Were they ever separate? Or does one inform and substantiate the other...

When I first met Afsaneh, it was a frigid morning in November. Huddled next to my space heater with layers of blankets on my lap, I opened my notebook and logged into our scheduled Zoom meeting. Afsaneh's bright image filled my screen: her dark, curly hair framed her smiling face and we greeted each other with warmth despite the cold. Connected through a mutual friend, Afsaneh is a 22 year old, recent college graduate with her degree in literature, born and raised in Boulder, who now lives in Denver and works as an assistant at a plastic surgeon's office. Having spent her whole life in Boulder, I could tell she had many fascinating insights on the particular questions I was set to ask. Throughout our conversation, Afsaneh detailed the influences of isolation, the power of exterior perception, and subsequent exhaustion resulting in identity relegation experienced in her life. After sharing basic demographic information where she identified as Iranian-American, I asked how Afsaneh saw that term relating to her race and ethnicity, a question I had wondered and discussed with interviewees before. After a brief pause, collecting her thoughts, she looked up, stating:

I just think of that term [Iranian-American] as a label. My family's from Iran, but I was born in America and raised in America. I'm not one or the other, I'm a little bit both. Race is a tricky one; being Iranian-American, we are technically White including "that of Middle Eastern origin." It's a weird place to be in—you tell somebody you're white, and then they look at you a little bit and they're like, "Are you sure?" I don't know what else I

mean. I guess when I think of myself and what I am, I'm Middle Eastern. I think that is my race and my place of origin.

Here, Afsaneh speaks to a commonly held confusion for many Iranian-Americans and other Middle Eastern people: technically categorized as part of the “white” category (de jure) on census forms and other government documents as a simplified way to account for the demographic of those from the SWANA region that does not also hold true in societal realities. Her way of understanding the labels, as simply a mode of distinction speaks to the difference felt in external impositions of who and what she is and her internal knowledge of being both of these identities, not just one or the other. Of significant note, however, is the way she describes her assigned label of “white” while naming it, “a weird place to be in,” especially when she continues by sharing the reactions she receives oftentimes when sharing this with strangers. From hearing other testimonies of the strangeness of this racial distinction, both within my interviews and the larger Iranian diasporic studies field (Maghbouleh 2017), many Iranian-Americans are not aware of the origins of their connections to this label, in addition to how this aids in a larger racialization process.

Through remaining in the liminal spaces of whiteness (Maghbouleh 2017), key microaggressive actions Iranians experience or societally held anti-Iranian (anti-Muslim racism as a whole in the US) sentiments are rarely thought about in relation to race and racism. Without seeing correlation between lived realities and race, everyday politics that provoke racial claims to an “othered” identity among legally white Iranian-Americans is ignored and unassuming in identity construction (Maghbouleh 2017, 4). Through only understanding these experiences in ethnic or cultural terms risks mistaking or ignoring the realities of Iranian Americans, which only

serves to reify and naturalize Iranian whiteness and to ignore the many everyday moments in which Iranian-Americans are imagined and imagine themselves outside of its limits (7).

As Afsaneh illustrated through her introduction, this awareness of racial difference, realized both internally and externally, is present and shifts the way she relates to the specifics her Iranian-American identity entails. But without knowledge of the processes of racialization or thinking about the history of the Iranian diaspora through the lens of a white label, a greater understanding on the conditional whiteness assigned to Iranians is not had. Through her response to these racial contestations—“I don’t know what else I mean”—it’s evident that this confusion and inconsistency between racial categorization and experiences of racialization or “othering” (9) is not thoroughly understood or conceptualized, at no individual fault, since it’s most likely present within the majority of the Iranian diaspora in the US as well.

After hearing these expressions from Afsaneh, I began to think about her relationship between these seemingly arbitrary labels (which we know aren’t arbitrary at all and tactically constructed by European Orientalists and those in the Pahlavi government which continue to inform race constructions to this day), her intimate understanding of identity, and the role played in all of this. Afsaneh then recounted growing up in Boulder and attending school there all her life. After mentioning there were no other Iranians in her elementary school, an extremely isolating experience, and other Iranians not being in attendance until she was in middle school (her sister and her cousin), she shared some of the difficulties of generally being in Boulder as someone who’s just a bit different: “Every time somebody asks me where I’m from I know what they’re really saying, so I like to be difficult. I’ll always say Boulder, Colorado first and then they’re like, “Oh, no. Where’s your family from?” **I mean, I’m from here in a lot of ways, right?”**

What Afsaneh speaks to here is a perfect example of the relationship between external perceptions, influences, and distinctions influencing the internal state of an individual through creating unnecessary confusion surrounding lived experiences and realities. As Afsaneh alludes to here, she is already well versed on the true intentions of the question, “where are you from?” and its attempt at securing an “othered” assumption in the minds of those who ask. As discussed before, the performative nature of Boulder creates the perfect grounds for these assumptions and practices to flourish, especially when they build on nationally and historically held misconceptions and societal biases, and (un)intentional acts of ignorance. The resulting internalized conflict and questioning of place and communally based belonging often requires levels of reassurance that are not readily enforced by the surrounding environment. Additionally, the labels Afsaneh spoke to earlier—Iranian and American—without the developed understanding of an Iranian-American identity and the lives of those who have only ever lived in the diaspora, inform an internally displaced notion of belonging despite the physical reality. She continued to describe the hyper awareness that accompanied many of the formative interactions in her life, and their significant impact on her relationship with her identity:

It was just weird always having to answer to somebody, to give an explanation of what I was and who I was. I don't know if I can necessarily say dealing with those different kinds of reactions was difficult, because it was just like my life, and I didn't really know anything other than that. It was definitely weird for me a lot of the time because I felt I had to explain myself more. When I was younger. I never really understood it, but as I grew up I started to see it was because you're ethnic. You're special. You're interesting.

There's some questions that even a stranger on the street is going to want to ask. It was weird, always being faced with that. But as you grow up in that situation, as it comes more often you don't stay as present, you're just watching it happen.

The confusion that accompanies constant explanation and justification of who you are, where you're from, and what you're doing in a specific place arose as a common thread across the conversations I had. Especially the fact that this began occurring at young ages when political, social, and racial dynamics were even less understood than they are now for members of the Iranian diaspora. What Afsaneh brings up here, however, is the integral notion of being inadvertently Iranian, something showcased through her mentioning of the eventual relegation of not your identity, per say, but the active ways in which you relate to and live within it. As mentioned previously with the overwhelming exhaustion felt by consistent navigation of the politics of pride, this passive demotion pulls autonomy from an individual, pulls them from the present happenings of their lives in an attempt to try and understand what's happening from an objective standpoint. This speaks to this idea of intentionality within the Iranian diaspora within Colorado and the difficulty of enacting this when circumstances overlap to perplex and desensitize. As Afsaneh says here, she wasn't even sure "difficult" was an appropriate descriptor, since these instances were so synonymous with her everyday life she couldn't find a distinction.

Being within this interrelation with your identity the majority of the time (given that an external presence of Iranians/Iranian culture was not consistently had in Boulder) impacts how you then relate to this part of yourself in spaces where this **is** accepted, represented, and normalized. I argue that one of the primary means of palatability Iranian-Americans in Boulder

engage in is self-relegation, imposed passivity, and internalized exclusion, diminishing what they know to be true because their entire lives have shown them that this truth is not accepted as such in this space. Explaining yourself, when you feel like it's even worth it, is the norm. Looks of disbelief when you say you're from Boulder happen often. And what's more, white, non-Iranians in Boulder feel there's nothing wrong with asking these questions of both Iranians and other BIPOC folks within the city; these microaggressive forms of curiosity, because they're nice. Because within the Boulder bubble, the myth of the multifaceted mirage is sustained by "well-meaning" probes and fundamental otherization. Instances like this show the necessity of community building, emphasis that must be placed on diasporic development, and honest reconciliation within the Iranian diaspora in Colorado to counter the impact of these realities that seek to further separate Iranian and American identities.

Returning to my discoveries regarding how whiteness was discussed by my interviewees, many spoke to the imposition of this identity within their lives and identification means in various ways. As Leila shared in the previous section, she experienced what she referred to as an "internal whitewashing," informed by both intra-communal and external societal forces. The resounding impact of this was evident within the first moments of our interview: "I am white, you know, 'supposedly.' There was never a Middle Eastern option to check, so I would just consider myself as white." What is the impact of this seemingly optionless reality for an external indication of one's identity? How are succeeding instances of self-realization, cultivation, and privilege informed by this known inconsistency with seemingly no alternative? Yalda also spoke to the discord and fundamental difference produced by this confinement, that was ambiguous by means of western ordained knowing, but instinctually felt.

In some ways I felt I had white privilege because I didn't think of myself as different from my peers. You just see so many white people that you kind of think this is what people look like normally. I personally do not identify as being white, just because I think that the experiences of my friends who are white and my experience growing up even though not many were negative [racially/ethnically], it's just different. It's just very, very different.

This understanding of “normal” that is reified in many of the white dominant, external spaces surrounding Iranians in Colorado reproduces feelings of being a perpetual other and the conditional nature of one's belonging within the Boulder and surrounding spaces. This notion of “white privilege” Yalda describes feeling through the racial sameness she perceived with her peers showcases the varied impacts of racialization, especially within an instance where this process has not been contextualized or is unknown to be occurring. Insights provided by the existence of double-liminality within the Iranian diaspora in Colorado are also evident within this discrepancy; feeling liminal within an identity you're not only told “officially” refers to you, but additionally through your interactions and intimate understandings of your surroundings. Without the opportunity for other examples or counter narratives, what are tangible means of reconciling lived experiences with lived realities?

Leila's recounting of her experiences with categorical confinements was also echoed in my conversation with Afsaneh, when she recounted her experiences with this and the humorous time her young, white, unprepared teacher had to field her questions about how to racially identify on a school safety test. After much thought, ultimately placing the country of Iran within the continent of Asia, Afsaneh excitedly thought her racial identity was “Asian.” The moment of

discovery ended when her teacher corrected her by telling her she was not Asian, she was white. Looking between her teacher and her hand, she knew there must have been some mistake, which she thought was a misunderstanding on her teacher's part and quickly pointed it out. Afsaneh's teacher told her to put whatever she felt comfortable putting down on her form and to talk about this more in depth with her parents, which she did, also hearing the same labeling by her mother and father, who were not as distraught as Afsaneh upon hearing that they were, in fact, technically, white. Despite this obvious confusion, there was not much discussion on the matter in her household. Her father simply told her they were white, and that was it. Looking back years later, Afsaneh reflected on how these convoluted experiences of racial labeling have impacted her current identity claims:

I never really know how to identify myself, like as a white woman or a woman of color. So I always tell people that I'm whatever you want me to be: if you think I'm a white woman, I guess I'm a white woman. Do you think I'm a person of color? Then I'm a person of color. I've never been able to find solid ground on that, so I've left it up to the whims of people. I think it takes a lot of the pressure off me to make that choice, because you're either compliant or you're defiant, and both of those take a lot of energy. I'm not a very decisive person, so somebody else can make that decision.

I asked before when the external becomes the internal. When do the lived experiences, day in and day out, the questioning, the pejorative curiosity, the comments, the microaggressions, at what point do they culminate to shift the sacred means of internal personhood? The ways you identify and how these labels are readily accepted. When the exhaustion and eventual submission

culminate in a pseudo-assimilationist result that relinquishes one's volition. Placing the appeasing act of code-switching in the deciding hands of another because regardless of what's said to the contrary, their assessment will always be seen as truth. As others, such as Roshan stated, the lack of control had in many of these important situations and moments shifted from being about intentionality and consciousness to how to respond as an act of survival. But I have to wonder, **is this the experience of those in diasporas?** Are we perpetually stuck in our own space of liminality because of the actuality of our internal and external circumstances? Like Afsaneh said in our first few moments of conversation, I'm not one or the other. I'm both. The Iranian diaspora is not one or the other, there isn't always space for our internal happenings to inform the external. Sometimes they happen simultaneously, in ways we aren't equipped to navigate in our emergent state.

Conclusion

Throughout this section, I discussed the concept and practice of belonging within the Iranian diaspora in Colorado and the significance of such as it connects to intentionality within an Iranian identity, as well as the reproduction of externally imposed generalizations that sometimes become internalized. I contend that the influences of external support and political relations in how Iran is perceived within general US narratives impact belonging through alienation and consistent confusion over the disconnect between perceived truth and known reality. This impacts the feelings of acceptance felt within the non-Iranian society in Colorado at large, also dictating public interaction with others in the Iranian community on a public level. The additional lack of a publicly presented Iranian collective in the Boulder/Denver area prevents those seeking more meaningful, established forms of connection and belonging from

creating these realities. This is in part due to a lack of perceived, tangible gathering spaces where Iranians feel the fullness of this identity can be realized.

Further insights within this section pointed to the intergenerational and chronic effects of exhaustion thwarting the development of a more cohesive Iranian social culture within Colorado. While feeling constant negotiation and self-imposed relegation, Iranians in Colorado often adopt a chameleon-like passivity, effectively learning the accepted performance of their identity before or while simultaneously attempting to realize its meaning for themselves. The influence of location also plays a significant role, as many interviewees attested to, observing the performativity of a place has subsequent consequences on the performance of identity.

