In recent years, many researchers have explored the intersections between queer identity and intercultural and/or religious affiliation (Faulkner & Hecht, 2010; Miller, 2011; McLaughlin, Hatzenbuehler, & Keyes, 2010; Yip, 2008). However, despite this research, many factions of the LGBTQ community, such as queer people of color, are often left out of the conversation (Haritaworn, Tauqir, & Erdem, 2008). This marginalization is also present within the predominantly white mainstream LGBTQ community, which leads to interlocking oppressions for queer individuals of color (Harper, 2005; Naborst et al., 2001). Expanding Crenshaw’s (1991) intersectionality, Leslie and MacNeill (1995) note that “within a racist, sexist, and heterosexist culture, living with plural oppressed identities can seem overwhelming” and can therefore be difficult to cope with and manage (p. 161). Some members of the dominant LGBTQ community seem reluctant to seriously consider “diversity” and to support various co-cultures and religions within their own population (Han, 2009, p. 109). Diverse perspectives are instead “embraced only when it is convenient and only when it is done in an innocuous way” (Han, 2009, p. 110). Furthermore, even when acknowledged, oppressive stories are not necessarily formed on their own, but rather “shaped by forces and barriers which are not accidental or occasional and hence avoidable, but are systematically related to each other” (Frye, 1983, p. 2).

The construction of identity within one’s own culture allows people “to utilize identity as a means to locate themselves in the world [these] identities can provide a comforting resource to (re)stabilize individual and collective subjectivities” (St. Louis, 2009, p. 565). Therefore, exploring how culture, faith, and sexuality interact within dominant cultures is pivotal to expanding research on queer of color identities (Han, 2009, p. 110). For queer people of color, sharing their stories involves a substantial amount of risk, though it is through the sharing of their stories that they may begin to disrupt the homogeneity of heteronormativity, especially within the family. Because there has been a noticeable lack of scholarly material addressing the issue of the queer Islamic perspective, special attention must be given to the growing number of queer individuals who face challenges navigating through the heteronormative limitations of Islam within Iranian cultural contexts (Minwalla, Rosser, Feldman, & Varga, 2005, p. 114).

**HOMOSEXUALITY AND ISLAM**

Islam is the second largest and fastest growing religion in the world and Islamic views on homosexuality have been historically critical (though, arguably, the same can be said of all major religious interpretations) (Knox & Groves, 2012). This conflict often arises not because of Islamic beliefs, but because “queer Muslims’ sexual identity is inextricably linked to their politicized religious identity in everyday life” (Yip, 2008, p. 284). Siraj (2006) maintains that “homosexuality in Islam remains largely unexplored because the Qur’an, as a heteronormative source, has suppressed dialogue about the topic” (p. 202). Moreover, because of stringent restrictions in Islamic teaching, queer Muslims “must choose to live an irreconcilable double identity, repress or deny their homosexual feelings, or turn their backs on Islam in order to be true to themselves” (Merry, 2005, p. 24). Only recently have queer Muslims who have been confined to a “culture of (in)visibility,” begun “speak[ing]...
out to re-claim their identity and to reconcile their faith with their sexuality” (Siraj, 2006, p. 202). Although homosexual identification in the Middle East, North Africa, and other Muslim majority regions is not new, many of the stories we read focus primarily on Arab cultural identities (Ritchie, 2010; Minwalla et al., 2005; Massad, 2002). Consequently, there is a gap in research concerning accounts of queer identity within Iran and its diaspora.

