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NEGOTIATING ISLAM: DEBATING AUTHORITY AND ETHNORELIGIOUS AUTHENTICITY AMONG IRANIAN AMERICANS IN THE U.S. SOUTH

Erfan Saidi Moqadam
University of Kentucky, erfansaidi@gmail.com
Author ORCID Identifier:

https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6452-2615
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Erfan Saidi Moqadam, Student

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DISSERTATION

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the
College of Arts and Sciences
at the University of Kentucky

By

Erfan Saidi Moqadam

Lexington, Kentucky

Director: Dr. Kristin V. Monroe, Associate Professor of Anthropology

Lexington, Kentucky

2022

https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6452-2615

ABSTRACT OF DISSERTATION

NEGOTIATING ISLAM: DEBATING AUTHORITY AND ETHNORELIGIOUS AUTHENTICITY AMONG IRANIAN AMERICANS IN THE U.S. SOUTH

This dissertation examines the flexibility of Quranic exegesis in accommodating self-defined Muslims' agency in the predominantly Christian society of the United States. This is a project to study Islam not from the perspective of an explicit ideology articulated by clerics, intellectuals, scholars and elites on scriptural texts, but rather one that focuses on Muslims' readings of scripture and practices of Islam(s), reconstructed in their lived experiences. During fourteen months of ethnographic research in four cities in urban and rural areas in the U.S. South with Iranian Muslims, interlocutors were found to be engaged in a particular kind of relationship with the Quran, a relationship untethered from the jurisprudence (*fiqh*) of the Iranian clerics that interpret the texts. These individuals cultivated a kind of non-jurisprudential agency that engaged in a process of logical reasoning and exploratory understandings of the Quran, which merged their identity with the dominant discourse of the U.S. citizen.

These non-clerical understandings of the Quran and Islamic teachings occurred in a context where Iranian-American Muslims use Islam to reckon their identity with their transnational circumstances. This dissertation argues that the ordinary Islam(s) of these Iranian Muslims can be characterized by their ability to accommodate religiosity in response to the multiple temporalities of their existence in a diasporic milieu. The Iranian-Muslim community is encompassed by multiple transnational (non)Muslim communities, which have created a diasporic condition that has allowed them to build a community not by creating a homogenous whole, but rather by developing a complex web of cross-cutting bonds that unite through heterogeneities, differences, and disagreement.

KEYWORDS: Migration, Ethnoreligious Identity, Racialization, Islam, Transnationality

Erfan Saidi Moqadam

April 13, 2022

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By
Erfan Saidi Moqadam

Dr. Kristin V. Monroe
Director of Dissertation

Dr. Kristin V. Monroe
Director of Graduate Studies

April 13, 2022
Date

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1.1 Theoretical Layout through ethnographic vignettes

The Heydar Center is the only Islamic center in Winstonburg[1] where Iranians and other Shi'a Muslims gather for Shi'i[2] ritual, ceremonies, and weekly Quran reading sessions. I visited the Center for the weekly Quran sessions, but on a particular day in September 2019, I took part in the *Ashura* ritual. Ashura is the most important religious holiday among Shi'a Muslims; it is a ten-day long commemoration of the third Shi'i Imam's martyrdom in the month of Muharram, the first of the Islamic calendar. The ritual included a sermon, congregational chanting and chest-beating, and the distribution of votive foods, which are prepared to fulfil a vow to the third Shi'i Imam. The sermon was delivered in English by an African-American cleric. According to Taher, one of my key interlocutors, the cleric's parents became Muslim during Malcolm X's era, went to Iran after the Revolution, and took him with them. He went to high school in Iran and went to Qom Seminary for Islamic education. He graduated from the seminary and became a Shi'i cleric with the typical, official clothing: a turban and a cloak.

The main theme of the cleric's sermon was about how Muslims need to maintain their religion in the U.S. He stated:

> "if we build community without that firm foundation, we will be shaky in our beliefs. People are not firm when it comes to practicing in a place which is *dar al-Kufr* (Land of Infidelity). There is a lot of struggles for maintaining a Muslim identity when you are surrounded by non-Muslims. In a lot of ways, the *kufr* (infidelity) and identity are not mutually exclusive. In this society, the cultural identity is very contagious, but spiritual identity or Islamic identity is firm based on what God says, not *kufr*."

[1] All names of the local individuals and places are fictitious and anonymized.
[2] Shi'i is the adjective form, while Shi'a is the noun.

The cleric's address exemplified the typical manner of Shi'i clerics who bring theological justification from the Quran or generate jurisprudential explanations to determine the most appropriate way of practicing Islam in given circumstances. First, he talked about how people are not firm in maintaining their Muslim identity. Second, he recognized this was due to their residence in a dominantly Christian society. And finally, by referring to the U.S. as *dar al-Kufr* (Land of Infidelity), he provided instruction for practicing Islam in such circumstances.

In this monologue, clerics, shaykh, ayatollah, etc., what I call the intermediaries, are those qualified to explain "correct" Islamic practices, while practitioners are passive listeners. However, during my field work, I observed that this lineal relationship had changed. The way the cleric entitled the U.S. as the Land of Infidelity, and delivered guidelines for such a situation, did not represent the concern of people with whom I did my research. For instance, during my interview with Vahid, a man in his thirties, I asked about the cleric's statement regarding the Land of Infidelity. Vahid's first reaction was to ask me about the meaning of *kafar* (infidel). I simply said, "a person who is a non-believer." He said, "no, *kafar* means the one who covers the *haqq* (truth)." He then asked me, "do they cover the truth more here [in the U.S.], or in Iran?" He continued by discussing that there are many who are not Muslim, but do not "cover the truth"; therefore, they are not considered "infidels." He concluded that the reason a cleric makes such a comment is that "our *fiqh* (jurisprudence) has become grandiose." Throughout my fieldwork, I observed that pious Iranian Muslims often disregard this monopoly of exegetical authority of intermediaries, who often attempt to construe the words of God for them. Vahid's argument against the "grandiose *fiqh*" inspired me to call Iranian-

American Muslims' actions a *non-jurisprudential practice* against the exegetical authority of the clerics.

In this dissertation, I explore how this top-down relationship of clerical authority has been circumvented by the way people engage with the Quran to shape a community based on solidarity and differentiation, inclusion and exclusion, and negotiation and conflict. Although, in many cases in Sunnism and Shi'ism, Islamic jurisprudence (*fiqh*) is mainly used for legal systems in Muslim societies, Iranian Shi'i jurisprudence has gone beyond the law and legal system by intervening into every aspect of Iranians lives (Nakissa 2015, 401). I recognize that the Shi'i institution of clerics, compared to their Sunni counterparts, is more flexible in terms of compatibility with contemporary issues. An outstanding example of the practicality of Shi'i jurisprudence is transgender sex-reassignment surgery, which was considered *haram* and sinful before Ayatollah Khomeini's *fatwa* in 1980, is today considered *halal* (religiously permissible) according to the Islamic sharia.[3] However, in this dissertation, the authority that I am referring to is the power dynamics of the institution of clerics that was established following the formulation of the doctrine of *velayat-e faqih*, "Guardianship of the Jurist" by Ayatollah Khomeini. According to this theory, followed by Iranian Shi'i theologians since the 1979 Revolution, qualified Shi'a *faqih*s (jurists) who have the most knowledge about Islamic law are legitimate leaders of society and must be emulated by followers. These clerics, in most cases grand Ayatollahs, are *marja'*, "worthy of being emulated." They provide spiritual guidance for pious Muslims in their everyday life (Beeman 2008, 123-4).

[3] In his fatwa Ayatollah Khomeini stated: "In the Name of God. Sex-change operation is not prohibited in Sharia law if reliable doctors recommend it. Inshallah you will be safe and hopefully the people whom you had mentioned might take care of your situation" (Alipour 2017, 97).

However, since the 1979 Revolution in Iran, when Shi'i clerics' power became institutionalized, Islamic requirements that were once suggested by different *marja* for their followers turned into societal requirements to be obeyed by the entire population, such as mandatory hijab in Iran. In my research, I found that many Iranian-American Muslims have moved away from clerical leadership and instead promote practices of self-investigation as alternative sources of spiritual guidance in their lives.

I define "non-jurisprudential Islamic practice" as ways of reading and interpreting the Quran through forms of analytical reasoning that do not involve intermediaries' jurisprudential interpretations. Although the term jurisprudence might remind the readers of legal and judicial subjects, "non-jurisprudential" does not refer to any specific legal concept. The reason I prefer non-jurisprudential over non-clerical is because the congregants have often looked beyond clerics' authority, generated by Islamic jurisprudence and not the clerics themselves, in as much as they are still invited to deliver speeches. Drawing on these practices of self-reliance in interpreting Islamic teachings and practices, I have found various layers of interaction through which Iranian Muslims produce holistic interconnections with their ethnoreligious identity across transnational contexts, their temporal pasts and homeland.

Weekly Quranic sessions were one of the central sites through which these interconnections were shaped and debated. In one session in Simonstown (a pseudonym)[4], Iranian-American Muslims were discussing a Quranic verse (29: 46) about the "People of the Book," a term used in Islam to refer to the believers in the Quran. Although it is not clarified explicitly in Chapter 29, the people of the Book in the Quran

[4] Simonstown is a fictitious name for one of the field sites, which is one of the largest urban areas in the South.

is a combination of four different groups including Jews, Christians, *Sabians* (a religious group in West Asia[5]), and Magians, which according to religious scholars and historians are Zoroastrians, a faith of the ancient Iranians prior to Islam. While they were talking about the meaning of this verse, no one specifically knew who these "people" really were.

Mohsen, a man in his fifties, who has a PhD in one of the medical subdisciplines, said, "this keeps it very open. It does not say Jewish or Christian or whatever. It says the 'People of the book.' I do not think we know who they are. Except for those two religions, there might be many more that we do not know about." Mohsen mentioned, for example, that Buddhists might be People of the Book. Dr. Naser, a man in his late forties who was a medical doctor, joined the discussion by saying, "I think we cannot read the mind of a person. I had a friend who was Hindu and when I pressed her on the subject that her religion has many Gods. She responded with 'yeah but we believe in one God.' People made up these to reach to God." Naser continued:

> "All the people I see as my patients they say I have faith and God is going to cure me. They are Christians, Jews, Hindus. I think as Muslims you just have to accept that other people can believe in God. But we have prophet Mohamad who told us there is a certain way to go to God, you want a shortcut to God, this is the way to do it. But still, you know the deep believe in Allah is in everybody. I think the beauty of the Qur'an is that it is not specific. You can have multiple interpretation that all make sense. And that all benefit you."

[5] In this dissertation, I use the term West Asia instead of the "Middle East." During my fieldwork, participant-observations, interviews, daily conversations, and any interactions that I have had with Iranians, in addition to my own lived experience in Iran and the U.S., I rarely heard Iranians identify themselves as "Middle Eastern," especially when they are speaking Farsi. Therefore, whenever, I use the term "Middle East," I put it in quotation marks to emphasize it is being used by others. The most common term for West Asia I noticed during the fieldwork were "our region," or simply, "there."

Naser's interpretation of the word "people" from the verse, aligned with other participants' understandings of the word, shows how "certain language-games lose some of their importance, while others become important" (Wittgenstein 1972, 66). In order to comprehend the way in which meanings occur in language or people's interactions, Wittgenstein notes that the "language-game which children are taught needs no justification; attempts at justification need to be rejected" (Wittgenstein 1958, 200). By means of such games, children are taught their native language; these games cannot be described as incomplete parts of a language. Rather, they must be regarded "as languages complete in themselves, as complete systems of human communication" (Wittgenstein 1972, 81). Similarly, Berger and Luckmann also point out these two levels of knowledge by comparing "the man in the street and the philosopher." They assert the man in the street understands a world that is "real" to him in different degrees of confidence, even though "the philosopher raises questions about the ultimate statuses of both this 'reality' and this 'knowledge'" (Berger and Luckmann 1991, 13). Although these levels of knowledge are analyzed in terms of philosophical inquiries, the focus of this dissertation is on the use of practice as a complete form of knowledge in the lives of individuals.

In my ethnographic analysis, I engage Wittgenstein's notion of the "language-game" to grasp the meanings of cultural practices. The way Naser and Mohsen reflected on who the People of the Book are shows how these two were involved in the language-games that created the meanings of "people" based on their understandings in the U.S. context, rather than looking for specification of the concept in the Quran. Specifically, Mohsen brought up the theme that anybody who believes in God can potentially be a part of the People of the Book. Naser shifted the language-game and expanded further on

Mohsen's view by saying "it is not important who the People of the Book are, it is important that they believe in God." Sister Asma [6], who wore a complete hijab (not showing hair, chest, or neck) as a sign of piety, commented on this discussion:

> "For me, when I think of Allah I have to think before, somebody I know, somebody I love. But it has to be somebody like a human. I have to think of the Prophet, for me to connect. This is exactly like the Jesus's God. For me in my mind, saying Allah is just a word, it has no meaning for me. Because everybody has different Allah, they are following something, they have different Allah in their mind. When I think of Allah, [it is] my personal way to follow the God of the prophet Mohamad. Other people use it in another way. My Allah is for me."

Here, Sister Asma's statement recalled the Christian idea that Jesus is the human embodiment of God, and thus her need to imagine a human embodiment of God, which she asserted could be the Prophet of Islam, is a totally different language-game that is implicitly disputed in the text.

Negar, a woman in her fifties who is a university professor of physics and the organizer of the Quran sessions, also wore a complete hijab, and she reacted to Sister Asma's comment by telling a story about a time when she was boarding a plane in the U.S. "A big guy, with a long beard in a very aggressive tone" asked her, "what kind of God do you believe in?" Negar said, "I was scared and thought maybe he was terrified because I was wearing hijab. I just answer quickly, the God of Jesus. He was shocked but could not say anything else and left."

Adnan, a Pakistani man in his fifties, jumped in: "Actually this is a very interesting point we are saying that the book is right. However, in this case we are saying that the

[6] I used the same prefix my interlocutors used for Asma. They did not use "sister" for other Iranian or even the American women who converted to Islam. However, they used the term "sister" for Asma who was from Pakistan and Ruqia who was from Iraq. This term might emphasize the Islamic sisterhood they have in common, though they are from different nationalities.

book is changed." Adnan reminded the participants of the Quran's greatest miracle, believed to remain unchanged over time. He passionately continued by saying, "Jesus is a messenger, is not God. Mohamad is messenger is not Allah. Allah is the only Allah. This is it." Adnan was referring to Asma's personal understanding and the way she imagined God. For Adnan, the way she described her understanding reflected the idea of "Jesus as the incarnation of God" that many Christians believe. Therefore, he sarcastically commented that the Quran "is changed," referring to what Sister Asma said about her image of Allah, who "has to be somebody like a human." Adnan referred to the verse in which this is explicitly clarified: "do not exaggerate in your religion nor speak (lies) against Allah … Jesus, son of Mary, was only a messenger of Allah … Allah is only One Allah; far be It from His glory that He should have a son" (4:171). Adnan reminded everyone that imagining a human embodiment of God is heretical and against the Quran.

Sister Asma's account of her understanding of God from the Quran, and her expression about "everybody has a different Allah," is in sharp contrast with the most fundamental belief of Islam. Everyone can become a Muslim just by saying the most famous Arabic sentence in Islam, *La ilaha illallah*, which means that "there is no God except Allah," what Muslims recite in their daily prayer. This group of Muslim Americans also define the People of the Book broadly to include even Hindu or Buddhists, according to Mohsen and Dr. Naser. When Sister Ruqia, an Iraqi woman in her sixties with a complete hijab, tried to point out that Buddhists or Hindus could not be included as the People of the Book, being non-believers according to the Quran, a debate was sparked between her and Negar, who argued that "the Quran is for the Prophet's era. However, if we believe that the Quran is for all times, it does not seem to be fair if we

exclude groups of people who worship God in their own way." Sister Ruqia however, insisted on her understanding about the People of the Book, and they moved on and continued reading the next verses.

These types of discussions over a term or concept align with what Carol Greenhouse calls "the *desire* for communal harmony" (Greenhouse 1989, 26). The negotiation over the meanings of the People of the Book have served as a communal bond for Iranian-American Muslims in Simonstown. Although they discussed multiple meanings of the term, finding one single, true meaning was not their goal. These discussions prevented them from "engaging in disputes or other sorts of confrontations that would create winners and losers or—more generally—authorities and constituents" (Greenhouse 1989, 105) because these understandings could not have established "*a* distinctive relationship—a relationship of power to truth" in the non-Muslim context (Asad [1986] 2009, 22). Drawing on Greenhouse's hypothesis that asserts "individual differences in interpreting scripture can be accommodated under the concept of differential spiritual maturity, within limits, and collective acceptance of Jesus" (Greenhouse 1989), I found that Iranian Muslims, along with other Muslim fellows in their community, retained their community under the collective acceptance of God though they had different exegetical understandings.

The Iranian-Muslim community in the U.S. reveals different potentials. Berger and Luckmann emphasize the role of the social system in which individuals and groups interact. They point out that "one cannot remain a Muslim outside the *umma* of Islam," … and thus "religion requires a religious community" (Berger and Luckmann 1991, 178). The fact that Iranians are outside of the *umma* of Islam does not mean they cannot remain

Muslim. However, they do reconstruct a religious community in interaction with the larger Muslim community in a predominantly Christian society.

These types of discussions about specific concepts occurred in almost every session during my observations and provided themes for further investigation during in-depth interviews. By unpacking these themes in my fieldnotes, I explore how Iranian Americans spontaneously expanded their ideas and understandings of the Quran, and thus their understandings of being Muslim in general. This type of practice on the one hand revealed a broad range of heterogenous narratives of Islam; on the other hand, it demonstrated a sense of withdrawing from the authority of intermediaries and their exegetical role. This cooperation in reconstructing a relationship with the Quran, Islamic concepts, and practices is an "insistent egalitarianism, that, not only is human authority inappropriate, it is also illegitimate" (Greenhouse 1989, 26). By this, I mean that although the meanings are debated and contested, they are acquired by emancipation from clerical authority, which has enabled Iranian Americans to develop an egalitarian investigation of meanings. The search is egalitarian in the sense that none of the exegeses have authoritarian approval.

Iranian-American Muslims *re*constructed their relationship with the founding text of Islam. The individuals first *de*constructed the clerical *either*/*or* rationale, which distinguishes the "correct" form of practicing Islam from the "incorrect" one, then they built up a new relationship with their faith based on the "counter logic of the *both*/*and*" to include any given meaning that is "correct" for the practitioner (Wilson and Dissanayake 1996, 5). In the clerical logic there is *either* one rigid understanding of the Quranic concepts *or* misunderstandings of true meanings. For instance, as Adnan sarcastically

mentioned, one must *either* commit to the idea that Jesus was the son of Mary *or* hold the heretical belief that Jesus is the human embodiment of God. Conversely, during the sessions I observed, *both* the idea that viewing the Prophet as a human helped Sister Asma envision God *and* Adnan's sarcastic reminder about the heresy were heard, contested, and debated. Although during their discussions they disputed each other's views, their debates never turned into a conflict. The fact that they strategically participated in different language-games, through which they changed the *either/or* narrative of intermediaries, inspired me to coin the term "dethroned Islams" for this practice.

In the dissertation, I draw on two key concepts in developing my theoretical model of dethroned Islams. First, I have borrowed Abdul Hamid el-Zein's term, "*islams*," a phenomenological approach via which anthropologists can study lived experience of "local Islams" in order to overcome the problem of assuming Islam, theologically, as a "unified religious tradition" (el-Zein 1977, 227-242)[7]. El-Zein argues that "Islam," as well as "religion," does not exist as a "thing" or an entity with inherent meaning. This idea resonates with the practice of negotiating the meanings of Quranic verses that I observed during Iranian Americans' Quran sessions. Contrary to the theologians and the Shi'i clerics, who claim to provide the "eternal meaning of Islam," my interlocutors demonstrated various expressions of "*islams*" that go beyond a pure and well-defined

[7] Shahab Ahmed criticizes the approach of multiple local "islams" because, according to him, it "under-determines and under-delimits the constitution of the term 'Islam' and effectively deems the word itself meaningless as a signifier of any specific phenomenon—and hence leads to the abandonment of 'Islam' as an analytical category" (Ahmed 2016, 116). Ahmed attempts to introduce a conceptualization of Islam in which there is coherence between "*Islam as theoretical object or analytical category and Islam as real historical phenomenon*" (Ahmed 2016, 7). As an ethnographer, I highlight the ways in which Islam is understood and practiced based on my interlocutors' accounts and experiences. The ways in which my interlocutors understand and even produce history in relation to their lived realities is meaningful for the purpose of this dissertation. In short, I am concerned with the cultural performance of these categories.

essence. Following el-Zein, I separate "the Islam of the Ulama," which provides "the incontestable and formal explications of religious meaning," from the islams of the people, which serve an existential function, in order to reconcile Muslim identity with a predominantly Christian society (el-Zein 1977, 243). The model of dethroned Islams not only emphasizes the heterogeneity of religious meanings, but it also underscores the way in which exegetical authority of the elite is challenged by mundane understandings.

Second, I engage Werbner's theoretical modeling of "collective identities," wherein the research indicates, "the fact that a person has heterogeneous identities, a multiplicity of identities, does not imply contradiction, ambivalence or a lack of commitment, because identities matter *in context*" (Werbner 2002, 267). Following this theory, I recognize synchronic dynamics of identity through which Iranian Americans situationally and selectively maintain collective identities that do not come into conflict with practice. For example, being a Muslim, drinking alcohol or shaking hands with an opposite-sex individual, and wearing hijab are not necessarily contradictory in different contexts for different individuals. This theoretical model of collective identities helped me to explore how manifestations of multilayered islams exist side by side in a community, and even situationally within the same person.

In order to explain how Iranian Americans shift between these identities, I draw on the concept of "strategic alterity," by which people use different rationalizations to shift "between strategic assertion of inclusion and exclusion (or the marking and unmarking of 'selves' and 'others')" (Kingsolver 2001, 110). For instance, when Taher disregarded the fact that turkey breast was non-halal, he must have strategically shifted the Islamic principle toward the reasoning that if he had not bought the turkey breast because it was

not marked as halal, the store might have thrown it away, which is wasteful and ignorant. Most interesting was that the person who determined that he could shift the principle was Taher himself rather than a cleric.

1.2 Project Aims

In this dissertation, I aim to show the workings of a diasporic context alongside the lived realities of Muslims in the U.S., which include individuals' understandings of the Quran without intermediary interpreters and reconstructing Muslim identities that are compatible with host settings. This is a diasporic context, surrounded by a Christian-dominant society, multiple transnational Muslim communities, and independence from the centralized institutional religious authority of the homeland. In analyzing both diasporic impacts and practitioners' agency, I aim to present a holistic perspective about the discursivity of identity to help better understand the social, political, and religious conditions of the Iranian community in the U.S.

During this process, I draw on "negotiated truth and reality" (Clarke 2007, 63-68), "the *desire* for communal harmony" (Greenhouse 1989), and the Wittgensteinian notion of the "language-game" (Wittgenstein 1958). I do this in order to develop an argument about how Iranian Muslims in the U.S. *de*construct the monopoly of jurisprudential Islam of intermediaries, who often propose an unnegotiated Islamic reality through a top-down, linear relationship of leader-follower. Instead, these individuals have *re*constructed a religiosity via which new meanings and related subjectivities are created through debates and negotiations, dissociated from authority.

I explore the quality of Islamiosity[8] experienced by Iranian Muslims in the U.S., especially the quality that I call "dethroned Islam(s)." This analytical approach broadens our understandings of Islam beyond those often proposed by Islamic clerics and scholars. This framework draws on the complex role of Muslims' existentiality and agency in understanding sacred texts, practicing Islam, and more broadly, reconstructing[9] their Muslim identities in the U.S. By existentiality, I refer to the lived realities of Muslims, which involve not a pedantic scripturalism of what Islam *should* be but instead focus on what Muslims *actually do* in practice. Dethroned Islam(s), as I use the term, has two meanings: first, it is a religious practice unbeholden to the dominant clerical and jurisprudential (*fiqhi*) articulations of the foundational scriptural sources, and second, it is a way of thinking about Islam as a never finished and fixed construction, but as something always in the process of being defined.

For instance, on one of the Shi'a holidays at the Heydar Center of Winstonburg, the cleric preached about the term *vali* (guardian), and the fact that in transnational settings dominated by non-Muslims, Muslims must be cautious that non-Muslims do not become their guardians. In Islamic tradition, guardianship is the right of the Prophet of Islam over Muslims; however, it is disputed among Muslims that anyone has such an authoritative right, except the Prophet. Shi'a Muslims believe, in addition to the Prophet, the Twelve Shi'a Imams also have the same right of Guardianship. The cleric asserted:

> "In another instance, when you buy meat, if the butcher is Muslim, that meat is Halal. However, if you buy meat from Walmart or Costco, their word is not trustable for us, even if it says Halal on the label. If we are not

[8] Islamiosity is their strong and insistent sense of belonging toward Islam despite being in a non-Muslim society.

[9] I use "reconstruction" because I found that Iranian Muslims exonerate their Islamic identities from those of the clerics. I refer only to those who expressed to or were observed by me during my fieldwork in my fieldsites.

> meticulous, they will take control over us and become our *vali* (guardian). Imagine we become dependent to Costco to buy our Halal meat and do not buy our meat from Muslim butcheries and groceries. And one day Costco does not provide Halal meat anymore, and those Muslim groceries who sell it more expensively are closed because we did not support them. Then, we will have the same misery that we had twenty years ago when we first came here. We used to find a farm in cold weather and slaughter lamb to provide Halal meat for our family. There were many who wanted their children to eat some protein, so they were telling their children, 'say *besmellah* (in the name of God), and eat the meat,' to make it Halal. This is like when you pray and then make *wozu*[10] *afterward*. Another point about this verse is that it is discussing guardianship. That means you should never let *these folks* become your guardian because they do not care about what we care about. They don't have our concerns."

The cleric's sermon was based on Islamic jurisprudence: the intermediaries warn Muslims about the necessity of supporting the community butcher; otherwise, they cannot trust the local store to provide halal meat. They may become dependent on "these folks" (non-Muslim locals), and thus these same folks become their guardians, which is against the Quranic teachings.

I heard a different viewpoint from one of my interlocutors during the interview after this sermon. Nima, a man in his late thirties who was Ph.D. student in one of the science disciplines at the University of Winstonburg, said, "if we are supposed to doubt these chain stores, we also have to doubt butcheries in Iran which is an Islamic society. They also used slaughtering machines that were imported from non-Muslim countries. And also imported frozen meat from non-Muslim countries as well. Why did we trust them then?" Obviously, Nima's reasoning was different than that of the cleric at the Heydar Center, who had just warned the audience, not bothering to explain his rigid view about non-halal meat. Although Nima was among the audience, his comment shows he simply disregarded the clerical advice and did not take it seriously as a religious duty. His

[10] Islamic act of washing parts of body before the prayer.

description shows that he had delved even deeper than the cleric into the issue of eating halal meat, bringing up more argument against the cleric's claim by contending that if Muslims were supposed to avoid the local store, they must also raise as much doubt about the meat consumed in Iran, a Muslim country.

I also noticed on different occasions that Taher bought turkey breast (non-halal) and was happy that he found a good deal after Thanksgiving. When I asked him about the fact that it was not halal, he responded, "it is just the breast. Turkey breast does not have that much vein to keep the blood after slaughtering." This is an example that shows how three different pious Muslims, who were at the same event, engaged in different language-games to describe their practices as Islamic, what I call dethroned Islam(s). Because of this, I analyze the cultural practice of dethroned Islam(s) used by the Iranian-Muslim community.

This theoretical approach resonates with Samuli Schielke's study on the "ambivalence, suspicions, and often open hostility" of the Islamic practice of *mulids* within the same community, which not only shows the "contested nature of *mulids*" but also explores "contested meanings of religion, modernity, class, social order, and moral subjectivity" (Schielke 2012, 4-7). I draw on Schielke's argument to show that though people take part in performing an Islamic practice, they do not present a unanimous form of religiosity, as shown in the case of halal meat among these three members of the community.

This ambivalence, the idea of dethroned Islam(s), can be analyzed as an ongoing process, not only in the community, but also as it shifts in different contexts even through the same individual. This is evident int the way Taher was fond of a pizza place that uses

halal meat; however, when he found a good deal on turkey breast, he disregarded that fact that it was non-halal. These different understandings of what is Islamic provide support for the plural usage of the word: "*Islams*" rather than Islam (el-Zein 1974, 10e; 1977; McLoughlin 2007; Marranci 2008). My intention is to provide an analytical framework for further theoretical understanding that includes quotidian reasoning, like the way Taher argued about non-halal meat: "turkey breast does not have that much vein to keep the blood after slaughtering."

My understanding of Islam is also important in the way that it takes these quotidian reasonings seriously, accounting for the way people actively put their understandings in conversation with jurisprudential reasonings of the intermediaries to produce meanings that are consequential in relation to lived realities. This differential theoretical tool requires the additional term of "dethroned," which is a metaphor for the authority of intermediaries that are often downplayed by quotidian Muslims. I use this theoretical model to describe how Iranian Muslims in the U.S. create such a heterogenous reasoning by *re*attaching[11] their ideas to the founding text of Islam—the Quran.

1.2.1 On Politics

One of the inevitable issues that the individuals in my study avoided explicitly was politics. They approached politics with different strategies, while oscillating among multiple horizons. For instance, as I mentioned above in the case of "oppressed" Yemeni women and children, who were bombed with U.S. military equipment by Saudi Arabia,

[11] I use the term "*re*attaching," to best describe the theoretical model of dethroned Islam through which these people detached themselves from meanings provided by the intermediaries and then *re*attached to the Quran and Islamic practices, without any intermediary interpreter, and produce new meanings.

they referred to the Quranic verse to make religious, moral evaluations. This action was about morality and how they articulated themselves as Muslims based on certain kinds of moral principles that were also political. However, they avoided explicitly discussing politics. For instance, when some of the discussions of the Quran sessions came to topics that were part of Iran's civic law and highly political (e.g., hijab), they used the strategy of focusing less on social and political aspects and more on discussing moral principles and textual bases. In the specific case of hijab, they found words connoted as moral principles for veiling, counted how many times they were mentioned in the Quran, and focused on it in the context of the chapter and its temporal horizon. In the majority of cases, they undertook radically different exegesis than with Islamic law in Iran.

Although they avoid criticizing the Islamic Republic narratives of Islam, their attempt of finding different answers from the Quran based on their own understandings, far from the intermediaries, is political act. It is political in the sense that this strategy shifted when they approached issues in the U.S. context. For instance, the week when the Iranian General was assassinated by U.S. forces, their reaction during the Quran session was silence. Only at the end of the session, the topic of the final prayer, always about different topics about each other wellness, was changed. During this time, the organizer of the session asked for God to redress the situation. It was after the assassination that the Islamic Republic promised a "harsh revenge," and people were stressed about the U.S.'s response. This assassination was among one of the most important achievements of the Trump administration, according to local American Trump supporters. However, the Iranians said no word about it; they just asked for prayer and demanded that God calm the situation that "we all know."

Despite the silence about U.S. political issues, I have observed how Iranian individuals use "strategic alterity" to articulate their identity in accordance with U.S. politics. For instance, once I went to downtown Winstonburg with Taher, and we were talking to American locals in a restaurant. I noticed he simply introduced himself as a Turkish national. When I asked him later about the reason he said, "in their eyes (American locals) we all look the same—all of us are the Middle Eastern. Being Iranian sounds awkward in such situation." He experienced that local people do not notice much difference between Iranian, Turkish, Syrian etc., so he strategically altered his identity to deal with the politics of the setting. Mahmood Mamdani considers this "Culture Talk," which is highly politicized, and contrary to culture studied by anthropologists, it is not "face-to-face, intimate, local, and *lived*" (Mamdani 2005, 17). According to Mamdani, "Culture Talk assumes that every culture has a tangible essence that defines it, and it then explains politics as a consequence of that essence" (Mamdani 2005, 17). My interlocutors' strategies showed that they were aware of the tangible essence of being Muslim, and its consequential politics in the U.S., and they pursued these fluid politics to stray far from narratives of *good* or *bad* Muslim.

1.2.2 Main inquiries

In this dissertation I seek to understand how some Iranian Muslims in the United States have developed understandings of the Quran that are sometimes contradictory. During fieldwork, I observed Iranian diasporans debating Quranic concepts, which I argue represent a process to resolve the perceived tension of Muslim existence in the host society, not removed from an imagined past in their homeland. Data provided by my

interlocutors suggests that they strategically adapt Quranic ideas in order to render them compatible with their lived realities in the U.S. For instance, the way they consider U.S. racialization and then position themselves, evidenced by how they shift race from corporeal characteristics to social class by discussing "oppressed people." These attempts at reconciliation between their Quranic perceptions and everyday lives will be illustrated in Chapter 4 of this dissertation.

In addition, I also analyze the ways some Iranian Muslims in the U.S. actively alter conventional accounts of Shi'i Islam, solidified by clerics and promulgated by the Islamic Republic. Rather than taking bare political action to oppose the Islamic Republic's model of Islam, I will show how some Iranian Muslims in the United States construct alternatives to the jurisprudential narratives that are the basis for the Islamic Republic's civic law and constitution. By looking at some of the ways Iranian-Muslim diasporans have debated and explored the meanings of Quranic verses, we can see that they are counteracting the Islamic Republic's doctrine, rather than getting involved in bare political arguments against the Islamic Republic. Through this process of counteraction, they defuse the doctrinal, antagonistic exegesis of the Quran.

I depict the ways in which Iranian Muslims perform dethroned Islams. This process will be different from various "interpretations" of the Quran and hadith proposed by Islamic clerics, scholars, and authorities because their debate is rooted in historical sources to offer a "true" Islam. Dethroned Islams place importance on the *processes of debating*, rather than a search for the "true" interpretation by providing historical evidence. I analyze the quality of the Iranian diasporans' dethroned Islams through the *logical reasoning* they have acquired from their lived realities in the U.S., employed

while debating Quranic concepts. I develop an argument based on the theoretical model of dethroned Islams to analyze the ways that Iranian Muslims can shift the paradigm from jurisprudential reasoning to the ongoing *processes of debating,* reflecting their transnational existence in the U.S.

1.3 Relevant literature

1.3.1 Anthropology of Islam

In this section, I discuss the discursivity of Islamic practices that have framed my analysis of the Iranian-Muslim community in the U.S. First, Asad's notion of discursive tradition is useful for analyzing Islam as a practice that cannot be defined as a universal religion, and it illustrates how problematic it is to conceptualize Islam as the object of *anthropological* study, disregarding the Orientalist bias of assuming such a fixed image of Islam. For example, during my fieldwork, I noticed that people's reconciliation of certain practices mentioned in the founding texts of Islam was a strategy to cope with the Western biases that assume there exists a "correct/incorrect," "true/false," "good/bad" Islam (Said 2012; Varisco 2005; Mamdani 2005; Shryock 2010). This process of debating centers around the fact that "it is (not) mentioned in the Quran."

In the following chapters, I will elaborate on Asad's (1986) suggestion that "an anthropology of Islam" should be approached in the way that Muslims do. Asad indicates, "a practice is Islamic because it is authorized by the discursive traditions of Islam, and is so taught to Muslims—whether by an '*alim*, a *khatib*, a Sufi *shaykh*, or an untutored parent" (Asad [1986] 2009, 21). In the following chapters, I explore how my interlocutors engage in this ongoing process of rational reasonings to symbolize their

existence in relation to their Quranic exegesis. I will explore how Iranian Americans challenge the Islam that has been "taught to Muslims," following dethroned Islams debated in an ongoing process (Asad [1986] 2009, 21).

Brinkley Messick is among the anthropologists who have followed Asad's suggestions, and he began his anthropology in a way that Muslims do, by examining their involvement with sacred texts. This has also inspired my theoretical thought about the Iranian-Muslim community in this investigation. Messick's investigations of the flexibility and interpretability of sacred scriptures has provided me with an open structure for articulating the constitution of authority. Although Messick's ethnographic description shows the existence of hierarchical relations of interpretations of the text, in his studies these interpretations are only offered by imams, governors, muftis, judges, and respected scholars. So, while the flexibility of meanings that Messick studied are central to my analysis, I examine how the diasporic circumstances have shifted the interpretive authority of the imams, muftis, and clerics to ordinary Muslims.

Samuli Schielke criticized Asad's concentration on orthodoxy in Islamic traditions. Asad argued that wherever Muslims have had the power to regulate *correct* practices and exclude *incorrect* ones, they could establish and claim orthodoxy. That is to say, Muslims could establish "*a* distinctive relationship—a relationship of power to truth" (Asad [1986] 2009, 22). Resonating with el-Zein's idea of "local *islams*," Schielke also argues there is "too much Islam in the anthropology of Islam," which makes it impossible to talk about orthodoxy. He suggests that "we may have to talk a little less about traditions, discourses and powers and a little more about the existential and pragmatic sensibilities of living a life in a complex world" (Schielke 2010, 1). His suggestion has had a major impact in

forming my theoretical framework for exploring how people have paid less attention to traditions, orthodoxy, and authority, and instead they have focused more on existential and pragmatic explanations sought in religious practices.

Specifically, Schielke suggests innovative themes for anthropological studies of Islam that address the contemporary issues in Muslim societies. "Ambiguity" is the central theme to his arguments because it can "smooth out inconsistencies," and "reconcile contradiction" (Schielke 2010, 2009, 2008). While he studies festive traditions among Muslims in Egypt, the focus is people's "production, contestation, and transformations in and around festive practice" (Schielke 2012, 7). Focusing on the "contestation and dynamics of festive culture," he accentuates "the political nature of festivity" that epitomizes the struggles over religion and society in general (Schielke 2012, 7). Similar to Schielke's studies, I have also found that people take action to produce new meanings and find the "correct" interpretation during the Quran sessions, but rather the politics of the contested discussions—the politics of heterogenous meanings that relate religion to modernity, social order, moral subjectivity, and even to racialization.

Another contribution to studies of a 'flexible' Islam is Loeffler's *Islam in Practice* (1988). I found Loeffler's detailed ethnographic accounts concerned with religion not only as a valuable set of doctrines, norms, and legal precepts, but also as a way in which individuals interact with their environment. More specifically, his descriptions about what kinds of people use which concepts for what purposes under which conditions are useful to reflect on Iranian Americans' practices of Islam in the U.S. I follow Loeffler's inclusive theoretical view that the "voice of the atheist and that of the preacher are

equally well heard," which has helped me to develop an all-encompassing analytical framework to examine the characteristics of Iranian Americans' lived realities.

Varisco takes a different view of the anthropological study of Islam by analyzing the rhetoric through which Islam has been represented as a religion from anthropological and sociological perspectives. Varisco addresses the view of one Islam versus multiple "islams," elaborated by el-Zein (1977), by discussing his ethnographic experience with Yemeni tribesmen who conceived their faith as practicing true Islam, not as one of the numerous ways of practicing. In accordance with el-Zein, Varisco states that the anthropologist's task is to define "as just another islam is invariably seen by the practitioner as an attempt to do Islam" (Varisco 2005, 149). I found Varisco's discussion about this tendency among non-Muslim and Muslims, "with a mainstreaming political correctness," to stand against the idea that "there is no monolithic Islam," very useful in explaining the myth of bipolarization. He recognized those Muslims whose main concern is to define a single, "true" Islam, and those who view Islam as a threat that needs to be "a homogenous target" (Varisco 2005, 149). The former represents clerical homogenization of Islam and the latter dominant anti-Muslim discourse.

I also employ Gabriele Marranci's theoretical approach, in which he explains "the role that emotions and feelings have on the informant's discourse of Islam" as well as the power that the surrounding environment has in its definition" (Marranci 2008, 86). In doing so, he indicates, ethnographers should concentrate their attention not only to Islam as religion, but also to development of "emotional empathy" with their target community (Marranci 2008, 86). He argues, in crisis - the "Rushdie Affair, Palestinian Intifada, Danish Cartoons Affair" – Muslims, regardless of their internal sectarianism and not

based on any religious dogma, but because of the "shared, and fundamental, basic ethos," become united, "ummah," and emotionally react to the environment (Marranci 2008, 114). I further his analytical approach to discuss how Iranian Americans both immerse themselves in the united *umma* and in sectarian differences in social contexts.

1.3.2 Diasporic Religion

"Diasporic Religions" is a term in Tweed's ethnography, *Our Lady of the Exile* (1997), about Cuban diaspora in Miami, and it is used by anthropologists working on religion in diaspora (Beliso-De Jesús 2015; Johnson 2007; Matory 2005; Wirtz 2007). It is a concept that captures the ways in which religions in diaspora actively seek creative solutions to grapple with the spatial distance from one's homeland. While governments attempt to institutionalize religions, diasporic religion goes beyond the boundaries and authorities of the nation-state (Boyarin and Boyarin 2002; Matory 2005). Yet, memory of the constructed past, and the desire to build an imagined future, contribute to the symbolization of a fluid present. That is, one can practice a religion outside the spatial context of the past, while simultaneously imagining oneself within that earlier context. For instance, I found Iranian Americans using various kinds of online platforms to contact their family in Iran, at the time of any rituals, constantly useing short videos of the recorded congregational chanting from Iran. They often played these during their present rituals in transnational contexts, wherein they also listened to Pakistani or Iraqi chanting. The result is another entity: diasporic religion.

Paul Johnson's concept of "multiple diasporic horizons" (2007) is useful to analyze how Iranians navigate these different temporalities of memory of the past, realities of the

present, and desire for the future. Horizon is the term that Johnson uses for the imagined temporalities that are created in the diasporic context. In the case of Iranian Americans, I will use this concept to examine how members of the Iranian-Muslim diaspora have come to identify themselves as Muslim American together with other Arab nationalities, Pakistanis, etc.; how they reconcile the Islamic Republic's Islamiosity with the sense of nationhood of the pre-revolutionary Kingdom to build unified diasporic community for the future; and how they exclude themselves from the "*bad* Middle Eastern," the focal point of American stereotypes, by racializing other Muslim Americans through ethnohistorical imagining.

In order to explore how these horizons have been shaped, I pay particular attention to everyday conversations surrounding religious practices. For instance, Iranian Americans did not have special gatherings to discuss the politics of Iran or the authority of clerics; however, many of these themes emerged in readings of the Quran. Kristina Wirtz (2007) pays much attention to more amorphous, often quotidian activities surrounding religious practices. My ethnographic accounts arose mostly from such ordinary conversations surrounding the Quran sessions and rituals. Wirtz asserts that rituals encompass "a nucleus of religious activity around which whirls all of the surrounding discourse about religious life, like a cloud of electrons" (Wirtz 2007, 5). Inspired by Wirtz's concepts, dethroned Islams demonstrate how such "clouds of discourse" were formed during the process of debating each Quranic verse. I found that these conversations represent participants' needs of reconciling Muslim identity with their lived realities in the U.S. For instance, one of these needs was to maintain Iranian community in the U.S. Although some Iranian Americans were refugees and anti-regime, others were politically neutral

due to religious belonging and familial connection with Iran, and so these individuals found a middle sphere via which to imagine a diasporic Iran for the futurity of their community in the U.S.

While Johnson's concept of "diasporic horizons" helps me understands how Iranians navigate these temporal spheres, Keith Axel's theory of *diasporic imaginary* also equipped me with an analytical tool to discuss how pious Iranian Muslims in diaspora create *an Iran* that exists *within* the diasporic context. In his work, Axel illustrates how the conflicts between the Indian nation-state and Sikhs contribute to the *creation* of a homeland called Khalistan (Axel 2002, 2001). I will use this theoretical framework to show how Iranian-Muslim diasporans imagine *an Iran* in which the idea of an Islamic leadership has merged with an ancient Iranian kingdom.