Throughout this section, viewing intentionality in all its complexities was also of prominent importance. I assert that in the previous section, intentionality was framed as a more physical, connective action, while in this section I examine belonging felt by Iranians in the Coloradan diaspora in more behavioral terms. This was primarily showcased through code switching, mitigating the impact of expression, language, and appearance, the reality of constant explanation and existing within a state of justification for who you are, influenced by the relationship between the act of intentionality and its necessity. With this consideration in mind, I found the relationship between intentional relationships to and with one's Iranian identity changed depending on the context, physical environment, and internal rationale, proving its indefinite and ever shifting applicability.

In the next section, I explore the idea of Iranian monolithic identity, both as it's imposed by external actors (non-Iranians, politicians, etc), and how this messaging is often reinforced or taken as defining qualities within internal identity conception and action. By continuing the discussions of palatable identity expressions and enactments, the role this plays in countering

monolithic conceptions of Iranianness is explored, as juxtaposed with the impacts this performance has on internal identity meaning making. Not only are these monolithic conceptions—rooted in anti-SWANA biases at large and homogenizing tropes—interacted with externally, but reproduced at the intimate level in varying and complex ways. The lacking presence of intersectional inputs required to holistically view a diverse population such as the Iranian diaspora at large is also discussed. Within Colorado, I therefore contend this omission contributes greatly to a perpetual feeling of displacement and fractured belonging, leading to significant disarray.

Chapter 3: Disrupting the Iranian Monolith

The Iranian monolith is a term I've come to identify as a singular understanding of Iranian culture, people, and history by non-Iranians based on biased, misinformed, and ignorant narratives perpetuated by Western media and politicians. Monoliths are also constructed within the Iranian community, based on Persian centric/dominant notions of a homogenous Iranian identity, which erases other marginalized groups within Iran and the diaspora. As I mentioned in the "Iranian Diaspora in the United States" section, these monoliths have proved to be detrimental to the lives and futures of Iranians in the diaspora, specifically after the 1979 Revolution, the 1979 hostage crisis and later after 9/11 with then president, George W. Bush's speech denoting three countries—including Iran—as the "Axis of Evil" (even though Iranians were not directly implicated in the attacks). This was again marked when Donald Trump was in the White House, swiftly implementing the Muslim Ban evoking another kind of monolith just as dangerous and pervasive: the SWANA Monolith. Mention of the Iranian monolith(s) and SWANA monoliths made frequent appearances within the interviews I conducted, in how those spoken with interpreted these single-story narratives (Adichie 2009) within their continual negotiation and exterior intentionality of their Iranian identity. Additionally, interviewees described how Iranian monoliths held by those in their non-Iranian communities resulted in the internalization of aspects of the Iranian monolith, often juxtaposing intimate experiences with their Iranian identity that appeared to fall to the wayside as a result of interwoven power dynamics.

In this section, I explore the implications and presence of the Iranian monolith, its impact on identity relation and expression, and the intentionality that often goes into countering its pervasive and ever present nature. I primarily focus on two understandings of the Iranian

monolith I found to be prevalent within my interviews, informing identity formation, negotiation, and relegation. The first is an externalized conception created by the non-Iranian society based on things such as socio-political rhetoric and anti-SWANA biases in general, stoked by media and cultural ideologies left unchecked and often valorized. As a result of this messaging, a second type of an Iranian monolith is often led to: an internalization of the markers within the Iranian diasporic community, in addition to other aspects of superiority ideals presently and historically drawn on. It's important to recognize that not all intra-communal dynamics within the diaspora come from a non-Iranian narrative; there are also Iranian cultural continuations that transfer intergenerationally and within families. In this section, however, I focus primarily on the influence the external, non-Iranian conceptions of the Iranian monolith have on members of the Iranian diaspora in Colorado, particularly within the Boulder area.

Additionally, in correlation with many of the findings from the previous section, means of representation and external perception impacted intentionality regarding monolithic understandings of the Iranian diaspora in Colorado. My analysis of these occurrences surround the crucial concepts of representation in these spaces (CO and Boulder) and its explicit connection to identity, influences of monolithic conceptions with minimal confrontation or countering, and the performance of palatability in the pursuit of exterior affirmation. I found there to be two primary ways in which Iranians in Boulder encountered and collaborated with representation, in the physical, social, and emotional spaces they inhabit: the ways Iranian culture and presence are shown in tangible ways in Boulder communities and the ways Iranian and Iranian-American individuals represented themselves in those same spaces based on myriad factors.

Double-Liminality and Self-Relegation

For some, the determination to provide a counter narrative to these misunderstandings outweighed the fear that accompanied consistent misunderstanding, pejorative curiosity, and demeaning commentary. Their willingness to showcase the parts of their Iranian culture that the media won't show, the parts that aren't discussed before politician after politician defames and homogenizes the people of Iran with no recognition of the theocratic, dictatorial regime that has exacerbated untenable circumstances for the Iranian people (some more than others) under its national guise for 45 years. Many I spoke to, however, did not share the same affinity; they, of course, wanted the surrounding community, the surrounding US and its rigid, generally misinformed culture, to share in striving for the recognition of their stereotypically based facts and eventually commit to unlearning, relearning, and repurposing their harmful rhetoric. But for many, the years of explanation, the exhaustion of constantly code switching, of self-censoring, of bullying, and microaggressions had taken a toll on their willingness to counter. Not to mention the intergenerational toll carrying a long lineage of pain, loss, suffering, and trauma, especially from the last generation or two. For many, the privilege held in being a member of the Iranian diaspora was enough of a burden. To be a constant representative in addition was too much.

One of the primary ways I found this cultural education and sharing to manifest through was in the sharing of Persian food. Oftentimes, the first thing people think of when they hear "Iranian/Persian" is the food. Kabobs, rice, maybe khorosht if they're extra impressive. But mostly kabobs, white people **love** kabobs. Food has played an interesting role in the presence of the Iranian diaspora here in the US, from the popping up of Persian restaurants where Iranians settle, to features on Anthony Bourdain's *Parts Unknown* and other food/culture/travel/cooking shows. Iranian comedians have based entire jokes on memories of the elementary school

cafeteria where their food was gawked at, questioned, and ultimately made fun of in ways that for many of that age, was a deterrent far more impactful than simply swapping their fesenjoon for sandwiches. Food in Iranian culture is extremely important: holidays are marked with particular dishes, gatherings are not complete without crammed tables, the same expectation for your plates.

Persian food is delicious, complex, rich, full of depth, life, and warmth, not dissimilar to those who stir pots and flip rice and skewer meat (cooking Persian food is a no joke type of thing, everyone). It's emblematic of the depth of Iranian culture, the centuries of history, the liveliness of the Iranian people who remain steadfast in these descriptors despite the brutalities they have endured for decades on end. I think it's this distinction that makes Iranians in the diaspora so overwhelmingly proud of their food: it showcases them in positive, humanistic terms, focusing on new and compelling flavors that create confusion from the ones spoon fed by the media. The presence of Persian food creates a palatable entry point into necessary conversations and an intentional way many of those I spoke with have found to introduce counter narratives in tangible, taste-filled ways. Food plays an interesting role in belonging, representation, and identity making within the Iranian diaspora. Not only is it a means of communal joining of other culturally similar individuals, as was the case in many of my interviewees: childhoods when Persians from all over the Boulder/Denver area would drive long distances to share meals, stories, laughter, and dancing with their communities, providing glimmers of collective representation that was otherwise lacking for many who attended.

The presence of Persian restaurants is minimal in the Boulder/Denver area—as noted by a few interviewees. Many felt that this lack of a physical Persian presence in communities lessened engagement, understanding, and willingness to engage in contradictory discussions by

non-Iranians. Many of the individuals I spoke to shared that through bringing non-Iranian friends and neighbors into their homes, sharing a Persian meal, they would at the same time showcase other aspects of Iranian culture that aren't commonly known. The ability for meaningful engagement both by non-Iranians (in the connotation of their curiosities and questions) and interviewees (who found greater intention in the words they used, sentiments they expressed, and discussions they chose to engage in) increased significantly. A number of those I spoke with also mentioned the role of having consistent Persian food in their lives, mostly from a family member cooking and bringing it for them weekly, was a large part of keeping Iranian culture alive within a culturally different context.

Despite finding moments of ways to engage in fully intentional conversations and expressions of Iranian identity within a diasporic setting, I also found there to be other ways Iranians in Colorado intentionally represent themselves in the physical and social environments they move within. As mentioned before, those I interviewed found there to be a constant negotiation of when they allowed themselves to name their identities in full, even then constantly navigating the intricacies of self-censorship and relegation. This results in a hyper-awareness of external perception and reaction to Iranian identification claims, which can also turn into disassociation and chronic exhaustion akin to feeling perpetually “othered” and ethnically ambiguous, both externally and internally.

The Iranian monolith was present within my life and conceptual understanding of Iranians' presence in the United States even before I had delved deeper into the specifics of what this idea meant in reality. From the stories of stereotyping, violence, and discrimination that accompanied my childhood, to the tropes I saw manifest through the microaggressive actions I encountered. As scholar and author, Hamid Dabashi states: “the phenomenal ignorance and

misrepresentation of Iran as a culture, country, and people based on historical delusions minimized, due to contention between the West and Iran historically” (2008, 24). Especially in a place like Boulder with limited access to an Iranian actuality besides the one many of those in the city pieced together from the images on their screens, I found this drawing on blanket monoliths to be justification for ambivalence, inconsequential interaction, and intentional ignorance that served a palatable and homogenous interest. Through generalizing the complexities of a group of people, their perspectives and their lives, a greater ease is found in prescribing labels and categorizations, societally reinforced through the mainstream. Particularly pertaining to Iran, this is seen in the massive rise in anti-Iranian sentiments and actions following the Islamic Revolution and all that followed in the Global North.

In thinking about how the phenomenon of the Iranian monolith relates to the diaspora, my research on Iranians in Colorado revealed a manifestation of this monolithic orientation that is both externally imposed and internally enacted. This arose particularly in regards to religion, the model minority myth, and conflation between the Iranian people—and by extent the diaspora—and the Iranian government, resulting in misplaced interpretations and misconceptions. This commonplace amalgamation was additionally confusing for second generation Iranian-Americans, many who had never traveled to Iran themselves, as they are associated with a culture and country they are physically (and in many ways emotionally) distant from. With their own diasporic conceptions of Iranianness and how it was present within their realities, many of my interviewees spoke to the difficulties of this externally imposed monolith. Additionally, contrast can be seen between institutional and public presence of the Iranian monolith, such as in school, which impacted their ability for an intentional relationship with their

identity, and internal considerations such as within the home having a different, but no less potent, impact.

Descriptions of an internal imposition of an Iranian monolith arose throughout my interviews in a couple different ways. As discussed above, incessant pressure to represent all Iranians, as an individual within the diaspora with an imagined yet barely tangible Iranian connection were sources of **discomfort and confusion, often resulting in dismissal, relegation, or deep questioning of sense of self.** Additionally, many interviewees spoke to this recurrent monolith within the Iranian community of comparison to other contingents of the diaspora around the US. For example, how Iranians in California, LA specifically, are seen by the rest of the country as representative due to their massive population and established presence. This internalized monolith also often draws on the assumption that everyone within the Iranian diaspora is ethnically Persian, speaks Farsi, hates the Islamic Republic, is critical of Islam, etc. Based on the enormous and diverse population of Iranians—both in Iran and in the diaspora—it is blatantly evident that this is not true. However, the powerful abilities of narratives often maintain these presumptions, perhaps out of homogenizing a disparate entity, perhaps out of superiority claims. Described as a “subculture” of the diaspora, the Iranian demographic in Colorado is dispersed, individual, and discrete, with little to no visual representations in the form of restaurants, markets, or businesses. Specifically within Boulder where this is even more of a rare presence, individuals from the often self-described “Iranian diaspora” questioned what distinction and meaningful representation could look like within the community.

Therefore, I assert that Iranians in Colorado experience a double liminality of their personhood, both within their physical reality and the society they exist within, as well as the Iranian diasporic community. As described through Yalda’s testimony in the previous section, the

reality of being both Iranian and American is known, but nevertheless impacted by not being fully embraced within either identity. Being slightly outside of each categorization without the establishment (in part or at all) of a distinctly diasporic identity only amplifies confusion, questioning, and unassuredness. Either preemptively or subsequently, belonging is additionally influenced by external markers of “othering,” internal disjointedness amongst the diasporic community, exile, and shame resulting in intergenerational displacement and skewed self-realization. Within this quandary, the ability to be intentionally Iranian in a place like Colorado is consequently impacted. A prominent mechanism of navigating this inability arises in learning to exist within this liminality through **chameleon-like abilities. In other words, the attempt of crossing over from the liminal position of an Iranian identity to more fully encompass the perceived reality of an American identity, more acceptable in society.** Similar to notions of palatability, I assert these abilities go beyond performing within this conformation in particular instances; there is a disjointedness, an internal instability that creates room for these learned behaviors to oftentimes become second nature. This oftentimes occurs by means of performativity, to whatever extent the “receiving” society would allow. While this sometimes arose by way of the language intentionally chosen and implemented in conversations, presentations, and dialogues, relegation, dismissal, or intentional masking all or some of these identities are also adopted. Through previous instances of “internal whitewashing” as Leila described occurring in her high school years, these internal negotiations are further heightened, making this mode of intentional assimilation more provoking and in some ways accessible. What I found to be interesting was the attempts at palatability and its interaction with intentionality mostly by means of assimilating into white, non-Iranian society through various means, and less so towards the other orientation in which liminality exists. I therefore ponder: to what extent is

this double liminality heightened/enhanced by the physical location of Colorado i.e, myriad place based considerations such as external perception and sense of solidarity based on tangible displays of Iranian culture within the non-Iranian dominated space? How is a sense of connection found and cultivated amongst others in the diaspora, as well as displaying efforts or realities of solidarity with those in Iran? **Is it possible to separate the external chatter, representation (or lack thereof), and societal definitions to understand one's own place within non-Iranian culture, within the terms of identification? How can one make a distinct meaning based on intimate experiences? How do you individualize the experience of a monolithically understood demographic to be part of the collective in more meaningful, representative, truthful ways?**

External Monolithic Conception

During my conversation with Afsaneh, she shared experiences of countering the externalized (mis)conceptions that surrounded her growing up in addition to prioritizing her intimate truths that showed otherwise. The difficulty that came along with this and the subsequent relegation and negotiation showcase the ways this monolith has confusing and damaging associations and influences on living intentionally in one's identities.

