

Food and Identity: The Iranian Diaspora of New Zealand

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Abstract

In this thesis, I investigate and critically analyze the relationship between foodways and identity for diasporic Iranians in New Zealand. My main objective is in-depth exploration of the role of food and foodways in (re)construction of a diasporic identity, (re)creation of a sense of belonging, and (re)building the feelings of ‘home.’

Drawing on Bourdieu’s (1977, 1979) theories of habitus, capital, practice, and field, I understand migration, in part, as a disruption of practice and habitus that occurs due to disruptions to foundational fields and ‘misalignments’ with new and emerging fields, potentially fragmenting the sense of self and leading to a heightened reflexivity and intentional identity performances as a consequence. I argue that food and food practices can be deployed as a means of attempting to create a ‘fit’ between field, capitals, dispositions, reflexivity, practice, identity constructs, and thus habitus, in especially the process of striving to achieve a new sense of belonging and feelings of ‘being at home’ in two worlds. I also demonstrate that Iranian migrants develop multiple, shifting, and evolving capital configurations which reflect their different practices in and between different social fields – in the form of a *habitus clivé* or *cleft habitus* (Friedman, 2016). This development enables Iranian migrants to effectively and innovatively operationalize their divided habitus in new sociocultural conditions, and to both consciously and unconsciously negotiate multiple, and at times contradictory, aspects of their (i) national identity (manifested in making intentional distinctions between ‘Persian’ and ‘Arab’ food; associating Iranian food and foodways with a collective, imagined, ancient past; publicly consuming ‘non-Islamic’ food items such as pork and wine as a way to cope with the existing negative stereotypical images concerning Muslims in the West); (ii) gender identity (manifested in women’s *voluntary* pursuit of the food practices that were perceived, prior to migration, as ‘oppressive,’ but were now deemed as a means of agentic liberation; women’s gaining respect, status, and symbolic capital in the community for cooking archetypical/authentic Iranian dishes; men maintaining traditional gender binaries in the domestic arena or within the Iranian community, yet publicly engaging in ‘feminine’ foodwork in front of a Western audience in order to fit in); and (iii) associated memories of home origins (manifested in deploying food-from-home(land) and collective rituals of home (i.e. *nazri*) as affective blocks of ‘home-building’ that not only reproduces the familiar, secure, communal, and hopeful ‘feelings of being at home’ (Hage, 1997; 2010) but also serve as a means of selective, remediating recollection of a sanitized and idealized version of the pre-diasporic past

which articulates the idealized genuineness of the pre-migration ways of life, thus generating a 'better' present/future in New Zealand).

I contextualize this by presenting a general description of the Iranian diaspora and their status in New Zealand, a general description of Iranian foodways in diaspora, and an analysis of the integral role of food and its symbolic dimensions in the (re)formation and (re)construction of different aspects of identity. I used ethnographic fieldwork and qualitative methods, including semi-structured, in-depth interviews, informal conversations, and participant observation in private and public spheres.

I argue that decoding the food and eating practices of migrant communities via ethnographically based research will extend the basic tenets of ethno-gastronomy and result in better and deeper understandings of the food and identity dialogics of migrant and diasporic populations. There are very few anthropological studies on the foodways of minorities and immigrant communities in New Zealand (particularly with Middle Easterners whose communities have until relatively recently been small and emerging in New Zealand). This research provides insight into effective community development strategies that could underpin the future well-being of migrants and their communities in New Zealand.

تا جهان بود از سر مردم فراز
کس نبود از راز دانش بی‌نیاز
مردمان بخرد اندر هر زمان
راز دانش را به هر گونه زبان
گرد کردند و گرامی داشتند
تا به سنگ اندر همی بنگاشتند
دانش اندر دل چراغ روشنست
وز همه بد بر تن تو جوشنست
(رودکی)

Since when the firmaments did Adam breed
No man there was who knowledge did not need.
In every age the wise have sought the road,
In every tongue, to knowledge's abode;
They gathered it and mickle it esteemed,
To engrave it on stone was worthy deemed,
For knowledge be the heart's effulgent light,
The body's armor, fending evil plight.

(Rudaki)

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Two months into my residence in Christchurch, New Zealand, I was invited by a group of Iranians (whom I had come to know shortly after my arrival) to the Persian New Year (*Nowruz*) ceremony that was going to be held in a small community center in Christchurch. Upon expressing my interest in attending, I was sent a message with some relevant information regarding the event's location, time, and planned activities which included Persian music and dance, Persian classical poetry-reading, and Persian food. In the message, there was also a call for 'tasteful ladies' who would be interested in decorating the salon with *Nowruz* ornaments. Women were also encouraged to contribute to the night by preparing authentic Persian dishes or *Nowruz* specialties that could make for a 'true Persian ambience' and would 'take us back home.'