More importantly, I will use aspects of Kamari Clarke's work on deterritorialized institutions of power among Yoruba networks in the U.S. Clarke illustrates how new networks of religious exchange are not only struggled over, contested, and produced outside of state hegemonies, but also how they reconceptualize the concepts of space and place. These reconstructions occur, not merely through people's imaginations, but also through the ways "people use these institutions to reclaim, and thus produce, the domains—spatial, temporal, national—in which modern classifications of ethnic and racial ancestry are being both usurped and reformulated" (Clarke 2004, 11). Clarke's theoretical toolkit has enabled me to illustrate how Iranians outside state hegemonies not only to renegotiate the dichotomous religious-national identity, which has been formulated within the boundary of state, but also reformulate the concept of race, which cannot simply be categorized as U.S. racialization or historical ethnicity.

1.3.3 Muslim Communities in the U.S.

One of the most influential sources in my development of a theory that can describe the politics of heterogeneity among Iranian Muslims was Mahmood Mamdani's *Good Muslim, Bad Muslim* (2005). He explains how "Culture Talk" essentializes Muslim lives in order to create politics in which Muslims are characterized as people with no history, no politics, and no debates, so they are all "bad Muslims," or it characterizes them as people who have a history, politics, even debates, and are thus are "good Muslims" (Mamdani 2005, 17). His approach enabled me to be aware of the contrasting narratives of Culture Talk and to observe people's live, local, and intimate reactions to such dichotomous narratives. Being influenced by Mamdani's idea of "good/bad Muslim," Andrew Shryock, in *Islamophobia/Islamophilia*, links and compares discourses that view Islam as an object of desire and affection with the dominant Western narrative that treats Islam as a source of fear and terror (Shryock 2010, 3). For Shryock, this dichotomy is part of a larger governmental paradigm that constantly distributes "Islamophobic discourse," by returning to certain stereotypes of a "good Muslim" who reads Rumi, treats women as equals, is politically moderate, and wears hijab by choice, is her husband's only wife, is highly educated, and works outside of the home (Shryock 2010, 10).

Also critical to my theoretical framing in this dissertation is Zareena Grewal's *Islam is a Foreign Country* (2014), which centers on the role of Islamic authority. Grewal analyzes the debates over Islamic authority in specific cultural contexts in the U.S. and the way revivalist men and women "without seminary educations are reinvigorating

Islamic public discourse" (Grewal 2014, 34). Muslims' agency, independent from clerical authority, is central to Shabana Mir's argument of how Muslim women found a "third space" in which to immerse themselves in American society. Mir's ethnographic accounts of the way women experience double scrutiny – from their own communities and the dominant host setting – and how they have found and created spaces within both communities to grow and assert themselves as individuals. This has helped develop my own approach concerning Iranian diasporans (Mir 2014, 3).

My own theoretical tool of dethroned Islams speaks to *processes of debating* fashioned by the Iranian diasporans to attribute multidimensional identities to the varying founding scriptures of Islam. Similar to this theoretical framework, Maimuna Huq has focused on Quranic study sessions to delineate ordinary people's engagement with religious readings and direct textual analysis to challenge mediated interpretations by clerics (Huq 2008). Resonating with Mir's "multidimensional identities," Huq explores how Muslim-women members of Bangladesh Islami Chatri Sangstha (BICSA) subvert hegemonic Bangladeshi cultural principles and religious leadership, neither in opposition nor accordance with power structures. Rather, they accomplished a complex and in-depth agency, generating ambivalent subjectivities (Huq 2006).

Within Edward Said's framework of "Orientalism," Nadine Naber explores the ways in which Arab Muslims form their identity in response to the Orientalist discourse, what she calls "reversal Orientalism" (Naber 2012; Naber 2014). I will use Naber's idea of "reversal Orientalism" to describe how *some* – especially the intermediaries or those of the pro-Islamic Republic doctrine – Muslims develop a reversal trick via which to stand against the prevalent myth of the Western-Muslim binary and prove that they are "good."

However, I argue that this framework raises the voice of Muslims and their active role in revealing the other side of the coin; it still falls into the same bipolarism – reflecting the Muslims' side of the story. That is, whether it highlights the way "Western" ideology considers the "Orient," or how Muslims have reversely responded to that Orientalist notion, the *fixedness* of identity is still being overlooked. Through my ethnographic cases, I will discuss how Naber's theoretical toolkit makes perfect sense, but only if we consider the intermediaries' narratives as typical accounts of Islam. Elaborating on the theme of the "Land of Infidelity," I will disentangle how clerics' expressed concerns and recommendations provide grounds for a "reversal" lifestyle, constructing a Muslim community for survival in the U.S.

While I have not specifically focused on the common perceptions regarding the association of Islam with post-9/11 global terrorism, I was inspired by the approach Ahmad Afzal followed in *Lone Star Muslims* (2014), decentering dominant framings of "terrorist" or "model minority" that can still essentialize Muslim identity within the Orientalist discourse. The way Afzal documented the heterogeneity of Pakistani-American lived realities inspired me to pursue the same methodology, not as a broad framework for various dimensions of their lives, but as a way to narrow down religiosity. Afzal provides a community-centered ethnographic study of the Pakistani experience in Houston, TX, in order to "show how specificities of class, profession, religious sectarian affiliation, citizenship status, gender, and sexuality shape transnational identities, and mediate racism, marginalities and abjection" (Afzal 2014, 7). Although he did not go into details of the Islamic thought through which one can claim to be a "gay Muslim," this

broad range of heterogeneity within a Muslim community encouraged me to explore the contested heterogeneities within the specific context of religion among Iranian Muslims.

1.3.3.1 Shi'a Muslim Communities in the U.S.

Few scholars focus on Shi'a Muslim communities in the U.S., focusing on how the performance of the Ashura ritual preserves Shi'i identity in the U.S. (Schubel 1991; Schubel 1996); how Shi'as were successful in maintaining their identity, though they are a minority within the larger Muslim minority (Sachedina 1994); and how Shi'i Muslims' bonds with the institution of *marja*s[12] as sources of emulation have become highly diverse minorities within the larger minority (Takim 2002; Takim 2008). However, Linda Walbridge is the only anthropologist who has specifically concentrated on Shi'i Muslim communities in the U.S., looking at the way individuals in these communities grapple with the issues of leadership and religious practices in the new environment (Walbridge 1996, 1999).

In *Without Forgetting the Imam*, Walbridge explores how Shi'a Lebanese in Dearborn, IL, have adapted to their new environment. She describes the role of the institution of *marja'* and how Lebanese and even Iraqi members of community are still committed to *marja',* following their theological teachings. Although Lebanese Americans in Dearborn still show commitment to the institution of *marja'*, Walbridge underscores the plurality of *marja*s prior to the rise of Khomeini in Iran. She asserts, "after his rise to political leadership, he rapidly established himself as the leader of all the other *marja'iya*. Those who resisted his authority, such as the well-known ayatollahs

[12] "Worthy of being emulated."

Shariatmadari and Taleqani, came to un pleasant ends" (Walbridge 1996, 66). According to Walbridge, contrary to Khomeini who was himself as both political and spiritual leader of the people, the vast majority of Shi'a clerics "live their lives far from the centers of political power and are far more concerned with issues relating to, say, ritual purity than the national debt" (Walbridge 1996, 66). Thus, those ayatollahs, such as Khu'i in Iraq who stayed away from political activities, continue to have the largest following in the U.S.

Although her study paid considerable attention to how Shi'a Muslims moderate their relationship with the religious authority and the institution of *marja'*, my interlocutors revealed a level of productivity in reconstructing their relationship with not only religious authority, but also with a basic meaning of Islam. By incorporating their understandings from the Quran into their lived realities, my interlocutors view themselves as Iranian Shi'i Muslims, who have shown no tendency for emulating *marja'* to interpret the sacred texts, and instead they highly rely on the collective processes of debating to find the meanings that they favor.

1.3.4 Middle-Eastern Communities in the U.S. South

This dissertation contributes to anthropological studies about the Middle-Eastern immigrant communities in the U.S. South by looking closely at how Iranian Americans involve themselves in the process of community building, the reformulation of the internal relationship of Muslim Americans, and racialization. The way Iranian Americans approach the sectarian conflicts within the Muslim community, the issue of authority, racial politics of the South, and the predominantly Christian society have complicated the

way anthropologists have written about how people from Middle-Eastern backgrounds encounter post-migratory ethnoreligious and racial identities. Only a few ethnographies have been written about Iranian Americans in metropolitan areas of Texas, discussing mostly how they have been stigmatized in the aftermath of the Hostage Crisis (Mobasher 2012) and how they have negotiated post-migratory "authentic" identities (Fischer and Abedi 1990, 314).

A few ethnographies have been conducted on how economic equality, ownership of property and business, and church participation of an Arab-Syrian community in the Deep South facilitated their acceptance by locals as non-Black residents (Tannous 1943). For Lebanese communities in Alabama, however, their commercial success made them less like Birmingham's working-class African Americans, while not compensating for racial difference (Faires Conklin and Faires 1987). More recently an undergrad anthropology thesis was written on how Christian Syrian and Lebanese descendants in the South prioritize their Lebanese, Syrian, and Arab identities, rather than their faith to overcome the difficulties of defining identity within the existing ethnic and racial categories (Moudy 2020).

Contrary to these few ethnographic explorations, some historians have deeply investigated how Middle-Eastern communities of the South have collectively negotiated their racial identity in relation to both dominant and non-dominant groups (Thomas 2020), attained a level of economic and social status accepted by native whites (Stathakis 1996), and have also grappled with the issue of U.S. racialization, broadening the meaning of whiteness (Gualtieri 2009, 2001). Scholars have also studied how Muslims have spread throughout the South, becoming a part of the religious landscape of many

southern cities and rural areas (Ramey 2006). Some highlight how, for instance, Muslims from Turkic countries (Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan) in the South have created state and regional cultural associations in Florida, Georgia, and Washington, D.C. (Fogarty 2014). In some case studies, scholars also have explored Muslims' presence in metropolitan areas in the South, such as in Atlanta, Georgia (Barzegar 2010).

By and large, the experiences of Middle-Eastern and Muslim Americans in rural areas and smaller cities of the U.S. South have gone relatively unexplored in spite of the growing number of studies about these groups since 9/11. My research fills this gap in the literature by investigating religious experience, processes of racialization, and citizen-making among Iranian Americans in a specific area of the U.S. South. In so doing, I contribute to understandings of the intersections between race, ethnicity, and religion in communities of the contemporary U.S. often neglected in the academic literature.

1.3.5 Iranian Diaspora in the U.S.

My dissertation will also contribute to the literature on Iranian diasporans in the U.S. in terms of the paucity of ethnographic research that specifically focuses on Iranians' Islamic practices. In the literature on Iranian diaspora, the Iranian religious landscape and the notion of "theocracy" play a key role, especially when "the impression that Iran is a theocracy with no democratic institutions" (Beeman 2008, 194). This ideology has been cultivated in U.S. political rhetoric since the 1979 Revolution, hostage crisis, and Iran-U.S. hostility (see Mobasher 2006, 2012). Therefore, any expression of Islamic affiliation is often seen as a sign of association with the Islamic Republic. This fact has not only

made the Iranians' Islamic practices less visible to the public in the U.S., but this is also the case within the literature itself. Therefore, Iranian-diaspora scholars have mostly focused on how they have become economically prosperous to represent themselves as "good" citizens (Naficy 1993, 1998; Mobasher 2007; Ansari 1977; Dallalfar 1996; Bozorgmehr and Sabagh 1988); how (pre)marital behavior and intimate relationships have changed among Iranian women in diaspora (Hanassab 1991, 1998; Hanassab and Tidwell 1993); how Iranian elderly cope with their expectations and their post-migratory reality (Hegland 2007, 2009); how the second-generation use cyberspace to fill the gap between generations and reconstruct their Iranian American identity (Graham and Khosravi 2002, 1997; Alinejad 2017, 2011); the question of identity and negotiation within the second generation (Chaichian 1997; McAuliffe 2005; Mahdi 1998; Mostofi 2003); and how first and second generation cope with the issue of race in the U.S. while they having two understandings of it (Maghbouleh 2017, 2010).

The Iranian-American community in southern California has undoubtedly been the focus of this attention, not only as an outcome of their sheer number but also because they have created a specific popular culture known as *los angelesi*, represented in music and entertainment on Farsi-language satellite TV channels. But what does it mean to be an Iranian and Muslim immigrant in the contemporary U.S. outside of metropolitan areas like southern California, Dearborn, and Detroit? My dissertation fills a gap in the literature of the Iranian diaspora in the U.S. by examining how everyday religious practices and the meanings they convey for the social order shape a community.

Scholars have addressed secularity within the Iranian community in the U.S. to discuss the diverse texture of the Iranian community since the migration (Bozorgmehr

1997; Bozorgmehr, Sabagh, and Der-Martirosian 1993; Sabagh and Bozorgmehr 1994). Anthropologists have also studied how the Iranian diaspora have attempted to eradicate Islam from their identity (Gholami 2016, 2014, 2012), or that they only practice rituals at funeral ceremonies on occasion (Spellman 2005). Multiple anthropologists have cited examples of Iranian immigrants denying any affiliation with Islamic Iranian identity, presenting themselves as "Persian" (Graham and Khosravi 2002; Gholami 2016, 2014; Mobasher 2012). And although some express no "Islamic" affiliation in representing their identity and community, especially that of the Iranian state narrative of Islam, others may still appeal to a monotheistic God and some revered Islamic figures (Gholami 2016, 11; Mobasher 2012, 178-8; Spellman 2005). Some ethnographies suggest that Iranian religiosity in post-migratory phases is a form of cultural Islam, which is less a religion and more a moral code entrenched in Iranian identity (McAuliffe 2007, 41; Kelley 1993). While the majority of the literature proposes that the Iranian diaspora has left Islam behind, few studies have referred to Iranians as "Iranian Muslims" (Kelley 1994; Sabagh and Bozorgmehr 1994), not studying their Islamic practices but addressing the secular religiosity of the entire community.

My dissertation contributes to Iranian-diaspora studies by focusing on the minority whose voice has not been reflected in the literature thus far. Through ethnographic, detailed description, I will discuss the multiplicity of meanings of Islam as the seminal core of Iranian-Muslim existentiality. By conducting an ethnography about Iranian Americans in both urban and rural settings in the U.S. South, I contribute to the literature by demonstrating how ideas about race and processes of racialization are key aspects of how people understand themselves as Iranians, as well as how they have developed their

sense of Americanness. My dissertation expands our understandings of what it means to be Muslim in the U.S., and how processes of belonging for immigrant communities are linked to the complexities of religion, racialization, and ethnicization.

1.4 Research Method and Field Site(s)

1.4.1 Field site(s)

Ethnographic fieldwork in this dissertation was conducted in the anonymized cities of Simonstown, Winstonburg, Footland, and Greavesville in the U.S. South, from June 2019 to August 2020. The names of the cities, field sites, places, and people, including my interlocutors and anyone who somehow mentioned in this research, were anonymized with pseudonyms to protect the human subjects. Since the Shi'i communities and their centers are few in numbers compared to their Sunni counterparts, I decided to anonymize the name of the cities. Although there are two urban settings in which I conducted my fieldwork, among the tenth to fifteenth largest cities in the U.S. South, there is only one Shi'i Islamic center for the community in the region. Simonstown and Winstonburg are larger cities compared to Footland and Greavesville, which are smaller towns and are considered rural. There are not many Shi'i communities and centers in Winstonburg and Simonstown, though they are large cities, but my subjects may be recognizable if locals read my ethnography.

Through my ethnography, I will portray the urban settings as opposed to rural areas while I describe incidents. For instance, I clarify that Winstonburg and Simonstown have universities in them, while rural areas only have community colleges. There are not precise statistics for the Iranian population in the U.S. South, or even in the entire nation,

so I relied on my interlocutors' reports about the demographics of my research population. It was my first question to ask about the demographics of Iranians to open a conversation and establish rapport.

1.4.1.1 Winstonburg

Winstonburg is among the fifteen largest cities in the U.S. South. Many students from the surrounding rural areas and small towns come to the city to attend the University of Winstonburg. Prior to my fieldwork, during the preliminary investigation in 2017, I attended a *Nowruz* (the Iranian new year celebration) in Winstonburg. During the celebration, I heard from one of the attendants that there are almost six-to-seven-hundred Iranian families in Winstonburg.

Iranians celebrate their national holidays at events that are usually organized by graduate students at the University of Winstonburg. And while there are many Islamic centers and mosques in Winstonburg, Iranian Muslims have their own Islamic center, *Heydar* Center (a pseudonym), in which they hold their own Shi'i rituals and holidays. My interlocutors from Winstonburg are mostly in their thirties and are PhD students at, or have graduated from, the University of Winstonburg. They grew up during the Islamic Republic, went to college, and they had an existential experience concerning *the* Islam of the Islamic Republic. And yet many had an unclear image of their next generation in the U.S.

1.4.1.2 Simonstown

Simonstown is also an urban area and among the ten largest cities in the U.S. South. Simonstown is also known for the University of Simonstown, major hospitals, and

companies in the region. I heard from one of my interlocutors, as I was conducting my fieldwork in Simonstown, that there are almost twelve-hundred Iranian families in the city. There are many Islamic centers and mosques in this urban setting; however, Iranian Muslims and other Shi'i communities have their own mosque, *Zaynab* mosque (a pseudonym).

In the Simonstown network, though there were some individuals in their thirties, my interlocutors were mostly in their fifties, sixties, and seventies. They mostly came before or right after the 1979 Revolution to pursue their education. That is, they finished high school in Iran and came to the U.S. to go to college. The majority of them received bachelor's degrees in technical majors and worked in the U.S. after graduation. Some of them pursued their graduate studies and received their PhDs, and they have worked as university professors or researchers at the University of Simonstown or taught at community colleges in nearby rural areas.

These two age ranges gave me different contexts in terms of memories and conceptions of Iran. Those of the interlocutors who left Iran before or at the time of the 1979 Revolution had only long-distanced perceptions of *the* Islam of the Islamic Republic and had no experience of *living* during the Islamic Republic. Rather, they had more experience about Islam in transnational spheres and successes in dealing with the second generation, which I will describe in Chapter Four, in the section "Concerns for descendants."

1.4.1.3 Greavesville

Greavesville, with a population around ten thousand, is part of the rural South. According to my interlocutors, Greaves Lake is one of the main tourist attractions. There were not more than two-to-three Iranian families in Greavesville, according to one of my interlocutors living there. In Greavesville, my main field site was the mosque, and my main interlocutor was Bahram, an Iranian who took part in Friday congregational prayer. Bahram introduced me to other members of the mosque with nationalities including Egyptian, Pakistani, Indian, and Bosnian. He also introduced me to another Iranian in the town; however, this individual was not interested in going to mosque. My Iranian interlocutor and other members of the mosque of Greavesville were medical doctors or in the medical field. They all had come to Greavesville to work at local hospital. They were all in their sixties or older.

1.4.1.4 Footland

Footland, with almost thirty thousand residents, is also part of the rural South. It has a relatively larger college compared to Greavesville. I learned one of my Iranian interlocutors, who lives in Winstonburg, taught at Footland College and commuted between Winstonburg and Footland, about a forty-minute drive. In Footland, there used to be a few Iranians in the town who had moved to Winstonburg or other states, according to my Pakistani interlocutor at the mosque in Footland. Due to the situation, I focused on the Muslim population that was somehow associated with the former Iranian residents of the area. Thus, I could grasp accounts *about* Iranians from outsider Muslims' perspectives.

According to the "Recruitment of Subjects" section of my IRB protocol, "people in the United States and potentially elsewhere, who have a connection to the subject matter," were potential interlocutors for my research. In Footland, I focused on the mosque that had been established by Pakistanis and included members from Saudi Arabia, Jordan, and Syria. It included their experiences with and views about former Iranian members of the mosque. I continuously took part in Friday congregational prayer and used my own identity as an Iranian, who grew up as a Shi'a Muslim, to experience the immersion of a Shi'a minority within the Muslim minority.

Therefore, in the larger cities of Winstonburg and Simonstown, where I found a more cohesive and arranged Iranian network who practice Islamic traditions and rituals, I anchored myself to the community, building deep relationships and exploring my research inquiries. In the rural settings of Greavesville and Footland, on the other hand, I endeavored to discover other Muslims' perceptions about Iranian Muslims. Though I found few Iranians in Greavesville and none in Footland, these two sites were very important in terms existential experiences of being Iranian Muslim: a minority within the minority. I cautiously use the term Shi'a or Sunni to split the Muslim population in the U.S., in the sense that it is difficult to separate Muslims with distinctive boundaries, especially when the main idea of the dissertation is that Islam is not a fixed entity or essence (el-Zein 1974).

1.4.1.5 Social statuses

To give a sense of my interlocutors' social statuses to my reader, I use a descriptive method, rather than terms such as lower-, upper-, or middle-class. I prefer the term

"status" instead of "class" in the sense that it is difficult to determine how people are situated in the rigid boundaries of "middle, lower, or upper classes," even when researchers employ questionnaires in which they specifically ask about economic status, career, or income. Rather, in my ethnographic account, I include brief descriptions about my interlocutors' age, sex, and occupation. I did not specifically ask about people's jobs during my interviews because I already knew their education and occupation after spending a long period participating in their weekly, sometimes daily, activities.

Via my brief descriptions, my reader can imagine my interlocutors' social statuses, rather than *my* perceptions of their rigid social "classes." For instance, when I talk about Negar, one of my key interlocutors, the first time I use her name, I will assert, "Negar is a woman in her late fifties who has a PhD and is a university professor in one of the science disciplines." The first time I talk about her husband, Baqer, I will say, "Baqer, Negar's husband is a man in his late sixties, and I have heard from Negar that he is a realtor." To give a general sense about my field sites and interlocutors, and because I use pseudonyms even for cities, I will constantly remind my readers of the context that Simonstown and Winstonburg are large cities and have universities in their limits.

This dissertation is not the study of men, though I interviewed many men. During gatherings and the Quran sessions, people usually took part as couples, or even if they were alone at the meeting, they were married. Therefore, during my interviews, I approached both men and women, and they mostly talked over each other. In some cases, I interviewed only women from the Simonstown network because their presence was equally influential, if not more so, than the men's, just as their opinions are in my project. Although men are overrepresented in terms of my interviews, the quality of female

Muslim existentiality contributed greatly to my project. I did not interview minors because it seemed out of the scope of my project; however, I looked for my interlocutors' perspectives and concerns toward the second generation—their children.

1.4.2 Research Method

My research method was mostly to engage in participant observations in mosques, Islamic centers, and homes of the Iranian diaspora, carrying out informal interactions and impromptu conversations. I also conducted in-depth, semi-structured interviews. My stage of initial exploration had already been started in my preliminary fieldwork in the summer of 2017 to gain knowledge of the target population and their everyday activities. As soon as I officially started my dissertation fieldwork, I began returning to the interlocutors from my preliminary fieldwork, with whom I had already an established rapport. Like Taher and Yousef, mentioned above, some of these people turned out to be my "key informants [interlocutors]" (Bernard 2011).

These, and other key interlocutors (now my friends), will be referred to multiple times in this dissertation. I did not seek in-depth interviews in the first phase of fieldwork except with my key interlocutors. By using the "snowball sampling" technique, individuals assisted me in contacting members of the research population, identifying potential research participants and expanding my networks. As I mentioned, Yousef introduced me to Negar, a woman in her sixties, who was the organizer of Quran sessions in Simonstown and one of my key interlocutors. This would have been impossible without their assistance to gain the trust of community members.

In some cases, I approached people by simply introducing myself as a PhD student who was conducting ethnographic research. I was not welcomed and heard. For instance, one Iranian sarcastically asked me, "are you funded by the Islamic Republic," meaning that was working for the Iranian intelligence community, and therefore he would not be interested in my project. So, I mostly conducted participant observation in the first phase of fieldwork and established deep rapport with my key interlocutors to minimize the community's distrust. I participated in community-based activities, such as religious ceremonies and holidays, weekly Quran-reading sessions, Friday congregational prayer, poetry night, and occasional social gatherings. Participant observation in the first phase was crucial in the sense that I could situate myself within the community to gain their trust and help them understand the academic purpose of in-depth interviews.

Fieldwork was conducted based on participant-observations in Islamic gatherings, weekly Quran sessions, rituals and ceremonies, and in-depth interviews and impromptu conversations with members of the Iranian community, Muslims with different nationalities, and on some occasions, with U.S. residents of other faiths. My interviews were mostly conducted in Farsi. I had some interviews with some members of the community from different nationalities. When I use direct quotes from my interviews, I have often translated them from Farsi into English. Whenever the interviews or a sermon that was originally in English, I mention that the sermon or the interviews were conducted in English; otherwise, it means I translated the transcript into English. During gatherings or ceremonies when non-Iranian Shi'is with different nationalities were present, the language of communication was English. Some clerics that were invited for

Shi'a ceremonies delivered their speech in English for the audience, who were often a majority of Iranians, Iraqi, Pakistani, or Americans.

During participant observation, the main technique I applied to gather data was note-taking in my notebook. I only took notes from the main themes that seemed to be related to my hypothesis and research inquiries. During participant observation, I realized that it can be distracting if I record the conversations or the sermon, especially because I was obliged to let participants know if I planned to record anything, according to my IRB protocol. I also realized it might make people uncomfortable if I took pictures during prayers, the Quran session, lectures, or rituals.

Growing up in a Muslim society, through a phenomenological view, I feel uncomfortable if anybody takes my picture while I am doing a prayer ritual. Second, it was technically impossible to participate in prayer and take pictures of myself and others. Therefore, as soon as I arrived home, I used my notes to freshly write down my ethnography and observations. The initial notetaking during the Quran session, sermons, or rituals offered preliminary insights on how to explore the major themes for further in-depth interviews.

I initiated introductory data analysis at very early stages of my research in order to refine the themes in my hypotheses and to "see things that I had not expected, or imagined, to be there" (Holbraad and Pedersen 2017, 5). For instance, I did not expect to notice the same people, who regularly participate in the Quran session, also take part in the Persian poetry night, enjoying the reading of blasphemic poems of Rumi. Nor could I have imagined hearing from an interlocutor, "I can be a pious Muslim and openly talk about it in the U.S., but in Iran I should be cautious since being pious symbolize

fanaticism." Throughout my ethnographic fieldwork, I continuously refined my processes of data analysis and was on the lookout for the "emergence of new theme and topics" that I might have previously overlooked (Bernard 2011, 156; LeCompte and Schensul 2010, 210). The data analysis I conducted in the field allowed me to make decisions about the remaining directions of the research, informing ongoing phases of the study (LeCompte and Schensul 2010).

1.4.3 Methodology

In this section, I explain my methodology of conducting ethnography, which is not my research method. Social scientists separate these two concepts: "'a contextual framework' for research, a coherent and logical scheme based on views, beliefs, and values, that guides the choices researchers make. Within this methodological framework, methods are the tools that researchers use to gather and analyze data, write and present their findings" (Kara 2015, 4).

By methodology, I mean the conceptual framework through which I have formulated my ethnographic inquiries, conducted fieldwork, and created theoretical analysis. I pursued the Wittgensteinian ethnographical sense that emphasizes the importance of capturing the whole interaction that surrounds the moment in which natural human behavior is occurring (Wittgenstein 1958). Wittgenstein suggests ignoring the description of the appearance of an object, constructing an object from a description, and reporting or speculating about an event. Rather, he offers a philosophical insight that can be very useful for the task of ethnography.

Wittgenstein denounces the possibility of "an ultimate theory of meaning" (Whitaker 2004, 493). In a Wittgensteinian sense, ethnographic methods of investigating must focus on "how meanings work *as they occur* in human interaction" (Whitaker 2004, 493). For Wittgenstein, meanings are "socially constituted within enacted forms of human interaction that he some- times called language games' and sometimes called 'forms of life'" (Whitaker 2004, 493). Wittgenstein's notion of language-game in context resonates with Berger and Luckmann's argument about "reality," as it is socially constructed, and the idea that "the sociology of knowledge must analyze the process in which this occurs" (Berger and Luckmann 1991, 13). These notions were very useful to view and embody the worldview of people who have internalized their cultural practice and forms of religiosity, as this is the only way the world is meaningful to them. They suggest setting aside descriptions, assumptions, and speculations about any cultural practices, just by practicing the way people of the community practice.

I looked at the way my interlocutors assign meanings to Islam, not only in the way they describe them, but also in practice as they "use" them. For my interlocutors, Islam has meaning as a result of the rule of "games" being played in context. Depending on the context and individual, Islam is a means of integrity with Christian colleagues in the Quran session, such as praying for healing from cancer, merely because the colleague in need is a "pious Christian." Berger and Luckmann point out a key element of forming identity that stands in a dialectical relationship with society. For them, "identities produced by the interplay of organism, individual consciousness and social structure react upon the given social structure, maintaining it, modifying it, or even reshaping it" (Berger and Luckmann 1991, 194). The dialectical relationship of Iranian Muslims with the

dominant Christian society have produced modifications in which they come to consider Christians as co-religionist, to be included in prayer. In this sense, Christian beliefs were not foregrounded, but rather people's shared piety. It is this piety that constituted a basis for inclusion. These kind of 'cross-faith' community building practices are not uncommon for Muslims to take part in given the reality that they live in a predominantly Christian society, although I also observed during my fieldwork some clerics recommending that Muslims' relationships with Christians and Jews should be limited.

Conversely, a Quranic verse, revelated to the praise of God's creation of humans, was also used as an irony by an interlocutor who overtly expressed that he did not believe in God, rejecting his friend who asked him to go on a Hajj pilgrimage to Mecca: "I'd rather go to Hawaii beach and watch girls and say 'Blessed is Allah, the Best of creators' [Quran 14: 23]."

Islam was also be used as "simple Islam" by one of my interlocutors, who has regularly participated in rituals but had no obligation to go to bars or date while spending time in downtown. These cases might not be even considered as possible forms of Islam in the eyes of clerics; however, these are forms of Islam that are enacted by ordinary Muslims. As an ethnographer, I focused on the acts of practicing Islam, "and the actions into which it is woven, the 'language-game'" (Wittgenstein 1958, 5). Following Wittgenstein, I was not looking for an ultimate meaning, or "essence," of Islam. Rather, I observed actions via which individuals assigned meaning to the world around them.

These games must not be described as "incomplete" parts of Islam, but as "complete" forms of Islamic practices. The language-game is a methodological kit that enabled me to grasp the usage of Islam, rather than focus on clerical explanations of Islamic practices. I

will follow this methodology, what Wittgenstein called "language games," to describe the Islamic practice of parents who have told their children to "say, in the name God," when buying non-halal meat from Costco. The meat was not prepared following the Islamic slaughter ritual; however, they have invented an act of simply saying, "in the name God," to satisfy their religious intention, even if it might be considered a nonsense act before an Islamic cleric.

1.4.4 Post-COVID Phase

I did not intend to have a fixed date for finishing and starting the first and second phases. But as the COVID-19 pandemic began in January 2020, the second phase of field work also started. At first, after discussing it with my advisor and committee members, we decided to shift from conducting fieldwork to writing this dissertation. However, after almost a week, I realized many members of the community had become active on social media, and they had transferred their gatherings, services, and rituals from in-person to online platforms. Therefore, I appropriately modified the "Research Description" in the IRB renewal and was approved by the Office of Research Integrity[13].

The members of the communities communicated through group email, Facebook, and WhatsApp to schedule their meetings. Since the pandemic, in addition to the weekly Quran session, they decided to have an extra session to discuss those social issues that they did not have time elaborate on during the Quran sessions. Therefore, they decided to

[13] In the modification of the Research Description, I disclosed: "In order to mitigate hazard due to COVID-19, I applied online platforms for conducting my ethnography instead of in-person interviews and observations. My target population shifted from in-person to online gatherings, meetings, and rituals; accordingly, I switched from in-person to online platforms to conduct interviews and participant-observations. Whenever the pandemic situation ends and my interlocutors have their normal, in-person meetings and gatherings, I will do in-person interviews and observations."

meet twice a week to have free discussion on Zoom. This was a great opportunity for me suggest themes for the discussions, related to my research inquiries. Zoom meetings became more frequent because people were home and had more time during the pandemic. For instance, during Ramadan (the Islamic fasting month), they decided to have a Quran-reading every night after *iftar* (the meal after the sunset). The pandemic allowed me to immerse myself in the community, as the gatherings were more frequent, and by the time that I asked my interlocutors to set up in-depth Zoom or phone interviews, they warmly welcomed me because they had become familiar with my area of interest from my previous questions during the sessions and informal conversations we had had. I started my digital ethnography via Zoom, social media, and phone for the second phase of fieldwork.

For the virtual sit-down, semi-structured interviews, and life stories, I used the themes that I grasped during participant observations, including the discussions during the Quran sessions and lectures. Sometimes I had certain topics for certain individuals based on their views or comments during the sessions. I also used some of the themes that were declared by clerics, who were invited to deliver sermons, to explore the personal narratives of individuals in terms of compromise and moderation in daily life, reconceptualizing new religiosities, creating continuity with clerical reasoning, adopting parts from the current diasporic context, and exploring boundaries around religious identity of Muslimness in the U.S.

In addition to participating in the Zoom Quran sessions, discussion, lecture on holidays, and rituals, I scheduled Zoom interviews with the members of community. These interviews vary in length from one hour to even three hours, and they sometimes

occur on multiple occasions. My intimacy and friendship with the members got to the point that I had occasionally received unexpected calls from my interlocutors, during which they wanted to mention something that they had forgotten during the interview.

1.4.5 Positionality

In this section, I discuss my positionality within the field sites and describe how it helped me to immerse myself in my research communities. I began my research with preliminary fieldwork during the summer of 2017, and I conducted my dissertation fieldwork from June 2019 to August 2020 in the U.S. South. I describe my position as an ethnographer, member, and "brother" in my field sites among the Iranian and Muslim communities.

During my preliminary field work in summer 2017, I heard from Masoud, an Iranian man in his early sixties, about networks of Iranians in the region of Winstonburg who had weekly religious meetings. In fact, Iranians of Winstonburg have a Facebook page in which they organize celebration gatherings of Iranian national holidays, such as Nowruz. However, I had never seen them announce any religious event on that page. By describing the kind of discussion they had, and the type of people who participated, Masoud tried to persuade me to attend one of these sessions.

During one conversation in his apartment in Winstonburg, Masoud was trying to describe the fabric of the Iranian community and said, "once I went to see a fellow in his apartment. I saw his [Iranian] roommate drinking beer with his lunch. But those who come to these religious meetings are the good people." What Masoud seemed to be

saying was that the Iranian community in the region was "good people[14]" who were essentially "good" Iranians on the one hand, and those who drink alcohol were "bad" Iranians, as alcohol is *harâm* (prohibited) in Islam. This essentialization about goodness, first, reminded me of the Islamic Republic's doctrine of Islam, and second, brought up the issue of my positionality in the field. I also sometimes drink beer. Thus, I thought how would these people think of me? Should I disclose what I personally believe and how I live?

It was around the time of the Ashura ritual that I heard from Masoud that their community would hold this ritual at the Heydar Center of Winstonburg, which became one of my main field sites. It was really stunning to hear that, in a city in the U.S. South, with a very small Iranian population, this detailed ritual was being performed. It was through Masoud's stories that I came to realize I that there was a network of pious Iranians in Winstonburg with their own Shi'i center.

To begin my dissertation fieldwork in June 2019, I asked Taher, one of my key interlocutors who regularly participated in the "good people" network, to introduce and connect me to the Winstonburg network of Iranian Muslims, so that I might take part in their gatherings and religious ceremonies. I also heard from Taher that there were other group of Iranians who had the same kind of network in Simonstown, another urban area of the region. He introduced me to Yousef, the co-founder of the Heydar Center of Winstonburg, who had lived for a year in Simonstown and had connection to the Iranian Muslims there.

[14] I translated this term from Farsi (*bache khub*) to English

Yousef is known as *haji*, the title that Muslims acquire after going on the Hajj pilgrimage. I called Yousef and described my work with the Iranian community. His first reaction was "when you say Iranian, what do you exactly mean by that. Even in Iran, they are *seventy-two nations*." Iranians use this metaphor in Farsi to refer to the heterogenous texture of society. He continued, "When they come to the U.S. it gets worse. Therefore, when you say Iranians, you need to clarify what you mean exactly. When I lived in LA for a while, I met some people who were Iranians that I would never want to look at their face again in my life." So, for Yousef, being a "good" Iranian required the commitment to Islamic practices. Otherwise, they were the "bad" ones, and he'd rather never have met them. The way Yousef described Iranians of the network in the weekly Quran sessions mostly imply how "good" they are. They are "good humans," mostly university professors, educated, and who have "good" children.

This dichotomous image of "good" versus those who, for instance, drink alcohol, as described by Yousef, made me cautious to express my opinion, not only about drinking alcohol but about other issues relating to the politics of the exclusion. He simply categorized some Iranians as "bad" because they were not consistent with an Islamic dress code or veiling. This circumstance shows the complexities of providing an insider point of view by a "native" anthropologist (Narayan 1993). Obviously, I was treated as a native anthropologist because of my "Iranian-like" physical features and my use of Farsi in conversations. Although I might have some personal beliefs about religion, Islam, or the dichotomy depicted by some of my interlocutors, I followed the strategy of "distancing" myself in the field (Ohnuki-Tierney 1984, 6). Based on the way Yousef described "good" Iranians from the rest, I moved beyond the dichotomy of "native"-

"non-native" ethnographer and focused on "shifting identities in relationship with the people and issues" that I sought to represent (Narayan 1993, 682).

In the field, during interviews and participant observation, either in a conversation with Yousef or the one he called "bad" Iranians, I situated myself as subject, "simultaneously touched by life-experience and swayed by professional concerns," and I acknowledged "the hybrid and positioned nature" of my identities in the field (Narayan 1993, 682). I played dumb and neutral as much as possible and tried to see myself through the eyes of my interlocutors.

When I first attended the Quran-reading sessions, Yousef had some Qurans in his hands and was passing them to members. He asked me, "would you also like one?" This question implied Yousef might have doubted my position as merely an ethnographer who was there to talk to people and observe their practice and not as an Iranian Muslim willing to take part in the service to receive the *savâb*[15] (spiritual reward) of reading the Quran. By responding, "sure, brother," I constituted a spiritual kin relationship that went beyond the "research-participant" situation (Thomas 2016, 67-8). During my fieldwork, I acknowledge my theoretical understandings were not the only constructs that formed my ethnographic solidarities. My interlocutors brought their own ideas of relationship to research encounters, and our relationships were created between these different constructs of relationship (Thomas 2016, 81). This friendship, or "spiritual kinship" relationship, was inevitable during my fieldwork, especially with my key interlocutors.

To participate in the weekly Quran readings of the Iranian Muslims in Simonstown, I usually asked Negar earlier in the morning to make sure they were going to have their

[15] The original Arabic pronunciation of this word is transcribed as *thawab*. However, the way Iranians pronounce this word sounds like *savâb*. I use the latter transcription; the way interlocutors pronounce it.

weekly session. They held their session in the side hall of a Church. I drove almost an hour to get there. Their network mostly consisted of men and women from the ages of fifty to eighty. I usually arrived in the afternoon. There were a few of them in the hall, and I left my things to use the bathroom. When I returned to the hall, Negar told me that "you really do a great job taking part in our sessions. God bless you." The rest of them also repeated, "God bless you." I felt like they were talking about me, while I was using the bathroom. Of course, I did not disclose that it was helping me a lot to take part in their meetings. I was gathering wonderful data, thus I let them think I also participated for *savâb* (spiritual award).

During my observation, I was usually taking notes while they were discussing. Later, during in-depth interviews, when I brought up some themes that I had heard during the sessions, they said, "yes, I remember you were taking notes," while they smiled. I also remember, after a heated debate, Mohsen humorously told me, "There you go. Take your notes; good stuff for your research." That is to say, my positionality was neither purely an ethnographer nor a new member of their network. It was still not clear for myself yet, since I felt awkward that I did not have time to participate in their meetings because I as writing my dissertation and missing that sense of intellectual curiosity about what they were bringing out of the verses each week. I still hear what Negar told me, "Even after completing your fieldwork, we still want to have you as part of our community."

Following this strategy, I let my interlocutors categorize me and my beliefs, so that I can "realize *their* visions of *their* world" (Narayan 1993, 676), as well as *their* visions of *my* world. During my fieldwork, I followed the role my interlocutor assumed of me in the community. They assumed that I was there to conduct my research and *also* to participate

in the Friday congregational prayer as a pious Muslim. That is to say, "I was unwilling to tear the fabric of social life they wove around me" (Abu-Lughod 1988, 153-4). Staying silent was the main strategy that I employed to deal with the issue of disclosure. I did not hide my personal positions, but I did not disclose them during the participant observations and interviews. For instance, I was compatible with both the interlocutor, who made comments about "the fallacious nature of all religions," as well as the one who invited me to Friday prayer. This was another factor that let me experience and understand *their* processes of debating Islams.

1.5 Overview of dissertation

I begin the dissertation by investigating how internal sectarianism is reconciled in various social contexts. Through ethnographic descriptions of those who, for instance, do not pay attention to Shi'a-Sunni differences and disregard fundamental Shi'i principles, I demonstrate temporal strategies that Iranian Americans employ to immerse themselves in Sunni majority communities. In doing so, they go beyond the fundamental boundaries of Shi'ism disseminated by clerics to navigate performances that favor their existence in the Muslim-American community.

In Chapter 3, "Guardian Untethered," I argue that the concept of Guardianship, or *faqih,* is negotiated and reduced to mundane concepts, such as mentorship in academia. Through this simplification of the concept, I demonstrate that the concept of Guardianship, through the contextual reasoning of the practitioners, can also be minimized to an official position that might be filled by a non-Muslim.

In Chapter 4: "Racialization and Claiming Whiteness," I draw on ethnographic evidence, such as the belief that the most trusted companion of the Prophet was "Persian, *not* Arab," in order explore that race and religion are conflated in a manner that demonstrates the ways that Shi'ism might be understood, not only as a religion, but also as a historical ethnicity or a culturally-shaped racial group.

In Chapter 5: "Iran (Re)imagined," drawing on ethnographic details such as the supposed resemblance of the supreme leader to ancient Persian kings, I demonstrate how Iranian Americans overlook the dichotomous Pre-revolutionary "nationalist" doctrine and the Revolutionary religious ideology to reimagine an Iran based on memory of the past, the image of Iran in global politics, and the futurity of Iranian transnational identity in the U.S.

In Chapter 6: "Land of (In)fidelity," I draw on the ethnographic analysis of clerical statements proposing the U.S. as the "Land of Infidelity," in order to explore how Iranian Americans have moved beyond the dichotomy that is disseminated by both U.S. mainstream political discourses, which characterizes Islam as a homogenous target and clerics who contribute to this homogeneity as creating a monolithic, "true" Islam.

CHAPTER 2: DISCOURSES OF A MUSLIM IDENTITY

In August 2019 after Eid Qorban's lecture,[16] everyone went to the room next to the main hall where they usually eat food and have lively conversation. I sat next to Mr. Heshmati and asked about the history of the Heydar Center [pseudonym], the only Shi'i center in Winstonburg. The name of the Center is one of the titles of the first Shi'i Imam, Ali, which was chosen by the members who had established the center. While there were rumors by non-religious Iranians that the Islamic Republic funds Shi'i Islamic centers abroad, during my fieldwork, I did not hear any mention of funding from the Islamic Republic.

Once, I was at the Center when they announced at the end of one of the rituals that they plan to expand the parking area and asked for donations. Mr. Heshmati continued by saying that he came to the U.S. in the seventies to pursue higher education. According to him, Iranians had the same gatherings and meetings that were more political than religious, and for religious practices, they usually went to mosque with Sunnis for praying and holding Islamic rituals, but that this meant that they did have their separate Shi'i rituals. Therefore, they felt the need to have their own Islamic center. This led me to ask about the idea of solidarity with a united *umma* as an Islamic commitment, and he responded with a shocked facial expression, "they are Sunni. We do *not* share a common belief with Sunnis. We only share the same name, Muslim. Otherwise, we have deep Islamic disagreement."[17]

[16] One of the main Islamic holidays, in which Muslims celebrate by donating lamb meat to poor people to symbolize Ibrahim's willingness to sacrifice his son and obey the command of God. Also known as Eid al-Adha, mostly among Arabic speaking Muslims.

[17] All direct quotations that I use in this dissertation translated from Farsi to English.

