

Staying I(ra)n: Narrating Queer Identity from Within the Persian Closet

Shadee Abdi

As of 2012, there are still five countries that put people to death for their sexual orientation: Mauritania, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, Yemen, and Iran. The Islamic Republic of Iran not only denies the existence of gays and lesbians but paradoxically considers homosexuality a capital crime. By using an auto-ethnographic and performative writing approach, I use the literature about queer people of color to contextualize my story as an Iranian-American lesbian continuously struggling to come out of the closet. I also highlight the limited research regarding LGBTQ people in the Islamic Republic of Iran. I conclude this essay with implications of why performing (in)visible stories are pivotal in eradicating oppression and how my story serves to open the (closet) door for other queer Iranian people who have been forced to live inside of it.

Keywords: autoethnography, narrative trespass, lesbian, Iranian, coming out

I remember how my grandmother would take me to *Fereshteh* [Angel] street corner where my parents first met. It was here where she would recite stories of how my father would wink at my mother from across the road, and wait for her to smile back at him. This became their secret code, and a harmless game that lasted for months. My grandmother swore that this innocent flirtation spanned through the majority of summer '73, and that my father's persistence (and form-fitting pilot's uniform) eventually won my mother over. She had fallen. Hopeless. Desperate. My mother *knew* what love was.

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*"In Iran, we don't have homosexuals, like in your country."
— Mahmoud Ahmadinejad*

Homosexuality, Culture, and Faith

In recent years, many researchers have explored the intersections between LGBTQ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer) identity and intercultural and/or religious affiliation.¹²³⁴ However, despite this research, many factions of the LGBTQ community, such as queer people of color, are often left out of the conversation.⁵ This marginalization is also present within the predominantly white mainstream LGBTQ community, which leads to interlocking oppressions for LGBTQ individuals of color.⁶⁷ Leslie and MacNeill note that “within a racist, sexist, and heterosexist culture, living with plural oppressed identities can seem overwhelming,” and can therefore be difficult to cope with and manage.⁸ Some members of the dominant LGBTQ community seem reluctant to seriously consider “diversity” and to support various co-cultures and religions within their own population.⁹ Diverse perspectives are instead “embraced only when it is convenient and only when it is done in an innocuous

¹ Sandra L. Falkner and Michael L. Hecht, “The Negotiation of Closetable Identities: A Narrative Analysis of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgendered Queer Jewish Identity,” *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships* 28, no. 6 (2011): 829-847, doi: 10.1177/0265407510391338.

² Shannon J. Miller, “African-American Lesbian Identity Management and Identity Development in the Context of Family and Community,” *Journal of Homosexuality* 58, no. 4 (2011): 547-563, doi: 10.1080/00918369.2011.556937.

³ Katie A. McLaughlin, Mark L. Hatzenbuehler, and Katherine M. Keyes, “Responses to Discrimination and Psychiatric Disorders Among Black, Hispanic, Female, and Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Individuals,” *American Journal of Public Health* 100, no. 8 (2010): 1477-1484, doi: 10.2105/AJPH.2009.181586.

⁴ Andrew KT Yip, “Researching Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Christians and Muslims: Some Thematic Reflections,” *Sociological Research Online* 13, no. 1 (2008): 5, doi:10.5153/sro.1660.

⁵ Jin Haritaworn, Tamsila Tauqir, and Esra Erdem, “Gay Imperialism: Gender and Sexuality Discourse in the ‘War on Terror,’” *Out of Place: Interrogating Silences in Queerness/Raciality* (2008): 71.

⁶ Gary W. Harper, “A Journey Towards Liberation: Confronting Heterosexism and the Oppression of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgendered People,” *Community Psychology: In Pursuit of Liberation and Well-Being* (2005): 390.

⁷ Nina A. Nabors, et al., “Multiple Minority Group Oppression: Divided we Stand?” *Journal of the Gay and Lesbian Medical Association* 5, no. 3 (2001): 101, doi: 10.1023/A:1011652808415.

⁸ Dorian Leslie and Lauren MacNeill, “Double Positive: Lesbians and Race,” *Racism in the Lives of Women: Testimony, Theory, and Guides to Antiracist Practice*. New York: Haworth (1995): 161.

⁹ Chong-suk Han, “Introduction to the Special Issue on GLBTQ of Color,” *Journal of Gay & Lesbian Social Services* 21, no. 2-3 (2009): 109, doi: 10.1080/10538720902771826.

way.”¹⁰ Furthermore, even when acknowledged, oppressive stories are not necessarily formed on their own, but rather “shaped by forces and barriers which are not accidental or occasional and hence avoidable, but are systematically related to each other.”¹¹ The construction of identity within one’s own culture allows people “to utilize identity as a means to locate themselves in the world... [these] identities can provide a comforting resource to (re)stabilize individual and collective subjectivities.”¹² Therefore, exploring how culture, faith, and sexuality intersect within dominant discourses is pivotal to expanding research.¹³ Because there has been a noticeable lack of scholarly material addressing the issue of the queer Islamic personal perspective, special attention must be given to the growing number of LGBTQ individuals that face challenges navigating through the heteronormative interpretations of Islam.¹⁴

Homosexuality and Islam

Islam is the second largest, fastest growing religion in the world and Islamic interpretations of homosexuality have been generally unfavorable.¹⁵ This conflict often arises not because of Islamic beliefs, but because “‘queer Muslim’ sexual identity is inextricably linked to their politicized religious identity in everyday life.”¹⁶ Siraj maintains that, “homosexuality in Islam remains largely unexplored because the Qur’an, as a heteronormative source, has suppressed dialogue about the topic.”¹⁷ Moreover, because of stringent restrictions in Islamic teaching, queer Muslims “must choose to live an irreconcilable double identity, repress or deny their homosexual feelings, or turn their backs on Islam in order to be true to themselves.”¹⁸ Only recently have queer Muslims who have been confined to a ‘culture of (in)visibility,’ begun “speak[ing] out to re-claim their identity and to reconcile their faith with their sexuality.”¹⁹ Although there have been some accounts of homosexual identification in the Middle East,

¹⁰ Ibid., 110.