Upon arriving at the ceremony on the night, I was greeted and welcomed by my new friends. Knowing that I was a 'food researcher,' they took me straight to the table where I was told there was 'someone you must meet.' I was then introduced to a woman in her early 60s who was presented to me as a 'culinary guru' in the Iranian community. In the few minutes that I was chatting with her, several people came to the table to either ask some 'technical' questions or applaud and commend her on her '*dastpokht*' (culinary skills) – for she had prepared some refined Iranian dishes that, as one commented, had 'put everyone else's dish to shame.' To all these complements and questions, she replied in a very humble, yet contented, manner. I then moved to my own table where I was offered, by my new friends, a complimentary glass of red wine in 'keeping with the national customs and traditions,' as well as New Year's '*ajil*' (trail mix) that was not only brought from home(land), but its 'origination in the Iranian Plateau,' made its consumption on the night an 'affirmation of Iranianness.' For the rest of the night, I occasionally found myself puzzled – for I, as an Iranian myself, was hearing for the first time about some of these food-based traditions or their *raison d'être*. For my Iranian counterparts, however, such traditions were not unfamiliar; in fact, they were so idealizingly identical that they could 'take them right back home,' making them remember and experience feelings of being at home, even though far away from it. The main themes of this thesis – namely nation, gender, and memory – formed in my mind as a result of these observations during that night.

During the course of the first year of my residence in New Zealand, I came to realize that the food practices and traditions I witnessed during that night – which were rather different from what I had witnessed back home – existed not only in Iranians' celebratory events and

‘national’ celebrations, but also in the realm of their everyday lives, food, and foodways. Of course, I was aware that the changes in Iranians’ ways of living and ways of being in New Zealand (or in any of their other diasporas, for that matter) were surely not reflected *only* in their food and foodways; however, having lived as a diasporic individual myself for some time, I had observed firsthand that for many Iranians away from home Persian food served as a cultural artefact and product, interweaving perceived pasts with aspirational futures, the constant with the transient, and the old with the new. I had observed how political and sociocultural meanings were embedded in their Iranian foods and foodways, turning the food into an indication of their multitude of relationships with other individuals, communities, and nations. The oscillating meanings that I had witnessed Iranians attach to their food and culinary practices in private and public spaces seemed to have become a favored device for the articulation of their diasporic presence, helping them continue, reject, re-evaluate, or redefine different aspects of their identity. This prior knowledge, coupled with my personal fascination with the sociocultural aspects of food, especially in the context of migration (in which I myself had been situated for the past decade), formed the main research questions of this thesis: how are Iranians’ food and foodways (and the meanings attached to them) maintained, transformed, or replaced with new ones (particularly with ‘Kiwi’ ones) in New Zealand? How and why do these changes come about, and more importantly in reaction to what factors, both in host and home country, are these food traditions performed and ‘invented’? Do the notions of nation and nationhood affect these performances and inventions? What are the gender dynamics within domestic and public sphere and how are these different from home(land)? How does food (particularly ‘food-from-homeland’) help Iranians achieve a sense of security, belonging, and nostalgia and remember feelings of being at home? Are there particular foods/foodways that can, more strongly than others, generate such feelings? What is the role of food in celebratory/monumental as well as in ritual contexts?

Thus, in this thesis I investigate and critically analyze the relationship between foodways and identity for diasporic Iranians mostly resident in Christchurch, New Zealand. My main objective is in-depth exploration of the role of food and foodways in (re)construction of a diasporic identity, (re)creation of a sense of belonging, and (re)building the feelings of ‘home.’ Drawing on Bourdieu’s (1977, 1979) theories of habitus, capital, practice, and field, I understand migration, in part, as a disruption of practice and habitus that occurs due to disruptions to foundational fields and misalignments with new and emerging fields, potentially fragmenting the sense of self and leading to a heightened reflexivity and intentional identity performances as a consequence. I argue that food and food practices can be deployed as a

means of attempting to create a ‘fit’ between field, capitals, dispositions, reflexivity, practice, identity constructs, and thus habitus, especially in the process of striving to achieve a new sense of belonging and feelings of ‘being at home’ in two worlds. I also demonstrate that Iranian migrants develop multiple, shifting, and evolving capital configurations which reflect their different practices in and between different social fields – in the form of a habitus clivé or cleft habitus (Bourdieu, 2000; Friedman, 2016). This development enables Iranian migrants to effectively and innovatively operationalize their divided habitus in new sociocultural conditions, and to both consciously and unconsciously negotiate multiple, and at times contradictory, aspects of their (i) national identity – manifested in making intentional distinctions between ‘Persian’ and ‘Arab’ food; associating Iranian food and foodways with a collective, imagined, ancient past; publicly consuming ‘non-Islamic’ food items such as pork and wine as a way to deflect negative stereotypical images concerning Muslims in the West; and so on; (ii) gender identity – manifested in women’s *voluntary* pursuit of the food practices that were perceived, prior to migration, as ‘oppressive,’ but were now deemed as a means of agentic liberation; women’s gaining respect, status, and symbolic capital in the community for cooking archetypical/authentic Iranian dishes; men maintaining traditional gender binaries in the domestic arena or within the Iranian community, yet publicly engage in ‘feminine’ foodwork in front of a Western audience in order to fit in; and so on; and (iii) associated memories of home origins – manifested, for instance, in deploying food-from-home(land) and collective rituals of home (i.e. *nazri*) as affective blocks of ‘home-building’ that not only reproduce the familiar, secure, communal, and hopeful ‘feelings of being at home’ (Hage, 1997; 2010), but also serves as a means of selective, remediating recollection of a sanitized and idealized version of the pre-diasporic past which articulates the idealized genuineness of the pre-migration ways of life, thus generating a ‘better’ present/future in New Zealand.