Mr. Heshmati's comment about Shi'as being so different from Sunni Muslims was a common clerical description of these two major branches of Islam. It also represents the way anthropologists commonly think about these sectarian differences, even in the U.S. (Walbridge 1996, 121). In Mr. Heshmati's explanation, the delineation between Shi'as and Sunnis is rooted in the clear-cut dispute over the righteous successor of the Prophet of Islam. Shi'as believe that the Twelve descendants of the Prophet were his righteous successors, whereas Sunnis believe the successors were companions of the Prophet, elected by the community of believers, known as Caliphs. This difference between the sects is emphasized by many scholars, for example Beeman: "the principal difference [between the sects] lies in determining the succession of leadership to the faith" (Beeman 2008, 71). In addition to historical differences between the sects, scholars who have studied Shi'i communities in the U.S. also emphasize the convergence of religion and politics, arguing that Sunni institutions funded by the Saudi State, and Shi'i organizations supported by Iran, represent the political doctrines of those respective governments (Sachedina 1994, 7; Takim 2002, 219). By contrast, I observed that many Shi'a Iranians did not consider the differences between these two groups to constitute the "deep Islamic disagreement," as asserted by Mr. Heshmati, whose viewpoint reflects Shi'i clerical doctrine.

For instance, in the mosque in Greavesville, a rural area in Upper South, wherein members followed the ritual prayer based on Sunni traditions, I asked Bahram, a Shi'a member, how he reconciled the "deep Islamic disagreement" described by Mr. Hashemi. He said, "I do whatever they do and just follow their way. We don't pay attention to these details." My ethnographic findings demonstrate that members of the Shi'i community,

when they are among Sunnis, immerse themselves and follow the way of the majority. Bahram's approach, this practice of immersing oneself among the majority, was shared by others I met.

In this chapter, I examine how Iranian Americans negotiate their religiosity in context. In doing so, I show how they actualize religious identity in ways that differ from the dominant ways of practicing Shi'ism represented by the institution of clerics and the Iranian state. I found that they practice Shi'ism in ways that challenge clerical principles, and that their own understandings of Islam are shaped by everyday experiences that complicated the Shi'a-Sunni dichotomy. For example, even though the majority of Iranians consider themselves to be Shi'a Muslim, and that the succession of Ali as the first Imam the essential principle of Shi'ism[18], I observed that some people with whom I did my research used the term "the Prophet's son-in-law" for Ali instead of the term Imam, when they were in a group with Sunnis. This is an example of how they indicate their respect for Ali while avoiding the issue that Ali and his descendant are considered the authority after the Prophet. Instead, they evoked a shared belief that Ali is "the Prophet's son-in-law," worthy of reverence.

I explore the example of "immersion in the majority" in conversation with key ideas from diasporic religious studies, illustrating the "high degree of cultural permeability" of members of diaspora whose performances of Shi'ism present versions that sometime contradict the fundamental principles of the faith (Boyarin and Boyarin 2002, 8). I

[18] Although Shi'i Muslims believe Ali was assigned by the Prophet as his successor, after the Prophet's death the majority of the community disregarded this fact and considered Abu Bakr as his successor, known as the first Caliph. After 25 years, the Muslim community belatedly recognized Ali as the fourth Caliph. Moreover, Ali's descendants, known as the Twelve Imams, are the successors of the Prophet in Shi'ism.

approach these performances from the perspective that views diasporic religion not as "a fixed construct with definable attributes," but instead as a "fluid field of practices and meanings" (D'Alisera 2013, 3). This is a strategy that shifted the very meaning of religion from "what shall I believe" to "how shall I believe it"—a distinction between "religiousness" and "religious-mindedness" (Vertovec 2000, 149). I understand "religiousness" as being committed to religious principles as a pious practitioner, while "religious-mindedness" gives the practitioners and opportunity to negotiate religious practice in context. For instance, when I observed a Shi'a member skip the phrase that emphasizes Ali's God-given succession in the calling for prayer at the Sunni mosque, I understood this to be a kind of act of "religious-mindedness," which was neither conversion to Sunnism nor betrayal of Shi'ism.

In the existing literature about Shi'ism in the U.S., we know about the heterogeneity of Shi'i communities that, far from being a homogeneous community, embraces a mosaic of diverse ethnic and cultural groups in the U.S. (Takim 2008; Takim 2002). We also know that the political situation of the Middle East has had a direct impact on Shi'i leadership (Walbridge 1996, 1999), how Shi'i groups form various socioeconomic classes based on their national origins (Leonard 2003), how they are committed to the role of the Twelve Imams in interpreting the Quran, in addition to the Prophet's sayings (*hadith*) (Schubel 1996), and how Shi'i mosques are highly dependent on the leadership of *ulama* and *marjas* (clerics) (Sachedina 1994). However, we know less about how and why individuals in these communities, independent from clerics, create contextual meanings of Shi'ism that, in some cases, contrast with basic Shi'i principles, and how they incorporate their own interpretations into the practice of Shi'i Islam.

In what follows, I explore how Iranian Americans, independent from clerics, negotiate the very fundamental principles of Shi'ism in three ways. First, in "Situational Islam" and "Reading Arabic" sections, I investigate heterogeneities within the Shi'i communities of Winstonburg and Simonstown. I argue that despite the sharp contrast with the jurisprudence of Shi'ism, individuals do not deny the continuity of Shi'i tradition in their everyday lives. Second, in the section "The True Successor," I draw on examples of clerical sermons to demonstrate how sectarian disagreements are still emerging in clerical statements, even though the members disregard them strategically in their everyday lives. Third, in "Shi'a immersion the Sunni majority," I examine how Shi'a practitioners immerse themselves in majority-Sunni contexts while retaining their Shi'i identity. In doing so, I draw on ethnographic analysis of certain rituals to explore how individuals renegotiate and substitute certain Shi'i principles. Finally, in the section "Reconstructed Taqiya," I conclude by reflecting on *taqiya*, which is interpreted by anthropologists as "dissimulation" (Fischer 1980; Beeman 2008). Through this process, Iranian Americans strategically incorporate their own interpretations of certain practices of Shi'ism to reconcile their identity within various social contexts.

2.1 Situational Islam

During the summer of 2017, I spent time with some Iranians to develop friendships during preliminary research in Winstonburg. I established a friendship with Taher, a man in his thirties, who was connected to the religious group of Iranians in Winstonburg. The group that was categorized "good people"[19] by Masoud (see Ch. 1: Positionality). As I

[19] This is a term that is translated from the Farsi term (*bache khub*) that one of my interlocutors used (See the introduction).

explained in Chapter 1, one of my interlocutors, Masoud, differentiated the religious from non-religious Iranians of Winstonburg by who drinks or doesn't drink alcohol. One evening at the gym, I introduced Taher to another Iranian acquaintance, Salman, a man in his late thirties; they were both engineers. After a couple of sentences about their expertise, Salman asked Taher to hang out sometime and oddly asked if he drinks alcohol. Taher answered, "yes, I drink occasionally." By his response, I doubted my earlier assumption of him belonging to the group of Iranians in Winstonburg that Masoud categorized as "good people" only because they do not drink alcohol.

One night that Taher, Salman, and I who explicitly called himself an atheist, got together, a heated debate emerged about the origin of the universe. Salman and I had similar views about the topic and referred to our very general knowledge about science, biology, and astronomy. Taher was quite sure about how the universe came to being and was trying to prove it by using an example of a sugar cube he was holding in his hand while drinking tea. He argued:

> "this simple object that we consume with our tea and have never paid attention has taken a very complicated process to manufacture. I have worked in the sugar cube manufactory and know how difficult this process is. Now compare this sugar cube [holding it on his hand] with *this* complicated universe. Do you simply think this universe and nature, came by itself [randomly formed without any creator], and is not, came by God [created by a grand creator]? For sure there must be an omnipotent creator to engineer this complicated universe."

His reasoning was reflective of this religious belief about the origin of the universe. His comment seemed to demonstrate a strong attachment to the group of religious Iranians in Winstonburg. However, drinking alcohol "occasionally," and being a member of the group that excludes those who drink alcohol because it is prohibited in Islam, was

confusing for me. This conversation made me interested in attending the weekly *jalase*[20], religious meeting of the "good people" of Winstonburg. I asked Taher if he participated in their gatherings. Taher confirmed that he was an active member of Heydar Center, the Islamic center of the Shi'i community of Winstonburg, and that they usually have these types of discussions in weekly Quran reading sessions.

A few days later, he sent me a video made of NASA pictures that started with an image of earth from space before zooming out to the Milky Way, and then to the whole universe in which earth became a super small particle. That video was mixed with a verse of Quran recitation: "It is Allah who has created the seven heavens, and of the earth their like" (12: 65). He sent this video, perhaps as further evidence for the fact that the universe was created as described in the Quran. In my next meeting with Salman and Taher, this topic was brought up, and Salman questioned Taher on how NASA pictures can prove the existence of "the seven heavens." While Taher responded, I heard what he had repeated on many occasions, "it is in the Qur'an," meaning this is the ultimate "scientific" proof. I specifically clarified to determine if he distinguishes "science" from *'elm*, knowledge, understanding (for the concept of 'elm in Muslim though see Bush 2020, 188; Amir Arjomand 2000, 11). He responded:

> "it is in hadith of the Shi'a Imams that human science before *zohur* (the reappearance of the twelfth Shi'a Imam), with its developed stage at the time reached only to number two out of twenty. It is only after the reappearance of Imam Mahdi (the twelfth Imam) that human science can be completed [twenty out of twenty]."

[20]There are different translations for the Islamic gatherings among different Muslim communities with the same Arabic root; *majlis* (Schubel 1991; Schubel 1996; Ba-Yunus 1991; Dannin and Stahl 1996). I borrow this translation from Azam Torab (Torab 2006, 1996), which is what Iranian Muslims use in their Farsi everyday conversations.

For Taher, that Quranic statements are not only a knowledge or an understanding of a belief system but also of scientific facts. If we cannot understand them, it is not because they are untrue but rather because human science has not yet been developed enough. However, I could not understand how he resolved "drinking occasionally," which is prohibited by the Quran, on the one hand, and being a member of a group of pious people who excluded drinkers, on the other hand.

Taher's response of "drinking occasionally" might reflect his "individual adjustments and adaptations" (Aswad and Bilgé 1996) to the condition of the host country or his "situational play of identities" (Werbner 2015, 2002). His understanding of Islam is perhaps reconstructed through synchronic dynamics of identities that are continuously made and remade in different contexts—the context of a Shi'i network that has weekly Quran reading sessions and the context of friends who go out and drink alcohol. Taher's expression of "drinking occasionally" and understanding the Quranic statements as absolute scientific facts provide good examples of "the dynamic logic of diasporic situational separations of identities and their fusion, achieved through creative acts of cultural performance" (Werbner 2002, 56-7)[21].

An Iranian who lives in diaspora can have a kind of flexible approach to the rules of religion, unlike in Iran, where the punishment for drinking alcohol is eighty lashes

[21] Shahab Ahmed discusses the wine-drinking habit of some Muslims by connecting it to Persian paintings in which Islamic artists in 1520 depicted a poem of Hafiz. Ahmed drew on his philosophical analysis to state: "wine is not merely a drink of this Seen world but is also the drink of the Unseen World" (Ahmed 2016, 422). He separates the wine-drinking into the physical impact of alcohol as the "Seen world" and spiritual drunkenness as the "Unseen world," which is metaphorically used to describe devotion to love in Persian literature. I do not make this distinction regarding the wine-drinking habit. I ethnographically analyze the cultural practice of "occasional drinking" by an Iranian Muslim in the U.S. If my interlocutors referred to alcoholic beverages as "the drink of the Unseen World" or spiritual drunkenness, I would ask about this metaphorical understanding of drinking during my interview. However, when Taher and Salman talked about drinking, they literally talked about a pack of beer they might buy from a liquor store.

(Iranian Islamic Penal Code 1991: Article 264-5). Similarly, Salman would never ask if Taher drinks alcohol in Iran because it is a crime. Moreover, Salman could not simply make heretical comments about the origin of the universe. If he was in Iran that comment would be considered heresy, and according to the Article 167 of the Iranian Constitution, the judge could decide for the fatal punishment (Ramazani 1980).

Based on the earlier comment that Masoud made, the members of Winstonburg Shi'i network are "good people" because they are committed to the Quranic teaching on the prohibition of alcohol. However, Taher's case went beyond Masoud's logic of "either/or" and shows that one can violate the Quranic exegesis regarding the prohibition of alcohol while passionately believing that the Quran is the absolute scientific reference (Wilson and Dissanayake 1996). Taher's flexible morality is a consequence of the diasporic situation. The fact that Taher occasionally drinks alcohol does not indicate he denies the principle of Islam on the prohibition of alcohol, rather he disorganized and reorganized those principle according to logics of diaspora to keep a new friendship that he might lose if he asserted he does not (Boyarin and Boyarin 2002, 10).

2.2 Reading Arabic

During the Quran sessions in the Simonstown Shi'i community, I observed a very innovative way of reading the scripture in terms of translation and understanding exact meanings of the Quranic words. The Quran sessions were conducted by Negar, a woman in her fifties who had PhD, along with other Iranians, including men and women in a non-segregated space. Dr. Naser, who attended the session usually with his parents, was a second-generation Iraqi and grew up in the U.S. A Pakistani man who brought his son,

who played with Dr. Naser kids in the next room, usually attended without his wife. Sister Asma was another Pakistani woman in her forties, who also brought her kids. Sometimes her Iranian husband came to the hall and said hello to everyone, but he never attended the sessions. There were two American women, Laura, a woman in her late fifties who had an Iranian husband I never saw, and Linda, a woman in her late sixties who attended with her Iranian husband, Hajj Eynollah. Sister Ruqia was an Iraqi woman in her late fifties who was always making comments and had answers to every question.

In August 2019, they were reading chapter (*Sura*) 29, The Spider (*al-Ankaboot*), and discussing the meanings of verse 29:

> "What! Do you come to men, and cut off the way, and commit outrages in your gatherings?' But the only answer of his people was that they said, 'Bring down us Allah's punishment, if you are truthful.'"

Negar usually read the Farsi translation, and she then asked Laura or Linda, who had converted to Islam read the English translation, and then of one the Iraqi members read the Arabic. After reading the Farsi translation, Iranian members were not sure about the first sentence: "commit outrages in your gatherings." They asked sister Ruqia and another Iraqi woman, whose first language was Arabic. They tried to explain the meaning of the first sentence of the verse in English.

After Ruqia and the Iraqi woman described the meaning of the original Arabic sentence, Mohsen, a man in his fifties, was surprised that the Farsi translation did *not* reflect the actual meaning. The Farsi translation described the phrase "commit outrages in your gatherings" as a simple gathering. But their translation indicated "eating prohibited (*harâm*) food and drinking alcohol." Then, Mohsen asked Laura to read the English translation, which was also vague. Negar played another English translation of the verse

from her laptop. Even the second English translation did not specify what two Iraqi, Arabic-speakers explained. Mohsen dramatized this by saying, “the meaning and translation can be misleading.”

Their discussion then went through the “punishment,” mentioned in the last sentence of the verse. When they were talking about the “punishment,” I noticed that Baqer (Negar’s husband) argued that God is gracious and merciful, referring to the phrase with which each chapter in the Quran starts, “In the name of God, Most Gracious, Most Merciful.” Therefore, he does not need to punish anybody. Sister Ruqia alluded to what happened to Saddam Hossein, meaning everybody who has done bad deeds will end up with a miserable life in this world, according to God’s will. She indicated that nobody needs to be punished, either by God or human.

Another verse that caused a heated discussion was verse 33:

> “And when Our messengers came to Lot, he was distressed on their account and in a predicament for their sake. But they said, ‘Do not be afraid, nor grieve! We shall deliver you and your family, except your wife: she will be one of those who remain behind.”

After reading all translations, it was Mohsen who brought up “why the majority of prophets’ wives either betrayed them or were killed. The same thing happened to majority of Shi’a Imams’ wives too. They were poisoned by their wives. Why they could not give their wives guidance.” Mohsen seemed to be sarcastically critical and might already have had a response. He said, “maybe their wives were the closest person to them and aware of their basic traits and needs.” I found his comment intriguing because of the ways in which it questioned the holiness of the prophets and the imams.

They also asked, mostly Mohsen, why women should wear hijab. Mohsen commented, “why men can pray however they want in front of *Khoda* (God), contrary to

women who must veil and cover their hair to pray, even if nobody presents but God? Is Khoda a man? Khoda is omnipresent. He may see women in the shower naked, why they should cover themselves for prayer?" The women reacted by saying that they must be covered before God to be respectful of his majesty. Negar's husband (Baqer) developed his own theory and said, "let's just we, men, in this group, talk about it. Put aside all the religious regulation. Which woman is more attractive, the one who is naked or one who is veiled?" Mohsen said, "it is relative. This is your opinion." Baqer tried to prove that this is a universal fact, that all men are more attracted to the women who are veiled and covered.

In the following week, they continued reading the rest of the chapter. They discussed *Qarun* (Korah) after reading verse 39. *Qarun* is a Quranic, as well as biblical, character known for rebellion against Moses: he is a symbol of wealth without morality. They agreed that nothing is wrong with being rich. However, problems arise if you become wealthy and act like *Qarun*. They brought up some examples of some billionaires who also donate money to charities. Negar said, "we are in the U.S. and this country is running by capitalist system. Nothing is wrong with that. We also wish our children become engineers and doctors [MD], to become rich. No problem with that. But what kind of manner they have after becoming. That is the point." Ayda, a woman in her sixties, responded, "being rich is good. But being rich in morality and behavior is more important."

They continued with the next verse,

> "Ad and Thamud (Their fate) is manifest unto you from their (ruined and deserted) dwellings. Satan made their deeds seem fair unto them and so debarred them from the Way, though they were keen observers" (Quran 29:38).

This verse caused ambiguity. Again, Mohsen asked to read different Farsi and English translations. The controversial term (*mustabserun*) simply translated to "observers." This word comes from the Arabic root (*basar*), which means "sight," according to the majority of the Iranians' basic Arabic knowledge. Different versions of this root are very common in everyday Persian language, such as *basirat*, which means "insight." After Sister Ruqia's explanation, they were surprised that this word sometimes has an opposite meaning and might mean "blind." They double-checked with Dr. Naser's father. He agreed that the word has dual meanings. It appeared to me that the diasporic milieu of discussing Quranic concepts, although they may arise the issue of misunderstanding the text when Iranian Muslims encounter Arab-speaking fellow, faced them with a reality that Islamic regulations, attributed to the "Word of God," may not properly be understood from the Quran.

Csordas proposes two aspects of religions "that must be attended to in determining whether or not they travel well, what [he] will call *portable practice* and *transposable message*" (Csordas 2009, 4). Many forms of yoga or Chinese Feng Shui are among such globalized "portable practices." For Csordas, "whether a religious message is transposable and in what degree depends on either its plasticity (transformability) or its generalizability (universality)" (Csordas 2009, 5). My interlocutors' discussion over possible meanings of a Quranic term in Persian, Arabic, and English reveals their Islams' "plasticity" and "generalizability," which radically stand against jurisprudential Islam. None of the participants of the session claimed to have the correct meaning of the term. Conversely, by engaging in a process of debating, they shared all possible meanings, dethroning their notions of Islam from the unitary meaning of the word.

I situate this "phenomenology" as a framework in my anthropological inquiry, in order to highlight the multiplicity of practices of Islam, such as Mohsen's sarcastic remark about the prophets' imperfect marital relationships, which cannot be excluded from the texture of the Muslim community (Merleau-Ponty 2007). These types of comments have not been heard from any Islamic clerics, and thus they have not received any attention because studies of Islam focus primarily on authorities' and clerics' opinions rather than on actual practitioners' (Fibiger 2015). It is true that an anthropology of Islam should be approached, "as Muslim do, from the concept of a discursive tradition that includes and relates itself to the founding texts" (Asad [1986] 2009, 14).

However, it is not clear who interprets the founding texts for Muslims. There exist hierarchical relations of interpretation, ranging from "imams, governors, muftis, judges, and respected scholars acted as the providers of answers for populace" (Messick 1993, 251). Shifting the paradigm from religious authorities and clerics to Muslims' practices and ordinary people's understandings, I am interested in how Muslims as people practice Islam; therefore, "it is a matter of describing, not of explaining or analyzing" (Merleau-Ponty 2007, 134). I agree with Wittgenstein's idea that, "we can only *describe* and say, human life is like that. Compared with the impression that what is described here makes on us, the explanation is too uncertain" (Wittgenstein 2008, 80). This approach helped me avoid making any assumptions about "true Islam" and focus instead on the ways in which my interlocutors gave meaning to their religious practice.

2.3 The True Successor

Amir-Ali had already invited me to take part in the Event of Ghadir Khumm at the Center in August 2019. According to Shi'ism, this event commemorates when the Prophet announced Ali as his successor; therefore, it is one of the most important celebrations for Shi'a Muslims. Amir-Ali, in the previous session, had asked me if I would let him know if I was coming so that he could prepare enough food for everyone, as he was in charge of the event. Later, I found that he was *Sayid* (the Prophet descendant), thus he is supposed to provide the votive meal for the event. After eating votive food, they went to the prayer room and prayed, with Yousef leading prayer. Afterward, they played the Aminollah prayer [the Ghadir Khumm prayer] on the screen and read it together from the text on their phones. This event is not recognized by Sunni as an Islamic holiday. Therefore, the content of sermons on Ghadir are usually conducted to emphasize the succession of Ali after the Prophet. Interestingly, Yousef delivered the sermon, which represented the way Shi'i clerics exaggerate the role of Ali for Muslim leadership because they believe Ali's right to leadership was neglected by Sunni Muslims.

2.3.1 Lecture about the concept of mowla

Yousef's sermon started by reading the famous statement by the Prophet on the event: "Anyone who has me as his *mawla* [guardian], has Ali as his *mawla*." Yousef asserted that the statement was clear enough that it did not need any reasoning and proving. However, he claimed that Sunnis and opponents of Ali have reduced the whole statement into a word of *mawla* as "friend." He referred to the Prophet hadith, which says "if I

wasn't scared of what Muslims might do with Ali because of the way Nazarenes (Christians) treated Jesus, I would reveal *all* virtues of Ali." Due to the miraculous way in which Jesus was born, Nazarenes overexaggerated by calling Jesus the son of God, according to Yousef. Therefore, whatever we know about Ali is not all his wisdoms. He argued that it was mostly because his opponents and enemies throughout history have tried to denigrate him and not disseminate his virtues.

Then he went on to tell a detailed story about Shemr sitting on the third Shi'a Imam Hossein's chest to cut his head off, and the Imam laughed and said, "why are you doing this?" Shemr said, "*boghzan le-Ali*, which means because of the *boghz* [hatred] toward your father [Ali]." Yousef then shifted the horizon from the battle of Karbala to the early Islamic era, when Muawiyah[22] gave a goat to the kids of Damascus and Kufa to grow up and play with. After the children became attached to the goat, Muawiyah's people took the goats from the children, explaining that Ali took their goats. By telling these stories, Yousef argued, people systematically spread hatred against Ali. Therefore, children grew hatred from their early ages toward Ali, which became acculturated and embodied in believers' hearts. Therefore, Ali's opponents have done their best to hide Ali's virtue throughout history.

2.3.2 "The clergyman in Najaf Seminary"

In another part of his lecture, Yousef told another story to discuss Ali's greatness. The story was about a young clergyman who was a student in the Najaf Seminary, and he was financially in a tight spot. The Najaf Seminary in Iraq and the Qom seminary in Iran are

[22] the founder of the Ummayyah Caliphate

the preeminent seminary centers of Shi'i education. The young clergyman, according to Yousef, visited the shrine of Ali and consulted with and entreated the Imam, complaining about his rough economic situation.

Yousef continued, Imam Ali came in a dream at night and told him "if you want to stay in Najaf next to my shrine, this is going to be your lifestyle: simple bread, yogurt, and vegetables. If you want a more prosperous lifestyle, go to Hyderabad, India and look for a man and tell him this half-line of a poem: *it goes to heaven and becomes as the sun*." The young clergyman got up in the morning and went to the shrine and consulted the Imam again and said, "I am suffering from my economic condition, so why would you refer me to India?" Again, he had another dream, and the Imam said the same thing.

The young clergyman gathered his belongings and traveled to India. He found the man's house and knocked on the door and told him the half-line of the poem. The man, who was rich, invited him inside his house and gave him half of his wealth, offering marriage to his youngest, prettiest daughter. When the young, shocked clergyman asked the reason, the rich man told him that he composed a half-line of poetry in Imam Ali's praise a while ago: *if Ali looks at a speck of dust out of favor*. But he could not finish the other half. He was struggling so much, and he asked many Persian poets in India to complete this line, but none of their poetry was compelling.

Therefore, he made a vow: if anyone could complete this line, he would donate half of his wealth and would agree to marry his daughter to them. Eventually, the clergyman showed up, and his half-line perfectly matched with the rest. The young clergyman told the rich man that he did not compose this half-verse, but Imam Ali came into his dream

and revealed this poetry to him: *if Ali looks at a speck dust out of favor, it goes to heaven and becomes as the sun*.[23]

These ethnographic examples reflect the paradigmatic Shi'i themes in popular preaching in Iran. However, I observed that these paradigmatic themes are cautiously put aside, sometimes even challenged, by practitioners during their conversations and in interviews. Although Shi'a Muslims usually refer to Shi'a Imams as examples of morality, mercy, and compassion, they do not bring up Shi'a-Sunni disagreements. For instance, Keyvan, a man in his sixties who continuously participated in the Quran sessions, mentioned, "I do not believe in Shi'a or Sunni title for us. We are Muslims and there is one source for us to refer to, the Quran." This differentiation disappears especially when living and practicing Islam in a majority-Sunni context.

2.4 Shi'a immersion in the Sunni majority

Taqiya (dissimulation) or fluctuation of Muslimness?

During the rituals and gatherings, I always tried to recruit interlocutors. Through the members of the Heydar Center, I was introduced to Dr. Bahram by his nephew. He was in his late fifties, and he had lived in Greavesville for over twenty years with his family. I had seen him occasionally in some of the major rituals, but not the weekly Quran-reading sessions. He travels to Winstonburg from Greavesville from one of the smaller cities in the region and cannot frequent all events of the network in Winstonburg. When I talked to him about my research, he explained that the Muslim community is very small in Greavesville. When I asked about other Iranian members of the community, supposedly

[23] Farsi transliteration: "*be zare gar nazar lotf Bu Torab konad, be asman ravad o kar aftab konad"*

Shi'a Muslims, he said that he was the only Shi'a Muslim in the city. However, he added, they have their own Muslim (not Shi'i) community, their network, gatherings, and their own mosque. He asserted that if I wanted to meet the community, Friday prayer is the proper occasion to establish rapport.

I participated in the Friday prayers on multiple occasions. They gathered each Friday around 2 pm for prayer. Before the prayer, one of them gave a *Khutbah* (a public preaching). Bahram told me that they do not have designated imam for this mosque. It circulates among members and every week one of us give a Khutbah. As soon as I entered the mosque and talked to Bahram, he introduced me to Dr. Hakim, a Pakistani man in his sixties. While we were talking about the imam of the mosque, he said, "I usually encourage them to give Khutbah. If they are not ready, I usually give a lecture."

During my participation at the Islamic Center of Greavesville, either before or after the prayers and lectures, I did not hear any indication of what I usually observed among the community in Winstonburg, about Shi'a-Sunni differences. During my participant-observations, I met Muslim doctors from India, Egypt, and Pakistan who took part in the Friday prayers with their wives. Bahram was the only Iranian in this community. Lecture topics were general, such as the importance of the Quran, how prayer keeps Muslims from evil and should never be neglected, how to pass on the Islamic values to the children, and the importance of serving and being respectful to parents and elders etc., shored up with some verses from the Quran and rarely some famous *hadith* (sayings attributed to the Prophet).

Once it was Bahram's turn to give a Khutbah. I did not hear any mention of Ali and Shi'a tradition in his sermon. His topic was about *Tawakkul*, which is an Islamic concept

of reliance on God or “trusting in God's plan.” This is a very general concept in Islam that both Shi’a and Sunni agreed on. In his preaching he constantly referred to Quranic verses and some *hadiths*.

When I asked Dr. Bahram, “now that you are the only Shi’a Muslim in this community, how do you handle those differences?”

He said, “I do whatever they do and just follow their [Sunnis] way. We don’t pay attention to these details,” referring to himself, his wife, and his children.

After his sermon, one of them recited the Azan, the Muslim call to prayer. Then everybody lined up for prayer. Since it was Bahram’s turn to give Khutbah, he also stood in the front to lead the prayer. The rest of us stood in one queue.

One of the differences between the two main branches of Islam is the using of *mohr*, which is a small piece of soil or clay tablet on which to put one’s head during prayer, a key part of the Shi’a tradition.

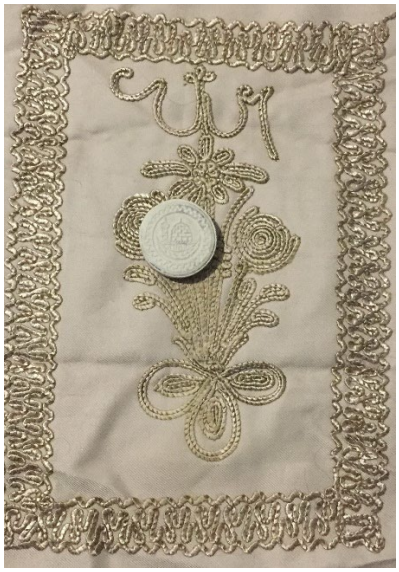

Figure 1: Typical mohr

Sunni Muslims strongly reject this because they believe it is an idolatrous act that symbolizes what Arabs used to do in worshiping idols before the rise of Islam. However, for Shi'a Muslims, the clay tablet is one of the requirements for prayer to be accepted and rewarded by God. If there is exception, in the case that they cannot find the clay tablet, they can use their thumb. Bahram and I were the only Shi'as in the congregation prayer. While they were lining up, I tried to locate a clay tablet in the mosque, but I could not find one. These tablets are typically provided in Shi'i mosques. Dr. Bahram started the prayer and the rest of the group followed. I tried to use my thumb during the *sujud* (low bowing or prostration) part of the prayer, when everybody put their head on the ground. However, I observed that Dr. Bahram did not use even his thumb and just followed the Sunni style. Another integral part of the prayer in Shi'i style is *qunut*, which literally means supplication, the act of holding hands in a palms-up and together position. Bahram did not recite that step of the prayer either.

Growing up in a Shi'a majority society, I have never been part of the Sunni congregational prayer. By the end of the first round of prayer, they shook hands and said "*taqabalallah*," meaning God may accept that. Thereafter, they sat in a circle and talked. After a while, Bahram stood up and recited *azan*, the call to pray, for the second round. The interesting point was that he also skipped the two additional sentences that Shi'a Muslim recite in their azan. The typical call for prayer starts with: "I bear witness that there is no God to be worshiped but Allah, and that Muhammad is the Messenger of Allah." However, Shi'a Muslims add two more sentences to their *azan* and proclaim, "I bear witness that Ali is Allah's *vali* and Allah's proof." If we get back to what Yousef

passionately discussed in his sermon, we must translate the last part of Shi'i *azan* as "Ali is God's successor," after the Prophet.

In any kind of praying congregation, believed by Muslims to have more social and spiritual benefits than the individual prayer, the imam or the one who leads the prayer, recites the Quranic verses while others remain silent. This act means the imam is the representative of the whole group. I observed that Bahram recited every single step of the verses and was not silent for any part while Dr. Hakim was leading the prayer. This might be related to practicing *taqiya* (dissimulation), which "helps keep disputes between Shi'tes and Sunnis covert. Shi'ites are permitted to pray behind a Sunni imam, and to behave like Sunnis when among a Sunni majority" (Fischer and Abedi 1990, 291-292). However, following the Shi'i tradition, we were the only ones who did not fold our arms during the prayer. Contrary to the rest who kept their arms folded, following the Sunni style.

Another fascinating point about the Muslim community is the participation of local Christian people in their ceremonies. This community does not celebrate specific Shi'i rituals; however, they commemorate ceremonies that all Muslims are agreed on such as Eid al-Fitr, which is the holiday that marks the end of Ramadan, a month of fasting in Islam. During a Friday prayer, I observed a local white man sitting in the corner, listening to Khutbah. Later when speaking to Dr. Shakur, an Egyptian man in his fifties, he introduced me to the local man, Dave.

Dr. Shakur asked him, "how was the Khutbah? Did that make any sense to you?"

Dave said, "it was very good; I enjoyed that. We have many things in common regarding God, specifically loving one another and goodness."

Shakur stated, “we have gathered here from different backgrounds, but under the same umbrella of Islam. And each of us have their own tradition in practicing Islam, like having different food that we each think that our food is more delicious than the others.”

Dave made a comment and said, “I love that part. The foods are amazing every time that I come here.”

On my way out, Shakur showed me the mosque’s bulletin board at the entrance and said, “you need to take a picture of this for your research. It shows our diversity, but unity under the *house of God* [the mosque].”

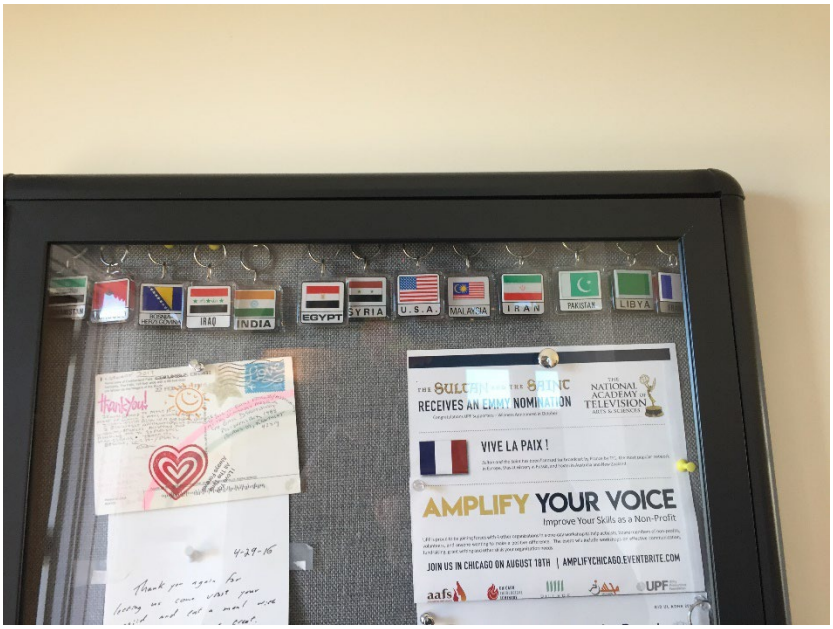

Figure 2: Bulletin of the Greavesville mosque

2.4.1 Masjid of Footland

My experience of participating in the Masjid (mosque) in Footland was similar to my experience at the Greavesville’s mosque in terms of topics of the lectures. Likewise, the one who delivered the sermon discussed general issues like spreading Islamic morality

and having good relationships with children, especially girls. At one of the Friday prayers, the preacher was a member of an institution who worked with Hollywood to promote the public opinion about Muslims in the film industry. His lecture was mostly about how Muslim men should build up their relationships, especially with their daughters, by referring to scientific research that revealed that the majority of young girls' deviations are rooted in their relationship with their fathers. He discussed the Prophet's relationship with his daughter Fatima, which he said epitomized an ideal example of father-daughter relations, one that should be followed by all Muslim fathers.

The reason I picked this mosque as one of my field sites was that I could not find any connection through the Iranian community. Instead, I found out there was a mosque in this city via a website and email contact. Once I sent an email and explained my research purpose, I quickly received a response from Adeeb. He told me that they have weekly congregational prayer, and it would be a proper time for me to participate in and get to know the Muslim community in Greavesville.

The first time that I entered the mosque, Adeeb recognized that I must be the person who had emailed him. He came close and introduced himself. It was before the lecture and the prayer. He asked a couple more questions about my research and asked if I had a questionnaire. I explained my method, and he suggested that the best way would be to introduce me after the lecture, so that people could get to know me. The lecture was in English, and sometimes, when he referred to Quranic verses or hadith, he read them in Arabic. The topic of the lecture was about Muslims' unity, and the necessity to keep Islamic centers open and visible, so that Muslims can participate and meet each other, showing the larger American society that they have the same healthy religious and social

interaction within their own community. At the end of the lecture, a man stood by the door with a box in his hand, and individuals dropped in donations for the mosque.

After the lecture and prayer, after he introduced me, we stayed more and talked briefly about the history of the Muslim community and the mosque. He introduced his friend, Qadir, a man in his late forties. They were the founders of the mosque and the ones who opened and closed the building. In terms of the history, Adeeb said that they first bought a house in 1991 with the collected money of the community. That house was the place for ritual, ceremonies, and gatherings; no one lived there. However, after 2014, they decided to build the current mosque by collecting money from all members of the community. When I asked them about the original nationalities of the participants, they said they were both from Pakistan like most the members of the mosque; however, Muslims from other countries – Libya, Iraq, India, and Saudi Arabia – also had come to their mosque. They mentioned that they have had two Iranians as well. But it was a long time ago and have moved to another state because of their job. After talking about the community, Adeeb was curious about the main questions of my research. I briefly told him that I study the multiplicity of Muslim identities in the U.S. So, Qadi said, "nationality has no meaning here. Their nation is Islam when they come to the mosque."

I asked Qadir to clarify, "do you mean nationality goes away, and they all become a united Muslim *umma* [community of believers]?"

He responded, "exactly."

I mildly tried to bring up the Shi'a-Sunni differentiation by asking, "since I from with background in which the majority of society was Shi'a Muslim. What I have seen and

learned is rooted in that tradition in terms of style of prayer and slight differences in ritual performance. Do you think might catch anyone attention and causes any mishap?"

Adeeb both laughed and said, "no, no, we do not pay attention to this type of issues. We are all Muslims. That is enough."

Qadir added, "yeah we are all Muslims, and it is the only thing matters here." He continued by saying if Muslim populations were greater in this city, the diversity of mosques would grow; consequently, these types of issues would grow as well. But in this city, because there are very few Muslims, these differentiations have gone away. Somewhere like Simonstown, which is a large city with many Iranians and Pakistanis, groups here have their own mosque and each community practices Islam in its own language. But here the main language is English, according to Qadir. He noted, however, that sometimes the one who is assigned to deliver the lecture for a certain week might do so in Arabic.

I asked, "what do the non-Arabic speakers do?"

He laughed and said, "they get along with it. They understand some of it. They still receive its *savâb* [spiritual reward]." The differences between Shi'a and Sunni that were exaggerated by emphasizing the role of Ali in the sermons of Ghadir, as well as the "deep disagreement" mentioned by Mr. Heshmati, were not issues among these group of Muslims.

Scholars who have focused on Shi'i communities in the U.S. often refer to internal disagreements among Shi'as, which are related to political and ideological issues in the "Middle East," on one hand, and the Shi'i leadership and the individuals and groups who identify with Ayatollah Khomeini's theories and view, Baqir as-Sadr or Fadlallah, on the

other (Walbridge 1999, 53-4). I do not suggest that internal disagreement within the Shi'i community does not exist. Nor do I deny the continuity of the Shi'i tradition emphasizing the role of Ali as the true successor among Shi'i community in the U.S. However, I draw on my ethnographic analysis to demonstrate that there is no ultimate "pure" form of Shi'ism.

As I have shown in the everyday conversations and rituals of these groups, differences were circumvented in order to maintain the integrity of the entire Muslim community. I found that people developed an understanding of the Islamic principle to justify their action separate from clerical approval. Through detailed ethnographic details, I explored how community members consciously "promote individual agendas and personalized interpretations that may contradict collective ideals and shared meanings" (Wirtz 2007, 137). These collective ideals and orthodox meanings of Shi'ism, such as the issue of the righteous successor of the Prophet, are put aside in order to promote a sense of community and religious cohesion among all Muslims.

2.4.2 Khutbah of the Friday Prayer

The week following when I participated in the Friday congregational prayer, it was Qadir's turn to give the *khutbah*. And I think our conversation somehow affected his choice of topic for the week. The main idea of the lecture was the importance of the Quran in the Muslim community. The Quran is like GPS for Muslims, according to Qadir. Whenever they feel they are lost in their everyday life, they need to go back to the Quran and find the true answer about their problem.

He said, “we set reminders in our phone. The reminder is chapter *al-Rahman* [The Beneficent] of the Quran. We should read it every day to remind us.” He mentioned multiple times that we only need to consider the Quran and *hadith*, and constantly said, “all praise is just for Allah.” His lecture was full of comparison between religious-spiritual paths and university degrees. For instance, he said, “having knowledge is not enough we have to apply. Once we think we have PhD and know everything, is so misleading in the path of God. There is no end for learning about God’s graciousness.” He referred to al-Bukhari whenever he used any hadith. Al-Bukhari is the authentic hadith source for Sunnis.

What impressed me the most, was the fact that he referred to Rumi multiple times. Although Iranians read Rumi’s poetry, Shi’a clerics typically not only ignore his poetry, but sometimes passionately dispute him. This mostly because of his piece to question the Karbala event. At the end of his lecture, he asked people to donate money so that that the community and mosque could survive, since they do not have any funding but the money that members donate. He also introduced me again and talked about my research.

At the end of each Friday prayer, Qadir introduced me to an individual, Yamin, who was a man in his fifties and university professor of the medical sciences. I talked to Yamin multiple times after the Friday prayer. When we were talking about his experience of Islam and the community, he asserted that Islamic *umma* does not make sense here. When asked about if it does not fulfill enough his spiritual need of being part of a Muslim community, he just said, “it’s different. Islam here is very different because people are from different nations, personalities, language. This makes it difficult sometimes to understand and believe that we really are part of an *umma*. Although we are from

different background, language and culture, when we get together here it becomes an Islamic gathering, but it is not an *umma*, in my opinion. It is a Globalized Islam."

I then tried to bring up the differences between Shi'a and Sunni, he responded that they really do not talk about different sects in Islam. He also said even back home they do not really talk about these issues, "because Islam is pretty much the same." He also stated that he had an Iranian friend who used to come to this mosque and they were close friends, but they never talked about the fact that, "you Sunni, I am Shi'a." He said, "Muslims become more connected outside their own country. When they go out, they don't care where they are from, what language they speak, what they belong to, if they are Shi'a or Sunnis." At some point in our conversation, he made an interesting point by asking, "I really do not exactly about Shi'as. Do they believe that *Ali is the prophet*?"

I briefly explained that the difference is the issue of succession after the Prophet. Sunnis believe the Caliph and successor of the Prophet is Abu Bakr, his companion. Shi'as believe that the Imam and successor of the Prophet is Ali, his son-in-law and cousin. Since it was around the time an Iranian high-ranked military official had been killed by U.S. forces in Iraq, Yamin also commented, "I don't about the detail of Shi'i ideology or what Iranian government is doing in the region. I don't if he was the main reason for escalating chaos in the region. But I did not like this because he was a Muslim."

My experience participating in the Islamic practices of mosques in Footland and Greavesville demonstrate many things: when Muslims are living in a majority-Christian context, they put sectarian differences aside and become more united in the diasporic setting; second, although Islam is "pretty much the same," transnational milieu have

created a paradigm of Islam that is overwhelmingly engaged with providing answers for the social and cultural issues of, not only Muslims and their descendants, but also the entire American society; third, Shi'a Muslims (e.g. Yousef and Mr. Heshmati) who pursue the Shi'i clerical doctrine in dealing with of Sunnis, often misunderstand their position toward the majority of Muslims (Sunnis). In other words, Sunnis do not position themselves in combat against Shi'as. For instance, Yamin did not even know exactly what Shi'a Muslims believed in ("do they think Ali is the Prophet?"). Fundamental disparities can simply be skipped, and yet they can still be pious Muslims, like Bahram skipping the Shi'i part of the azan.