**HOMOSEXUALITY AND IRAN**

While there are non-Muslim religious minorities in Iran (e.g., Armenian, Assyrian, Chaldeans, Jews, Zoroastrians, Bahá’ís, and Iranian Christian converts), the Islamic Republic of Iran is a nation unquestionably governed by its unique adaptation of Islam (Sanasarian, 2000). Therefore, researchers must look for the suppressed voices associated with queer Iranian identity in relation to Islam in an Iranian context. As of 2019, there are six countries that put people to death for their sexual orientation: Northern Nigeria, Saudi Arabia, Somalia, Sudan, Yemen, and Iran. Iran not only considers the acting on homosexuality a capital crime but is paradoxically the only country in the region to have explicit laws that wholly deny the existence of gays and lesbians (Ireland, 2008). In 2007, former Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad completely repudiated the presence of homosexuals in Iran (Khanna, 2007). The irony of this position is pointed out and mocked in the *New York Times*, when Fathi (2007) writes, “for a country that is said to have no homosexuality, Iran goes to great lengths to ban it.” Furthermore, Ahmadinejad’s outright denial of homosexuality undermines the legitimate “existence of homosexuals and cease[s] to officially recognize or announce [homosexuals’] citizenship rights—a clear assertion of the government’s position on the matter.” It is important to note, however, that Iran relies on a particular and specific Qur’anic interpretation to develop and sustain laws, these laws are not universal nor are they indicative of an entire religion. Islam, and the Qur’an itself, (like any religious text), should be interpreted solely by the individual. Siraj (2011) emphasizes that the lack of Iranian and Islamic scholarship regarding women’s same-sex sexualities is due to the fact that “lesbianism in Islam is at its very infancy, as references to homosexuality in the Qur’an have been directed almost exclusively at male homosexuality” (p. 100). In order to better understand the marginalization of queer Iranian women, this chapter focuses on queer Iranian women’s identity.

**PERFORMING NARRATIVE, AUTOETHNOGRAPHY, AND SILENCE**

Personal narrative and the ability to perform narratives make it possible for individuals to express stories that otherwise may never be told. Fisher (1984) proposes that narrative “is meaningful for persons in particular and in general, across communities as well as cultures, across time and place” (p. 8). We frame our lives through narratives, but “we are each ‘colonized’ by the pre-existing narratives of our social worlds which drive the way we think of ourselves and the very way we live our lives” (Mair, 2010, p. 157). Moreover, Langellier (1999) asserts that personal narratives “may restore and re-story experience outside the workings of context, power, and identity” (p. 135). In other words, “performative writing turns the personal into the political and the political into the personal” (Pelias, 2005, p. 420). This is especially prevalent when voices of people of color are overshadowed, rewritten, and retold.

Langellier (1999) explains, “personal narrative surrounds us and is persuasive, proliferating, multiplying, consolidating and dispersing” and aligns the narrator among the various marginalized and muted experiences of others (p. 125). Langellier also describes the importance of performing these personal narratives by asserting that “the enhancement of experience and the constitution of identity in personal narrative depend upon our bodies as our access to and means of expression” (p. 139). For this reason, performing personal narrative is fundamental to individuals and “communities who are left out of the privileges of dominant culture, those bodies without voice in the political sense” (p. 129). Thus, the focus on performing personal narratives highlights the ways in which narrators tell stories and shapes language, identity, and experience (p. 127).

My narrative is told specifically through the use of autoethnography. Ellis describes autoethnography as “part auto or self and part ethno or culture” (Ellis, 2004, p. 31). Autoethnography attempts to expose the intricacies of identity through life experience and bids to “reveal the fractures, sutures, and seams of self interacting with others in the context of researching lived experience” (Spry, 2001, p. 712). Because of the cultural influence in my story, autoethnography serves as a fitting choice for understanding the bridge connecting the personal and the cultural in order to “make unfamiliar characteristics of the culture and/or identity familiar for insiders and outsiders” (Adams & Holman Jones, 2011, p. 110). More importantly, as a queer person
of color, I follow the lead of queer people of color autoethnographers (e.g., Alexander, 2012; Calafell, 2008; Calafell & Moreman, 2009; Eguchi, 2014; Griffin, 2012; Gutierrez-Perez, 2017; LeMaster, 2013; Eguchi, 2014), as they critically unpack their stories of queer worldmaking within their specific intersectional cultural contexts. Following Alexander’s (2012) lead, using autoethnography as “a critical methodology or approach to doing critical cultural examinations that might shape the mode of investigating experience but not establish a standard of experience” (p. 141). Meaning, while this is my story, and though it may contain themes that work across other queer Iranian American women’s stories, it is not meant to be viewed as the only queer Iranian American women’s story. Instead, this methodological choice gives me space to break free from normative assumptions about queer transitional stories.