¹¹ Marilyn Fry, “Oppression,” *The Politics of Reality: Essays in Feminist Theory* (1983): 2.

¹² Brett St Louis, “ON ‘THE NECESSITY AND THE ‘IMPOSSIBILITY’ OF IDENTITIES’ The Politics and Ethics of ‘New Ethnicities’,” *Cultural Studies* 23, no. 4 (2009): 565, doi: 10.1080/09502380902951011.

¹³ Han, “Introduction,” 110.

¹⁴ Omar Minwalla, et al., “Identity Experience Among Progressive Gay Muslims in North America: A Qualitative Study within Al-Fatiha,” *Culture, Health & Sexuality* 7, no. 2 (2005): 114, doi: 10.1080/13691050412331321294.

¹⁵ Harry Knox and Sharon Groves, “World Religions and the Struggle for Equality,” <http://www.faithinamerica.org>, (May 29, 2012).

¹⁶ Yip, “Religion,” 284.

¹⁷ Asifa Siraj, “11 I On Being Homosexual and Muslim: Conflicts and Challenges,” *Islamic Masculinities* (2006): 202.

¹⁸ Michael S. Merry, “Should Educators Accommodate Intolerance? Mark Halstead, 1 Homosexuality, and the Islamic Case,” *Journal of Moral Education* 34, no. 1 (2005): 24, doi: 10.1080/03057240500049265.

¹⁹ Siraj, “On Being Homosexual,” 202.

North Africa, and other countries practicing Islam, these stories focus primarily on Arab cultural identities.²⁰ Consequently, there is a gap in research concerning accounts of queer identity within the Islamic Republic of Iran.

Homosexuality and Iran

While there are non-Muslim religious minorities in Iran (e.g., Armenian, Assyrian, Chaldeans, Jews, Zoroastrians, Bahais, and Iranian Christian converts), the Islamic Republic of Iran is a nation unquestionably dominated by Islam.²¹ Therefore, researchers must look for the suppressed voices associated with queer Iranian identity in relation to Islam. As of 2012, there are five countries that put people to death for their sexual orientation: Mauritania, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, Yemen, and Iran.²² The Islamic Republic of Iran not only denies the existence of gays and lesbians but paradoxically considers homosexuality a capital crime.²³ In 2007, former Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad completely repudiated the presence of homosexuals in Iran.²⁴ This position is mocked in *The New York Times*, when Fathi writes, “for a country that is said to have no homosexuality, Iran goes to great lengths to ban it.”²⁵ Furthermore, Ahmadinejad’s abhorrent denial of homosexuality undermines the legitimate “existence of homosexuals and cease[s] to officially recognize or announce [homosexuals] citizenship rights—a clear assertion of the governments position on the matter.”²⁶

Siraj emphasizes that the lack of Iranian and Islamic lesbian scholarship is due to the fact that “lesbianism in Islam is at its very infancy, as references to homosexuality in the Qur’an have been directed almost exclusively at male homosexuality.”²⁷ In the same vein, very limited accounts of queer Iranian perspectives are ever heard, and the few studies conducted in the United States and abroad are predominantly directed

²⁰Jason Ritchie, “HOW DO YOU SAY ‘COME OUT OF THE CLOSET’ IN ARABIC? Queer Activism and the Politics of Visibility in Israel-Palestine,” *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 16, no. 4 (2010): 557-575, doi: 10.1215/10642684-2010-004; Minwalla et al., “Identity Experience.”; Joseph Andoni Massad, “Re-orienting Desire: The Gay International and the Arab World,” *Public Culture* 14, no. 2 (2002): 361-385, doi: 10.1215/08992363-14-2-361.

²¹Eliz Sanasarian, *Religious Minorities in Iran*, Vol. 13. Cambridge University Press, 2000. xii.

²²Lucas Paoli Itaborahy, “State-sponsored Homophobia,” *ILGA, May* (2012).

²³Doug Ireland, “IRANIAN QUEER RAILROAD LAUNCHED---Gay Refugee Works to Speed Transit to Asylum-Willing Nations,” <http://direland.typepad.com>, (May 12, 2012).

²⁴Satyam Khanna, “Ahmadinejad Denies Existence of Gays in Iran,” *Think Progress*. (September 24, 2007)

²⁵Nazila Fathi, “Despite President's Denials, Gays Insist They Exist, If Quietly, in Iran,” *The New York Times*. (September 30, 2007).

²⁶Ashram Parsi, “Queer Iranians and Mr. Ahmadinejad in the Press,” *Trans. Ava. Cheraq Magazine*. (October 1, 2007).

²⁷Asifa Siraj, “Isolated, Invisible, and in the Closet: The Life Story of a Scottish Muslim Lesbian,” *Journal of Lesbian Studies* 15, no. 1 (2011): 100, doi: 10.1080/10894160.2010.490503.

toward male homosexual orientation.²⁸²⁹ Like most feminist scholarship, attempting to “battl[e] systemic inequities,” the uncovering and recovering of women’s voices becomes crucial.³⁰ In order to better understand the marginalization of queer Iranian women, this article focuses on Iranian lesbian identity.