2.5 Reconstructed Taqiya

Taqiya (dissimulation) has played a pivotal role in the history of Shi'ism, since Shi'i believers have had to conceal their actual identity and faith to avoid persecution (Dabashi 2017, 114; Deeb 2011, 72; Fischer 1980, 70; Eickelman 1981, 214). It has also become one of the fundamental religious controversies with Sunnis (Keddie and Matthee 2002, 284). This concept is sometimes used in the West to accuse Muslims of systematically lying and deceiving (see Bangstad cited in Abu-Lughod 2016). Even those who study Islam scholastically are accused of being "stealth" jihadist[24] (Spencer 2008; Abu-Lughod 2016, 599). Obviously, Shi'a Muslims do not need to practice *taqiya* in the U.S. Their public procession for Ashura commemoration (Schubel 1996; Schubel 1991), mosques, and Islamic centers in America (Leonard 2003, 34-35) illustrate they can freely practice their faith. However, I argue that this practice has been neither completely left behind nor

[24] *Stealth Jihad: How Radical Islam Is Subverting America without Guns or Bombs*

has it been pursued via historical meaning. Rather, the diasporic position contributes to expanding the meanings of *taqiya* as a spectrum, applied situationally in social discourse by denoting various significations (Werbner and Basu 1998, 117).

For instance, the case of Bahram who said, "We don't pay attention to these details," or plainly skipped the crucial part of the call for payer indicating Ali's eligibility to receive God's succession after the Prophet. These actions do not mean Bahram concealed his Shi'i identity in the face of death. Everybody in the gatherings knew he was Iranian and Shi'a Muslim. Nor does it mean that he does not care about Shi'i traditions. On one occasion, when he came to Winstonburg to be among the members of Heydar Center, after the regular prayer and Quran reading while they were chatting and eating food, Bahram was warning younger members of the group about dangerous shootings, recommending they not to go out after certain time at night. He then told story of a young man who was part of the Muslim community who worked as a pizza delivery driver and accidentally got shot and passed away. While he was telling this story, one comment caught my attention. He kept saying "one of *our* people," and repeated "one of *our own* Shi'a people." Bahram's meaning of "*our* people" oscillated situationally.

Gellner points out, "oscillation of opinion, as one might expect, has nothing to do with reason; it has to do with the politics of fear, uncertainty, deference and hierarchy" (Gellner 1983, 9). I would argue that "our people" has multiple layers. When the closest layer, Shi'i fellows, are minority or not available, the second layer, Muslims in general (Sunnis or any sectors), becomes "our people," compared to the majority Christian host society. Although it not a traditional sense of *taqiya*, the phrase of "we don't pay

attention these details," is one of the fluctuated meanings of *taqiya*, performed merely in the context of the Muslim community of Greavesville.

I have noticed other types *taqiya* during my observations. During my interview with Yasin, a married man in his early thirties who was graduate student at University of Winstonburg, I began to categorize him as an Islamic Republic supporter based on his comments about Iran's leadership. At some point in our interview, he was defending Iran's military interventions in Syria, Yemen, Iraq with the excuse of defending "oppressed" people, which is each Muslim's duty according to the Quran. He said,

> "although it's our responsibility to defend the *oppressed* people, but it has different levels based on our ability. You see what is happing around the world. But cannot defend all of them. Defending the *oppressed* has levels. Sometimes, we have capability to support, for instance, Palestinians, or to defend the Harams[25], then, we physically do. Sometimes we cannot, we do not have the ability, then we do another level, which is taking action verbally. We verbally condemn, for instance, what Israelis do or what Indian do to Muslims. Remember Tabas operation[26]? Iran was so mad at the time. They did not anything, because they couldn't. They did not have the capability at the time. But, in the case of the *Sardar* [General officer], they responded that way."

The cautious use of the term "in the case of the Sardar," for the assassination of the Iranian high-ranked by the U.S. and also referring to Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) operation to launch missiles at the Ain al-Asad airbase as "that way," Yasin had his own way of performing *taqiya*. He did not want to get into trouble by using even the names of "Soleimani," or "Ain al-Asad." He continued by explicating the third level, stating, "sometimes you do not even capable to express your disagreement and

25. Haram means Shrine. He referred to Shrines of Zaynab and Ruqayyah, sister and daughter of the third Shi'i Imam Hossein. "Holy Shrine's Defenders" is the rhetoric that the Islamic Republic uses to call its troops in Syria to justify its military intervene.

26. He refers to the "Operation Eagle Claw," in which U.S. Armed Forces attempted to entered Iran to end the Hostage Crisis and saved fifty-two U.S. staff. However, the operation was failed because of sandstorm and without Iranian Army intervention.

condemn the oppression. Like *us*, *here*. We cannot even verbally react. That might cause *us* some trouble. This is the third level: *you can fight against the oppression in your heart*."

The same attitude was adopted about the issue of the assassination by members of the Quran-reading network of Simonstown. It was the week after the General had been killed. Before sessions began, Negar usually asked everybody to begin the session with reciting *amma yujeeb*, the *du'a*[27] (prayer) for "health and the curing of illness." *Du'a* differs from *namaz*[28] prayer, a formal prayer that Muslims are required to perform five times a day including the prostrations (*sujud*), the bowing (*ruku'*), and the palms up position (*qunut*). Instead, *du'a* is a type of prayer that Muslims can perform anytime that does not required ritualistic acts. They either directly ask God or resort to the Prophet or one of the Imams as an intermediary to grant their wishes. The latter is more common among Shi'i believers.

In the Simonstown Muslim community, Negar, the organizer of the session, always asked to include everyone in *du'a*. If needed, she would name an individual to be specifically included in the prayer. For instance, once Hajj Eynollah, Linda's daughter, had surgery and was still in the hospital. Negar asked to include her in our *du'a* and asked to "think about her while asking God, so that she get healed sooner." In addition, *du'a* could include anybody, even someone not in the Muslim community. Once Fakhri, a

[27] Pnina Werbner describes *du'a*, as "the final benediction pronounced by the saint over the whole congregation, is the most spiritually powerful act of the whole ritual. It is the final transformative moment which follows a series of other 1itual acts" (Werbner 2016, 29).

[28] Islamic prayer, which refers to five time required daily prayer is called *salat* by Arab-speaking Muslims. However, Iranian use their own Farsi term, *namaz*.

woman in her seventies, asked the members to include a "young woman," who works with Fakhri's daughter and was just diagnosed with cancer: "she is a pious Christian."

The week after the assassination, Negar, who usually asked to recite the *du'a* for "health and the curing of illness," changed the introductory *du'a* to a recitation of the chapter *al-Fatiha* (The Key): "we all know the situation *there*, please recite the first chapter and asked God in your *du'a* to solve the problem." Since the Quran starts with the chapter *al-Fatiha,* which has only seven verses and is very simple to memorize, it plays a crucial role in performing *du'a.* It is also essential because of its meaning, in which Iranians metaphorically ask God to untangle complicated situations. Negar, using the word "*there*," to refer to Iran, the assassination of Soleimani, IRGC's missile attack to the U.S. base in Iraq, epitomized the third level of performing *taqiya*, which also was enacted by Yasin. In a situation that may cause any inconvenience, not out of fear of death, they conceal their disagreement and defend the oppressed *in their heart*. In this case, based on their implicit indications, content of the *du'a* might be a wish, such as God bless the assassinated General, discard the potential war situation, or punish the oppressors.

2.6 Conclusion

Thomas Tweed proposes that religions are "locative" when associated with people residing in their homeland; it becomes "translocative," for the religions of diasporic groups, moving symbolically between the homeland and host society (Tweed 1997, 139). According to Tweed, Cuban exiles who visit the shrine of Our Lady Charity in Miami repeatedly intimated that "a primary reason they come to the Virgin's shrine is to pray for

Cuba" (Tweed 1997, 94). He asserted, "Diasporic time is fluid, slipping from constructed past to imagined future, and both the past and future inform the experience and symbolization of the present. Diasporic religion, in turn, negotiates diasporic identity as followers remember the homeland's past and imagine its future" (Tweed 1997, 94-95).

Diasporic practices of Islam also move Muslim Iranians between a constructed past and an imagined future. Their main concern is often the war escalation in Iran, which is rooted in a constructed past. It is the way in which they avoid condemnation, even verbally, about the assassination of the General, who was demonized in the new land. Their imagined future is to have normal life, which is compatible with American culture. The future, and constructed belongings of the past, reconstruct a diasporic meaning of, in this case, *taqiya,* helping to symbolize the present. The present context in which they are neither satisfied that an Iranian General was killed nor agitated for taking revenge for the assassination, much like the Islamic Republic's rhetoric.

Diasporic religion provides a third level to condemn "oppression" *in their heart*. At this level, as suggested by anthropologists, diaspora must be considered "a positive *resource* in the necessary rethinking of models of polity" to question the modern nation-state ideals (Boyarin and Boyarin 2002, 5). Drawing on ethnographic analysis of Iranian Americans, I demonstrate how the doctrinal Shi'i models of polity, by providing new models of piety, skip the antagonistic paradigm against Sunni narratives. Examples of this were Bahram's mellow topic for his lecture, adopting the Sunni style prostration without *mohr*, and skipping the phrase that refers to Ali's succession for *azan,* showing the power of diaspora in "creating the cultures and communities that call their homelands" (Matory 2005, 36).

I call attention to the power of diaspora, not in offering alternative models of polity for the state, but instead *creating* an imagined religion that appears never to have consisted of a split such as Shi'a-Sunni. The way Iranian Americans may encounter Sunni understanding of Shi'ism, like Yamin who asked, "do they believe that *Ali is the Prophet*?," or receive warm welcomes from Sunni the way I did in the mosque of Footland as an Iranian supposedly from a Shi'i background, has allowed them to develop strategies beyond monolithic Shi'ism.

My ethnography "is wielded not as an epistemic power special to anthropologists alone, but as a simple lesson, beyond the control of any of its makers, of the learning process itself" (Whitaker 1996, 8). This learning process made it impossible for me to designate the complex array of meanings my interlocutors demonstrated as simply Shi'i versus Sunni Islam. These fluid, ever-shifting discourses about Shi'ism made me wonder if this conflict *practically* exists. The common answer I heard from my Iranian interlocutors was, "we all believe in the Quran." I therefore argue against anthropologists who disregard practitioners' religions and instead generalize about "religion" by defining roles for different religions such as, "Yoruba religion and Hinduism tend to fit this pattern, appropriating the personae, signs, and ritual techniques of multiple neighboring religions," and then separate evangelical Christianity, which tends to "define other religions as unworthy of imitation" and Islam that "defines a role for Abraham, Jesus, Jews, and Christians in its history, cosmology, and legal system" (Matory 2009, 238). This view assumes religion as an entity separate from people's religious practices.

As I briefly described in the case of "Reading Arabic," the transnational arena provides practitioners with an opportunity to hear others' understandings based on

reading the Quran through different translations. Though I will delve into this exegetical agency in the following chapters, here I describe how the multiple perceptions of one word can demonstrate how Quranic concepts, and consequently the basic meaning of religion, can be subjectively perceived, sometimes with completely opposing meanings. In this chapter, through multiple ethnographic cases, I attempted not only to disentangle this "definitional chaos" surrounding the general concept of religion, while also scrutinizing the presupposed Shi'a-Sunni dichotomy (Donovan 2003).

In the case of *taqiya*, I discussed how it has been proposed as a typical characteristic of Shi'ism, even in the literature of anthropology, as a solidified concept. This approach has even been pursued in the work of anthropologists of Shi'i communities in the U.S.: "As a majority, the Sunnis persecuted the Shi'a, forcing the latter to practice *taqiya* (concealing one's faith) and to live in remote areas so as to remain undisturbed. Thus, the Shi'a could be ignored by the government which was dominated by Christians (mainly Maronites) and Sunnis" (Walbridge 1996, 36). Although she does not refer to the Shi'a circumstances in the U.S., she mentions discontinuity of the concept of *taqiya*, as it is (or is not) practiced in the diasporic situation. My ethnographic case, on the other hand, is not involved with the (dis)continuity of this exemplar of Shiism, but it rather deeply engages the very generative agency of practitioners in creating the ever-shifting, existential meanings of *taqiya*—the meanings that stray far from how it is defined in the literature. Other than simply defining *taqiya* as concealing the Shi'i identity when one feels endangered (Dabashi 2017, 114; Deeb 2011, 72; Eickelman 1981, 214), Michael M. J. Fischer is the only anthropologist who goes further by providing a detailed description of the circumstances under which *taqiya* can become operational:

> "(a) You should not throw yourself to martyrdom by your own hand when among hostile people; rather save yourself to fight another day. (b) You should not waste your breath with those who are intellectually incapable or whose minds are closed. (c) In the interest of common goals, you should forget differences with other branches of Islam, though you may argue the differences in a friendly way" (Fischer 1980, 68).

Although Fischer's formulation clarifies the concept, and though the third condition would properly explain one of my interlocutors' comments, I still argue against the objectification of the term *taqiya* when it is being defined, *explained*, and thus represented.

My ethnographic representations, on the other hand, "can be taken as pedagogic experiments and judged not by what they construct, but according to how well they might bring the parties involved into some kind of lucid contact with one another" (Whitaker 1996, 8). That is, I did not represent the concept of dissimulation as one of the presumed sources of difference that split a portion of people under the name of Shi'a from their Sunni fellows. I did not even look to the term *taqiya* to examine the "true" meaning because I do not aim to offer a "true" definition to the literature. Neither did I approach Islamic intermediaries (clerics, *marja'*, *faqih*), as Fischer asserted he "approached [Ayatollah] Makarem privately with three inquiries" to ascertain the proper circumstance to perform *taqiya* (Fischer 1980). I instead focus on how "individual participant construct (and deconstruct) intersubjective religious meanings in their experiences," and how these (de)constructions "maintain a dynamic balance between communal goals and individual agendas" (Wirtz 2007, 135). Rather than investigating what the *marja*' and clerics have asserted about the correct meaning of a concept, I observed how my interlocutors shape their individual, exclusive interpretations of an Islamic practice, such as *taqiya*, even though they promote collective ideals and shared meanings. Although one of Walbridge's

Twelver interlocutors agreed that "there is no difference," she argues that some of the beliefs in Shi'ism make it almost impossible to ignore the differences. For Walbridge, the problem is latent in the authenticity of *marja*' *taqlid* ("source of emulation") in the American Shi'a community due to issues such as "whether a *marja'* is recognized, which *marja'* is followed, and how much influence he has largely determine a host of other issues" (Walbridge 1999, 63).

My interlocutors, on the other hand, demonstrated a high degree of detachment from the institutions of *marja*', *faqih*, *shaykh*, ayatollah, etc., what I call the intermediaries, and instead they reestablished an intimate relationship with the Quran. Although they have invited clerics to deliver sermons for some religious holidays, they practically disregarded the *marja*', as it is "generally the preserver of a strict and conservative view of religion" (Walbridge 1999, 63). Instead, they returned to the Quran and looked for Quranic explanations about doubts in their everyday lives. The concepts such as *taqiya* or Shi'a-Sunni differentiation are not explicitly mentioned in the Quran; therefore, they are often overlooked by them. My interlocutors' attitudes toward the Quran revealed a new paradigm that shifted from the intermediaries' interpretive roles to the individuals' subjective, exegetical agencies.

This shift has been neglected in the anthropological literature, even though it exists in the literature of diasporic religion mostly focused on Christian-centric, Afro-Caribbean-Haitian-Cuban religions—often exempting Islam. I contribute to the discipline by disentangling the idea that undoubtedly was adopted from intermediaries' notions of Islam, rather than Muslims' existentiality—the idea that constructs a singular Islam divorced from how it is practiced in everyday life. This paradigmatic idea also presumes

clear-cut meanings for a Shi'i apparatus with the centrality of *marja*'. I suggest this shifted paradigm needs to be referenced in the presupposed definitions in anthropological literature with regard to religion in general, and Islam specifically.

CHAPTER 3: EVOLVING GUARDIANSHIP

In the Event of Ghadir Khumm[29] in Heydar Center in Winstonburg, Yousef was designated as the preacher of the ceremony. The Center often did not have a cleric lecturer, so one of the members of the community would be assigned to lecture at a specific event. Yousef was discussing the legitimate successor of the Prophet by analyzing the Ghadir sermon's components. He referred to a Quranic verse to pull out the original meaning of *vali*[30] (root of the word *mowla*). Yousef recited a verse to extract the truthful meaning of *mowla* from the Quran:

> "Believers, take neither *yahud* (Jews) nor *nasara* (Nazarenes) for your allies [*owlia*]. They are allies of each other. Any of you who allies with them is indeed one of them. Indeed, Allah does not guide the wrongdoing lot" (Quran 51: 5).

According to Yousef's exegesis of this verse, God is saying that Muslims should not take Jews and "Nazarenes" (Christians) as their *owlia* (the plural for *vali*). To support his exegesis, he laid out the etymology of the word *val*, the root of *vali*, which means proximity (*qorb*), and he concluded that when two things are very close to each other, one would say they have *val* (closeness).

After etymological analysis of the term, he returned to the main theme of the verse by asking what was God's decree toward having a Jewish or Christian friend? According to Yousef, God brings up Jews and Christians because they are closer to Muslims than other ethnoreligious groups. He drew on the jurisprudence to declare that it is not prohibited to

[29] Ghadir Khumm is one of the most important Shi'i holidays, in which they celebrate Ali's succession. According to Shi'i narratives, in the Ghadir event the Prophet delivered a sermon including a famous declaration; "whoever I am his *mowla* (Guardian), from now on Ali will be his *mowla*."

[30] The Arabic word *mowla* and its family words (*wali*, *wilayat*, *owlia*) pronounce differently when Persian speakers use them. I transliterate the way Iranian pronounce it as *vali*, *velayat*. They pronounce *mowla* and *owlia* closer to the original Arabic pronunciations. Therefore, I keep them as they are in Arabic.

have a relationship, even with non-believers; however, he argued, when this friendship causes Muslims to abandon some of their basic principles, they need to back off. For instance, when a medical doctor tells a Muslim not to fast, his view is only accurate if the doctor is a Muslim. However, if the doctor is not a Muslim and does not provide a compelling reason, this view and prescription is not truthful, according to Yousef.

This vignette is an exemplar of the clerical top-down hegemony through which one's understanding of scripture is presented as the ultimate exegesis of a verse and motivation for the audience to follow these teachings, as they are rooted in the Quran and jurisprudence. The main theme of this verse was one of the issues American Muslims faced in the U.S.—the guardianship of non-Muslim over Muslims. Although Yousef was not a seminary-trained theologian or jurist, I understood his sermon in the typical clerical manner that offers an ultimate interpretation.

In this chapter, I explore how the concept of guardianship manifests in the lives of Muslims in everyday ways. Guardianship is the divine authority of the Prophet over Muslims. In Shi'ism, this authority passed to the Twelve Shi'i Imams. My analysis focuses on four aspects of Guardianship: first, the dynamics of the concept that can be applied to the mundane role of non-Muslim politicians; second, the ways in which Guardianship is demanded by Shi'a clerics; and third, the discursive meaning that can be minimized to mentorship in everyday life. I demonstrate how the issue of authority is contested and ever-shifting among Muslims. Therefore, I approach the concept of Guardianship, as brought up in sermons, as a pivot to analyze how people can reconceptualize their religiosity. Leadership, and the concept of authority as a fundamental characteristic of Muslim identity, is reconstructed in a way that even the

authority of non-Muslim over Muslim was deemed legitimate—something they were warned to avoid according to some exegeses during sermons.

Following Asad's suggestion, I look at the way Muslims attach to "founding texts" to explore the concept of Guardianship as "a particular *discursive tradition*" (Asad 2009, 232). I also build on Messick's notion of the centrality of "founding texts," as part and parcel of his anthropology of Islam, and the "exegetical situation in which the meaning of a passage is open or uncertain" (Messick 2018, 137). Drawing on participant observation, I show how the concept of Guardianship is justified by a jurisprudential reasoning and carries meanings among community members. However, it is interpreted differently among quotidian Muslims. The concept of Guardianship, though seemingly transformed for the diasporic sphere, has been revised in an exegetical manner, not only for a present existence, but as a result *of* a tangled past and *for* a desirable future. In doing so, I draw on the literature of the doctrine of *velayat-e faqih*, "Guardianship of the Jurist," which argues that a qualified Shi'a *faqih* (jurist) has the right to rule Muslims during the Occultation (absence) of the twelfth Imam (Adelkhah 2000; Beeman 2008; Fischer 1980, 154). Through detailed ethnographic accounts, I will show how people, referring to their own existential reasoning and playing the role of exegetes, dispute, debate, and elaborate on the essence of the "Guardian" in a way that creates meaning for their everyday lives. That is, I further anthropological conversations about the importance of text in Islamic tradition by demonstrating the lack of continuity in Asad and Messick's discursive methods when they constrain it to the intermediary roles of exegetes, jurists, and those who have "a distinctive relationship—a relationship of power to truth" (Asad [1986] 2009, 22).

I argue that at the very moment when the paradigm of the *discursive tradition* shifted from Muslims' own existential reasonings to the exegetes, *faqih*, or other intermediary positions, the *discursive* became *solidified*. I contribute to the discipline by providing a detailed ethnographic account of a text-based, diasporic, religious community who actively goes through the process of "self-questioning stimulated by conditions of 'diaspora' coupled with religious pluralism" (Vertovec 2000, 149). I also contribute to the discipline by focusing on people's *discursive* horizons, rather than historical accounts, in order to unpack, for instance, the concept of Guardianship of the Jurist. In so doing, I show how the foundational concept—guardianship—that used to be meaningful, has been trimmed of its political component while retaining its essential qualities by the encompassing of an unprecedented phenomenon: for instance, guardianship of non-Muslim over Muslim to reconstruct the basic meaning of the transnational Muslim identity.

In the following section, "Inexorable Guardians," I discuss my ethnographic findings regarding the issue of Guardianship, and the way Muslims detract divinity from the concept to change the politics of authority, so that it becomes more about reciprocal responsibilities between citizens and the non-Muslim authority in the U.S.

In the second section, "the guardian *faqih*," I investigate how Guardianship is demanded by clerics after the Prophet and Twelve Imams, and how this alleged position is contested by practitioners. I draw on an archetypical sermon in which the assigned preacher discusses the Guardianship that can pass on to high-ranking clerics. This is one of the entangled issues of Islamic authority that ended with a heated debate among

participants. It drew on multiple temporal horizons of Islamic utopia, the memory of the past in Iran, and lived realities in the U.S.

In the third section, "Plurality of Guardianships," I draw on interviews to discuss how the concept of Guardianship was taken away from its divinity, so that it can convey different meanings in everyday lives as mentor or advisor. Then, in the final section, "Plural *marja'*," I discuss how the concept of *marja'* is preferred to the Guardianship of the *faqih*, exploring how the heterogeneity represented through my interlocutors is claimed to be at the heart of Shi'ism.

3.1 Inexorable Guardians

In the lecture of Ghadir Khumm, Yousef explained why Muslims who live in the U.S. must manage their relationship with Christians and Jews. He said, "if we go out to play soccer with friends and then go to a restaurant, and a friend orders a beer, you cannot eat at the table with them because there is alcohol." He argued that one might say to himself that it is awkward to live, and concluded, "If your friendship has gotten to this point, you need to distance your relationship." According to him, though they have friendships and relationships with non-Muslims, Muslims must keep their principles.

By referring to Christians and Jews in the U.S., Yousef warned the audience that whatever happens to "*these folks,*" Muslims need to think about their own interests. He asserted that he has been friends and worked with non-Muslims for years; however, when he did not act like them, he was not welcome. He referred to the experiences of other "fellows," who also reached to the point that if "you want to live here, you need to become like them."

For Yousef, if Muslims let that domination happen, they might not think for themselves: "nothing's wrong if we drink alcohol a little bit." He also warned them, the descendants, though the second generation was good to some extent, the third generation "was wasted—no prayer, no nothing," referred to the Islamic commitments (*vajebat*). One of his regrets was that, when he had lived in Simonstown for a year, he heard from some parents that they could talk about homosexual rights (through the Islamic perspective) with their own children. Conversely, my observations of the lived experience of group of Iranian Muslims he was referring to did not show such concerns.

During my fieldwork in Simonstown in May 2020, the Iranian-Muslim group recited a verse that caused a long discussion about the Prophet's relation to his *umma* (Muslim community) and the reason he had multiple wives. The verse says,

> "The Prophet has a greater right on the believers than their own selves, his wives are their mothers" (Quran 33: 6).

This verse initiated a long discussion about the Prophet's right to have multiple wives. It also allowed me to examine what I heard from Yousef and the network in Winstonburg in conjunction with the Simonstown network concerning the Prophet's "greater right." I examined what I heard not just about multiple wives, but about his legacy of being God's successor among Muslims after him and during the time when no *masoum* [31] is present.

On that day, members of the community were busy with discussing the topic of "multiple wives" and reciting the rest of the chapter. During other sessions, either during the Quran sessions or the free discussion sessions about Quranic topics during the COVID phase, I tried to bring up the question of what happened to the Prophet's "greater

[31] In Shi'ism, there are fourteen infallible figures, each of which is called masoum, including the prophet, his daughter and the twelve Imams.

right," which is Guardianship over his *umma*. In Shi'ism, this divine right passed to Twelve Imams. During Occultation of the Twelfth Imam, some Shi'a clerics argue this right can be passed to the clerics, while others dispute that Guardianship can be passed to any non-*masoum*.

In these sessions, they discussed Quranic topics from the recitation sessions; the discussion topics were open. I tried to suggest some topics that could relate to my project. Eventually, Negar decided to merge all topics to include everybody's suggestions; some of those topics were "is it possible to have an ideal government and include religion in politics," "how a state can be both Islamic and ideal," "what is the state responsibility of the *hokumat* (state) towards people, and vice versa." Their topics and content of discussions were not specifically about a certain place or time. During discussions, their examples were mostly about multiple diasporic horizons: "in Iran," "in our country," or the imagined utopia of "during the Prophet, or Ali," or "even here" (the U.S.).

In one of the open discussion sessions, in which they talked about an Islamic and ideal system of governance, they started from an abstract, imagined state by using Islamic narrative of the Prophet and Ali's era, and this eventually led to a debate about the current situation of Iran with some mention of "even here" in the U.S.

Hajj Eynollah was a man in his eighties who came to the U.S. before the 1979 Revolution to seek an education. He married his American wife and stayed in the U.S. She also takes part in these sessions. He started the discussion by talking about *Hazrat* Mahdi's (the Twelfth Imam in Occultation) type of governance after his reappearance. *Hazrat* is a title that Muslims use to honor the Prophets and Imams. Hajj Eynollah asserted there are two types of divine legitimacy for establishing a state. First, there is an

Islamic governance that belongs to the Twelfth Imam, in which people play no role. Second, there is still a divinely legitimate form of state, in which people take part through election. The latter is still divine because the people follow the same path of the Prophet and the Imams. During this same discussion, Keyvan, a man in his late fifties who has always made explicit comments about Iran's situations, reacted to what Hajj Eynollah said about the divinely legitimate state based on people's election and exemplified this abstract type of state by comparing it to the Iranian state. It was around the time that the deputy head of the Judicial System in Iran had been arrested because of corruption. Keyvan talked about the fact that even in the divinely legitimate state, corruption can happen, but it does not represent corruption in the entire system.

The individuals in the meeting mostly discussed what was going on in Iran, and the financial problems people have experienced there. Keyvan kept talking about the ideal Islamic principles that must be implemented in society. I asked a question about who is supposed to implement these principles as he was just talking about them. Keyvan said, "people themselves." He said, "people started the Revolution by *Allah o Akbar* [God is the Greatest]. This revolution has roots in people's culture." I was getting close to my answer about the Prophet's Guardianship legacy and who was successor of this divine succession in the absence of the *masoum*. For Keyvan and Hajj Eynollah, the divine succession of authority is held by the Guardian, who is determined by the people. For example, Hajj Eynollah referred to "ninety-eight percent" participation in the election right after the 1979 Revolution, in which people voted for "the Islamic Republic" instead of the Shah's Imperial State.

Mohsen reacted to Keyvan and Hajj Eynollah's statement: "that is true ninety eight percent of people voted for the Islamic Republic. However, you cannot vote for a system forty years ago and do not revise it anymore. At the time Iran's population was thirty million. Now it is eighty-five million." Mohsen also brought up the issue of the Guardian Council, which has ultimate authority in qualifying the electoral candidate for Presidency, Parliament, and the Assembly of Experts, whose task is to evaluate the supreme leader's performance. Mohsen gave examples from the U.S. context and said, "here whatever happens any citizens can amend the law and legislation. They made a system for everybody to go to Heaven. What if no one wanted to go to Heaven."

Mohsen's wife, Arezoo continued: "I grew up in the Islamic Republic, went to school and collage there. What have they done that some people even do not believe in God?" Then, Sohrab, a man in his late sixties, reacted to Arezoo's comment by saying that there was no statistical evidence that people and youth are fed up with Islam or even God. He also said it is not practical to change the whole governance system every thirty years. Baqer, Negar's husband, made a similar comment about changing and revising laws and legislations with examples that are all from the U.S. He talked about Brexit in the United Kingdom. He also mentioned that the U.S. Supreme Court ruled on very historical and important legislation that employers who fire an individual because of being transgender breaks the law. Transgender people could not be part of the U.S. military."

During another open discussion session with the topic of "people's responsibilities towards government," Negar spoke about a Muslim citizen. As usual, the group began their discussion in a very abstract way to talk about the meaning of a citizen in imagined temporal contexts: a Muslim citizen, a citizen in Iran, in the U.S., or a Muslim in the

historical context of the Prophet's era. Negar stated one of the major responsibilities of a Muslim is to be faithful to the contract. She talked about the way she always kept her deed under surveillance to see whether she contributes enough to society as a teacher, fulfilling her responsibilities. Therefore, whoever is doing business, be it a doctor or a realtor, needs to be meticulous in what they are doing to fulfil what they have promised. For Negar, keeping promise is one of "God's attributes."

Mohsen covered both contexts, saying that in countries with predominately Muslim populations, religion influences civic law, and it is even in constitutions. The situation is different when Muslims are a minority, "like here," in the U.S. Mohsen asserted: "we, as Muslims, have to follow the law better than other citizen so that they question how are you so good and this is Promotion of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice." As Mohsen and Negar explained the status of being a "good citizen," as equal as being a "faithful Muslim," because it is mentioned in the Quranic verse that Muslims must committed to "keeping a pledge" (17: 34). Mohsen also brought up an example of an Iranian who told him he did not want to pay taxes. Mohsen was arguing that this is wrong for two reasons: "first, we made an 'Oath of Allegiance' to the U.S., for we need to keep that promises personally as a Muslim. Second, it will be socially harmful because they might say 'this Muslim guy is breaking the law.'" For Mohsen, the "Oath of Allegiance to the United States," which is a part of the process for becoming a citizen, is not only a legal commitment but also a religious responsibility.

The way the interlocutors discussed their responsibilities toward the state revealed the creativity of the diasporic context. They expressed their responsibility toward the U.S. government by using moral and ethical codes embedded in the constructed past. The way

they criticized the Iranian state reveals they do not feel the same responsibility toward the Islamic Republic. Neither was their promise similar to the legal commitment of an American citizen to the U.S. government. The concept "Oath of Allegiance" was adopted in the U.S., clothed with Islamic moral codes, to establish a Muslim American Oath of Allegiance. However, from what Negar and Mohsen described about their civic and Islamic responsibilities toward U.S. society, these were quite different from what Yousef discussed concerning Muslims' associations with Jews and Christians. I decided to bring this up and asked them to discuss this Quranic verse in the one of their free-discussion sessions. As Negar was summarizing the topics from the last sessions and Muslims' duty for "keeping a pledge," in any society including the U.S., I brought up the issue of "the Guardianship of Jews and Nazarenes" from verse 51:

> "Believers, take neither *yahud* (Jews) nor *nasara* (Nazarenes) for your allies. They are allies of each other. Any of you who allies with them is indeed one of them. Indeed, Allah does not guide the wrongdoing lot."

At first, everyone carefully read the verse and its Farsi translation. Negar said they can spend time, share food, and even marry with to the People of the Book. Hajj Eynollah said, "*vali* has many meanings. He can be your guide and can be the Guardian, as it is mentioned in the Quran, in many verse, *vali o Allah*, who are the Messengers of God, appointed to be the Guardians of people." Keyvan said this verse indicates this exactly: "do not take Jews and Christians as your *vali*. Unless there is a constitution thoroughly followed by everybody." Following this, Hajj Eynollah gave the example of Lebanon as an exception, wherein Christians, Jews, and Muslims get along under one Constitution. Keyvan responded that "actually, in Lebanon with a majority of Muslim, the Christian president does not have much power."

Mohsen tried to analyze the verse in its historical context: “it is different today. Every individual has a vote in society and can action. We came to a predominately Christian society. If there was a righteous and fair person, there is nothing wrong with voting for him. If there was a Muslim who was better than we will vote for him. There might be a Muslim in a predominately Muslim society but one who is not honest and truthful. It was different during Hazrat Mohammad’s era. There were chiefs of the tribes who ruled their communities. Individuals did not have voice as citizens. Here, though, people have right as citizens. I do not think it applies in today’s life.”

Negar shared her understanding by talking about a table on which there were alcoholic beverages, and that a Muslim should not sit at that table. She gave the example of Iran’s President, who goes out of the room if there is liquor at the table. She said, “Muslims say we need to have caution (*ehtiat*), unless we are obliged to. In the Quran, many things are ordained as *harâm* (forbidden), unless we *have* to do it. This verse also is one of those verses that you should not do it, *unless* you have to do it.” Hajj Eynollah, commented that “we vote for them because we think they can provide better situation. That does not mean we took them as our Guardian. We can vote for somebody while have our differences.” Mohsen jumped in by saying, “it can be concluded in two ways: once you choose someone as your *vali* to have control over you mind, heart and thought, in another case you choose someone as political leader or president. In the second case, I do not see any problem.”

Kayvan responded by saying, “I think we want to say it English, choose your *mentor* from among people who have your own faith. In business also we need to have mentor who has the same faith who knows you do not go somewhere they serve liquor. I think

this verse is more about getting mentor." Mohsen responded, "I translate it *role model*. Someone who you want to follow to be like him. My mentor was Christian and was very the most important individual to help me at the time, when I was in grad school." Negar moderated what she said earlier about the obligation of Muslims who live in non-Muslims countries: "we, Muslims, are free in practicing the basic principles of our faith. If we abandon the fundamental principles, then the Quran says, 'wasn't God's earth width enough that you didn't go somewhere else to leave?' If we got to the point that there was no more room for reconciliation, we should leave that place."

These different understandings of the same verse go beyond the rigid interpretation that Yousef provided in the Ghadir Khumm's sermon. Although they read and understood the same concept (*owlia*), which Yousef had scrutinized etymologically, they interpreted it differently through their everyday lives, such as the role model, mentor, political leader, president, advisor, etc. What makes the members of the Simonstown network different from clerics was that they did not construe the term to understand its absolute meaning in the context the verse was revealed. Rather, they created meanings that were concordant with norms and values they live. As long as meanings are compatible with the core moral and ethical principles of Islam, they did not dig into a single term to discover the ultimate meaning at the time of its revelation during the Prophet's era.

3.2 The Guardian *faqih*

After the Quran reading at the Heydar Center in Winstonburg, it was Yasin's turn to lecture. When he declared his topic was *velayat-e faqih*, everyone cynically looked at

each other, which might mean this would be very controversial. Yasin started his speech by announcing that he was not addressing those who dispute the Guardianship of the Jurist, nor was he speaking to those who had no problem with it. It caused more cynicism from everybody. Yousef said, "in that case, is your audience the wall?" Everybody laughed. Yasin started his speech by addressing the views that argue the Guardianship of the Jurist is a concept that was coined by Khomeini, an innovative theory he developed in the book "Islamic Government: Governance of the Jurist" (Khomeini and Algar 2005).

Numerous anthropologists and other scholarly observers of Iran point out how the structure of the Islamic Republic relies on the idea of the Guardianship of the Jurist, which argues that a qualified Shi'a *faqih* (Islamic jurist) has the right to rule Muslims during the Occultation (absence) of the Twelfth Imam (Adelkhah 2000; Beeman 2008; Fischer 1980, 154; Dabashi 1993; Amir Arjomand 2000). Shi'ism is dependent on the "individual personalities" of *faqih*s, who are selected by consensus based on the knowledge and wisdom they display. This trait of Shi'i *faqih*s, through their institutionalization of Ayatollah Khomeini's doctrine of *velayat-e faqih*, gave rise to the claimed theocracy in Iran, even though this was rejected by other grand ayatollahs (Beeman 2008, 196-7). Michael M. J. Fischer, for example, cites individual agency of Shi'a clerics for the debate between Khomeini and other Grand Ayatollahs Khoi and Hakim. They opposed Khomeini's interpretation of the Quranic phrase, "holders of authority" as entitling a *faqih* or jurist to take a post such as head of state, legislator, or governor. This debate ended with a threat to Ayatollah Hakim by some of Khomeini's followers: if Hakim did not visit and pay his respects to Khomeini, they would publicly rip off his turban (Fischer and Abedi 1990, 129).

Yasin, however, argued that the idea of *velayat-e faqih* is an innovation in the Shi'a tradition by Ayatollah Khomeini that is not correct, and there is a lot of evidence in *hadiths* and the Quran that prove the existence of this concept, not only in Shi'ism but in Islam more broadly. He referred to some *hadiths* of Shi'i Imams, and more importantly, to the most referenced Quranic verse by Shi'a clerics: "O Believers, obey Allah, and obey the messenger and those of you who are in authority" (chapter 4, verse 59).

Yasin argued that according to the verse, "those of you who are in authority," this is Quranic proof for the concept of *velayat-e faqih*. As such, it is each Muslim's duty to obey *velayat-e faqih*, including it in a divine hierarchy after God and the Prophet. Yasin asserted that although some grand ayatollahs have disputed the theory of *velayat-e faqih*, they exercise it in practice. The fact that they are *marja taqlid* ("source of emulation") and have followers means they are their followers' *vali*. They are their followers' guardian. He also stated even *men have the right of Guardianship over their wives*. I was wondering how women of the gathering would react to this comment, but I did not observe any reaction. Granted, they were all in their late twenties and thirties.

However, another time during Mr. Heshmati's lecture, I noticed the elderly women react unexpectedly. Mr. Heshmati is Yousef's father, a man in his seventies who is a university professor in Iran, who usually comes to the U.S. during the summer. His lecture was about *sele rahem*, which literally means the "womb-ties," and this refers to associating and visiting with relatives and helping them. In the lecture, he indicated *sele rahem* is one of the pious Muslim's *vajebat* (commitments), which causes sins to be forgiven and proliferates livelihood. However, Mr. Heshmati emphasized that "in *sharia* it specifically refers to associating with *paternal* relatives. It means you need to visit your

*amo*s (paternal uncles), *amme*s (paternal aunts) and paternal cousins." The fact that paternal relatives have priority seemed to be totally unexpected for people in the session, especially among the female members, including his wife Zahra Khanum. She reacted sarcastically. Rajab's mother, a woman in her early seventies, more seriously said, "Islam has always oppressed women." Additionally, Mr. Heshmati sardonically referred to a common expression about a man who was asked about his place of origin and responded, "I have not yet married." It means men after marriage become so attached to their wives' family that they feel they even share their places of origin. By repeating this expression, Mr. Heshmati tried to moderate his earlier saying, asserting, "we already are attached to the mother's family as a default because they have priority." His later complementary explanation seemed to placate the women.

Contrary to Rajab's mother, the younger women were neutral during Yasin's lecture when he brought up men's Guardianship right over their wives. That caused me to specifically ask Yasin's wife about this during my in-depth interview with him. While I was interviewing Yasin, his wife was present and listening to our long conversation. I reminded them about the night of his lecture when no women reacted to that subject. Therefore, I specifically asked Yasin's wife what she thought of "men's Guardianship right over their wives." The question seemed to be unexpected to both. Yasin's wife said she needed to think about it. After seconds of thinking, she said, "I did not pay attention to that part the way you brought it up. I have thought of that. If men piously follow the words of God, they cannot be unfair to their wives. Then, nothing is wrong about the Guardianship right, not like what we see sometimes in Iran where sometimes men abuse their right over their wives."

My understanding prior to Yasin's wife's comment was that younger Iranian women have taken more action to earn "some amount of freedom" in their marriage with their husbands (Mahdavi 2009, 30-63). I expected she, and other younger women during the lecture would immediately react to Yasin's statement about men's Guardianship over their wives. However, the way she described the seemingly unfavorable Guardianship of men over their wives, reveals "the limits of 'cultural relativism' through a consideration of the oppressed women in the Muslim world" (Abu-Lughod 2002). This "cultural relativism" may not consider how the same culture can be understood and performed differently among women. Moreover, these younger and elder women's Islams show how sharp contradictions on the issue of women's oppression in Islam could co-exist within the same Muslim network that piously comes to the weekly Quran session.

After Yasin declared some of the characteristics of the concept during his lecture, especially the Guardian Jurist's divine right to hold authority, and everyone started reacting. At first, Yasin stated that he was *not* talking about a specific individual who holds the position of *velayat-e faqih*, referring to Iran's current Supreme Leader, Khamenei. He just wanted to discuss the concept in general. Everyone humorously reacted. It seemed to me that they all had many criticisms and would rather implicitly discuss these by criticizing the position.

The reason they did not intend to mention even Khamenei's name as the person who currently holds the position of *velayat-e faqih* was that they did not want to be "political" in the Quran session, as I heard multiple times from Taher. Amir-Ali's wife, for instance, posed a critical question: "what if *velayat-e faqih* is extremely oppressive? What if he represses people? Should people not protest?" She teasingly added, "of course, I am not

talking about Iran. I am talking about Kim Jong-un, the North Korean Supreme Leader." Everybody laughed. Yasin took it as a joke and continued talking about the authority of the Guardian *faqih* and said he even has the authority to cancel Friday congregational prayer, which is of the most *political* rituals in Islam. Yasin was referring to the *khutbah* (lecture) before the Friday prayer, part of the ritual. In Shi'ism this is considered a section of the ritual in which political issues can be discussed. However, as I discussed in the last chapter, in the majority Sunni mosques of Footland and Greavesville, *khutbahs* mostly covered ethical and moral subjects. Even Bahram who was the only Shi'a in the community, did not include anything about politics in his *khutbah*.

Amir-Ali and Yousef said that Friday prayer is not *vajeb* (required) during the Occultation. Yousef referred to the *shaykh* (clerics) who come for Friday prayer in the Heydar Center, and he said he also approves that prayer is not required during the absence of a *masoum*. Amir-Ali pulled up Ayatollah Sistani's *resale* (manual) to prove his interpretation. In Shi'ism, each Grand Ayatollah develops his own *resale*, in which they discuss their own jurisprudential rulings and views over detailed matters that are not explicitly mentioned in the Quran. Shi'a Muslims have their own *marja*. Amir-Ali might not be Ayatollah Sistani's follower in the traditional way of abiding by his jurisprudential rulings, but his reference to the Ayatollah's online *resale* was twofold. First, he is one of the most famous and oldest Shi'a clerics, and more importantly, as I already heard from Mojtaba, Yousef's brother, the Ayatollah is a symbol of a *marja* who has denounced the clerics' holding of authority during Occultation.

The discussion heated up between Yasin and Yousef over the fact that the Guardianship of the Jurist is not an election. Yasin was arguing that it *is* based on the

electorate. He said when people *bey'at*, pledge allegiance to the Guardian *faqih*, that means they have elected a person. This caused many reactions. Mojtaba said, "please do not insult our intellect. I agree that Khamenei made good decisions in many cases. But we cannot say his position is elective." From this point on, everybody got into the debate by explicitly discussing the Guardianship of Khamenei. Yasin responded: "take for example the Friday prayer when a crowd of people gather, or what we saw in the three days public funeral for *sardar* how many people gathered. This isn't *bey'at*?" Sardar means an army general symbolizing General Soleimani, who was killed in the U.S. force operation. Not to mention the name of Soleimani was a level of practicing *taqiya*. For Yasin, the Islamic concept of *bey'at*, pledge of allegiance was equal to modern concept of election. Yousef said,

> "this lecture brought up a concept based on the Quranic verse that all agreed on. However, the problem is that it is very *subjective* [using English word]. That means it is not possible to establish the governance system of a country based on a theory that can be interpreted in multiple ways. The result would be what we see in Iran. We have a relative who refers to the hadith that says any trade and business is *harâm* (religious forbidden) in the land that governed by oppressive rulers. Reversely interpreted, he believes that Khamenei is oppressive; therefore, any trade and business is *harâm*. They live in Dubai."