The limited resources surrounding queer Iranian American women’s narrative create a space in which the denial of voice becomes problematic and detrimental for the community. Romo-Carmona (1995) attributes this silencing to the fact that “historically, lesbians of color compartmentalize and prioritize the multiple layers of oppression they experienced rather than integrating them in an effort to end oppression” (p. 90). By acknowledging untold narratives, individuals can uncover suppressed stories in order to overcome hierarchical opposing forces, which may promote liberation. For example, “those who experience multiple layers of marginalization, such as lesbians of color, may be empowered by a newfound visibility within the LGBT community” (p. 90). Theorists suggest that through this process narrators are able to reconstruct their lives in order to make them more meaningful (Mair, 2010).

The silencing of queer women of color has uncovered a growing need to understand myriad lived queer of color experiences (Han, 2009). For Iranians and Iranian Americans, the varying opinions regarding sexuality between the Western and non-Western world create dissonance for queer individuals living in the West (Mireshghi & Matsumoto, 2008). Experiencing one’s own culture as homophobic may lead to potentially destructive psychological effects. Therefore, the necessity of telling untold narratives is paramount.

In Theatre of the Oppressed, Boal (2000) speaks to the idea of invading “the stage” with reality (p. xxi). In this context, I am adapting Boal’s literal stage toward other spaces, particularly, the page. This “symbolic trespass” is described as freeing oneself from the forces of oppression:

> Thus, I frame this piece in what I deem as narrative trespass. The uncovering of my story serves to free me from the forces of oppression that continue to silence my body and my voice. This narrative trespass allows me to break free from the dominant discourses that have continued to deny my identity and have instead attempted to tell my story for me. Narrative trespass doesn’t ask for permission making space for stories that have otherwise been stifled by signs that have historically read, KEEP OUT. By sharing our own untold stories, we can attempt to reclaim our identities from behind those violent limitations. As Gutierrez-Perez (2017) states, “Like all other contexts in which we exist, auto/ethnographic performances of queer bodies of color are dangerous work because our histories with master narratives grapple with the politics of colonialism, violence, and genocide” (p. 150–151).

The primary concern of this piece is to highlight an (in)visible theory of queer of color worldmaking narrated through my own personal account oscillating between my Iranian and American cultural identities that provides trespasses of sociopolitical narratives as a vehicle for knowledge production and critical insights into frameworks of power. This perspective, though rarely heard, may open (closet) doors that can help destroy the rigid barriers that muted others’ stories. I am optimistic that through narrative trespasses, through the sharing of my story, that other queer Iranians, and those who have been historically silenced, marginalized, and Othered may attempt to break free through. It is my hope to finally exist.

### DEFINING HOME

While I grew up in a few small towns across Southern California, I will always consider Irvine my hometown. However, when someone asks me the ever-offensive question, “where are you really from?” the answer is as immediate as it is descriptive: “I’m Iranian.” Iran has been inscribed on me since birth and has been a
permanent fixture of who I am. While unlike my parents and sister, I was not born in Iran, I have visited about six or seven times in my life. I carry with me images of magnificent castles of fallen kings, sapphire-encrusted mosques, freshly snow-capped mountains, desert expanses of desert, and hefty amounts of smog that cover the streets of Tehran. My mind still wanders to the thought of enjoying freshly grilled kabobs delicately wrapped in freshly baked sangak in front of Azadi Tower, and my stomach yearns as I recall the sensuous fragrance of rosewater from my grandmother’s secret rollet recipe. These thoughts take me to the place my parents called home. The place I feel where I feel the most (dis)connected.

A BACKWARDS JOURNEY OF SELF-DISCOVERY AND (IN)VISIBILITY

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

Until recently, I haven’t considered sharing this part of my life with my mother. Instead, I have made excuses. Excuse after excuse. I justify all the reasons that make it impossible for me to share one of the most important aspects of my life, something so pivotal in shaping who I have become as a person. Yet every day, I hate my circumstance a little bit more. And perhaps worst of all, with each passing day, I seem to hate myself just a little bit more. I am scared to death of what would happen if I told her. I know she’ll be angry. I know I’ll be a disappointment. But mostly, I am afraid she will stop loving me.