Performing Narrative, Auto-Ethnography, and Silence

Personal narrative and the ability to perform narratives makes it possible for individuals to express stories that otherwise may never be told. Fisher proposes that narrative “is meaningful for persons in particular and in general, across communities as well as cultures, across time and place.”³¹ We frame our lives through narratives, but “we are each ‘colonized’ by the pre-existing narratives of our social worlds which drive the way we think of ourselves and the very way we live our lives.”³² Mair argues however, that these narratives “may be resisted and challenged by individuals or groups, leading to evolution in the ways we understand ourselves and our life options.”³³ Moreover, Langellier asserts that personal narratives “may restore and re-story experience outside the workings of context, power, and identity.”³⁴ In other words, “performative writing turns the personal into the political and the political into the personal.”³⁵ This is especially prevalent when voices of people of color are overshadowed, rewritten, and retold. Fisher’s metaphor of the *Homo Narran* is useful for understanding the narrative paradigm:

The idea of human beings as storytellers indicates the generic form of all symbol composition; it holds that symbols are created and communicated ultimately as stories are meant to give order to human experience and to induce others to dwell in them to establish ways of living in common, in communities in which there is sanction for the story that constitutes one’s life.³⁶

²⁸ Kate Korycki and Abouzar Nasirzadeh, “Desire Recast: Production of Gay Identity in Iran,” In *APSA 2011 Annual Meeting Paper*. 2011.

²⁹ Minwalla et al., “Identity Experience.”

³⁰ Jessica Valenti, “Who Stole Feminism?” *Thenation.com*. (September 29, 2010).

³¹ Walter R. Fisher, “Narration as a Human Communication Paradigm: The Case of Public Moral Argument,” *Communications Monographs* 51, no. 1 (1984): 8, doi: 10.1080/03637758409390180.

³² David Mair, “Fractured Narratives, Fractured Identities: Cross-Cultural Challenges to Essentialist Concepts of Gender and Sexuality,” *Psychology & Sexuality* 1, no. 2 (2010): 157, doi: 10.1080/19419899.2010.484597.

³³ *Ibid.*, 157.

³⁴ Kristin M. Langellier, “Personal Narrative, Performance, Performativity: Two or Three Things I Know for Sure,” *Text and Performance Quarterly* 19, no. 2 (1999): 135, doi: 10.1080/10462939909366255.

³⁵ Ronald J. Pelias, “Performative Writing as Scholarship: An Apology, an Argument, an Anecdote,” *Cultural Studies ↔ Critical Methodologies* 5, no. 4 (2005): 420, doi: 10.1177/1532708605279694.

³⁶ Fisher, “Narration,” 6.

Langellier extends Fisher's identification of the *homo narrans* by explaining, "personal narrative surrounds us and is persuasive, proliferating, multiplying, consolidating and dispersing" and aligns the narrator among the various marginalized and muted experiences of others.³⁷ Langellier also describes the importance of performing these personal narratives, by asserting that "the enhancement of experience and the constitution of identity in personal narrative depend upon our bodies as our access to and means of expression."³⁸ For this reason, performing personal narrative is fundamental to individuals and "communities who are left out of the privileges of dominant culture, those bodies without voice in the political sense."³⁹ The focus on performing personal narratives highlights the ways in which narrators tell stories and shapes language, identity, and experience.⁴⁰ Thus, the cultural stories we share about ourselves create new meanings for our lives and allow for better cross-cultural association.

My narrative is told specifically through the use of auto-ethnography. Ellis and Bochner discuss the benefits of this method:

Auto-ethnography shows struggle, passion, embodied life, and the collaborative creation of sense making in situations in which people have to cope with dire circumstances and loss of meaning. Auto-ethnography wants the reader to care, to feel, to empathize, and to do something, to act. It needs the researcher to be vulnerable and intimate. Intimacy is a way of being, a mode of caring, and it shouldn't be used as a vehicle to produce distanced theorizing.⁴¹

Ellis further describes auto-ethnography as "part *auto* or self and part *ethno* or culture."⁴² Auto-ethnography attempts to expose the intricacies of identity through life experience and bids to "reveal the fractures, sutures, and seams of self interacting with others in the context of researching lived experience."⁴³ Because of the cultural influence in my story, auto-ethnography serves as a fitting choice for understanding the bridge connecting the personal and the cultural in order to "make unfamiliar characteristics of the culture and/or identity familiar for insiders and outsiders."⁴⁴

The limited resources surrounding Iranian lesbian narrative create a space in

³⁷ Langellier, "Personal Narrative," 125.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 139.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 129.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 127.

⁴¹ Carolyn S. Ellis and Arthur P. Bochner, "Analyzing Analytic Autoethnography An Autopsy," *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* 35, no. 4 (2006): 433, doi: 10.1177/0891241606286979.

⁴² Carolyn S. Ellis, *The Ethnographic I: A Methodological Novel about Autoethnography*, Vol. 13. Rowman Altamira, 2004. 31.

⁴³ Tami Spry, "Performing Autoethnography: An Embodied Methodological Praxis," *Qualitative Inquiry* 7, no. 6 (2001): 712, doi: 10.1177/107780040100700605.

⁴⁴ Tony E. Adams and Stacy Holman Jones, "Telling Stories: Reflexivity, Queer Theory, and Autoethnography," *Cultural Studies ↔ Critical Methodologies* 11, no. 2 (2011): 110, doi: 10.1177/1532708611401329.

which the denial of voice becomes problematic and detrimental for the community. Romo-Carmona attributes this silencing to the fact that “historically, lesbians of color compartmentalize and prioritize the multiple levels of oppression they experienced rather than integrating them in an effort to end oppression.”⁴⁵ In a social scientific study measuring Iranian Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual (LGB) mental health, Miresghhi and Matsumoto discovered that when Iranian individuals recognized their culture as homophobic, higher levels of perceived stress were reported, thereby, linking suppressed narratives to anxiety between culture and autonomy.⁴⁶ Conversely, being able to voice these narratives may result in positive societal outcomes. McCall stresses the importance of individuals sharing their intersections by telling their stories, “personal narratives and single-group studies derive their strength from the partial crystallization of social relations in the identities of particular social groups.”⁴⁷ By acknowledging these untold narratives, individuals can uncover suppressed stories in order to overcome hierarchical opposing forces, which may promote liberation. For example “those who experience multiple layers of marginalization, such as lesbians of color, may be empowered by a newfound visibility within the LGBT community.”⁴⁸ Theorists suggest that through this process narrators are able to reconstruct their lives in order to make them more meaningful.⁴⁹

The silencing of lesbian and bisexual women of color has established a growing need to describe the lived lesbian experience and consequently requires scholars to look more closely at this phenomenon.⁵⁰ According to Gallor and Fassinger:

Literature on culture-specific perspectives regarding selected ethnic groups and the identity formation process for individuals within those groups suggests a need for more empirical research on the self-identification of ethnic minority lesbian and gay individuals and what social factors, if any, affect their identity development.⁵¹

Specific to Iranians and Iranian-Americans, the varying opinions regarding homosexuality between the western and non-western world creates dissonance for LGBTQ

⁴⁵ Mariana Romo-Carmona, “Lesbian Latinas: Organizational Efforts to End Oppression,” *Journal of Gay & Lesbian Social Services* 3, no. 2 (1995): 90, doi: 10.1300/J041v03n02_07.