I had my own sense of what it was like to be Iranian in Iran. Trying to hold onto that while also trying to fit in with the predominantly white area I grew up in was difficult. The expectation is that we as Iranians are always excellent; we often uphold this to try and counter the dehumanization we face, to aspire to a certain set of standards to show we're worthy, high achieving and hardworking people. It's worth questioning critically when we're not in the majority and in the context of the United States, what is the

motivation for these things? And why is it that these kinds of social patterns are showing up?

The dehumanization Afsaneh speaks to is a common experience of all of those I spoke with, to various extents. From more subtle acts of microaggression to blatant forms of discrimination, these often culminated in the creation of a palatable expression of self that was more likely to be accepted by those in their surroundings. The usage of “aspiring” in Afsaneh’s testimony is interesting to note, as it speaks to the larger deficit/difference mindset the systematic presence “othering” cultivates in the minds of those facing discrimination and a sense that they didn’t belong. It’s interesting to consider the creation of monoliths, whether they’re negative or “positive,” and the motivations for doing so; how they arose, are they attached in particular situations. As second-generation Americans—the first generation to be born or grow up in the diaspora—examination of the specific social processes and reproduction of these tropes is essential in moving towards a more developed and holistically representative demographic, both as a whole and in the myriad subcultures nationwide. The double liminality present in Afsaneh’s statement depicting the disparity between her intimate knowledge of Iranian culture and identity and what her surroundings told her also showcases the influence a place has on questions of identity, belonging, and self.

My conversation with Roshan spoke to the experience of being an Iranian in Colorado and contending with the representational aspect of the Iranian monolith. They spoke of their own development, freedom of expression, and coming into their own, despite the times of alienation felt in regards to being Iranian throughout the process. For the most part, Roshan shared positive experiences in regards to being the sole Iranian in many of the spaces they moved through in

their life. For them, sharing aspects of Iranian culture—the food, the music, the traditions—was a way of connecting on a more tangible level with non-Iranian, white community members, otherwise indifferent. As Roshan swirled chai in the small ceramic cup they held, they shared: “For me, keeping up with the culture and sharing the culture with other people has been what’s kept it alive for me.” Despite these positive experiences, growing up in Boulder was also difficult and they faced many experiences of fundamental “othering” throughout their childhood. Eventually ending up in college at the university in Boulder, they explained feeling a pressure to defend Iran around their uneducated and oblivious peers. This frustrating and confusing experience of receiving the monolithic messaging created in a different time, still finding its applications today from those who were so clearly unaware of what they were speaking to, created gross discontent for Roshan.

As an Iranian, I’m not a monolith. There are other Iranians who disagree with me, sure. Perhaps this is a reason why it's important to be around people who are like you, because when you're the only one, there's a lot of pressure to speak for everyone and that sucks because I don't speak for all Iranians. How could I, I live in Boulder!?

Roshan’s usage of “monolith” here is an example of externally impressed tropes that then become the responsibility of individuals to comprehend and counter, despite there not being sufficient understanding or applicability given the liminal nature of their realities. Roshan continued to say:

It's funny, whenever there's a small group of BIPOC, because we're such a small group there are so many efforts to be in community and build camaraderie we oftentimes all get put in the same bucket of having the same interests or worldview, or perception of things. As much as race, ethnicity, and culture can be a unifying factor, it can also be such a dividing force.

The idea of being a “representative” of one’s culture implies that there is intention placed behind it. As we see in this example, Roshan enacted their intentionality in seeking to educate their peers through various means, but not always with the intention of showcasing parts of themselves others were excited and willing to consume. These attempts were often in service of acceptance, explanation, as Afsaneh described above. The term intentionality, as it’s seen here, is different from other shows of intentionality within the Iranian diaspora in Colorado interacted with thus far. This intentionality takes a more performative role, vying for a layer of external acceptance that is otherwise not had when simply living in your identity in whatever way that rings true for you is not accepted, questioned, or attacked. While the capacity to seek an understanding of the experiences of the greater pool of BIPOC and continually “othered” folks in Boulder is beyond the scope of this project, observing this phenomenon within the Iranian community makes me think the experience of creating palatable versions in an attempt of demonstrating oneself is common.

As exhausting, seemingly unnecessary, and supplementary as this process can seem in building a case of “worthiness,” Roshan offered an interesting consideration as our conversation on this topic began to wind down:

If you're not making your voice heard, someone else is going to make the decisions for you. Especially in regards to marginalized individuals, not everyone is going to keep our interests in mind. When you're in the diaspora, you're a different subsection of the culture: we're not living the day to day of Iranians. We're living the day to day of Americans with an Iranian heritage and I think that's really important to think about.

Here, Roshan speaks to the importance of recognizing Iranian diasporic positionality, despite its confines within the non-Iranian society. Through consistent awareness of both the ways this identity is oppressed while also offering privileges, I believe Roshan speaks to the formative realizations necessary for an Iranian diasporic identity to arise. Although this process is informed by the myriad other identities individuals in the diaspora hold—notably their Iranian and American ones—there are unique, integral insights such as the ones Roshan speaks to above, that will inform this curation in comprehensive and intentional ways. Reza also echoed sentiments of the distinct experience Iranians in the diaspora have regarding representation. He states:

It's our responsibility in the diaspora to explain to people, whoever we know and hope they will explain it to other people. It makes it more visible what people are going through back home, which in the past hasn't been represented. There are a lot of activists, you know, the young people that are helping, especially your age group. Some of the kids I've seen in California and Europe, they haven't even been to Iran. They were born in the western countries yet they are the voice of the Iranians back home. And I think that's important.

This sentiment coincides directly with the necessity of utilizing our voice, which Roshan spoke to, especially in situations of societal and historical marginalization. But a counter to the very statements made earlier by Roshan can also be understood in terms of being a voice for the voiceless, despite the disconnect from Iran physically and all that comes with that distance. While Roshan made sure to stress that their upbringing in Boulder made them very unqualified from making broad stroke statements about Iranians both in the diaspora and in Iran (due in part or in whole to the enclosed nature of this city specifically and the Colorado subculture in general), Reza's statement can offer a point to the contrary.

I don't believe Reza's statement aims to imply that because Iranians in the diaspora are both a monolith and intrinsically linked to the feelings, knowledges, and realities of the Iranian people they're the best to frame a representation to non-Iranian and western communities in the US. But rather, because of our unique perspectives and intimate discoveries of what Iranianness looks like in contrast to mainstream depictions and misrepresentations, Reza is encouraging a more prominent usage of those voices as a tangible counter narrative. While I believe this sentiment was spoken to in many of my interviews in different ways, it is important that when this work is attempted, those of us in the diaspora are cognizant of the inherent biases and lens our expressions are moving through. There is no doubt that diasporic experiences and connection with an Iranian identity and representation places diasporic Iranians in the unique positions to walk the line between authenticity and hybridness.

However, there is still the necessity for careful consideration of how this knowledge is informed and substantiated by a diasporic existence that is very different from the ones of the Iranian people—something that those in the diaspora will never truly understand. Further, as I've discussed previously, there's not one homogenous Iranian identity. Most of the current

monolith disruption—as is reflected primarily in this analysis—is external. I argue that in the pursuit of disrupting monoliths within the Iranian experience and identity, attention must also be devoted in an intersectional examination of what monolith disruption means when considering the plethora of other marginalizations within the country of Iran (Kurds, Baluchis, Azeris, to name a few).

Disrupting Imperialist Narratives

After Jina Mahsa Amini’s death, there were weekly protests around the country organized by Iranians all over the diaspora, gathering together to chant, mourn, and make visible this monumental and important struggle. Protests were organized in Denver, CO, right outside the capitol building every Saturday in the afternoon. While I didn’t attend them often, one weekend my baba and I decided to make the effort to be there and also check out what the larger Iranian diasporic CO population looked like. Leaving the Boulder Bubble on the RTD heading south, baba and I were the only ones wearing “Woman, Life, Freedom” pins. We looked out the window in silence wondering what the day would bring, who we would meet, what we would see, how we would feel. Upon arriving at the downtown bus station, we quickly rode the escalator up to the street and hopped on another bus that took us from our location, through the big city to the capitol. The moment we situated ourselves I heard a familiar language floating from my right: the words foreign but familiar, the intonation reminiscent of an identity peripherally occupied in an English dominant public space. I looked up to locate, seeing a beautiful woman with gray hair and a red, white, and green “Woman, Life, Freedom” shirt, accompanied by a girl who looked about my age with a short, brown bob and big, dark eyes. I nudged my baba with my eyes: “they’re speaking Farsi!!” I said. Upon leaning over and

speaking to them, we became fast friends. Tara and her niece Sepideh who had recently arrived from Iran to attend business school were also in Denver for the protest. Traveling from Superior a quick 15 minutes from Boulder, they spoke to their previous experiences with this larger contingency of the Iranian diaspora at the capitol and the surprise they had upon first attending at the large number of Iranians present within the Denver area. After exchanging numbers that day, I later found an opportunity to continue the discussion of the Colorado Iranian diaspora almost a year later as I began my interviewing for this project.

Tara and I met over Zoom on a cloudy Friday afternoon. Her shining eyes greeted me with kindness as I shared my screen and went over last minute interview questions. Our conversation spanned the length of an hour, drawing on many fascinating insights and topics, but particularly on the perception of Iranians and others from the SWANA region and the monoliths they're assigned. Particularly, Tara spoke to this phenomenon and one very prominent mode of monolithic reinforcement that is massively influential.

It's been difficult to engage with anything because I feel like media coverage of the Middle East at large is always inherently flawed and problematic because once again Orientalism is embedded within, and there's desensitization to the violence that is happening in a lot of these spaces because of the way that it's broadcasted. Media has so much influence on people's views of how they see Middle Eastern folks. And movies and films don't assist in deconstructing any of these stereotypes.

The role and influence of media coverage of Iranians has long been skewed and biased. With the most stereotypical depictions beginning after the 1979 Islamic Revolution and

following the hostage crisis, negative messagings persist to this day, cultivating a desensitization to how those in SWANA countries and in their diasporas are viewed by some non-Iranians in the US. This created an overall external monolithic image of Iranians through the absence of viable and substantiated counter narratives. Within Boulder where the exposure to different points of view, ways of being, and perspectives is limited, I found the absence of active intent by non-Iranians and white folks to reconstruct or think critically about the ways in which this narrative is being constructed and whose benefit it serves.

Insights shared by Roshan on utilizing your voice—one that has been and is likely to be silenced—in pointed and strategic ways can also be seen in connection within the topic of SWANA media representation. When there is only a monolithic representation and voice narrating that representation that often doesn't have first hand experience or perspective, this poses a significant dilemma. Not only are integral perspectives not showcased to a non-Iranian/western audience in desperate need of comprehensive variance, but what is being shown from that westernized lens is often not applicable to people's intimate experiences. As Tara and other interviewees have shared, this significantly impacts feelings of belonging by generalizing something as diverse and varied as one's identity and the myriad considerations that must be accounted for in its construction and development. Some of those I spoke with shared resorting to becoming chameleons of sorts, palatable interpretations of the external questioning in replacement of attempting to change perceptions. As one interviewee said: "There's only so much you can do to change something that is and has been constantly reinforced for decades. I have to decide how much I want to change someone's opinion when I already know the outcome." As discussed earlier, this connects to exhaustion, the limited nature of belonging, and how much one has to become palatable for non-Iranians within the Boulder area. This particular

quote showcases the introspection and presence of intentionality when attempting to navigate the reinforcement of public perception so influential in the construction and enactment of one's identity.

But as mentioned previously, without the intention from white, western, non-Iranian society to counter these accessible, widely regarded, and spoon fed single-stories (Adichie 2009), a paradigm shift cannot occur. What's more, it's not about shifting understanding at an individual level to be more inclusive—like all things, the systemic root of this must be examined; the structures that allow for and perpetuate violence, inequity, and disenfranchisement and produce the harmful rhetorics of racialization and discrimination. Additionally, what are the influences of temporality in regards to when and how these systems were waged historically against Iranians and are continually informing actions—both diasporically and inside the country—within the western concepts of permanence and implied culpability?

Through the following quote, Tara offers a way to understand how this idea of an Iranian monolith is internally imposed within the Iranian diaspora and in Colorado specifically.