So instead, I resolve to keep quiet, to live a private life, and to be spared the incessant nagging associated with marriage-related inquiries from my extended family in Iran. Specifically, the constant tormenting from my distant aunts and cousins that I find the “perfect” husband. The reminders that I am getting older and that I should just pick a good man while I’m still young and fertile are endless. Then there is the tiresome, well-intentioned, reaffirmations from my favorite aunt, Sheyda assuring me that, “When the time is right, a boy will certainly want you. You’re such a pretty girl, Shadee!” I continue to tolerate these conversations for fear of the alternative, being isolated and ostracized within my family and my culture. I am unwilling to tell my aunts and uncles, my cousins, or my mother about my queer identity. I cannot tell them that when I envision my future, I am living somewhere on the pacific coast with my wife, our two children, and multiple adopted puppies. I cannot share this dream with my family because I will probably lose them. Iranians, in general, do not talk about sexuality (queer or otherwise). But in relation to Iranian social discourse, queer people simply do not exist. And if they do—and importantly, are caught—there is always the circulated image of the said person resting at the end of a descended noose to remind them of the consequences. So, when my family asks about (heterosexual) marriage, my response is always “Enshallah [God willing]” which seems to subdue them. Until the next phone call.

I decide to remain vigilant until my mother begins to notice changes in my personality. She sees a positive evolution and immediately recognizes my upward mentality as the symptom of young love. Her thick Iranian accent, which after approximately thirty-four years of living in the United States has yet to fade, cuts across the room.

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

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

“What ees hees name?”

“Huh? What’s whose name?” I smirk, slightly caught off guard by her question. She knows this smile though, and I come to realize through this exchange that I don’t give my mother nearly enough credit. Of course, she’s been here before. I reflect back to my first visit to Iran, the summer of 1995, just after my sixth birthday. I remember how my grandmother would take me to Fereshteh [Angel] street corner where my parents first met. It was here where she would recite stories of how my father would wink at my mother from across the road and wait for her to smile back at him. This became their secret code and a harmless game that lasted for months. My grandmother swore that this innocent flirtation spanned through the majority of summer 1973, and that my father’s persistence (and form-fitting pilot’s uniform) eventually won my mother over. She had fallen. Hopeless. Desperate. My mother knew what love was.

Understanding her familiarity with first-love syndrome, I notice that my mother wants to play an
expedited version of “Twenty Questions,” and as I try to make my escape, she stops me. “Don’t play games with me! Your mother knows that you are seeing eh boy, Shadee Jan [dear]. You cannot hide it from me!” A rare sound escapes her as she allows herself to laugh. She continues, “Just remember, Iranian girls don’t misbehave. You have to get married, and don’t have de fun. Especially eef he is Muslim, den of course he want you to be virgin. White men don’t care, but they prefer virgin too. I watch Sexy City, I know.”

“That’s disgusting, mother!”

“What is disgusting? Sex ees not disgusting, Shadee Jan. You just have to wait until you are married, and den you vil know . . . Anyway . . . What ees hees name?” She repeats. This time, she is serious.

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

***

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

Bonnie: “Oh my god, are you sure?”
I secretly type back before my sister finishes one of her anecdotes.

Shadee: “Yeah. I have to. She’s my sister. I have to be honest. I’m tired of lying to her.”
I receive a response within seconds.

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

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

“I have to tell you something!” I yell, to my own surprise.
“What?! I almost spilled my tea!” She shoots back at me. Her eyes are insisting I say whatever is so important that I would shriek in a crowded coffee shop. I’m suddenly timid. This is new.

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

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

“Uh. No! I did not have abortion! Where did that come from?” I’m annoyed at her accusation. She ignores my question.

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

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

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

“Uh . . . hello?” She pushes.

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

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

“Nothing. I mean I didn’t do anything, necessarily.” She’s lost her good spirits too. It’s now or never and so I sigh, “I’m gay.” I reflect on my choice of words then, specifically choosing gay because on some level, it seemed less harsh than the alternatives. Now, I identify as queer.

And with that, neither of us moves. After a few seconds I foster the courage to meet her gaze and when I do, I notice that behind her thick-rimmed glasses, she has tears in her eyes.

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

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

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

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

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

“It’s not a phase! Why would I even tell you if this were a phase? Why would I choose this life for myself? I’m not psychotic!” I take a second to catch my breath, “Do you think I want to live a life where I can’t bring the person I love home to meet my mother? Do you think I want to be ridiculed and persecuted by my family and my culture? Do you think I want to sit in this coffee shop, midday, so fucking petrified to tell my sister because I think she won’t love me anymore?! I’m crying hard now and I see her do the same. “I’m terrified of everything, Neda! I’m afraid of what could happen to me if anyone in Iran were to find out. I’m afraid of losing you, losing the kids, losing a place to live . . . losing mom.” We’re both confused, and frustrated, and wanting answers, but are simultaneously silent. We stay silent for at least ten minutes. While I wait for Neda to say something, I text Bonnie and let her know that this was not the reaction I had hoped for. All I want is for my sister to acknowledge that this is not a choice, and that I am doing the hardest thing I have ever had to do. “I’m so afraid.” Minutes pass until she finally responds; it feels like time has stood still.