⁴⁶ Sholeh I. Miresghhi and David Matsumoto, “Perceived Cultural Attitudes Toward Homosexuality and their Effects on Iranian and American Sexual Minorities,” *Cultural Diversity and Ethnic Minority Psychology* 14, no. 4 (2008): 372, doi: 10.1037/a0012920.

⁴⁷ Leslie McCall, “The Complexity of Intersectionality,” *Signs* 30, no. 3 (2005): 1781, doi: 10.1086/426800.

⁴⁸ Romo-Carmona, “Lesbian Latinas,” 90.

⁴⁹ Mair, “Fractured Narratives,” 156.

⁵⁰ Han, “Introduction,” 112.

⁵¹ Susanna M. Gallor and Ruth E. Fassinger, “Social Support, Ethnic Identity, and Sexual Identity of Lesbians and Gay Men,” *Journal of Gay & Lesbian Social Services* 22, no. 3 (2010): 289, doi: 10.1080/10538720903426404.

individuals living in the western world.⁵² Experiencing one's own culture as homophobic may lead to potentially damaging psychological effects. Therefore, Miresghhi and Matsumoto call for further scholarship on the Iranian LGBTQ population.⁵³ To advance this area of study, individuals must take initiative in sharing their stories. Therefore the necessity of telling untold narratives is paramount. Still, McCall stresses that the means of which they are told is nowhere as important as the telling itself, "whether the narrative is literary, historical, discursive, ideological, or autobiographical, it begins somewhere, and that beginning represents only one of many sides of a set of intersecting social relations."⁵⁴

In *Theatre of the Oppressed*, Boal speaks to the idea of invading "the stage" with reality.⁵⁵ This "symbolic trespass" is described as freeing oneself from the forces of oppression:

If we do not trespass, if we do not go beyond our cultural norms, our state of oppression, the limits imposed upon us, even the law itself (which should be transformed) – if we do not trespass in this we can never be free. To free ourselves is to trespass, and to transform. It is through a creation of the new that that which has not yet existed begins to exist. To free yourself is to trespass. To trespass is to exist. To free ourselves is to exist. To free yourself is to exist.⁵⁶

I frame this piece then, as a *narrative trespass*. The uncovering of my story serves to free me from the forces of oppression that continue to silence my body and my voice. This *narrative trespass* allows me to break free of the dominant discourses that have continued to deny my identity and have instead attempted to tell my story for me. By sharing our own untold stories, we can attempt to reclaim our identities from behind those violent limitations. Thus, the primary concern of this piece is to expose an (in)visible narrative by exploring my own account as an Iranian-American lesbian, oscillating between my religious Iranian culture and my American identity. This unique perspective, though rarely heard, may open (closet) doors that can help destroy the rigid barriers causing the muting of those who have stories to tell. I am optimistic that through *narrative trespasses*, through the sharing of my story, that other queer Iranians, and those who have been historically silenced, marginalized, and Othered, may attempt to break free. It is my hope to finally exist.

Defining Home

While I grew up in a few small towns across Southern California, my heart and home belong to the city of Irvine. However, when someone asks me where I am from, the

⁵² Miresghhi and Matsumoto, "Perceived Cultural Attitudes," 372.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 372.

⁵⁴ McCall, "The Complexity," 1781-82.

⁵⁵ Augusto Boal, *Theater of the Oppressed*, Pluto Press, 2000. xxi.

⁵⁶ Boal, *Theater of the Oppressed*, xxi.

answer is as immediate as it is descriptive: “I’m from Iran.” Iran has been written on me since birth and has been a permanent fixture of who I am. Unlike my parents and my sister, I was not born in the Islamic Republic of Iran, though I have been given the opportunity to visit on three separate occasions. I carry with me images of magnificent castles of fallen kings, sapphire-encrusted mosques, freshly snow-capped mountains, desolate expanses of desert, and hefty amounts of smog that cover the streets of Tehran. My mind still wanders to the thought of enjoying freshly grilled kabobs delicately wrapped in pita bread in front of Azadi Tower, and my stomach yearns as I recall the sensuous fragrance of rosewater from my grandmother’s secret rollet⁵⁷ recipe. These thoughts instantly take me to the place my parents called *home*. Yet, unfortunately, because of who I am, I will never be allowed to do the same.

A Backwards Journey of Self-Discovery and (In)Visibility

So *this* is what all the hype is about! I’m glowing. I’m smitten. I’m walking on air and I have permanent butterflies in the pit of my stomach. I have fallen in love for the first time. I mean head-over-heels, crazy heartbeats, Sunday brunches, walks in the park, feeling more like me when I am with her than without her, kind of love. Yet, with this joyous feeling also comes incredible fear. This amazing discovery comes laden with guilt and shame because for the first time in my life, I have actually contemplated telling my mother why I have been so happy for the past couple of months.

Until recently, I haven’t considered sharing this part of my life with her. Instead, I have made excuses. Excuse after excuse. I justify all the reasons that make it impossible for me to share one of the most important aspects of my life, something so pivotal in shaping who I have become as a person. And everyday, I hate my circumstance a little bit more. I hate my culture a little bit more. I hate myself just a little bit more. I am scared to death of what would happen if I came out to her. I am afraid of being a disappointment. I am terrified that she will be heartbroken the same way she was when my sister, Neda, married her security guard husband, Rahim, a man who would never be good enough for her daughter, *the doctor*. Mostly, I am scared that she’ll stop loving me.