This was the time I really could not be objective and reacted to what Yasin said about people's participation in Friday prayer that, for him, symbolizes *bey'at* to the Guardian *faqih*. I said, "those people, shown in the state's media, are state workers. Participations in Friday prayers and state rituals count as their overtime hours." It was risky to make such a biased comment, but I took a chance to participate in the conversation.

Unexpectedly, Amir-Ali supported me, bringing up an example of his mother: "my mom was teacher. It has always been in her paystub that in what state rituals and

processions did your participated." His wife also commented that "they [the state] always threaten ethnoreligious minorities that if they do not come to the states rituals and processions, they will not let them have their own parliament members." Nima, a man in his thirties, who always came to the gatherings with his wife, made a similar comment about the *subjectivity* of the concept. He said, "the problem is your wrong hypothesis. You described that based on the Quranic verse it is *vajeb* to obey God, the Prophet, and his successors, which are the *masoum*s. You assume that a Guardian *faqih* is *masoum*." In addition, Yousef supported what Nima had said: "it is true. Nobody has doubt that Muslim should obey God, the Prophet, and his successor who are the twelve Imams. However, there is no *masoum* around during the absence."

Since this debate was during the parliamentary election in Iran, and usually many campaign videos are published on social media during an election, Yousef made an example associated with the Iran's election environment. He said, "I am fond of the idea that Mr. Khamenei choose parliament members and I think in these circumstances, it works very well. Moreover, it does not these embarrassing videos of dancing and acting ridiculous only because of getting more votes. *However*, we should not call it *election* anymore." Yousef was referring to President Bush (the son), who once addressed the Iran's supreme leader, "whoever I am people voted and elected me, but you were not elected by people" (narrated by Yousef). Then Taher, sitting next to me, said "who said that it is not based on people's voting? The Guardian *faqih* is elected by elected, like president and parliaments members."

Although the system of governance in Iran is "theocratic," there is a intertwined system of election that makes it look like president and parliament members, as well as

the supreme leader, are elected through official voting process every four years (Beeman 2008, 200-203). The *Assembly of Experts* contained a group of *faqih*s who are directly elected by the people, and their responsibilities are to evaluate the performance of the supreme leader or even remove them in case they are incapable of accomplishing their task. However, there is another institution that put into question the democratic process of the electorate. The *Guardian Council* is a political body that has supreme authority to (dis)qualify every electoral candidate, and the head of Guardian Council is appointed by the supreme leader. That is to say, Iran's leader appoints the chief of the institution who qualifies the experts whose task is to legitimize themself.

When I brought up the issue of the Guardian Council in the election system in response to Yasin and Taher, Yasin argued that this system is based on the Constitution people voted for forty years ago. I responded by saying that the majority of those who are opposed to this system were not even born at the time. Yasin said, "where on earth change constitution every forty year. If that is the case, whoever become eighteen would dispute the entire system." I disclosed my only my opinion, but I also questioned Yasin, who represented a group of Iranian state supporters who sincerely believed in the system of the Islamic Republic.

Yasin replaced his hypothesis with fact. He proposed that the Quranic verse indicates that Muslims should obey the successor of the Prophet. As Nima mentioned, this concept is formalized the through Quranic reasoning, but the problem is that Yasin assumed that obtain the authority through the same process as *masoum* did. As discussed, the technical ambiguity of the concept of *velayat-e faqih* is in its formulation. As Yousef argued, this concept is too "subjective" in the sense that one abstract theory can be interpreted in

multiple ways, becoming a basis to rule a country. My job is not to analyze and criticize the idea of Guardianship of the Jurist or the Islamic Republic doctrine. However, I do want to excavate the process in which this doctrine is embedded in people's belief. Yasin amalgamated the divinely ascribed authority of the Prophet and *masoum* with the socially achieved expertise of *faqih*. He shored up the legitimacy of the *faqih,* once with divinity of the Quranic verses and hadith, and by referring to the line of experts who endorse the *faqih*.

I do not suggest here that the concept of Guardianship of the Jurist is explicitly clarified based on the founding text of Islam. Rather, I aim to illustrate the nebulous processes of debating through which an idea, in this case the Guardian *faqih*, is (dis)embedded in people's understanding of the Quran, *and* their lived realities in diasporic context. Yasin's presence in the country, called "the Great Satan" by the system he vehemently supported, testifies his interest, at least, in the education system of the U.S., which encouraged him to live "the Great Satan" county.

Moreover, the way he referred to the Iranian Constitution when he said, "no country around the world changes constitution every forty year," reveals how he viewed himself in multiple spheres. These spheres include the memory of the past in Iran with its complicated state apparatus, which itself was highly interwoven with the temporal horizon of the Islamic utopia, and "a grasp of these layered pasts is needed to understand the ritual events of the present" (Johnson 2007, 60). The present is also negotiated through the process of debating over the Guardian *faqih* that has overwhelmingly occupied the memory of the past and understandings of another past through reading Quranic verse not disassociated with their lived realities in the U.S.

Although Yousef said he was fond of the supreme leader's decision and policies in some cases, the way he narrated the former U.S. President's response to the Iran's leader demonstrated a regret for the lack of a transparent election system. On the other for Yasin, the modern concept of election is equal to *bey'at,* as represented in the state rituals and processions. However, his horizon shifted at the time he responded to the Guardian Council's veto authority over and electoral candidate by referring to the modern concept of a constitution. Their Islams, as I described, started from the Quranic verse in which they all piously believed; however, the "clouds of discourses" over the verse revealed the disagreements that coalesce among the members of the Iranian-Muslim community in Winstonburg.

3.3 Plurality of Guardianships

During my interview with Vahid, a man in his thirties, the concept of Guardian *faqih* was among one of the themes that came up multiple times. I remember that during the Quran sessions, according to the routine, attendees made a *du'a* for different concerns, such as wishing for everybody's wellness, a cure for someone who was sick, or even to combat a threat of war in the home country. One of the oddest *du'a* (prayer) was when Vahid wished for and asked everybody to pray for the wellness of the Twelfth Imam, who is believed to be in Occultation.

Growing up in Iran, it was a typical *du'a* made by the official clerics on TV, radio, or during school congregational prayer. This statement would have always been accompanied by a following wish for the wellness of the Supreme Leader who was known as the current Guardian *faqih* and the deputy of the Twelfth Imam. This statement

sounded more like official rhetoric of the state repeated in public spheres, rather than the belief of a pious Muslim. The Twelfth Imam, who is supposed to be in Occultation and not dead, must be protected by a divine power, and he does not need ordinary people to say *du'a* for his wellness. I remember these sorts of comments for the Imam's wellness sometimes became a joke even for pious people. It also got worse when Ahmadinejad's[32] government, during official meetings, left an empty chair for the Twelfth Imam, as he might be present during the meeting. It was among the religious-based, political rhetoric of the government at the time, demonstrating that the government is dedicated to the majesty of the Imam in Occultation.

I personally never heard about the wellness of the Imam from ordinary, pious people around me, except those who had some affiliation with the state. My assumption changed when I heard Vahid during the Quran session in Simonstown. It sounded odd to me because he was in the U.S., which is considered the "Great Satan" in Iranian state rhetoric. He was a scholar with a high number of citations in one of the engineering disciplines, and he also belonged to a generation who was assumed to be part of the state's opposition. Therefore, I noted Vahid's *du'a,* so I could bring it up during our interview.

On another occasion, one of the members of the network sent out an announcement about the prevention of any interaction including trade, business, friendship, and relationships with the Chinese found in Persian literature. It was during the time that the Iranian state, under the burden of the U.S.'s maximum pressure, was negotiating an agreement based on China's access to southern islands in the Persian Gulf for energy and

[32] the sixth President of Iran

fishing resources. Ayda, who brought up this "tragic" agreement with China, referred to Nizami Ganjavi, the Persian poet from the Twelfth Century, who discussed "Chinese untruthfulness, hypocrisy, lying, and perfidy," in his poetic pieces. She also referred to Montesquieu's *The Spirit of the Laws*, in which he mentioned "Chinese cunningness in trading businesses."

After these comments, some members, like Mohsen, disputed this "generalization about an ethnicity," and said, "when we generalize about an ethnicity, we should not be surprised when others say the same about us." Among the opponents' and proponents' reactions, Vahid's response seemed unique and different. He referred to a Quranic verse:

> "… Indeed, the noblest of you in the sight of Allah is the most God-wary among you. Indeed, Allah is all-knowing, all-aware" (Quran 49:13).

He then argued, "based on the Quran, *taqwa* (God-wary)[33] is the only touchstone in front of God. *Taqwa*'s definition can be very broad, but race is not one of them for sure. *Taqwa* is an achieved status, and everyone regardless of race, gender, even *religion* can reinforce it in himself. A non-Muslim also can achieve *taqwa*; therefore, be humbled before God. Finally, based on our belief, the Quran is the ultimate, accurate book. Therefore, there is no reason we refer to other books including prose texts of our poets or other ancient Persian treatises."

During our in-depth interview, these two main themes were in my mind; however, I did not directly ask if Vahid had used the same rhetoric of the state in Iran when he made a *du'a* for the Twelfth Imam's wellness. Rather, I started with his comments about *taqwa* or humility before God. He said, "the concept of *taqwa* cannot be only pulled out from the Quran. It needs some interpretation. There are some authentic hadiths from the

[33] Humbleness in front of God.

Imams. I personally read various interpretations of the Quran and also their associated hadiths." Then he went on to explain what the characteristics of a *taqwa*-holding person are. Like any general sketch of a "good" person, Vahid described a *taqwa*-holding person as one who "knows what is good and what is bad and avoids stealing or oppressing people if that person is in power. No matter this person's race, rooted in Mars or anywhere else, if he has *taqwa*, he is closer to God. Islam is not split by cultures."

He asked me about the meaning of *mu'min* (believer), and I answered right away, "to believe in God." He said, "No, that is the basic meaning of being Muslim—submission to God. *Mu'min* means others are *safe* around him." It was the same connotation I heard from other interlocutors; however, Vahid included non-Muslims in the circle of *mu'min*-ness:

> "it doesn't require prayer five times per day. The Quran says: 'maintain the prayer. Indeed, the prayer restrains from indecent and wrongful conduct' [Quran 29:45]. This is true, but if I just bow and stand straight only to fulfil the minimum requirement, and it does not help me to become a better person; if I fast and do all the *vajebat*, but it does not make me a better person; if people around me do not feel *safe*, then I am not *mu'min*. It includes non-Muslim as well. There exist many people, as we see here [the U.S.], we really feel *safe* around them. So, they are *mu'min*, though they are not necessarily Muslim, do not pray five times per day, and do not fast. Now, you tell me how many people we knew there [Iran], who were Muslim, but many people were not *safe* around them?"

Vahid's interpretation of the specific Quranic verse he mentioned, and the "authentic hadiths" that he did not overtly refer to, was a totally innovative, non-jurisprudential statement of *mu'min*-ness versus Muslim-ness. His "Muslimness" was the expression and fulfilment of the requirements (*vajebat*); however, *mu'min*-ness was a superior quality that might not even require the prerequisite of Muslimness. That is to say, even a non-Muslim can reach that higher level. According to Vahid's perception of Islam, a non-

Muslim American "here" in the U.S., or even a "Martian" race, can be *mu'min* and thus closer to God.

After the distinction he made between abundant *mu'min*s "here" and the plethora of Muslims who merely do the minimum requirement "there," I felt more comfortable to bring up a more political theme. I asked him about his idea of whether the Prophet's Guardianship legacy might pass to anyone in the absence of the *masoum*. Thus, is it plausible to establish a theocratic state based on the Guardianship of the *faqih*? Vahid responded:

> "it is very complicated. It seems to me that people's need for understanding *religious* matters is among their [*faqih*s]'s responsibilities. They are promoters of religion, which is mostly morality and ethics. It goes back to the issue that our *fiqh* [jurisprudence] really become corpulent, and this is a consequence of those who are promoters of religion [*faqih*s]. My sincere belief is that the Imams are *masoum* [infallibles]. '*Ulama* [clerics; including *faqih*s] could be *good* people; however, it is also possible they make mistakes, though they are wearing the Prophet's mantle. We have seen more than a few *akhunds* who fought against each other. We believe that *masoum* can make the best decisions; however, they [*faqih*s] might not make the best one, even though they might be very *good* people. As we see in our Iran, many of those who are involved in massive embezzlement scandals are not wearing suits and ties. Many of the people who embezzle today have massive beards *are* clerics or are their relatives."

Having a beard for men became a sign of piety during the 1979 Revolution. There are almost no clerics who shave their beards. It is believed that the Prophet and Imams kept their beards as well. Nowhere in the Quran does it mention the prohibition of shaving one's beard. However, it has been discussed in jurisprudence that it is recommended that men keep their beard as a symbol of piety.

Vahid then continued and said,

> "some people claim that corruption did not happen for five years during the Imams' reign. I cannot believe that others did not do that, but I believe

> during the *masoum* it is the least. Some people argue that during Amir's[34] reign, the society was less complex than today in terms of bureaucracy. I still cannot accept it was that simple. On the contrary, I think, it was even broader and had a more complicated structure [than today's Iran]. They were all connected, people from Iran to Egypt to Yemen, Iraq, and Syria. I think the point was that a *masoum* knew better how to make a better decision. Do you know how a non-*masoum* [*faqih*s] might endanger the society? Under the name of Islam, they may gain power, first damage the religion, and then abuse power against the people; the dynamics might best describe the situation in Iran. Religion is a strong apparatus. People go and become martyred for the sake of religion [referring to the Iran-Iraq War]. If religion comes to power and does not operate truthfully, it might result in what we see in Iran today."

I tried to delve into the topic by asking specifically about the role of the Guardian *faqih* as the Prophet's successor, being the deputy of the Twelfth Imam. This is the political rhetoric in Iran, based on Shi'a eschatology, legitimizing the authority of the Guardian *faqih*.

Contrary to his earlier comments, in which he radically criticized the situation of Iran, he did not explicitly denounce the status of the current Guardian *faqih*. Without mentioning the name of the current Supreme Leader, also designated officially as the Guardian *faqih*, Vahid said, "these people in Iran who discuss the concept argue the current Guardian *faqih* is the best option because he has the required experience, knowledge, and awareness to rule the country in the current situation more so than others [other *faqih*s], with which I agree merely in the case of governance. However, it does not mean he can hold the same Guardianship as the Prophet had over the Muslim society. I have multiple Guardians. The first one is my father; he is my *vali*. My advisor is my *vali* in education. I have another *vali* in the gym—my trainer. To me, Guardian means my

[34] It refers to Ali, the first Shi'i Imam who is believed to be the *Amir al-Momenin*, the Commander of the Faithful after the Prophet.

mentors in my life. But I cannot accept and do not believe in the idea that there is a Guardian, sitting in the Prophet's place who has control over Muslims' lives."

3.4 Plural *marja*s

During Yasin's lecture on the Guardianship of *faqih*, Mojtaba was one of the opponents of his theorization who was enthusiastically active and argued against Yasin's statements. During our in-depth interview, I also asked Mojtaba about the idea of passing the Prophet's Guardianship to the Guardian *faqih*, and thus the establishment of a divine state. I had already observed Mojtaba's passionate disagreement to the idea, though he was fond of the Islamic Republic's policy. This contradictory expression raised an interesting inquiry about possible disagreement with the state's most fundamental doctrine, while still advocating for the state's overall policy.

As soon as I asked if he believes there is a divine thread from the Prophet's Guardianship all the way to the *faqih*, Mojtaba responded: "No. No. I don't believe in that. As far as I am aware, in Islam, at least in Shi'a Islam, we do not have such a thing as *vali faqih* [the Guardian Jurist]. In my opinion, this is a political made-up status. I do not believe in a theocratic state when a *masoum* is not presented." When he was trying to explain by providing historical evidence, I jumped in and said that the historical reasoning was not important for me. I just wanted to know his reasoning about why a theocratic state *cannot* exist in the eyes of a Muslim during the Occultation. He responded:

> "I don't agree because such a state can beautifully start for the sake of God with purified intentions, but it just stays that way for a few years. Then abuses will start happening right after it is institutionalized. For instance, as we see in the case of the Islamic Republic, when it started, it was based on

> good intentions. It was our own parents' decision to reform the society. There were many good people like Chamran or Beheshti who catalyzed it, but after a while, some people, under the name of religion, began to abuse power—which is what we see in Iran today. These people who later abuse power call themselves Muslim and do everything under the name of Islam. However, the damage they have caused to Islam and Shi'ism, even Yazid could not have inflicted."

Yazid had ordered the killing of the third Shi'a Imam, and he is one of the most hatred figures in Shi'ism. Mojtaba argued that the establishment of the Islamic Republic created a deep distrust among people, such that nobody would ever believe in the idea of the theocratic state in the absence of a *masoum*.

For Mojtaba, this unlikelihood is not limited to Iran and Islam, and this brought up the example of Israel, which has the same problem. He said nationalist Jews argued Jews do not have a country and they need one. That was true, "but the Zionism in Israel has no association with Judaism." Mojtaba indicated that this is the same problem. Zionists have killed many Jewish people if you deeply look at their history. Many Jews believe that they should not have a Jewish state. Here in the U.S., there are many Orthodox Jews who declare that they should never have a religious state because it ruins up their religion. Mojtaba said this is the same argument they make.

He went on to clarify that Muslims should not have a religious state when our *masoum* is not present. Therefore, it is not just the issue in Islam. He argued it is not possible to have a state based on religion because it is not practical. The first thing it does is destroy the religion itself. He referred to Ayatollah Sistani, a well-known *marja'* in the Shi'a world, who has "a deep understanding of religion," and who also disputes such a doctrine. Mojtaba's main reason was the abuse of power because anyone might offer an interpretation that seems meaningful at the time, but after a while, that interpretation

becomes meaningless. Once it becomes a rule, it becomes irremovable under the name of God. Mojtaba concluded that "these interpretations cause no problem if religion stays in the personal level, but not in the state."

3.5 Conclusion

For Mojtaba, the plurality of Muslimness is important to recognize: "is everyone supposed to be *one* type of Muslim in society? How many *marja'* do we have in Shi'ism who have different ideas?" By referring to the quintessential characteristic of Shi'ism, different *marja*s have different views *within* the same faith, and Mojtaba went beyond the dogma that Muslims must have a homogenous *umma* and normalized some extreme differences between Muslims and non-Muslims, coexisting in the same society.

For example, he brought up the example of his lived reality in the U.S. and pointed out the fact that their Islamic center is located right next to a church. I jumped in and asked, "what is the problem if a mosque is next to a church and everybody practices their own faith and coexists?" He indicated, "I don't see any problem. Conversely, I even say it *has to be* this way. Our age does not let us remember Shah's reign, but based on hearsay from the last generation that, for instance, in the evening you could hear *azan* [the call for prayer] and people went to mosque for prayer on one side of the street. Some others went to disco and dance on the other side of the street. There wasn't a *thing* under which everybody must have lived, like an umbrella."

Mojtaba's account reveals nodes of regional interconnections, and the creation of new categories in relation to the historical imaginary. Mojtaba has a strong connection to his parents who live in Iran and visit the U.S. during summer. Therefore, he did not

criticize the Iranian state like an ordinary political opponent. I had this conversation with him on another occasion where he said, “we must be thankful to this state [the Islamic Republic] that at least provides high quality security for our parents who live in Iran.” During this account he criticized the very idea of a state based on Islamic values and principles. Although our topic was about the Islamic Republic, he implicitly referred to historical imaginary (Shah’s era) in which some can go to disco and another can go to mosque on either side of a street—an ideal that is epitomized through his lived realities in the U.S.

Clarke suggests that in order to understand these alterations and flows, anthropologists need to consider “how concepts of space and place are being reconceptualized not simply through people’s imaginations of spaces constructed through institutions but through the ways people use these institutions to reclaim, and thus produce, the domains—spatial, temporal, national—in which modern classifications of ethnic and racial ancestry are being both usurped and reformulated” (Clarke 2004, 11). Although Mojtaba renegotiated the Islamic format to manage a society by using the example of Iran, he reclaimed and produceed spatial and temporal domains of his existence as a citizen in order to reformulate meanings of an Iranian identity in the U.S.

For Clarke, global presence and migration have contributed to the reconfiguration of new imaginaries that were previously overdetermined within the geographic boundaries of concepts such as nation-state and ethnicity. In other words, transnational presence assists to move “from an approach to culture that focuses on the domination of the state through which objects are made, secured, and rendered intelligible, to culture as the historically constituted flows of cultural ideas and imaginaries” (Clarke 2004, 32). Clarke

argues that, although transnational imaginary of the deterritorialized people who might seem to have limitations on power, the "move toward imagining is intensified and more variable with increasingly mobile subjects who are more actively meshing the socially real with the production of the spatially real. Understanding these distinctions between social classifications of daily life and particular institutional productions of how life ought to be is about understanding the real that is itself constructed and, therefore, exists in imagined classification of social norm, in relation to the production of the real" (Clarke 2004, 35).

Focusing on the processes of the production of what is *spatially real*, this detaches our understanding from the modern territorialized conceptions of the socially real, and thus opens up the ways in which possibility and intelligibility are produced and renegotiated. Understanding the "strategic alterities" that are informed by deterritorialized forms of imagination disclose the conditions of possibility that not only exist within imaginations of social norms but also impact the production of what is the transnational, and even local, real.

The institutions of *marja'* or the Guardian Jurist are *real* within the previous condition within the state boundary that was pulled out by Mojtaba, disclosing a possibility through which he argues against the very fundamental idea of the unity of *umma*, what he called "umbrella." He benefited from the unfixity of "reality" on the basis of an imaginary as a reminder of an unspoken possibility, even though it has produced contradictory, new, or related subjectivities. These new subjectivities existed within the historically constituted terms that became deterritorialized imaginary. Moreover, the

freedom of transnational mobility rendered the conditions through which he could reshape and re-signify particular ways of seeing.

Anthropologists have studied and analyzed the concept of *velayat-e faqih*, mostly due to the crucial role it has played in the establishment of the Islamic Republic. Beeman considers the doctrine the most fundamental apparatus via which the Islamic Republic is called a "theocracy." He argues, "The very appellation 'theocracy' is in itself misleading and shows a poor understanding of the governmental structure that was set up following the Iranian Revolution of 1978-79" (Beeman 2008, 195-6). Relying on this theoretical scheme, Beeman illustrates that although the Guardian *faqih* "controls directly or indirectly almost every aspect of government, the *faqih* is, himself, chosen by an Assembly of Experts, who are elected by the people" (Beeman 2008, 197). Similarly, Dabashi portrays the doctrine of *velayat-e faqih* as "perhaps the most significant ideological antecedent of the Islamic Revolution in Iran in an ideal-typically 'religious' context … as formulated by Ayatollah Khomeini" (Dabashi 1993, 11).

Other anthropologists have considered the sociopolitical reflections of the doctrine as they study the state's political structure (Adelkhah 2000), youth support of the Reformist government (Varzi 2006), and the framework for the future Islamic Republic (Bajoghli 2019). Michael M. J. Fischer is the only anthropologist who has analyzed the theorization of the doctrine through a "model of the dialogic method of the *faqih* or jurist in interpreting the Qur'an and Islamic revelation" (Fischer and Abedi 1990, 129). He referred to Khomeini's exegetical argument in which "with the help of a series of hadith," the *faqih* can be the successor to the Prophet and the Imams. Indeed, the *faqih* and not merely the Imams are the referent of the Qur'anic verse (4:59): "O you who believe, obey

God, His messenger, and the issuers of orders among you (*ulu al-amr*)" (Fischer and Abedi 1990, 129). Fischer also accentuated other *marja*s' disagreements about the clergy's endorsement via the jurisprudence and the *hadith*, then be able to take active official positions of authority. Fischer provided detailed descriptions about some of Khomeini's followers who furiously threatened that if Hakim did not visit and pay his respects to Khomeini, they would publicly rip off his turban (Fischer and Abedi 1990, 129). Although Fischer drew some attention to the exegetical basis of the doctrine, and more importantly the reflection of this innovative doctrine among the community, the way people perceive this in their everyday lives is missing from his account.

Referring to two major sources of Quran exegesis, al-Tusi's *Tibyan* and al-Tabrisi's *Majma' al-Bayan*, Amir Arjomand deeply analyzes the controversial term *ulu al-amr* ("those in authority") in the verse, and he argues, "Both al-Tusi and al-Tabrisi assert that 'those in authority; (ulu'l-amr) are neither the secular rulers (*amirs*) nor the *'ulama'*—neither of whom are immune from error and sin—but rather the infallible Imams" (Amir Arjomand 2010, 205). This specific verse, what Amir Arjomand calls the "authority verse" (*ibid*), was discussed multiple times during discussions about Iran's state, the authority of the supreme leader, and politics, in the sense that the untangled issues and circumstances in Iran are rooted in the exegetical impression of this verse. Amir Arjomand's attempt is among the few deep studies of textual analogy of the concept in the social sciences, revealing how the gap between the actuality of political power and religious authority have remained unbridged (Amir Arjomand 2010).

Though his sources are seminal in unraveling the very complicated meaning and circumstances that the "authority verse" and its attached concept of the Guardianship of

the *faqih*, it relies completely on miscellaneous textual sources provided by *'ulama'*, *faqihs*, clerics, and Islamic scholars, or intermediaries. I turned this paradigm, which adheres to intermediaries, on its head by looking at the issue from a bottom-up perspective in contrast to common, top-down frameworks in the literature. Maimuna Huq is among the few anthropologists who address this paucity in the literature, by focusing on the *users* of the Islamic scriptures and audience engagement with the texts (Huq 2008). In order to move beyond intermediaries' voices, my ethnography demonstrated how *people* have deeply embedded their own exegesis of the concepts by avoiding any micropolitical involvement with the current Guardian *faqih* of Iran.

My interlocutors' reflections were neither a political rejection of the current system in Iran nor an approval of the doctrinal exegesis of the "authority verse." Their strategy goes beyond the "modernist binary of the universal (global) sublating the particular (local)" (Wilson and Dissanayake 1996, 6). They left behind the oppositional formulation of global/local, which has been best visible through the past four decades of the Iran-U.S. relationship (Beeman 2008). Rather, they have developed and have become involved in the "transnational imaginary," which encompasses the "horizon of contemporary cultural production by which national spaces/identities of political allegiance and economic regulation are being undone and imagined communities of modernity are being reshaped at the macropolitical (global) and micropolitical (cultural) levels of everyday existence" (Wilson and Dissanayake 1996, 6). That is to say, they have moved beyond the dichotomous politics of *either/or*, and reorganized the processes of their cultural production around the "counter-logic of the *both*/*and*," informed by both macro and micropolitics of everyday lives (Wilson and Dissanayake 1996). That is, instead of taking

a macropolitical action and denying the very idea of the Guardianship and the issue of authority as a retrogressive ideology within the state, they are involved in its exegetical basis (micropolitics) to renegotiate the reformulation of meanings in relation to transnational existence (macropolitics).

My ethnography explored a wide range of exegetical conceptualizations of Quran-based ideas that were more aligned with the lived realities of my interlocutors than any *actual* meaning of the text. These exegetical statements have ranged from accounts about rulers' and citizens' mutual responsibilities, to the exegesis that applies to the concept of the Guardian, to multiple mentors in everyday life. These statements are still applied even if the rulers are non-Muslims such as in the U.S.—despite the exegetical facts that Muslims should avoid being ruled by Christians or Jews. This bottom-up paradigm needs to be expanded in conducting the anthropology of Muslim societies, so as to raise the voice of *practitioners* rather than intermediaries and figures of authority who have always been heard and have already been extensively studied.

CHAPTER 4: RACIALIZATION AND CLAIMING WHITENESS

In October 2019, during one of their typically lively conversations, Taher, Yasin, and Yousef were discussing Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps and its military interventions in the Middle East. But the topic soon, and surprisingly, turned from geopolitics to questions of race. Gathered around a table at Yousef's house after their weekly Quran session in Winstonburg, a small city in the upper U.S. South, the three men began debating the Revolutionary Guard's involvement in Yemen and came to agree that this was justified because Iranians and Yemenis shared a racial background.

Yousef drew on the classic narrative about how the "Aryan" race (*nezhad*) prevails throughout what were once the Persian Empire's territories. When I disputed the biological reality of Aryan ideology, Yousef referred to the historical context in which Yemenis were an ancient Iranian ethnic group who raised and trained horses for the Persian army. For Yousef, the fact that Houthis, a Yemeni ethnic group, "practice Shi'ism like Iranians today," explained that they share a common racial identity with Iranians. He further clarified, "When we are talking about race, we are talking about something we *believe* in, like the Persian language, that binds all of us together."

Yousef's plain description of race as a belief that culturally binds a group of people together was one of the many moments in my conversations with Iranian Americans in the U.S. South that complicated the way anthropologists commonly think about how people from Middle Eastern backgrounds encounter U.S. racialization. In Yousef's explanation, race and religion are conflated in a way that demonstrates the ways that Shi'ism might be understood as a religion, surely, but also as a historical ethnicity or a culturally-shaped racial group. In Iran, the prevailing discourse surrounding Iran's

intervention in Yemen has been rooted in a rationale about Yemeni Shi'is being oppressed, so Iran is responsible for defending them.

This fact is explicitly mentioned in the Iranian Constitution, under Article 154, as the "brotherly commitment to all Muslims, and unsparing support to the underprivileged and oppressed peoples of the world" (Ramazani 1980, 189). Additionally, Yousef provided a rationale based on racial commonality that, I suggest, is an outcome of his post-migratory situation. Notably, his comments underscored conceptions of race that, in the U.S. context, are inescapable across the social domain. At the same time, however, he offered an understanding of race that diverged from the phenotypic dimensions of race that are predominant in U.S. racialization.

In this chapter, I draw on ethnographic analysis of how Iranian Americans racialize others based on ethnohistorical imagining. In doing so, I show how they conceive of race in ways that differ from the dominant ways of navigating U.S. racialization. I found that they claim whiteness, regardless of their phenotypic characteristics, and that their own navigations of racialization were shaped by histories and experiences that went beyond racial phenotypes of the U.S. (e.g., the history of the Persian Empire and Yemen).

For example, given that Iranians undoubtedly consider themselves as part of the white middle class, they refer to American stereotypes against them as "redneck," "ignorant" or "rural," rather than exemplifying discriminatory attitudes taken by dominant "white" people. The way in which they view themselves as white middle class reflects an embodiment of "cultural citizenship," which is constructed through the "dual process of self-making and being-made" within the hegemonic framework of nation-state where race and class are conflated (Ong 1996). Iranians' claim to whiteness is shaped through

the racializing logic of class in which "the white man, and deserving citizenship, the convergences and overlaps between hegemonies of race, civilization, and market behavior as claim to citizenship" are indisputable (Ong 1996, 739).

In fact, Iranians often distance themselves from the main characteristic of middle-class white Americans—phenotypic whiteness—while also claiming this identity relationally. The categorical tension comes from the denial of belonging to a watertight national (phenotypic) whiteness. Instead, by going inside the category, Iranian Americans situate themselves within degrees of whiteness and citizenship. These are examples of the gradual categories of citizenship, what Ong describes as "graduated citizenship," in which varied populations are subjected to different modes of regulations in terms of their relevance to global capital (Ong 2006, 78-9). However, Iranians' endeavor to claim the identity demonstrates they are not only being regulated by the dominant categorical structures, but they also regulate the very meaning of the categories of whiteness and citizenship.

This idea is brings to mind Bourdieu's discussion of systems of classification that "function within and for the purposes of the struggle between social groups" (Bourdieu 1984, 480). It is not about economic status, money, whiteness, or a racialized category or de facto classificatory system. It is about how Iranian Americans' "collective representations" of those classifications that become a "*social* function" expressing the distinction (Bourdieu 1984). The extent to which they are involved in this "common system of classification while still being subject to antagonistic social uses" demonstrates their embodied dispositions (*habitus*) toward, and cultural performance of, class in U.S. settings (Bourdieu 1984, 480). In short, despite the shared phenotypic whiteness between

the American middle class and "rednecks" in the U.S. racial formation context, Iranian Americans brand themselves as the former.

Balibar illustrates how the discourse that entails workers who constitute a "degenerate race," resulted in the equation of "laboring classes" with "dangerous classes," and that they lack the qualities of fully fledged citizenship (Balibar 1991, 209). By drawing on a distinguished class, education, and cultural sophistication, what they have in common with the American middle class, Iranian Americans make a distinction within whiteness to declass some white Americans in order to secure their own fully-fledged citizenship, regardless of phenotypic traits. In this chapter, based on my observations of Iranian-American lenses of U.S. racialization, I develop an argument about how my research subjects carried particular understandings of race that are shaped by modalities of, not only within but also beyond, the U.S. framework of racialization.

In the anthropological literature, scholars emphasize the racial understanding of the clash of values between the U.S. and Middle-Eastern worlds, which has been intensified by racial politics. In the existing literature, we know how racism and discrimination against Middle-Eastern people being remade as the meaning of "race" has continued to shift (Naber 2008b, 303), how respected newspapers contribute to the misrepresentations of Arab and Muslim Americans (Joseph, D'Harlingue, and Wong 2008), how they have frequently been included or excluded from the cultural mainstream (Shryock 2008, 81-112), and how they *became* white but "not quite white" (Samhan 1999, 209) That whiteness has been unsettled or disrupted after 9/11. However, we know less about, as emphasized by a few historians, how and why they "became white," and how they have

incorporated their own ethnohistorical memories into to the U.S. racialization (Gualtieri 2008, 128; 2001, 21).

Iranian Americans' conceptions of race shape and are shaped by terminologies that extract meaning from their communal memories beyond the U.S. context. In what follows, I explore how Iranian Americans in the U.S. South, where the "notion of people fitting strongly into one category or the other is much stronger than in other parts of the country" (Lewis 2016, 69), strategically refer to the term "Aryan" race (*nezhad ariyayi*) to justify their whiteness. The U.S. South as the "race-place nexus" (Morris and Monroe 2009, 21), with a history of racial exclusion, provides a compelling site within which to examine the ways Iranian Americans affirm their racial identity, seeking to influence dominant U.S. racial discourse.

Part of what enables them to make this claim is not only the ethnohistorical justification of "Iran means the Land of Aryan," but it is also related to language. The word race has different connotations in Farsi. Although today race is generally translated to *nezhad* in Farsi, the original word has multiple implications other than biological superiority. In Farsi, the term expresses a sense of *we-ness* that is mostly associated with shared "descent" groups, history, language, and ethnicity (Zia-Ebrahimi 2016, 46). Hence, the non-phenotypical sense of race in Farsi (*nezhad*) enables Iranians to strategically alter the meaning based on discursive commonality to construct a sense of *we-ness*.

Drawing on the notion of "strategic alterity" (Kingsolver 2001), I seek to develop an argument about patterns of racialization that Iranian Americans often follow to fluctuate between multiple horizons of meaning in different nuanced social contexts. While

Iranians rely on certain understandings of race that align with some American mainstream notions of race regarding their middle-class status, they also conceive of race in a hierarchical sense. They pursue this alternative strategy to play out racial meanings in relation to other racialized groups. The way they identify themselves in relation to the dominant native whites differs from how they characterize their identity, for instance, in regard to Arabs.

In this chapter, by investigating the alternative strategies Iranians have developed to negotiate their racial identity, I provide a critical perspective on the racial politics that have shaped the lives of Middle-Eastern immigrant communities in the U.S., which "have failed to make them exclusively 'white' or 'non-white' but have convinced them that they are indeed Other" (Shryock 2008, 112). In contrast with the experiences of Middle-Eastern communities in Southern California (Bakalian and Bozorgmehr 2009; Abdulhadi, Alsultany, and Naber 2011) and Dearborn and Detroit, Michigan (Aswad 1974; Abraham and Shryock 2000) that have been the focus of contemporary anthropological study, Iranian Americans in rural and smaller cities of the U.S. South represent a lower-profile immigrant community that has not received much scholarly attention[35].

While there has been more significant attention paid to the formation of Middle-Eastern communities in the U.S. South in the historical scholarship, it is notable that these communities have achieved a level of economic success that has allowed them to assimilate into white middle-class populations of this region. Previous investigations focus on how individuals have collectively negotiated their racial identity in relation to

[35] A notable example that best explain the context of keeping a lower profile of Middle Eastern, especially Muslims, within the broader community and the needs for more ethnographic researches is most famously in Murfreesboro, Tennessee in which the U.S. Supreme Court overruled the local judge who ordered a halt to mosque construction (See Smietana 2014).

both dominant and non-dominant groups (Thomas 2020), attained a level of economic and social status to be accepted as "us" by the native whites (Stathakis 1996), and grappled with the issue of U.S. racialization to shift and broaden the meaning of whiteness (Gualtieri 2009, 2001), wielding their Christian identity was a strong argument in favor of their whiteness. However, my investigation of Iranian Americans' understandings of race sheds light on how they navigate different strategies to create a niche for themselves in U.S. racial hierarchy, while maintaining Muslim identity in a predominantly Christian society.

By looking closely at how Iranian Americans conceptualize racial meanings and navigate different strategies to claim whiteness, I develop an argument about how Iranian Americans engage with this process based on the "counter logic of the *both/and*" (Wilson and Dissanayake 1996, 5) to conceptualize race and navigate a whiteness that is shaped at the intersection of commonalities of citizenship status, class, education, economic success, location, ethnohistorical memories—both within *and* beyond the U.S.

In what follows, I first investigate new racial meanings by analyzing how Iranian Americans' racial positionalities were framed during weekly Quran sessions in Winstonburg, a small city in the upper U.S. South, in response to everyday realities—e.g., U.S. racial politics. Next, I examine the ethnohistorical particularism that has shaped the racial understandings of Iranian immigrants by analyzing the ways in which they view themselves as racially distinct from their fellow Muslims despite their shared Middle-Eastern phenotypes. In doing so, I investigate categories of identity, within and beyond U.S. frameworks, by which they conceptualize and claim non-phenotypic whiteness. I conclude by reflecting on the strategies of "ethnicization" (Gualtieri 2009;

Conzen et al. 1992) through which Iranian Americans incorporate pre-migratory communal memories in post-migratory identities in various social contexts in the U.S.

4.1 The Floyd Crisis through a Quranic Lens

Across the U.S., in the wake of George Floyd's murder in May 2020, people were protesting and Black Lives Matter was brought into the spotlight. During some protests, some public places were looted, and the footage was broadcast on news channels; the situation became worse with the former President's notable tweet:
"when the looting starts, the shooting starts."

Winstonburg, like the majority of large U.S. cities, was placed under curfew. The Quran session I attended in 2020 began with people's responses to this situation, and then they started reading verses. It was Arezoo's turn to read the verse about *munafiq* (hypocrites). The verse says:

> "If the hypocrites and those in whose hearts is a sickness, and the rumormongers in the city do not desist, We will prompt you [to take action] against them" (Quran 33: 60).

After she read the verse, Negar commented on the harmful consequences of hypocrites in society. Negar's husband, Baqer, talked about the meaning of *munafiq* (hypocrites) and gave an example to prove his point: "if we compare it with today's society, it is talking about people who go out into the streets and vandalize public places. It says those who damage and destroy the society will be captive and will be punished in *akhirah* [afterlife]."[36] Baqer's reaction about what was happening in the streets across the U.S. through the Quranic concept of "hypocrites" demonstrates his dissatisfaction with and

[36] All direct quotations that I use in this article translated from Farsi to English.

anxiety about vandalism. In his comments, he neither reflected on the issue as a racial conflict, nor did he racialize the protestors. The fact that a group of protesters vandalized public property made them "dangerous classes" (Balibar 1991, 209). Therefore, regardless of their skin color, they were "hypocrites" and lacked the qualities of fully-fledged citizenship.

Kayvan, a man in his sixties, jumped in and said, "this is not bad that people protest and demand their rights, but the way they are doing it will turn out against their rights because the FBI will get involved, and they will end up being criminals. From this viewpoint, Baqer's point is correct, but their [BLM protesters] reason is different with what the Quran is saying." Kayvan elaborated on the ethical and moral aspect of this comparison and said, "we cannot judge these people," based on his experiences of working with African Americans in the restaurant business and how the U.S. racial discourse resulted in this racial conflict.

This was an example of how these individuals associated what they understood from reading the Quran with everyday realities. The way Baqer criticized vandalism carried no phenotypic meanings of racialization. It also showed his process of justification for police action, by comparing what the Quran said about hypocrites who vandalize public places and what police might do to control the situation. But it was not the only way of relating the verse to the Floyd crisis.

4.2 "We," the Citizens

During my fieldwork, I usually tried to use the themes that I heard during my observations and expand them in in-depth interviews with my interlocutors. I brought up

the topic of race in my interview with Kayvan and asked about the way he pictured U.S. racial discourse to investigate how he positions Iranian Americans in the U.S. racial hierarchy.

Kayvan told me the story of an African-American neighbor, a university professor at the University of Winstonburg, who once told Kayvan that he had been pulled over fifteen times in their neighborhood without being guilty of any offense. Contrary to the Black neighbor's experiences, the police once pulled Kayvan over, and although he was driving twenty miles over the speed limit, he gave Kayvan's driver's license back and let him go as soon as he saw his address on the Wisteria Ln. [pseudonym], a wealthy neighborhood.

"Wearing suit and tie," was another reason that the police might have let him go, according to Kayvan. He concluded, "there is really a prejudice against them. The police only did that to him just because he is African American." For Kayvan, the alignment of his non-Black skin color with his "suit and tie," and the location where he lived, prevented possible racial discrimination by police. It was clear that for Kayvan, Iranian Americans and African Americans are not equally racialized as "people of color." The characteristics of the social class they both belonged to could not change the racial discrimination against the African-American neighbor by the police, but it did change the circumstance for Kayvan.

Kayvan pointed out that it was really difficult to "judge them [African Americans], even if some of them might shoplift. They think all people of the world owe them because they were slaves. That is true, so we cannot really judge them if we look at it from a bigger picture." While he was talking about his experience with African

Americans, he constantly used "we" and said, "*we* did that to them. *We* must look at how they grew up. *We are compensating for what we have done to them*." This, of course, was implying reductionist stereotypes about African Americans, but this is a crucial moment for Kayvan to acknowledge "class racism" as a political problem; this is not only crucial for the constitution of the nation-state, but it is also critical for assertion of Kayvan racial identity (Balibar 1991). By seeking a solution for this racial situation, Kayvan dialectically positioned himself at the "white" end of the black-white spectrum as the racialized embodiment of different kinds of social capital (Ong 1996).

After his passionate assertion, in order to examine his intent of using "we," I asked Kayvan what he meant by "we." He said, "we are compensating for what we have to them [African Americans]." Kayvan responded, "by 'we,' I meant myself. I have been living for forty-four years in this society. If I have seen such a thing happen in this society, and if I have not done much to stop it, I also feel guilty and responsible about it. *When I said 'we,' it was symbolic*. I mean all of us. We are living in this society. I was eighteen, when I came to the U.S. That means I have lived two-thirds of my life in the U.S. I have seen so much of these discriminations at work. But what I have done?" I jumped in and directly asked if that when he said "we," he meant *we, the citizens*, or *we*, the "whites?" Kayvan responded:

> "[author name], you are in a situation that you are still young and educated. You will get a job and live in this society. This is a *trick* they use. You should know that. You must say 'we.' When I talk to Americans, I say 'we.' That means here is *my country* as well, and I also have a right to take part in this society, have a voice, and express my opinion. Indirectly, I am saying to them that I am part of this society *because I pay taxes in this country*."