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

***

I cannot look at my mother without a pang of guilt coursing through my body. It is a familiar feeling—for the children of Iranian parents, feeling guilt is nothing new. She smiles at me and hands me a glass of freshly squeezed orange juice and a cup of cardamom scented tea. I have to decide which to drink first, and while it seems unnecessary to indulge in both, I don’t dare to refuse my Iranian mother’s first of many tea offerings. I decide, while waiting for the hot tea to cool down, to drink the orange juice. I sneak a glance at my mother who smiles at my calculated choice. I haven’t seen her this content in quite some time. Not since before her divorce from my father. . . . I know that is only part of the reason why she remains so jaded, the other part has to do with Neda moving across the state to marry a man who promised they’d move back, but never did.

My mother is particularly cheery this morning, but I know that she’s putting on a show for me, wanting me to believe that everything is okay in her secluded world. She is also excited because it is a week before my birthday and one of the few times every year where she seems to be truly joyful. Each year, in ritualistic fashion, she pretends that she cannot remember the exact date I was born. She keeps up the ruse until the minute before midnight, where I “conveniently” find the surprise she’s been hiding from me all week. This happens every year, and each year I pretend that I don’t catch on. I do this because my mother loves me. She loves me so much that I never had to question where my next meal would come from. She loves me so much that we celebrated Christmas every year, just because I wanted to—even when it meant she had to wait in line on Christmas Eve to get me that brand new Cabbage Patch Snacktime Doll, Sadie, to have something to put under the tree. She loves me so much that I never had to wonder why I only had one parent to love me.

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

“So, how is school?”

I don’t have a chance to respond before she speaks again.

“Vy don’t you have ch boyfriend, Shadee Jan?”

***

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

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

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

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

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

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

I think of the time when I had tried to convince my neighbor, Annabel, to “marry” me so that we could run away from home and create a life outside of Orange County’s conservative walls and far from the restrictive views of my Iranian family. We were nine. She said no. Even now, I remember vividly how brutal the mock rejection felt in my soul. Sometimes, I allow my imagination to get the best of me, and I wonder what would have happened if, even in jest, she had accepted my proposal. Would we have had a fake ceremony amid the West Valencia apartment homes in Fullerton, California? Would we have stood together in the gazebo directly across from the jungle gym in the communal playground or made rings made of crabgrass or exchanged vows promising to love each other as long as we both were home by curfew? I imagine what would have happened had she said yes. But mostly, I am glad that she didn’t.

***

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

***

(RE)TELLING MY STORY

My story is derived from years of questioning. Years of wondering whether the pictures on my wall adorning Sara Ramirez and a half-naked Britney Spears would ever give me away. Years of worrying whether my mother would accidentally open the wrong drawer of the dresser next to my bed and discover stacks of books with titles like “Butch/Femme Inside Lesbian Gender” or “I Can’t Think Straight.” This burden centers my narrative in the deeply rooted beliefs of my culture. And while I will always have a place in my heart for beauty, family values, and love that come with being an Iranian, I have admittedly resented living a life of fear within the binary of visibility and invisibility. I have lived as both the individual and amongst the collective and I have oscillated my existence in relation to the Iranian closet for as long as I can remember. But I have realized over time that that closet door is not meant to open or shut, the way we might understand the Western “closet” to function. Instead, I have figured out how to live my life in way that make sense of the liminal realities of my existence. I have learned that this particular closet has sliding doors. Being a queer Iranian American doesn’t mean having to choose one or the other – it means embracing all the ways my experiences have lead to me to where I am today. I am more proud now of all of the intersections of my identity in a way that I never thought possible. And honestly, I wouldn’t trade that for anything.

