READING AND RESPONDING:
FINDING AND MAKING MEANING IN THE LIFE WRITING OF
DIASPORIC IRANIAN JEWISH WOMEN

by

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Abstract

This project investigates the English-language life writing of diasporic Iranian Jewish women. It examines how these women have differentially imagined their diasporic lives and travels, and how they have in turn been imagined and accepted or rejected by their audiences. In the first chapter, I use “home” as a lens for understanding three distinct life writing texts, showing how the authors write about what it means to have a home and to be at home in contrasting and even contradictory ways. I show how, despite potential hegemonic readings that perpetuate unequal relationships and a normative definition of the ideal home, the texts are open to multiple contestatory readings that create spaces for new formulations and understandings. In the second chapter, I look more closely at the intersections between trauma stories and the life writing of Iranian Jewish women, and I argue that readers use life writing texts about trauma to support an egocentric reconstruction of American democracy and dominance. I also show how a critical frame for understanding trauma can yield interpretations that highlight, rather than ignore, relationships of power and privilege. In the final chapter of the thesis, I present a case study of two online reading groups, and I show that communal reading environments, though they participate in dominant discourses, are also spaces where resistance and subversion can develop.
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Chapter 1: Introduction

It seems appropriate that a thesis project investigating life writing should begin with a narrative, if only as a means of introducing the methodological and theoretical principles and interests that have guided me along this path. In the fall of 2010, I served as a teaching assistant in GNDS 120, my department’s introductory Gender Studies course. About 250 students enrol in the course each fall, and they participate in weekly small-group tutorials of 25 to 30 students led by teaching assistants. In my tutorial, only a handful of students identified as people of colour, and even fewer as male. This was representative of the rest of the course. The professor was a white woman, as were most of the teaching assistants.

One of the reading responses assigned during the semester involved The Breadwinner, a novel by a Canadian author about the experiences of a young girl in Afghanistan under Taliban rule. Students were asked to respond to the text, and to “analyze gender representation in the novel and consider cross-cultural understandings of oppression and empowerment.” A number of themes emerged from the student responses; some were surprising, others less so. Three are of key relevance here. First, despite the generic status of the novel as a realist work of fiction, students routinely identified with the characters as “real people.” They wrote about hoping that, someday, the characters would be able to effect change in Afghanistan, or that they had not understood the situation of women in Afghanistan until seeing it from the perspective of someone who was truly experiencing it. Second, almost without exception, students’ self-positionings invoked an us-versus-them approach: students understood themselves as the enfranchised subjects of a liberal democracy that existed in isolation from the inhumane authoritarian state under control of the Taliban. When they discussed cross-cultural understandings, students rarely considered their own status as the novel’s consumers, or the involvement of their elected government in the current war in Afghanistan. Third, students accepted the premises of the novel
and its contents as valid and authentic. They did not question the authority or the knowledge of
author Deborah Ellis, a Canadian who spent time interviewing women in an Afghan refugee
camp.

I was troubled by the student responses. Though the texts that I was studying for my
thesis differed in significant ways from *The Breadwinner*, they also shared some key similarities:
the employment of realist modes of writing, the presence of charismatic women or girl
protagonists, and settings which referenced an Ur-narrative of oppressed women in Muslim lands.
This was one of my initial reasons for thinking more carefully about reading practices, and how
we shape the texts we read just as much as they shape us. What kinds of reading practices led my
students to their particular responses to *The Breadwinner*? What kinds of reading practices was I
using to understand the texts that I had selected for my thesis project? How do these practices
and the resulting reader responses connect to the ways that we live and move through our various
personal, professional and educational communities? How might attentive and intentional use of
different reading practices lead to transformative or oppositional understandings of popular
narratives? By transformative or oppositional understandings, I refer to understandings of texts
that transcend additive or egalitarian approaches to multiculturalism in favour of differential
approaches to multiculturalism that consider the importance of location, individual and collective
relationships, historical trajectories, and the dynamics of power.

These were the questions that helped me formulate my approach to my thesis project,
which attempts to chart how reading and writing about ourselves and others can and does inform
the way that people move in the world. In particular, my project examines the English-language
life writing of diasporic Iranian Jewish women. More specifically, it examines how these women
have differentially imagined their diasporic lives and travels, and how they have in turn been
imagined and accepted or rejected by readers. Textual analysis and reception theory both play
prominent roles in my analysis. In this introduction, I begin by explaining my approach to understanding and classifying autobiography, as well as why autobiographic writing is well-suited to my particular research aims. Next, I explain why it is important to contextualize the texts that comprise my project, and I attempt to provide such a context. Finally, I provide an outline of themes and ideas that are emphasized throughout my thesis, describing the progression of the chapters and the connections between them.

**Life writing as a critical practice**

The texts that I examine here are not all autobiographic in the strictest sense of the word, nor do I suggest that they provide a ground for a unifying theory of Iranian women’s writing. Rather, I have studied these texts as documents that allow readers and critics to engage in what Marlene Kadar calls the genre and attendant critical practice of life writing. The texts themselves range from short essays on identity to standalone memoirs to autobiographical fiction. In other words, they are “more or less autobiographical documents and texts – as long as we understand that ‘autobiographical’ does not necessarily equate with either ‘objective’ or ‘subjective’ truth” (Kadar ix). Kadar suggests that understanding a text as life writing extends beyond generic classification and into critical practice. By examining life writing, readers can consider the relationship between writer and narrator, as well as the subject positions for readers that connect to this relationship. Readers trace the autobiographical aspects of the text, drawing over the faint lines that constitute narration to sharpen, emphasize, and embolden the tales – or certain aspects of them. Through this tracing process, new understandings of the text emerge. Thus, to analyze life writing is to analyze the complexities and ambiguities of a genre that “implicates self and other(s) in a context in which a dialectic of relationality is both acknowledged and problematized” (Kadar and Perrault 3).
My project is concerned not only with the formal qualities of texts, but also the dialogical ways in which texts generate authority for their authors and for readers. This makes Kadar’s approach ideal for a project like mine, which attempts to understand how authors construct themselves and are constructed. Through autobiography, we can learn how people agree to “see” others, and how their own frames for viewing the world might shift. This shifting is dependent upon reader acceptance of an author’s claim to authority. This does not mean that the author must present a unified, consistent self at all times, but rather that she must engage in ongoing strategic negotiations within the text so that the “I” who speaks maintains integrity from the perspective of the “I” who reads. A number of interlocking factors work to preserve claims to authority, or in some cases, to damage them: Is the author/narrator presented as reliable; that is, can she be trusted to tell a coherent truth? Is the author/narrator worthy of subjecthood; that is, does her opinion carry any significance? Is the textual representation indeed representative; that is, is the story recognizable?

As Gillian Whitlock suggests, “autobiographic writing is engaged in an ongoing process of authorization in order to capture not its subjects so much as its object: the reader” (Intimate 3). However, while autobiographic writing may be constantly engaged in a process of authorization, extra-textual forces such as current events, marketing strategies, and book packaging are simultaneously influencing and even overriding this process, so that the establishment of autobiographical authority is the result of a complex interplay between both intra- and extra-textual factors. Given that all of these factors are designed to capture the opinions and reactions of readers, autobiography thus becomes a uniquely interesting ground for understanding how particular versions of reality are constructed, circulated, and adopted.¹

¹ I am indebted to the previous work of numerous scholars on how authority has been constructed in relation to autobiographic writing. In particular, I note the following: Leigh Gilmore’s work
Multiculturalism and pedagogical praxis

My project is also concerned with how gender and ethnicity impact the production and reception of texts, and emphasizing the dialogical aspect of autobiography provides new ways for readers – including students and teachers – to understand and address diversity. Life writing enacts a “narrative itinerary,” along which readers travel in tandem with a text’s narrator through various events and incidents (Smith and Watson xxi). The notion of an itinerary implies careful construction and planning of stopping points as well as the point of origin and ultimate destination on a journey. By reading autobiography in order to understand why particular points are prominent while others have been excluded from the list, and by thinking about how one’s own location impacts the appeal of certain aspects of this itinerary, readers may begin to recognize the “double discourse of autobiography”: its ability to resist hegemonies, and its use in co-opting or hiding difference (Hesford Framing xxii). As Hesford remarks with regard to autobiographical writing assignments in university composition classes, “If differences exist within particular social and discursive configurations, then writing identities in the multicultural classroom is not about finding a true essence or writing a real self; it is about recognizing that these autobiographical essences and selves do not originate with the subject alone” (70). In other words, the critical practice of life writing, as described by Kadar, provides an opportunity to understand difference as multiply situated and determined. Recognizing these negotiations of power within published life writing may also aid readers in understanding how they invoke the autobiographical in their own lives, and how their own narrative itineraries overlap and contradict those of others. Hesford continues, insightfully, “It is precisely the embedding of multiple social on the relationship of truth in autobiography to established institutions and authorities; Paul John Eakin’s article about selfhood and truth-telling in autobiography; Wendy S. Hesford’s comments in “Rape Stories” on the impacts of autobiographical scripts (which she adapts from Smith and Watson); and Whitlock’s work in Intimate Empire and Soft Weapons.
discourses and interlacing subject positions that make autobiography so promising a catalyst for multicultural literacy” (70).

Yet naming and mapping these discourses and positions was a task that my students were unable to accomplish when they analyzed *The Breadwinner*, which, though it is not life writing, was handled as such by many in the class. Though they had been assigned a number of readings on power and experience as they relate to gender, students had not been assigned any historical reading about Afghanistan. They had only received the briefest of introductions to how imperial and colonial missions have gendered components and consequences. Consequently, they were unable to situate the realist narrative of the novel in a context of geopolitical trajectories past and present in Afghanistan, nor were they able to situate the role of this particular text in the context of North American discourses about Muslim women’s lives or the war in Afghanistan. Finally, they were unable to situate themselves with respect to the former two contexts. Who could blame them? We (teaching assistants and course instructor) had asked them to perform a complex analytical task without providing them with the vocabulary, the tools, or the background that they needed in order to perform this task. As a result, they relied on reifications of the Third World Woman and Western Democracy as a means of understanding the text. They situated both the text and themselves according to the discursive framework with which they were most familiar (a softened and institutionalized governmental version of multiculturalism, one that welcomes all into our liberal Canadian democracy but abhors particular “barbaric cultural practices” [Canada]).

A different approach to this text might have assigned students secondary readings that provided background on the historical and political situations from which the book emerged. It might have also included critical readings to be read in conversation with the novel. Perhaps even a more detailed description of the assignment, which suggested some questions that students could address in their papers, would have aided students in moving towards located and more
self-reflexive analyses. It is clear that as teachers, we did not provide students with the resources that they needed in order to produce complex responses to the novel. If we had, perhaps there would have been greater diversity and questioning among the papers. For example, one student in my class, following a conversation about assignment expectations, used Wikipedia to learn more about the ascent of the Taliban in Afghanistan. Her research on the history of Taliban rule led her to emotions of uncertainty and discomfort when she realized the extent to which she was linked to this history. She drew on Peggy McIntosh, included in the course readings, to express her new understanding of privilege, quoting, “My schooling gave me no training in seeing myself as an oppressor, as an unfairly advantaged person, or as a participant in a damaged culture” (“White Privilege”).

By failing to provide students with tools for alternative understandings, we perpetuated the normalization of a certain set of beliefs and attitudes about life in urban Canada in our classrooms. It is clear that Ellis’s novel participates in the “missionary girl power” project, which Sensoy and Marshall describe as “newly emergent discursive strategies that construct first world girls as the saviours of their ‘Third World’ sisters” (296). This project racializes “first world girls” as white and positions those in the “Third World” as non-white. It reifies these racializations and subsequently positions those who are white above those who are not in a hierarchical pairing where white saves non-white, and non-white aspires to be like white.

Without additional tools for understanding Ellis’s novel, particularly the contexts of its writing, publication, and reception, the students in my tutorial understood the story within the context of “missionary girl power,” because of its consistency with their existing assumptions and worldviews. Therefore, our presentation of the novel furthered the missionary girl power project as well as the racial hierarchy upon which it relies. As educators, when we failed to provide students with tools for reading differently, we also failed to challenge this hierarchy’s status as
normative and natural, reinforcing white privilege and safety. From one perspective, students’ readings of this text reflect a liberal feminist approach to gender and activism. However, from another perspective, the pedagogical presentation of the text reinforces the naturalness of that approach and also of whiteness and white privilege. It was not only the students who were unable to reflect upon their relationship to the text, but also those of us in positions of power (or just me, at the very least) who did not consider, or consider enough, the messages that we were sending by presenting the text and assigning the reading response as we did.

I am suggesting here that self-reflexivity and attention to context are essential elements in the critical practice of life writing and, as Hesford and others note, to pedagogical praxis as well. Hesford and Kozol describe a “dialogic process,” by which readers locate themselves within local and global communities, as an essential component of reading life writing (11). Such a process helps to combat re-victimizing or exoticizing representations of those whose lives are different from our own. It also helps us to understand how our own positions influence the ways in which we read and understand life writing texts. In the paragraphs that follow, I attempt to provide a context for the texts that comprise this study, so that my readers can gain some familiarity with the historical and material conditions that influence the texts’ publication and circulation, as well as the conditions that contributed to their contents. This context is admittedly partial, and it focuses on areas that I have determined are of importance to the issues discussed, but it is, at a minimum, a first step towards a nuanced and critical perspective on the texts discussed here.

**Iranian women’s lives: pre- and post-1979**

The texts that I study here are all focused on the lives of Jewish women born in Iran during the latter half of the twentieth century. The vast majority have transnational settings, usually the United States and Iran. Most are explicitly influenced by the Islamic Revolution of 1979 and its impact on the lives of Jewish and non-Jewish Iranians. They are a subset of a much
larger collection of memoirs published by diasporic Iranian women, many of which have achieved extreme popularity in certain locations, catapulting their authors simultaneously toward celebrity and token statuses. These are characteristics that the texts share. They differ, however, in the explicitness of their political perspectives, in the formal qualities and generic characteristics of the texts themselves, and in the social locations of their authors in terms of class, generation, and geography.

The material conditions of Iranian women’s lives depend greatly upon a number of shifting factors, but their status is primarily “measured in pre- and postrevolutionary terms,” according to Anne Donadey and Huma Ahmed-Ghosh (624). Donadey and Ahmed-Ghosh explain that secular forms of feminism, focusing on individual rights, tended to dominate Pahlavi era (pre-revolutionary) discussions of women’s issues. Feminist leaders were often socialist, Western-educated, and economically secure. Accordingly, many of the improvements in women’s lives during this time period were limited to upper-class women who were participating in and benefiting from the Pahlavi dynasty’s intense modernization (defined as Westernization) projects. In addition, what may have been an improvement in one woman’s life could have curtailed agency in another’s. A paradigmatic example of this, and one that is being mimicked


3 It should be noted, as well, that Jewish Iranians are neither the only nor the largest minority population in Iran. The Muslim population itself is diverse, and other religious minorities shared the oppressive experiences faced by the Jews in addition to facing unique forms of discrimination. These populations include Zoroastrians, Christians, Armenians, and Bahai’s. Bahai communities and individuals continue to be particular targets for state-organized violence, lacking the constitutional protection given to other minority religious groups. In addition, while Muslims comprise 98 percent of the population in Iran, they are a minority in the Iranian diaspora (Naficy Making 26). Minority religious and ethnic groups thus play a greater role in shaping diasporic cultural production. Though this project focuses specifically on the writing of Jewish Iranian women, it should be remembered that the texts examined here are also in conversation with the texts of a diverse group of texts produced by creators located in numerous positions throughout the Iranian diaspora(s).
today in France, is the banning of the veil in the Reza Shah period. The changes in women’s lives, though linked to feminist movements, were also multiply determined; for example, one of the motivating factors behind the monarchy’s modernization projects that were linked to women’s status was a desire to diminish the power of the clergy in Iran, since it threatened the monarchy (Donadey and Ahmed-Ghosh 625). At least on paper, however, women’s state-related agency increased through the years leading up to 1979. Women were enfranchised in 1963, received greater rights relating to marriage and divorce, and took on civic leadership roles in the judiciary and parliament (Afkhami 114). However, these reforms neglected to improve the lives of many lower- and lower-middle class Iranians, and women from these classes supported the revolution in great numbers.

The immediate aftermath of the revolution yielded a removal of many of women’s civic rights, which prominent male Islamic clerics had linked to cultural degradation and the weakening of Islamic values. By 1986, national census statistics made clear that women had been disadvantaged in several areas post-revolution, including labour-force participation and the attainment of higher education (Moghadam 186). Yet, as Moghadam points out, the policies that impacted these declines have since been undermined, and many of their effects have been reversed in consequent years. A number of factors influenced these policies, including the presence of modernist clerics; the gendered consequences of the Iran-Iraq war, such as the mobilization of men and the number of male casualties; the rewarding of women committed to the Islamic Republic’s regime with prominent civil service positions; the need to stabilize population growth, which resulted in access to contraception and family planning resources; and activism on the part of Islamic feminists, who use the teachings of the Quran as a means of agitating for women’s empowerment (Moghadam 186-8).
The texts studied here are all written by women who left Iran in the years surrounding the revolution, and who come from middle to upper class backgrounds. Information about the differential impact of the Shah’s modernization project on women from different class backgrounds, as well as about which women may have supported or opposed the revolution, and why, is thus incredibly important in understanding these women’s perspectives and experiences. Moreover, the intensity of the restrictions imposed upon women immediately following the revolution – and the fear of such restrictions that developed as Khomeini’s popularity grew in the lead-up to the revolution – can be expected to mark these memoirs more so than the relative improvements in many women’s lives in the years that followed the revolution. First, because most of the authors studied here left Iran prior to the development of any leniency, and second, because the revolution served as the major reason for their emigration from Iran to the United States. For them, the revolution is the source of intense dislocation, and its memory bears the imprint of trauma, whether that memory is personal or inherited from parents and other family members.

**Iran-U.S. Immigration**

The years surrounding the revolution are marked by mass emigrations from Iran, often to Western countries including Canada, the United States, and the United Kingdom. The years immediately prior to the revolution, 1974-1977, are significant because of the increase in non-immigrant (visitor and student) arrivals from Iran to the United States, a number that multiplied threefold during those years. Bozorgmehr and Sabagh suggest that many of these arrivals did not intend to remain in the United States permanently, given the depressed American economy and the relative prosperity in Iran due to the Arab oil embargo, from which Iran profited as an OPEC member (9). Instead, they suggest that overseas study was an attractive option for wealthier Iranian parents and students given the limited number of university spots available in Iran and the
increasing demand for employees to administer and manage “Iran’s imported modern industry.” In 1974-5, Iranian students were the predominant group of foreign students at U.S. institutions, comprising 8.9 percent of the foreign student population (10).

Three points are notable about pre-revolution migration. First, prior to the revolution, increasing numbers of Iranians were already studying abroad. Second, the class profile of these transnational Iranians was one of economic security. Third, many of the migrants were temporary ones, like students, who may have returned home to Iran for summers or permanently.

Transnational migrations affect not only the host country, but also the home country. The relative mobility of wealthier Iranians, the increased earning potential for students upon their return to Iran, and the increased exposure to Western cultures and attitudes for these migrants all would have contributed to a growing gap between rich and poor in Iran, which may also have been coded along the same lines as level of religious observance and affinity for Western forms of modernity. This is consistent with the information discussed earlier about the Shah’s modernization project and its differential impact on the status of women, and it also clarifies some of the historical conditions that preceded Khomeini’s rising popularity and the eventual revolution.