I contextualize this, throughout the thesis, by presenting a general description of the Iranian diaspora and their status in New Zealand, together with a general description of Iranian foodways in diaspora, and an analysis of the integral role of food and its symbolic dimensions in the (re)formation and (re)construction of different aspects of identity and belonging, particularly nationalistic ([Chapter 3: Nation](#)) and gendered ([Chapter 4: Gender](#)) intersections. I then turn my attention to memory work ([Chapter 5: Memory](#)) or remembering (both nostalgically and critically) a home from the past and the ways in which Iranians engage in practices of home-building (both pragmatic and aspirational) in the present and for the future. I use ethnographic fieldwork and qualitative methods, including semi-structured, in-depth interviews, informal conversations, and participant observation in private and public spheres.

Having observed firsthand the paramount and rather visible role of food in the life, experience, and identity maintenance/expression of diasporic Iranians, I was rather surprised, upon deciding to write my PhD thesis on the topic, to see that no more than a couple of studies to date had discussed or examined the topic from a sociocultural perspective within the Iranian diaspora.¹ Furthermore, there was also a lack of *any* detailed studies concerning the Iranian diaspora in New Zealand (not only on food, but in general), with the exception of three doctoral theses in the fields of tourism (Etemaddar, 2014), linguistics (Gharibi, 2016), and politics (Kooshesh, 2019), though none in the discipline of Anthropology. My aim in this thesis, is therefore, to narrow this gap and to also contribute to New Zealand's anthropological research into food and eating by integrating an examination of Iranian diasporic food and foodways and bring forth the processes of identity-formation that are associated with these food and foodways for migrants and diasporic groups. As Abbots (2016) notes, the significant contribution that studies of food and migration make is not only to the anthropology of food, but also to "our understanding of the ways in which the globalized movement of people, objects, narratives and ideas is experienced and negotiated" (p. 115). I argue that decoding the food and eating practices of migrant communities via ethnographically based research extends the basic tenets of ethno-gastronomy and results in better and deeper understandings of the food and identity dialogics of migrant and diasporic populations. Given that there are very few anthropological studies on the foodways of minorities and immigrant communities in New Zealand (particularly with Middle Easterners whose communities have, until relatively recently, been small and emerging in New Zealand), this research provides insight into effective community development strategies that could underpin the future well-being of migrants and their communities in New Zealand.

Food, Identity, and Diaspora

The importance that societies and cultures assign to food and its associated practices is far beyond its physiological properties or that food is a biological necessity. Rather, as Lupton (1996) notes, food and food practices "serve to mark boundaries between social classes, geographic regions, nations, cultures, genders, life-cycle stages, religions and occupations, to distinguish rituals, traditions, festivals, season and times of day" (p. 1). In this sense, food becomes a very complex, and at times contradictory, modality with tremendous potential as a means of measuring social praxis and changes as it is linked to broader issues at both micro

¹ Namely: Harbottle (2000) among British Iranian communities, and Sanadjian (2015) among Iranians in Germany.

and macro levels of different societies (Duruz, 2010). That is why many scholars from different disciplines have utilized food and foodways as a means to understand socio-cultural, economic, and historical structures, institutions and practices between and within different individuals and communities (e.g. Belasco, 2006; Bell & Valentine, 1997; Douglas, 1986; Mintz, 1985; Pilcher, 2006).

While there is some suggestion of innate preferences for certain tastes (e.g. sweetness) and a rejection of others (e.g. bitterness), many scholars, such as the French anthropologist-cum-sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, are of the opinion that taste is a sociocultural construct, acquired in the social and cultural contexts in which one is brought up and socialized over time. This acquired taste, learned initially during early childhood, unfolds and evolves over the course of lifetimes as an internalized, embodied, often unconscious part of one's preferences, choices, and particular ways of being – including what foods are liked or disliked, what food practices are considered appropriate or inappropriate, and so on. In other words, those tendencies toward particular ways of being (and particularly, ways of cooking and eating) – what Bourdieu calls '*habitus*' – become part of one's common sense which, though not entirely *determining* practices, will nevertheless routinely structure them to a great degree. As long as this set of dispositions fits and aligns with the social world of which it is the product (for example, in the familiar sociocultural setting of a migrant's origin homeland), one feels in control like a "fish in water" (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 127). However, as soon as the said 'fit' and alignments break down in the face of 'new' situations (for example, in the unfamiliar, disruptive sociocultural settings of diaspora), one may lose control and feel like a "fish out of water" (p. 127). In a familiar setting, certain practices can be utterly taken for granted – part of what Bourdieu calls *doxa*. However, the lack-of-fit situations compel and create space for reflexive questioning of, and conscious reflections on, the very same practices that used to 'go without saying,' potentially giving rise to the adoption and/or innovation of different norms, values, and practices than those acquired in the past.