It's also just a matter of framing because not only are we not even in media or journalism or reporting but now you're dealing with communities of individuals that have these kinds of ideals that have been planted because of the media, and they're taking it into their own community and making that the framework in which they understand current situations, which is dangerous.

This point Tara brings up speaks to the insidious nature the media, and the external narrative it purports, has on intra-communal dynamics within the Iranian diaspora, often

perpetuating the very monolithic language and sentiment known to be untrue. What's interesting to examine in this dynamic, however, is how these rhetorical falsehoods, limited in their breadth, are able to take such hold within the diasporic community, influencing relationships between subcultures and individuals alike. When one has been born and raised in the diaspora, is this presence even more influential, since almost all of their messaging is then coming from this western perspective. **How, then, does this impact the ways that Iranians in the diaspora, especially in the Coloradan subculture, are intentional in relationships with their communities and identities in addition to their relationship with the country of Iran and the people still living within?**

Internal Monolithic Conception

As present as external impositions of an Iranian monolith are, it's also crucial to understand how this phenomenon occurs within the Iranian diaspora. As previous discussion has confronted, external perceptions have massive influence—especially in Colorado where this occurrence is minimal—on how Iranians feel they can overtly showcase aspects of their Persian identity. The ways, therefore, these tropes become internalized and intimately reproduced can speak to larger considerations of connection with oneself, within the diasporic community, and within both transnational connection and solidarity with those in Iran. As Tara spoke to above, oftentimes these limited and strategic narratives that seek to address larger geopolitical, economic, and imperial conflicts become just as impactful within the demographic they're waged against, despite internal knowledge indicating otherwise. It's particularly fascinating to examine the temporality of the Iranian monolith: the ways in which many of the same tropes, biases, and justifications for the continuation of an Iranian monolith from the end of the 20th century pertain to much of how it's currently used at this moment in time. While this term has

shifted, of course, given the multitude of factors and changes both Iran and the United States have undergone in the past 45 years, much of the imperial, orientalist undertones remain the same. This consideration can be applied in a great deal of how the Iranian diaspora is and should be understood, specifically as it pertains to intergenerational considerations and solidarity measures within movements of dissent happening within Iran, such as the Woman, Life, Freedom revolutionary movement.

Throughout my interviews, I found this phenomenon arises in discussions of homogenization attempts of the Colorado Iranian diaspora with the larger Iranian demographic in the US by both non-Iranians and white folks not accustomed with the myriad distinctions this identity holds, as well as Persian normativity within the vast and complex ethnicities, religions, and races within the Iranian state and identity. This, therefore, contributes to an internalization within the Iranian community of ideas and assignments rooted in westernization and assimilation. It is important to recognize how this internalization is different across generations, based on the presence and extent of the externally imposed Iranian monolith, as it informs the level of intention and consciousness of contending with this phenomena. In pondering how western mechanisms of thinking often result in a subconscious viewing of diasporic considerations, opportunities to think deeper about the multitude of spaces Iranians in Colorado occupy, while also being cognizant of the double liminality that is also inhabited. With these deliberations in mind, I assert that the power and profound influence of the external and internal Iranian monolith contributes in significant ways to a sense of connection, intentionality, and solidarity within the Iranian diaspora in Colorado and beyond.

Sitting on that green velvet couch with Fatima, my laptop balanced precariously on a pile of notebooks and Iranian diasporic texts next to our almost gone, shared piece of terrible bread,

our conversation moved to discuss internal dynamics within the Iranian diaspora. While not specific to the particular collective in Colorado, Fatima spoke with a steadfastness rooted and informed by honest and intimate experience.

Iranians almost exist within this notion of the model minority where they don't view themselves as other Middle Eastern people. I've never been one to be like that. I talk about race, I talk about a lot of stuff that maybe is not within the conventions of a lot of conversations in the Iranian community, for example, with the insane amount of colorism in the community. There is also a traumatic past often left uncontested with. For some people, they can't handle it, and so they become completely Westernized in the way that they talk, the way that they dress, the things that they enjoy, and the culture they consume. Westernization is something that we're inevitably going to encounter as a diaspora just due to proximity and acclimation and socialization and other pressures, which we just have to navigate, even as it kind of presents difficulty in solidarity with those in Iran.

Three things are important to note here: the first, as discussed above, is this notion of generational categorization of “Middle Eastern” identity as white (Maghbouleh 2017, 7). Second, also discussed earlier, anti-Arab sentiment and Iranians using Aryanness to distance themselves from the greater, mostly Arab SWANA region (Maghbouleh 2017; Dabashi 2008). Third, I found the use of the term “model minority,” so often regarded in westernized, oriental discourses to further categorize Asian and SWANA individuals as others within already societally “othered” folks, but with the justification for slight humanization based on perceived “exceptionalism.” For

Fatima to use this particular term in reference to how some Iranians deem themselves to be hierarchically distinct from others within the diaspora and often SWANA region at large indicates the noticeable presence and internal realization of this perceived reality. Her particular verbiage of “they,” also implicates an almost “us and them” distinction, the “them” interpreted as Iranians without the particular recognition of the impact western socialization of thought, conception, and reality have on their internal construction. The mentioning of “uncontested trauma” also implicates the phenomenon of disenfranchised grief within intra-communal monoliths created in part as a result of an inability to fully express and connect within larger consolidations of the Iranian diaspora in the US.

The myth of the “model minority,” predominantly used to refer to Asian Americans, has a complex and exclusionary history in its usage and prominence in the US, particularly as it pertains to disassociation with Black communities. Understanding the roots of the model minority myth requires a comprehension of how both racial meanings are applied to and racialization of Asian Americans deviates from the commonly conceived Black/White binary (Omi and Winant 1994). Historically, Asian Americans have existed within a racial discourse scholar, Claire Jean Kim (1999) identifies as “a field of racial positions,” referring to their comparative racialization to both white people and Black people that complexifies the commonly conceived racial hierarchy placing Asian Americans as a movable group that can oscillate between the otherwise fixed categories of “white” and “Black” based on their ability to prove themselves worthy of conditional whiteness (Kim 1999, 106).

The juxtaposition of the Asian American experience within the model minority myth on the one hand creates a process or “relative valorization,” where they’re revered for their “achievements” in regards to other marginalized folks in different positions, while also in a

perpetual state of “otherness” commonly called “the forever foreigner,” placing them in a rigid and distinct social categorization (Kim 1999, 107). Not only does this diminish the realities of Black and African American communities, specifically those who are in high-achieving positions, but it blatantly serves white supremacist intentions of maintaining harmful racial binaries and further desensitizing people to systemic racism in the US and our resounding collective complicity (Ng et al. 2007). This, therefore, leads to a lack of recognition of the distinct ways Asian Americans face racialization in the US, imposing a kind of liminal and ever shifting superiority on Asian American individuals that often causes tension with other marginalized communities (Jo, 2004; S. J. Lee, 2006; Lei, 1998). The effects of this imposition also have deleterious effects on intra-communal dynamics and the intimate realities of individuals’ meaning making, dignity, and reconciliation of lived experience and perspective with exterior expectation.

Correlation between the Iranian diaspora in the US and the model minority categorization is implicit, overt, and highly present. Many Iranians have made it almost a defining feature to be highly educated and respected, in addition to being accompanied by a particular physicality of affluence, much of which comes from an attempt to counter the systematic dehumanization, anti-Iranian racism, and anti-Muslim/Arab racist connotations encountered in every facet of daily life (Mostofi 2003). For many of the individuals I interviewed, this overt showcasing of external validation by means of distinguished, respectability, oftentimes becoming the general image of Iranians in the US, can feel alienating and misrepresentative of the variance of the diaspora in terms of class standings, educational levels, occupations, religions, and phenotypes encompassed within.

This additionally relates to an internalized hierarchy some Iranians find themselves implicated within, predicated on what's known as the "Aryan myth." By believing themselves to be the "world's first white people," and therefore as close as it gets to whiteness and the colonial powers who determine this, many Iranians find this to be a tangible source of superiority to wage over the rest of the SWANA region. In the early 20th century, Iran was considered to be the "historic cradle of white civilization" throughout the larger SWANA region, originally in regards to Parsi individuals—an ethno-religious minority group often seen as the "true" Persians who migrated from Persia in the eighth century—who are now living around Southwest and South Asia (Maghbouleh 2017).

Through comparison of others in the SWANA region with ethnic Parsi individuals, a scale of whiteness was established which others in the region were compared to by ruling colonial powers and later Parsis and others in their place of origin: Iran. Through the nationalization efforts of Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi in the 1950s occurring from displaced orientalist notions of white supremacy, attempts to modernize the country were in full and multifaceted swing, including a greater push for institutionalization of an Aryan-Iranian history taught in schools (Maghbouleh 2017, 25). This ideological reinforcement has stood the test of time and extended in distinct and sustained ways within Persian society and accompanying political reflections.

One such manifestation presents itself in the fair amount of colorism within the Iranian community, both in Iran and in the diaspora, due in part to white supremacist sentiments that are cultivated through this "Aryan myth." Historically, a tenuous relationship has been had between the Iranian government and non-Black Iranian population with Afro-Iranians. Living mostly in the coastal areas of Iran (Hormozagan, Sistan, Baluchestan, Bushehr, and Khuzestan),

Afro-Iranians' presence dates back to the days of the Indian Ocean slave trade, where Africans were enslaved and sold by Arab slave traders. The enslavement of Africans in Iran continued until 1929 when it was abolished. Others within the Afro-Iranian community migrated in the time after abolition as merchants or harvesters (Al Jazeera 2020). Many of those who study Iranian history through the lenses of slavery and abolition remark this abolition resulted in subsequent erasure of this population in the eyes of Iran's national image and agenda (Al Jazeera 2020).

Lacking the humanitarian accompaniments required in a national process of reconstruction and integration of this visible and important population has ramifications that continue to this day. Afro-Iranians and the provinces they most heavily populate bear the brunt of the disastrous effects of climate change and governmental resource mismanagement (as many other ethnic and religious minorities around the country are subject to, such as the Kurds), with little to no national recognition of their plights and making substantial efforts to provide aid. Racial discord is also greatly fomented through the systemic racial complexities and white supremacy that holds significant power within political and public thought. A case can also be made that embedded colorism additionally contributes to Iranians' dislike of minoritized communities within the country—in regards to race, ethnicity, and religion—and the region at large, due to perceived “primitivity,” and phenotypical compositions differing from what has been racialized as “white” among also holding aspects of anti-Muslim racism that many Iranians transnationally share. Remarking on these diverse differences, Fatima continued to offer this thought:

Our treatment in the US, based on our gender, wealth, skin, color, all of these other factors are gonna produce different opinions of the diaspora, of yourself, of how you see your community. We've gotta figure out our intra-community stuff and build our own foundation as Iranians in the diaspora if we want non-Iranians to take our cause seriously and make it something they are passionate about. I don't love the idea of trying to become palatable for a white/non-Iranian audience, but we're going against the media and all these other factors that are misinforming people, so that means our level of care and intention has to be all the more collective and I'm not seeing that.

Here, Fatima speaks to the intra-communal ways these categorizations are reinforced and the influence they have on ensuing dynamics, connection, and solidarity amongst each other on a small and large scale. This historical and cultural presence informs the relationship with the "model minority" myth here in the US, which often serves as a conduit for long standing racial ideologies, dogmas, and practices within Iranian history and culture to come to fruition, despite the less than favorable implications this label ultimately assigns. While within my interviews the relationship between the "model minority" and Iranianness was only mentioned explicitly once in my conversation with Fatima, it was alluded to a great deal of other times in less explicit namings, but still drawing on coinciding tropes and superiority claims. For example, a few interviewees mentioned the reactions of surprise their white, non-Iranian peers and colleagues had when they mentioned that their family members in Iran are playing the same video games, watching the same Tik Toks (to an extent), doing pretty much the same things they do in the US. Why the surprise? Their thoughts are that since no one knows the true extent of what life is like in the SWANA region, reinforced by lackluster and monolithic media coverage serving

orientalist interests, there truly is no knowledge of the vast and multifaceted world that exists in cosmopolitan, modern, skyscraper adorned cities across the region. This then warranted the justifying claim: “It’s [Iran] not like that. It’s a *civilized* place.”

These ideas of Iran being a “civilized” place in contrast to the implied “uncivilized” nature of its predominantly Arab neighboring countries draws, in part, on narratives of a Persian empire pre-Islam. By stating how the Persian empire was full of civility, disrupted only by the introduction and growth of Islam, has carried through to anti-Muslim sentiments of today. This belief was echoed a few times throughout my interviews, in addition to oral testimonies from family and friends in my personal experiences. The theocratic presence of the Islamic Republic has only heightened this animosity towards Islam as a whole, stoking anti-Muslim racism in the process. Within the minds of the Iranian people in the country and in the diaspora, there is a longing to return to their “original culture,” meaning a pure Persian existence that perhaps only existed in the imaginations of those displaced by their grief, eager to find a scapegoat, something to explain the harms of capitalism, globalization, and colonial modernity hidden behind a veil.

To imply that to be “civilized” rests on having access to western technology, beauty standards, and ways of life suggests Eurocentric framing colors the ways the SWANA region is regarded. The motivations of such a claim cannot be explicitly traced to one particular instigator, since westernization appears to be present within the thoughts, actions, and sentiments of those inside and outside Iran. However, what can be recognized is the homogenous intentions that appear in a multitude of situational and ideological spaces, reaffirming various degrees of anti-Black and anti-Muslim racism and white supremacy, however conditional this therefore becomes once considered within the context of the US and its complex racial politics.