Following 1978, the immigration patterns of Iranians to the United States shifted dramatically. First, a far greater proportion of non-immigrant arrivals adjusted to immigrant status upon their arrival in the United States. This may have happened as temporary visitors began to realize that they were permanent exiles (Bozorgmehr and Sabagh 11). Second, the annual number of Iranian immigrants increased dramatically, nearly tripling in size between 1978 and 1986. Finally, the number of Iranian students in the US declined significantly after 1980, with Iranian student presence falling more sharply in the US than in other foreign countries (11, 12). This decline was due, at least in part, to Iranian restrictions on foreign travel and the
difficulty of accessing a U.S. visa, which was impossible in Iran for many years after 1980.\textsuperscript{4} Many of the Iranians who arrived in the U.S. in the early 1980s arrived from a third country, and a great proportion of them achieved status as refugees and asylees (an increase from 0.4 percent of Iranian immigrants in 1978 to 48 percent in 1986).

**Jewish Diversity: Iran and the United States**

The Jewish presence in the geographic location that is present-day Iran dates back over 2500 years, prior to the arrival of Islam in the same area. The beginning of Islamic rule brought a downward shift in Jewish status, and when Shiite Islam was adopted as the state religion in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the situation deteriorated further. However, the secularization policies of the Pahlavi dynasty, throughout the twentieth century, yielded improvements in the lives of many Jews. The Pahlavi regime was the most peaceful and prosperous era for the Jews of Iran, particularly as upward mobility was now achievable through secular Westernized education, though Jews still faced anti-Semitism and maintained communal memories of the dangerous lives Jews had led in Iran in the recent past. Negotiating the hyphen in “Iranian-Jewish” would have been challenging, as certain ethno-religious practices segregated the Jews from their majority Muslim neighbours even as a shared language and cultural practices brought them together (Baer 44). These experiences differed across geographic locations within Iran, and they were inflected by class and gender.

Although, as in many Middle Eastern countries, there was a mass Jewish emigration from Iran after the founding of the State of Israel in 1948, the Jewish community in Iran remained large. It is estimated that about 35,000 Jews emigrated at this time, many to Israel, leaving a population of around 80,000 to 90,000 Jews in Iran (Levin 6). In the decades that followed,\textsuperscript{4}

\textsuperscript{4} The U.S. embassy closed following the 1980 hostage crisis.
Jewish life in Iran could be fraught with tension, particularly if Jews were suspected of supporting Zionism, but the next major wave of Jewish emigration from Iran was not until the revolution and the declaration of the Islamic Republic. This migration was far larger than the first and, according to the World Jewish Congress, approximately 20,000 to 25,000 Jews live in Iran today, primarily in Tehran (Levin 10). However, the Iranian Jewish population remains the second-largest Jewish population in the Middle East, following the State of Israel. Meanwhile, by 1990 in the greater Los Angeles area, the largest Iranian Jewish community in the United States, there were nearly 30,000 Iranian Jews. Prior to the revolution, this number was in the hundreds (Kelley and Friedlander 102). More detailed demographic data, including current information about the number of Iranian Jews in Iran or in the United States, is difficult to find and questionable in its reliability. It is clear, however, that like many Iranians who emigrated during this time, emigrating Jews were often middle and upper class professionals who had benefited from the old regime.

Shoshana Feher writes that “the Iranians’ experience is unique among Jewish immigrants to the United States” (73). Iranian Jews were not received warmly by existing American Jews, nor did they find they shared much ritually or culturally with the Americans, who were primarily of Ashkenazi (eastern European) descent. In Los Angeles, the Ashkenazi Jewish community rejected the Iranians’ customs and denounced the ostentatious materialism that seemed to characterize the immigrants’ lifestyle. A recent article in a Jewish online daily describes the more banal aspects of the conflict as follows: “There were people upset that families were coming in late to services, that people were talking to each other in Farsi rather than English, that women were ululating at bar mitzvahs and weddings, and most infamously, that Persian regulars who were not synagogue members were taking home cookies after Friday night Oneg Shabbat services” (Hoffman 2).
The racism within areas of Jewish ritual practice and celebration is reflected and extended broadly in North America’s Jewish communities. In Jewish Studies scholarship, for example, a severely limited number of texts focus on the lives and histories of non-Ashkenazi Jews, including both Sephardi (Mediterranean) and Mizrahi (Middle Eastern and North African) Jews. While this focus on Ashkenazi Jews is in part due to their numerical prevalence in North America, it is also indicative of the same Eurocentrism that permeates much academic literature. Aviva Ben-Ur refers to all non-Ashkenazi Jews as “The Jews Who Weren’t There,” and her description is apt. While non-Ashkenazi Jews – Jews of the Middle East, Africa, Asia, Spain and Portugal, among others – make up a minority of the American Jewish population, their erasure in popular and scholarly representations of Jewish people has led to inaccurate and harmful stereotypes and assumptions about the histories, desires, and practices of Jewish communities both within the Jewish world and outside of it. To give a personal example, this means that I, as an Ashkenazi Jewish woman, know painfully little about the historical pathways and ethno-religious practices of those Jews who are not of Ashkenazi descent, despite fifteen years spent attending Jewish day school, eight summers at Jewish camps and programs, and a five year heavy involvement with a Jewish youth organization. I heard the story of Esther every year on the Jewish holiday of Purim for many years, and never once asked what had happened to the Jews of Persia and Media, about whom the story is told. I did not know that in Hamedan, Iran, is an important site that is said to mark the graves of the story’s heroes, Esther and Mordecai. In other words, my Jewish genealogy remained incomplete, my knowledge contingent on a single

5 Despite profound shifts in some academic disciplines towards alternative (non-Eurocentric) or multicultural perspectives, Jewish academic literature often continues to discount or ignore multiculturalism within Jewish communities. For example, Insider/Outsider: American Jews and Multiculturalism (Biale, Galchinsky and Heschel) focuses primarily on Jewish ambivalence towards multiculturalism and fails to address how multicultural approaches might lead to new understandings within Jewish circles (as opposed to across Jewish and non-Jewish circles).
unifying narrative that I had been taught. In the context of creative cultural production, the prominence of this monolithic narrative means that Iranian women writing about their lives as Jews must contend with the hegemony of the Ashkenazi Jewish establishment, which may challenge the authenticity of their perspectives in numerous ways. Shtetls and sheitls are absent from these women’s stories, and the texts depict a different cultural and religious Jewish experience from that which American Jews and non-Jews alike have come to expect.⁶

New audiences for diasporic Iranian cultural production

Although a stream of Iranian immigration to the United States continues, the majority of Iranian women who have published life writing in English are from the revolutionary generation of émigrés or their children. Many, like Dalia Sofer and Roya Hakakian, left Iran as children. Others, like journalist Azadeh Moaveni, were born in the United States to parents in a state of liminality, a place in between places, where attachments are unstable and feelings of exile result in a questioning of absolutes and assumptions (Naficy Making 9). The majority of the authors were educated at least partially at American universities. Only a few published narratives, like Shirin Ebadi’s Iran Awakening, are written by women who were educated and who spent much of their adult lives in post-revolutionary Iran.

What marks these writers as unique is their prominence among English-language readers. The large concentration of people of Iranian heritage in specific metropolitan areas and the relative economic affluence of these migrants has yielded syncretic forms of cultural production that are “narrowcasted” within those areas, to use Hamid Naficy’s term (Making xviii). In 1993, Naficy wrote about the televisual media production of Iranian exiles as follows:

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⁶ Shtetl is a Yiddish word for the small Jewish villages of Eastern Europe. A sheitl is a wig, commonly worn by certain groups of observant Ashkenazi Jewish women following marriage.
On the one hand, Iranian exiles have created via their media and culture a symbolic and fetishized private hermetically sealed communitas infused with home, past, memory, loss, nostalgia, longing for return and the communal self; on the other hand, they have tried to get on with the process of living by incorporating themselves into the dominant culture of consumer capitalism by means of developing a new sense of the self and what can be called an “exile economy” (xvi).

Naficy describes a community that develops cultural products like television programs, radio talk shows, and weekly magazines according to certain American values (e.g. consumer capitalism), but that infuses those products with a distinct exilic subjectivity. Importantly, these products are marketed specifically to Iranians living in America (though as Naficy points out, they also reach Iranians in Iran), they are produced nearly entirely in Farsi or “Penglish” (a mixture of Farsi and English), and they are funded primarily through advertising by Iranian businesses. Thus, the publication of English-language Iranian women’s life writing texts, which have been highly successful with non-Iranian readers, marks a significant shift. This is reflected, though often unacknowledged explicitly, by academic criticism on the reception of the memoirs, which tends to focus on cross-cultural understandings – that is, how white Anglophone women access, read, and absorb these texts.

It is only recently that any sort of autobiographical writing by Iranian women, regardless of language, has achieved prominence. Farzaneh Milani writes that “Iranians, who have been fascinated with Western literary traditions for the last hundred and fifty years, have basically turned their backs on autobiography” (2). Milani suggests that certain aspects of Iranian and Islamic culture have heightened the avoidance of autobiography for women. She notes that if a cultural or religious ideal is one in which things should be kept hidden, or veiled, then someone who prides herself on this inaccessibility “can hardly be interested in such an undertaking as revealing her private life,” nor would such an undertaking be welcomed by her peers (5). Instead, women found other ways of telling stories: tapestry, embroidery, lullabies, songs and games. The
few autobiographies by Iranian women that exist at the time of Milani’s text, written in 1990, are rarities. Today, however, a search for Azar Nafisi’s 2001 memoir Reading Lolita in Tehran yields no shortage of computer-generated suggestions of other memoirs by Jewish, Christian and Muslim women of Iranian heritage.

**Reception of diasporic Iranian women’s life writing**

Iranian women’s life writing has motivated an overwhelming critical and popular response in the United States, and their popularity is undoubtedly linked to a renewed American interest in the Middle East post-9/11. In particular, two themes have emerged consistently in critical readings of the memoirs and their receptions, and I detail them here because they are consistent with my own findings with respect to Iranian Jewish women’s narratives. These themes are unified by their association with desire: desire for knowledge, for empathetic identification, for a cosmopolitan identity, and for an escape into exoticism. The themes re-emerge in different forms throughout the chapters of my thesis: in the first chapter, I show how they can be subverted through alternative reading practices that attend to the place of home in the narratives; in the second chapter, I show how they work to enable liberal women readers to understand the narratives as generic forms of trauma. In the final chapter, I produce concrete examples of how these reading practices emerge in book club discussions.

First, Iranian women’s memoirs, and those by women from other Muslim countries, are often read as ethnographic studies. Using Chinua Achebe’s Things Fall Apart as a paradigmatic example of such reading practices, Dohra Ahmad reminds us that ethnographic readings of literary narratives presume both the complete reliability of literature as a container for authentic cultural knowledge and an ethnocentric approach on the part of the reader. In the case of American popular literature on Muslim women, ethnographic reading, or reading “for knowledge” as Burwell, Davis and Taylor term the practice, promotes facile understandings of
specific situations that are “packaged as definitive comments... on Islam at large” (Ahmad 107-8). My students modelled this type of reading when they responded to The Breadwinner with comments about patriarchy in Islam, though religious practice and values played minimal roles in the text itself. Ahmad notes that regardless of whether the texts actually attend to historical and geopolitical specificities, or emphasize the prominence of another factor over Islam, the packaging and commentary on those texts generally erases these attentions and emphases.

Although the texts that I am studying are those of Jewish women, packaging and commentary is similarly used to extend the narratives to allow for commentary on Islam. This practice erases the Jewish specificity of the stories even as it manipulates it in order to serve a dominant discourse about a so-called Muslim world.

Second, though the memoirs allow women to speak, thus subverting the racist image of a silent and inscrutable Oriental woman, the mode of speech that women narrators may use is limited to individualist liberalism, so that Western values continue to reign supreme and imperial practices remain unquestioned. So, for example, though Reading Lolita may be perceived as supporting a feminist cause in its project of educating young women, it reinforced messages about the oppression of Iranian women at a time when the United States was deeply involved in a war on terror and had singled out Iran as a tyrannical and evil dictatorship (Bahramitash 230). Its focus on middle-class urban women, who share quite a bit with the memoir’s intended audience, further advances this message and aids in the text’s co-optation as a propaganda tool. As Ahmad notes, “these heroines are made over to look like us precisely so that we can take for granted what we are rescuing them into” (109). The idea of rescue is itself imbued with colonial superiority, as Leila Abu-Lughod describes. Saving is not only about saving someone from something, but also saving to something. Like the missionary girl power project, memoirs like Reading Lolita reaffirm Western superiority, failing to ask important questions: “What violences are entailed in
the transformation, and what presumptions are being made about the superiority of that to which you are saving her?” (Abu-Lughod 787-8). Even when authors do not intentionally speak from a liberal individualist perspective, this framework can be imposed onto their texts.

The body of my thesis articulates and tracks these themes in various ways. In the first chapter of the thesis, I use home as a lens through which to examine the life writing of three Jewish Iranian writers. These writers find home in their houses and in their homelands, but they also describe the ambiguity and insecurity that emerges from recollecting and reimagining home. In this chapter, I show how Farideh Goldin’s *Wedding Song* can be read as a challenge to nationalist understandings of home through its ambivalence towards the nation-state and the illusory promises of the American Dream. I examine how Homa Sarshar’s essay “In Exile at Home” refuses ethnographic reading practices by refusing to disclose personal details about its narrator and her life, instead lending itself to a political project of coalition that brings together a diverse group of Mizrahi Jewish women. Finally, I explore how Gina Nahai writes autobiographically through her fiction in *Moonlight on the Avenue of Faith*. Nahai imagines home and exile through her mother and daughter protagonists, but her work is easily lent to a de-contextualized understanding of Iran that is unmoored from political and historical anchors.

In Chapter Two, I consider trauma and the role that it can play in understanding life writing texts about dislocation and disruption. I distinguish between a framing of trauma whose outcome is privileged compassion, and a framing of trauma that is self-reflexive and explicitly located. I show how promotional materials for Goldin’s *Wedding Song* promote the first type of framing, and I provide an alternative reading of one aspect of Goldin’s experience that uses the second type of framing. This chapter shows how certain types of reading practices work to recuperate and/or preserve hegemonic perspectives on Western superiority and power.
The final chapter of my thesis is a case study of digital reading groups. It examines how communal reading environments lend themselves to the reading practices described here, but also how dominant perspectives can be challenged and rethought in the context of group discussion. In the chapter, I use reader postings from two book club discussions to discuss how Dalia Sofer’s *The Septembers of Shiraz* is received and reacted to by groups composed primarily of English-speaking adult women.

As a whole, this project pursues three interconnected goals. First, it examines the reception of diasporic Jewish Iranian women’s life writing through an exploration of their life writing texts and the peripheral materials that surround those texts. It “takes meaning to be not an attribute immanent in texts but, rather, a product of the larger discursive contexts in which they are read” (Amireh 16). Second, it contributes to a small body of scholarship on multicultural Jewish experiences, providing a reminder that there is no unique and homogeneous Jewish identity. It serves as a chance to ask how flows of information between and within Jewish and non-Jewish social formations might change to recognize Jewish heterogeneity. Third, my thesis attempts to contextualize the life writing of these women within a number of historical, political, and cultural trajectories, remaining accountable to the authors and their texts by focusing on rooted and located understandings. From a pedagogical perspective, I hope that by highlighting some of the complexities involved in reading and critiquing these texts, I can take steps towards developing liberatory reading practices that emphasize dialogue, self-reflection, and critical analytic perspectives.
Chapter 2:

Imagining homes and homelands

“I am convinced that this question – how one understands and defines home - is a profoundly political one.” (Mohanty 126)

Sitting on a plane, a white male professional asks Chandra Mohanty a question she has been asked many times before: “When are you planning to go home?” A South Asian academic who studied and works in the United States, she remains troubled by this question to the present, because the question is complicated. What is home, exactly? And where is it? What qualities must one possess in order to claim home without complications? Mohanty finds herself entangled in a web of questions that accompany these, as do several of her colleagues who are committed to transnational or multicultural feminist thought, like Sara Ahmed and Avtar Brah. Her commitment to these questions stems from a desire to craft a dialogue and build coalitions that are “anchored in equality, respect, and dignity” for all peoples, and she writes that “defining genealogies is one crucial element in creating such a dialogue” (125). Home, as a starting point, a present location, or an ultimate destination, is an essential aspect of such genealogies, and conceptions of home can reveal historical and cultural differences between individuals and collectives, as well as opportunities for alliance and sharing. Moreover, for diasporic populations, who have built communities outside the borders of an extant or extinct homeland, conceptualizing home may have troubling and serious implications for a subject’s ability to be “at home” or to “leave home.”

Ahmed, in particular, thinks about what it means to be at home in the context of narratives about migration and estrangement. She critiques several scholars’ work on migration and nomadism for its tendency to aggrandize and exoticize a figurative homelessness, conflating
multiple types of journeys and travellers (refugees, nomads, economic migrants, etc.). Such scholarship elides literal and metaphoric migrations, so that a new universalism can be found in that which we all lack: a home. To suggest such a universalism, Ahmed posits, is “to conceal the substantive difference it makes when one is forced to cross borders, or when one cannot return home” (81). Instead, she says, we should complicate our notions of home, attending to the differential relations that exist within homes as well as to the permeability and mobility of the barrier between “home” and “away.” Home, which is often identified with security, purity, and comfort, must be destabilized and recognized as conflicted, permeable, and often unsafe.

Ahmed’s comments are particularly pertinent to an examination of diasporic lives, where traumatic and violent displacements are often central to communal identity. In such lives and communities, collective memory and partial histories form a basis for understanding home as a place of origin, while strategic coalitions and imagined connections underpin notions of home as a place of belonging. These two homes may be one and the same, or they may be mutually exclusive entities, and their locations are dynamically affected by the set of experiences that shape the individual subject. They may also bear no resemblance to one’s place of residence, which, for some, is not a home at all. Interrogating the meaning of home allows us to understand how home informs a subject’s sense of self, as well as how home can be used as a component of strategies for political resistance.

In this chapter, I argue that “home,” as a concept that frequently figures in diasporic lives, is a valuable lens through which to understand diasporic women’s life writing. “Home,” in this case, is not a singular concept nor even necessarily a tangible place, but rather a discourse through which writers can recuperate and resituate identity, even as their lives are disrupted or fractured by dislocation. I examine here how the life writing of three Iranian Jewish women resident in the United States participates in this discourse, showing how, despite potential
hegemonic readings that perpetuate unequal relationships and a normative definition of the ideal home, each of these texts is open to multiple contestatory readings that haunt a hegemonic reading and create spaces for new formulations and understandings.

Gillian Whitlock suggests that Iranian women’s memoirs may belong to “a kinship network of memoirs scarred by trauma and loss transferred across generations, which trades as a lucrative commodity in global networks sustained by desires for exotic orientalisms” (“Tehrangeles” 21). Her work provides a firm reminder that these texts, though a single woman may write their contents, are mediated and conditioned by geopolitical economic and cultural flows. Any reading of Iranian women’s memoirs must consider how and why the texts have been written as they are written, published by whom they have been published, and received as they have been received. In the introduction to this thesis, I described how these memoirs are distinctly different from past forms of writing by Iranian women and from previous forms of cultural production by Iranians in the U.S. I also noted the unique situation of Jewish Iranian writers with respect to other Iranians in the U.S. as well as to American Jews. All of these factors contribute to the production of these texts, to the forms they take, and to the stories that they stress. In analyzing the memoirs, it is crucial to show how the memoirs circulate as commodities, accumulating political and cultural capital through a number of shifting and overlapping factors, including related current events and media coverage; political, celebrity, and literary endorsements; and reader fantasies and desires.