Kayvan asserted that, in addition to defending African Americans' rights, he was also claiming his rights by saying "we." Similar to those who feel they are American, he claims to be American. Their only difference is that their parents or grandparents came to America, but Kayvan himself migrated to America. Kayvan asserted this is a lesson from the Quran and his faith that "we must have a sense of ownership, and therefore, a sense of responsibility about this society and what is happening here." Although I tried to bring up the phenotypic differences between Iranian Americans and "white" Americans, Kayvan circumvented the racial issue by elaborating on how I should say "we" if I want to take part in this society.

Paying taxes was a way of whitening, though Kayvan did acknowledge that Iranians are non-white. His recommendation for me revealed that citizenship status, along with non-Black physical traits, are ways to confirm his social and racial identity. Similarly, Karen Brodkin demonstrates that the meaning of Jewishness in the U.S. racialization is a concept that is not completely associated with Jews' skin color. Thus, Jews' economic prosperity was a major factor in identifying Jews as "white" (Brodkin 1998, 37). So, like Brodkin's description about "whitening Jews," Kayvan's practice of tax-paying as a way to become "us" in the society evidences the process of *whitening* Iranians. It also shows why Iranians have concentrated on economic prosperity (Mobasher 1996) and technical university majors in the United States (Bozorgmehr and Sabagh 1988).

Although I attempted to bring up the social hierarchies of "races," Kayvan simply found a way around what I had recalled. Kayvan did not say that he had never experienced those hierarchies, but he verified that Iranian Americans "construct their identities and conduct their lives in ways that are meaningful to them" (Goldschmidt

2006, 13), whether or not "American Whites" admit it. By relying on economic prosperity and paying taxes, they claim their right to citizenship, we-ness, and thus, being part of the "white" middle class.

Although I attempted to touch base with the social hierarchies of "race," Kayvan did not acknowledge "race" as a biologically visible difference between him and "white" Americans. Grappling with the meaning of race, Hartigan found that "when whites talk about race they consistently invoke or mobilize class distinctions between themselves and their white neighbors" (Hartigan 1999, 19). When Kayvan referred to his "suit and tie" and his living in "Wisteria Ln.," his socioeconomic status seemed to reassure him of his social class, which was undeniably "white" and *was* in the same position aligned with those *citizens* who are supposed to feel responsibility for what *they* have done to African Americans.

What this suggests is that Iranian Americans have not gone through a path of assimilation that is recognizable to the American majority. Iranian-diaspora scholars have described Iranian immigrants' attempts to change the public image of their community from what was affected by political conflict, such as how the Hostage Crisis, which depicted them as aggressive "Muslims," to "Persians" who originated in the Caucasian area in ancient Persia (Maghbouleh 2010; Mahdi 1998; Mobasher 2012; Gholami 2016). I found, on the other hand, they have not only left behind their Muslim identity, but they have also reconceptualized the U.S. concept of race, class, and citizenship through their own ethnohistorical and religious systems of meaning to make sense of different social contexts. That is, they "conduct their lives in ways that are meaningful to them," regardless of the "hegemony of race" in American society (Goldschmidt 2006, 236).

Although Kayvan is aware of this "structural assimilation" that has been "imposed, more or less subtly, by the state and social elites" (Goldschmidt 2006, 235), he considers it a "trick," and he counteractingly employs "we, the citizens," which incorporates none of the "reductive conceptual categories like 'race,' 'religion', 'ethnicity', and 'culture'" (Goldschmidt 2006). Rather, it was a response to the "hegemony of race," based upon his own exegetical conception from the Quran, which ordains that he has a responsibility toward the society he lives in. He did not explicitly mention the Quranic verse for his exegesis; however, his overall learning from the Quran convinced him of his responsibility toward African Americans. More importantly, he also confirmed that within this "Black and white" conflict, he does not view himself as a "person of color." Instead, he sees himself as a part of "we," the taxpayers who are responsible for "what *we* have done to them." Thus, Kayvan's conceptualization of whiteness demonstrates the need for recognizing "the heterogeneity of whiteness that emerges from these interpretive uses in divergent, novel contexts, each featuring nuanced conflations of race with class- and place-specific discourses" (Hartigan 1997, 498), *as well as* religious accountability toward the society.

Here, "we," under certain circumstances, plays a different role in this game, which disregards the difference between Muslim and non-Muslim. Wittgenstein uses the example of the word "now" to describe such a situation. He differentiates the function of "now" from the function of expressions like "five o'clock," "mid-day," "the time when the sun sets," etc. He argues that, although these specifications of time are the same as the usage of the word "now" in our ordinary language, it can't be said "now" is the "moment at which I speak" (Wittgenstein and Docherty 1991, 108). There is no doubt that the

function of the word “now” is entirely different from a specification of time. He indicates that we need to look at the usage of this word in our language, but “it is obscured when instead of looking at the *whole language game*, we only look at the contexts, the phrases of language in which the word is used” (Wittgenstein and Docherty 1991, 108). While Iranian Americans are participating in different language games, they constantly, “under certain circumstances”, change the meanings of the concepts of Islam, ethnicity, whiteness, class, racialization, and citizenship (Wittgenstein and Docherty 1991).

4.3 Iranians in Relation to other Muslim Americans, e.g., Arabs

One of the examples that can best describe how the people I worked with shift the meaning of “we” in different contexts is when they encountered the discrimination against Muslims in the U.S. These discriminatory perceptions are highlighted by the cases of polygamous and underaged marriage practices in Islam. In one of the sessions, Mohsen, a man in his late fifties, said, “The Prophet, in the Quran, says men cannot have more than four wives, but he himself had eleven to twelve wives. He also married Aisha who was nine years old. Therefore, these are still the common objections against Islam that we must research to have reasonable answers.” Shahin, a man in his late forties, tried to justify these practices as a necessity of their time. He indicated that Muslims must view these types of practices as “cultural,” meaning that it only applied to the culture of people during the early Islamic era in Arabia and does not essentially mean that other Muslims, in other times and spaces, should follow these rules. The typical strategy my interlocutors applied was that any controversial issues, such as polygamous or underaged

marriages, were part of the culture of Arabs, separating religion from ethnicity and culture.

Baqer then jumped in by saying, “there are some societies, even in the twenty first century, who live beyond the *repugnance* of that time. On this earth, today, there are still some societies who live more primitively than in early Islamic eras.” As I observed on multiple occasions during fieldwork, Iranians look at Islam from the historical and cultural contexts of the Arabian Peninsula and Arabs. Although Baqer does not use the name of Arab culture, it seemed it was one of the typical comments about “those Arabs,” who still marry underaged girls or still practice “slavery” or polygamous marriage.

Kayvan referred to what Mohsen mentioned about polygamy and responded, “what we heard about four-wife marriages, which *is* in the Quran, was in accordance with the orphan situation. When the numbers of orphans and widows increased, the Prophet indicated that it was God‘s will for them to adopt these children.” Kayvan referred to a Quranic verse:

> “If you fear that you cannot act justly towards the orphans, then marry such women as seem good to you; two, three, four of them” (Quran 4: 3).

Kayvan continued by noting, in the early Islamic age, Muslims’ situations were not good. They did not have that much wealth. It was ordered “to adopt these kids. And if you cannot treat them like your own kids, marry their mothers.” Therefore, polygamous marriage practice was a recommendation regarding the orphan situation, not for “licentiousness, which was common during the *culture of ignorance*.” The typical strategy of these common critiques of Islamic practices is to recontextualize them as being within Arab culture, not the Muslim identity. Indeed, racialization of those

controversial practices is a strategy to eradicate the social stigma from their own Muslim identity.

Kayvan discussed the Quranic verse on the "age of puberty" (Quran 24:59), which is usually referred to for justifying underaged marriage, and argued "I think the Quran is telling what not to do, instead of what to do. It did not say that this is a certain *vajeb* (requirement) for Muslims to pursue. It says you cannot marry them before a certain age." He then evoked the common strategy that *those Arabs who lived fourteen hundred years ago* used to married girls prior to the age of puberty, and the Quran condemned that "culture of ignorance."

In the interview with Kayvan, when I brought up his comments about the Arab culture, he explicitly said, "you need to separate Islam from Arabs. Arabs were lizard and grasshopper eaters." This example demonstrates that Iranian, themselves, use distinctions in through their own viewpoint, which reveals how racialization and stereotyping goes in all different direction. They experienced it. They do it to others. And in so doing, they use a set of basic perceptual schemes that are meaningful in Iranian culture, "in the pairs of antagonistic adjectives commonly used to classify and qualify persons" (Bourdieu 1984, 468). In this case, they use "lizard eaters" vs. civilized, ancient Persians. That is, behind the racialization of these historical narratives lies their understanding of the whole social order—"the opposition between the 'elite' of the dominant and the 'mass' of the dominated," which symbolizes the white dominant group, including Iranians, and other racialized minority groups (Bourdieu 1984, 268). Therefore, everyone is in this complex. In a Wittgensteinian sense, though conceiving of race primarily in the U.S., they contextualize their distinction historically to claim their own ethnic identity.

Kayvan delved even more deeply into this distinction by referring to a *hadith* from the Prophet in which his companions asked him about who "the people" are:

> "O you who believe! whoever from among you turns back from his religion, then Allah will bring a people, He shall love them and they shall love Him, lowly before the believers, mighty against the unbelievers, they shall strive hard in Allah's way and shall not fear the censure of any censurer" (Quran 5: 54).

Kayvan, his eyes filled with tears, said, "the Prophet tapped Salman, the Persian's shoulder and said: 'this man and his people.'" Salman, the Persian – not an Arab, is one of the first and most trusted companions of the Prophet. For Kayvan, according to the *hadith*, the Prophet determined that Salman the Persian and Iranians are "the people;" this verse promises that they are the favorite of God. This complex toward Arabs is rooted in the Arab invasion of Persia from 633 to 654 AD that resulted in the fall of the last Persian Empire. However, they separated Islam from the Arab invasion that occurred during Caliphs, and not from the life of the Prophet. During my interviews, I heard multiple times from my interlocutors that the Prophet participated in none of the wars between Arabs and Iranians.

Although U.S. popular culture and media discourses in the aftermath of 9/11 "consolidated the conflation of the categories 'Arab,' 'Middle Eastern,' and 'Muslim'" (Naber 2008a, 38), less attention has been paid to the way Middle-Eastern and Muslim communities categorize themselves in relation to other Middle-Eastern immigrant groups. While dominant U.S. discourses, such as mass media and government officials, have classified "the 'Arab,' who was once positioned as white, but not quite" (Naber 2008a, 39) as Other, Iranians, who themselves were subjected to this discrimination, have tried to strategically benefit from the situation. They do not openly denounce the hegemonic

discourses about the "Arab Other," so as to not only become one of the "we," the majority, but also to separate themselves from the "Arab Other" who once invaded them and destroyed their Empire *fourteen hundred years ago*.

In so doing, similar to dominant U.S. government and media discourses on "the Arab," they refashion "European discourses that portrayed Islam as homogenous, uncivilized, and culturally backward, and violently misogynistic toward women" (Naber 2008a, 32). They then replace "Islam" with "those Arabs," as Kayvan explained. The way Shahab, Baqer, and Kayvan pictured the polygamous and underaged marriage practices as "cultural," "repugnant," and Arab's "ignorant culture" were strategies to associate with anti-Arab dominant U.S. discourse, not only confirming their own proximity to whiteness but also to evoke their historical Persian identity: chosen people, according to Kayvan's exegesis of Verse 5: 54.

While playing these *games*, certain language-games are underestimated, while others become more underscored. For instance, it was beneficial to consider the boundary between citizenship and whiteness blurry enough, in order to include this group of Iranian Americans as "we, the citizen," at the expense of downplaying the fact that the Quran's message is just for Muslims not non-Muslims. Wittgenstein asserts that "when language-games change, then there is a change in concepts, and with the concepts the meanings of words change" (Wittgenstein 1972, 10e). Although Kayvan called his strategy of mixing up all these concepts—race, religion, citizenship, ethnicity— a "trick," Kingsolver calls this procedure, "strategic alterity"—"the practice of shifting *between* strategic assertions of inclusion and exclusion (or the marking and unmarking of 'selves' and 'others') to

both devalue a set of people and to mask that very process of strategic devalorization" (Kingsolver 2001, 110).

Devalorizing Islamic polygamous and underaged marriages practices as the "Arab's culture of ignorance" demonstrates that they acknowledge this power relation of white supremacy and its position in the hierarchy of American "racial formation" (Omi and Winant 2014, 111). However, by involving language-games, they have strategically altered their position in the group apart from the "other," in order to mark themselves as "selves" who also acknowledge these practices as "uncivilized, and culturally backward."

Based on Kayvan's expression about his role and responsibility as the citizenship towards African Americans, as well as Baqer, Shahin and Kayvan passionate rejection of the Arab "ignorant" and "repugnant" practices, I further draw on Omi and Winant's definition of the "racial project" to discuss how they navigate language-games obscuring the boundaries of religion, ethnicity, racialization, and citizenship. Omi and Winant define *racial project* as "an interpretation, representation, or explanation of racial identities and meanings, and an effort to organize and distribute resources (economic, political, cultural) along particular racial lines" (Omi and Winant 2014, 125). Iranians in the U.S. do not seem to reject this project. Rather than denying it, they are actually involved in the process by drawing on a different *game*. They have created their own meanings and explanations for their racial identity.

Iranian Americans are not only aware of U.S. racialization, but they also actively make comment, explain, interpret, and justify this procedure. I found useful the way Kingsolver distinguishes different types of citizenships, market, and national citizenships. She indicates that a *market* citizen is used to argue for or against groups' rights within

nation-states regardless of legal status" (Kingsolver 2010, 30). This resonates with Ong's concept of "graduated citizenship," in which she describes these gradations of governing that "overlap with pre-formed racial, religious and gender hierarchies, and further fragment citizenship for people who are all, nominally speaking, citizens of the same country" (Ong 2000, 62). The way Kayvan described the police discrimination in his neighborhood symbolizes these gradations of citizenship. He was sorry about such stereotypes from police toward, not toward "us," "the people of color," or "the immigrants," but *these* people of color, and expressed this is *our* (the dominant racialized group) responsibility.

The way they also reject the Islamic practices of polygamy and underaged marriage in the modern day shows they have never practiced such "repugnant" Arab practices like their "chosen" Persian ancestors. Clarke calls on anthropologists to refashion their understanding of "linkages—national and racial—not in modern terms, in which territory and place have standardized our classification of Others, but in relation to the historically-constituted ways that people see linkages" (Clarke 2004, 10). Kayvan denounced the "Arab ignorant culture" of underaged marriage, not dominant U.S. discourse as "Islamic" practices, but in a historically constituted way that links himself to Salman, the Persian, and his "people." His pre-migratory communal memories enabled him to adopt post-migratory values, which sends nearly the same historical message as Islam did to stop such "ignorant" Arab practices.

4.4 Conclusion

The ownership of capital, having professional businesses, higher education, etc., have enabled Iranian Americans to consider themselves as "we, the taxpayer citizens," "full citizens of the nation-state" as opposed to the "cultural visibility" of minorities (Rosaldo 1993, 198-199). They have gone beyond the boundary of "cultural citizens," and they have become part of the "culturally invisible mainstream" (Rosaldo 1993), who have a responsibility to think about subordinate groups of "our" society and denounce "repugnant" practices that are not compatible with "our" values.

However, phenotypic differences between them and "white" people play almost no role in their orientation of socio-racial identity. The way they racialize Arabs or reflect on African Americans' situations demonstrate "phenotypic differences are not necessarily seen or understood in the same consistent manner across time and place, but they are nevertheless operating in specific social settings" (Omi and Winant 2014, 13) because they feel obligated to position themselves as "we," when the dominant majority excludes one racialized group (e.g. Arabs). Yet, they go through different paths and rationales when acknowledging dominant majorities' racialization of human groupings based on phenotypic traits. They do not view racialization only through bodily difference.

A more useful category to describe Iranians' embeddedness in U.S. racialization is "ethnicization," what Gualtieri defines as "the construction of a sense of peoplehood vis-à-vis outsiders" (Gualtieri 2009, 14). For example, when they were discussing the George Floyd crisis, they talked less about his phenotypic difference from the officer and more about the poverty that had cause him to use a counterfeit $20 bill. When racializing Arabs, they only referred to the "ignorant traditions," which Islam acted to remove. They

understood dominant discourses and valued the host society, but they also reinvented them in relation to packages of ancestral knowledge.

Scholars define this procedure as ethnicity, a "process of construction or invention which incorporates, adapts, and amplifies preexisting communal solidarities, cultural attributes, and historical memories" (Conzen et al. 1992, 5). Although the interlocutors in my work relied on historical memories, their analyses are grounded in real life and must provide a response to current social issues—e.g., convicting the September 11 attackers against the Pentagon and the World Trade Center – even though they share the same faith with attackers. My ethnography shows how Iranian Americans in a Southern U.S. setting are constantly recreating themselves, and how their Iranianness is "continuously being reinvented in response to changing realities both within the group and the host" (Conzen et al. 1992, 5). They operationalize racial meaning in a dynamic manner to conceptualize their sense of ethnicity, whiteness, class, racialization, citizenship, and even religiosity in the larger U.S. social order.

For example, the individuals in my study would have never pulled the solution from the Quranic teachings to assist and empower subordinate "Blacks," if they had not migrated to the U.S.—thus, there would be no need to compensate for what *they* have done to African Americans. My analysis of the way Iranian Americans conceptualize racial, religious, ethnic, citizenry, and class hierarchies offers a platform via which to examine how intentions and desires toward inclusivity can shift, substitute, and recreate racial meanings within the exclusionary discourse of U.S. racialization.

CHAPTER 5: IRAN (RE)IMAGINED

In June 2020, I went to Taher's apartment in Winstonburg where he lived with two other roommates, Rasul and Houshang, whom I met for the first time. They both came to the U.S. after winning the immigration lottery. My primary purpose in meeting them was to establish friendships with them. Rasul and I were chatting about our military service because we were the only ones who had experienced it. He had served in *Sepah* (the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps), not the national army (*Artesh*), and he asked me questions about my experience serving in the Army. Throughout our conversation, he compared the current state of the army with the glory of the Pre-Revolutionary Era in Iran.

While he was talking about the Pre-Revolutionary time, he kept using the term *A'la Hazrat*, meaning "His Imperial Majesty," the respectful address for the Shah of Iran, used by people who respect the Pahlavi Dynasty. In the revolutionary literature and state rhetoric of Iran, the title of Shah has always been attached with a hateful suffix, "Shah-e *mal'un*" (the anathematized Shah) or "Shah-e *kha'en*" (the traitorous Shah). The revolutionary rhetoric has always been positioned against Pre-Revolutionary values, terms, and titles. Rasul, using the respectful address for the Shah, was at odds with his service in the IRGC. For mandatory military service in Iran, men are routinely assigned to serve in the national army, not in the IRGC. To serve in the IRGC, one must have some background, special admission, or family members in this military force.

One of the topics of this group's conversation was Iran's foreign policy, which is a common topic among Iranians. They were discussing whether Iran should intervene in the Israel-Palestine issue, the Syrian Civil War, or Iraqi interior affairs. While they were

talking about the Palestine issue, they referred to the Quranic verse about changing the first *qibla* (the direction for Islamic ritual prayer), from a*l-Aqsa* Mosque in Jerusalem to the Sacred Mosque in Mecca: "We shall surely turn you to a direction that shall satisfy you. So, turn your face towards the Sacred Mosque (built by Abraham)" (2: 144). Houshang argued that the first *qibla* was not *al-Aqsa* Mosque in Jerusalem. He claimed that the first *qibla* was Petra, the historical city in southern Jordan, saying "it has changed later in Islamic texts." It is worth mentioning that the only holy site near Petra is the Tomb of Aaron, the brother of Moses at the Mount Hor, which is a pilgrimage site for Jews.

Al-Aqsa is important enough to the Islamic Republic to name a special branch of the IRGC after it, Quds Force. *Quds,* meaning sacred, is the Arabic name Muslims use for Jerusalem. The city is sacred because it accommodates the *al-Aqsa* Mosque. Quds Force's ultimate goal is to emancipate Jerusalem. This doctrine is so critical that it is part of the Constitution of the Islamic Republic. With his comment, Houshang not only denied the fundamental doctrine of the Islamic Republic, but he also questioned the accuracy of the Quranic verse that refers to the mosque as the first *qibla*. His comment also questioned the greatest miracle of the Quran, which is unchanged Muslim belief. This reason was enough to categorize Houshang an opponent of the Islamic Republic.

However, my assumption was not correct. When Houshang was talking about the Iran nuclear deal, he asserted that Trump's withdrawal from JCPOA[37], the Iran nuclear deal, was favorable to Iran. He said, "they [Iranian government] retreated from national right and resources in JCPOA for sanctions removals; something that never happened

[37] The Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action

completely." He also brought up the role of Jason Rezaian, the *Washington Post* journalist involved in the nuclear deal negotiation. Jason Rezaian was indicted for espionage by the U.S. government and was released during the nuclear deal negotiations. Houshang's political views about the story of the nuclear deal and Jason Rezaian's alleged espionage finely replicated the Islamic Republic's rhetoric. However, proponents of the Islamic Republic would never use "His Majesty," often used to revere the Shah. Nor would they question the location of the first *qibla*, explicitly mentioned in the Quran, merely by arguing that "it has changed over time."

In the Islamic Republic's doctrine, fundamental principles such as Quranic messages, antagonism toward Shah, the U.S., and Israel cannot be disputed. Since the Revolution of 1979, the clerics of authority claimed to have restructured the country in a way that represents Islam of the Prophet's time. All rhetoric is centered around religious ideology and *umma*. Even during the Iran-Iraq war, the dominant rhetoric was to defend Islam and Muslim land, not the nation. Therefore, the Shah, who symbolizes Iranian nationalism, modernization, alliance with the U.S. and Israel, and pre-Islamic values would never be revered within the Islamic ideology of the Islamic Republic. However, my ethnographic findings reveal that these boundaries between Islamic ideology and nationalist narrative are blurred in diasporic contexts wherein Iranian Americans negotiate their ethnoreligious identity.

In this chapter, I explore the intersections between religion and nation. That is, much of what Iranian-Muslims deem to be "national" is closely related to religion. By the same token, this religiosity is imbued with a sense of nationhood. I demonstrate how the

notions of "nation" and "religion" are linked, and often even substituted for one another, in people's lived realities and everyday political discussions.

My ethnography of these everyday conversations surrounding the current news shows the challenges in pinpointing what "nation" and "religion" mean for people or where the conceptual border is that separates these two, often taken-for-granted ideas. I develop my theoretical argument within the anthropological literature about how religious discourse and practice are part of the process of social and national identity formation. My framing resonates with van der Veer's argument, in which he points out distinctiveness between secular nationalism and religious faith as a private matter, as proposed by the British colonizers and the Indian response—what he calls "religious nationalism" (van der Veer 1994, 1995a). Although van der Veer's theoretical contribution encompasses religious practices and discourses as constructive bases that link to national identity, I argue that these two concepts, "religious" and "national," are difficult to parse among the Iranian-Muslim Americans that I worked with in my research.

The concept of "religious nationalism" has been utilized in the scholarship on the role of Islam in Iranian nationalism (Aghaie 2014; Fozi 2016). However, my approach will seek to contribute to a resolution of the conceptual problem that presumes that "nation" or "religion" are solid entities. Although they have been once neglected in the idea of "secular nationalism," they can be considered thorough the lens of "religious nationalism" or "Islamic-Iranian nationalism." Drawing on Axel's approach of the "Diasporic Imaginary," I will show how, contrary to the notion that assumes the homeland creates diaspora, diaspora members create the homeland (Axel 2002, 426). In this chapter, I will explore how people *imagine* Iran outside of the dichotomous discourse

of the pre-Revolutionary, nationalist, glorious kingdom as opposed to the post-Revolutionary, Islamist, traditional theocracy. I utilize Dusenbery's approach that points out that an interest in creating "Khalistan" among Sikhs in Canada is not a desire to leave for the "homeland," but rather a desire to belong in the countries of immigration (Dusenbery 1995). I discuss how Iranian Americans have adopted an interchangeable viewpoint, not aiming to overthrow the governance system in Iran, but instead fostering a desire to reconstruct a community without this duality, which can impose the separation of religious practices and discourses from nationhood.

In the chapter, I first investigate the politics of belonging by analyzing how Iranian-American identities have formed during everyday negotiations of geopolitics of the homeland, so as to articulate the past in ways that favor the futurity of communities in the U.S. Next, I examine fluid particularism, which has shaped the identity politics of Iranian immigrants by analyzing the ways in which they develop "theories" to resolve the discrepancies of religiosity and nationhood. In doing so, I investigate categories of identity through which individuals conceptualize their Iranian diasporic identity. I conclude by reflecting on the reversible and fluid meanings of "nation" and "religion," through which Iranian Americans incorporate conflictual "nationalistic" and "Islamic" configurations in diasporic communal identity.

5.1 Shi'i Shah

In August 2019, after the lecture of the weekly Quran session in Heydar Center of Winstonburg, everyone went to the next room to eat food and chat. Mr. Heshmati, Yousef's father, came and sat next to me and asked a question he had asked before:

> "Now that you are doing research on the Iranian community, what is the reason that other nationalities are always together? Koreans are together, Indian are always together, but Iranians are separated. Some gather because of religion, some of them gather around these *Mojahedin* [an Iranian political-militant organization against the Islamic Republic]. I have seen this during the last fifty years in the U.S. In this small city, the Iranians are not few in number."

I briefly explained the idea of "nation" as an "imagined" concept to explain Anderson's "imagined communities" in simple language. However, this concept made it more complicated for him, and he said, "do you mean we don't have a nation?" I realized that I had gone too far by explaining such a specific term used in anthropology. I realized that in the field I should listen rather than teach. However, his statement indicates the bipolarity of two types of Iranian Americans who have built and maintained community around religious practices, national celebrations, or political opposition against the Islamic Republic.

Yousef, who was listening, said, "in all cultures *mashrub* [alcoholic beverage] exists, and if you put it in the middle, everybody gathers. For instance, Mexicans gather for drinking and do not like the White's alcoholic drinks. They put aside all differences and center around a common purpose [drinking]. Even Rednecks become integrated around biking and get together, no matter what they believe or where they are from." He gave his experience of when he turned in front of a motorcycle without signaling, and apologized immediately, but the motorcyclist showed him the finger and did not pay attention to his apology. The policeman who saw what had happened said to Yousef, "you were about to kill him." "The policeman said: 'it is because I am a motorcyclist myself'," according to Yousef.

In Yousef's opinion, the policeman did not care about the law, he cared only about motorcycling. Diasporic context provided a situation in which Yousef observed that any practices – drinking alcoholic beverages, motorcycling, religious practices, national events – can create a sense of community. Therefore, when Iranians are outside the boundaries of the state, religiosity and sense of nationhood are not mutually exclusive. Yousef and Mr. Heshmati's critiques convey the message that categories such as nation, religion, community, Islam, and Shi'ism might be renegotiated in order to create new meanings for the desirable future of community in the U.S.

Yousef's critique seemed to be directed at the anti-regime Iranians, who mostly stay away from any Islamic gathering as a symbol of the Islamic Republic but might come together for other social events unrelated to religion, such as drinking, partying, or having food. He delved into the presumed dichotomy:

> "Iranians here [in the U.S.] assume that they are a united nation, and the *shir o khorshid* flag [meaning lion and sun in pre-revolutionary Iranian flag] and Reza Pahlavi [the last Crown Prince of Iran] have become the symbols of Persian language and Iranianness and this type of stuff outside of Iran. Then we see videos where he speaks with his daughters at home *in English*. Many of them [anti-regime Iranians] criticize the Islamic Republic's foreign policy by saying 'neither Gaza nor Lebanon, Sacrifice my Soul for Iran.' However, it turned out Hassan Nasrallah[38] and his daughters speak Farsi fluently."

This account represents the multiple diasporic horizons that Yousef imagined and oscillated among. He talked about the Crown Prince, whose father used to be King in the past, to argue he cannot represent Iranian national glorification because his daughter is unable to speak fluent Farsi, which was his concern for the future. He shifted between these temporal and spatial spheres to imagine a future in the U.S. His example of Nasrallah, whose daughter speaks fluent Farsi, opened a new horizon: a Lebanese Shi'i

[38] Hasan Nasrallah is the leader of Hezbollah, a Shi'i militia group in Lebanon.

clergy whose only shared identity with Iranians is religion, which has become an example of the spread of "Persian language and Iranianness."

While Yousef was downplaying the influence of the Crown Prince, his position about the Shah was unexpected. He referred to a documentary about the Shah's funeral in Egypt that was just broadcast on one of the Farsi-language, satellite TV channels. Yousef said, "I feel really sorry for Shah, *peace be upon him*. He was not a bad man. There is always some oppression during the reign of any King. He really had concerns about Iran and was a real patriot." This account rearranged the structure of the religious-nationalist binary in Pre- and Post-revolutionary times by using the phrase, "*peace be upon him*," for the Shah. This is the phrase that pious people use after the name of religious figures. Hezbollah is a Shi'i militia that was created by the Islamic Republic, but Yousef used the leader of Hezbollah as an example of national pride for Iranians.

At the same time, he referred to the Shah as person who deserved to be honored with "peace be upon him." He explained how, before the Revolution, the Shah had supported Imam Mousa Sadr in Lebanon (Samii 1997). Mousa Sadr was an Iranian cleric who played a crucial role in establishing a sense of community in Lebanon. He has been missing for over forty years, after he was invited to visit Libya during the rule of Ghaddafi. Yousef clarified that the Shah's antagonism toward Khomeini does not signify his opposition to Shi'i clerics and Islam because he supported Mousa Sadr and appointed him as the Shah's representative in Lebanon.

Yousef also developed a conspiracy theory about Sadr's disappearance: "Khomeini's plane from France landed in Tehran without difficulties, but Mousa Sadr's plane was vanished on air, and nobody knows what happened after forty years."

Regardless of the authenticity of this information, Yousef used the Mousa Sadr example to evoke an image of the Shah that reveals his religious affiliation and support for Shi'i clerics. This image has been presented neither by the Islamic Republic nor by anti-regime, nationalist Iranians. Since the Shah forced Khomeini into exile in Paris, he was depicted as an anti-Islam individual.

On the other hand, for anti-regime, nationalist Iranians, Khomeini represented the clerics or authorities who promoted radical Islam because of the hostage crisis and the 1988 state-sponsored executions of Iranian political prisoners. Yousef minimized this dichotomous tension by underlining the role of Mousa Sadr as a popular and moderate Shi'a cleric in Lebanon, showing that the unprecedented aspect of the Shah's persona was contrary to the anti-Islam image disseminated by the Islamic Republic, maintaining a strong relationship with the institution of Shi'a clerics despite progressive nationalist plans. Yousef made the point that the Shah supported Lebanese Shi'as, although he had relationships with the U.S. and Israel.

I then brought up the dichotomy of Iranian vs. Arab, the Quran vs. *Shahname*[39], or Cyrus the Great vs. Ali, among religious and so-called nationalist anti-Arab and anti-Islam people in Iran and Iranian diasporas (Gholami 2016; Spellman 2005; Mobasher 2012). Yousef stated,

> "Shah was not against Islam. He visited Imam Reza [the shrine] to show respect to Islam, but he did not have enough of that populist sense to show that he is religious. That was why religious and traditional groups of people did not support him. The Islamic Republic has made the same mistake but in reverse; It put too much emphasis on the religious aspects and downplayed the sense of nationalism. There have been some attempts

[39] Shahnameh means the Book of the Kings. It was written by Ferdowsi almost one thousand years ago and includes stories of Iranian Shahs based on mythology and historical events. Throughout the book, Ferdowsi talks about "Iran" and "Iranian culture," regretting that Iranians were defeated by the Arabs (Zia-Ebrahimi 2016; Marashi 2011).

since Ahmadinejad [the sixth President of Iran] to pay more attention to the nationalistic aspects."

In this account, Yousef presented an image of the last Shah of Iran as someone who supported the institution of Shi'i clerics and their expansion in Lebanon. Given the fact that Yousef emphasized the role of Mousa Sadr, an Iranian cleric to create a sense of community in Lebanon, this aligned with the fact that Hassan Nasrallah and his daughter can speak Farsi. Therefore, Yousef described a Shi'ism not as a branch of Islam but as a group that has some community in Iran, some in Iraq, and some in Lebanon. Nor did he indicate that Lebanese Shi'ism was limited to the Hezbollah group that had been established by the Islamic Republic. There was an ethnohistorical bond that also made the last Shah of Iran send his trusted cleric, Mousa Sadr, into Lebanon as his representative.

Yousef also mentioned that there were two strategic mistakes by the Shah, who did not publicize he was religious, and by the Islamic Republic, which had ignored pre-Islamic Iranian culture. Yousef's account indicates this strategic mistake was realized by one of the Islamic Republic presidents. They tried to include the pre-Islamic, Iranian values and traditions as part of the sense of nationhood, what some scholars called "Neo-Iranian Nationalism" (Fozi 2016; Fozi 2014). Yousef gave an example: "they [the state] found that it was a wrong policy [to propagate only the Islamic values]. When I was in Iran, I realized that the media and IRIB [the national TV] are highlighting non-Islamic holidays like Yalda night[40]." In response to what I asked about the new policy, Yousef said, "I noticed in front of Western *cultural invasion*, such as Papa Noel [Santa Claus] or Valentine's Day, they have tried to revive the pre-Islamic national celebrations."

[40] On Yalda night or *shabe chelle*, Iranians celebrate the longest and darkest night of the year, which is around December twentieth, the winter solstice.

The term "cultural invasion" was used by Iran's supreme leader to conceptualize the Western, especially American, lifestyle that was being followed by the new generation of youth in Iran. The way Yousef used this term showed that he had borrowed it, and he also viewed the American lifestyle as cultural invasion. He asserted that the new policy, followed by Ahmadinejad's government, was essential to developing national discourse, thus absorbing the majority instead of focusing exclusively on religious matters. Yousef said, "Islamic topics are limited to certain types of people; however, with national matters you can associate with the entire nation."

Yousef's critique of this nationalist-religious dichotomy began with his concern about the community "here" in the U.S. Although he navigated among multiple temporal and spatial arenas to talk about religiosity of the Shah and nationalistic aspects of the Islamic Republic, "place or place of origin" were not his primary concerns (Axel 2002). His diasporic imaginary does not act as a new kind of place of origin or new system of governance for Iran that combines both nationalistic and religious "matters," but it indicates "a process of identification generative of diasporic subjects" (Axel 2002, 412). This attempt demonstrates that rather than conceiving of homeland, the situation shaped Yousef's mentality of what religion or nation is. It is more convincing to consider how Yousef reimagined a homeland in which Shi'i clerics, either Iranian or Lebanese, ethno-historically have the same origin and the last Shah who was religious enough to use "peace be upon him" after his name.

This reimagined Iran is not a solution for the past discrepancies in the homeland but for the future of his hyphenated identity in the U.S. Yousef asserted how he identifies himself as an Iranian American:

> "I define myself as a child of divorced parents with regards to the Iran-U.S. relationship. There are some politicians here [the U.S.] that I like so much. I really do not care about the politics in Iran. Whoever becomes the mayor, a member of parliament or a city council does not matter. What matters is its global aspects. Iran's foreign policy is very important to me. Iran's foreign policy is very good now, and they are not dependent like Shah."

Although Yousef seemed to be proud of Iranian military power, he did not seem to have the typical revolutionary attitude towards the Shah and the pre-revolutionary Imperial State of Iran. While he was describing Iranian military forces since the Revolution, he was not situating the current Iran state against the Shah's regime, totally dependent on West, especially the U.S., and traitorous to its own people, like a typical supporter of the Islamic Republic would have done. Instead, he positioned Pre- and Post-revolutionary Iran in the same linear progress towards development, each of which had their own flaws, but not in the two conflicting poles of "religious" and "nationalist."

The fact that Yousef did not care much about Iran's interior policy reveals how the Iranian diaspora, rather than a community of dispersed Iranian individuals, must be understood more productively as a transnational, mobile category—a productive process of contrasting "temporalities (anteriorities, presents, futurities)" (Axel 2004, 27). Yousef's reimagined Iran has become an ideal homeland on which he depends to gain respect in the U.S.: "the real homeland, but to which they do not want to return" (van der Veer 1995b, 12). In this process, he collected certain traits of the past through which the Shah of Iran was a religious person who visited the shrine of the eighth Shi'i Imam and sent Shi'i clergy, like Mousa Sadr, to Lebanon. Then, he recognized the Islamic Republic's president, who attempted to revive certain pre-Islamic values and current foreign policy. Thus, Yousef reimagined a homeland that favored his transnational

identity for the future, regardless of the essential meanings of nation emphasized by Iranian nationalist and religion disseminated through Post-revolutionary doctrine.

5.2 Shi'i Aryanism

In October 2019 after the Quran recitation, Yousef, Taher, and I were talking about the Zam[41]'s arrest by the Revolutionary Guard in Iraq, which was a news bomb from a journalist who lived in France and was known as one of the most wanted journalists by the Iranian intelligence community. *Sepah* (IRGC) issued a grandiose announcement about this great achievement accomplished through a complicated mission.

The language they were using about this event was the same as pro-regime Iranian media inside Iran. Yousef, Taher, and later Yasin who joined us, were satisfied and happy about this great "achievement." While they were expressing their satisfaction with the arrest of Zam, I learned that they were very supportive of the statements of another exiled journalist, Behrouz Delshad [pseudonym][42]. When they realized that I was surprised that they listened to an individual who voiced unflattering assertions about Islam, the

[41] Ruhollah Zam was a journalist who lived in France and is known as one of the most wanted journalists by the Iranian state's intelligence community. He is the son of Ayatollah Zam, who was one of the trusted politicians in the state. The way in which Zam grew up let him have many connections inside the system of the Islamic Republic. Therefore, he has always had special news that made his simple Telegram channel one of the most visited anti-regime media outlets, inside and outside Iran. Zam was executed by the Islamic Republic court in December 2020.

[42] Behrouz Delshad was arrested in the 2009 post-election protest and later left Iran as a political refugee. He is known because of his online media where he insulted Islam and the Prophet. Instead of advocating for the theocratic doctrine of the state, he tries to revive ancient, pre-Islamic Iranian values from within the Islamic Republic. Although Delshad is against Islamic values governing Iran, he states in his programs that Iran's Revolutionary Guard has played the same role that Sasanian Empire's army did. According to him, after 2500 years, IRGC has helped Iran to reach the Mediterranean Sea similarly the ancient Persian army. Also, Khamenei, the supreme leader, fulfilled the same role as the ancient, Iranian King of Kings, Xerxes, in ruling the country. Instead of "ayatollah," he calls the supreme leader Shahan shah Khamenei, meaning King of Kings.

Prophets, and Shi'i Imams, Yousef said, "No, do not pay attention to this superficial stuff. Listen to what he says carefully." Taher reacted to Yousef's comment:

> "Delshad is a very knowledgeable political activist. He knows a lot about Iranian history. Unfortunately, he offends the Prophet and Imams, but he is following the right policy and knows that the supreme leader and IRGC are following the right path. He is in favor of what the Islamic Republic does, but he replaces Shi'ism with *ariayi* (Aryan) ideas. He believes that the supreme leader and the IRGC are doing the same thing that the Achaemenid, and Sassanid empires and the Persian army did."

This idea also reflected on the works of scholars who have studied a kind of nationalistic movement in which pre-Islamic, Iranian values merged with current Islamic structure, often referred to as "neo-Iranian nationalism" (Fozi 2014; Fozi 2016) and "Islamic-Iranian nationalism" (Aghaie 2014).

Michael M. J. Fischer also noted this in advancing a thesis of Henri Corbin, which indicated that Shi'ism was a relatively transparent translation of Zoroastrianism, originated in Iran. He listed the three pivotal principals of Shi'ism with Zoroastrian equivalents: the divine light of Shi'a imams replicates the *farrah-e izadi*, the divine grace of legitimate sovereignty; Mahdi, the Shi'a eschatological redeemer, emulates the *saushyant*, the Zoroastrian messiah; and hereditary succession of the imams' roots in the hereditary transmission of the charisma (Fischer and Abedi 1990, 177). What was intriguing was how the latent antagonism of this idea can be resolved as it appears in everyday life. This antagonism was epitomized in the Islamic Republic's attempt right after the 1979 Revolution to destroy the Persepolis historical monument as a symbol of the past Kings' oppression and injustice and anti-Islam Iranian nationalists, who see Islam as an Arab invasion which fourteen hundred years ago destroyed Iranian culture.

In order to find out how these discrepancies are digested in the cultural performance of what I call Shi'i Aryanism, I unpacked this idea during an in-depth interview with Taher, who asserted that the current supreme leader in Iran is doing the same thing as ancient Persian Kings. In May 2020, I conducted this in-depth interview with Taher, going into detail about Shi'i Aryanism. I started the conversation from Yousef's comment on Houthi, specifically when he stated, "these Houthis are of Iranian *nezhad* [Aryan race], and Yemen was the center for training horses in the Sassanid empire." I also brought up the idea that Behrouz Delshad uses the title of *Shahan shah*, meaning King of Kings, instead of ayatollah, for the supreme leader. This title, a historical title for Kings in ancient Persia, was used for the Shah of Iran before the Revolution.

Taher stated, "Delshad argues that Iran has had a Shah for 2500 years. This one [Ayatollah Khamenei] is also a Shah. The only difference is that he has been granted a religious legitimacy on top of his political legitimacy. Throughout history, Iran has had a Shah, and nothing has changed. It has a Shah now too."

I also brought up that Delshad talks about the idea that Shi'ism, in the modern era, is a "software," which is only the appearance: the essential "hardware" is the "Aryan race." He argues that Shi'i lineality, in which *imamate* has passed on from father to son, duplicates the Persian-Aryan kingship system through the divine ring of power, granted from *Ahura Mazda* (Zoroastrian God), passes on through father-King to the son-king.

Taher said, "That's true. According to this idea, the format is *ariayi* (Aryan), they have just given the Shi'i name to that."

I asked if this idea was supported by him, Yasin, and Yousef. I noticed that it sounded like they were agreed on this thesis. I wondered how Yousef made sense of Delshad's

non-Islamic – and to some extent, anti-Islamic ideas – as someone who practices Islam and deeply believes in the Supreme Leader and the Islamic Republic's policy. Delshad is famous for his radical anti-Islamic programs; he has produced many videos against Islam and the prophet. I asked Taher how this idea is rationalized in his beliefs on Islam and the Islamic Republic.

Taher explained, "yes, he badmouths Islam very much. He chose to be Zoroastrian. He denies Imam Hossein and the Karbala event. He argues that Imam Hossein participated in the war and Arab invasion of Iran 1400 years ago, based on historical evidence, although there are many opponents who argue that Imam Hossein had not participated in any war before the Karbala event. This idea [Delshad] looks at Iran's policy and what is going on in Iran in the bigger picture of the historical Iran, in which it has always been presented as a powerful empire in the region. Considering all its ups and downs, it has never been weak and could have kept its integrity. This stability is still the same with the current system [Islamic Republic]. With regards to what is happening in the region, the present, globalist system in which some [superpowers] want to gain control of the world, the current system of governance is the best for Iran and keeping the unity of the nation. Delshad strongly emphasizes the integrity of Iran. We need such as system currently presented, what Delshad calls *Shahan shahi*; otherwise, if the supreme leader who is called *Shahan shah* is overthrown, the system will collapse, and Iran will be separated and balkanized."

I commented to Taher that these were Delshad's arguments, and the way Taher described them sounded like he approved of them; they made sense to him. I asked, "How do you digest this from both religious and nationalistic points of view, as a person

who believes in the system? How is it possible to merge Iranianness, Aryanism with Shi'ism? By letting Delshad and people who follow this idea interpret the Islamic Republic as a kingship, do they think they will become pro-regime anyway? And do you really think that Shi'ism with the Islamic, Arabic root might have some common ground with Aryanism?"

Taher responded: "we have something called the idea of *velayat-e faqih*, ["Guardianship of the Jurist"]. *Velayat-e faqih* has not risen haphazardly. It is true that it was introduced since the revolution, but it is rooted not only in the Islamic jurisprudence, but they also might have such a view that one supreme authority, like this [Shah], stands over the system."