As Fatima further relayed, it is important to be cognizant of the massive intergenerational implications that are present within the diasporic demographic in this country and the subsections of solidarity that must be cultivated in order for intentional acts of Iranianness to arise within swaths of westernization.

As first gen kids, there's a solidarity we experience that is only ours based on our uniquely Iranian-American upbringing. I don't feel like we were necessarily Westernized in a way that we didn't acknowledge our community but I feel like Westernization does have an impact on **how** we acknowledge our community and how we show up in those spaces. In the future, what I'm looking to either spearhead or be a part of is a joint grieving space where we can create our future together, where we can have a space to speak openly about these things. I have no expectation at the end of the day to ever change anyone's mind. It's very complicated—we approach things differently intergenerationally, because of how our folks had to acclimate. Their shame, or wanting to be perceived a certain way that I don't really have to deal with.

Here, Fatima makes an important distinction between the ways westernization can be present in varied and myriad forms. While it can sometimes take effect through aspects of imperial imaginary and inherited orientalism, other times it exists within the consciousness those in the diaspora find themselves holding. **The intrinsic link between the political, social, and cultural realities Iranians in the US exist within have an impact on how they intentionally interact with an Iranian/Persian identity, both internally and externally.**

Conclusion

Throughout the examination of the Iranian monolith's presence within the Iranian diaspora in Colorado internally and externally, the important role of place in considerations of identity, belonging, and self was emphasized. Those interviewed expressed the performativity they often felt accompanying showcasing their Iranian identity within spaces around Colorado—notably Boulder—often resulting in what I refer to as a chameleon-like relegation that seeks to traverse from one liminal identity standing to the other more accepted version in that current place. Interviewees also expressed the immense pressure they often felt to defend Iranians, Iran, and Iranianness in the face of misunderstandings and biases, often born from an Iranian monolith. Oftentimes, these implied requests felt misplaced and individuals felt unequipped to represent an entire demographic with all its multifaceted and intersectional pieces in the monolithic, simplified way they were being asked to do so in.

This section served as a discussion surrounding the complexities, contradictions, and considerations of an Iranian monolithic conceptualization within a non-Iranian society and state, as well as intra-communally among the Iranian diaspora. Palatability and how this is different from performance and code-switching was also examined as it relates to the cultivation of an Iranian monolithic depiction. This showcases how external influences that inform one's identity realities that are different from what's been constructed or advised to construct in the face of these societal, cultural, spatial limitations of the surrounding environment are difficult to accomplish. This, therefore, results in a foundational shifting rather than an instantaneous one, as is often seen within various performativity means, providing a layer of complexity to disrupting these monoliths, as they occur both externally and internally.

The way intentionality manifests and is made meaningful for individuals is often a consideration in fracturing monoliths. Oftentimes this is influenced by a signal of perpetual othering received from the society in which this identity is intentionally enacted within. What is the impact of this on an internal sense of intentionality? Does it thwart this inclination within oneself and the ways this is therefore related to on a personal scale? The links between political, social, and cultural realities between the US and Iran also have an impact on how monoliths are constructed, substantiated, and intimately understood by Iranians in the diaspora. There is also a need to examine how externally imposed monoliths become internalized and melded within intra-communal conceptions to produce multiple layers of generalized expectations.

In the final section of this analysis, I examine how what has arisen through the previous exploration of dynamics within the Iranian diaspora in Colorado manifest within solidarity measures in relation to those in Iran, particularly in relation to movements of dissent as seen with the Woman, Life, Freedom revolution beginning in 2022.

Conclusion

In this section, I use the phrases “Jin, Jiyan, Azadî,” “Zan, Zendegi, Azadi,” and “Woman, Life, Freedom” (WLF) interchangeably to denote the revolutionary movement.

Throughout the past year and a half, Iranians around the world have been shaken, inspired, devastated, and reminded of the revolutionary, persistent, bold, and creative forces of the Iranian people with the start of of the Jin, Jiyan Azadî/Zan, Zendegi, Azadi, or Woman, Life, Freedom (WLF) revolution. The movement began in September of 2022, when a Kurdish woman, Jina Amini, who was visiting the capital city of Tehran was arrested and beaten into a coma by the morality police for supposed improper wearing of her hijab, soon after passing away. Amini’s death was the catalyst that propelled the Iranian people—led by women presenting folks and young people—into the streets to protest the various cruelties the Islamic Republic has been waging against its people for the last 45 years. The phrase, “Jin, Jiyan, Azadî” is rooted in over 40 years of Kurdish women’s movements for autonomy and freedom against various forms of government and international oppression in the various geographic spaces they occupy in the SWANA region (Bodette 2022).

Kurdish oppression by the Iranian government and specifically the Islamic Republic has persisted for 44+ years. Through the means of brutal state suppression and the disproportionate exposure to environmental and political harms, the Kurdish people within Iran have been accused of trying to divide the nation of Iran with their determined effort for a Kurdish state (Washington Kurdish Institute 2022). Despite this, the Kurdish people in Iran are resilient, mobilizing and persisting despite the brutal circumstances that surround their existence. While the entire history of the Kurdish presence and struggle is beyond the scope of this particular thesis, it is imperative that this history and reality is held when considering movements of

liberation around the world, especially regarding the Woman, Life, Freedom movement and those within the Iranian Kurdish community who have long called attention to this erasure (Molana et al. 2023, 103). While this term has been translated from its original Kurdish wording (Jin, Jiyan, Azadî), to Farsi (Zan, Zendegi, Azadi), it is essential to recognize the roots of where this came from and the significance of who it was and is used by.

Acknowledging the complex and defiant nature of this term and its significance during the war in Kurdistan in the 1990s against the Turkish state is also imperative in understanding the political ideology and consequential connotations of anti-oppression and anti-exploitation that this phrase encompasses (Bodette 2022). Through the mobilization efforts of women joining the Kurdish forces, an internal struggle began to mount in importance regarding women's liberation and autonomy. As argued by the founder and leader of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), "women's oppression is the basis of all other forms of oppression—society can't be free if women aren't free" (Bodette 2022). As the PKK evolved and "restructured" during the early 2000s, it became the only political organization in Kurdistan to prioritize the expressions and rights of women, working alongside their interests (2022). Since the beginning of the WLF movement in September 2022, this phrase has been used worldwide by Kurdish and Iranians in the diaspora grieving and standing with their country people who are fighting against the intolerable Islamic Republic regime and the many non-Iranian allies standing with them.

Allyship by non-Iranians, especially western, white, non-Iranians regarding women in the SWANA region is a complicated and multifaceted process. Western ideas of feminism have long been implicated as key facets of substantiating imperialistic means and justification, playing into idealisms of savior complexes and orientalist tropes that seek to simplify and misrepresent gender injustices, specifically in application to Iran (Khoja-Moolji 2015). As scholar, A. Marie

Ranjbar notes, the concept of ‘freedom,’ particularly when used in connection to anti-compulsory hijab protests, must be viewed as how it seeks to reproduce white feminist, savior complexes, and are often only made visible (and legible) once these protests conform to conceivable feminist mobilizations and orientalist tropes (Ranjbar 2021, 360). White feminists, and anti-Muslim racists alike, often see this movement as confirmation bias for the derogatory and demeaning images of barbaric, controlling, Muslim men they’ve long held and believed (Ranjbar 2021), or as Meghan Bodette calls it, “opportunistic support” (2022). Furthermore, when using the English or Farsi translations, the original Kurdish phrase is seldom acknowledged, which erases the long history of struggle and persistence of the Kurdish people. It is impossible to view this current movement in isolation from the many instances of dissent in favor of women’s rights, self-determination, and freedom of expression seen many times before and implicated in multi-faceted ways.

Through visible public dissent, societal reckonings, and deep ideological shifts within the minds and souls of those that are in opposition to the Islamic Republic, The Woman, Life, Freedom movement is the most recent iteration of these longstanding mobilizations for Iranian women/people (both pre-1979 and post-1979 Iran). It is, however, unique in regards to scale, international prominence, and presence of youth in the movement (Molana et al. 2023, 102). While Iranian women specifically have steadily been a part of political and social movements for liberation, the WLF movement marks the first time that mass protests focus on the centrality of women’s rights in addressing systemic injustice communally (102). These integral considerations, while beyond the capacity of this current analysis, provide insight into the criticality and historical comprehension required to inform the instances of the present in reflective and generative ways.

Solidarity within the Iranian Diaspora in Colorado

The topic of solidarity proved to be an essential point of inquiry within my analysis of the Iranian diaspora in Colorado. Crucial intergenerational insights to the differences and similarities that have arisen in this moment are in correlation with other key instances of defiance within Iranian history and have greatly influenced the lives of many, if not all, in the diaspora. Through this pseudo reawakening for some Iranians of perhaps dormant traumatic memories, experiences, and their resulting personal alignments, elements of temporality can offer insights into how members of the diaspora are experiencing the current revolutionary moment. The position of diasporic Iranians, while anything but a monolith, seems to exist within a fairly continual state of otherness. I found this to occur on two primary levels. The first was the otherness felt internally by members of the Iranian diaspora in Colorado in relation to the Iranian diaspora as a whole in the United States. The second was the otherness felt externally as Iranians in a place where dispersion creates a palpable sense of difference within an otherwise homogeneous, white dominant society. Within the US as a whole, subsections of the diaspora and their cultures create political, cultural, and communal differences, often as a result of being influenced by the uniqueness of the place.

Those interviewed in the CO Iranian community mentioned feeling disconnected and in a constant state of disjointedness and alienation from the rest of the Iranian diaspora in the US, particularly in the more concentrated areas and their corresponding culture. Additionally, another layer of otherness was found in feelings of separateness and overall removedness when it comes to Iran itself, Iranian society, Iranian politics, in some ways, even Iranian culture. Almost every person I spoke with felt guilt, shame, and overwhelming despair that they could not share the various burdens experienced by those in Iran. This was especially in reference to the WLF

movement, the restrictions on freedom of expression, speech, poverty, censorship, etc. The interviewees expressed wanting to find more “meaningful” ways of being in diasporic solidarity and feeling guilt for the overwhelming privileges they freely accessed, creating yet another layer to intergenerational exile.

For example, every one of my interviewees spoke to the way the WLF uprising in Iran held significance not only in the way their pride, connection, and solidarity had grown internally within themselves and their Iranian communities, but externally as well with an international reception, not expected or seen previously in regards to Iranian movements for sovereignty, human rights, or collective freedom. The presence of this deep guilt and notable grief was doubly present within their feelings of pride and reverence. Guilt that they could not share the harms their country people were gallantly fighting, shame surrounding the privilege they pursued by simply existing in the diaspora. Disenfranchised, intergenerational grief over the devastation and seemingly ruined nature of a once prosperous and emboldened country, the result of a grandiose diasporic imaginary constructed with each story, each member, each passing year without a tangible connection to a place so viscerally present.

In the following pages, I share pieces from the interviews I conducted with members of the Iranian diaspora in Colorado regarding sentiments and enactments of solidarity. In the final section of my thesis (Epilogue), I divulge my personal experiences with solidarity as a means of amplifying aspects of what is gleaned from my interviewees through an autoethnographic account. As much as there was a collective effort of the diaspora to set their differences aside (initially, at least) and come together in the wake of the Woman, Life, Freedom movement, there were ultimately factors that constricted the ability for fully fledged solidarity of Iranians living outside Iran with Iranians living within. While this includes myriad political elements, many

which span 45 years or more, within the interviews I conducted in the Colorado, the WLF movement amplified feelings of overwhelming shame, guilt, disjointedness, and a sense of diasporic privilege which made engagement and connection difficult and oftentimes impossible.

The Impacts of Distance, Real or Perceived

Many of my interviewees spoke to how the physical distance between their position in Colorado and Iran impacted their immediate solidarity with those at the forefront of the WLF movement. As Yalda offered in between the scratches of her dog on her bedroom door wanting to be let out: “Being spread out more, it's definitely harder to feel that sense of solidarity with Iran, especially because geographically it's so far away, but I do really feel very connected to these women and to really feel for them and feel like a part, a piece of my heart is with them.” While physical distance played a role there were additionally major trepidations many felt and continue to feel about speaking out against the regime, even in the diaspora. The rule of fear is present, often intergenerational or introduced by many interviewees' parents, and impacts the ability for important visual support, often a difficult reality to contend with. As Afsaneh shares:

At the height of it [WLF] my family didn't want to talk about it back in Iran, because it's always a very, very dangerous situation, just because of how brutal the government can and will be. My mom did ask my sister and I not to post about it on our social media because we have family in Iran and we like to visit. She has that paranoia, which I have too: if I say or do anything, talk about it too much or over-state my opinion, somebody's gonna get burned for it, which never feels good, especially since we're 3,000 miles away. To still be ruled by that fear sucks.