Amidst these multiple contexts and influences, any discussion of ‘home’ becomes fraught with tension and complication. Naficy describes home as one entity in a triad of linked concepts: house, home, and homeland. Houses are physical spaces of residence; they connote property and possession. Home is temporary and moveable; “it can be built, rebuilt, and carried in memory and by acts of imagination” (“Introduction” 6). Homeland is a concept that is dreamed of and
fought for, yet, Naficy claims, it is the most abstract of the three. The three concepts are intimately intertwined. In the texts that I analyze here, home is located primarily within either a house or a homeland. These latter two concepts have similarities: both are supposed to convey a certain amount of security and safety; both bestow a particular set of rights upon those who call them home (property rights, citizenship rights). Both can be places of violence; both depend on circumscribing borders that include and exclude; both have inhabitants who vie for power and control within that domain. House and homeland have differences, too. Homelands are imbued with the mythical qualities and imagined history of the nation; houses are rarely thus endowed. For migratory peoples, new houses can be rented and bought; new homelands are not so easily acquired. A house rarely assigns any coherent identity to its inhabitants; homelands carry nationalisms and national identities that must be protected. Yet in the houses of the diaspora, the nationalisms of the homeland are often retained and celebrated. But how does this process happen? When is home found in the homeland, and when is it found in houses? Where else can it be found? And how does autobiographical writing serve as a device for writing about and defining home?

It is these concepts – homeland, house, home – that I would like to keep in mind as I chart a partial genealogy with these texts, examining how we can read the authors’ discussions of home and migration as a means of constituting identity and writing themselves into Jewish diasporic discourse. I am also interested in reading for resistance; that is, reading these texts for the ways in which they contest popular assumptions or fantasies about an exotic other. I discuss three authors and their texts here: Farideh Goldin’s *Wedding Song*, a memoir of her childhood in Iran prior to the Revolution; Homa Sarshar’s essay, “In Exile at Home,” about the impact of Ayatollah Khomeini’s triumphant return to Iran on her career in journalism; and Gina Nahai’s personal essay “Mercy” alongside her novel *Moonlight on the Avenue of Faith*, which are
committed to examining the importance of memory and relational identities during ongoing migration and exile.

**Home and kinship in *Wedding Song***

Farideh Goldin was born in 1953 and left Iran for the first time in 1975, prior to her final year of college. In her memoir, we learn that she had been desperate to leave for years. Following the machinations of her family to arrange a marriage for her, her narrator says, “More than ever now, I knew that I didn’t belong. I had to find a way out” (157). After a long struggle and many arguments with her parents, an uncle intervenes on her behalf, and Farideh spends her final year of college at Old Dominion University in Virginia in 1975 and 1976. She returns to Iran only one more time.

One could say that Farideh only leaves Iran because she is rebellious in nature, or because Iranian Jewish life is heavily oppressive for a young educated woman, or because America offers greater liberal freedoms, and one could find some basis in the text for each of these reasons. A proportion of the texts’ popular readership draws exactly such conclusions, and this is reflected in the reader reviews at online booksellers like Amazon.com, where one reader comments, “This is a book every American woman should read to understand how lucky we are to have been born in America.” However, such explanations of Farideh’s journey would be simplistic and reductive, turning a nuanced and historically situated migration narrative into a trite rehashing of cultural scripts about proper femininity, the ‘backwards’ East, and the American dream. Rather, to examine Farideh’s departure from Iran, we must turn to her mother, for it is with her mother that Farideh’s history of migration begins. If home, in one register, can be defined as the starting point of a journey, then home in this case begins with Farideh’s mother,

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7 From this point forward, I will use the author’s surname, Goldin, to refer to the author or her authorial intent, and her first name, Farideh, when discussing the memories told in the memoir.
Rouhi. Rouhi is an insistent voice throughout the memoir, speaking to Farideh about her past and her future. Even the structure of the memoir reflects Rouhi’s presence. The first chapter is entitled “Bloodlines;” the first section of the chapter, *Maman: My Mother*.

Farideh’s mother Rouhi was born in Hamedan, Iran, to a poor Jewish family. Goldin writes that Rouhi was married at the age of thirteen, a common occurrence in families at that time as “officials helped families get around the law that forbade child marriages” (10). She imagines what her mother’s childhood house “in the cramped ghettos of Hamedan” would have looked like, with no running water and a mud stove, and how her mother would have felt when Farideh’s father, a man of twenty-three, convinced Rouhi’s mother Touran to send her with him as his wife. They would live hundreds of kilometres away in Shiraz. Rouhi pleads with her mother, “Maman, Maman, please don’t send me away, please, please,” but Touran is firm and enduring in her decision, and as Rouhi retells this story to Farideh, now thirteen herself, she says, “Maman peeled me off and turned her back” (19). Rouhi’s sense of forced dislocation crosses a number of registers, spanning an intimately physical cleavage from her mother and a distant journey to another city. The emotional trauma of leaving is reflected in a set of physical repetitions of dislocation, a pattern that is also reflected elsewhere in Goldin’s memoir.

Her mother’s dislocation, from the ghetto of Hamedan to the ghetto of Shiraz, has a lifelong impact on Farideh. Farideh recalls her anxiety as Rouhi uses the same word for her mother as Farideh uses for Rouhi, and she begs her mother to stop telling the story. Over and over again, Rouhi tells the story of her marriage to Farideh, until Farideh covers her ears and yells at her to stop. Then Rouhi tells the story to herself, sitting “alone on a low stool plucking chickens, or rubbing the soap into dirty clothes” (20). But Farideh still hears her, and she is bound tightly to her mother’s story. She knows why her mother tells it: Rouhi can do to Farideh what Touran did to Rouhi, and what Touran’s mother did to her. When Farideh is twelve, her
first marriage proposal arrives, via an old woman at the movie theatre. Rouhi refuses the woman, but turns to look at Farideh and says, “I could have given you to them, you know. That’s what happened to me” (149).

Scenes like this are repeated throughout Goldin’s memoir, and the coercive element of Rouhi’s behaviour towards Farideh serves to emphasize the roles of fear and violence in determining home. Rouhi’s mother must literally peel Rouhi away from her body in order to send Rouhi away from her childhood home, while Rouhi uses the threat of such repudiation to bind Farideh more closely to her. The trauma of dislocation and of emotional abuse is transferred across physical locations and generations.

Farideh sees marriage as a slaughterhouse, and she seeks ways to escape and prevent her family’s continual attempts to find her a match. She understands that they are only hoping to see her succeed according to the standards for women of the Shirazi Jewish community, but she is continually haunted by her mother’s dislocation and separation from her family at a young age. Her own desire to escape is mirrored by her mother’s youthful attempts to escape her father’s family. Rouhi writes a letter to her great uncle, hoping he might redeem her from her marriage. She also writes to her mother, saying, “Please come and take me away or I will die in this foreign land” (30).

Earlier, I described homeland as one way in which home can be imagined, and I noted the boundaries that surround a homeland as one way of defining who does and does not belong in that home. Yet, Rouhi’s description of Shiraz as a foreign land challenges the primacy of the nation-state’s borders in defining territorial exclusions. Rouhi would not have had a passport, nor would she have ever left Iran prior to her marriage. However, the journey to Shiraz is a long migration, one that leaves her feeling foreign and isolated. It is not only space that she crosses on the bus ride to Shiraz. She also traverses boundaries between classes and between childhood and
adulthood. When Rouhi finally receives a response to her letters, several months later, it tells her simply that her only home is her husband’s home. She has no other. For Rouhi, home is not linked to nation or homeland, and while she may call her husband’s house a home, it is neither safe nor comforting, reflecting Carole Boyce Davies’ comment that “home is often a place of exile for the woman, as are, sometimes, community and nation” (22).

Rouhi’s insecurity and isolation in Farideh’s family’s house – a place that should be home – haunts Farideh. As a child, Farideh loves listening to her father’s stories that often involve homecoming, but, growing up, she finds it increasingly difficult to reconcile her wanderlust with his childhood homesickness. Eventually, she begins to retell his stories to herself with changed endings, where she travels onward and away, “never to return” (25). It is perhaps her experience watching her mother that motivates her detachment: she sees the pain in Rouhi’s eyes when her father visits Tehran and Rouhi cannot accompany him. Goldin’s memoir thus becomes a story about ongoing travels: her mother’s journey from Hamedan to Shiraz, Farideh’s passage from Shiraz to Tehran and Hamedan for short trips, and, eventually, the voyage from Shiraz to New York and then Virginia. Farideh never feels at home in the physical spaces that house her family, and of their first home outside of the mahaleh, or Jewish ghetto, she says, “I never lived in a place more confining” (124).  

Despite her discomfort in their physical spaces, Farideh belongs to her family and its story. This is the kind of belonging which “is assembled precariously out of the shards of individual lives and their ‘imagined relations’ to genealogies (private histories) and public events” (Gunew 109). Farideh finds home in her family relationships, and though they are not

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Goldin’s memoir differs from many other popular Iranian women’s memoirs in a number of notable ways, including her childhood in a working-class family and her location in Shiraz (as opposed to the more cosmopolitan Tehran). While her family gains greater economic security as Farideh matures, many of the stories in *Wedding Song* are reflective of her class origins alongside her Jewish status.
always easy or comforting – nor does she always desire proximity to her relatives – they are where she belongs. Goldin repeatedly and passionately returns to stories of interactions with her mother, her father, her paternal grandmother Khanom-Bozorg, and the various aunts, uncles and cousins who weave in and out of the memoir. It is family history that she rewrites and re-imagines in her quest to find home, and, ultimately, it is in this history and these memories that she is able to construct a place where she belongs.

Goldin never describes the nation-state of Iran as a place where she belongs, but there is another nation-state whose name appears frequently in her memoir: America. She writes, “My mother’s words, much stronger than my father’s, echoed in the back of my head. ‘You have to find a way to leave this hellhole,’ she always told me. ‘Find someone to take you away. Don’t allow yourself to get trapped here like me’” (25). Farideh is intrigued and frightened by her mother’s plans for her (43), but eventually America becomes the ideal destination for her escape, a place that holds the promise of “individual freedom and rights, of the power of critical thinking, free expressions of thoughts and exchange of ideas” (156).

When thinking about Goldin’s use of America in her memoir, I have found it helpful to rely on Inderpal Grewal’s conception of America as “a nationalist discourse that produce[s] many kinds of agency and diverse subjects” (2). In Grewal’s view, America has contributed to struggles for rights both inside and outside the United States’ territorial boundaries. These discourses of struggle often emerged from prior imperial histories and played into new imperial formations, in which the United States was often implicated. Grewal writes, “The relevance of America [is] not solely in the subjects it produced within the United States but in its ability to create networks of knowledge and power, cosmopolitan and ‘global,’ that traversed and rearticulated national boundaries” (3). From this perspective, Goldin’s recollections of her perceptions and experiences of America during childhood and young adulthood can be
understood as one result of the flow of power imposed by the United States on areas around the world. This flow produced an Iranian subject during the time of the Shah who saw America as a safe space, a country in whose arms she could be cradled (Goldin 199), even as she experienced her parents’ memories of the 1953 crowning of the Shah by Western powers as a “humiliating loss of self-determination” (42).

The same flow of power strengthened national boundaries even as people and ideas crossed those boundaries in increasingly greater numbers. Goldin represents these border crossings as filled with contradictions. She depicts herself with the other children in her family as they “scramble, push, and shove like animals for a piece of America” (127). The pieces of America they are pushing for are animal crackers, tossed at the children from the balcony by the family’s American tenants. The American couple lives in the entire upper floor of the family’s first home outside of the Jewish ghetto, while Farideh, her siblings and parents, her grandmother, and her uncle’s family, live in the main floor below. The tenants are simultaneously captivating and repulsive to the youth. Goldin describes how she and her cousins see the Americans as *najes*, unclean, in exactly the way that many of her Muslim neighbours in 1950s and 1960s Iran see the Jews as *najes* (126).

The other appearances of America in the text – and it is frequently ‘America’ and rarely the ‘United States’ to which Goldin refers – allow for a similarly complex understanding of how one Iranian Jewish woman, now living in America, sees herself as a child imagining that “exotic” place (135). Grewal points out that in a transnational age of mass connections, even those individuals who have never left their home country are still affected by the experiences of those who have. In Farideh’s case, America becomes the ideal home long before she ever sets foot on American soil. Her America is a myth, grouped with the cold seas travelled by the Vikings and “the imaginary mythical land of Touran” (135) as an exotic locale for childhood imaginings.
Farideh is not alone in imagining America in this way. She discusses Iranians who embrace the West during the rule of the Shah, who fill movie theatres playing European and American films, who dance “to the beat of the Beatles and the Rolling Stones,” and who sprinkle their speech with English words. Ultimately, she tells the reader what these activities represented for those who participated: “They dreamed of America,” the land of fun, freedom, excitement, and lust (43).

Like the moviegoers, Farideh also dreams of America. She has never seen it, nor has she ever seen an ocean or an airplane (135). However, a global travel of ideas and symbols accompanies the global travel of material goods, allowing Farideh to conceptualize an iconic America as the home of hope and compassion through her interactions with American products. She tells the story of the first time she tasted chocolate and identifies it as the moment she first dreamed of America.

I tried all different chocolate bars when I moved to America. Many looked like the one I remembered, but none tasted so good. I know now that I don’t really like chocolate. I hadn’t cherished the crumbs as food… At that moment, I knew that I was going to leave and find a home, my very own place in the world. I knew that there was hope in my future. For the first time, I started to dream of America (144).

The chocolate was produced by a large corporation, bought through the donations of American Jews, transported by the Jewish agency in Iran, and distributed to “underprivileged” Jewish children. It is a migratory object laden with symbolic value no less crucial to Farideh’s understanding of America than the one that is facilitated by her American and British teachers of English literature at the Pahlavi University of Shiraz many years later.9 The chocolate serves simultaneously as a cue for recognition for American readers, who recognize in it the American dream that has been both taught and marketed to them.

Farideh’s discussion of America as a place of belonging – as a home – is complicated by

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9 Pahlavi University was renamed as Shiraz University following the 1979 Revolution.
the use of Iranian memoirs to contribute to imperialist or colonial narratives about the Islamic world. Memoirs as a genre have been described as a “soft weapon.” In the very moment that they personalize and humanize foreign experience, they can be co-opted by or complicit in the work of state or other authorities who manipulate and manage public opinion and emotion (Whitlock *Soft* 3). In fact, a large amount – if not the majority – of literary criticism on Iranian women’s life writing has focused on exactly this (explicit or easily accessed) complicity. Several scholars have published articles about the use of Nafisi’s *Reading Lolita in Tehran* to rationalize and justify homogenizing conservative Western perspectives on Muslim men and women, or to maintain harmful master narratives about a monolithic Muslim and Middle Eastern culture. 10 Goldin’s work is differently positioned because it represents a Jewish female subject, but it is still available for such appropriations. 11 Attention to the ambivalence about America expressed in *Wedding Song* is thus crucial to a transnational feminist reading.

One of the earliest stories in the memoir is also one of very few that are set in the United States rather than in Iran. Farideh travels to Los Angeles from her home in Norfolk to meet relatives from her mother’s side. Farideh describes her cousin Mohtaram’s apartment, which is filled with ornate furniture covered in a heavy plastic. She looks at the walls, papered with family photographs, thinking about how Mohtaram would have been surrounded by the tangible bodies of her children and grandchildren if she still lived in Iran. In America, Mohtaram is

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11 In fact, Goldin’s work is also susceptible to other ideological political uses because of her frequent allusions to anti-Semitism in Iran, particularly given the post-1948 attention to anti-Semitism in Muslim countries.
separated from her descendants by highways, traffic and busy schedules. In a sentence that by itself constitutes an entire paragraph, Farideh comments wryly, “The clocks run faster in America, I knew” (33). In America, that is, family members are more distant – and less available even when they are close by. There never seems to be enough time to spend with others, because more immediate priorities emerge and demand time. Comments like this suggest that American life may not lend itself to finding home through intergenerational connections, the major means by which Goldin establishes her own location in this memoir. If so, then perhaps the reality of America is not the home Farideh once desired. She comments later in the text that her daughters’ “young American minds” cannot understand what life was like in “a Jewish ghetto in a small Iranian town.” Her distinction between her own mindset and that of her daughters is clear (70). The reader is left to wonder if perhaps Farideh has never found herself completely at home in America, has never become an American in the psychological sense. Towards the end of her text, she notes that for her, “America had been a naïve utopian dream, and at least for a while a refuge, a deliberate escape from all that was familiar” (192). We do not learn about why America stops being a refuge, or how Farideh loses her naïveté, but what we know for certain is that America has become a more complicated place.

The epilogue of the memoir contains only one major episode, about a family wedding in Norfolk in 2001, long after many of Farideh’s relatives immigrate to the United States. At the wedding, Farideh reflects again on her own placement in relation to her extended family. She notes the irony of their presence in America, as many of them rejected her upon her departure from Iran. Yet it is with family that the memoir begins and with family that it ends, and even her resentment of her mother has softened into a new kind of love and understanding. When a relative comments to her that her father, who is living in Israel at that time, is missed, she adds, “My mother too… I miss Maman too” (198). While the ways in which she relates to her mother,
her father, and the other members of her family change throughout her life and throughout the
text, the primacy of family over land as a means of locating oneself is consistent. Land and the
safety or comfort it can provide is always contingent and vulnerable to rupture. Home is found
and written not in geographic locales but in a collective ‘We’ that shares real and imagined
connections (Ahmed 78). This ‘We’ is complicated in its inclusions and exclusions, but the
writing of her memoirs and the process of using storytelling to chart belonging allows Goldin to
delineate a tentative collective identity for those whose notion of house and homeland, and even home, is unstable.

**Contingency and coalition: “In Exile at Home”**

Goldin’s migratory life leaves little room for nostalgia. However, Homa Sarshar’s essay
about the day she realized she would leave Iran reveals a far greater passion and sense of loss for
her native country. Goldin never found the nation to be emblematic of home, but Sarshar’s
narrator-self is explicit about her loss: “*On October 8, 1979, the ayatollah robbed me of my
country*” (128, original emphases). For Homa, this is a massive, violent trauma, which results
in an “*overwhelming pain of separation and isolation [that] takes over my entire being*” (128,
original emphases). It is worth noting that it is not any harsh action on the part of Ayatollah
Khomeini that causes Homa’s loss. Rather, Khomeini’s arrival in Paris in 1978 sets in motion a
chain of events that leaves Homa feeling “in exile at home.”

Homa arrives at work at a prominent Iranian newspaper on October 6 and prepares to
complete her usual task of translating French news reports that have been received. On that day,
and on each of the next two days, she is told that no reports have come in, so she sits idly at her

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12 The text of Sarshar’s essay reads October 8, 1979, but given that the rest of the narrative takes
place over the course of three days (October 6-8, 1978), I suspect this is an error in the text and
should read 1978 as well. To my knowledge, October 8, 1979 has no special significance in the
history of Iran.
desk. On October 7, Homa demands that her editor assign her work: “Khomeini is in Paris now… France-Presse should be wiring reports by the ton!” (125). The editor sends her out of his office, but she returns the next day, asking him why somebody else has been translating her news reports while she is told that none have been received. After a few moments of arguing, her editor replies, “What are you thinking, little girl? You think they’re gonna let some Jew translate reports on Ayatollah Khomeini? And a woman Jew at that? The news will get defiled” (126). The term “defiled” is a translation of najjes shodan, which refers to “the polluting of objects by the hands of dogs, pigs, Jews, etc.” (Khazzoom 234). With this statement, Homa’s world falls apart: her respected editor has transformed, and she has experienced hatred and contempt because of a religion that she has not contemplated in years. When Sarshar turns to a close friend and fellow journalist in the aftermath of this incident, her friend responds with a similar anti-Semitism: “You’re different from the rest of your people… But if you ask me, I think you Jewish people should best return to your own country” (128). Sarshar’s speechlessness turns to rage.