This theoretical perspective can be readily applied to the context of migration and diaspora where a lack of fit between practices acquired in the home(land) and those prevalent in the new society may emerge, giving rise to conscious reflections on structures, institutions, and practices. Upon such conscious reflections, the migrant/diasporic individual may feel, on the one hand, the need to adjust the 'old' ways to the 'new' ones in order to function in, and assimilate and belong to, the new environment, while, at the same time, may have the urge to preserve the 'old' ways (often in significantly idealized and sometimes innovative ways) in

order to maintain a sense of distinction, recreate experiences of home, and thus create a sense of continued belonging to one's *own* community (both homeland and diasporic). The outcome is the construction of a grafted or hybrid identity which encompasses "a particular set of dualistic dispositions" (Guarnizo, 1997, p. 311) and what Bourdieu (2004) calls a 'habitus clivé' (or 'cleft habitus') – a sense of self "torn by contradiction and internal division" (Bourdieu, 2000, p. 16) – that both consciously and unconsciously draws upon and combines elements of both home and host country – and which is the ethnographic, theoretical, and analytical foci of this thesis.

Food and foodways, in this regard, can be useful means to critically evaluate and examine such conscious and unconscious processes as well as the ways in which fluid identities are performed in the context of migration and diaspora where identity-construction may be a more conscious and problematic process (Harbottle, 2000). As Kalcik (1984) notes, food can be "manipulated consciously or unconsciously to make a statement about identity" (p. 54) not only about the self and the group of which one is a member, but also the identity with which one would like to be perceived by others. In other words, what one eats does not only show who one is, but also who one wishes to be. This is evident in the many scholarly works around hybridized foodways in the anthropology of food, addressing larger issues of acculturation, incorporation, or rejection (e.g. Beyers, 2008; Caplan, 1997; Harbottle, 2000; Tuomainen, 2009). Although food and foodways that migrants carry with them from their original home have been noted as one the cultural traits most resistant to change (e.g. Cardona, 2004; Gabaccia, 1998; Leppman, 2005), practical issues around acquiring origin homeland foodstuffs and migrants' consequent agency and creativity often gives rise to the production of hybrid food and foodways (Renne, 2007), contributing to the fluid understanding and enactment of their identities. In this sense, migrants' multiple and hybridized subjectivities are manifested, among other things, in their food and foodways that "can simultaneously constitute, and reflect, a range of, sometimes contradictory, attachments that intersect with ethnicity, class, gender, age and nationality" (Abbots, 2016, p. 120).

Iranian Identity: A Background

The idea of Iran as a religious, cultural, and ethnic reality can be traced back to 2600 years ago (Gnoli, 2006). The inscriptions of *Darius I* and *Xerxes* mention 'Iranian language' as the language of Persians, refer to *Ahura Mazda* as 'the god of Iranians,' and consider the

Persians and their kings as ‘Iranian’ and ‘of Iranian stock’ (Gnoli, 2006). Also, in *Avesta*,² there are expressions that clearly indicate that the word ‘Iranian’ was used as an ethnic name and in its collective form³ (Schmidt, 1991) to talk about a people who were already aware of their ethnic, linguistic, and religious belonging (Gnoli, 2006).

However, it was only after the advent of the *Sassanid* dynasty in the 3rd century that Iran as a political idea came into existence (Litvak, 2017) as a result of “a convergence of interests between the new dynasty and the Zoroastrian clergy” (Gnoli, 2006, para. 4), giving rise to the idea of ‘*Iran-Shahr*’ (Kingdom of the Iranians). This convergence transformed Iran into a political state based on the twin powers of the nobility and the clergy (Smith, 2009). As a result, a sort of ‘national’ culture was formed that, being fully aware of its ‘Iranianness’ (Gnoli, 2006), was attracted to, and drew upon, its heroic past (Daryaei, 1995; Yarshater, 1971) as well as its Zoroastrian religious tradition; a culture that, although imprecise and undergoing many changes over the centuries, laid the foundation for Iranian identity for the centuries to come.

After the Muslim conquest of Iran and the fall of the *Sassanid* dynasty (the last kingdom of the Persian Empire) in 651, Islam became the official religion of Iran. However, unlike Mesopotamia, Levant, or Egypt where the Muslim conquests also led to the triumph of the Arabic language as the medium of high culture and vernacular of everyday life (Kennedy, 2007), Iranian cultural and linguistic identity survived and reemerged in a different form (Lewis, 2004). It was during the following four centuries after *this* time that a modified version of the pre-modern, Iranian identity began to appear that although impacted by Islamic influence, was heavily drawing upon pre-Islamic Iranian culture and identity (Gnoli, 2006; Yarshater, 1998).

This emerging identity that was mainly in response to the Arab invasion of Iran started during the early Abbasid era in the mid-8th century (Choksy, 2005) through the efforts of the Persian literati (many of whom were from influential bureaucratic families) and developed well into the 9th and 10th centuries with and alongside the rise of de facto autonomous Iranian dynasties⁴ who insistently identified themselves as ‘Iranian’ and, with the help of the Persian

² The primary collection of religious texts of Zoroastrianism and the chief source for religious traditions of the Persian political state before Islam.