I asked: "for you, can it be equal to the Achaemenid tradition in which *Shah* received the kingship from *Ahura Mazda* [God]? Is it similar to past monarchical systems in which Shah was called *zelollah*, which means shadow of God? Does this idea follow the same tradition?"

Taher stated, "it is almost the same in practice, but nobody calls him *zelollah*."

I then asked if *velayat-e faqih* is related to title of *sayid*.

Taher said, "not necessarily. But we have seen Khomeini was practically sayid, this [Khamenei] is also sayid. It has not passed on from father to son. But, for now, in the time of the *gheybat* [the Occultation of the twelfth Imam], the supreme leaders are representative of *ma'soumin*, the infallibles [referring to the prophet, his daughter and twelve Shi'a imams]. *Vali faqih,* "the ruling jurist" is elected based on the Assembly of Experts' approval."

I asked, “are you arguing that the title of Shah has been transformed to *vali faqih* by keeping the same concept of kingship”?

Taher: “the concept has remained the same, but we see that based on the constitution he has less authority than Shah. Personally, I do not agree with calling Khamenei *Shah* [King] since he is a *vali-e faqih* [the Jurist]. But, even for those who believe in this idea, these two [institutions of the kingship and the Guardianship of the Jurist] are not mutually exclusive. I believe that this person [Khamenei] is *vali faqih* in the modern Iran, but it does not contrast with he [Delshad] who calls him *Shah*. I personally do not believe that Khamenei is a Shah. I more agree with *velayat-e faqih* because his authority is not at the level of a Shah. His authorities are general. He can only comment on the macro policies. In appointments and removals and macro financial decisions, he cannot make any decisions. These are not part of his duty. In contrast, the Shah’s authority was more broad. That is why, I personally believe that *vali-e faqih*, in Iran, under this situation, could also functions as a Shah.”

I asked if he meant, hypothetically, that this jurisprudential institution plays the same role as the Shah’s.

He affirmed and continued by saying, “this theory motivates those who are *shahi* [pro-kingdom] and believe in *shahanshahi* [kingship system] and are looking for some of the positive features of that system. They might accept Khamenei through that lens and look at its practical function, rather than just its religious title: The Guardianship of the Jurist.”

I asked: “This new, imagined neo-nationalism project addresses those pro-kingships, if you like the kingship system. The current system is practically doing the same thing, but with a different title. Is that what it is about?”

Taher responded: “Yes, exactly. That means you can look at the current system [Islamic Republic] through that lens. This way you can accept the system. Because if don’t look at it through this lens, the person who is not very religious will not believe in Khamenei.”

I asked if this means opponents must look at it as a [imagined] hybrid system.

Taher responded: “exactly. That means that they look the system, in a way that they like. This view would cause unity in Iran. The most important point of this perspective, which Hajji [Yousef], other folks, and myself believe, is that it would unify Iran. This massive gap between religious and non-religious people is getting deeper and deeper.”

I asked if he could elaborate on this “massive gap.”

Taher said: “Those who are religious are getting radically religious, and those who are non-religious are getting more irreligious. This gap is getting deeper and more visible. In order to have solved this issue, a new theory must have been formulated. The only way this issue could be solved is that one would not only look at the system through a religious point of view, but would also consider it through a nationalistic perspective as well. This person [Khamenei] who has been granted a religious justification, would be given another justification. Thereafter, he can be seen as a national figure. Then, it also fulfills the idea that ‘we have always had a Shah throughout history.’ There he is; he can also be seen as a Shah for the pro-kingship people. This theory can contribute to unity, accepting Khamenei, and accepting his policies. Additionally, since he orders *sepah* (the

IRGC), they would accept *sepah* as well. Therefore, these people also become proponents of the system. This idea can unify Iranians: whether religious or irreligious. *It creates common ground for the two parties*."

What Taher referred to as a "massive gap" was the concept of nation and religion essentialized by Pre-revolutionary, nationalist principles and the Islamic revolutionary doctrine. Although he was trying to find a solution for the binary, his suggestion was not a solution to fill this gap in Iran, but it was for the future of Iranian community in the U.S. This is an example of the ambiguities of migration, what van der Veer referred to as the dialectics of "belonging" and "longing:" "The theme of belonging opposes rootedness to uprootedness, establishment to marginality. The theme of longing harps on the desire for change and movement, but relates this to the enigma of arrival, which brings a similar desire to return to what one has left" (van der Veer 1995b). Taher's new solution to create "common ground for the two parties" is a sentiment to strengthen the "longing" to be in the U.S. among the Iranian diasporic community. This is a desire for change and movement to navigate beyond the binary in daily interaction, unifying community for a future that occurs "here," not in the homeland. This new solution crosses the boundary between nation and religion determined by Pre-revolutionary, nationalist views and Islamic revolutionary ideals.

5.3 Revolutionary Cyrus

In July 2020, in one of the free discussions in the Simonstown network, participants started the session by discussing "what it means to be a believer." They searched for the meaning of the word "believer," *mu'min*, in the Quran to identify the exact meaning. The

root of the word "believer" is *'amn*, which means *safe*. Negar, as usual, looked up how many times it repeats in the Quranic verses. From the frequency of the word *mu'min* in the Quran, Negar concluded that a "real believer" is an individual that others feel safe while they are around.

Hajj Eynollah mentioned, "this is an enormous struggle to fight against our ego so that others feel good around us." In his comment, he used the term "war," and he indicated that each "real believer" is in a constant "war" with their ego (*nafs*). Hajj's comments caused Mohsen and then Negar elaborate on the topic that the largest *jihad* is the one against our ego, and that was why none of the Imams ever entered any war. Negar said, "none of the Imams started a war to gain ruling power. Even our *Sunni brothers* believe that, for instance, Imam Hossein did not go to Kufa for war, and thus gain the power to rule. He was invited by the people of the Kufa."

While she was telling the story of the Battle of Karbala and the martyrdom of the third Shi'a Imam, Kayvan asked, "what were the reasons for the Prophet's Wars?" Negar responded that the Wars during the Prophet's time were all they had to defend themselves against non-believers who constantly attacked. She said, "all Islam's wars served defensive purposes." Kayvan shifted his imagined domain from the Islamic era to the current political circumstances of Iran:

> "but I cannot accept that in response to war and oppression we just stay and defend. We are under sanctions, and we cannot stay calm and do nothing. My point is that just being nice, and being a role model of good people is not effective. While, we are reserved and modest, we must also be prepared and ready if anyone attacks us, thus responding stronger. I think our Prophet and Imams were also prepared and ready to fight back while they were modest and reserved, and everyone felt safe around them."

Negar continued by referring to the rest of her anecdote about Imam Hossein and the Battle of Karbala. This time, she mostly tried to narrate the story from "our Sunni brothers'" perspective, who respect the Imams very much because they also believe that the Imams did not cause any war to gain power. Hajj Eynollah once more repeated his main idea: "we need to define *jihad*. Jihad is not killing whoever is an infidel. The bigger jihad is self-construction. As the Prophet said after one of his war, 'this one was the minor jihad, the major jihad is internal, against your ego.'"

I was wondering how they reconciled these ideas about war with the Arab invasion of Persia. Thus, I asked them when the Arab conquest of ancient Persia was. I further prompted them to consider it being around the Prophet's time. Almost all of them quickly responded, "No. It was around Omar, the second Caliph's time." Mohsen and Negar, while talking over each other, said, "from the Prophet's invitational letter to Yazdegerd (the last Persian King), until his death was almost thirty years. After the Prophet's death, Omar attacked Iran."

Kayvan then proposed a very key question, but he already seemed to have his own answer. He asked, "why did Shi'ism start from Iran, and why are the majority of Iranians Shi'a?" Mohsen seemed to start looking up the answer on his phone. Meanwhile, Negar explained the event of Ghadir Khumm, in which the Prophet appointed Ali as his successor. She went on to explain that after the Prophet's death, the elder companions of the Prophet voted for Abu Bakr to be the first Caliph. The ethnic and tribal factors and the fact that Abu Bakr's daughter was the last wife of the Prophet played a crucial role. These reasons did not make sense for Iranians; therefore, they believe Ali is the true successor of the Prophet, according to Negar.

Mohsen, who seemed to find his answer online, shared his nine reasons why Iranians are majority Shi'a: 1. the change in the center for Islam from Mecca to Kufa; 2. Islam not being an Arab religion, which Iranians liked very much, hence their love for Hazrat Ali; 3. the migration of many Imamzadehs [Imams' descendants], especially the eighth Imam; 5. Salman Farsi ,who was the closest companion of the Prophet; 6. the Ashura event and its passionate ritual; 7. the majority of the Imams' students being from Iran; 8. Iranians were influential in Yemen; and 9. the most important one, Shah Ismail Safavid[43] changed the official religion to Shi'ism because Iranians were at war with the Ottomans.

Kayvan, who brought up this question, presented his own answer, which was Iranian "high culture." For Kayvan, "anybody or anything that entered Iran first got the Persian language and then was impressed by the culture. Our high culture was like a shell that received a rock and refined it and turned into a pearl. I think, in the same way, we received Islam and refined it." He also asserted that if the third Shi'i Imam, who was killed in the battle of Karbala, lived "in our time, he would never have been killed and defeated." He stated that Iran had been a very powerful country in the region and Ahmadinejad, the sixth president of the Islamic Republic, had been the most popular individual in the region.

The answer to his earlier question was the idea that "Shi'a Muslims are more often looking for *haqq* [truth]." He gave the example of Saudi Arabia, which is supposed to be the leader of the Muslim world; however, they had become like "a cow being milked by the U.S." Before Ahmadinejad's term, he said, the U.S. used to threaten Iran that "all options are on the table, but since then, they did not even talk about war." Then, he asked

[43] 1501 to 1524

"now tell me which Islam is better, Iranian's or Arabian's. They do nothing." For him, Shi'ism is an Iranian version of Islam that was refined after being absorbed by Iranian "high culture." Kayvan's perspective about his anti-Arab, Persianized Islam resonates with an idea I heard discussed with other state supporters—those who, contrary to the Islamic Republic's doctrine, were proud of the Persian Kingdom equal to their Muslimness. I had many long in-depth interviews with Kayvan about these themes. He sometimes called me and said he had forgotten to mention something during our interview and would then talk about it for another hour.

During our interview in July 2020, which first detailed his life history, he started his story by mentioning multiple times that he was not "exposed" to Islam. He also mentioned, "I cannot read the Quran as well as you can." I noticed that during the Quran session, whenever it was his turn to read, he asked to be skipped and go to the next person. My Arabic reading skills, like others from my generation who grew up in the first years of the Islamic Republic, is "good," according to Kayvan, because there were required courses in school such as Quran, Religious (Islamic) Teachings, and Arabic language. These courses, at least, helped my generation to be able to read Arabic, though we may not completely understand meaning. Kayvan mentioned this multiple times, and it seemed that he regrets that he was never "exposed" to the Quran in this way. He said that his wife is Iranian and received her bachelor's degree in Iran. Therefore, her Arabic reading skills are "good" too, and she always helps him find the Arabic roots of Quranic terms.

He found out about Simonstown Shi'i Muslim network and the Quran sessions while he dropped their son off at the weekly Quran and Farsi language class for kids. They

were listening to the ideas that Negar was teaching children during the classes, and this was how he was "exposed" to the Quran. He said, "while we were waiting for the kids, the parents were also talking about the topics. I learned many things that I have never heard anywhere else." Since he left Iran before the Revolution with a high school diploma, he had no experience of the education system afterward: Quranic and Islamic treatises credits that every student must take as core requirements. And, although he was a proponent of Islamic Republic politics, his description of "refined" Islam was spiced by the anti-Arab nationalism that was promoted during the Shah era.

Kayvan described his personal life history and why he was not "exposed" to the Quran. His father was a member of the *Tudeh* (Iranian Communist) Party, and he had been arrested for that reason during the Pahlavi Era, before Kayvan was born. Kayvan is currently in his sixties. He asserted that since his father was a "communist;" he was not "exposed" to any religion. While he was talking about his father as a "communist," which was enough for him to identify his father as an irreligious individual, he described that "although he was drinking alcohol, smoking cigarettes, and not praying five times per day as Muslims do, during Ramadan he fasted. During the mourning of Muharram (ten-days ritual of Ashura), he also funded the *tekyeh* (commemoration hall) of their neighborhood for the votive food." For Kayvan, this type of Muslimness his father practiced was not ideal, and it was one of the reasons that caused him not to be "exposed" to religion.

After finishing high school, around the age of sixteen, Kayvan came to the U.S. to pursue his education. And when the 1979 Revolution happened, he went back to Iran, where the "circumstance was inconvenient and unstable," so he returned to the U.S. He

said, “the situation was so chaotic. Some people who were drunk and alcoholic all the time before the Revolution, now became *komite* [morality police] and asked women to fix their hijab.” After finishing his degree back in the U.S., he married his Iranian wife, and he became more “exposed” to the Quran and Islamic teachings through children’s classes in Simonstown and the Quran sessions with the parents. He, both during the Quran sessions and the interview, constantly referred to Mr. Bazargan’s interpretations of the Quran while discussing Islamic concepts. He said there was an app on his phone where they listen to specific interpretations of Quranic verses by Mr. Bazargan. Those interpretations, their discussion sessions, and his wife helped exposed him to the Quran to find answers for many problems that he had in everyday life. He also mentioned the Persian poetry night, during which Rumi’s worldview of “have your own faith and let others have their own” gave him a wonderful perspective about Islam.

Although Kayvan supported the current Iranian regime, he stated that he was also hurt by the Islamic Republic. He told me a memory he had of walking along the street with his mother right after the Revolution. One of the morality police officers (*komite*) told his mother aggressively, “save your hijab.” It was a hurtful experience because his mother was already a modest woman with a normal, traditional headscarf and nothing was wrong with her hijab. He said, “I was going to beat the hell out of that young rude *komite* officer.” He said he was telling these stories to communicate that even though he supports the regime, he is not happy with everything. His cousin was one of the *mujahedeen*[44] that they [the Islamic Republic] had executed. His sister also was a political dissident and spent a long time in the prison, her feet burnt by cigarettes during

[44] An Iranian political-militant organization against the Islamic Republic

her interrogation. So, while he defended some politics, he looks at Iran from a broader view.

Considering all of these shortcomings, when Kayvan sees that the current Iranian state is defending "our national interest against superpowers and made us independent, I was convinced." Without having experience of living in Post-revolutionary Iran, he said during Shah's reign,

> "we could not even make nails. We imported everything. I lived during the Shah era. We could not have a simple political view, under SAVAK's[45] suffocating atmosphere. Now, look at Iran. People express their political opinion however they want. What Khamenei has done to make Iran the strongest power of the region, *reminds me of Cyrus and ancient Persian Kings*."

Kayvan's account is a perfect example of reversibility of religiosity and nationhood when individuals become de-territorialized. He mentioned that he knew no Arabic and was not exposed to the Quran before these sessions, but now he is able to differentiate "refined" Islam from unrefined and compare Iranian with Arabian Islam. When I asked him about his comments during the discussion sessions about Arabs, and the fact that Islam is a religion that arose from Arab culture, he argued that "Islam is not just for Arabs. Islam is a religion for the entire humanity."

According to the way he described Islam, the Prophet, and Shi'a Imams, it seemed to me that he imagined a divine status for them outside of Arab culture. He clarified that he was looking at the current Supreme Leader as a religious person and said "I am looking through my nationalistic view. He is way more nationalistic than Shah." This statement reveals that contrary to the Pahlavi Dynasty, known as the symbol of Iranian nationalism (Zia-Ebrahimi 2016; Marashi 2011; Ansari 2012), the supreme leader

[45] Iranian domestic security and intelligence service before the Revolution of 1979.

is a cleric, and he disputed pre-Islamic values as a symbol of nationalism. In Kayvan's account, religion, territory, and nationhood become articulated. As an immigrant who follows Iran's event from news, he pointed out that contrary to U.S. sanctions, there are some people who work tirelessly in Iran to domestically develop the missile program while under an arms embargo. Then he said, "it is like this country [the U.S.]. There were some people who really worked hard to build this country, and it was a really good country thirty, forty years ago when I came here."

This imagination is not about the politics of the Iranian state because it is not limited within the boundary of the nation. But it does seek to end the disgrace Kayvan faced in the U.S.—the hostland that once put sanction on the missile program and "sanctioned mechanical parts of the F14 fighter jets during the Iran-Iraq War." When Kayvan states that the leader of Iran "reminds me of Cyrus and ancient Persian Kings," this not a credit for changing the political map of Iran. This is a reimagination of an Iran to construct a diasporic community in which second, third, and fourth-generation descendants own affective ties to the imagined homeland where some people work hard to build the country, just like here in the U.S.

5.4 Conclusion

My ethnographic findings demonstrate that Iranian Americans have engaged with multiple spatial and temporal formations of religiosity, as well as a sense of nationhood outside of the boundaries of the homeland, which signifies their transnational identity in the U.S. When they negotiated any categories related to "nation" and "religion," their meanings reflected the cultural performances of nation and state in diasporic context to

conceptualize their transnational identity in the U.S., not the homeland. Although the place of origin is central to their discussions, the locality of the homeland is extremely elusive within the diaspora, as is the dichotomous paradigm of anti-regime "nationalist" and pro-Islamic Republic "religious" Iranians who fall into a dual temporality. The first was generated by the Pahlavi modernization process and nationalism. The second was created by the Revolution of 1979 and clerics' authority.

Conversely, I argue that time is not structural for Iranian Americans in separating Pre- or Post-revolutionary eras, nor is it when discussing their sense of nationhood and religion. By characterizing imagined Iran, these individuals engage with a discursive process of temporality and homeland that has been reconstituted multiple times in response to transnational Iranian identity politics, and particularly diasporic opposition to the Islamic Republic (Naficy 1993). Thus, Iran is not just the place of origin that is transformed within communities that are globally dispersed. The way Iranian Americans navigate the idea of Iranian identity between multiple temporalities presents a challenge to analysis of the diaspora as an offshoot of place of origin.

Kayvan's remark about the supreme leader as an embodiment of ancient Persian kings is a spatial and temporal imaginary description, which is a product of the diasporic vision rather than an idea initiated in the homeland. Ayatollahs, including the supreme leaders, have expressed their ideas about the pre-Islamic kingdom system as brutal, oppressive, and sexually perverted on multiple occasions. They had even planned to bulldoze Persepolis and other Iranian ancient sites in the early days of the Revolution (Amanat 2017, 781). Yousef also described the Shah as a religious person and his appointed cleric, Mousa Sadr in Lebanon, as a more eligible leader for the Revolution

than Khomeini. At the same time, he discredited the Crown Prince because of his daughter's inability to speak Farsi, while considering an Arab-speaking Lebanese cleric, Hassan Nasrallah, a symbol of Iranian nationhood because his daughter *could* speak Farsi fluently.

These discrepancies in Yousef's description cannot occur in Iran within structural time. Through a discursive production of temporality, he created a new image of the Shah, who was neglected as a religious person, as well as aspects of Nasrallah's life, which has never received attention from Iranians. Likewise, Taher suggested that those who are interested in the ancient-kingdom system of Iran can imagine the current Supreme Leader as the Shah since he plays the same role as a religious cleric. These ideas cannot be produced in the place of origin because of the concrete structure of power. However, it occurs in the minds of the members of the diaspora because of the discursive spatial and temporal arenas, as the Shah and the Supreme Leader are not limited to structural time. Therefore, the homeland in which the Islamic Republic left no room for its predecessor to be compared cannot be "originary and constitutive of a diaspora" (Axel 2002). These ethnographic accounts of ordinary conversations surrounding religious practices demonstrate that, for Iranian Americans, place of origin is not the primary issue, even though every theme they discussed originates in Iran.

The creation of an imagined Iran in which, according to Taher, Iranians can be unified, whether religious or irreligious, does not arise through a definitive relation to place but through formations of temporality. Thus, their imagined Iran, "does not act as a new kind of place of origin but indicates a process of identification generative of diasporic subjects" (Axel 2002, 412). These creations have been constantly generated and

reconstituted thorough the discursive production of the meanings of nation and religion – not to explore what they were in the past but to investigate the future of their diasporic community.

CHAPTER 6: LAND OF (IN)FIDELITY

In July 2020 during an interview with Nima[46], I asked what his feelings were about the cleric of the Heydar Center calling the U.S. is *dar al-Kufr* (Land of Infidelity) because it is a predominantly Christian society. Nima said that we must first discuss the definition of *kufr*. I summarized what I had learned from my interlocutors: *kufr* might be defined as "covering *haqq* (truth), and thus covering the existence of God." Nima responded:

> "In general, I do not consider it a Land of Infidelity here. If some place has an Islamic name, it does not necessarily denote that it is a *dar al-Islam*, where the ultimate Islamic ideals prevail. I personally do not believe in that because even in that so-called Islamic land [Iran], we see many *kufr*s, sins, and improbity."

The theme of Land of Infidelity was brought up during the sermon of the Ashura ritual in August 2019. During the sermon, the cleric warned participants that they should actively maintain their religion because people are not diligent when it comes to practicing in a place like the U.S., which is a *dar al-Kufr* (Land of Infidelity. As an example, the cleric told the story of a Muslim Indo-Caribbean commemoration known as Hosay Trinidad[47], in which the mourning ceremony for the third Shi'i Imam has been transformed into a carnival of dancing and drinking.

He related this example to show how the faith of this group of Indian Muslims has become so diluted over time that "it just became a *cultural thing*." For the cleric, the cultural performances of the Ashura ritual, which vary across time and space, represented the weakness and disconnection of Muslims from their faith. Therefore, this example was

[46] Nima is man in his late thirty who came to the U.S. for higher education. He was Ph.D. student in one the science disciple in the University of Winstonburg. He was married and had not yet had children.

[47] This is another version of Ashura ritual practice by a group of people who migrated to Trinidad almost two centuries ago from India.

to warn the audience that if they do not maintain their religious practices, their religion simply becomes a "cultural thing" for the next generations, particularly in a place like the U.S.

In this chapter, I draw on ethnographic analysis of how Iranian-American Muslims negotiating ideas that essentialize non-Muslims as non-believers (infidels) and those which accept non-Muslims as "good" people in spite of being non-Muslims. I also show how Iranian Americans challenge the idea that there is a monolithic Islam that emerge from both clerical authorities and U.S. mainstream discourse. For example, the cleric's concern about the Caribbean ritual and comments about the U.S. as a Land of Infidelity is the kind of essentialized understanding of Islam that in fact fuels anti-Muslim discourses in the West (Jamal and Naber 2008). I did not find this understanding of Islam among my interlocutors. Instead, I found that they developed a conception of Islamic principles as Muslims in a Christian-majority society in very individual ways. I use the concept of "infidelity" not to explore how it impacts people's lived realities, but rather to illuminate how it is used to situate, and thus to construct, identities in opposition to a mythology that is highly dichotomized: the Muslim absolute world versus that of the infidels.

Drawing on Fernando's idea of a "constellation of heterogenous identities," I show how my interlocutors conceptualize heterogeneities, not in relation to a central criterion of American culture, but rather in relation to "always relational and constantly shifting, never essential" identities (Fernando 2014, 98). For instance, when I asked about the concept of the Land of Infidelity from one of my interlocutors[48], he did not deny that the

[48] Mojtaba, a man in his thirties, who had not yet had children. I will go through more details of our interview in section "Concerns for descendants."

U.S. is a land of infidelity because parents must constantly be worried about their kids seeing "bad things," *kufr* and visible sins. He asserted Eastern Europe is worse than the U.S., and Iran worse than both in terms of visible sin and *kufr*. His solution was "our own community," which was an imagined community based on collective commitments to securely raise children.

His solution for purifying the land on which he established the imagined community resonates with Werbner's idea where she asserts, "each community is constructed through performative imaginings and *continuously* mobilized and renewed by these performances" (Werbner 2002, 61). Shabana Mir's concept of "third space" accurately describes the way Iranian Americans bypass the Muslim-infidel binary in the U.S. (Mir 2014, 41). Relying on Fernando and Werbner's theoretical outline, I turn Mir's "third space" into a *web of spaces* to describe how my interlocutors constantly and situationally expose a constellation of Muslimness. My contribution to the field of anthropology is a framework that refuses the existence of an a priori, ontological, stable, essential meaning of Islam offered by intermediaries, which has traditionally received more attention. Instead, I focus on *practitioners*' production of temporalities in which new meanings are negotiated to reflect local norms rather than original connotations of Islamic concepts.

In what follows, I first investigate how Islamic concepts, e.g., the "Land of Infidelity," are formulated during lectures and rituals in a top-down, clerical way among Iranian Americans. I continue exploring the examples of these inflexible clerical concepts by exploring how practitioners moderate them in everyday practices and how new advice contrasts with earlier clerical statements. In doing so, I examine how Muslim audiences are encouraged to present themselves as "good people" among non-Muslims, in order to

establish a mutually respectful citizenship. Then, I analyze how an African-American cleric reconciled controversies over the historical Black Muslim organization, the Nation of Islam, and his Shi'i Muslim training in Iran by moderating the story of Malcolm X. I conclude by reflecting on the ways Iranian Americans dispute and circumvent clerical statements to create their own webs of spaces, in which their descendants can thrive.

6.1 Hand-shaking issue

In his discussion about Muslims' struggle in maintaining their religiosity in the U.S., after the discussion of the Hosay Trinidad ritual, the cleric brought up the hand-shaking issue among Muslims. According to the clerics, Muslims struggle quite a bit in maintaining their values, practices, and identity. One of those struggles in the U.S. is "the culture of shaking hands" with non-*mahram*. When Muslim men go to a place for business, and a non-Muslim woman wants to shake hands, Muslim men might think it is awkward because they cannot refuse shaking hands due to politeness. The cleric warned everyone that as soon as they think "it is just a handshake" and not a big deal, they begin compromising their faith. In the cleric's view, this will never end, especially in the case of disciplining children. They might say "it is just this" or "it is just that," and after a while they realize that their religion has been compromised, and "it is wrong," according to the cleric.

The cleric told a story of an interfaith meeting where a cleric with special clothing – a cloak and turban – rejected shaking hands with the female organizer who greeted him. Although the cleric was wearing the typical clothing of Shi'i clerics, the woman was surprised and asked the cleric if he was a rabbi. The cleric said, "no, I am a Muslim." The

woman said, “I am accustomed to not shaking hands with rabbis.” This was in New York, and most orthodox male Jews do not shake hands with women. It was interesting because she did not have friends or references to tell her that *this* is a Muslim practice. The cleric was emphasizing that Muslims have neglected their religious commitments compared with Jewish rabbis because that woman had met all kinds of Muslims who shake hands, but very few – like the young cleric – who did not. Therefore, she did not realize that Muslims are required not to shake hand with the opposite gender. He concluded, those rabbis were firm in their practice and confidence to express their religious commitments.

He continued with another story about a Muslim man who was in IT and trying to find a job. Like other stories, this young Muslim man also had an issue with expressing his Muslim practices publicly. The cleric said, after waiting, this young Muslim man eventually was invited for an interview by a big tech company. Prior to the interview, he realized that a woman was supposed to interview him. This young man, who anticipated the woman might want to shake hands with him, wrapped his hand with a cast. The cleric furiously said the Muslim man was not confident enough to say, “I am Muslim, and Muslims do not shake hands with non-*mahram.*” After a very successful interview, they emailed him and said they were happy with all of his expertise and experience; however, they said, “we need someone who will be able to do a lot of physical activities.” Everybody laughed by the end of this story. The cleric reached the conclusion that the young Muslim man did not get the job because he was not confident enough to openly say he would not shake hands because of his faith.

My interlocutors, however, did not make these kinds of claims about their own Muslim identity. As I described in the last chapter, female members of the network had

different levels of veiling with a hijab. One who does not show any hair and skin wears a "complete" hijab, a term that they use. Not all women during the Quran sessions had the "complete" hijab. There were some who wore a headscarf loosely, such that some parts of their hair were visible. There were some women who did not have any head scarf at all. By the same token, when it came to shaking hands, different Muslims had different attitudes. I could not mark those who shook hands as semi-Muslim and those who did not as pious or full-Muslim. For example, I noticed on multiple occasions when I was spending time with Taher, he shook hands with women. Of course, this only happened while we were outside of the Center. Still, he recognized himself as a pious Muslim.

In Islamic tradition, *mahram* are individuals who are related to one another through marriage or blood; therefore, they can be seen without a hijab. The reason Muslims refuse shaking hands is because touching non-mahram is not permissible in Islam. During one of the conversations that usually happened after the Quran recitation, Mojtaba told me a story about one of the members of their network who rejected the opportunity to shake hands with a female colleague. In order to prove the flexibility of Islamic practices, he said, "I later explained to him [the pious Muslim who did not shake hands with his female colleague] that Islam is a religion that says even if you are fasting and a person offers you a food, in order to not break that person's heart, you are permitted to break [end] your fasting. Now you broke that person's heart by refusing to shake hands merely because she was non-*mahram*?"

Mojtaba's aesthetic understanding of fast breaking was completely new to me and made me ask him again to check if there is such an exception[49]. Mojtaba, without any

[49] In Islamic jurisprudence (*fiqh*), a specific penalty or fine is appointed for neglecting commitments (*vajebat*) called *kafare*. Fasting, along with praying five times per day, are among the basic commitments in

doubt, reassured me and said, "you did not know? Yes, there is such an exception to not break the heart of another Muslim," but in practice he expands it to non-Muslims as well. Contrary to the *fiqh*, and what the cleric constantly emphasized, Mojtaba's interpretation of Islam shows that he believed that certain Islamic practices can be skipped occasionally, not only to make another Muslim happy, but even to satisfy non-Muslims. I use the term *fiqh* (jurisprudence) because many Muslim practices and instructions are not explicitly discussed in the Quran. Therefore, Muslims follow the jurisprudence to find out how to apply a Quranic rule in practice. Thus, it is the domain of the clerics to interpret the text for Muslims' everyday practices.

While Mojtaba had this idea about skipping some aspects of the jurisprudence, in the network of Simonstown, I noticed a different attitude toward handshaking. Before one of the sessions started, while people were joining one after another, I was talking to Mohsen when Negar came in. From a distance, she mimed shaking his hand without touching him. At first, I was not sure what was happening. Negar realized that I did not completely understand what Mohsen had done. Therefore, she explained that they humorously mime shaking hands, which symbolizes the same thing without touching. She said, "you should see what I do at work." She then acted out hugging from a distance. She explained how she ended up inventing this distanced, virtual solution to deal with physical greetings at work. She said, "what should I do? They are American men and do not know. They think it is ok to say hi and hug me. Now, they know that they can do that, but only from a distance." She laughed. These examples evidence how Muslim individuals exclusively

Islam. It means that if a Muslim, for any excuse, intentionally breaks his fasting during Ramadan, he must pay *kafare* to make up the commitment, which is equal to fasting for two months or feeding sixty poor people.

decide how to reconcile their Islams within the diasporic context, which sometimes radically differs from jurisprudential and clerical advice.

In contrast, the cleric at the Heydar Center, who was lecturing during the Ashura sermon in Winstonburg, warned Muslims to beware of faulty reconciliation. For the cleric, public expression of Muslim identity is one of the keys for being successful in U.S. society. He brought up the example of the early Islamic era to show how early Muslims made changes in their traditions instead of adapting to what he called "ignorant" culture. He asserted that if Muslims look at the example of the Prophet, they can see that even for those who seemed to oppose Islam, for instance by throwing trash at the Prophet, personality and character were what could ultimately change their view.

Contrary to the meaning that the cleric extracted from the example of the early Islamic era, used to encourage Muslims in the U.S. to *change* the dominant host culture, my interlocutors showed different strategies to coexist with non-Muslims. In so doing, they referred to the Islamic practice of the Promotion of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice, which is the duty of each Muslim: enjoin what is right and forbid what is wrong. For Mohsen, paying taxes, and thus being a good American citizen, was the right thing to encourage others to do, and those who do not like to pay taxes to "these non-Muslims" are doing "wrong."

Regarding the lecture, the cleric continued by sharing his personal life. His parents became Muslim and found there is not much conversation about *ahle bayt* (the Prophet's household). It was around the time of the Revolution, and since Iran was a pioneer in spreading the words of *ahle bayt*, his mother and father moved there. They were there during the Iran-Iraq War, investigating "who are *ahle bayt*," "who is Imam Hossein," and

"why is there not much conversation about *ahle bayt*" in worldwide Muslim communities. They chose his name, "Mir Hossein," after Imam Hossein. He said,

> "my parents traveled to Iran and Qom to learn about Islam and *ahle beyt*. They could not hear this message anywhere else in the world. I would definitely not be here without my parents' curiosity about *ahle beyt*. It is extremely powerful. The responsibility of each and every one of you is to spread this message. Islam and Imam Hossein's message are meant to be shared. We have the responsibility to spread this message which would be the solution and salvation for the problems of humanity."

At end of the lecture, the clerics came down from the pulpit (*minbar*), and Yasin stayed in the front and recited some Ashura chants. He was reading the chants off his phone about Zaynab, Imam Hossein's sister, more like a non-melodic declamation. After him, Nima started chanting, which was melodic and more dynamic in terms of rhythm and beat. This style is more typical of the chanting done during Ashura, inspiring mourners to chant back and beat their chests. Since he was chanting in Farsi, although majority of us were Iranian, it was difficult for the Pakistanis and Iraqis to sing along. In addition, during the Ashura ritual in Iran, male participants do the ritual in a separate place from women. However, in the Ashura of Winstonburg, women were in the same room, sitting back by the wall while lightly chest-beating and quietly chanting back.

Every night, during the ten days of the rituals, after the sermon the rituals ended with chanting and chest-beating. During the ten days of chanting, there some religious poetry in lamentation for Imam Hossein in Farsi. The majority of participants were Iranian, and the chanting was organized mostly by Nima. It was followed by Pakistani chanting in a *qawwali* style (Qureshi 1981). However, it was just a man singing with his teenage son in Urdu and others could not accompany because of the language barrier. The situation got better when an Iraqi chanted a couple of verses in Arabic; the response was simply, "O

Hossein." The African-American clerics, on one of the nights of the rituals, chanted some verses in English. The musical tone of the cleric chanting was more rhythmic than melodic and sounded more like rap music than traditional Ashura. At the beginning it was difficult to follow because the clauses were English and long, but the participants eventually could catch couple of words to respond to with congregational singing.

6.2 The following day of the ritual

When I arrived the Heydar Center, they had already started eating food, which looked completely new to me. It looked like *abgoosht*, a popular Iranian stew of shredded lamb meat, tomatoes, chickpeas, and dried lime, served with bread. However, this one was served with rice, which was odd to me as an Iranian. I asked Amir-Ali, who was sitting next to me, about the food. He said, "it is Iraqi *gheyme*. They smashed the lamb meat and also add chickpeas." *Gheyme* is the most popular votive food distributed at the annual Ashura commemoration. The Iranian *gheyme* is a stew consisting of lamb, split peas, dried lime, and thin-cut, fried potatoes, served with steamed rice. This food is one of the crucial parts of Ashura, so much so that people call it "Imam Hossein's *gheyme*," meaning that the food is blessed because the people who provided and distributed the food have done this in the memory of the Imam; therefore, eating the food also has spiritual rewards. However, it did not give me that sense that I was used to feeling because the ingredients did not evoke the same memories I had of the "Imam Hossein's *gheyme*."

While we were eating the food, Masoud, who had just come back from Iran for his marriage ceremony, was talking about the situation in Iran. He was talking about a

mistake he had made – getting a flight from Tehran to Chicago, and then driving from Chicago to Winstonburg after a fifteen-hour flight. The most important part of his story from his travel to Iran was how everything was expensive and how the dollar price had gone up compared to *toman* (Iranian currency). He complained that the Trump Administration's decision to leave the Iran nuclear deal had affected the economy. Tehran's traffic and air pollution were also dramatic, negative points.

After finishing the votive meal, I went up to listen to the sermon, which had already started. Masoud and others were still talking about his story and did not seem to feel obligated to go and listen to the sermon. However, I wanted to follow up about some of the topics that the cleric had discussed the day before. As I came to the main room of the Center, the cleric was talking about the fact that in U.S. society, most people do not have enough background to talk knowledgably about Islam. The same cleric was lecturing about how the narrative of Islam for mainstream American society seems far away from and has no correlation with actual Islam. Contrary to the typical anti-American attitudes that I have observed among Shi'i clerics because of the politics of their training in Iran, this African-American cleric demonstrated a different strategy while he was talking about the connection between African Americans and the history of Islam in the U.S.

According to the cleric, from the inheritance of many African slaves who were Muslim, to other movements of people among the African diaspora who were Muslim, African connections with Islam have been important. He argued that Islam is not a religion that has recently come to America. This is something that Muslims often do not consider, which can cause them to simply assimilate instead of keeping their presence as a Muslim. According to the cleric, Muslims tend to isolate themselves. A very good

example is the fact that they shy away from keeping their original names (Muhammad, Ali, Javad, Jamil, and Zaynab) and tend to modify their name to sound more American. He said, "I met a Muslim whose name was Joe. Then, he told me his actual name is Javad [people laughing]. I have met many who called themselves Mo instead of Muhammad or Jay instead of Jafar."

The cleric explained that when Muslims keep their own name, as they contribute to American society, it normalizes Muslim identity and reveals that Muslims play crucial roles in building society. For him, Muslims keeping their original names is an important part of religious identity. He said Muslims must be proud of their Muslim-sounding names. If they are ashamed of their names, it makes the negative narrative in the media worse. When they work and contribute to society, they become part of American history. If they keep their names, their neighbors, colleagues, and classmates will see they are just like everyone else. He brought up the example of Muhammad Ali, the champion of the world, who proudly took on his name. He argued if Muhammad Ali would have changed his name, nobody would have known that he was a Muslim.

According to him, Muslims try to modify and assimilate their identity to non-Muslim culture in the U.S. He shored up the current issue of present Muslims' lived realities in the U.S. and the imagined past by giving an example from the Prophet's time: "the way that Muslims had such a presence in society, they established an *umma* [community] such that people were drawn toward them not the other way around. They did not assimilate to the culture of *Jahiliya*. *They* changed the culture." Jahiliya, or "the Age of Ignorance," refers to the time prior to the advent of Islam. According to Islamic traditions, people were "ignorant" because, for instance, they buried their female infants or worshiped multiple

idols instead of the absolute, singular God. The cleric continued, "they were the people who replaced the *Jahiliya*[50] culture with a good cultural practice, with Islamic practice." It was the presence of Islam that civilized the society of the Prophet's time; however, Muslims today try to hide their identity in encounters with non-Muslims. Thus, they remain unknown in society, according to the cleric.

He went on to state,

> "when Muslim is some 'bad guy' on TV, it is easy to be afraid. When Muslim is someone you work with, you are going to school with, and you deal with in everyday life, you will see, 'no, they are good, normal people actually.' They are good people."

He argued that when Muslim identity is associated with "a kind neighbor," when Muslim identity is associated with "the hardest worker," then it actually changes the narrative, which cannot happen when Muslims assimilate and hide their identity. He pointed out that one cannot associate Muslims with something good when they do not know that 'Jay' is Muslim. How can they associate Muslim identity with something positive and say *mashallah* [Islamic word for admiration]? He asserted that when people see negative portrayals on the news, they can then say, "no, I don't agree. My neighbor is Muslim. My co-worker is Muslim. I work with Muslims. They are fine." He brought up many examples of Muslims' everyday lives, contrary to dominant anti-Muslim discourses, to show that Muslims must exhibit their religion instead of hiding it.

The cleric's instruction for building an Islamic culture in the U.S. reveals how "patterns of meanings are constituted in particular histories of production, and sites of

[50] the Age of Ignorance

difference are embedded in variations between old practices and innovative rearticulations" (Clarke 2004, 105). He took the historical theme of the Age of Ignorance in the early Islamic era and guided the Muslims' actions through that theme into the modern U.S. According to this instruction, they must apply the "good (Islamic) cultural practice" to overcome and push back against "some bad guy's" deed on TV, which may influence impressions on the American mainstream.

These types of remedies reveal the importance of local-global flows in relation to "historically constituted imaginations to political economic connections" (Clarke 2004, 106). The cleric had no problem with Muslims' engagement in the global economic flow; however, he emphasized the exposure of Muslim identities to change the face of the "bad guys" into normal citizens who contribute to society. His recommendation demonstrates that though his particular mapping is "in the realm of the imaginary, the imaginary itself is productive of material consequences" (Clarke 2004, 106).

Although his pattern makes sense in the sense of building a community in the transnational domain, it also discloses the hegemonic fixity of clerical Islam. My interlocutors, on the other hand, show a different path in forming their community. Their identity is not reduced to choosing Muslim-sounding names, as the cleric was trying to insist. For instance, while I was talking to the members of the Greavesville mosque, they were talking about the history of the mosque in the region and the vital role of Rock, who was in the construction business. Rock is a short form of an Iranian name. At first, I thought that I didn't know this person; however, as they described him, I realized that he was from another network of Iranians who categorized themselves as non-Muslims.

Contrary to my expectation, based how Rock expressed himself as a non-religious person, I found that the members of the Greavesville mosque were so proud of Rock. In fact, he seemed to have contributed the most in building the mosque, the pivotal space for the Muslim community in Greavesville. So, while he presumably changed his name to a more American-sounding one for business, he also contributed to building the mosque even though he was not a practitioner of Islamic rituals. Rock's attitude toward his community, as well as the community's feelings toward him, shows how fluid the idea of Islamic community-building can be practiced, contrary to the "correct" instruction for practicing Islam as formulated by clerics.

6.3 Islam as a Nation

In another instance of the clerical understanding of Islam, the cleric discussed the example of Malcolm X and how Islam can offer a practical solution for racial problems in the U.S. He referred to the Nation of Islam as one of the most "important nations" that has ever existed in America. He asserted that the Nation of Islam came into existence during the period of post-slavery, but it was at a time when racism was still paramount in American society. He tried to inform the participants, who were mostly Iranian, Iraqi, and Pakistani, about the history of racism in the U.S. He said that racism in this country is a part of American history. He emphasized that Muslims must be aware of and understand that when Islam came to existence in this country, many Black people were living in poverty.

He then mentioned one of the core values of the Nation of Islam was the "white man was the devil." He said this core value was very important for people when there was so

much oppression of Black people and people of color in America. He claimed that "*Islam paints all people with the same brush*." He described Malcolm X's *hajj* pilgrimage when he said, "during the Hajj we sat down with people with blue eyes, from different races, different colors. Our identity was a Muslim identity. That is how we were all connected. Islam is a solution for the problem in America. As long as the racism exists, the oppression exists, Islam is the only true solution." He claimed that shortly after proposing this idea, Malcolm X was assassinated because he had said many things that are important behind the scenes.

Then he tried to clarify Malcolm X's assassination by telling the story of Dr. Muhammad Mahdi, an Iraqi doctor who was friends with Malcolm X. According to the cleric, Dr. Mahdi sponsored Malcolm X to go on Hajj. This Iraqi doctor was Shi'a. He stated that "there is no doubt that he shared the message of Karbala to Malcolm X. Who knows how much would have changed in America if he was allowed to live?" Malcom X's assassination had something to do with his friendship with this Shi'a doctor. He did not clarify more about this theory, though. However, it shows how an African American who was born and raised in the U.S., then become Shi'i cleric under the Iranian Qom seminary, could reconcile these contradictions of his own identity. While he was well received and had transformed the idea of land of infidels to the audience, he encouraged Muslims to present their identity, so that "neighbor" and "co-workers" may confirm that Muslim are "good" people. But he did not clarify how they mutually can have "good" relationships with infidels.

In his analysis of the Nation of Islam, the cleric did not clarify the theological basis of the Nation, wherein Elijah Muhammad is the Messenger of God, which is contrary to

what other Muslims believe, that the original Prophet is the "seal," the last messenger of God. Moreover, in the Nation of Islam founder, Wallace D. Fard, was elevated to the status of God: "We believe that Allah (God) appeared in the person of Master W. Fard Muhammad" (Laremont 1999, 44). Although he stated that the "white man was the devil" as one of the bases of the Nation, which is against the teachings of the Quran to classify people based on their nations, ethnicities, and appearance, he did not clarify the heretical theology of the Nation of Islam in the eyes of traditional Muslims.