Sarshar’s essay shifts back and forth between two decades: June 1989, immediately following Ayatollah Khomeini’s death; and October 1978, the month of the trauma that shapes the essay. Aside from her career as a journalist and her geographic locations – Los Angeles in the 1980s and Tehran in the 1970s – Sarshar reveals very little about her life. Unlike Goldin, she conveys no information about her family, her education, her history, and her intimate desires. This makes Sarshar an exception among Iranian women writing about their lives, and it means that her work circulates in different pathways than many other life writing texts. It does not lend itself to the typical reading practices used by Western readers for understanding these texts, the ethnographic and empathetic practices described in the introduction.

According to these practices, readers buy texts that they believe will make them feel good by affirming the superiority of their own choices and lifestyles, or to feel that they have gained
some kind of capital. Often, this capital takes the form of truth acquisition, whether psychic or factional. Reading from their own positions within the American middle class, “North American women approach the texts of… Iranian women authors from within dominant discourses, reading for oppressed and/or resisting heroines with whom to empathize and identify and/or ‘exotic others’ who will reveal to them truths about a foreign world and culture” (Burwell, Davis and Taylor 69).

Homa Sarshar reveals no such truths. Her text does not reflect an exotic East – there is nary a veil to be found, and her story about anti-Semitism in the newsroom could have happened in any number of locations – nor does she permit readers to consume the details of her life in Iran. While her rage is channelled towards Khomeini, Sarshar’s trauma is in seeing a world she thought she knew fall apart. She does not criticize the revolution, nor does she valorize the Shah. Rather, she is haunted by the loss of home, a loss that returns to her a decade later, sharp, painful, and insistently appearing “outside the boundaries of any single place or time” (Caruth 9). Despite the apparent life of comfort and relative security we can assume that she now leads, Sarshar’s wounds seem as fresh in the 1989 parts of the text as they are during those pivotal moments in October 1978.

According to the standard reading practices and discourses that shape the reception of Iranian women’s texts, Sarshar’s essay should thus remain unread and unpopular. Sarshar does get published, though, and for an interesting reason: this is not a standalone piece, but rather one in a series of essays by Jewish women of North African and Middle Eastern heritage. Sarshar’s voice is one perspective within a polyphonic group whose essays are linked by an explicitly feminist desire to unveil “the rich, multicoloured texture of identities commonly portrayed as one-dimensional or black and white” (Khazzoom xiii). Sarshar’s essay about leaving Iran and losing a home becomes part of a project to build the foundations of a home for Mizrahi Jewish women,
who are frequently excluded from or tokenized in Jewish feminist anthologies. Sarshar is not asked to be the sole “Authentic Insider,” as Uma Narayan would say (“Looking” 142), but is rather contributing one perspective among many, and one which may conflict with the perspectives of other authors, who are Iranian, Yemenite, Iraqi, Tunisian, Moroccan, Egyptian and Libyan Jewish women living in Israel and North America.

Thus, Sarshar’s essay contributes to discourses on home in three ways. First, home is homeland, which is a place of no return and a place of origin, a lost Iran which can never be recovered and which perhaps never existed. The pain of this loss and the inability to return reflects a more ancient Jewish loss and exile, as Homa asserts angrily when her journalist friend suggests Jews would be better off returning to their own country, Israel. She yells, “If Israel is my country, then Arabia is yours! Why don’t you try going back there, because you came to Iran 1,400 years after I did” (128). In two short sentences, Homa distinguishes between the present-day State of Israel and a historical homeland, elaborating the complexities of belonging to a migratory people who, in some cases, have not been all that migratory, and may contemplate an ancient homeland with respect and nostalgia, but not with yearning.

In the second instance, home is the place where Sarshar lives now, a Los Angeles that is sometimes called Tehrangeles because of its large Iranian population. In Los Angeles, Sarshar is perhaps more affiliated as a Jew than she ever was in Iran, having founded the Center for Iranian Jewish Oral History. She continues to publish and to work as a journalist, but her work is done primarily in Farsi. There is some irony in this, since her work in Tehran was dependent upon her facility with French language translations (Sarshar 125). She acknowledges in interviews that life in California has been good to her, but that she still misses Iran and the life that she led there (Sullivan 218-19). Thus, while Los Angeles has provided a place for Sarshar to flourish, that flourishing is based upon a diasporic subject’s longing for her homeland and a set of projects that
bring aspects of that homeland into her American life. In this way, Sarshar brings home to Los Angeles through language and history, despite the tension and even distaste that she feels for Iran in the present. This tension is clear through the essay, as Sarshar draws parallels between the geographies of Iran and L.A. She speaks of Iran with longing and nostalgia, but her nostalgia is tinged with repulsion and despair.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, home becomes a space of conflict and contingency but also of coalition. Unlike bestselling memoirs by women from the Muslim world, Sarshar’s essay fails to fulfil typical Western desires to read the exotic other through an empathetic and thus egocentric lens. This is not a defect but a position from which to initiate resistance to those desires. By re-centering the needs and experiences of Jewish women of North African and Middle Eastern heritage, The Flying Camel creates a space for new understandings of the trauma of dislocation. The essays that come together with Sarshar’s may stand in uneasy adjacencies, but they share a common goal and together form a point of origin for future action – in other words, a home. This returns us to Mohanty’s epigraph at the start of this chapter, and the acknowledgement that home is profoundly political.

Writing home through fiction

The politicization of home is clear in Gina Nahai’s fiction and autobiographical writing about Iran. Born in Tehran and educated in Switzerland and the United States, Nahai has written three novels set in Iran. Its Jewish communities play roles in each of these texts. Nahai describes her fiction as based on truths collected from her own memories, the memories of her family, and also the memories of many Iranian immigrants whose oral histories she has collected. She is careful, however, to qualify this description: “Memory, of course, is a selective device; it never retains the entirety of an experience. What we remember is not what was, but what we saw, and that recollection, in turn, is altered and amended over time by other subjective factors” (Nahai
“Dreaming” 160). Nahai notes that much of what she remembers about Iran is bitter and hard, and that her characters always seem to find belonging in exile, rather than at home. Their homes, she says, “end up betraying them,” even when those homes are built as sites of protection or wealth (161).

Nahai’s autobiographical essay, “Mercy,” provides insight into the characters of her novels and Nahai’s own comfort in exile. In “Mercy,” Nahai describes the pressure that she felt as a child in Tehran. She is a member of a new generation of Jewish girls, whose parents expected her to achieve all of the happiness and success that their own lives had failed to yield. If she pursued a life according to these expectations, she would have to leave her family behind, abandoning them. If instead she stayed, she would be betraying their hopes for her. As a result, Nahai chooses a life in “the neverland of in-betweens,” ambivalent about her choices and racked with “a sense of profound and unrequited guilt for having failed, even before I had started, at the task for which I had been brought to life” (“Mercy” 132; 133). In this land of in-betweens, she chooses to bear witness by fictionalizing the lives of the Iranian Jews whose stories she has been told. Her fiction, though it may tell the stories of others, also tells her own story again and again, as her characters move from place to place, home to home, always searching for something but often unsure as to the object of that search.

While Nahai’s novel *Cry of the Peacock* features versions of her French grandmother and other ancestors, it is *Moonlight on the Avenue of Faith* that most reflects Nahai’s own quest for belonging and home. *Moonlight* begins in 1938 with the birth of Roxanna the Angel in the Jewish ghetto of Tehran. Nahai tells the story of Roxanna’s childhood in the ghetto, her marriage to Sohrab the Sinner, who is the son of a wealthy Jewish family living outside the ghetto, and Roxanna’s mysterious disappearance in 1971. Following Roxanna’s disappearance, her daughter Lili narrates the story, detailing Lili’s move to Los Angeles as a child and her eventual reunion
with Roxanna’s childhood friend Mercedes, then with Roxanna’s sisters, and finally with Roxanna herself, all of whom eventually arrive as immigrants to L.A.

In *Moonlight*, the mother and daughter characters Roxanna and Lili mirror Nahai’s own ambivalence about staying and leaving, about responsibility to the self and to others, and about whether one should always look forward or turn back. From her birth, Roxanna carries with her the smell of the sea. At night, she lies afloat in a sea of feathers, which her sister Miriam fearfully collects and hides inside their shared cotton comforter (*Moonlight* 10-11). Roxanna is restless, and she begins her nomadic life as a teenager soon after her employer Alexandra dies, always heeding Alexandra’s advice: “All you have to do… is not look back” (72). Throughout *Moonlight*, Roxanna moves forward, leaving old lives and relationships behind and refusing to confront the past. Lili, meanwhile, lives in fear of being left behind, alone, and invisible. She follows her mother around, guarding her, unable to tell Roxanna that being near her is the closest that Lili has ever come to feeling safe (157). As an adolescent, Lili uses pens to draw all over her own body, a desperate defence against her sense that she is “inmaterial and nonexistent… invisible to myself and everyone else” (238). Always haunted by the night that Roxanna left her, Lili uses drawing as an attempt to establish her own bodily existence, combating the despair that has surrounded her ever since “the night Roxanna left, when I called her and she turned around, looked at me, and did not see me” (238, original emphases). Roxanna refuses to be found even when her family searches her out (319); Lili does not leave even when she is overcome by sadness (354). While Roxanna could “never stand the feel of [her] feet on the ground” (160), Lili is afraid to leave home, and she cries when her father sends her away to the United States (200; 208).

Nahai believes that “Every story we write is about ourselves; every truth we record is our own natural truth,” (“Mercy” 135). The concluding chapters of *Moonlight* clarify some of
Nahai’s own truths, reconciling the tensions between staying and leaving and blurring the lines between home and away. Roxanna, previously beautiful and lithe, lands in the Los Angeles airport “two hundred and eighty-three pounds and barely able to walk” (330). She is obese and dying, and her sister Miriam diagnoses her as “dying of Guilt… dying of Sorrow.” Roxanna is a human tear jar, an embodied example of the object that Iranian women use to collect the evidence of their suffering and sorrow, drinking it when full to prove their grief. Unlike other women, however, Roxanna has no method by which to re-absorb her grief. She has avoided her sorrow for over a decade, and now, returned to her family and besieged for the first time by doubt, the sorrow and guilt have returned with physiological vengeance.

Miriam decides that the family is going to save Roxanna using almond tears, a desperate cure for irresolvable tragedies. A long preparation process is used to collect almond oil in their mother Shusha’s tear jar, the sole possession that Shusha bequeathed to her daughters and the only tangible object that ties them to their past in Tehran. A person whose soul is pure must feed the tears to Roxanna, and Lili is that person (356). When Lili feeds Roxanna, Roxanna grabs her hand and takes her on a fantasy journey back through Los Angeles, Turkey, northern Iran, and Tehran. She shows Lili the places where she has been and the place where Lili’s life started, the Avenue of Faith. Finally, Roxanna cries real, salty tears, feeling lighter with each one, and she shows Lili, on this journey, “the possibility of another truth” (374, original emphases).

Roxanna’s tears are the embodied equivalent of Nahai’s writing. Each bears testimony, and each brings its creator a moment of resolution and release. When Roxanna sees Lili for the first time, she feels as though she is looking at herself, “an island alone in an infinite sea” (365). When Lili feeds her the almond tears, Lili cries too, her tears falling onto Roxanna’s face. As the almond tears reach Roxanna’s lips, she feels regret for the first time. Taking Lili, she bears witness to the past, to the joy that led to Lili’s birth and the tragedies that led to their separation.
In these moments, she cries, and she feels “as if with each tear [she is] shedding another pound… as if it is the tears that have weighed [her] down” (371). At last, Lili is freed from the past, from the desire to know and from the fear of being left behind, and Roxanna is freed from her refusal to look back, a refusal that had left her terrified and unable to form human connections in the years following her departure from Iran.

Telling their story, Nahai also finds release. Like Roxanna, she attempts to move forward, but she cannot find peace until she turns to face the past. Like Lili, she is unwilling and unable to remain invisible, to maintain silence. Unable to change the past, she instead chooses to bear witness. By writing, she is able to stop searching at last, finally able to “[make her] peace with guilt” (“Mercy” 133). Thus, though Moonlight is not autobiography in the typical sense, its characters and relationships give us a new grammar for describing the awe, anguish, and opportunity that are latent in journeys from home into exile or from stability to transience. Nahai ultimately differs from Goldin and Sarshar because she has found in exile a corrective or alternative to trauma. For her, displacement is never about a moment of rupture that continues to haunt, but instead is about finding new places of tentative safety, homes in exile, from which she can view Iran from a distance.

Yet Nahai’s valorization of exile corresponds to an inevitability of displacement that reappears frequently in her work, and it is accompanied by the construction of a phantasmic Iran de-linked from reality. She paints border crossings as natural and inevitable, and the shifting of borders as similarly common. Even in Cry of the Peacock, which follows the rise and fall of several of Iran’s monarchs, political and territorial demarcations are portrayed as linked to fate and destiny. In her books, beautiful women engage in passionate sexual relationships with multiple men; their husbands are failures who cannot cope with their lives or their wives. When they need to escape, these women simply make the decision to leave, and then, they grow wings
and fly, as Roxanna does in Moonlight on the Avenue of Faith. These fantasy elements of Nahai’s work have been described as magical realism, though Nahai suggests they are simply the result of a “translation of one culture into another,” or the shifting of idioms from one language to another (“Dreaming” 162). Though this magical realism may suggest for some readers a need to read beyond the surface of the texts, it is more likely to satisfy Orientalist reader desires to enter a mystical, surreal Iran, which is static and outside of history, and whose citizens have no lasting connection to the land itself. This Iran is likely to be conflated with the everyday Iran in the news, a nation-state whose development and policies are contingent upon changing political realities and relationships, not fate. While Nahai may not have intended this conflation, her novels belong to discourse on Iran purely by virtue of their subject matter, and their impact on this discourse cannot be disregarded. I do not mean to suggest that realist strategies of representation are inevitably better than fantasy, but rather that within the North American context, there are particular dangers associated with Nahai’s work and its parallels with Orientalist tropes.

I raise my qualms with Nahai’s work because I want to emphasize that the question of understanding “home” in Jewish Iranian life writing is also a question of how to maintain multiple complementary and contradictory viewpoints, so that Goldin’s genealogy, Sarshar’s unhealed wound, and Nahai’s testimony can be read side-by-side, without one single narrative achieving prominence or overshadowing the others. A purely celebratory perspective on diasporic homes eliminates any accompanying hurt, so that the pain and trauma of dislocation or an ongoing connection to a land of origin may be diminished. Meanwhile, perspectives on displacement that are motivated by the consequences of trauma may reflect the wounds and the experiences of their narrators, but they may also abstract events and individuals from their historical and material contexts and causes. As Smith reminds us, “There is no essential, original,
coherent autobiographical self before the moment of narrating” (108). Consequently, the work that autobiography does is always motivated by some desire, whether for unity of the self or for the achievement of political purpose; moreover, autobiography cannot be “true” in any eternal sense. However, since autobiography also constitutes a representation, it can be taken up, manipulated, reworked and reused for a multiplicity of purposes that differ from the author’s. Collectively, these texts and others like them comprise a genre, and though at first they may share only descriptive qualities (their narrators are Jewish women from Iran), the grouping gains meaning as the genre is delimited, has its limits challenged, and is again delimited.

Avtar Brah has written that “culture is the embodiment, the chronicle of a group’s history” (18). Yet culture is tied to material conditions that are frequently evolving, so that cultural reproduction, exemplified by these texts, is always also cultural transformation. Thus, the development of the genre from the grouping is not only the development of a literary qualification, but also a contribution to the development of a diasporic identity. Home can be found within these writings, then, and though it is not consistent, stable or easily inhabited, life writing provides a means of marking it. The genre, too, provides a space for finding Ahmed’s “We,” where an affectively constituted home is imagined. To borrow Amy Motlagh’s language, “The diaspora does not create the genre; it is the genre that helps create [the diaspora]” (31). Conceiving of these texts in this way is a crucial intervention in the understanding of Jewish and Iranian diaspora as complicated, relational, and in flux, and in the location of home for diasporic populations as similarly complex.
Chapter 3: Reading Trauma

Roya Hakakian’s memoir of her childhood in Iran from 1979-1984, Journey From the Land of No, begins with a preface set in New York in 1999. Roya, a journalist with CBS’s 60 Minutes, develops a digital relationship with David Unger, a New York Times reporter who relies on her as an expert source about Iran. Eventually, the student uprising in Iran that motivates David’s initial emails is quenched, and Roya no longer feels compelled to respond to his messages. She sends him a final response, disavowing her status as a good source, and telling him that, “When it came to Iran… I was anything but objective. The past and the events of the years that followed the revolution had biased me forever.” (13). Within moments, he replies. He wants to know what happened to Roya in those years.

In the epilogue and acknowledgements to the memoir, Hakakian writes that she and David still correspond, and that he introduced her to the editor who would publish Journey. She does not, however, discuss how David responded when she began to tell him her story, nor does she describe what she expects to gain from the telling. Instead, she describes the reasons not to write: “When you belong to a breed on the verge of extinction, a Jewish woman from the Islamic Republic of Iran living in the United States, one small slip can turn you into a poster child for someone else’s crusade. And you know of nothing more suspect than a crusade” (14). She describes how challenging it is to tell pain from anger, and her preference to muffle both. She describes the decision to write in English: “Persian could summon the teenager at sea. English sheltered the adult survivor, safely inside a lighthouse” (15). Yet nowhere does Hakakian describe why she finally decides to write her story, or what happens when she does. The next chapter takes the reader back to the late 1970s; the narrative does not return to the present until its conclusion, and even then, it does so only to list happy and unhappy endings.
But to write and be published is to write for an audience, and David’s motives for wanting to hear Roya’s story extend beyond benign interest. There is a market for stories like Roya’s, stories that leave their narrators in fear of reliving their memories yet unable to release those same memories (14; 15). These are trauma stories, and their appeal to readers is similar to the appeal of women’s memoirs set in Asia and the Middle East. This appeal is the ability to consume without consequence – to “try on” a life and be able to step away from it just as easily, all the while knowing that the narrator cannot step away from her life in the same manner. This form of consumption, whether in the case of Middle Eastern women’s memoirs or in the case of trauma stories, affirms a reader’s own place within the dominant segment of a hegemonic social order. It confirms his or her own status as normal against a protagonist whose skin is not-quite-white or whose psyche is not-quite-right. Simultaneously, it confirms the reader’s belief in a global sisterhood or universal humanity. After all, thinks the reader, this person whose text I am reading is different, but not that different. This process of reading functions in a similar manner to the process that bell hooks calls “Eating the Other.” Discussing young white male students at Yale who compete in their attempts to sleep with differently racialized women, she writes, “They claim the body of the colored Other instrumentally, as unexplored terrain, a symbolic frontier that will be fertile ground for their reconstruction of the masculine norm” (368). In this chapter, I look more closely at the intersections between trauma stories and the life writing of Iranian Jewish women, and I argue that readers use traumatic life writing texts to support an egocentric reconstruction of American democracy and dominance.

Online reader reviews and professional reviewers rarely use the term “trauma” in their discussions of texts like Hakakian’s, nor are the texts catalogued as such. Despite this, the texts’ link to trauma and the use of trauma as a tool for understanding the texts is clear from reviewer comments. The dictionary definition of trauma refers to a “deeply distressing or disturbing
experience” and the subsequent emotional shock (“Trauma noun”). The life writing texts examined in this thesis, particularly the memoirs by Hakakian and Goldin, are centered upon such moments of distress and disturbance. Reviewer blurbs in the opening pages of Journey call the narrative “uncanny,” “haunting,” and “tragic.” They also emphasize how these narrative qualities shape their own readings of the text in terms that are generally reserved for those who have survived trauma. For example, reviewers feel that it is a “privilege to bear witness” to Roya’s experience; and, notably, they emphasize her “triumph” as she “escapes the veil.” These comments suggest that readers see Hakakian’s memoir as the story of a wounded past that visibly scars her present, which is consistent with the above definition of trauma.