So instead, I resolve to keep quiet, to live a private life, and to be spared of the incessant nagging associated with marriage-related inquiries from my extended family in Iran. I am tired of the constant tormenting from my distant cousins that I find the “perfect” husband. The persistent reminders that I am getting older and that I should just pick a good man while I’m still young and fertile, fatigue me. Then there is the tiresome, *well-intentioned*, reaffirmation’s from my favorite aunt, Sheyda, that “When the time is right, a boy will certainly want you. You’re such a pretty girl, Shadee!” I continue to tolerate these conversations for fear of the alternative, being isolated and ostracized within my family, and my culture. I am unwilling to tell my aunts and uncles, my cousins, or my mother, that I am gay. I cannot tell them that when I envision

⁵⁷ Rollet is a Persian rolled cake.

my ideal future, I am living somewhere on the pacific coast with my wife, our two children, and multiple adopted puppies. I cannot share this dream with my family because the reality is that I will probably lose them. Most Iranians are not exposed to the intricacies of orientation, or given the opportunity to express their own sexual identities. In our culture, gay people simply do not exist. And if they do, the outcome usually rests at the end of a descended noose. Instead of opening that gigantic can of worms, my response is always “*Enshallah* [God willing]” which seems to subdue the masses. Until the next phone call.

I decide to stick to my guns until my mother begins to notice changes in my personality. She sees a positive evolution, and immediately recognizes my upward mentality as the penultimate symptom of young love. Her thick Persian accent, which after twenty-nine years of living in America has yet to fade, cuts across the room.

“Vy are you always esmiling all de time now?” My mother curiously asks me.

“I got an A on my rhetoric exam! Obviously I’m going to be happy, mom!” I sing back to her, knowing full well that she does not know what rhetoric means. Still, she is looking at me with knowing eyes and pauses. She’s questioning herself before she decides to start speaking again.

“What ees hees name?”

“Huh? What’s whose name?” I smirk, slightly caught off guard by her question. She knows this smile though, and I come to realize through this exchange that I don’t give my mother nearly enough credit. Of course she’s been here before. I reflect back to my first visit to Iran, the summer of ’95, just after my sixth birthday. I remember how my grandmother would take me to *Fereshteh* [Angel] street corner where my parents first met. It was here where she would recite stories of how my father would wink at my mother from across the road, and wait for her to smile back at him. This became their secret code, and a harmless game that lasted for months. My grandmother swore that this innocent flirtation spanned through the majority of summer ’73, and that my father’s persistence (and form-fitting pilot’s uniform) eventually won my mother over. She had fallen. Hopeless. Desperate. My mother *knew* what love was.

Understanding her familiarity with first-love syndrome, I notice that my mother wants to play an expedited version of ‘Twenty Questions,’ and I as I try to make my escape, she stops me in my tracks. “Don’t pelay games vit me! Your moder knows dat you are seeing eh boy, Shadee *Joon* [dear]. You cannot hide eet from me!” My mother plays dirty. A rare sound escapes her as she allows herself to laugh. She continues, “Just remember, Iranian gerls don’t misbehave. You have to get married, and den you have de fun. Especially eef he is Muslim, den of course he vant you to be vergin. White men don’t care, but dey prefer vergin too. I vatch *Sexy City*, I know.”

“That’s disgusting, mother!”

“Vat is deesgusting? Sex ees not deesgusting, Shadee *Joon*. You just have to vait until you are married, and den you vil know... Anyvay... What ees hees name?” She repeats. This time, she is serious.

“Trust me. There is no *be*.” I calmly state before finally retreating to my room. Well, I justify to myself, at least I’m not a *total* liar.

“Punishment for lesbianism (Mosahqeh) is one hundred lashes for each party... If the act of lesbianism is repeated three times and punishment is enforced each time, [a] death sentence will be issued the fourth time.”

- Iranian Penal Code; 129:131

My sister, Neda and I are sitting inside of Paradise Perks, a local coffee shop, where I am anxiously playing with my phone, typing a quick text message to my friend Bonnie stating urgently, “I’m going to do it. I’m just going to tell her.” My sister is sipping her hot English breakfast tea, and is recounting stories of my two young nephews, whom I only get to see about three times a year. I laugh when she informs me that her two and a half year-old, Sina, can actually count to ten now, until I feel a sudden vibration at my side. I check my screen and find one new message.

[Jan 3, 2012 8:44 PM:]

Bonnie– “Oh my god, are you sure?”

I secretly type back before my sister finishes one of her fifteen anecdotes.

[Jan 3, 2012 8:49 PM:]

Shadee - “Yeah. I have to. She’s my sister. I have to be honest. I’m tired of lying to her.”

I receive a response within seconds.

[Jan 3, 2012 8:49 PM:]

Bonnie- “Good luck. Let me know what happens!”

As I move to put my phone away, I realize Neda hasn’t even registered that I haven’t been reacting to her stories, or that my palms are sweating and that I cannot get my legs to stop trembling. I finally stop her mid-sentence because I simply cannot make it through another adorable tale about the trials and tribulations surrounding pre-school naptime.

“I have to tell you something!” I yell, to my own surprise.

“I almost spilled my tea, asshole! What?!” She shoots back at me. Her choice of words make me laugh – I always forget that she is 11 years my senior. Her eyes are insisting I say whatever is so important that I would shriek in a crowded coffee shop. I’m suddenly timid. This is new.

“Is there anything I could ever do to make you not love me?” I ask her. I don’t dare look her in the eye, for fear of her response. She takes a second before giving an audible gasp.

“Oh my god! You had an abortion!” She hisses at me, leaning in closer. “Shadee, aren’t you in graduate school? Aren’t you supposed to be smart? Know to use protection?! How could you be so stupid?!”