³ For example *airyāfi*; *daij hāvō* (Iranian lands/peoples); or *airyōšayanəm* (land inhabited by Iranians).

⁴ Such as *Tahirids* (820–872) and *Saffarids* (868–903) in eastern Iran; *Samanids* (914–999) in Central Asia; *Ziyarids* (930–1090) in Caspian region; *Kakuyids* (1008–1141) in central Iran; and *Buyids* (934–1062) in southern and western Iran.

literati (particularly Ferdowsi's *Shahnameh*,⁵) were linked to pre-Islamic kings and legends through invented genealogies (Ashraf, 2006a), placing 'Iran' within a both territorial and mythological geography. This manner of constructing an Iranian identity based on territorial-mythological conceptions of Iran survived until modern times, contributing further to the construction of a distinct Iranian identity in modern times (Ashraf, 2006a).

During the period of Turkish rule in Iran, Iranian identity went through further processes of (re)constructions and (re)formations. Beginning with the reign of the *Ghaznavid* (977–1186) in the late 10th century, references to the names 'Iran' and 'Iranian' started to appear more frequently in the literary and historical works (Tetley, 2009). Major works concerning the traditional history of Iran were produced or translated from other languages to Persian, not only by Iranians, but also by prominent Arab historians (Kilic-Schubel, 2005; Hanaoka, 2016). This led to the survival of Iranian traditional history as well as helping establish the idea of the territorial and genealogical origin of the Iranian people (Ashraf, 2006a). Although references to 'Iran,' 'Iranians,' and 'Iranian kings' in this period were made in a 'historic' sense, it gradually started to be also used to refer to contemporary events, lands, and people, implying a sense of continuity in Iranian identity (Ashraf, 2006a). However, this changed during the *Saljuqids* (1037–1194), under the reign of which the Iranian society went under a further 'Islamization' as a result of the foundation of a religio-political system that combined the temporal authority of the king with the symbolic religious authority of the clergy (Ashraf, 2006a). As a consequence of this, Islamic identity in this period overshadowed the Iranian identity, and Iranian myths and legends were eclipsed with Islamic ones.

However, the Islamic orthodoxy that had cast a shadow on Iran during the reign of the Turks gradually gave its place to religious tolerance during the Mongol rule (1219–1370), particularly under the *Ilkhanate* (1256–1357), marking a new era in the history of Iranian identity. The name Iran started being used with more contemporaneous entities and the term '*keshvar-e Iran*' (the country of Iran) was used, perhaps for the first time, to indicate the contemporary kingdom of Iran (Ashraf, 2006a) alongside other kingdoms of the time such as Egypt, Byzantium, India, and China. This reinstatement of the terms 'Iran' and 'Ianzamin' which usually coexisted with a "clear geographical awareness . . . both in its totality and its constituent parts" (Ashraf, 2006a, para. 52), accompanied by the fashion of linking the traditional history to the contemporary eras, gave Iran a sense of dynastic continuity from the

⁵ 'The Book of Kings,' one of the longest epic poems (the longest written by a single poet) written by *Ferdowsi* between c. 977 and 1010 CE.

ancient time to the Mongol period, thus reconstructing a new conception of Iran's pre-modern cultural and national history.

The rise of the *Safavids* (16th – early-18th century) was yet another significant point in the construction of Iranian identity. The *Safavid* declared *Shi'ism* as the official religion of the state and called for voluntary conversion of their subjects. Mainly motivated by political aspirations, this was to grant their kingdom and their population an identity that was distinct from the other political entities in the region,⁶ all of whom adhered to *Sunni Islam* (Ashraf, 2006a; Enayat, 1982; Moazzen, 2017). Such ethno-religious distinction was further intensified when powerful and influential religious figures of the time such as Mohammad-Baqer Majlesi awarded religious merit to Persian ethnicity by claiming that “in the matter of faith, the Iranians are superior to the Arabs” (in Enayat, 2005 [1982], p. 33).⁷

This marked the beginning of a new religious as well as ethno-national identity within the geographical boundaries of the *Safavid* kings who, being proud of both their new Shi'i identity as well as their ancient Iranian identity, started to identify themselves with a combination of both. For instance, while *Safavid* kings kept identifying themselves as descendants of Persian pre-Islamic, mythical rulers (e.g. *Fereydun*, *Jamshid*, or *Keykavus*), they simultaneously created an invented genealogy that not only linked them to the Shi'i Imams as well, but also linked Shi'i Imams to maternal descendants of *Sassanid* Kings⁸—thus they popularized the myth that Shi'i Imams were in fact ‘Persian by origin,’ and Shi'ism was indeed ‘inherently Persian-Iranian’ (Litvak, 2017). Such “symbiosis of Persian and Shi'ite traditions” (Ashraf, 2006a, para. 60) was further observed in the dissemination of various Shi'i rituals (such as the commemoration of *Ashura*⁹) alongside ancient, Zoroastrian Iranian festivals (e.g. *Nowruz*,¹⁰ *Mehregan*,¹¹ *Yalda*,¹² etc.), both of which found their way into the cultural traditions of Iranians. All these factors contributed to a further blend of the national and religious

⁶ Namely the Ottoman Empire in Southeast Europe, Western Asia, and North Africa; the Moghul Empire in South Asia; and the Uzbeks in Central Asia.