Hakakian herself offers a far more nuanced approach to her own experience. Though she recently called the start of Iran’s 1979 revolution “my life’s most cherished trauma” (“Egypt”), in a 2009 panel discussion at Harvard’s Nieman Foundation for Journalism, she asks, “Trauma? What trauma?” (Kaplan, Moss, and Hakakian n.p.). In this discussion, she says that she did not realize her work counted as trauma literature until she received the invitation to the panel discussion, entitled “Art and Literature: Guiding Journalists in Trauma’s Portrayal.” Instead, she says, “I never knew I was writing about trauma. I thought I was just writing.” It is only later, when she sees how her work is received, that she understands her own experience as trauma. She understands it this way because she sees that others have understood it this way. A number of factors contribute to this understanding: her text is set in a location that many Westerners associate with gendered oppression for women; her life is marked by revolution and upheaval that irrevocably change her ability to feel secure in her place of birth; and the episodes in the memoir are marked by political violence with tragic outcomes. Yet Hakakian’s realization comes not from seeing the elements of her published text but rather from a shift in perspective: “Not so much from the Middle East or Iranian perspective to American or Western perspective, but rather
from the communal and collective perspective to a very individualistic and personal perspective. Suddenly what I knew not to have been a traumatic experience began to look like a traumatic experience.”

**Reader Framings of Trauma**

The reviewer blurbs quoted above all describe Roya’s story as the poignant narrative of a single individual, albeit one who lives in a chaotic time and place. This is consistent with Hakakian’s newfound recognition of her experience as trauma, and it suggests that the designation of Roya’s narrative as trauma, as evidenced by her invitation to the expert panel on retelling trauma stories, is correlated with viewing the narrator as a distinct individual. This suggests that when readers recognize a story as trauma, they are touched – even “moved” – by the story and its narrator. Touching can invoke a set of affective responses that include compassion, empathy, and trust in the narrator and/or the writer. Compassion, in turn, provides the reader with a sense of security about her own position, confirming her belief in her own superiority, and erasing her connections to the trauma story. These connections, which range from a reader’s role in supporting the market for trauma texts to the reader’s own status in relation to the status of the text’s author, are the ones which might have enabled a more critical understanding of the flows of power that are at play in the trauma and its telling. My argument here is that when trauma narratives become popular with U.S. readers, it is often at the expense of critical analysis and located understandings.

I argue that trauma narratives (that is, narratives about surviving deeply distressing experiences) are recognized and praised by readers when readers feel uncorrupted compassion for the narrators. Compassion results when narratives meet three criteria: a story’s narrators must be recognizable as normatively human, the story must not implicate listeners as complicit in or personally linked to the narrator’s trauma, and the narrative must make claims to factual truth.
The first of these qualities enables reader empathy and compassion, the second ensures that this compassion does not cause the reader any sense of guilt or doubt, and the last allows a reader to feel that his or her compassion has been ethically earned. The fulfillment of these three criteria is dependent not only upon the text of the trauma narrative, but also on the availability of the text to particular forms of recuperation. Thus, the trauma of a rape that meets the criteria of rape scripts is more likely to gain prominence than that which falls outside of the bounds of normalized rape narratives, because the former narrative is more easily individualized as a singular but authentic tragedy (a terrible thing truly happened to a good person), while the latter may challenge the stability of a listener’s physical/racial/gender/class/sexual security and privilege. However, even this latter story may be accepted as traumatic and deserving of compassion if it can be recoded “into the idiom of personal injury, …deflect[ing] an ideological analysis of violence towards women” and enabling reader compassion without reader responsibility (Hesford “Rape Stories” 34). When such a recoding is resisted or becomes impossible, victim blaming and the attacking of a survivor’s character or integrity result.

Similarly, the relative popularity of trauma stories by Iranian women can be explained in part by the implicit support that they lend to U.S. imperial projects in Muslim countries like Iraq and Afghanistan, as well as their affirmation of a reader’s conception of him or herself as being in a superior or more powerful position without any attached culpability. In contrast, we could examine the dearth of popular texts by indigenous U.S. authors that tell stories about the trauma of settler colonialism. These stories rarely receive acknowledgement as trauma in mainstream presses because of their location close to home, which facilitates the stories’ abilities to implicate U.S. readers and challenge their self-positionings. As Laura Brown remarks, “Real trauma is often only that form of trauma in which the dominant group can participate as a victim rather than as the perpetrator or etiology of the trauma” (122). The pronouncement that a person has
experienced “real trauma” is consequently dependent not only on the traumatic event and its aftermath, but also its political and historical contexts, and the ease with which it can be recuperated into dominant discourses.

In the body of this chapter, I address one specific example of how a trauma narrative can be recuperated into dominant discourse, and how that recuperation is facilitated by the secondary texts that influence reader reception. I also outline alternative ways of reading that trauma narrative, showing how differently located and self-reflexive readings can result in a different set of responses and understandings. While I have already defined the popular framing of trauma through its association with compassion in order to show what kinds of narratives popular audiences recognize as traumatic, I provide a more rigorous overview and definition of trauma here, which I use in the critical framework for my analysis. Experiences of trauma, while they are linked to individuals and are often dealt with as individual cases, are tied to broader political and cultural flows. In this chapter, it is these ties that draw my interest. I am less interested in how talking about trauma is linked to healing, and more interested in talking about what we can learn from examining how trauma is written and read in various settings and contexts. In particular, the contexts that I address here belong to the diaspora space of the United States, which Avtar Brah defines as “the point at which boundaries of inclusion and exclusion, of belonging and otherness, of ‘us’ and ‘them’, are contested” (209). Ultimately, I argue that while mainstream (white women) readers of Iranian women’s trauma narratives feel compassion for the narrators of the trauma, this compassion is not a productive emotion. Instead, compassion becomes the basis for a re-centering of white American supremacy and innocence. However, alternative understandings of trauma and trauma narratives are possible and even productive, and I attempt to pursue such an understanding here. I return to Farideh Goldin’s writing, and her essay “Feathers and Hair,” to perform this analysis.
Academic Framings of Trauma

The concept of “trauma” is itself contested: medical/psychiatric, psychoanalytic, and cultural interpretations all vie for legitimacy in the multiple domains in which trauma discourse occurs, such as news media, entertainment media and academic literature. In my analysis, I interpret trauma from a cultural perspective. Consequently, though I draw upon clinical and psychoanalytic discourses, my critical emphasis is on trauma as a relational category of analysis. Aside from the obvious disciplinary reasons for this emphasis, there are also problematic implications for my project that are attached to clinical and psychoanalytic understandings of trauma, and I review these briefly here.

Clinical perspectives

I define a clinical perspective on trauma as one that seeks to identify and heal a pathology that stems from a traumatic event or series of events. The most prevalent associated pathology in this case is that of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, classified as an anxiety disorder within the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM) since 1980. By naming the effects of trauma as a pathology to be cured or treated, an expert’s authority is imposed on traumatized individuals, removing their interpretive agency. In this way, any disruptive potential of the speech of trauma survivors is neutralized, leaving dominant discourse intact. While I acknowledge the manifold benefits that therapy provides to many survivors of trauma, I join Arthur Kleinman and Joan Kleinman in asking,

What kind of cultural process underpins the transformation of a victim of violence to someone with a pathology? What does it mean to give those traumatized by political violence the social status of a patient? And in what way does the imagery of victimization as the pathology of an individual alter the experience – collective as well as individual – so that its lived meaning as moral and political memory, perhaps even resistance, is lost and is replaced by ‘guilt,’ ‘paranoia,’ and a ‘failure to cope’? (10)

The conversion from individual to patient happens in multiple ways. For example, a
survivor of racial violence may work with a therapist following a violent event. The therapist may read the survivor’s description of his or her nightmares as one of the symptoms of PTSD, and may then use a set of therapeutic techniques designed to abate or work through those nightmares. By coding the nightmares solely as a symptom of a mental disorder, the therapist erases the racism that is immanent to the violent experience. By pathologizing the survivor’s experience, a political event is recoded as personal, and the burden of healing is placed on the survivor (to work through his or her pathological symptoms) rather than on society as a whole. This is a strategy that can be used to exclude those who trouble a social system from the system itself, because their speech is marked as illness rather than as rational thought, even as the system commends itself for aiding those who need help. The expert therapist is the person who gives meaning to the survivor’s speech, and “it is the expert rather than the survivor who will determine under what conditions the survivor speaks and whether the survivor’s speech is true or acceptable within the dominant discourse’s codes of normality” (Alcoff and Gray 271).

A parallel to the clinical perspective on trauma occurs in the context of trauma narratives that are published as popular memoirs. In this case, readers serve as the experts or the listeners to confession. They are empowered to legitimize or reject the survivor’s speech, and most often this speech is legitimized as a story of individual triumph over tragedy or a narrative of healing from some abnormality or malfunction in an individual life (i.e. from a pathology). Again, the defining feature of the trauma is the expert’s role in interpreting and legitimizing it, as well as the focus on healing or closure. When the expert, or reader, delegitimizes the trauma, chaos and condemnation ensue, as in the case of the questioned veracity of Rigoberta Menchu’s resistance memoir or the “mercenary self-exposure” in Kathryn Harrison’s memoir of incest (Eakin 113).
Psychoanalytic perspectives

While the psychoanalytic perspective on trauma maintains the primacy of the expert in labelling trauma, its focus shifts from traumatic healing to the constitution of trauma. Cathy Caruth is acknowledged as a leading humanities scholar in the development of contemporary psychoanalytic approaches to trauma. In her introduction to Unclaimed Experience, an anthology of multidisciplinary essays attending to the various impacts and aspects of trauma, Caruth suggests that trauma is defined not by the traumatic event itself – which, she points out, “may or may not be catastrophic, and may not traumatize everyone equally” – but by the emphatic and insistent return of that event to the psyche of the individual, whether through flashbacks, nightmares, or some other form of memory (4). This definition is marked by traces of the criteria for diagnosing PTSD, which requires “persistent reexperiencing of the traumatic event” (American Psychiatric Association). Caruth, however, is not defining PTSD; she is defining a generalized form of traumatic experience, one that will enable us to “examine how trauma unsettles and forces us to rethink our notions of experience, and of communication” (4). Yet she focuses on the return of the traumatic event almost to the exclusion of all other aspects of trauma. For her, an event becomes traumatic only when it imposes upon and even possesses the lives and minds of the individuals who experienced the event.

Because of Caruth’s prominence, there is no shortage of literature assessing various aspects of her approach to trauma. The point of greatest concern for me is Caruth’s strict limitation on what counts as trauma. Drawing on Freud, Caruth writes that trauma is characterized not only by its return, but also by an inherent latency where the traumatic event itself can never be fully accessed and was never fully experienced. Trauma is experienced only in the return of the traumatic event, and the “events, insofar as they are traumatic, assume their

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13 See, for example, Brison or Cvetkovich for critiques of aspects of Caruth’s work.
force precisely in their temporal delay” (9; emphases mine). These comments situate trauma in a precarious place. According to Caruth, a period of latency is a required component of trauma, and a traumatic event, in the moment of its occurrence, retains no force as trauma until it returns in memory. Such a definition challenges the classification as trauma of repeated or punctuated events that have lasting, integrated, and overlapping impacts on their victims/survivors. It poses a similar challenge when the everyday conditions of an individual’s life are enough to induce the kind of possession of the individual that Caruth describes as traumatic. In such a case, there may be no time for a period of latency, and the individual may be responding to one traumatic event even as another traumatic event occurs. Is trauma only trauma once the subject (or object) of the traumatic event has emerged into a place of safety, or is it possible to endure new traumatic events even as one is simultaneously recalling or responding to a traumatic past? By requiring trauma to be experienced only belatedly, we refuse to accept the kinds of complex trauma whose origin is found not in a single wounding event, but rather in a series of events or in structural configurations that constantly compound the force of trauma.\textsuperscript{14} It may be clear already that these types of traumas often emerge from the everyday experiences of many women, people of colour, indigenous peoples, people living with poverty, and others who experience systemic (or system-approved) forms of oppression.

In fact, both the psychoanalytic and clinical models for understanding trauma are best suited to particular forms of trauma: discrete, solitary events that can be easily assimilated into liberal individualist discourse. The clinical model depends upon assuming that the people involved in a trauma can be seen as individual actors who can choose to take control of a situation, and whose decisions and willpower are the only barriers to a desired recovery, while the

\textsuperscript{14} My thinking on this topic has been influenced by, but is not identical to, that of Laura Brown, and her reference to Maria Root’s notion of “insidious trauma” (128).
psychoanalytic model excludes everyday forms of trauma that cannot be easily separated into an initial event and its persistent return in memory. In other words, these models of trauma best address the situations of privileged subjects whose lives are marked by an instant of tragedy. These subjects are most often white middle class citizens of Western liberal democracies, the very same subjects who are most likely to consume trauma narratives. Because these subjects rarely experience the limitations of these models for trauma in their own lives, they also miss the limitations of the models when they are pleasurably consuming the narratives of others.

**Cultural perspectives**

It is clear, then, that a more inclusive definition of trauma is necessary. Because of my desire to avoid pathologizing trauma and to allow for flexibility in the types of experiences that count as trauma, I am content to define trauma by naming only a few qualifiers that may ascend and descend in prominence depending on the situation.  

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First, trauma is composed of both event(s) and aftermath. I retain here what Caruth calls “the central Freudian insight of trauma,” which lies “in its refusal to be simply located, in its insistent appearance outside the boundaries of any single place or time” (9). Such a formulation of trauma requires us to be vigilant about identifying the diverse effects of trauma, allowing the everyday to stand alongside the extreme, and remembering that trauma is never really over. Second, trauma involves not just violence but violation, a threat to the integrity of the self (Culbertson 171). By this I mean that trauma indelibly affects the way that a person or a collective is able to perform or represent itself. As Alexander points out, “In this sense, the cultural construction of trauma begins with a claim. It is a claim to some fundamental injury… and a demand for emotional, institutional, and symbolic reparation and reconstitution” (11). Third, I emphasize the relational status of trauma, which

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15 By discussing what “counts” as trauma, I recognize both the constructedness of the concept of trauma as well as the role that relations of power play in determining this construction in different arenas.
incorporates the first two qualifiers into a framework that positions trauma as a shifting network comprising links of various strengths and directions between individuals and other entities.

By viewing trauma as a network, we begin to see that trauma is never about a single individual. A person’s reformulation of its notion of the self during or following a traumatic event may take a number of different forms, such as explicit retellings of the trauma story or changed decision-making processes and affective responses to particular situations. Each of these responses or decisions is also, in some sense, a retelling of the trauma. Such a constant and undeniable retelling allows us to infer the ways that one person’s (or one group’s) trauma touches other people. Cvetkovich remarks that “Like trauma, touch is a term that has both physical and emotional, both material and immaterial, connotations” (51). When trauma touches people, it carries dual meaning: it comes into contact with them, creating an impression upon them and restricting their movement in some way, if only temporarily, and it touches them emotionally, engendering an affective response. This ‘touching’ is what makes trauma relational, allowing an academic focus to shift from questions about ‘what happened to cause this trauma, and how can we resolve it?’ to questions about ‘how is this trauma affecting and interacting with various groups and individuals?’ The temporary nature of touch, and its varying strength, suggest that trauma is not a stable category, and that its manifestations, causes, and consequences differ across temporal and spatial locations.

**The Norfolk Compass**

I return now to how popular audiences use trauma to frame texts, responding to the texts with a compassion that individualizes and abstracts the trauma from its context. I recognize that my focus in this argument shifts away from the pain and violence that has shaped the lives of trauma survivors. I wish to affirm the strength and bravery required to publish trauma stories, but I also want to interrogate how “dominant discourses can recuperate their hegemonic position…”
subsuming [disruptive speech] within the framework of the discourse in such a way that it is disempowered and no longer disruptive” (Alcoff and Gray 268). I use Goldin’s *Wedding Song* as a primary text for this interrogation.

Leela Fernandes writes that “A trans/national feminist approach recognizes a dialectical relationship between the intratextual realm (modes of representation within the textual form) and the intertextual realm (social and political contexts that include national discourses and trans/national relationships of power within which texts circulate)” (49). Thus, to understand the trauma network that materializes around a story, the text itself does not suffice. One must also look at the material and political conditions that shape the circulation and reception of Goldin’s text. In this analysis, it becomes apparent that recognition of Goldin is limited in specific ways. While her experience is recognized as “personal trauma” in the UPNE promotional material for *Wedding Song* (“UPNE”), the network of connections that emerge from this trauma prioritize a re-centering of American supremacy and innocence over a critical engagement with the changing historical and cultural contexts of her trauma. Thus, Goldin’s story is used in ways that “maintain a focus on the global that constitutes the West’s gendered subject as the mark of the ‘universal,’ and the world of the Muslim gendered subject as that of death, violence, and misogyny” (Thobani 129), despite Goldin’s status as a Jewish woman.

I look to gain insight into how Goldin’s work is accepted by readers by examining her depiction in an article in the *Norfolk Compass*, a weekly community tabloid published under the auspices of the Virginian-Pilot newspaper (Afer-Anderson 1, 8-9). I begin by examining how Goldin can be recognized as normatively human through the article and through *Wedding Song*, and I then examine how the second criteria for reader compassion, lack of reader culpability, works to refocus attention on the Western gendered subject. Finally, I suggest how alternate readings might complicate or challenge this focus. My analysis here is tentative and slightly
nervous, as I heed Patricia Yaeger’s warning about the dangers of turning bodies and traumas into texts: “Who profits when someone else’s body is turned into a set of tropes to be perused as an academic commodity?” (33).

The *Norfolk Compass* places Goldin’s body at the centre of her work’s acceptance as a narrative deserving of compassion within a white American context. Both Goldin and her narrator are recognizable as human because of their physical presentation, and because their bodies behave in the ways that readers expect them to behave. In contrast, Whitlock provides an example of a scenario when this is not the case: those who seek asylum or refugee status have often been refused empathy and sympathy for their claims. When asylum seekers go to extremes (‘testimony incarnate” such as self-harm or lip sewing), listeners and viewers see this as alien behaviour, instead of recognizing in it the suffering of a relatable human being (*Soft Weapons* 83). A person who harms himself or herself has stepped beyond the bound of normative human recognition, beyond the bound of empathy. As a result, his or her testimony also fails to achieve recognition. Conversely, when a survivor’s body conforms to the standards of the listener or reader, it is easier to recognize and its testimony can better be heard, though the form that this hearing takes may be as yet undetermined.

The author of the *Norfolk Compass* article facilitates recognition of Goldin’s body by noting Goldin’s attractiveness, including her “sparkling eyes” and warmly smiling lips as well as her “graceful demeanor.” Her racial ambiguity, which has “left many strangers pondering her cultural heritage,” only serves to increase the attraction, while the author appeals to a notion of ethnic dress as he describes “the red and black scarf draped exquisitely across her left shoulder” (9). This description of Goldin skilfully enables reader recognition by appealing to a brand of multiculturalism that ignores meaningful and rooted difference in favour of superficial markers. Goldin is portrayed as kind, friendly, attractive, and slightly exotic, but her difference is limited
to that of clothing, accent, and subtly shaded skin. Her ethnic difference is just enough to make her interesting, but not enough to make her dangerous. She is enigmatically Middle Eastern, with the “enduring humility” required in order to tell a story on behalf of “Middle Eastern people too often encumbered by American stereotyping” (9). I quote the article’s description at length because I wish to make explicit the ties between the journalist’s reading of Goldin’s body and the availability of liberal multicultural language that inscribes her story as “important to Jew, Gentile, and Moslem alike” (9). She is straight, able-bodied, well-educated, and middle-class, and the photographs that accompany the article corroborate this description. The photographs also focus heavily on family images, both past and present, suggesting that Goldin is committed to her duties as a private citizen in the intimate public sphere of the United States (Berlant 4-5; 101). Similar images appear throughout Wedding Song, where Farideh’s body is coded through the normative imagery of gendered childhood, like hair-braiding and missing baby teeth (Goldin 53). The consistency between the Compass article and Wedding Song helps to collapse the critical distance between author and narrator, so that once Goldin is recognized as normatively human by readers of this article, they feel compassion when they read about what one reader calls “systematic and awful oppression of young girls” like Farideh (Amazon.com).