Within the non-Iranian world, however, there were shows of support and allship with the Iranian women, which one interviewee mentioned as having a significant impact on her identity connection and pride in being Iranian. Especially being in an isolated place like Boulder, interrogating the importance of external shows of support in relation to strengthening a side of someone's identity provokes questioning about the relationship between the doubly-liminal stance many Iranians in the Colorado diaspora occupy. Through the WLF movement, many in the second generation felt they saw a tangible connection to their lives; seeing the streets in Iran not only filled with but being led by young people created a resonance and solidarity unlike previous movements of dissent. As Roshan discussed, they believed the interest and support by non-Iranians to be representative of a crucial shift in the Iranian monolith so prevalent their entire lives. "People (non-Iranians) have an idea of what Iranians are and always will be. But with WLF, they began seeing a side to these people that they'd never seen before. They were fighting against the government saying, 'fuck you' and stating very clearly, 'we want our future.' I think that rings true for many people."

Additionally, within the Iranian diaspora there were feelings of intra-communal solidarity, as Leila spoke to from her college with a sizable Iranian population:

With the Woman, Life, Freedom movement, it just really brought us together, because I think individually we can feel so separated from Iran and so powerless. But together we have booths on our campus to bring awareness to what's going on, organizing marches downtown. It definitely helps, while it might not impact the political climate directly it brings the sense of community that really feels empowering. This also showed the need for an increase of knowledge around

topics like WLF movement and other issues in Iran—there's not a lot of depth of knowledge.

Leila brings up an interesting point of recognizing the collective power within the individualized situation many are placed in by being part of the Iranian diaspora in the US, its tumultuous and often solitary existence. Thinking intergenerationally, many of the first members of the Iranian diaspora were single immigrants or those who were on student visas here to attend school and return back to Iran. The 1979 revolution and all that followed quickly changed that, creating an entire generation of those who were now living in exile from their country of origin, placed in a drastically individualistic situation. While mechanisms of creating community within the diaspora have since shifted to become more accessible and prevalent, as we've been privy to throughout the exploration of the diaspora in Colorado, Iranians have adopted an independence reminiscent of early days of forced assimilation and survival mechanisms. Within this imposed hyper-independence, furthered by the intra-communal hierarchies, the collectivist roots of Iranian culture are often forgotten, resulting perhaps in disjointedness when moments like WLF occur and questions of solidarity arise. To have members of the second generation, born and raised diasporic members taking the lead in reclaiming this collectivist culture, not just within family friends or in internalized ways, but in exterior shows of solidarity with all who hold some connection to Iran exudes hope.

Contending With Emotional Realities

Doing this work within the devastating circumstances of the Jin, Jiyan, Azadî revolution was and is difficult. A recent Human Rights Watch report released in early March details news shared by Iranian officials of a supposed “pardon” of those detained in the protests estimated at over 22,000 people (Human Rights Watch 2024). With an estimated 834 state sanctioned murders taking place in 2023 (The Iran Primer 2024), and over 500 people killed for protesting in the streets (Iranian Diaspora Collective 2023), the despair of the Iranian diaspora runs deep. As many interviewees expressed, while there are aspects of increased engagement that have sprouted from the diaspora in the wake of this movement, most are grappling with a sense of hopelessness and apathy, almost. As Leila continues to share:

Personally, when I see things on Instagram or on the news I’m like, “oh, my goodness!” What did I do to deserve the freedom that I have here? My dad's choice to immigrate? That brings a large sense of guilt to me, I didn't do anything, my life would have been so different had I grown up in Iran. There's some shame in there, for sure, of not being there, of not being able to help. But almost more than that there’s hurt, hurt that I can't share the burden. That I can't relieve some of that. It frustrates me a lot.

Reza echoed these sentiments with his own experiences:

Sometimes if I do try to connect, it just brings me back down, and it makes me feel a little bit sad and a little bit guilty. It's really hard not to shut down. I was trying to find a

balance between reading news and still being engaged, but also not bringing myself to the brink of not being able to do anything. I still don't really feel like I've dealt with that feeling of powerlessness. I don't really know how to navigate this. I don't know how to reconcile why my family and I deserve safety over somebody else's. It's something I talk to my parents about a lot; both of them feel a lot of shame for leaving Iran and coming here and when these tough moments happen it's really hard not to feel like, "Why are we here? Why can't we just either bring them over or go back and make things better somehow?"

Based on these sentiments, it doesn't seem like in these situations a specific place in the diaspora is as influential or important in moving through these discrepancies as was originally thought. While there is, of course, an impact in being more dispersed and less physically visible, I assert these expressions are rooted more in an internal sense of displacement regardless of physical determinants. The overwhelming guilt and shame participants testified to feeling arises both in "tough moments" of overt conflict, as well as carrying the subconscious knowledge of the disenfranchisement experienced by family and friends in Iran in perpetuity. To feel guilty implies believing something you did or participated in was harmful or warrants remorse, focusing the burden of impact solely on yourself. A similar phenomenon to a survivor's guilt, perhaps, this places your existence in immediate isolation from others in similar diasporic positions within your community, rendering intentional, conscious connection or identity construction a difficult task. As both Leila and Reza express above, their feelings of powerlessness, shame, and inability to shoulder the burden of things beyond their control is seemingly rooted in their inability to physically be in Iran, which influences their knowledge and

perceived participation in navigating intentional ways of holding these tragedies in ways that seem tangible. This was a commonly expressed sentiment amongst almost all of my interviewees, in which I also found resonance in reflecting on my own experiences of shame that developed in the weeks following Amini's death.

The feelings of fear, contempt, anguish, and devastation are ingrained in my disposition even now a year and a half after. To say so sounds silly: why wouldn't I be affected by this monumental event on an existential and cellular level? In what world wouldn't I become absorbed by but equally debilitated by the constant videos, photographs, big dark eyes, and hanging corpses that infiltrated my psyche and mind persistently? To say I wasn't and that it didn't motivate and direct most if not all of my past and current action would be untrue. My experiences do differ from the ones expressed by my interviewees by way of the shame they expressed feeling throughout moments of visible struggle and through the intergenerational and temporal moments of their lives. I didn't feel that overwhelming shame in regards to my positionalities and physical location. But that's not to say I didn't and don't feel enormous guilt. In my mind, shame and guilt are different things, although can be conflated as one: the former describes feeling anguish over who you are in relation to a perceived other entity that you are in some way, despite degrees of liminality, connected and bound to. But what if that intentional obligation remains elusive regardless of known connection? Do physical denotations make a difference when integral internal workings appear absent? Guilt, to me, is this phenomenon, the liminality of shame that feels unrequited by all that shame encapsulates, but that does not appear to hold room for the self-imposed displacement of your convoluted associations. There are many times when I listen to the news, speak to my family, or watch the horrors unfolding around the SWANA region and feel deep, overwhelming sadness. I feel ashamed by the privilege I have, by

my displaced sense of connection. I stand in solidarity within the abstract however tangible my actions may be. Perhaps it's my feelings of ineffectiveness, of never being able to impact the pervasive ideologies that exist in perpetuity. The indifference that often accompanies my tight chest and sweaty palms. Unearned shame. Displaced shame. Ineligible shame.

Throughout this examination, feelings of permanence, belonging, representation, connection and intention have been derived through recognition of physical presence in Colorado. Whether this was through describing the difficulties, discoveries, or questions navigating this environment held throughout lived experiences, equally noteworthy were the internal dialogues present within those I spoke with and the impact of these on identification and intentionality in an Iranian existence. This double liminality exists within feelings of belonging and feelings of exile. Between gratitude and grief. Between fulfillment and abandonment. The liminal existence of Iranians in the diaspora is always present in the shadow of a place they cannot return to, have never been to, may never go to...

Throughout the preceding pages, I have examined the various ways in which Iranians in the diaspora in Colorado are engaging with and creating intentional engagements with their Iranian identities. Despite the myriad difficulties encompassed within the many interactions of this meaning making and iterations of intentionality based on key attention paid to the confounding circumstances and considerations of place based, there is nevertheless a staunch commitment to their Iranian identities, however this may manifest. While some prefer to have visible, external reinforcements and a supporting surrounding society that aids in their intentionality finding more tangible roots, others found that by simply creating the circumstances within both non-Iranian and intra-communal spaces for monolithic conceptions of this identity

and all that accompanies it to arise in distinct, honest ways for the individual, room for a more authentic showcasing of their intentional relationship with their identity comes to fruition.

Iranians in the diaspora have existed within this space of disenfranchised grief for decades passed down intergenerationally, mainly through the intentionality of language, residing in the political conceptions of pride. This has therefore created in the minds of many second-generation Iranians a confusion about the ways they are able to express their Iranian identity, while holding an understanding, however muddled, that a fully divulged representation is not allowed. This is especially true within Colorado, where the action of naming an Iranian identity or anything adjacent is precarious in the external reactions of those in the surrounding community. When the WLF movement began, however, Iranians started to notice a shifting in the ways that people around the world were relating to Iran in a way they had not seen prior in their lifetimes. To see this drastic shift in almost sudden allyship and solidarity (whatever the underlying intentions), positioned this previous relation in very different terms. For the first time in many people's lives, taking pride in their Iranian identity became easy, second nature, almost, given the resoundingly positive and supportive reactions seen in external western society. For the first time, the grief Iranian people felt towards the Islamic Republic, the brutality, the murders, the desecration of Iranian society and people was seemingly heard by those around the world, providing an opportunity for collective strength and desperately needed understanding and compassion. For many, myself included, talking about Iran and our connections to the nation became a source of empowerment instead of wary shame. We felt the tides were shifting in favor of finally seeing the distinction between the Iranian people and the Islamic Republic, although I do recognize this often lacks the necessary intersectional considerations necessary for complete liberation to occur for *all* Iranian people. This movement for liberation, for freedom, for

autonomy, and human rights was almost as applicable to the Iranians in the diaspora as it was for the Iranian people. To live as almost all Iranians in the diaspora do with an intrinsic connection to Iran, regardless of if you've physically been there, if you speak Farsi, if you even like koobideh kabob...to feel the pain of your country people with every passing year, every state sanctioned murder, every beaten woman who had a strand of hair fall from her roosari, has an untenable impact. And as interviewees mentioned, even thousands of miles away, those in the diaspora are still beholden to the whims of the Islamic Republic. The WLF movement provided what many in Iran and the diaspora had lost many revolutionary moments before: hope.

The Iranian diaspora in Colorado exists within a double, sometimes triple, sometimes multi-state presence of liminality. Not only do many members find themselves on the outskirts of both the American communities they have lived in for many years or were raised within, but additionally as many second generation individuals can attest to, within the Iranian/Iranian culture they experienced primarily within the home and in particular, curated, intentional external examples. The third area of liminality often exists within the Iranian diaspora itself in the US, since the demographic in Colorado is a subculture of the larger population, and finds itself distinct from other cohorts around the country. This liminality paired with the lack of external representations seen in the surrounding society that encourages a designation of "otherness," making some Iranians in Colorado feel like anomalies within communities and places they've existed within their entire lives, imposes a chameleon like ability onto these individuals, manifesting in the palatable ways their Iranian identity is performed and therefore internalized. While sometimes distinctions are readily made between what is intimately known to be one's true conception of their Iranian identity and the externally recognized monolith, oftentimes this is not the case and instances of this micro aggressive curiosity results in

relegation and confusion. Additionally layered with intergenerational aspects of trauma, guilt, shame, and disenfranchised grief not consciously addressed in collective, communal ways, I assert that the Iranian diaspora in Colorado exists (as of current) within a nascent yet intentionally emergent state. Discourse previously mentioned, confounded by the overall burgeoning presence of the entirety of the Iranian diaspora leads me to this malleable and dynamic conclusion. Without specific prerequisites, such as greater external representation, unbiased and critical comprehension, and conscious, intentional efforts for cultivating an Iranian diasporic culture that is distinct yet informed by the myriad identities and pasts individuals hold, in what ways will this population come to fruition?

Within this, however, it must also be understood that these are not fixed, universal, or one-ended processes. What would the point be to dismantle one constricting monolith only in service of imposing another? Being the multi-faceted, divergent, and becoming demographic the Iranian diaspora is, there are infinite possibilities for using these distinct experiences and perspectives of living outside of Iran but still feeling an undeniable connection, regardless of how it manifests in service of curation. How this is navigated within the confounding factors of intergenerational aspects, historical connotations, and socio-political realities is determined in both dynamic and ordinary ways is the current undertaking. What if this construction has already begun, slowly, discreetly, in between traversing the liminality of yourself and your surroundings, with each connection made, each conversation had, every commonality discovered. Especially in a place like Colorado, the commitment to intentionally relating to and understanding what it means to be Iranian and its immeasurable manifestations provides concrete input into diasporic possibilities not yet discovered but well within the purview of this unique demographic. It may

not look the same for everyone, but this in no way diminishes its purpose, its validity, and its potential.

Epilogue

When I stepped off the plane at Baltimore/Washington International Thurgood Marshall Airport, proudly displaying my “Zan, Zendegi, Azadi” pin written in Farsi script, I felt ready for the upcoming weekend, the significance of which had built up tremendously during the 3 ½ hour flight from Denver. I walked quickly from the terminal to the MARC commuter train to downtown D.C. where my cousin and his partner would pick me up for my first Persian experience of the trip: dinner at Rumi’s.