Malcolm X's membership in the Nation of Islam also can be divided by the period of his membership in the Nation of Islam and his post-*hajj* (pilgrimage to Mecca), when he converted to traditional Sunni Islam (Laremont 1999). While the Nation's pro-Black Muslim/anti-white Christian dichotomy was created under U.S. racial formation, the African-American cleric did not mention that such racial structure has no Quranic justification for Muslim audiences. It was after the *hajj* pilgrimage that Malcolm X noticed that all Muslims – "white," Chinese, Pakistani, Arab, European – were praying in the same line together and asked "how could this harmonious multiracial religious experience coincide with Elijah Muhammad's vision of an exclusively black Islam?" (Laremont 1999, 42).

The cleric did not address the most sensitive issue of the Nation, which is the explicit heresy—first, their affirmation of Elijah Muhmmad as the prophet, and second, Wallace D. Fard, the found of the Nation, as God (Allah)'s embodiment. Considering these controversial topics, the fact that the Nation of Islam could have motivated and encouraged African Americans under the name of Islam was the most important factor of this institution, which allowed a disregard of basic heretical contradictions. Contrary to

the cleric's notion of the U.S.'s racial dichotomy, my interlocutors did not understand themselves through this Black-white racialized structure. They usually referred to the Quranic verse in which God says, "the noblest of you in the sight of God is the most God-wary among you" (49:13) regardless of nation (*sho'ub*) or tribe (*qowm*). Although the interlocutors have made some racialized comments about groups of people in some cases, for instance Arabs, their racialization is based other linguistic, cultural, and ethnic factors.

Through particular imaginings of belonging via the Shi'a mythology, the cleric, who had been trained in Iranian Shi'a seminary, attempted to link Malcolm X to a Shi'a ideological framework based on a Shi'a doctor funding Malcolm X's pilgrimage to Mecca. Whether or not this assumption is real or imaginary, the cleric's attempt to reconstruct Malcolm's Shi'i identity is an example of the "moments in which new norms are shaped with preexisting institutions" (Clarke 2004, 19).

Although this example shows how a Muslim, the cleric, might make meaning in relation to transnational conditions and historical imaginations, it still leaves the issue of authority unresolved in the sense that he was one of the Muslims who imagined such a linkage. I might hear the name of Muhammad Ali in my interviews and conversation, but I hardly ever heard the interlocutors refer to Malcolm X or the Nation of Islam because of those unsolved heretical, theological bases. And although the cleric did not show affiliation with the Nation, his emphasis on Malcolm X post-*hajj* conversion, and the imagined Shi'a identity, and more importantly their encouragement of economic self-sufficiency and the growth of businesses within the African-American community (Laremont 1999, 48), indicates he has been inspired by what might solve racial issues in the U.S. within Islam as nation (*umma*), regardless of theology.

The example of Muhammad Ali and his sports narratives was a smoother way to discuss Muslims in America. The cleric discussed the way he rejected the Vietnam War at a time when he was the champion of the world, a legend among not just boxers but all athletes. There was a time that he was vilified by the media, which made him seem like a bad guy, because he did not go to fight in Vietnam. Muhammad Ali argued that it was not his war; therefore, he did not want to kill people, according to the cleric. Although the media vilified him, at that time, he looked at the bigger picture. Eventually, the cleric said, they gave him all kinds of awards and prestige because of what he had stood for, expressing his convictions publicly.

The cleric argued there may be a time when it is not easy, and mainstream society is not supportive. However, Muslims should be firm in their path. Then he portrayed how much it can change culture in America, when a Muslim, someone like Muhammad Ali, says: "Allah is the greatest." The cleric asked, how does that change the mentality of people in society? For him, what Muhammad Ali did was a big deal. As I explained, the cleric did not expand on the anti-racist activities of Muhammad Ali and mostly focused on how he had influenced the anti-war movement and the defending of oppressed people.

During my interviews and observations, I have noticed that the Muhammad Ali example came up multiple times. It seems that Muhammad Ali's case is a more convenient pattern for shaping the dominant cultural context. For one, he was an athlete with widespread fame. Moreover, his 1993 trip to Iran made him popular among Iranians. One of my interlocutors referred to Muhammad Ali's example while he was defending Iranian state's policy about the missile program. He asked me if I have ever heard Muhammad Ali's story about how he became a boxer. He said that once someone beat

him and stole his bicycle when he was a child. Thereafter, he learned that he must be strong enough to defend himself. Then my interlocutor linked this story to Iran's policy as a country; they must expand the missile program to be strong enough, so no country dares attack them.

6.4 What Is to Be Done for the Next generation

During the lecture of Ashura in the Heydar Center, the cleric was not just criticizing what Muslims have done, but the cleric also offered instruction for the audience to claim their identity as Muslims, an identity highly entangled with a publicly-practicing Islamic identity. He discussed a lot of suggestions of how they practice Islam in the U.S. to promote their identity. One of the practical actions he proposed was to think about the next generation. He mentioned the small size of the Shi'i community in the U.S. and shared his experience about when he was younger in Philadelphia, where there was no Shi'i community. Even though there was a big Muslim community, it was influenced by the Wahhabi[51] movement. He said that they had to go to places such as New York, New Jersey, Maryland or D.C. to find some other Shi'as with which to hold Ashura rituals.

One of the centers that he used to go had a program exclusively for Shi'i rituals. He said he used to go all the time because it was the closest place to commemorate Ashura rituals. Once, the people of that community asked his mom, "why do you come here? You know it is in Urdu [Pakistani language]. I wouldn't come here if it was in different language." He said, "they couldn't even think that someone would come just for the sake of Imam Hossein, just for *that* reason. It was a *completely* cultural connection to each

[51] considered radical by some

other." The cleric's religious connection was something different than the cultural connection. Therefore, "if there is only a cultural connection, there is not much to share." Religious connection was the ultimate kind of connection among members of a community. Cultural bonds only based on shared language are the biggest threats for the community, according to the cleric.

When the community invited him to give lecture, years later, they told him,

> "We need someone to come lecture in English." Afterwards, they told him, "Some years ago, *we did not think about the future*. When we established this center, we were just thinking about, we were missing our home, and having one thing from home. We were also trying also to have a place so that we could meet, gather, socialize, and we share some good values as well. *We did not think about what we needed for the coming years*."

He encouraged any person who is a Muslim in the U.S. to think not just about what they need right now, but what they may need in the coming years as well. What will they need in forty years, for instance? What will the future generation need? The Pakistani individuals asserted, "we did not have a plan for the future. What happened was, we lost the entire generation."

He advised the audience to have a plan concerning *what will be the needs of the future*. He told a story about when he went to a mosque and saw children playing with their iPads and devices. They had very beautiful names, Mahdi, Sajad, Ali, and Hasan, according to the cleric. When he asked, "these are very beautiful names, do you know the meaning?" They said, "not really." He went to another room and saw two men arguing over chicken and other meat. So, here there was a serious fight about what kind food they wanted to serve, but their children did not even know what their names meant. This story caused everybody to laugh. He then concluded his sermon by indicating that Muslims have to think about what they will need in forty years.

During the ten days of Ashura ritual, the cleric lectured with the same agenda. Although he went to high school and the Qom seminary, his basic expectation was radically different than what I had observed in the field and heard from my interlocutors. I considered this cleric an Iran-trained cleric, based on what he said about his personal life; however, his sermon was not a typical example of what can be expected from a Shi'a cleric. I participated in the Ashura ritual of the following year, which was entirely virtual on Zoom. The lecture that was delivered by a Sayed who was not a trained cleric from seminary. The Sayed mostly talked about the typical Muslim commitments and association with the Quran. Not even during other religious holidays, such as the Prophet's Death anniversary, Nights of Decree during Ramazan, *Arba'een*, the fortieth day after Ashura etc., have I observed a sermon like the one African-American cleric delivered. His sermon sounded to me like a theorized manifesto of a concrete doctrine of Islam for the U.S. setting. What made this cleric, Mir-Hossein, and his sermons an interesting case for my project was the way he transformed the general ideology of Iranian political Shi'ism by strategically employing the clerical technique of jurisprudential reasoning to create a doctrinal model of Islam for the U.S. context. Although he did not overtly make any political comment, the term he used for the U.S. as the "Land of Infidelity" was a political one in the sense that he did not provide any evidence for his claim.

My interlocutors showed discomfort when I raised this topic during my interviews. I used the term *jurisprudential reasoning* because the cleric had the ultimate answer for every issue he discussed, and he was there to tell the audience *what is right*. He noticeably inherited this technique from the seminary system in which he was trained. Contrary to

this clerical methodology, my interlocutors' everyday practices revealed that they do not need clerical answers for *what is right*. Rather, they are deeply involved in a collective *process of debating*, whether they can reach the ultimate answer or not. More importantly, this cleric was offering a narrative of Islam that was being ripped off from culture. He deliberately tried to separate cultural identity from "spiritual, Islamic identity," by arguing that the Hosay Trinidad's practice of Ashura was more of a "cultural thing" than an Islamic tradition in the context. He also raised a deep concern about Muslims' needs for future of their descendants.

Remarkably, some of my interlocutors told me that they not only have no concern about their next generation but are very glad they raised their children in the U.S. They believe their children are more interested in Islam in the U.S. than if they had been raised in Iran. This clerical determinism, and his concern toward the next generation regarding "right" Islamic practice, was a scrutiny of "authenticity" marking what the community was doing as the community's "inauthenticity." This cleric's attempt resonates with Clarke's account of tourists in the Oyotunji village of the Yoruba community in the U.S., who often try to "identify things that are 'authentically' African, and many who visit are disappointed by what they regard as the village's 'inauthenticity'" (Clarke 2004, 61). Clarke asserts that the value of religion for them "does not lie in the religious institutions itself but in the geopolitics of subjectivities produced and authenticated by its institutions as well as the conditions for the possibilities of social change that it conjures" (Clarke 2004, 63). The cleric's narrative of Islam is an ideal form of *his* understanding of some jurisprudential text through which settings are *either* land of believers *or* infidels. This type of narrative is concerned with how Islam *should be* rather that how it actually *is*.

Clarke states that Yoruba practitioners "engage in practices in which meanings related to Europe, Christianity, and white dominance are resignified and new interpretations are produced—for truth is not a thing. Truth and reality are negotiated through the production of ongoing acts of remembering and forgetting" (Clarke 2004, 63). Similarly, Iranian practitioners' meanings are also reformulated in relation to the U.S. setting with the dominance of Christianity and the white-nonwhite binary in the U.S. South. Their Islam exists in relation to this new condition in the U.S., or even in the South, and thus new subjectivities must be produced.

6.5 Their Land of Fidelity

During my interview with Mohsen and Arezoo, we talked about many issues related to Iran, the U.S., and their circumstances. I let them talk mostly, telling me their stories in the way they preferred. At first when I contacted Mohsen for the interview, I did not ask to interview both of them. However, during the interview, Arezoo joined. Arezoo is in her forties, and she grew up in the Islamic Republic, experiencing the Islamic doctrine more tangibly. Whenever I participated in free discussions and everybody had their time to talk, she once gave her time to me: "I give my time to Mr. Erfan, because we have the same opinion." Her comment illustrates my reflexivity during the fieldwork. Although I was neutral during my observations and tried to participate in compliance with the network's norms, during the free discussions, the participants seemed to note my criticism of the intervention of doctrinal Islam. Therefore, addressing political Islam was the prevailing theme during our interview. Once Arezoo was describing the over thirty-five years she and Mohsen have been in the U.S., and she said, "our lives are mostly here.

Although we born and raised in Iran, everything we have is here. Our kids born here. Here is our second home."

I jumped in and said, "while you are talking, keep the concept of *dar al-Kufr* (the Land of Infidelity) in mind."

She immediately responded, "I do not believe in it at all."

Mohsen aggressively reacted by saying, "those who say such a thing, I don't know why they are here. Why don't they pack their stuff and go back?"

Arezoo continued by saying, "when I go to Iran for a visit, I always tell my relatives that I have seen religion, values, and the right way of doing stuff in the system [Mohsen introjected: "humanity"] more here [in the U.S.] than Iran. In everyday life, we all see how people respect each other's rights. Nobody violates another person's rights. How they respect me as a foreigner. How simply I could immerse myself, live in the society, and have 'privilege' to practice my religion. I think they [the U.S. society] are treating us fairly. Here is my second home."

They argued against the concept of the "Land of Infidelity" by telling the story of their children who went to Catholic school. I was surprised and reacted. Arezoo explained, "we sent them to Catholic school because we did not want them to go to a kind of school that has no principles."

Mohsen said, "we did not tell them to be Muslim. We just wanted them to go to a kind of school that has some principles and discipline values."

Arezoo: "we told them that we are Muslim and practice Islam, but we did not tell them you have to be like us. We told them we sent you to Catholic school because we want you to be raised with some 'discipline.'"

Then, Mohsen referred back to his last argument against "the Land of Infidelity," and said, "I wanted to highlight that when we sent them to Catholic school, the principal and school staff made sure to tell our children that that pizza has pepperoni. So, we do not eat pork. The school staff made sure that our kids ate cheese pizza not pepperoni when going to cafeteria. Or, when they go to congregation and they were making the sign of the cross, they taught our children to just put their hand on their shoulder. They told them you do not need to do that. They meticulously emphasized that 'do not do this, because in your religion you don't to this [the sign of the cross].'"

I specifically asked whether they have or had concerns about their religious identity passing on to their children or how their children identify themselves.

Mohsen said, "we have never told them what to do or practice Islam. But my older daughter, who is twenty-four, and the younger one more so, who is twenty years old, are involved in the Muslim Association in the University of Simonstown."

Arezoo: "our children identify themselves as Muslim Iranian-American. They received this identity [Islamic] from us. We did not tell them what to do. But they now practice Islam, pray, and fast during Ramadan. We did our part. Twenty years ago, we decided to have this network for our children. Negar joon [dear], had class when they were younger and taught them some basic thing about our beliefs. When they became older, they continued these believes and decided what to do."

Mohsen said, "my younger daughter became part of an organization called Who Is Ali. They got the chapter of Simonstown here. They go buy scarves, coffee, and other stuff, and go downtown and give it to homeless people and say this is from the Who Is Ali organization. Every Wednesday, they have a meeting in the University of Simonstown

with Sunni and Shi'a kids their age, and discuss about challenges, Muslim issues and different topics."

Drawing upon this ethnographic account, I argue against the clerical statement that Muslim residents in the U.S. have, or *must* have, difficulty integrating into American society and thus change the dominant culture. Conversely, Mohsen and Arezoo have taken the discipline of Catholic school as an opportunity in American society, which seemed to be aligned with their Islamic practices. Catholic school's discipline seemed adequate for raising their children.

While there are some groups of Muslims who might follow that path depicted by the cleric, a closer look reveals the ways ordinary people immerse themselves in the Christian-dominant society of the U.S. Once we recognize this, we can have conversations about the possibility of a transnational American-Muslim identity politics that has diverged drastically from clerical or jurisprudential interpretations of Islamic practices. For example, Mohsen and Arezoo's contentment with their children's religious training shows that they have not simply opposed the jurisprudential Islam and left that behind, but rather they have developed their own theological reinterpretation of Islam in accordance with both the sociocultural context of the U.S. and the concern to pass on their religiosity to their descendants.

This case is also evidence of how people's practice of Islam goes beyond the description of some scholars who define concrete characteristics for religions by claiming that "Islam defines a role for Abraham, Jesus, Jews, and Christians in its history, cosmology, and legal system" (Matory 2009, 238). This type of characterization might be right, if they only consider the scriptures as their source, but they often fail to note

people's understanding and praxis of those scriptures. Matory highlights the role of religious leaders in providing explanations for their followers in accordance with the new transnational scene. He says, "if they wish to retain or gain followers, they must offer explanations of life that not only refer to the distinctive experience of their followers but also encompass and redefine the same real-world material and social realities that all the religions, polities, and economies share in any give locale" (Matory 2009, 238).

Although Matory's outline for redefining the world view that is aligned with current material and social realities are very similar to what my interlocutors have pursued, the practitioners' roles are much more active than the those of religious leaders. Contrary to what Matory portrays as the district roles of "the leaders" and "the follower," my interlocutors have shown a very dynamic role in reconstructing more harmonious religiosity with the social realities, viewing themselves as equal, if not more qualified than any religious leader. For Matory, "not all religions see other religions as mutually exclusive rivals. Some religions endeavor to encompass not only the shared real-world circumstances but also the other religions themselves" (Matory 2009, 238).

Drawing on what Mohsen and Arezoo described about their interaction and favorable experience with Catholic school, I can argue that these types of characterizations that some scholars have provided about "religions" lose their meanings when it comes to practitioners' everyday practices and understandings. Because of their decision to send their children to Catholic school can be analyzed in the context of the U.S. South, Mohsen and Arezoo might have seen the Catholic community as an ally among local Christians. I have heard from some local Christians, describing Catholicism as stereotypical such as "Catholic men like their mom," that they do not use the term

"Christian" for Catholic individuals. However, this reveals that Mohsen and Arezoo have their characterizations of Catholic school as a place that provides their children with more discipline and respect for Islamic beliefs, and they did not seem to be worried about any influence of Christianity on their children's behavior during their time at school.

6.6 Concerns for Descendants

The theme of the Land of Infidelity came up multiple times during my interviews. For instance, I asked about this theme during my interview with Yasin, the graduate student who gave a lecture about the Guardianships of the *faqih*, passionately supporting the doctrinal involvement of the state in people's everyday lives. When I asked Yasin about the concept, he simply responded by asking, "is this country running through a divine's order?" I responded, no. He said, "then, it is a Land of Infidelity." Yasin was among the few interlocutors who blatantly expressed his advocacy for this "odd" idea. It might seem odd because it does not seem reasonable when someone thinks a place is a land of sin, yet still continues living there. Then someone might ask, in an aggressive tone, as Mohsen did, "why don't they pack their stuff and go back?" Although, I did not directly ask Yasin this question, I found out more about it in other interlocutors' responses.

During my interview with Mojtaba, I asked his opinion about the idea of the Land of Infidelity, and contrary to Mohsen and Arezoo who strongly denounced it, he agreed, explicating why the U.S. *is* a Land of Infidelity. This was unexpected since he was fond of the coexistence of Muslims with non-Muslims in U.S. society. For him, it *had to be* this way, contrary to the doctrinal ideology of the Iranian state where everybody *must* live under the "umbrella" of a homogenous *umma*. Mojtaba explained, "the clerics

brought up the idea that the U.S. is a *dar al-Kufr*, he meant that sins and misdeeds, and thus infidelity, are more visible and accessible here. It is even worse in Europe. For instance, when a mother is picking her kid up from school and going home, they pass a cinema marquee with a massive pornographic scene."

I was surprised because I have never seen such a display on the street in the U.S. Mojtaba reassured me:

> "I lived for a period of time in Europe. It is worse than here. There is a street called the Red-Light District, and when you pass by, there are naked women instead of mannequins behind the shops' windows. It is a public place and people walk by with their family and kids. At least in the U.S. when people go to strip clubs or bars, they check IDs. In Europe, there are no boundaries."

By this example, Mojtaba tried to clarify when talking about *dar al-Kufr*, in his understanding, parents should be worried every time their children go out of the house because they might see many immoral scenes based moral standards in public space. He clarified the publicity of what he considers sin, *kufr*. I said that I had never seen such a display in the U.S., and asked him if he thought the U.S. is a better place to live compared to Europe.

He still argued that the U.S. is a Land of Infidelity because there are still many "strip clubs and bars," even though "pornographic images" are not visible on cinema marquees. He then gave the example of the prohibition of alcoholic beverages in Islam:

> "there is a hadith from the Prophet saying: 'Actions are by intentions.' For instance, if somebody goes to a mosque and declares, 'I donate ten million *toman* for helping a family.' This is just for show, and God may not accept that because the *intention* is not really philanthropic. He does it for other benefits. Therefore, this action receives no *savâb* [spiritual reward]. However, this does apply in the case of alcohol. Islam says: 'even if you do not drink it due to the taste of the alcoholic beverage, although your intention was to drink it, you will still receive some *savâb*.' Why is adherence to this prohibition so important? Because of all the associated nastiness and filth

> [immoralities] around it. It is not like one goes out, watches a show, and returns home. He may get a disease [STD] from stripers, use drugs, have a car accident due to driving drunk, etc. It is like a domino effect."

Based on his description, I realized that he could have protected himself from all these "sins and *kufr*s", which somehow answered my question of why he was still living in the Land of Infidelity.

However, I wondered how he reflects on this concern for the next generation and his potential children raised among these visible sins. He calmly responded, "we have to be more cautious then, *more included in the community*. Do you remember Dr. Hasan? [I did not] He uprooted himself from Winstonburg and went to Texas. He said there was not the biggest Muslim community in Winstonburg, so he went to Texas to raise his children where there is a bigger Muslim community. These are the kinds of actions we can do to counteract the deviant situation. Of course, these are all relative. Maybe the situation for raising kids is worse in Iran."

I jumped in when he mentioned Iran. I argued that these concerns can still be raised in Iran, even though "sins" are not visible on the street. Many of those "bad things" he mentioned are accessible on the internet.

Mojtaba went on to talk about the level of "infidelity" in Iran and said, "exactly. You could say this in the past, not Iran's present. The last time I went to Iran for a visit, I realized that immoralities are even more prevalent than in Eastern Europe. A married woman, for instance, has five boyfriends. Every married man has four girlfriends. Some of these nasty attitudes become normalized now. So, this is not the Iran that I left years ago. When I go to Iran, it is a culture shock for me."

I said, by his definition of the idea of "the Land of Infidelity," Iran could also be considered a *dar al-kufr*. Mojtaba confirmed, "yes, with the way I define the Land of Infidelity, today's Iran is a *dar al-kufr*, really—even worse than the U.S., to be honest."

I then asked if the idea of a land of fidelity is a utopian idea or if it actually exists on earth. If so, where would it be? He said, "it really depends on the parents' view about Islam and morality. It is not like which one is better, 'Iran or the U.S.?' It goes back to the community in which you want to raise your kids and be involved. Think of the community Dr. Hasan found in Texas. He told me they live in a big neighborhood, all are doctors, and have their own Shi'i rituals. They are raising their kids in such a community."

6.6.1 Nima's plan

The theme of infidelity and the concern about raising children in the U.S. was also discussed with Nima during our in-depth interview. When I specifically asked Nima about considering the U.S. a Land of Infidelity, he could not decisively determine. It was still a question for him. He said, "if you asked me years ago when I came here, I might have had a different view and told you my decisive view. As time passes, the situation has changed; my knowledge has been developed; I have investigated certain issues more; therefore, some issues become more important. I considered myself a pious Muslim. Before coming here, I had still practiced some of the basic requirements and was a semi-religious person. The reason was that in Iran they did not educate us enough about Islam. It was just a thin surface of Islam. We really did not know the rationale behind many practices and why we needed to do certain stuff. When I came here, some simple things

turned to issues. For instance, in the case of eating halal meat, especially chicken, I used to believe that the process of slaughtering here is almost the same as Iran, justifying my belief that, in Iran, they also imported slaughtering machines from Western countries to provide chicken meat. Later, when I focused and studied more, I realized I should have actually questioned the way *they* provided halal meat *in Iran*."

I asked him if he meant that the chicken meat they provided in Iran, in his opinion, was not prepared a hundred percent following the Islamic technique of slaughtering (*zebh*). He said, "yes, when I came here, I realized how it is possible to use a machine to slaughter chickens in the same way they do in Western countries and call it halal. When I came here, and because I have found more religious tendencies, I paid more attention to if the meat is really halal."

I asked what changed such that he became sure that the meat he consumes is halal. He said, "here, there is a separate store specifically run by a Muslim for providing halal meat for Muslims. In Sharia, when another Muslim confirms that it is halal, you can trust it. His saying is *hojat* [proof]. Even an investigation is not required. When I just came to the U.S., I sometimes thought by myself if I go to KFC and eat chicken, it is not a big deal. They slaughter meat the way they do in Iran. I have never done that, but I thought about it. Now, my viewpoint is different. I take it more seriously. Now, let's get back to the concept you asked about—the Land of Infidelity. I did not even know about that when I was in Iran. When I came here, I realized that there exists an Islamic *mas'aleh* (issue) saying that 'under any circumstance, a Muslim should not be in a Land of Infidelity; if so, it has to be only for *tabligh* (propagation of Islam).' I have not yet focused on it very much."

To clarify about the land of infidelity, based on what he believed at the time, he explained that he did not consider the U.S. a land of infidels because he had seen less sins and improbity in his everyday life compared with those places that claimed to govern based on Islamic ideals. He did not have an answer for some of the issues of Muslimness in this country: for example, the fact that he pays taxes, and the money might be spent on "missiles that are dropped on children and women in Yemen."

He asserted that he had not yet reached a conclusion that this country is a Land of Infidelity, especially for "raising children," which he brought up himself. I then asked if he has any concern about raising his children in the U.S. He said, "I really thought about it, and my opinion at the time was that, if in the U.S., we would explain that we are Muslim, we do these practices, and these are our boundaries, and they would respect our boundaries more than in Iran. I think I can explain some religious principles to our children, and they would accept it here, compared to the super *negative atmosphere* they have created for Islam that you would not even dare talk about it in Iran. There is a really negative atmosphere of being religious and Muslim that might make it very difficult for children to shape their mentality. It can be probable that one finds his own community in Iran, raising children following the Islamic principles to some extent, but what if they go out of the community? There are so many negative attacks against religion in Iran. Thus, I really think that I can raise my children following the Islamic principles and religion in a way that I want, more simply in the U.S."

6.6.2 Negar's contentment

Mojtaba and Nima, who both asserted they would rather raise their own children in the Land of (In)fidelity, were talking about their future. They were still in their thirties, and I knew they did not yet have children. I also heard the same comment from other interlocutors who had already raised their children in the U.S.; they did not regret it. During our in-depth interview, I asked Negar, who had mentioned, "the next generation's voice is louder than us," to expand more on this idea. She said she remembered meeting the parents of one of the Simonstown city council members. They told her that although they had immigrated from India, settled in the U.S., and a had good life, "they cannot raise their voice as loudly and broadly as their descendants." They told her their children can impact a broader circle than they could. Like the House Representatives, who are Muslim and women. Regardless of what opponents say, their presence at the House makes the situation better for Muslims; not just as a representatives, but as Muslim women who can take part in society and have a voice. Negar indicated children's voices can be universally heard more than those of the previous generation.

Negar then told a story about her daughter being stuck in traffic and waiting, and a car passed all the other cars by going up the emergency lane. Her daughter got so angry about these types of people, who do not respect others' rights in public spaces. Negar said,

> "this was a big wake up for me, that how negative, lasting and visible effect it could be if somebody like me, who always wears a hijab, commits a misdemeanor so that everybody can see. Thus, they might simply generalize it to the whole group. For instance, they might say, 'all these hijab women deviate from laws.' Therefore, I always pay attention to do the best I can because it is visible; therefore, I feel like I carry an enormous responsibility. Many times, it happened that I changed my way and chose a longer way, but I

have never even thought about committing any traffic violations so that people are not thinking I represent all Muslim women by doing the wrong action."

Since she had mentioned hijab, I jumped in and asked her if she was able to pass the tradition to her daughter, who was twenty-three. She said, no, and nothing more. I felt there was slight remorse in her voice when she said that.

I then elaborated more on my question, indicating that I was not just asking about hijab specifically. I said, "I am asking to examine if there have been any concerns about you having passed your Islamic belief and tradition to your daughter. I assume a Muslim woman who always wears a complete hijab must like to pass the same tradition to her daughter. So, do you even call it a concern, or to you, is it just a simple moderation in the U.S. context and not a big deal in your mind?" Negar said this was a very interesting question. She first gave background about her own family. Among female relatives, like her sisters and sisters-in-law, she is the only one who wears hijab. In her family, they have all kinds of hijabs: some wear *chador*[52]; some just wear *rusari* (scarf), and some wear no hijab. She said, it was her own decision to wear a hijab.

Sometimes her family humorously says, "we did not understand who stole your right," she laughed. But she said she knows that if her parents had told her, "You have to wear a hijab," she would have never worn it. She said, she would have never accepted being forced to do something. Since she had this feeling, she could have never told her daughter, "you have to wear a hijab." She said, it happens sometimes. She had asked, "Maman[53], why do you wear such a short dress?" She has told her that such clothing is

[52] Chador is an open cloak woman wear to cover their hair and body, but not their face. It is different than a *burqa* that covers the face.

[53] In Iranian culture, when parents address their children, they use their own paternal and maternal statuses. They also use the children's statuses too. But, when Negar says: "Maman (mother) …," it means

not very appropriate or that she was showing too much skin. She advises her daughter very rarely. After taking a deep breath, meaning she is happy, she said, “Thank God, she has been modest enough, so far. I am not saying that she does not wear a short dress sometimes, but she mostly wears dresses that seem appropriate to me.” She said, she has based her discipline on the idea that even if she is not with them, it would still be the same. As a Quran teacher for other children, she said, “unfortunately, I might have had more impact on others than my own daughter because I am her mother and did not want to be pushy.”

Me: “you said, ‘unfortunately.’ Does that mean you would be happier if she wore a hijab the way you do?”

Negar: “I am not just talking about hijab. When she talks about other people’s rights such as being respectful to others, not lying, helping people and so on, I can tell she is better than me. I mean, I can really see that in her attitude. The religious lens through which I look at the world is less intense in her. For instance, she looks through a lens of *human rights* rather than what is based on the Quran or religion.”

Me: “for you, being religious is the principle; for her being *good* is the principle. Is that right?”

Negar: “mine is mixed. In my opinion, being *good* is equal to being religious. She does not have this view, but still believes in being *good*, which is not necessarily rooted in religion.” Then, she talked about her twenty-three-year-old daughter and seemed to be happy and satisfied with the way she had raised her and who she has become. I directly asked her has she ever regretted raising her daughter in the U.S. and not in Iran. She

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“daughter …” In other words, in addition to addressing a son with, “hey, son close the door,” a father may also say, “Dadi, close the door,” with exactly the same meaning.

quickly, loudly, and decisively said, *NO*, and mentioned this was especially one of the questions they discussed with Arezoo because their daughters are almost the same age.

Negar specified that Arezoo has two daughters: one of them eight months older than Negar's and the other three years younger. They grew up together. But she asserted "*we are definitively agreed on the idea that it was the best decision to raise our kids here*." When their daughters go to Iran for a visit, they are not comparable with youth in Iran, according to Negar. She did not mean that their children are better, but in terms of their moral and ethical principles they seem to be. She stated that debauchery among youth in Iran is unimaginable and said "I am not talking about them having boyfriends or girlfriends. I am talking about lifestyles and things that are important to them are *way different* than things that are important for *our* kids. This is really visible when we go to Iran." Negar's comment contrasts with the clerical concern regarding the needs of the next generation for the coming years in the "Land of Infidels." Negar and Arezoo both were satisfied with the decision to raise their daughters in the U.S. among non-Muslims.

Negar was the organizer of the Quran sessions and a volunteer teacher of Farsi language and the Quran to the children of community members. She has a Ph.D. in one of the science disciplines and was one of the most trusted people in the network of Simonstown. Contrary to the clerics' warning about the needs of the next generation, Negar,whose daughter was in her twenties, did not have this experience with her own daughter, but because of her teaching role, she had practical experience about needs of the children of the community. The fact that Negar and Arezoo were delighted that their children were raised in the U.S. does not mean that they had no other choice or were unaware of what the cleric was warning. However, they decisively made this decision,

relying on their ability to provide a collective moral and ethical community, independent of clerical institutions.

6.7 Conclusion

For the cleric who was trained in Iran, Iran must be a land of fidelity due to the prevalence of Islamic morals and values. Contrary to the clerical assumption, my interlocutors began by referring to examples of "a married woman, for instance, has five boyfriends. Every married man has four girlfriends," according to Mojtaba. Additionally, Negar described the immorality and lifestyles of the youth when she visits Iran. The moral and ethical tenets for them did not appear to be connected to the clerical approach and explicit meanings of the text[54], nor were they fond of the rebellious lifestyle of the youth who confront the state-enforced Islamic values inside Iran (Khosravi 2008; Mahdavi 2009).

The morality and ethics that the interlocutors have emerged from the host society in ways that favored their cultural expectations. The way Mohsen and Arezoo address their concerns about moral principles by sending their children to Catholic school shows how they benefited from the behavioral codes they found compelling, based on the history of anti-Catholic sentiment, allying with another minority in the context of the South (Bridgers 2006, 97). Mojtaba's strategy was to find "our own community" in the U.S., based on his example, a community who even has its own subdivision in Texas. Even

[54] I will discuss in the next chapter how they discredited Islamic practices e.g., polygamous marriages and underaged marriage, which are rooted in the Quranic verses, and how they ascribe them to the "cultural" practices of the Arab people in early Islamic era.

Negar, whose daughter does not wear hijab like she does, stated that it was the best decision to raise her children in the U.S.

These ideas and experiences show how they embrace a future of multiplicity while maintaining their Muslim identity. Mojtaba's solution of having a community of Shi'a Muslims with their own separate subdivision, Mohsen and Arzoo's decision to ally with the Catholic minority and their school system, and Negar's view of her daughter as a "good" girl even though she doesn't wear hijab reveal how Iranian Americans create spaces between two ends of the dichotomy (Mir 2014). At the one end of this dichotomy is the cleric who promoted a fixed Islamic identity and its required maintenance in the "Land of Infidelity," and the other end is the anti-Muslim dominant discourse seeking a monolithic target (Varisco 2005; Said 2012).

Contrary to this politics of bipolarization, the interlocutors' strategies of reorienting Islamic values in the predominantly Christian context via their own ethics and morality show there is "no fixed, normative center, only dynamic, crosscutting constellations of heterogeneous identities" (Fernando 2014, 98). The hand-shaking regulation established by the cleric was a perfect example of how people go beyond the *either*/*or* logic and find adaptation strategies, such as Negar, who creatively mimed shaking hands or acted out hugging to find a third space between touching non-mahram and rejecting handshaking.

This *both*/*and* logical reasoning was not limited to Negar's personalized strategy. Mojtaba even went beyond the prohibition of touching non-*mahram*, by referring to the Islamic teachings whereby one can end fasting to avoid breaking the heart of another Muslim. By replacing the act of "fasting" with "rejecting handshaking" and expanding "another Muslim" to "human being," Mojtaba created a third space between rejecting

handshakes and leaving behind nonnormative Islamic regulation in the U.S. Therefore, their coping strategies with non-Muslims were far more complicated than the cleric's essentialization. Although these strategies are not homogenous, they show deeper engagement with Islamic principles and the Quran; there is a collective decision of the community to negotiate these principles, making them meaningful in relation to groups of people and in societal context.

CHAPTER 7: CONCLUSION

Over four decades of the establishment of the Islamic Republic and hostility between the U.S. and Iran, the consequent wave of Iranian immigration to the U.S. has received scholarly and popular attention. However, post-migratory experiences of Iranian Americans in the area of the U.S. South have remained mostly unexplored in the literature. In this dissertation, I utilized the discursivity of Quranic exegesis as a method for analyzing the reconciliation of Muslim identity with the predominantly Christian society of the U.S. I focused on everyday activities, religious sessions, and ethnic ceremonies in which Iranian Americans use non-clerical understandings of the Quran to merge their identity with the dominant discourse of the U.S. citizen. I explored the impact of these conflictual transitions in the sociopolitical and religious lives of Iranian Americans by examining how identities intersect with religion, citizenship, and racial positioning, and how they conceptualize these categories through their own ethnohistorical imagining of American society.

In the dissertation, I argued that relations of class and religion play critical roles in the formation of citizenship and social life while highlighting the vital amendment of Iranian Americans' politics of Islamic practices: a broad range of heterogenous narratives of Islam in accordance with the U.S. context on the one hand, and withdrawal from the authority of religious leaders and their exegetical roles on the other. I developed this argument by investigating how quotidian understandings of the Quran produce a community characterized by experiences of solidarity and differentiation, inclusion and exclusion, and negotiation and conflict that maintain harmony with U.S. society. My work addresses a problem central to the anthropology of Islam: the relations between

orthodoxy and Islamic tradition in which Muslims have the power to regulate correct practices and exclude incorrect ones. I focused on ordinary interactions that generate Islamic tradition without orthodoxy. My analysis of these interactions reveals that it is not only the lack of central authority that makes these shared and contested meanings possible, but also the American religious landscape itself. The way that Iranian Muslims in the U.S. untethered themselves from the Islamic Republic's doctrine of Islam resembles the way early immigrants on American soil protested centralized religious authority of the Church of England. I highlighted the significance of the classed citizenship that enables Iranians in the U.S. to return to the sacred text without any jurisprudential medium of intermediaries, which has shaped a form of Protestant Shi'ism[55]. This aligns with the ways in which early immigrants to the U.S. in the 17th century and beyond adhered to the idea of literacy and *sola scriptura* (only scripture) (Bridgers 2006).

Iranian Americans with whom I did my research did not explicitly mention the influence of the religious landscape in the South on the Iranian community. However, during some of my observations and interviews, I could trace that thread through the ways that they reconstructed their post-migratory ethnoreligious, economic, and racial identities. For example, Akbar, a man in his late sixties, uniquely depicted the influence of the South on the Iranian community in our first meeting. In July 2019, when I first met him and explained my general topic about Iranian ethnoreligious identity in its post-migratory phase, his first comment was about how youth in Iran are more relaxed in

[55] Scholars have referred to Shi'ism as "a religion of protest" by analyzing its traumatic birth in early Islamic history as a rebellion movement against the caliphate system (Dabashi 2012). However, the idea of Protestantism that I use in this dissertation reflects practitioners' agency in producing meanings of the text, which challenges the knowledge of the clerics.

terms of dating and sex, even though it is not in public. After his last visit to Iran, he was surprised how drastically moral values have changed. When I tried to explore if his statement was related to the change of religious identity, he commented:

> "Iranians have come here and seen how Americans are serious about their religious belief, how many churches are in the streets, have bible reading groups, and have thought 'why don't we keep our religious traditions?' Likewise, they have held religious rituals and gatherings. They have Quran-reading sessions. We have a regular Quran reading group here that I am going to introduce you to."

His observation of the changing social norms and values in Iran, and his comments about the bond of the local people with Church in the South, demonstrate two separate progressions of evolving religious identity. While youth's defiance against the official moral and behavioral norms in Iran have been widely studied by anthropologists (Khosravi 2008; Mahdavi 2009; Varzi 2006), the influence of Southern ties with Christianity and the Bible on Iranian-American Muslims has remained unexplored. Although Akbar mainly relied on the economic prosperity of the Iranian community to become "good citizens," he mentioned they have also been influenced by "many good characteristics from American society," by which he meant the multiplicity of churches and bible-reading gatherings that resulted in the normalization of Quran-reading sessions. While we know much about how Iranian Americans adopt the dominant culture of capitalism and socioeconomic classism from U.S. society, we know less about how they have embraced the politics of religion in the South to renegotiate the memory of the past in conversation with the Quran (*sola scriptura*), in order to understand their communal future. In this dissertation, I found they have created contextual meanings of a 'Protestant Shi'ism' that contrasts basic Shi'i principles and incorporating their own interpretation.

Although the institution of Shi'i clerics is more flexible compared to their Sunni counterparts, in terms of compatibility with contemporary issues of Muslim societies, in Chapter 2, I demonstrated how Shi'a Muslims are capable, without any jurisprudential hesitancy, to shift the fundamental belief of Shi'ism by omitting the crucial parts of the Shi'i call for prayer, orders, and symbols among the Sunni majority.

In Chapter 3, I showed how Iranian Muslims, despite clerical advice regarding the prohibition of Christians and Jews' guardianship over Muslims in the Quran, regenerated meanings of guardianship that legitimized any hierarchical relationship between non-Muslims and Muslims in the U.S. These quotidian understandings of guardianship were generated in contexts where the cleric did not have the power to regulate the orthodox meaning of the concept. I argued that despite the technical connotation of the Guardianship of the Jurist, as it is well-established in Shi'i jurisprudence, this concept can simply be used for advisors, trainers, and mentors without any divine meaning.

In Chapter 4, I explored how religion, ethnohistorical and communal memory, U.S. racial discourse, and social class were conflated in Iranian Americans' strategies for conceptualizing new racial meanings and claiming whiteness. The way in which they supported African Americans as a group of oppressed people might be understood as a religious duty but also as a strategy with which to attach themselves to the middle-class majority, who also often care about economically disadvantaged groups. I also showed how they rely on the ethnohistorical differences with the Middle Eastern groups who share the same phenotypic traits in the context of U.S. racialization, in order to exclude themselves from dominant U.S. anti-Arab discourses.

In Chapter 5, I discussed how the diaspora is not an offshoot of the historical, social, and political situation in Iran. I found that Iranian Americans, engaging in the duality that has imposed the separation of Islamic discourses from the sense of nationhood in Iran, create an imagined Iran in which both concepts of nation and religion are closely related. This new idea of homeland does not provide solutions for the country of Iran, but it forms a transnational Iranian identity in which nationhood and religiosity are conflated.

In Chapter 6, I investigated the ways in which Iranian Americans provide a complex array of Islams that circumvents both non-Muslims who consider Islam a threat that needs to be homogenous, and the clerics who fuel this tension by considering non-Muslims "infidels." In the discussion of concern for the next generation, I showed how Iranian Americans rely on their everyday experience and interactions with a predominantly non-Muslim society to determine whether or not these individuals are "good" people, rather than simply categorizing non-Muslims as "infidels."

As my ethnography has shown, the experience of being Muslim is central to the formation of identity among Iranian Americans. In their experiences of rethinking Islamic practices, Iranian Americans in the U.S. South navigated their Muslim identity in ways which reconcile with the dominant discourse of the U.S. citizen. These processes of renegotiating Islamic tenets, I have argued, are in fact illustrations of quotidian agency that has diminished the authority of the institution of clerics. By focusing on the discursivity of Quranic exegesis, I have provided a departure from anthropology's concern with power dynamics to demonstrate how existential and pragmatic sensibilities of everyday life cannot only reformulate taken-for-granted Islamic principles but also renegotiate the very meanings of categories of identity, such as religion, class,

racialization, sense of nationhood, and ethnicity in transnational contexts. My field work in the U.S. South among Iranian-Americans revealed new areas for further explorations. For instance, this ethnography highlighted how transnational citizenship enables Iranians in the U.S. to return to the sacred text without any clerical intermediaries. This direct relationship with the text, along with inspiration from the American religious landscape, created new meanings for not only their religious practices in the U.S. context, but also their racial positioning. Areas for further exploration are the ways in which Iranians understand U.S. racialization in an intersectional framework that incorporates class, citizenship, communal memories, and ethnohistorical belongings.

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VITA

ERFAN SAIDI MOQADAM

PLACE OF BIRTH
Tehran, Iran

EDUCATION
2019 M.A. Anthropology, University of Kentucky (*en passant*)
2012 M.A. Anthropology, Islamic Azad University, Science and Research Branch
2005 B.A. Music - Iranian Classical Music, University of Tehran

GRANTS AND FELOWSHIPS:
2022 William Y. Adams Award for Teaching, Department of Anthropology, University of Kentucky
2021 Hajja Razia Sharif Sheikh Award, Islamic Studies, University of Kentucky
2021 Travel Grant, Department of Anthropology, University of Kentucky
2020 Allocated Tuition Scholarships Fellowship, Department of Anthropology, University of Kentucky
2019 James S. Brown Award, Appalachian Center, University of Kentucky
2019 Adelski Dissertation Research Award, University of Kentucky
2018 Travel Grant, Department of Anthropology, University of Kentucky
2018 Limon T. Johnson Fellowship, the Graduate School, University of Kentucky
2017 Limon T. Johnson Fellowship, the Graduate School, University of Kentucky
2015 Limon T. Johnson Fellowship, the Graduate School, University of Kentucky

PROFESSIONAL POSITIONS HELD
2022-2019 Instructor, Department of Anthropology, University of Kentucky.
2019-2015 Graduate Teaching Assistantship, Department of Anthropology, University of Kentucky.