The Compass also uses physical geography to emphasize a narrative of American innocence and superiority. Goldin’s memoirs are published in America, she lives in America, and her book is read primarily in America. The article begins with a lengthy description of an incident in the memoir when Farideh’s father burns all of her books in Iran, afraid that they will compromise his daughter’s chances at a good marriage. The description is adjacent to an image of Goldin sitting at a table in a local bookstore, signing copies of her memoir for eager readers. The contrast between Iran, where books are burned, and America, where individuals are free –
even encouraged – to write and publish stories of trauma, is evident.\textsuperscript{16} What is missing, though the image suggests it, is how political and economic processes and policies shape the circulation and reception of such stories. Instead of an understanding of how traumatic lives become commodities, readers walk away with an autographed book and the confidence that they are privileged to be living in the right place, rather than with an understanding of the conditions that grant this privilege (Thobani 132).

As I noted in the previous chapter, Goldin is noticeably ambivalent about America and the U.S. influence in Iran prior to the 1979 Revolution. Her ambivalence reappears in the Norfolk Compass article, where Goldin comments, “Deep down, people are essentially the same… One has to stand up for herself in America as in Iran” (8). While this comment could be read as a pronouncement on the illusory quality of equality in America, it can also be read as a statement of universal values and humanity. Depending on the reading, her comment carries very different meanings. The same process occurs when we attend closely to Goldin’s memoir, and here I turn to the essay “Feathers and Hair” in Wedding Song and the framing of the essay in the publisher’s reading guide for Wedding Song to show how the relationships between Iran and America can be severed, and the countries’ political and cultural similarities diminished, so that American readers can be absolved of any responsibility or connection to the cultural rituals that Farideh witnesses. Severing these relationships allows readers to isolate Farideh as an individual and distance themselves from the location from which she tells her story, establishing their own positions as judges. Thus, the compassion and other emotional responses that are motivated by Farideh’s narrative flatten the political dimensions of the narrative’s production, circulation, and reception. These emotions reauthorize imperial and colonial attitudes towards the Middle East generally,\textsuperscript{16}

\textsuperscript{16} Shirin Ebadi highlights the contradictions between this image and political reality. Her attempt to publish an English-language memoir in the United States was initially subject to American government intervention and censorship (210-213).
and Iran in particular. Such attitudes are reflected in reader comments at Amazon.com, which range in tone from admiring (“Goldin’s story is the story of a brave woman re-evaluating norms that have been practiced blindly from generation to generation.”) to flippant (“Oh man, this book gave me nightmares. It has plenty of emotions including rage and pity. Good read.”).

“Feathers and Hair”

In “Feathers and Hair,” Goldin describes the preparations that precede her cousin Ziba’s wedding. While the men of the family negotiate the terms of the marriage contract, many of the women of the family gather together with Ziba to eat, sing, and celebrate. Those women who are not included in this gathering are exiled to another space outside in the yard, where they perform much of the manual labour required for the wedding. This latter group includes Farideh and her mother, as well as domestic employees like a washerwoman. Farideh resents her mother as the source of her exile, and she angrily plucks feathers from a slaughtered chicken as part of the koshering process before the poultry is cooked. She sees the band andaz [depilator] arrive, and shortly thereafter she hears Ziba screaming as the band andaz removes Ziba’s pubic hair.

The removal of Ziba’s pubic hair is certainly not life threatening, nor does it pose any immediate danger to Farideh herself. Hair removal is also a long-standing practice across a range of societies and cultures, and though it may be physically painful, it is rarely considered traumatic. Ziba herself is proud of her role in the performance. “‘It hurt like nothing I have ever experienced,’” she boasts. “‘Even the band andaz said she had never seen anyone bleed so badly!’” (153). Yet Farideh sees the plucking as tangible sexual violence and violation: a physical action meant to hurt and damage the body and the self in preparation for a first sexual encounter. Goldin writes that the most frightening aspect of the plucking ceremony is its status as spectacle, which signifies “the loss of privacy and self-determination” (153). The intense physicality of the experience is emphasized by the parallel plucking of the chickens, whose
“delicate skin tore easily” (152). Farideh feels helpless knowing that she and her body are marked for this fate, and she is horrified by the intense humiliation of such an initiation into womanhood.

Like the *Norfolk Compass* article, the Hadassah-Brandeis Institute study guide for *Wedding Song* provides readers with a context that helps them to frame the memoir. In this case, the guide aids American readers, particularly those invested in Western imperial and/or white liberal feminist perspectives, in receiving this story as a tale about violence and patriarchal control that is endemic to Iranian society. They can thus refuse to see their own lives as shaped by similar rituals and processes. For example, the questions in the study guide emphasize several aspects of the *band andazi* ritual that differentiate an Iranian or Middle Eastern (read: inferior) context from an American (read: superior) one, and they use Goldin’s text as support. One questions asks how the parallel activities of chicken plucking and hair plucking are related. While my earlier reading of this parallel emphasizes the physicality of the two rituals, the reading guide has primed readers to think about Goldin’s memoir as a text that “helps us to learn about the clash in values and morality that exists between the Moslem and Western cultures” (Jaffe n.p.). Consequently, this question contributes to the formation of a dichotomy between a reified Here (America) and There (Iran) that paints Iran as barbaric and unsanitary: in America, private hairs are waxed in sanitized rooms; in Iran, these hairs are plucked like the feathers of poultry. Similarly, in America, hair removal is perceived as a personal choice; in Iran, it is a public ritual. The dichotomy is underscored by the gendered quality of the event, establishing a hierarchy between women’s bodies in America, which are free from violence and coercion, and the bodies of women in Iran, which are plucked like chickens. Any parallels and similarities between American women’s body hair removal and Iranian women’s hair removal are erased. Instead, the question asks about the parallels between the chickens and the Iranian women. I do not elaborate
here on the similarities between hair removal processes, nor do I mean to equate the two. Rather, my aim is to show how any potential links that might have caused Goldin’s readers to recognize and identify with not only her body but also her experience are erased by the reading guide in favour of a “cultural essentialism” that portrays this experience as an inherent and stable part of Iranian Jewish culture (Narayan “Essence” 81).

It is when readers recognize and accept Goldin’s work as a story about trauma that the re-centering and aggrandizement of America is enabled. For audiences to read her story as trauma enables a response of compassion, and this compassion is in turn read as a marker of what it means to be American. Compassion can only be granted from a place of privilege, so the reader’s ability to feel compassion for Farideh affirms his or her security as a free and safe individual. Moreover, to feel compassion for another, without feeling any guilt or doubt about the origins and motivations of one’s compassion, confirms one’s status as an ethical individual. Like Meghan Boler, I am “not convinced that [compassion] leads to anything close to justice, to any shift in existing power relations” (255). In fact, what I am arguing here is that compassion, in the case of Goldin’s memoir and others like it, actually serves to perpetuate these power relations. Through the consumption of another’s suffering, American readers learn to value their own society above that of the Other’s, viewing it as developmentally superior and as uniquely powerful.17

**Can We Read Trauma Differently?**

In the introduction to this chapter, I remarked that I was thinking about these narratives within the “diaspora space” of the United States. Brah writes that in an age of transnational connections, where complex diasporic communities are spread globally but share intra- and inter-

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17 I use ‘powerful’ in the sense that American readers a) see the U.S. as uniquely capable of instilling change in other parts of the world, an attitude reminiscent of those which authorized colonial exploitation (Kleinman and Kleinman 8) and b) see themselves as possessing forms of personal agency, or power, that individuals in other parts of the world lack.
diasporic connections, we must expand our perspective on diaspora to include not only those who live within particular diasporas but also those who come into contact with these diasporas. By reading Goldin’s narrative alongside the texts that shape its reception, we have seen how a particular interpretation of her story can be overdetermined by supplementary texts, like the Compass article and the HBI guide, that support reader investments in the maintenance of U.S. triumphalism and exceptionalism. These investments are threatened by the expanding and fluctuating borders of diaspora spaces, where white U.S. citizens are increasingly forced to interact with immigrants and people of colour whose affinities and experiences may differ significantly from their own.

By understanding memoirs like Goldin’s within a framework of trauma and compassion, white American readers can ease their anxieties about the extensive impacts of racialization and imperialism. As Schaffer and Smith point out, these “acts of consumption of other peoples’ lives enable some to dispel the fear of otherness by containing it” (25). At times, the actual contents of a text are subjugated to the discourses within which mainstream America desires them to fit, in an attempt to maintain the firm borders and boundaries that are challenged by diasporic populations. Schaffer and Smith note that collections of testimony regarding human rights abuses, though they make such stories more widely available, can also impose an outside framework onto the stories, reducing the differences between authors to a bland patina of sameness. Readers use each new narrative to confirm the ur-narrative that they have heard before, compressing or ignoring differences between stories. The same process occurs within the genre of diasporic Iranian women’s memoirs. For example, despite Goldin’s contextualization of her oppression within both Middle Eastern and Jewish cultural norms, and her attention to the impact of her shifting class status, the University Press of New England blurb for Wedding Song eliminates these framings in favour of a focus on the ostensibly Islamic roots of her oppression: “In Goldin’s
experience, Jewish fundamentalism was intensified by an Islamic context. Although the Muslims were antagonistic to Jews, their views on women’s roles and their treatment of women influenced the attitude and practices of some Iranian Jews” (“UPNE”).

So, how can we read trauma differently? Are there strategies that readers and teachers can use so that the violence and violation of trauma are recognized but a self-reflexive awareness of the reader’s role in translating, interpreting, and relating to the trauma is retained? How can trauma be written and read so that a focus on suffering bodies does not result in passive compassion and a recuperation of the narrative into dominant discourses? In this section, I re-read Goldin’s work from a different perspective and a different context: my own status as an Ashkenazi Jewish woman, and the re-printing of “Feathers and Hair” within the anthology *The Flying Camel*. Instead of using a frame for trauma that is tied to compassion, I use the critical cultural perspective that I outlined earlier in the chapter. By re-situating the essay in a collection focused on the diverse experiences of Mizrahi Jewish women, and by understanding my own relational status with respect to this collection, a new possibility for interpretation develops which might allow acknowledgement of both the trauma itself as well as its cultural and political reverberations. This interpretation will, I hope, “turn the terms of inquiry from desiring, inviting, and granting space to others to becoming accountable for one’s own investments in cultural metaphors and values” (Kaplan 139).

I began this segment of my project in an attempt to discover what might be “specifically Jewish” about the traumas experienced by the writers here. Even the language of discovery, however, points to my own desires to find something new and remarkable in the lives and bodies represented in the texts that I am consuming. I hoped that by reading these texts, I might find

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18 Notably, the Canadian distributor of the text, UBC Press, revises this segment of the blurb, referring instead to the “Jewish fundamentalism supported by an Islamic context antagonistic to Jews but very much in sync with some Iranian Jewish views on women.”
something that linked me to their authors, building connections between my own experiences and theirs that were premised upon the cultural and religious practices and storytelling that have been instrumental to the development of my Jewish identity. However, this desire failed to adequately acknowledge the asymmetrical relations that shape my access, interpretations, and responses to trauma texts written by diasporic Mizrahi Jewish women. While I was able to understand how recognizing these texts as trauma narratives perpetuated dominant hierarchies of race and nation in the United States, I could not recognize how my own location as a Canadian and Ashkenazi Jewish woman, with only a tenuous relationship to any kind of migration, was driving my alternative readings of the texts. Reading “Feathers and Hair,” I saw the hair-removal ritual as a rehearsal of the patriarchal norms in Judaism with which I was already familiar, and I sought out identifications, rather than recognizing affiliations, with the authors of this text and the others that I was reading. In my eagerness to move beyond a white supremacist hierarchy, I was prepared to reinforce another dominant hierarchy. It was only when I realized the parallels between my initial reading of “Feathers and Hair” and an analysis of the story centred on its relationship to rabbinic Jewish texts that I gained a different awareness of my own location with respect to Iranian Jewish trauma narratives. I hope that the reading of “Feathers and Hair” that follows reflects this awareness.

There is certainly a textual basis for understanding “Feathers and Hair” within a model founded upon Jewish patriarchy. Jewish culture, like many other cultures, has a complex and gendered relationship with hair. The expectation that women will remove their body hair appears as early as the 3rd and 4th century CE in the Talmud, re-appearing in biblical commentary in later centuries, as well. Hair removal is explicitly tied to gendered violence through rabbinic commentary on the story of Tamar and Amnon in 2 Samuel. Amnon rapes his half-sister Tamar, despite her explicit dissent, and following the rape, he is overcome by hatred for her. Pearl
Elman retells Talmudic interpretations of the source of this hatred. One Talmudic rabbi, R. Isaac, explains in tractate Sanhedrin that Tamar entangled Amnon’s genitals with her pubic hair, mutilating him during the rape. Another rabbi, Raba, points out that daughters of Israel have no pubic hair or underarm hair. This implies that Tamar is not a daughter of Israel, and in fact the Talmud tells its readers that she is actually King David’s daughter by an unconverted captive wife.\(^{19}\) Rashi, an 11\(^{th}\) century biblical and Talmudic commentator, explains that while Jewish women are no longer hairless, they had been so until they sinned and became haughty (Elman 4-5). The message is that Jewish women should be hairless, and that Jewish men must keep their hair.\(^{20}\) Based on these texts, we can understand the hair plucking ritual in “Feathers and Hair” as part of an existing conversation within Judaism about controlling women’s dangerous bodies. Rashi connects women’s body hair explicitly to sin, while R. Isaac suggests that women’s pubic hair is dangerous to men, implying that adult women’s sexuality is a threat to masculine integrity and power. Elman writes that other sources in the Talmud clarify that the rabbis are indeed aware that Jewish women have pubic hair; therefore, it may be that the rabbis’ suggestion “that female pubic hair can mutilate a man’s genitals or possibly emasculate him [is] symbolic of their perception rather than reality. They may have used this symbolism to make a very strong point that proper Jewish women are hairless, read powerless, and therefore they submit and certainly do not retaliate” (Elman 5).

I do not wish to ascribe the hair-plucking ritual in “Feathers and Hair” to a natural or eternal state of misogyny within Judaism. These texts pre-date “Feathers and Hair” by centuries, in some cases, and Jewish religion has certainly evolved along a number of different trajectories.

\(^{19}\) According to rabbinic law, Jewish identity is passed through the mother; thus, Tamar would not be considered a Jew by rabbinic standards.

\(^{20}\) Rashi actually makes exactly this remark in his commentary on Deuteronomy 22:5, which proscribes cross-dressing for Jewish men and women. Body hair (or a lack thereof) is thus also linked to proper gender performance in Judaism.
since they were written. I also do not wish to suggest that the women in Farideh’s family who coordinate the ritual are simply subject to the norms imposed by men onto women’s bodies. Indeed, Farideh herself acknowledges their agency within her essay, writing “Years later, I came to feel that maybe the only power our mothers had was the power to implement the rules of patriarchy. Sympathy replaced my anger, and I even felt respect for our mothers’ zeal to survive” (“Feathers” 17). Rather, my goal in reviewing these texts is to re-contextualize Farideh’s narrative as one which has specifically Jewish connotations. It belongs to a set of texts and traditions, religious and otherwise, which acknowledges and negotiates Jewish women’s diverse, ambivalent and complicated relationship to body hair. These traditions range from the removal of hair for religiously prescribed reasons to a reclamation of body hair as a specifically Jewish trait. By foregrounding the story’s membership in this set of texts and traditions, we can take a first step towards a critical analysis of trauma stories that links both the trauma and its telling to historical and political trajectories. This is not to say that all Jewish readers are the same as Farideh, nor that religion/ethnicity is the only factor that can be used to provide a context for her story, but rather that by emphasizing unexpected and politicized linkages, we can begin to develop a more critical picture of how a trauma network exists within, resists, and perpetuates particular relationships of power.

“Feathers and Hair” was republished in a revised form in The Flying Camel: Essays on Identity by Women of North African and Middle Eastern Jewish Heritage in 2003, shortly after its initial publication in Wedding Song. As does its placement alongside rabbinic texts, understanding this text within the context of Mizrahi Jewish women’s lives serves to further locate its author and her relationship to diverse and diasporic Jewish communities. Cvetkovich reminds us that we should not undervalue anthologies, given their status as nascent representations of emerging public cultures. Though narrative anthologies are often ephemeral
texts, replaced in later years and decades by more sustained cultural products, they manifest a collectivity that is eclipsed by the institutionalized or individually authored later products (Cvetkovich 133). *The Flying Camel* is a hopeful example of such an emerging culture, featuring new and reprinted essays by more than fifteen Mizrahi and Sephardic women examining racism, anti-Semitism, and misogyny. Within the context of *The Flying Camel*, it becomes clear that it is insufficient to understand Goldin’s text as representative of the trauma of living in a patriarchal Muslim state, and insufficient to understand it as simply occurring within a history of Jewish violence towards and fear of women’s bodies. Instead, *The Flying Camel* offers a framework for understanding Goldin’s trauma within a set of complex issues relating to identity and community, so that the pain of her trauma is acknowledged and recognized alongside the politics of speaking out about this trauma in a Jewish world that would often prefer to erase Mizrahi existence, and in a North American non-Jewish world that is testament to the success of this erasure. In the section that follows, I re-read Goldin’s work alongside another essay in *The Flying Camel*, inserting it into a series of intersecting dialogues about gender, race, nationality, sexuality, and religion.

If “Feathers and Hair” highlights the challenges and oppressive structures that limited many Jewish women’s lives in 1960s Iran, then Julie Iny’s essay about growing up as an Iraqi-Indian-Ashkenazi Jew in California reminds readers that, for Mizrahi Jews, emigration from their countries of origin yielded a new set of hierarchical relationships to be negotiated. Iny uses a realist form of narrative to explore a range of political experiences, interspersing anecdotes about growing up in Zionist Ashkenazi Jewish communities with analytical attention to the significance of her stories. She writes about experiencing dismissal and distaste for her Arab identity from her friends in her socialist-Zionist youth organization, and about her desire to assert that identity in the face of both her own light-skin privilege and dominant Jewish discourses that limit Jewish legitimacy to markers associated with Ashkenazi Jews. Her essay is also inflected with an
attention to class differences: after experiencing a year of anti-Semitic teasing in junior high because of her “big Jew nose,” she opted for cosmetic surgery as a solution to the teasing. She notes, parenthetically, “it was only because my family was middle class that I was able to come up with this ‘solution’ to the oppression” (91). Finally, Iny attends to the geographic differences that shape Mizrahi experiences, reminding readers, “American Mizrahim experience the cultural discrimination, but not the systematic socioeconomic discrimination, perpetrated against Mizrahim in Israel” (90). In Israel, Julie witnesses diatribes against Mizrahim and Arabs from strangers and friends, but for the first time she also develops a communal identity through the friendship of other Jews from the Middle East and North Africa.21

Food plays a role in Iny’s essay, as it does in Goldin’s. Julie is able to explore her Iraqi-Indian identity through a Jewish cookbook focusing on that tradition, and her childhood memories of drinking Ashkenazi staple Manischewitz are complemented by memories of Indian foods cooked by her grandmother and aunts. Food is also representative of the token multiculturalism that is practiced by the Ashkenazi Jewish community, a multiculturalism that imbues a deep uncertainty in Julie about her own position in American Jewish life. She tells the story of a friend who denigrates her desire to attend Mizrahi services on Yom Kippur, a fast day and the most religiously important Jewish holiday. As a result, Julie stays home instead of going to the synagogue, and breaks the fast with the friend’s family. Moroccan couscous is served at the meal, and Iny notes, “Mizrahi food, of course, is worthy of Ashkenazi affection” (98, original emphases).