For the longest time, I did not have the opportunity to read a story like my own. I constantly searched for pieces that were similar, but never quite close enough. I feel accountable for sliding open my door for someone else. By sharing my story, I hope to have created a space for others to be heard. Though the choice to publish this article initially with my name and in an open access venue (Liminalities) has been something I continue to grapple with, I wholeheartedly believe in the responsibility placed on those who have access to visibility and possession of social reality to create a pathway for others to follow. What I have been most surprised at since the publication of this essay, is the immense support I have received from colleagues, students, and otherwise strangers. Often it resonates with those who otherwise feel that their stories have not always been centered. Either way, it has meant something for some, and as a scholar, that is the best I can hope for.

I never thought I would muster the courage to disclose my sexuality with anyone until my mind and my body could no longer perform that silence, until I had to tell my story not only narratively, but emotionally,
socially, physically. Until I had to trespass. Since writing this piece, and its Consequential publication, I have given it to my mother to read including the original letter. I’ve also since written a subsequent article that explicates the reverberations of both writing this piece and its effects on my mother and I’s experiences (Abdi, 2019). We are working on our relationship. It’s not easy, and every day we struggle with what her world will see in me (and in her) if they find out. We have good days and bad days. Days when she doesn’t believe me, and other days when she does. Through unintentional criticality, she has become increasingly invested in the belief that sexuality is a spectrum, which in and of itself enthralls me. Our familial story is still being written, but I know now that it is because of these moments, we must continue to share largely untold narratives because we “believe they do something in the world to create a little knowledge, a little humanity, a little room to live and move in and around the constraints and heartbreaks of culture and categories, identities and ideologies” (Adams & Jones, 2011, p.109). Calafell (2010) articulates this point by affirming the “importance of the narrative voice to give flesh to an intersectional perspective to identity” (p. 355). She continues by saying that “narrative does not allow the nuances of intersectionality to be flattened by dry and meaningless numbers that quickly erase the humanness and complexity of people and their ordinary but extraordinary experiences” (p. 355).

I frequently question my place in this world, especially, as a queer woman of color. However, it is through scholarship, discourse, and narrative trespass that I have been able to grow in my own journey of finding voice and visibility. It is our responsibility to continue to perform and write about our identities and our Othered selves, because by sharing accounts that have been historically marginalized, narrators are given a stage and an opportunity to defy the oppressive. It is through story, autoethnography, personal narrative, and narrative trespass that individuals may ascertain their position within social constructs that have insofar as told our stories for us. Similar to many

Figure 33.1 A Letter from Yesterday

Mom,

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

Mom, I’m gay.
You may have stopped reading at this point, and I’d understand that. I get that you come from a different world. That you’ve grown up knowing and hearing conflicting things, and that you’ve learned the same backwards lessons time and time again. But I also know that you’ve adopted. You’ve been here for thirty years, and I know that you’ve changed. I have seen you grow. And I need you to know that this doesn’t change who I am. I am smart. I am kind. I am normal! I’m still your daughter. The only difference is that I don’t have a husband. I never have, and you’ve known that. On some level, you’ve known there’s always been something different about me. That I have never colored inside the lines. I have a life that you haven’t seen a part of, and I want so badly for you to be in it. I want you to be at my wedding. I want you to be the best grandmother to my children. I want to introduce you to the people I fall in love with. And I did fall in love once, mom. And I’m so, so sorry that you weren’t part of that journey with me. I’m so sorry that you couldn’t experience the joy of watching your daughter fall in love for the first time. You know I was happy... happier than you had ever seen me. And I was, I was unreasonably happy. And then I got my heart broken, Shattered. And you weren’t there for that either. You saw my pain. You heard my Sobs. You thought you knew and that you understood. But really, you know nothing. I didn’t let you.

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

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

Your daughter,

Shadee

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

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

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

Your daughter,

Shadee
performance scholars who have written their stories for the world, my work is meant to offer a viewpoint that has been historically marginalized, prompting in-depth research into the lives of those who are generally (in)visible, oppressed, and voiceless.

NOTES

1. In this chapter, “queer” is used as a less binary descriptor of non-heterosexual.
2. Afghanistan, Brunei, Mauritania, Pakistan, Qatar, and the UAE still hold death penalty as a “legal possibility.”
3. In this chapter, the word “homosexuality” is used purposefully. I do not discount its pathologizing history, but rather it is used to emphasize Iranian legal discourse surrounding this discussion.
4. Rollet—rolled Iranian rose water cake.

REFERENCES