⁷ As Litvak (2017) notes, “Lewis Namier’s statement that ‘religion is a sixteenth century word for nationalism,’ or that it at least served as the potential cement for what would become nationalism, applies to Safavid Iran” (p. 10). Hobsbawm (1990) also regards religion as the catalyst for nationalism and cites, as a prime example, the contribution of Shi'ism to the formation of Iranian national identity since the Safavids (See Hobsbawm, 1990, pp. 137).

⁸ Precisely the last Sassanid King, Yazdgerd III.

⁹ The anniversary of the death of the third Shi'i Imam, *Hussain Ibn Ali*.

¹⁰ The Persian New Year's Day.

¹¹ The Persian festival of fall.

¹² Winter solstice celebration

collective memory of Iranians and laid the foundations for an ‘Iranian-Shi’i’ identity for the coming years.

With the rise of modern concepts of nation in the late 18th century in Europe, Iran also entered this golden age of nation-building and nationalism with a historical awareness and cultural consciousness of a continuous Iranian identity (Ashraf, 2006b) and with enduring, coherent narratives and experiences of recurrent pre-modern identity construction over many centuries (Hobsbawm, 1990; Smith, 1991). These ideas that were mostly an attempt to revive the ‘true’ (pre-Islamic) Iranian identity emerged with and alongside the rise of Qajar dynasty in the late-18th century (1789) and were further promoted following the introduction of modern schools¹³ as well as the printing press and book publication¹⁴ in the mid-19th century¹⁵ (Ashraf, 2006b). They eventually resulted in the rise of a romantic nationalism, constructed ‘from above’ and led by western-educated intellectuals and literati whose core narrative was a romantic view of the pre-Islamic past, a distaste for the Muslim-Arab conquest of Iran, and a willingness to embrace Western norms and values (Fazeli, 2005).¹⁶

The narrative of Iranian nationalism during this period praised ancient Iran – its political institution, language and religion – and viewed Iran’s pre-Islamic period as an era of power and splendor which came to an end with the nation’s invasion by Muslim-Arabs who ‘forced’ Islam on Iranian people, and eventually took Iran to an era of political and spiritual weakness. Such narratives often proudly placed emphasis on how Iran, despite having to become a Muslim state, resisted becoming an Arab state by preserving its cultural identity and, most importantly, its language.¹⁷ Thus, the emerging nationalist narratives were frenetic in its efforts to distance themselves from Arabs (and, by association, Islam) by portraying Arab culture as backward, despotic, and carnal, and contrasting it with the civilized, intelligent, and sophisticated culture of the Iranians. Influenced by orientalism and the European doctrines of Aryanism, nationalists also stressed commonality with the admired Europeans by underlining,

¹³ Such as *Dar ol-Fonun* (Polytechnic Institute) and *Madreseh-ye Olum-e Siyasi* (The School of Political Science)

¹⁴ Most of these titles and newspapers were devoted to pre-Islamic Iran and representing the nationalistic ideas of the Neo-Zoroastrian movement and disseminating romantic nationalism.

¹⁵ This corresponds to development of nationalism in 19th-century Europe which has been acknowledged as the by-product of the development of the printing press (Anderson, 1983) as well as the progress of schools and universities (Hobsbawm, 1962).

¹⁶ It was during this time that the terms ‘mellat’ and ‘melliyat’ started to be used for the first time as concepts referring to ‘nation’ and ‘nationality’ respectively, transforming the identity of Iranian people from ‘subjects’ (*ra’aya*) to ‘citizens’ (*shahar-vandan*).

¹⁷ They even prompted a movement to ‘purify’ the Persian language of Arabic words – which, of course, proved impracticable.

for example, linguistic kinship of Persian with French and English due to their common Indo-European roots.

Such ‘historical’ narratives based on the Aryan myth and Indo-European hypotheses stayed fairly consistent through to the 20th century and heavily inspired and constituted the formal ideological framework of the ideology of the Pahlavi regime (1925–1979) and their state, which deployed, and put into practice, a kind of “Aryan and Neo-Achaemenid nationalism”¹⁸ (Bausani, 1975, p. 46) to establish an ‘authentic’ Iranian identity – that was, in the Pahlavi’s cultural ideologies, very consistent with Western culture (due to both Iranians and Europeans imagined as ‘Aryans’) and quite incompatible with Arab and Islamic culture (due to Arabs being Semites). As then British ambassador Sir Anthony Parsons wrote in his 1978 annual report, the Shah had gone as far as claiming that Iran was, in fact, a member of Western Europe and that it was, according to the Shah, merely “an accident of geography” that had placed Iran in the Middle East and separated it from its ‘natural’ partners and equals (in Zia-Ebrahimi, 2016, p. 147).