21 The Mizrahi experience in Israel is different from, though connected to, the experiences of Mizrahi Jews in the United States. Mizrahim in Israel regularly face systemic discrimination, as well as overt and covert racism, and they generally have a lower socioeconomic status and level of education than Ashkenazi Israelis. See Shohat (“Zionism”) and Motzafi-Haller for discussions of Mizrahi experiences with the Zionist project and scholarship on Mizrahi women in Israel, respectively.
For Farideh, the Ashkenazi food at her wedding is a means of distancing herself from her Iranian past. She writes, “The chickens were not plucked by anyone I knew; they did not even look like birds. Breast of chicken stuffed with wild rice was on the reception menu, not Iranian stew made with chopped herbs; not aromatic rice topped with crusty, saffron-colored *tadig*” (“Feathers” 18). Her wedding is a long distance, geographically and culturally, from Ziba’s marriage in Shiraz for which Farideh and her mother plucked the chickens. Yet Farideh admits, “If I have any regret about my wedding day… it is the fact that I allowed my fear of and disgust with some customs to erase all the others” (19).

Farideh, raised in Iran in a life that felt like “a dark abyss,” tries to distance herself from her Mizrahi heritage through her immigration to America (19). Julie, raised in America with a hybrid identity, looks to her Mizrahi roots as a source of cultural richness and fulfilment and also as a component of her identity that has sensitized her to race and class politics. The two essays highlight the complexities of surviving and resisting violence and oppression within one’s own community even as one copes with and challenges the oppressive structures that limit the community externally. Alongside the other essays in the anthology, they narrate an emerging Mizrahi women’s subjectivity marked by the traumas of displacement and complex relationships to religious and ethnic identities.

**Conclusion**

Trauma invariably touches people, both in its occurrence and aftermath and in its later retellings. But how does it touch people, in what ways and formations? How do their own interactions and their own bodies, their own fears and insecurities, their own locations impact their relationship to stories about trauma? How might we change the form that this touching takes, so that context and texture are infused into stories that are individualized rather than politicized? I have suggested in this chapter that one framework for understanding and accepting
trauma narratives is an affective response of compassion for the story’s narrator. This response is possible only when a narrative conforms to three criteria: a claim to truth, actions within the bounds of ‘normal’ humanity by the survivor, and a release of the reader from a political relationship to or culpability in the trauma. The resultant compassion reflects privilege and detachment, which allows for a re-centering of the reader and a confirmation of his or her superior status and humanity.

The *Norfolk Compass* article and HBI reading guide provide insight into how Goldin’s text meets these criteria. They suggest compassionate readings of *Wedding Song* that rely on a West versus East mentality. This mentality paints the latter category as static and barbaric while the former is dynamic and civilized. However, by reframing Goldin’s text, and texturing it with the diverse but intricately connected essays of other Mizrahi Jewish women, a new set of meanings emerges. These meanings ask readers to think about their own positions vis-à-vis Goldin, and about how they will choose to interpret her narrative. Reading Goldin’s story within an anthology of essays by Mizrahi women, I am forced to acknowledge my own relationship to and investment in her trauma, and to recognize the various political and historical configurations that have shaped her representational decisions. I cannot feel a compassion that is free of obligation, because I am called to account for myself by a discursive context of texts that, together, highlight relationships of power and privilege across, rather than within, borders and generations.
Chapter 4: Reading in digital communities

The first two chapters of this thesis examine different possibilities for reading that depend upon the framework through which a particular text is viewed. These chapters rely on book reviews, author interviews, reading guides and other tools that help to ensure that a text was received within a particular set of discourses. In this final chapter, I perform a case study of reading practices in two U.S.-based online forums for a semi-autobiographical novel by an Iranian Jewish author. Instead of examining the forces that determine the politics of reception, I examine the moment of reception itself. Of course, these two aspects of reception cannot be separated entirely. Reader responses to the text of a novel or memoir (the moments of reception) are always already influenced by the politics of reception: a book’s cover art and description, the size of the initial printing of the book, and marketing resources devoted to the book’s promotion all contribute to pre-formed ideas about a book that shape reader reactions once the book is read.

In this chapter, I analyze online book group discussions and blogger book reviews for *The Septembers of Shiraz*, opening a window into the reading practices and insights that develop through the digital interactions of a community of women readers.22

Results of previous book group studies

Book group participation has been described as primarily a women’s cultural phenomenon. For example, the Victoria Council of Adult Education (CAE) in Australia maintains a lending library for book groups; in 2000, 95% of the 11,007 book group members affiliated with the CAE were women (Devlin-Glass 572). Similar statistics apply to book groups

22 While online book clubs are, to some extent, anonymous, the avatars and usernames that people choose are often gendered. Most online book club users present as women through these indicators, or identify themselves as women in their introductory posts.
in other English-speaking countries, such as the United States and the United Kingdom (Poole 263). This link between book groups and women, however, often manifests itself as an assumption that the groups, their effects, and the political possibilities that they enable should not be taken seriously. Yet, as feminist scholars have shown in other instances of women’s engagement in mass culture, there is much to be learned from women’s interactions in book groups. In fact, “demeaning attitudes toward these mass cultural forms and women’s engagements with them reflect larger patriarchal assumptions about the value of women in society” (Striphas 298). My examination of online book groups shows that book groups are worth taking seriously: they constitute a discursive community in which women find others who confirm their own readings of and affinities for particular books, as well as a space where literary critique and analysis can be levelled in non-confrontational and counter-hegemonic ways.

Some scholars suggest that the dismissal of book groups by most academics is due to book group emphasis on collective reading practices, an emphasis that challenges normative imagery of the individual reader. Beginning with images from early Christian art, Elizabeth Long uses historical image texts to show that both writing and reading have been constructed in Western societies as solitary ventures. In these solitary forms, reading and writing remain pure and intellectual pursuits, detached from the economic and political processes that might clarify the contexts and consequences of reading and writing. Since charting these connections would challenge these privileged modes, a focus on collective reading practices thus becomes undesirable. As Long notes, “recognizing the importance of the collective processes that determine the availability of books, privilege some styles of reading while dismissing others, and either legitimate or devalue certain books inevitably brings into view both the commercial underside of literature and the scholar’s position of authority within the world of reading” (11). In addition, Burwell writes, other assumed (Western) truths about reading and writing, such as the
“private/public divide... [and] the received linear model of production-dissemination-reception” (284), are challenged by an extended study of collective reading practices.

Yet these aspects of collective reading are precisely what make book groups so interesting as a topic of study. Through book groups, we can begin to understand how books are perceived as commodities, how certain reading practices come to be privileged in particular situations, and how these reading practices open up possibilities for subversion and reinforcement of dominant discourse. The body of this chapter delves into these issues further. I begin by discussing common characteristics that book groups studied by academics have tended to share, and I describe the two book groups that form the basis for my own examination. After providing this context, I use online discussions and associated online book reviews for Dalia Sofer’s *Septembers of Shiraz* to show how readers support each other in their reading practices, and how conflict is negotiated in book group discussions to yield transformative or oppositional understandings.

According to recent studies, women’s book groups most frequently select realist fiction for their book group discussions, and this fiction is normally considered to be of a higher quality than members’ other recreational reading (Devlin-Glass 575). The distinction that book club members make between their “regular” reading and their “book group” reading suggests that they take notions of literary authority quite seriously, and that they endeavour to ensure that book group selections are endowed with such authority. At the same time, book group analyses are generally devoid of analytic textual study, eschewing formal literary concepts (Poole 273; Devlin-Glass 575; Burwell 285). This means that while book groups rely on literary specialists, such as book reviewers and academics, to aid in book selection, the terms by which the book groups evaluate the books differ markedly from the terms of evaluation of the specialists, which are focused on literary aesthetics. So, Devlin-Glass asks, “If aesthetics is not a secure or
fundamental part of their working vocabulary, what do taste and reading mean for these women?” (575)

The answer seems to be that books are most desirable and receive the most positive responses when their readers can relate to them. Whether book group members are working professionals or exist outside of the paid labour force, and whether they are younger adults or retirees, they engage most deeply with a book when its characters are vivid, its plot is quick-moving, and its setting is relevant to contemporary life. Studies of Oprah’s Book Club have drawn similar conclusions about what is valued by book club readers. Ted Strifhas notes that book club episodes of Oprah valued the content of a book “to the extent that it shared a clear connection with life, or that it resonated with their everyday interests, personal experiences, and concerns. One way in which the Book Club both established and maintained this connection to life was through its constant emphasis on the actuality – not merely the realism – of the settings, events, and people featured in each book” (Strifhas 306). In other words, regardless of a work’s status as fiction, non-fiction, or a blend thereof, book group readers engage in a distinctly ethnographic mode of reading that either enables them to “know” something about the setting and context of a text, or that provides them with tools for understanding their own lives. This may explain why Middle Eastern memoirs written by women are so popular among book groups: geared towards middle class American women audiences, these memoirs feature settings that are relevant to current events and protagonists who are both relatable and real.

Classifying book groups

There are advantages and disadvantages to this emphasis on actuality and its attendant reading practices. On the one hand, by using reading as “equipment for living” (Burke qtd in Long xviii), women may gain new insights into their own situations and relationships. Long describes this as a highlight of women’s book groups. In addition, by diverging from established
forms of literary analysis, women are able to evaluate, understand, and absorb books without any obligation to canonical traditions or procedures. Yet reading “as equipment for living” is also another form of the empathy- and identification-based reading practices discussed in the earlier chapters of this thesis. The problematic issues relating to context and historicity that have been discussed to this point are still in play. Thus, studies of women’s book groups point out that because book group members tend to come from fairly homogeneous backgrounds, they will often arrive at similar conclusions about selected texts, focusing only on those areas of the text with which they are comfortable, and glossing over those areas which may challenge their prejudices and preconceptions. Despite these limitations, however, the fact remains that the book groups constitute a space for conversation that would not exist if women were reading in isolation. Thus, given a particular group composition and setting, discussions within a book group can become grounds for new discoveries and conversations, as different readers submit their own insights for feedback and discussion with other members.

Book groups in the English-speaking world can be defined along two sets of intersecting axes. First, book groups can be either independent or affiliated: they may be formed by a group of women who share a particular relationship (friends, colleagues, etc.), or a third party may facilitate the group. For example, Barnes and Noble bookstores in the United States run hundreds of book groups in-store, and the corporation even assigns staff members to facilitate programming for such groups (Long 192). Even when a group is independently formed, it may rely on a third party for resources and recommendations, like the CAE in Victoria. Second, book groups take place in person as well as online. While in-person groups are often closed to new members after forming, or receive only a few new members over a prolonged period of time, online book groups are generally open to anyone with internet access, and their membership may be constantly in flux. Consequently, while in-person book groups may frequently diverge from
book-focused conversation, this form of divergence is less likely in online groups, which often occur over several days or even weeks rather than in real-time, and whose members may not share the intimacy that develops in a closed group. As with in-person groups, online groups can be organizationally affiliated or independently formed. In this analysis, I look at two online book group discussions. One took place in an independent group; the Barnes and Noble Community online book club forum facilitated the other.

The Barnes and Noble (B&N) Community forum sees hundreds of registered members log on to its site each day. This number is in addition to a similar number of guests online at any moment who may access but not contribute to book group postings. The forum allows readers to participate in facilitated discussions on specific books, but it also attempts to mimic the broader conversations and relationships of in-person groups through forum spaces titled, “Welcome! Introduce Yourself Here!” and “What are you reading?” Readers use screen names and avatars to distinguish themselves, and they are assigned status recognition like “Inspired Bibliophile,” as well as digital laurels, that indicate their frequency of use and participation on the B&N forums. A group moderator facilitates the discussion for a given book, setting up a number of message boards designed to encompass particular sections, themes, and characters. All readers are welcome to post to these boards, as well as to create their own boards. The B&N Community read *The Septembers of Shiraz* in October 2007, though messages continued to be posted until March 2008. Twenty-one different message boards were created to facilitate discussion; fifteen of these received responses. Fifteen participants submitted sixty-four responses altogether, and a number of the respondents were participating in the B&N Community for the first time. The author, Dalia Sofer, was also an active participant on these message boards.

The independent book group that I examine is entitled Everyday I Write the Book (EDIWTB). EDIWTB is primarily an independent blog written by Gayle Weiswasser, featuring
book reviews, book blogging news, and author interviews. Every few months, Weiswasser facilitates an online book club discussion of a recently released book. All blog readers can participate in the discussion by posting in the “Comments” section of a blog entry. Book publishers have sponsored several club discussions by providing review copies of the selected book for up to twenty book club participants. As in the B&N community, participants use screen names and avatars to identify themselves, but at EDIWTB, they more frequently link to their own blogs, websites, and book reviews at the end of their postings. EDIWTB featured Sofer’s novel in July 2008, after announcing in June that the title would be read. In September, Weiswasser also published a Q&A with Sofer that followed up the book group discussion. It is clear from the publisher sponsorship and author availability that publishers see the blogosphere as a valuable forum for marketing new texts to potential readers. Typical book group discussions on EDIWTB begin with a review by Weiswasser, followed by an extensive discussion by other readers in the comments section of the review. The discussion on The Septembers of Shiraz included thirty-nine responses contributed by twenty-seven individual readers, and nearly all of the responses were contributed over the course of four days at the end of July 2008. The discussion is also supplemented by numerous links to contributors’ own long-form reviews.

Responses to The Septembers of Shiraz

The Septembers of Shiraz is Sofer’s first novel. A semi-autobiographical story, it takes place during a single year, 1981-82, in Tehran and New York City. Sofer follows the four members of the Amin family as they deal with life in the aftermath of the Islamic Revolution. The story is anchored by the arrest and eventual release of Jewish jeweller Isaac Amin, who is suspected by Iranian authorities of illicit involvement with Zionist organizations. After Isaac’s arrest, his wife Farnaz and 10-year-old daughter Shirin must cope with life on their own in Tehran, while college-aged son Parviz struggles with isolation and loneliness in New York. The
story echoes Sofer’s experience as a youngster whose father was arrested on similarly vague charges in the same time period, though Sofer is adamantly explicit about the fictional status of most of the plot and characters (B&N Community “Questions for Dalia Sofer”). Numerous reviewers praised Shiraz highly following its publication – the New York Times Book Review described the novel as “miraculously light in its touch, as beautiful and delicate as a book about suffering can be” (Messud), while sources as varied as The Jewish Daily Forward and Marie Claire magazine were similarly effusive (Iannotti; Milzoff).

Like the professional reviewers, the readers in the online communities generally praise Septembers of Shiraz. They place it in the context of other similar texts that they have read, and their comments and individual reviews are replete with recommendations for those who enjoyed the book. A major factor in the praise, however, is not Sofer’s “light touch” described by professional reviewers, but rather the setting of the novel in post-Revolutionary Iran. As one EDIWTB participant notes on her blog, “I have already told you that I am Iran obsessed, right? Not just Iran, but also Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan, India, Sri Lanka...well, maybe just internationally obsessed” (Bethany). In other words, Sofer’s text is being read not as a novel about a transnationally connected Iranian Jewish family, but as a story about an exotic and nonspecific Middle East and Asia – an “international” which is narrow in its scope yet generic in its narrative variety. The intertexts suggested by other readers in their reviews and responses are consistent with this situating of the novel: another EDIWTB reader notes on her personal site that “for some reason, I am drawn to books about the Middle East” (Julie P.) while a number of readers recommend other books deemed similar to Sofer’s based on their Middle Eastern conflict-ridden settings. Whether a novel is set in Afghanistan or Iran, in 2001 or 1981, seems irrelevant to the recommendations. Examples of such books include Khaled Hosseini’s The Kite Runner

And yet, despite its generic status, *The Septembers of Shiraz* fails to fulfil many readers’ desires for closure and insight. At EDIWTB, great attention is paid to what readers described as Sofer’s dispassionate tone. A reader named Melanie writes, “I'm glad I read the book, but after the first chapter I didn't really like it. I felt that the characters went through all these trials, but no one came to any great realizations in the end.” Several others think that the novel’s ending lacks closure, failing to maintain its status as a “page turner” and leaving certain plotlines “hanging” (MDemyan; Stephanie C). A few are disappointed in the moderate language that Sofer uses to describe Isaac’s time in prison and his torture, writing comments like, “I felt like a more skilled writer would have found a way to convey the horror and the deep fear that must consume a person in such a place” (TLB).

Negative comments like these reflect the novel’s failure to adequately meet reader expectations. When one reads literature from an ethnographic perspective, then literature must meet certain expectations in order to be worthwhile. It must provide insight, for example, into some of life’s universal truths, or, at a minimum, confirm a reader’s existing perspectives. When Melanie expresses her disappointment in the novel, she is saying that the characters let her down by failing to develop appropriately. In other words, she is not interested in the aesthetic qualities of the novel, nor in its underlying themes and commentaries. What she wants from a book is characters who satisfy her expectations, whose lives may be messy in the beginning but who

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23 Throughout this discussion, I include the username of the commenter who I am quoting as well as the forum in which the comment was posted. However, the Works Cited entries for the book group discussions are listed under Weiswasser (for EDIWTB) and B&N Community as the authors.
eventually find themselves neatly packaged and morally improved, delivering lessons that can be easily recited by readers upon completion of a text.

These expectations are aligned with my discussion in the previous chapter about what sorts of narratives are and are not acceptable as trauma narratives. I noted then that a performance of normative personhood is one of the requirements that a text must meet in order to earn its reader’s compassion, and that an emphasis on individual healing is at play in therapeutic perspectives on trauma. TLB’s disenchantment with Sofer’s portrayal of prison and torture emerges because Isaac’s calm and dispassionate existence in prison is misaligned with TLB’s expectations about what people in prison should feel like and act like. Because Isaac does not meet TLB’s expectations for normative personhood, his trauma narrative is unacceptable. Yet Isaac is a fictional character, so the rejection is displaced onto Sofer as an inadequately skilled writer.

Reader comments about the novel’s similarity to other texts of this genre and the novel’s failure to meet reader expectations are consistent with the findings of previous scholarship on book groups. There is a heavy emphasis on characters, and whether or not readers liked, sympathized with, or imagined themselves in the roles of those characters. On the B&N boards, readers are encouraged to respond to moderator Rachel-K’s question “Is there a character you are anxious to get back to, or that you are uncomfortable with? Do you identify with one more than others?” In response, readers discuss falling “in love” with a certain character, being “gripped” by an individual’s story, and which character was a “favorite” (B&N Community “Perspectives”). As in Marilyn Poole’s study of women’s book groups, readers at B&N “really seem to engage with the characters in the books, who are discussed as if they were real people… In a sense, they gossip about them” (273). Readers express a desire to share with the book’s characters in their
experiences, writing comments like, “I kept wanting to give them a nudge,” and, “Here was a young man that I wanted to stay with, and wish him well” (B&N “Perspectives”).