“Uh. False! I did not have abortion! Jesus. Where did that come from?” I’m annoyed at her accusation. She ignores my question.

“Are you dating a black guy? Mom is going to kill you! Persians don’t marry black guys, Shadee. Good luck bringing him home!” She seems content with this scenario and lets out a chuckle to signify the ridiculous nature of her inquisition.

“Neda! I’m not doing either of those things! I’m being serious. Is there anything I could ever do to make you not love me?”

“I mean, maybe I wouldn’t love you if you murdered someone or something,” she jokes before I give her a look signifying that I am not in the mood for games. “What is it, Shadee? I don’t have all day.”

“I’m. I mean... I like...” I have practiced this conversation in my head ten thousand times and yet no words are coming to me. I’ve drawn a blank at the most inopportune time and I find my lips are now conveniently glued to the rim of my empty coffee mug.

“Uh...hello?” She pushes.

I slam the cup down frantically, hoping that somehow this action would provide me courage. “I really, really need you to still love me, because if you don’t then I have no one and I’m scared, and I love you and I don’t want you to not let me see the babies anymore!” I say in one breath. My voice seems to be running twelve steps ahead of my brain.

“What the fuck? Shadee! What did you do?!” She’s angry now.

“Nothing. I mean I didn’t *do* anything, necessarily.” She’s lost her good spirits too. It’s now or never and so I sigh, “I’m gay.” And with that, neither of us moves. After a few seconds I foster the courage to meet her gaze and when I finally do, I notice that behind her thick-rimmed glasses, she has tears in her eyes.

“No. You’re not.” She finally speaks, and is firmer and more serious than I have ever seen her.

“Yes. I am. I would never lie to you about something like this,” I assure her. I watch as she carefully sets her cup of tea on the table beside her purse. She is thinking about what to say next. She is thinking about not letting those drops fall from her eyelids. She is wary.

“No. You’re not... Persians aren’t gay. No.”

“Stop saying no! I’m gay, Neda.” I anxiously inspect the crowded coffee shop when I feel people watching me. I’m frantic now. They all must be wondering what’s going on, and what has made two grown women cause a scene big enough to require them to put down their blueberry scones.

“You’re not a lesbian, Shadee. Don’t be stupid. You’re young. You don’t even know what any of this stuff means.” Her voice is lighter now, softer, and she touches my shoulder to put me at ease. “It’s probably just a phase. Sometimes I think girls are pretty too. It’s not a big deal.”

“It’s not a phase! Why would I come out to you if this were a phase? Why would I choose this life for myself? I’m not psychotic!” I take a second to catch my breath, “Do you think I want to live a life where I can’t bring the person I love home to meet

my mother? Do you think I want to be ridiculed and persecuted by my family and my culture? Do you think I want to sit in this coffee shop, midday, so fucking *petrified* to tell my sister because I think she won't love me anymore?!" I'm crying hard now and I see her do the same. "I'm terrified of everything, Neda! I'm afraid of what could happen to me if anyone in Iran were to find out. I'm afraid of losing you, losing the kids, losing a place to live... losing mom." We're both confused, and frustrated, and wanting answers, but are simultaneously silent. We stay that way for at least ten minutes. While I wait for Neda to say something, I text Bonnie and let her know that this was not the reaction I had hoped for. All I want is for my sister to acknowledge that this is not a choice, and that I am doing the hardest thing I have ever had to do. "I'm so afraid." Minutes pass until she finally responds to me. To me, though, it feels like time has stood still.

"Of course I still love you, Shadee." I smile for the first time since we've sat down and I feel a sense of relief as a giant 500-pound weight lifts from my shoulders. This means that there is hope. There is a light at the end of the tunnel. "But don't tell mom." The weight falls back on top of me; only this time, I am crushed.

"And Allah has made for you mates (and companions) of your own nature. And made for you out of them sons and daughters and grandchildren and provided for you sustenance of the best: will they then believe in vain things and be ungrateful for Allah's favors?"

- Holy Quran 16:72

I cannot look at my mother without a pang of guilt coursing through my body. It is a familiar feeling, but best described as a knife slowly piercing the inside of your skin and tauntingly stabbing you whenever it feels like you have had an impure thought. She smiles at me and hands me a glass of freshly squeezed orange juice, and a cup of cardamom scented tea. I have to decide which to drink first, and while it seems unnecessary to indulge in both, I don't dare refuse my Iranian mother's first of many tea offerings. I decide, while waiting for the hot tea to cool down, to go for the orange juice. I sneak a glance at my mother who smiles at my calculated choice. I haven't seen her this content in quite some time. Not since before her divorce from my father... eight years ago today. I know that is only part of the reason why she remains so jaded, the other part has to do with Neda moving across the state to marry the only man my mother hates more than my father.

My mother is particularly cheery this morning, but I know that she's putting on a show for me, wanting me to believe that everything is okay in her secluded world. She is also excited because it is a week before my birthday, and one of the few times a year where she seems to be truly joyful. Each year, in ritualistic fashion, she pretends that she cannot remember the exact date I was born. She keeps up the rouse until the minute before midnight, where I 'conveniently' find the surprise she's been hiding from me all week. This happens every year, and each year I pretend that I don't catch on. I do this because my mother loves me. She loves me so much that I never had to ques-

tion where my next meal would come from. She loves me enough to have stood in line on Christmas Eve to get me that brand new Cabbage Patch Snacktime Doll, *Sadie*, just to have something to put under the tree. She loves me so much that I never had to wonder why I only had one parent to love me.

I appreciate the practiced silence between us until the thickness of her voice courses through my veins and jolts me back to reality. My body reacts before my brain registers what she is saying.

“So, how is ehschool?”

I don’t have a chance to respond before she speaks again,
“Vy don’t you have eh boyfriend, Shadee Jan?”