When I had initially booked my flight to D.C., it was the week before September 16th. I, like many others, had felt the dwindling of the Women, Life, Freedom (WLF) protests, both in Iran and the diaspora. People were frustrated, people were tired, and mostly, people were divided. Divided on their views, divided on their attempts at solidarity, divided on their conditions for what a “Free Iran” would mean. Decades, generations worth of trauma, anger, confusion, and grief were coming to a head, without comprehensive avenues of expression, condemnation, or shows of support/alliship from many around the world, and especially within the West. This was a precarious notion, especially given the imperialist role many countries within the West, and especially the US, play within countries around the world. The fundamental question, never fully answered, was how to stand in meaningful solidarity and how to ask for such from those in power without the underlying and implicit white saviorism built into the very fabric of western interest. What myself and I think others meant when support from the US was uttered was representative, truthful intention regarding their media representations, restructuring of their “diplomatic” relations (which was very much beyond the political scale we had knowledge of), and genuine support for the bold actions of the Iranian people despite the

brutalities they were enduring. What does it mean when we begin seeking support and validation (of sorts) from the very entity responsible and that benefits from the continued plights of oppressed people worldwide? The Iranian community's relationship with the governments of western nations, but especially the United States grew even more convoluted than it was before—who thought that was even possible? But as the days turned into months and had now nearly reached a year, as more innocent, Iranian people were killed, brutalized, raped, tortured, executed, arrested, and maimed, it seemed many of the fierce human rights activism had come to a stop. Regardless, the anniversary of Jina Mahsa Amini's death was set to re-ignite this lull, calling the Iranian diaspora to come out in every major city to stand together in solidarity, mourning, and hope on this revolutionary day. As an Iranian in the diaspora, I am both proud of and unsure of my identity and place within this community. I hoped that this meaningful event would create further imperative for my voice.

My cousin came to this country when he was 21 years old. The recipient of the coveted "Visa Lottery" program (courtesy of the incredibly generous U.S.), my father's sister and her husband moved to Boulder, Colorado in 2001 with two of their three sons. Arriving not only in a new country, but in this particular city must have been an extreme culture shock. Not to mention my father, an anti-war, anarchist hippy, with a white-American partner and child on the way must have also proved to be a bit stupefying! Their first year was full of 4 am shifts at the CU dining hall, an uncle/brother pushing for the quick assimilation into American culture in order to protect them from the traumatic and dangerous treatment he had been subject to, as well as the meeting of new, incredible people (namely me, duh), and the attempts at relaxing into the devastation of leaving behind a home, family, and identity that become impossible.

I stepped off the train in D.C. and walked from the tracks to the terminal. In between the bustling of those headed into the city for their Friday night plans stood two scanning eyes belonging to my dear cousin, S and his partner, R. Both S and R are artists—my cousin, a graphic designer who worked at an Iranian television station in D.C. for many years, and his partner, an acclaimed illustrator and author who is known far and wide for her incredible work. She writes and illustrates children's books, surrounding or including Iranian esque topics and themes—her newest book being a child's guide to Rumi's life and legacy. I waved hello and ran up to give them both big hugs and compliments and thanks for their picking me up. After stopping in the main terminal at the train station for a quick selfie, we were off to the Prius that would take us through the winding and historic streets of D.C. to a restaurant called Rumi's where we would eat, drink, listen, and celebrate each other, our culture, and our identity as proud Iranians in the diaspora, surrounded by table after table of people doing the same.

The first night felt like what I imagine it must be like in Iran: full of delicious koobideh, rice, and bastani, we drove back to their gorgeous D.C. townhouse (I told you she was a well known artist). Inside, the walls were filled with beautiful scenes of Persian gardens, figures dressed in traditional Persian clothing, vibrant colors all drawn by R. On your way to the kitchen were traditional tea sets, plates with Farsi script, and my cousin's newest book dedicated to "Woman, Life, Freedom" displayed prominently on the shelf. Although it was well after 10pm, S began brewing chai and R went through the fridge to procure baklava, peste or pistachios still in the pod not yet dried or roasted, pieces of lavashak or Persian fruit candy, all from the numerous surrounding Persian markets in the D.C./Baltimore/Virginia area, while I watched in awe as this production unfolded. We sat in front of their television, turning it on to reveal only Persian channels—all the movies were in Farsi, the news, the sports, you name it. R turned the

channel to “Radio Javan,” a popular Persian music platform playing all the hits, similar to what I suppose MTV must have been like. **For what seemed like hours, we watched, drank, ate, and talked about the past, the present, and even dared to speculate about the future.** While “Age Ye Rooz” played prominently with R taking videos as we both sang along and swayed to the music, the words of S proclaiming his hatred for Iran were deafening.

The next day, the three of us walked down to one of the main centers of the city for a light breakfast before gathering with other Iranians for the protest that afternoon. R had made me a special WLF shirt from a graphic she had designed that was used for a mural in Santa Monica. Along with my WLF and “Iran, Iran, Iran” written in Farsi script earrings, I felt proud of my choice to be with my new community on such a significant day. While we were walking around, I asked question after question about the number of Iranians in the area, what the past year had been like, hopes and speculations they each had for this movement, and how/if this moment differed from those instances of revolution in the past. R seemed more enthusiastic in answering my questions than S did; I noticed his body language shift, his face somber, and his dark eyes gaze down at his sour cherry and pistachio scone. R described the large showings to D.C. protests, which happened every week in front of the White House. Many came from the surrounding areas with a large showing of multigenerational, varied members of the diaspora. In fact, the son of the late Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, also called Reza Pahlavi, resides in a quaint Virginia town 40 minutes from where we sat. As one can imagine, this physical presence provided additional feelings to an already unresolved and vehement discourse surrounding Reza Pahlavi and his supposed rightful and imminent place back at the head of Iran. S piped up a bit during this discussion, stating his support and admiration for Reza before returning his eyes to his scone as a couple at the next table eyed my pin widely.

Before leaving for the protest, R decided to warm up some leftovers they just had lying around in the fridge: fesenjoon, with leftover koobideh, torshi, and a fresh pot of rice with tahdig, because why not have a Persian feast before standing and walking for 3 hours. As we prepared lunch, we decided to watch some videos on what was being said about the recent prisoner swap the U.S. had done with the Islamic Regime, and the included \$6 billion dollar bonus. Many, including the three of us, were outraged by this deal and the blatant disregard the Biden administration seemed to have towards the murderous, brutal, despotic regime they were still doing business with, regardless of the pleas and demands from Iranians within their country to stop their aiding of this regime for months. S shook his head, while R nervously stirred the khorest. S browsed for a few more videos on Youtube before landing on a video of Reza Pahlavi speaking to some Fox News host who kept calling him "Riza." I was a little shocked that this was the current choice and both S and R seemed interested with what was being said. Granted, what was being discussed was not particularly inflammatory, but I was more surprised at the principle of not only choosing to get your information from a channel like Fox News, but that Reza Pahlavi would be speaking on such a platform. With knowledge of what Fox News stands for and has done within this country in the past (not to mention their super great views of people from the SWANA region, especially "Eye-ran"), how could two, young, educated, seemingly progressive individuals heed every word with reverence often reserved for those who speak the truth? The longer we sat there, the conversation grew from questioning this particular interview to questioning the political views of many within the Iranian diaspora as R told me that many Iranians were in favor of Trump winning the 2024 election. Granted, I already knew many Iranians were Trump supporters, due to their meritocratic, conservative monetary ideals as hardened, often privileged, often white supremacist views on their place within this country and

the world. But that was back in 2016. The justification I got for my questioning revolved around the widely believed notion that the Trump administration's ideas to rip up the nuclear deal would have weakened the Islamic Republic so significantly that when WLF began the dissent would have been enough to topple the regime and free Iran. Okay, so I sat with this, listening as S continued to talk about how the Biden administration did this and this that would have never flown under Trump, all seemingly in the favor of a country he recently expressed such disdain for. But the reality that so many Iranians who are Trump supporters for myriad reasons (economic, political, his anti-Muslim racism), is that when push comes to shove (as was apparent during the Muslim Ban in 2017 where Iran was most definitely one of the countries in prominence on the list), Trump is unlikely to make the distinction the Aryan supremacy claims of Iranians often hope will transfer. With the one track capacity so characteristic of American politicians, in what capacity do Iranians think there will be any effort to see beyond the easy access generalizations and stereotypes of anti-Muslim/SWANA racism? I felt confused as I ate my very Persian lunch as a very questioning Persian about to go be among also confused and questioning Persians.

In the Uber ride over, R played a tapping elimination game with our legs she used to play as a child in Iran—similar to eenie meeny miny moe, as she and S spoke exclusively in Farsi, the dominant language spoken in their household and the one they were most confident in, despite S being in the U.S. for 22 years and R 11. When we arrived at the White House, we jumped out of the car into a sea of red, white, and green; bold Iranian flags with the official Islamic symbol at the center replaced by a triumphant lion with a sword before a setting sun, a signifier of the Persian empire, its glory, and its vitality separate from the IR. We walked to a field not far from the anemic representation of the US Empire with a stage set up blasting various protest songs

that have surfaced since the beginning of the revolution: “Roosarito” by Mehdi Yarrahi, a prominent Iranian musician who was imprisoned for this radical tune, “Bizaram Az Dine Shoma,” سرود آزادی or “Freedom Anthem” all rallying together the most Iranians I had ever seen with my own two eyes. Beautiful children with big brown eyes, old Persian babas with shiny heads and big bellies, women wearing traditional Persian dresses, flashy young men with trimmed beards and a halo of cologne mouthing along to the words of the songs. My attention turned to a woman standing in front of me, realizing soon that it was a fellow Iranian activist from Denver I had worked with numerous times throughout the past year. We greeted each other and took a selfie (obvi), before turning our attention to the stage as speakers began coming out calling for our chants and speaking poignant words in both English and Farsi. I looked around at those both near and far; talking, laughing, embracing, holding each other in this moment of solidarity, on this day of immense grief and symbolism. I thought of my baba, how much I wished he could be here with me, wondering how many of the people surrounding me suffered from the same trauma, deep and full sadness, and utter devastation that precluded him from teaching me Farsi, from telling me to avoid naming what I was, all the while instilling within me the most beautiful, vibrant, extraordinary culture and traditions that come with being Persian.

I realized in that moment that there is both immense power and pain that comes with being an Iranian in the American diaspora. Our power lies in our collective responsibility to recognize, strengthen, and ground our culture, traditions, language, and personhood in a place that diminishes, disregards, and demoralizes us with every passing policy, political decision, speech, and hateful encounter. That relegates our existence to the limits of inclusion, the periphery of autonomy. The community is here. There are thousands, maybe even millions of us, and yet, why is that feeling of isolation so pervasive? Is it the feeling of disjointedness between

your self-identification and how the world and country sees you? That feeling of insufficient connection to a place you feel such a strong pull to, one that dictates most everything if not all things in your life, all your thoughts, actions, and even language, without feeling safe in your pride, conviction, questionings, or grief? The community here is not a collective. We are a collective people with an individualist adoption. Holding onto semblances of a place that no longer exists. A reality that isn't there, and for many, never was. When I look at my cousin, I see such immense pain: for what he's lost, for what he feels unable to reclaim, for the confusion he and so many others are stuck in, amplified by this movement. How can Iranians in the diaspora call for the liberation of the Iranian people, for the freedom and sovereignty they so long for, when our ideas on the fundamentals that create this are glaringly different? Were priorities ever ones that existed outside of imperial and white supremacist and anti-Muslim/SWANA racist imaginaries? Calling for Reza Pahlavi to resume his father's monarchy, therefore imposing yet again a western conception of democracy, freedom, and self-determination showcases how truly different so many of us within the diaspora are, and how significantly there needs to be a collective reckoning, grieving, and healing within our own formations, while using our resources and opportunities as mechanisms to amplify, strengthen, and demand so that the voices within Iran that risk their lives to walk down the street without hijab are not drowned out or distracted by the muddled diaspora. We owe it to them now more than ever.

When I think of being in solidarity within the WLF movement from my position—solidarity with the Iranians in Colorado, solidarity with the Iranian people to which I feel an even more liminal connection—I am often perplexed by the myriad possibilities I feel this process encompasses. I used to think that being in solidarity could only be one thing—something meaningful, something tangible, and something I most definitely didn't feel was within my

capacity. I didn't feel the right of solidarity was mine to enact, because I believe solidarity requires a connection. A connection to the people around you, to the issues and experiences you're seeking to offer support within, and most importantly, solidarity requires you to figure out how this is enacted within your own capacity for recognition, for understanding, in service of something greater than yourself, yes, but also something that is impossible without the participation **of** yourself. Over the past year and a half, I've come to understand the power internal recognition has in my own identity reclamation and realization. External acceptance regarding my Persian identity was and still in many ways is what I spend so much of my time and energy waiting for, attempting to conform into what I believe others perceive me or don't believe me to be, adopting the glimmers of representations that come into my life as my own aspiring monolith to which my experiences and connections never seem to hold the same significance or validity. It's interesting, however, that this tends to fade within moments of crisis. When the news broke that Jina had been killed, I remember feeling confused: I felt a dull sense of sadness, the kind that echoes within a deeply buried chamber of intergenerational grief; I felt discredited in any emotions, but I immediately remember running to Instagram, to see what others were feeling. How was I supposed to feel in an instance I felt I'd seen so many times before but never impressionable enough to spark an identity quest that would lead to a comprehensive viewing of this arduous understanding? I think apathy is too strong a word, but I will admit to feeling a reluctance of sorts, since I thought I knew what would happen. I knew how this would be perceived. I could hear the mass media reports that never came calling this yet another brutal act by the barbaric **Iranian Government**, those bearded, Islamic, terrorists from 1979 against the oppressed, docile, and primitive brown women who dared to let her hair down (metaphorically) in the face of the brutal system of heteropatriarchal control. If you ask most

Iranians, this was the narrative running through their heads as well. And rightfully so: I understand as much as I can the absolute contempt and incandescent outrage deeply seeded at a ruling power that forced a diaspora of exiles. I will never understand the ever present yearning, all-consuming anguish, and geographic remorse felt by the premiere members of the Iranian diaspora, and the many that continue to populate it as immigrants. But I knew that the complexity of this situation would be lost on the zero-sum, anti-Muslim homogenization efforts of western controlled narratives. What does it mean to seek recognition from the very source that seeks to benefit from the catastrophe they created in the first place, a self-serving justification for demonization that acts in perpetuity, while holding the power to validate, officiate, substantiate all under the guise of enacting change and condemnation when the design is performing exactly as intended? What is the role of intentionality when this is realized? When will this be known? Does intentionality therefore become in service of simply reinforcing and upholding the same structures that make it impossible for solidarity to arise besides the ways allowed through the confines of an imagined reality?