This narrative maintained its influence during the entire reign of the *Pahlavis* (Motadel, 2013) and manifested itself in a number of rather radical moves by the State, including: changing the name of the country in 1935 by Reza Shah from ‘Persia’ to ‘Iran’ (literally meaning ‘The Land of Aryans’), signaling the racial kinship of Iranians with their fellow Aryans of Europe and asserting a general sense of Iranian superiority over its neighboring nations on the basis of race (Zia-Ebrahimi, 2011); assuming the title of ‘*Aryamehr*’ (meaning ‘Light of the Aryans’) by Mohammad Reza Shah in 1965, suggesting his leadership of a racially defined ethnic group (Ansari, 2012); and most importantly celebrating 2500 years of Persian monarchy at *Persepolis*¹⁹ and *Pasargadae*²⁰ in 1971 by Mohammad Reza Shah, followed by the change of Iran’s *Islamic* calendar to an invented *imperial* calendar²¹ in 1976²² as ultimate constructions and expressions of his Iranist discourse of Iranian identity (Holliday, 2003). The regime further propagated such themes both through a uniform, state-approved educational curriculum as well as mainstream media who further disseminated such attitudes among ‘ordinary’ Iranians by giving rise to continuous discussions concerning the woes of the

¹⁸ The nationalist quest to reconstruct ancient Iran with a particular focus on the *Achaemenid Empire* 550–330 BC) and its kings (particularly its founder, *Cyrus the Great* – ca. 598–530 BC), and the revival and implementation of their [often imagined] ideologies.

¹⁹ The ceremonial capital of the Achaemenid Empire, composed primarily of a group of palaces and possibly temples, intended for the purpose of celebrating festivals, especially *Nowruz* (the Persian New Year).

²⁰ The capital of the Achaemenid Empire under Cyrus the Great from 559 to 530 BC, thus Iran’s oldest capital.

²¹ Assuming the birth of Cyrus (ca. 598 BC) as its starting point.

²² The calendar was later abandoned in 1978 due to impracticality as well as the fury it stirred up among the clergy.

Iranian nation, blaming Arabs and Islam for the nation's decline, and advocating all things Western. Having already spread a sense of nationalism among the intellectuals, newspapers, and periodicals started to expand their cognitive map of readers to the entire country and refueled a nationalist consciousness and discourse also among the ordinary people, and, in doing so, inscribed, among all classes of society, a certain habitus that was culturally continued and was passed down, consciously or semi-consciously, to future generations of Iranians in an active and reciprocal manner.

However, these rather radical policies of Westernization and disregard for Islamic aspects of Iranian identity were not received well – neither among the majority Muslim population of Iran, nor among the secular, both of whom started to consider the Shah a ‘puppet of the West’ (Brumberg, 2001). This, coupled with the political suppression, the country’s deteriorating economic conditions in the mid-70s,²³ and excessive extravagance, corruption, and elitism of the Shah triggered a popular uprising and opposition to the Pahlavi regime (Amuzegar, 1991) that was “backed by Islamic activists . . . , the urban poor, merchants of bazaar . . . , the university students, lower-ranking government employees, and men and women of modest urban backgrounds” and financially supported, at least at the outset, by “sympathizers in the bazaar community and other religiously inclined people” (Amanat, 2017, p. 703). The oppositions eventually led to the Iranian Revolution of 1979 which, bringing down the Pahlavi regime, abolished the institution of monarchy and created instead the Islamic Republic which considered the ‘Governance of the Jurist’ (*‘velayat-e faqih’*) as the only legitimate ruler of people in an Islamic state.

As the revolution unfolded and turned Iran into an ‘Islamic Republic,’ it gradually, yet blatantly, became clear that the ‘Islamic’:

meant not merely respect for Islamic moral values in a secular constitutional framework. Nor did it mean merely honoring a national icon in the person of Ayatollah Khomeini. [Rather,] it . . . meant . . . a radical state with theocratic underpinnings, or more accurately, a hierocracy headed by an authoritarian guardian jurist and buttressed by an oligarchy with militant clergy as its core. (Amanat, 2017, p. 742)

Thus, deploying modern means of dominance and control, the new regime’s clerical elite and its subservient lay subjects quickly utilized intimidating and violent tactics (Amanat,

²³ The rise of cost of living, persistent inflation, urban unemployment, and accelerating gap between the rich and poor, to name a few.