“The West says that the marriage of homosexuals should be allowed under the human rights charter, however, we [Iranian officials] think it is sexual immorality and a disease.”

- Dr. Mohammad Javad Larijani, Secretary-General of the Iranian High Council for Human Rights

I am sixteen, and I have become aware that I am staring at the adorable brunette who sits in the back of Mr. McDaniel’s *‘Introduction to Theatre’* course. I am sixteen, when I realize that the feelings I have for that brunette are more than gaping expressions of friendship. I am sixteen when I realize that I am *fucked*.

I have known for a while that I was different and that there had to be an explanation for not wanting to ever be within kissing distance of the opposite sex. Boys are disgusting. I wish my boyfriend, Steve, would get the hint that the idea of sticking my tongue in his mouth is enough to have me running to nearest restroom to expel my lunch. But, I am playing the game, and playing it well. And I use the opportunity, mid French kiss, to try and put the puzzle pieces together. I recall times in my past where signs of my Sapphic identity should have been more evident.

I remember my sister’s voice in my head when she would burst into hysterics as she recounted the stories of my childhood experimentations, “You used to go around the department store and grab all the mannequins’ boobs!”

“I did not!” I would immediately yell back! I don’t know if it was to assure her, or to convince myself that there hadn’t been such foreshadowing.

“Yes you did! You were such a little lesbo!” She’d smugly toss back at me.

There was also the year where my sister had asked what I wanted for Christmas and I had *begged* for the original Rosie O’Donnell talking doll, instead of a Malibu Barbie (with optional pink convertible... and Ken).

I think of time when I had tried to convince my neighbor, Annabel, to “marry” me so that we could run away from home and create a life outside of Orange County’s conservative walls, and far from the restrictive views of my Iranian family. We were nine. She said no. Even now, I remember vividly, how brutal the mock rejection felt in my soul. Sometimes, I allow my imagination to get the best of me, and I wonder what would have happened if, even in jest, she had accepted my proposal. Would

we have had a fake ceremony amid the *West Valencia* apartment homes in Fullerton, California? Would we have stood together in the gazebo directly across from the jungle gym in the communal playground or made rings made of crabgrass or exchanged vows promising to love each other as long as we both were home by curfew? I imagine what would have happened had she said yes. But mostly, I am glad that she didn't.

"Death penalty offenses in Iran include blasphemy; apostasy; adultery; prostitution; homosexuality; and plotting to overthrow the Islamic regime, as well as murder, rape, and robbery."

- Iranian Law

I am twelve years old when I first recognize that my heart has skipped a beat for another woman. My eighth grade English teacher, Jennifer Callaway, has officially taken over my emotional psyche and has a cold, hard grip on my emotions. She has no idea that when I am sitting in her class, practicing past-tense verbs, all I am really thinking about is how perfect her teeth are when she smiles, and how the freckles on her face create a crescent shape that easily form a symmetrical pattern around her dimples. I notice her and it becomes part of the reason English quickly skyrockets to my favorite subject in school. And though I am still a child, I hope that she notices me and thinks that I am somehow worthy of the extra attention I so deeply crave. I just want to be a good student. *Justified*. I just want someone to look up to. *Justified*. It's normal for a young girl to be captivated by someone she respects and admires. *Justified*. And... she's really, really pretty. *Shit*.

"Do ye commit lewdness such as no people in creation (ever) committed before you? "For ye practice your lusts on men in preference to women: ye are indeed a people transgressing beyond bounds."

- Holy Quran 7:80-81

Telling My Story

My story is derived from years of questioning. Years of wondering whether the pictures on my wall adorning Sara Ramirez and a half-naked Britney Spears would ever give me away. Years of worrying whether my mother would accidentally open the wrong drawer of the dresser next to my bed and discover stacks of books decorated with titles like "Butch/Femme Inside Lesbian Gender" or "I Can't Think Straight." This burden centers my narrative in the deeply rooted beliefs of my culture and religion. And while I will always have a place in my heart for the beauty, family values, and love that come with being an Iranian, I have admittedly resented living a life of fear within the binary of visibility and (in)visibility. I have lived as both the individual and amongst the collective and I have hidden myself inside of this Persian closet for as long as I can remember.

In this essay I utilize narrative inquiry, defined by Connelly and Clandinin as "the

study of experience as story” that is used by people who “shape their daily lives by stories of who they and others are.”⁵⁸ And it is by reliving my therapeutic and revealing journey of self-discovery through the lens of my Islamic/Iranian culture that has allowed me to do so. Like Fox, “I depend on personal narratives about gay life to enrich a history of gay culture that has been denied to me throughout most of my education.”⁵⁹ Though by never having had the opportunity to read a story like my own, I have been obligated to search for pieces that were similar, but never quite close enough. I feel accountable for opening that door for someone else. By sharing my story, I hope to have created a space for others to be heard. That responsibility falls on those who have access to visibility and possession of social reality to create a pathway for others to follow.

I never thought I would muster up enough courage to step out into the real world and utter the words “I’m gay” until my mind and my body could no longer perform that silence, until I *had* to trespass. I have now come out to everyone in my life excluding my immediate family (with the exception of my sister). And though I have grown up, I have also created a space allowing me to safely oscillate between my two worlds. This is hard. It is both physically and emotionally exhausting. But, “being certain people is *work*.”⁶⁰ Like Calafell, my experiences have led me to “embrace the Otherness in myself,” which has made me long for stories of other marginalized bodies that have been silenced and forced to live on the hyphens of their dueling identities.⁶¹ We must share these narratives because we “believe they do something in the world to create a little knowledge, a little humanity, a little room to live and move in and around the constraints and heartbreaks of culture and categories, identities and ideologies.”⁶² Calafell articulates this point by affirming the “importance of the narrative voice to give flesh to an intersectional perspective to identity.”⁶³ She continues that “narrative does not allow the nuances of intersectionality to be flattened by dry and meaningless numbers that quickly erase the humanness and complexity of people and their ordinary but extraordinary experiences.”⁶⁴ I frequently question my place in this world, *especially*, as a queer woman of color. As an Other. However, it is through

⁵⁸ Jean D. Clandinin and F. Michael Connelly, “Narrative Inquiry.” *Handbook of Complementary Methods in Education Research*, ed. Green, Judith L., Gregory Camilli, Patricia B. Elmore, and Elizabeth Grace. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2006. 477.