I found my mind turning these specific considerations over and over. Thwarted by the inability to conceive of anything other than the disparity between myself and what I perceived to be the Iranian community now coming together in more visible and concrete standings as this seen before event grew into the potential always encompassed within the revolutionary spirit of a population relegated to debilitation and death. It wasn't until I attended an event at my school where I felt an inclination of a dormant and never-before used label. Through organizing within my diasporic capacity with other Iranian-Americans, some immigrants, some second generation, some half-Iranians (just like me!), I began to see the Iranian monolith I had come to understand, both politically and in terms of orientation had more malleability than I had ever allowed myself

to realize, known I had the capacity to. Within a matter of months, I felt a comfort and confidence in identifying as an “Iranian-American” that had never been present before, except in moments of spite. I found a reclamation of power, of pride I had never allowed myself to realize was there to cultivate. I made connections between my family, my community, my people that were not previously apparent, or at least not with the clarity and respect I had for them now. There are still moments of unassuredness, questioning of my motivations for being so involved, for feeling such a visceral connection, still under the guise of misappropriation. Do my actions stem from some diasporic, white saviorism, a product of the western ideologies I consume despite my indifference to their origins or meaning? How can I truly say I stand in solidarity with a movement of people only known through the screen of my iPhone? While these thoughts still cloud my mind on the days when my action becomes inaction, when I stare too long at my reflection in the mirror, when I hear a phrase in Farsi that I can’t decipher, I can also feel myself evolving, moving past these confines into a realm unbeknown to the deficits of explanation. When I’m sitting with my friends in the affinity group we created and have sustained for almost two years, Boulder4Iran, full of connection, storytelling, community, and meaning. When we sit across from the teams of Colorado’s Representatives like Neguse and Hickenlooper and express our anguish over the US’ robotic, calculated approach to foreign politics, especially in the SWANA region. When I’m referred to as “an Iranian kid” or when others send endearing Farsi phrases my way, previously reserved for my father, I feel a sense of power, an undeniable belonging, a belief that I have a meaningful place within this work, and the work within me. That although I may not belong within an already established sense of this identity in some key ways, my difference does not diminish the responsibility I have to use my diasporic privilege and positionality to listen to, hear, and amplify intentionally ignored circumstances. Over time, my

passive relationship and understanding of intentionally living in my Iranianness has shifted from viewing it as a predetermined process to which I was not a part of, to an action that requires consistent and complementary making and unmaking. This, as I've discovered throughout this process, is as unknown to me as it is to many other second-generation, children of immigrant Iranian-Americans in Colorado, as I'm sure it is for others living in the ambiguity being bi or multi-racial provokes.

Perhaps that's the reality of an Iranian-American living in the diaspora in Colorado. Although I'm not sure about everyone, this is the reality for me. Despite my complicated acceptance, consistent negotiation, and fear that I can never be enough within the context of a creation that doesn't not compute the unique nature of my circumstances, my process of retrieval, like the Iranian diaspora in Colorado, emerges with each passing day, each passing consideration, each reclamation, and each reconceptualization of key engagements like solidarity that encompasses the whole in a perceivably splintered state. Perhaps it was never meant to be cohesive. Perhaps it never will be. Given the many complexities, differing experiences, and select perspectives, is it ever feasible to expect hegemony will produce consensus? But what if this isn't what's needed in moments of friction, within the gaps of expansive and elusive imagination. What if what's needed is to reframe the perception of these cracks not as something that we seek to minimize, but grow with and within the versatility of the perceivable margins. Maybe this is where our power lies. In the liminality of the supposed and the devised.

Appendices

Appendix 1

Title of research study: Insert Title of Study

IRB Protocol Number: 23-0508

Investigator: Rumi Natanzi

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to interview Iranian-Americans, both first and second generation, in Colorado, primarily Boulder and Denver areas, to gain insights into the lives, experiences, and perspectives of this under researched and underrepresented community within the larger Iranian diaspora in the U.S.. Through these interviews, I hope to investigate the multitude of variables that intermingle to create the unique Iranian diasporic experiences in Colorado. Through posing open ended questions, I aim at gathering deeper understanding into the most salient aspects of Iranian-American diasporic identity, intergenerational presence, and positional accountability. Since the Iranian diaspora in Colorado has not been researched, this study will explore new avenues for Iranian diasporic studies. By providing your stories you will contribute greatly towards my undergraduate thesis.

We expect that you will be in this research study for one hour or two hour meetings during the month of October, 2023.

We expect about 8-10 people will be in this research study within the Boulder, Denver, and surrounding areas.

Explanation of Procedures

Participating in this research study will require a 1-2 hour interview, either online (recorded via Zoom) or in person (recorded via recorder). Before the interview, I will send the interview questions to the participant to allow for the interviewee to feel comfortable and prepared ahead of time. Right before the interview, I will go over the overall purpose of this study, as well as its goals and objectives. The interviews will be recorded in order for later transcription through a software application, so I can further analyze and code for themes as my research progresses. I will also take written notes during the interview. Once the nature and objectives of the study are covered, I will

follow with an explanation on this consent form that must be agreed to verbally before we can begin our conversation (via a waiver of documentation of consent).

Voluntary Participation and Withdrawal

Whether or not you take part in this research is your choice. You can leave the research at any time and it will not be held against you. It is the right of the participant/subject to withdraw at any point in the study and no reason needs to be given for your/their decision to withdraw nor will you/they be pressured to give reasons. Your wishes to be removed or withdrawn will be accommodated without pressure or reservation. If you, the participant/subject, decides to withdraw after the interview has been conducted, you will be asked if you wish to have the interview deleted and destroyed, or if you wish to have your interview to continue to be part of the data of the study.

If you are a CU Boulder student or employee, taking part in this research is not part of your class work or duties. You can refuse to enroll, or withdraw after enrolling at any time, with no effect on your class standing, grades, or job at CU Boulder. You will not be offered or receive any special consideration if you take part in this research.

Risks and Discomforts

The risks to participants in this interview process are minimal. While the interview questions are not overtly harmful in their intent, the extent to which it's answered is up to each individual. I do not see, however, the impact from these interviews having a lasting impact on participants' overall wellbeing or mental health.

Potential Benefits

There are no direct benefits to participating in this study.

Confidentiality

Information obtained about you for this study will be kept confidential to the extent allowed by law. Research information that identifies you may be shared with the University of Colorado Boulder Institutional Review Board (IRB) and others who are responsible for ensuring compliance with laws and regulations related to research, including people on behalf of the Office for Human Research Protections. The information from this research may be published for academic purposes; however, your identity will not be given out. Interview recordings will be saved on a harddrive or immediate recording device, never to a cloud on my computer or phone.

It is important that I convey to you that any information obtained about you for this study will be kept confidential to the extent allowed by the law. Research information that

identifies you may be shared with the University of Colorado, Boulder Institutional Review Board (IRB) and others who are responsible for ensuring compliance with laws and regulations related to research, including people on behalf of the Office for Human Research Protections.

Audio recordings of interviews will be deleted/destroyed after written transcriptions of the interview have been completed. This process may take up to 2 months. Electronic copies of transcriptions will be stored as password protected documents on my computer. These copies will be kept until findings are accepted within my honor's thesis project. All electronic copies of files, including transcriptions, written notes and signed consent forms will be physically destroyed after the research process. Any theft or loss of data, will be reported immediately to the IRB.

As the researcher, myself and my advisor will be the only people to have access to the signed consent forms, transcribed data, written notes, and audio coded data.

All data used from participants in the final study will be referred under a pseudonym to ensure complete anonymity and respect for the privacy of the individual whose story is being shared.

There are three exceptions to this promise of confidentiality:

1. If we see or are told information that makes us reasonably suspect that a child or at-risk adult is being or has been abused, mistreated, or neglected, we will immediately report that information to the county department of social services or a local law enforcement agency.
2. If we learn of a serious threat of imminent physical violence against a person, we will report that information to the appropriate legal authorities and make reasonable and timely efforts to notify the potential victim.
3. This promise of confidentiality does not include information we may learn about future criminal conduct.

Payment for Participation

No monetary compensation will be provided.

Questions

If you have questions, concerns, or complaints, or think the research has hurt you in any way, please feel free to reach out to the research team at Rumi.Natanzi@colorado.edu

or at 720-548-8485. Also feel free to contact my research advisor, Dr. Nishant Upadhyay, at Nishant.Upadhyay@colorado.edu for any questions, concerns or complaints.

This research has been reviewed and approved by an IRB. You may talk to them at (303) 735-3702 or irbadmin@colorado.edu if:

- Your questions, concerns, or complaints are not being answered by the research team.
- You cannot reach the research team.
- You want to talk to someone besides the research team.
- You have questions about your rights as a research subject.
- You want to get information or provide input about this research.

Appendix 2

Hello, there!

My name is Rumi Natanzi—I'm an undergraduate student at the University of Colorado, Boulder studying Leadership and Community Engagement, Ethnic Studies, and Geography. As an Iranian-American born, raised, and educated in Boulder, Colorado, I am interested in hearing more from Iranian-American individuals on their experiences, self-identification, and life in Colorado. I am conducting this research for my senior honor's thesis in Ethnic Studies, titled "An Examination of Relations, Phenomena, and Identity within the Iranian Diaspora in Colorado", which I plan to defend in April 2024. This project has been approved by CU Boulder's Institutional Review Board to ensure ethical and honest research is conducted. I am reaching out to you to see if divulging some/all/none of the information detailed above sounds like something that would interest you. **Particularly, I am interested in hearing more about how your geographic location impacts your sense of self, your positionality, and your relationship with Iranian culture and identity. I am also interested in hearing about how you find this influences your engagement/solidarity with the current Zan, Zendegi, Azadi revolution currently happening in Iran.**

You are invited to sit down for a 1-2 hour conversation with me, either in person or over Zoom (coffee, chai, treats included), please feel free to email me at: rumi.natanzi@colorado.edu or text/call me at: 720-548-8485.

Thank you very much for taking the time to read this request, and I look forward to hearing from you if you decide to participate.

Rumi

Appendix 3

1. **How do you identify?**
 - a. **Age, gender (pronouns), racially, ethnically, socio-economic class**
 - i. **First generation? Second generation?**
 - b. **What does the term “Iranian” mean to you?**
 - i. **What does the term Iranian Diaspora mean to you? How would you define this?**
 - ii. **How does this term shift based on the political atmosphere in the United States and Iran?**
2. **Where are you from/where did you grow up?**
 - a. **What was your experience growing up in this space, both in general and in terms of your Iranian identity?**
3. **What is the immigration or migration history of your family/yourself?**
 - a. **Who was the first person to move (to the US, but CO specifically)?**
 - b. **Why did they choose to come here (to the US, CO specifically)?**
 - c. **Why do you choose to remain in Colorado?**
4. **How present are aspects of Iranian culture in your life?**
 - a. Language
 - b. Cultural celebrations
 - c. Food
 - d. Customs
 - e. Community
 - f. Religion
 - g. Etc
5. **How do you feel Iran/being Iranian is represented in mainstream U.S. narratives?**
 - a. **What do you like about this/don't like about this?**
 - b. **What would you like to change about this image/verbiage/etc?**
6. **How are/do historical events concerning Iran and the United States have an impact on your present life/self-understanding?**
 - a. **In what ways?**
7. **What, if any, is it like to be Iranian-American in a place with so few members of the Iranian diaspora, opposed to a place like LA, NY, DC, etc?**
 - a. **How do you feel as an Iranian living/going to school/having grown up in Boulder (or whatever location I'm in)?**
 - i. **Can you share a bit about what your experience has been like living here?**
8. **How involved are you with current events happening within Iran or that concern Iran?**
 - a. **How have movements of dissent, such as the current Woman, Life, Freedom movement, impacted you or your life?**

- i. How have your ideas of previous dissent movements shifted in light of Woman, Life, Freedom?
 - b. Do you think aspects of your physical positionality influence your perspectives on these movements?**
 - c. Do you feel a sense of solidarity with Iranians in Iran?**
 - i. How do you think your position in the diaspora influences this?
- 9. (Backup question if needed) If you could tell the world one thing about what it means to be Iranian/Iranian culture/your Iranian life, what would it be?
 - a. What do you wish people knew about Iranian culture/Iranians in the diaspora?

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