**New findings**

Yet the comments on the EDIWTB list, as well as those in the B&N Community group, also challenge the findings of previous studies. These comments suggest that the book group environment can indeed lend itself both to aesthetic evaluation of literary texts as well as a critical analysis of the social, historical, and market forces that are at play in the authoring, publication, and reception of a book. For example, Weiswasser’s opening review at EDIWTB notes that, “my one disappointment with the book is its dispassionate, even tone, which Sofer adopted throughout the story.” Weiswasser attempts to explain this tone by noting the novel’s semi-autobiographical status. She suggests that perhaps because Sofer was so close to the story, she needed to “maintain some distance from her characters to keep her sanity.” Reader emphasizes on the autobiographical aspects of the text relate to reading practices that stress knowledge as an important acquisition from literature, an emphasis that is reflected in the high number of posts on the B&N board “Questions for Dalia Sofer,” which received over twice as many posts as the next most popular B&N Community board for Shiraz. At EDIWTB, other readers also ascribe particular aesthetic and plot decisions to Sofer’s autobiographical connection to the novel, using that connection as a means of downplaying their criticisms or, alternatively, as the source of the text’s rich detail.

However, the responses to these comments shift the discussion from “disappointment” and “autobiography” – or relatability and truth – to aesthetic purpose and context. The first response to Weiswasser’s comment sees the dispassionate tone that Weiswasser describes as an “effective device” to aid readers in understanding the novel’s characters (Lindsay). Another describes it as a mirror for the characters’ lives and the sense of resignation that pervades their actions and inaction (Julie P.). These book group participants understand Sofer’s decisions about
language and tone in the context of aesthetics. Rather than discussing whether it disappoints them or meets their expectations, they are concerned with its effectiveness. Still other readers suggest that the dispassionate tone would allow the book to be more widely read. In a world saturated by horrific images, perhaps Sofer’s moderation would ensure that her novel was “palatable” to more readers (Dawn). Certainly some responders had precisely this experience: “This was a terrible time and terrible things happened. Usually, I can’t read those books. I know they happen because I read the newspapers and see the tv news but I don’t always want to read a book about it, you know? The author’s tone is what kept me reading (and liking) this book” (Mary).

Thus, the online groups studied here differ from those groups studies by scholars like Long, Devlin, Poole, and others. While readers are certainly concerned with a text’s relatability, measured by how well it coheres to their expectations, they are not hesitant to comment on a text’s aesthetic qualities. They also demonstrate an interest in and awareness of what leads a book to publication and popularity, although this interest is not necessarily political in nature. Indeed, rather than desiring moral clarity and neatly packaged characters, a number of respondents praise Sofer for her refusal to delimit clear borders. The book group discussions do not reflect a tension between this praise and the criticisms of the novel previously discussed. Instead, disagreements are phrased as alternative possibilities, and respondents attempt to support those with whom they agree.

For example, a number of posts draw attention to the ambiguities between heroics and villainy in the text, an aspect of the novel that has also drawn critical attention (Sofer “Literature and Terror”). While most respondents did not have a high level of familiarity with the Revolution and Iranian politics, they realized that Sofer’s story is an attempt to question what it means to be innocent or guilty, and the role that wilful blindness plays in such determinations.
Sofer’s Revolutionary prison guards are textured by their pasts, where many were tortured by the Shah’s secret police, and by their presents, where they father children and supply small forms of relief to current prisoners (35; 194; 210). A number of comments are similar to this one at EDIWTB, where a reader notes, “I also found it very interesting that the author even portrayed the ‘bad guys’ as somewhat decent people – it really made me question my original thoughts about these characters. I definitely understood the message in this book that things aren’t all black and white when it comes to situations like this – the lines are definitely blurred” (Julie P.). While Sofer portrays the damage and injustice done to Isaac and Farnaz as a result of the Revolution, she also notes that the couple’s decisions are often morally ambiguous. She suggests that their capitulation to the Shah’s regime and indifference to his political tactics make them complicit in the damage and pain that the old regime caused. As an EDIWTB commenter writes, “I guess these traits kept the characters real and not just victims” (Carol). This is a particularly astute comment in the context of other readers’ expectations, as well as the ur-narratives that permeate any discussion of realist fiction and non-fiction about the Middle East and Asia. Rather than expecting life-changing revelations or ultimate triumphs for the characters, Carol suggests that a viable alternative to the “strong survivor” narrative in realist texts about the Middle East and Asia is a narrative that portrays people as flawed, struggling, and ambivalent.

Indeed, amidst a stream of comments about “favourite characters,” Middle Eastern memoirs as “eye-openers,” and the chance to have a “window… into something I knew little about,” runs an undercurrent of subversive comments that note Sofer’s political commentary and attention to context. A number of comments attend to the class critique that pervades the novel. At least one critic has rebuked Nafisi’s Reading Lolita for the silence and invisibility of non-middle-class characters (Bahramitash 231), and despite being paired with Reading Lolita as a favourite by several commenters, Sofer’s novel takes a very different approach when addressing
the issue of class. A commenter named Ti remarks upon a number of interactions between the Amin family and their housekeeper, Habibeh, as well as Habibeh’s son and Isaac’s former employee, Morteza. Ti points out that the Amins’ verbal considerations of Habibeh and her family are undermined by their thoughts and actions with respect to Habibeh and Morteza (Weiswasser “Online Book Club”). Another EDIWTB commenter, discussing how the book indeed meets her expectations, reveals her awareness that the story’s happy ending is entirely class-contingent: “I was happy with the ending and know the family endured more than most. They were lucky though because without there [sic] money, this book would be telling a quite different ending” (Lisa C).

Based on the book group discussions at B&N and EDIWTB, it is clear that book groups are more diverse and discerning in their analytic capabilities and purposes than previous studies have suggested. The participants in these groups do reinforce a number of the findings of previous book group studies: they emphasize characters over other aspects of the text; they are concerned with understanding the “reality” behind “true events of great significance” (Dawn; Weiswasser “Online Book Club”); and they rarely express outright disagreement with one another. These characteristics mean that book groups lend themselves well to the problematic reading practices that scholars like Ahmad, Burwell, and Whitlock describe in relation to life writing texts by authors who have Arab, Muslim, or Middle Eastern heritage. However, the book group discussions also involve moments of political critique and aesthetic commentary. In these moments, readers challenge the hegemonic political perspectives that are upheld by the more typical comments. By raising the issue of class, for example, readers turn a generic story into a specific one, remarking that Shiraz’s narrative is only possible for a family from a particular class background in Iran. They also shift the discussion from one that focuses on characters as individuals to one that focuses on the place that those individuals occupy within a broader
society. In other words, these moments provide the basis for a more rooted understanding of Sofer’s text, and the contexts and histories from which it emerges. While the discussions do not develop beyond this basis, they certainly suggest that there exists within women’s book groups a capacity for critical political thought and conversation that exceeds that which has been granted to it by previous studies.
Chapter 5: Conclusion and Future Directions

In the introduction to this thesis, I wrote that I was interested in understanding how Jewish Iranian women living in the United States have imagined themselves through their life writing texts, and how they have in turn been imagined by their readers. I developed such an understanding in the chapters that followed, using Kadar’s critical practice of life writing to examine the complicated and shifting relationships between readers, writers, texts, and narrators. I examined how home is differentially constructed and written in memoir, essay, and fiction by diasporic women, and how the supplementary materials that accompany a text can recuperate that text into a dominant discourse that is comfortable and comforting for certain (white liberal) audiences. I also showed how communal reading environments provide an opportunity to develop different and even subversive understandings of a text, though these environments lack an explicitly political focus. Throughout all of these discussions, I emphasized the importance of reading practices in the development of critical perspectives, showing how contextualizing a work and attending to the circumstances of its reception can yield important insights. This conclusion returns to the goals that I stated at the outset: understanding life writing through texts as well as through the contexts of reception; theorizing and incorporating Jewish diversity into Jewish Studies scholarship; and committing to located and self-reflexive interpretations that lead to improved pedagogical praxis.

It is clear that life writing has been a valuable genre for Iranian Jewish women to explore issues of dislocation and migration. All of the authors studied here – Hakakian, Goldin, Sofer, Nahai, and Sarshar – currently live in the United States but spent their early childhoods in Iran. All of their texts are concerned with border crossings, transnational connections, and the dissolution and rebuilding of relationships and homes. They use different aesthetic and literary
strategies to tell their stories, but ultimately, they all achieve their goal: telling their stories. Life writing is not about dates and numbers, but about recalling and arranging memories in order to construct a narrated self. In this sense, life writing is an intervention that clarifies how an author sees herself, or how she hopes to be seen.

Yet the critical practice of life writing involves not only the author and her text but also the reader. The reader is responsible for interpreting the memories that the author has set on the page, for observing what narrative elements the author has chosen to emphasize, and for considering both the aspirations that the life writing text attempts to achieve and the stakes of pursuing those aspirations. It is clear from the chapters of this thesis that these are not simple responsibilities. Multiple factors are woven around and through the life writing text itself so that it has always been influenced by other factors by the time it meets the reader’s eyes. Indeed, the experiences and perspectives of the reader also tint reception, in addition to the symphony (or cacophony) of promotional materials that accompany and surround the text.

Thus, my thesis investigates what Iranian Jewish women have to say about leaving or finding home and about surviving trauma, but, in addition, it investigates how readers respond to the authors’ utterances and what materials encourage them to respond in particular ways. It shows how texts can be used to re-centre and celebrate the white subjects of liberal democracies, but it also shows how the same texts can be understood to challenge dominant discourses by highlighting the religious, cultural, historical, and/or political contexts. What my thesis does not do, and where future investigations might lie, is examine how to translate the assessment and performance of the reading practices used here into educational settings, so that instructors and students can develop critical perspectives on the texts they are studying and on their own responses to those texts.
Improving pedagogical praxis

I began this project by discussing university students’ responses to The Breadwinner, a young adult novel about a young girl living in Taliban-controlled Afghanistan. I noted then that student responses were generally characterized by a few distinct qualities: identifying with the protagonists as real people; a distancing of their own lives and contexts from the ones in the novel; and a ready acceptance of the novel’s premises and contents as valid and authentic. The Breadwinner is a popular educational choice in Canadian elementary and middle schools, just as Reading Lolita in Tehran appears on the syllabus for university courses that range in content from women and Islam to critical multicultural education. Reading Lolita appeared on the syllabus for 597 university courses in 2005 alone (Keshavarz “Women’s” n.p.)! The realism and authenticity that my students perceived are qualities that make these texts appealing to educators, since they confer upon the texts a cross-category appeal that makes them seem suitable tools for both history and literature classes. The texts that I have studied here often share these qualities, and some are similarly used in course syllabi as mandatory or recommended reading.

Yet, as Fatemeh Keshavarz points out, realism and perceived authenticity are not equivalent to truth, nor do memoirs and other forms of life writing claim to tell an absolute truth (“Women’s” n.p). This fact is ignored in many educational contexts, so that, for example, the Union for Reform Judaism can recommend Goldin’s Wedding Song and The Flying Camel anthology as educational choices within the “History” category of books for adolescents. All this speaks to the need to develop more reflective and adaptive pedagogical practices, which, in teaching literary texts, attend not only to the texts themselves but also to the reception of those texts. By incorporating reception theory into classroom discussions, teachers can counteract reading practices that allow students to estrange themselves from the texts that they are reading,
and they can show students how meaning is not always inherent in a text but is also determined and influenced by factors as varied as cover illustration, book pricing, and catalogue data.

As Burwell points out, however, one of the dangers of using reception theory to understand texts written by minoritized authors is the “suggestion that Third World women’s texts are always and inevitably appropriated by processes of commodification and imperialism, that they pose in their narratives no challenges or resistances to the colonizing gaze of the hegemonic readership” (Burwell 283). How can instructors balance a desire to encourage located and self-reflexive interpretations from students while maintaining recognition of author agency? Similarly, how can anti-racist feminist teachers balance teaching deconstructive approaches that allow for multiple, even infinite, interpretations of a text with politically engaged approaches committed to an anti-racist feminism? While my thesis project shows that reception theory and contextualized readings are valuable approaches to understanding texts whose authors are “other” in some way from the texts’ popular audiences, questions remain as to how these approaches can be integrated in a university classroom setting.

Lisa K. Taylor writes that integrating such approaches “presumes a complex, dynamic reader who acts not as a sovereign, universal subject, but observes, historically situates and intervenes in her responses to the text as a member of a dialogic reading community” (Burwell, Davis and Taylor 73). But what kinds of settings support the development of such a community? How do teachers teach context? To what extent should instructors be directing the scope and content of student inquiries? Research in this area might investigate learning outcomes when these texts are taught in different pedagogical environments, as well as to what extent students perceive and accept an instructor’s educational goals.24

24 Taylor provides one such case study in her description and analysis of a multicultural education course that she taught, which included Nafisi’s memoir on the course syllabus.
The comments in the online book groups studied in Chapter Three share many qualities with the responses that my students submitted for *The Breadwinner*. In part, this is unsurprising. The vast majority of my students were white middle-class Canadian women, and they share a common experience with many of the online readers. However, the similarities between the recreational reading practices of the book groups and the academic reading practices of the students suggest that there may be fewer differences between the popular and the academic than one might presume, and that the reading practices learned and practiced in educational settings are retained and used once formal education has been completed. This is a strong argument for the importance of teaching critical reading skills in post-secondary education settings, and a lesson about how the borders between different spaces are never as clear as they may at first seem.

**Complicating Jewish representations and analyses**

The insight provided by my project extends beyond pedagogical praxis. It also suggests new dimensions for Women’s Studies and Jewish Studies scholarship that accommodates and investigates diverse populations and their cultural products. Loolwa Khazzoom, in the introduction to *The Flying Camel*, points out the need for spaces where Jewish women can write themselves. She emphasizes the urgency of such spaces for North African/Middle Eastern Jewish women whose lives have often been veiled by multiple hegemonic power structures. She writes,

> In a world where Jewish is synonymous with Central and Eastern European, where North African/Middle Eastern is synonymous with Arab Muslim, where “of color” is synonymous with “not Jewish,” and where communities are generally represented through their men, …people try desperately to reconfigure us [Jewish women of North African and Middle Eastern heritage], lest they should have to reconfigure fashionable uniting and dividing lines (xi).

My aim in this thesis is not to reconfigure, but rather to show the ways in which Jewish Iranian women’s voices contribute to and resist dominant Jewish and mainstream discourses. By
highlighting how Goldin’s “Feathers and Hair” essay belongs to a history of Jewish ambivalence towards women’s hair, I began to bring Jewish feminist issues into conversation with broader feminist agendas. By attending to my own investments in Goldin’s story, I also marked the power dynamics that are at play within and between different Jewish communities. This is part of an attempt to complicate Ashkenazi hegemony by centering non-Ashkenazi Jews within my analysis. This analysis is devoid of many of the simplified markers used to denote “Jewish culture” in much of North American mainstream media and literature, such as Holocaust survival, eastern European foods, and particular physical features. To challenge and make visible Ashkenazi hegemony is a practice that is essentially absent from much Jewish Studies scholarship and feminist scholarship on Jews. This is detrimental to understanding Jewish worlds as multichromatic and dynamic rather than as monolithic entities. In the case of Mizrahi Jews, it contributes to a marginalization of non-Muslim Middle Eastern identities outside of Israel and to the erasure of the very serious systemic racism and discrimination experienced by many Mizrahi Jews living in Israel.

What we hold onto

Much of this thesis has been concerned with what it is that we see in the things that we encounter, and what it is that enables, forces, or guides us to see in such a way. Dalia Sofer’s text is perhaps the most appropriate for concluding this discussion because of her preoccupation with the solidity of objects and the transience of human reality. Sofer’s desire to show the multiple facets of life, as evidenced by the numerous narrating voices and moral vagueness in The Septembers of Shiraz, is tempered by an equivalent desire to show that, ultimately, all of her characters are searching for home – for something to anchor them to the worlds that they live in.

Sofer’s autobiographical essay, “Of These, Solitude,” portends these preoccupations. In the essay, she discusses the contradictions inherent in her life as a child in Iran. Of her synagogue
experiences she writes, “where I expected to find reverence I was doused in jabber,” and following her brother’s well-rehearsed Bar Mitzvah ceremony at a swanky hotel in Israel, she notes, “He was rewarded with a belly dancer named Jamillah” (207). Meanwhile, her own arrival at adulthood “was marked by a maxi pad bought for a nickel at the Caesar’s Palace public restroom” (208). An awareness of class and gender permeates the essay, which also details Sofer’s sense of isolation after leaving Iran. In Israel, the family’s first destination, she is bullied and ostracised for her Iranian heritage; later, in the United States, she again finds herself a stranger among Jews (209, 210). Walking amidst the Ashkenazi Jewish population of Manhattan’s Upper West Side, she thinks, “This is not just a religion congregating… It’s also a culture, one that I am not a part of… I’ve realized that I have no business there” (211). Sofer’s essay rejects religious kinship as a pillar for unity, and her essay is imbued with moments of loss, loneliness, and a search for home that is nostalgically linked to the scents, sights, and sounds of her childhood in Iran.

*The Septembers of Shiraz* takes these moments of loss and turns them into stories, weaving a narrative about the things that people grasp hold of when they find themselves adrift. As Isaac is arrested at his workplace on September 21, 1981, he notes the “indifferent items witnessing this event – the scattered files, a metal paperweight, a box of Dunhill cigarettes, a crystal ashtray, and a cup of tea, freshly brewed, two mint leaves floating inside” (1). He describes the objects as indifferent, and yet, throughout the novel, it is objects to which the characters turn when they are searching for truth, meaning, and safety. It is objects that mark time passing or that revive memories of past experiences temporarily forgotten. It is objects that are capable of bringing laughter, tears, and anger to the faces of characters who are unable or unwilling to communicate with the people that they love.
When Isaac returns to his office, over one year after his imprisonment, the objects on his desk are still there, standing witness: “even the glass of tea is where he left it, filled now with greenish layers of fungus” (281). Parviz, unable to make physical contact with his Hassidic love interest, Rachel, uses flowers and their unwritten meanings as a way to make his feelings known. When her mother’s ring goes missing, and then a teapot does, too, young Shirin wonders whether she herself could somehow be responsible for the disappearances. Hearing Habibeh describe the items as “misplaced,” Shirin applies the terminology for the objects to the people in her life. Shirin confuses the distinction between objects and people, as Sofer tells the reader, “It occurs to Shirin then that her father, too, has simply been misplaced, and that he will one day be returned to his rightful place, in his leather chair in the living room, with his books and cigarettes, sipping the tea that her mother will serve him from the silver teapot, the sapphire ring back on her finger” (50). When Isaac’s sister, Shahla, discusses leaving Iran, she rejects the idea because of the belongings that would need to be left behind: “If we leave this country without taking care of our belongings, who in Geneva or Paris or Timbuktu will understand who we once were?” (56)

In all of these instances, and in many others, Sofer’s characters turn to objects as a means of grasping for a meaning that they believe would otherwise elude them. Like the American chocolate that symbolized freedom for Farideh in Wedding Song, the tear jar that contains a mother’s sorrow in Moonlight on the Avenue of Faith, or the radio that plays the news of Khomeini’s death in “In Exile at Home,” the objects in Shiraz symbolize a constancy and a tangibility that is lacking when home is destabilized or damaged.

In this thesis, I have attempted to examine what happens when we see books as objects. What meaning do we assign to them? What tools do we use to help us assign meaning? What forces limit or manipulate the meanings that we assign? By beginning to answer these questions, I have provided insight into the possibilities for apprehending and absorbing life-writ
narratives by Jewish women from Iran. Ultimately, I hope that this thesis will serve as a resource for other scholars interested in critical pedagogy, life writing texts, memoirs from Asia and the Middle East, and the relationship between Mizrahi Jews and the dominant Ashkenazi populations in the United States and elsewhere.