⁵⁹ Ragan Fox, “Tales of a Fighting Bobcat: An “Auto-archaeology” of Gay Identity Formation and Maintenance,” *Text and Performance Quarterly* 30, no. 2 (2010): 125. doi: 10.080/10462931003650153.

⁶⁰ Tony E. Adams and Stacy Holman Jones, “Performing Identity, Critical Reflexivity, and Community: The Hopeful Work of Studying Ourselves and Others,” *Liminalities* 9.2. (2013): 2.

⁶¹ Bernadette M. Calafell, “(I)dentities: Considering Accountability, Reflexivity, and Intersectionality in the I and the We,” *Liminalities* 9.2. (2013): 7.

⁶² Adams and Jones, “Telling Stories,” 109.

⁶³ Bernadette M. Calafell, “When Will We all Matter?: Exploring Race, Pedagogy, and Sustained Hope for the Academy,” *The Sage Handbook of Communication and Instruction* (2010): 355.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 355.

scholarship, discourse, and *narrative trespass* that I have been able to grow in my own journey of finding voice and visibility.

Spry emphasizes that by “interpreting the auto-ethnographic text, readers feel/sense the fractures in their own communicative lives,” therefore readers must be moved emotionally and critically.⁶⁵ In the same vein, “performative writing often evokes identification and empathic responses. It creates a space where others might see themselves.”⁶⁷ Ellis stresses that, “as social scientists, we will not know if others' intimate experiences are similar or different until we offer our own stories and pay attention to how others respond, just as we do in everyday life.”⁶⁸ It is our responsibility to continue to perform and write about our identities and our Othered selves, because by sharing accounts that have been historically marginalized, narrators are given a stage and an opportunity to defy the oppressive. It is through story, auto-ethnography, personal narrative, and *narrative trespass*, that individuals may take control of their position within social constructs that have insofar told our stories for us.

Juxtaposing the Iranian narrative with my own challenges the narrative fidelity of both, creating a paradox within myself. Questioning Iranian/Islamic beliefs through my personal experiences creates a foundation upon which research may be expanded. Similar to many performance scholars who have written their stories for the world, my work is meant to offer a viewpoint that has been historically marginalized, prompting in-depth research into the lives of those who are generally (in)visible, oppressed, and voiceless. So, like Ellis, I can only hope that my story “is unique enough to provide comparisons, yet universal enough to evoke identification.”⁶⁹

⁶⁵ Spry, “Performing Autoethnography,” 712.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 714.

⁶⁷ Pelias, “Performative Writing,” 419.

⁶⁸ Carolyn Ellis, “THERE ARE SURVIVORS”: Telling a Story of Sudden Death,” *The Sociological Quarterly* 34, no. 4 (1993): 725, doi: 10.1111/j.1533-8525.1993.tb00114.x.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 725.

A Letter for Someday

Mom,

First off, I love you. I love you so much that I can't imagine a life without you in it, without you meeting my children, without you meeting my partner. You've been the most amazing person in the world to me, because you've played the role of my mother, my father, and my best friend. I've known for years that we've grown apart. I've felt it, and I know you have too. We've fought about it. About why I've disappeared, why I've been distant, why I've been so unbelievably angry at everything... and why I've taken that out on you. The version of me that you see is not how others know me. I'm shadee, I'm eternally happy, I'm positive, and I believe in the good of the world. But, now I avoid being home because it's time away from being myself- if that makes sense. And I know that you don't understand that, you can't. And I know that it's not fair to you, and that you miss your daughter. But I can't live like this anymore. I can't breathe anymore. I'm hiding behind a mask of anger, because I miss you. I miss my mom. I miss the relationship we used to have. And I know you miss me too. You're clear about how I've changed, and how I remind you more of daddy every day. So you deserve honesty, even if that means that I lose you. But I have faith that you will still love me. I believe that you won't turn away from your daughter, because a mother wouldn't do that. Would she?

Mom, I'm gay.

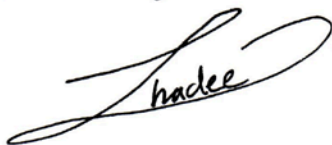
You may have stopped reading at this point, and I'd understand that. I get that you come from a different world. That you've grown up knowing and hearing conflicting things, and that you've learned the same backwards lessons time and time again. But I also know

that you've adapted. You've been here for thirty years, and I know that you've changed. I have seen you grow. And I need you to know that this doesn't change who I am, mom. I am smart. I am kind. I am "normal." I'm still **your daughter**. The only difference is that I don't want a husband. I never have, and you've known that. On some level, you've known there's always been something different about me. That I have never colored inside of the lines. I have a life that you haven't been a part of, and I want so badly for you to be in it. I want you to be at my wedding. I want you to be the best grandmother to my children. I want to introduce you to the people I fall in love with. And I did fall in love once, mom. And I'm so, so sorry that you weren't part of that journey with me. I'm so sorry that you couldn't experience the joy of watching your daughter fall in love for the first time. You knew I was happy... happier than you had ever seen me. And I was. I was unbelievably happy. And then I got my heart broken. **Shattered**. And you weren't there for that either. You saw my pain. You heard my sobs. You thought you knew and that you understood. But really, you knew nothing. I didn't let you.

I want things to change. I need you to love me. I need you to be a part of this journey with me, because it's one of the most important aspects of my life and I need my mother by my side. I'm the same person, I promise. Actually, that's a lie... I am better.

I love you more than anything in my life. I want nothing more than for you to be a part of it.

Your daughter,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Shadee". The signature is written in black ink on a white background.



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