2017), suppressing all the oppositions with at least 900 executions taking place between January 1980 and June 1981 (Bakhsh, 1985). The secular nationalism of the Pahlavi state was transformed and developed a radically-religious focus for the new regime. The state definition of the ‘core nation’ which was, during the radically-modernist Pahlavi, based on a civilizational and linguistic understanding, took an entirely religious character (Yesiltas, 2016). Instead of promoting Iranians as a ‘pure Aryan race’ and propagating pre-Islamic culture through the state-controlled media and the education system, the new regime took Islam as the focal symbol of identity between the state and the people (Zimmt, 2015). It was after *this* time that ‘religious nationalizing’ was promoted as the primary dynamic of state-society relations and religious identity started to be recognized as supranational (Yesiltas, 2016). It was particularly collective expressions of ‘Muslimness’ (in particular, Shi’i faith) that were strongly promoted by the state, in attempts to further transform the Iranian collective identity into a religious (Islamic) one and dominate official and public spheres with such narratives while suppressing alternative narratives and modes of identification (Mozaffari, 2014). As a result of such continual suppression and prosecution of any opposing cohorts and individuals by the new regime, and the subsequent eight-year war with Iraq, many Iranians fled Iran to the West and beyond.

The rapid replacement of past ‘national’ symbols of collective identification with new ‘religious’ ones dictated by the new regime was reflected, especially in the first decade after the revolution, in various scales from everyday aspects of people’s lives (such as hairstyles,²⁴ outfits,²⁵ foods,²⁶ and even the use of verbal²⁷ and non-verbal²⁸ language) to more nationwide issues such as ordering the government employees to participate in religious rituals²⁹ or changing streets’ and monuments’ names as well as the official name of the country³⁰ and its flag.³¹ According to the Islamic republic regime, the ‘authentic Iranian identity’ could only be achieved when and if Iranians returned to the ‘embrace of Islam’ (*‘aghush-e Islam’*) and became true and committed Muslims. The idea of ‘martyrdom’ (*shahadat*) was added to this

²⁴ For example: men being warned against ‘Western-inspired’/‘unconventional’ hairstyles/facial hair (e.g. ponytail, mullet, etc.).

²⁵ For example: women being commanded to wear somber-colored scarves and mantillas in public; men being warned off against wearing shorts or ties.

²⁶ For example: alcohol and pork sale and consumption being pushed underground; non-alcoholic beers becoming a mainstay.

²⁷ For example: the use of ‘Islamic’ discourse (such as ‘*salamon alaykom*,’ ‘*en-sha-allah*,’ ‘brother/sister,’ etc.) being promoted.

²⁸ For example: shaking hands with both hands or avoiding direct eye contact between opposite sexes being encouraged.

²⁹ For example: daily prayers becoming mandatory in government offices; Friday prayer becoming mandatory for military personnel.

³⁰ from ‘Iran’ to ‘*Islamic Republic of Iran*’

³¹ The ‘Lion-and-Sun’ emblem at the center part of the previous flag replaced with the ‘Allah’ emblem.

new paradigm during the eight years of Iran-Iraq war (1980–1988)³² which had a transformative effect on Iranian society and their collective identity at large:

The experience of political isolation and the singlehanded resistance against the enemy rekindled a sense of self-reliance that endured even the callous stubbornness of the leader of the Islamic Republic. It is as if the majority of the Iranians chose to memorialize the trauma and tribulation of a ghastly war as reaffirmation of their national resolve. (Amanat, 2012, pp. 24–25)

After Iran accepted the ceasefire in 1988, the Iranian regime continued its ‘purification’ process to cleanse the ‘impurities’ and ‘pollutants’ of the ‘outsiders’ by promoting a populist brand of folk religiosity to consolidate its institutional base (Amanat, 2012); however, having suffered from a human loss of approximately half a million (Razoux, 2015) and a financial loss of roughly 500 billion dollars (Karsh, 2009), the regime shifted its focus from the rhetoric of blood and sacrifice to a culture of *ritualistic* cleansing that ideologized a resistance against the ‘cultural invasion’ (*tahajom-e farhangi*) of ‘our’ Iranian culture (Amanat, 2012, p. 25). However, despite the systematic and prolonged investments of the Islamic Republic to Islamize Iran and to also forge a new cultural identity for Iranians in the years after the revolution, such attempts were only partially successful and at a diminishing rate. As Amanat (2012) notes:

True, the postrevolutionary generations by and large are more attached than the Pahlavi era to such [religious] symbols and rituals. . . . Yet, staunch supports of the Islamic republic aside (and those sectors who financially and otherwise benefit from the regime), there exists below the surface a defused but deep level of skepticism. Among a large sector of the urban middle classes – now more than 75 percent of population – exists an almost endemic defiance of ideological Islam. Among the intellectuals and educated public a vast majority seem to be questioning the very idea of Islam as prime building block of Iranian society. (p. 25)

Discussing the findings of three national surveys carried out in 2000–2001 in Egypt, Iran, and Jordan, Moaddel and Azadarmaki (2002) demonstrated that although Iran had the larger Muslim population with the least secular state among the three countries, Iranians placed the least emphasis on religion³³ compared to Egyptians and Jordanians. They interpreted this as a “shift away from fundamentalist beliefs in contemporary Iran” (p. 304), concluding that

³² Frequently referred in media as ‘the battle of truth against falsehood’ (*jang-e haq hālāt-e batel*)

³³ In terms of the significance of religion in daily life, spiritual needs, participation in religious services, attitudes toward religious institutions, attitudes toward (the non-Muslim) culture of the West.

“the experience of having lived for more than two decades under an Islamic fundamental regime has had a counterproductive effect, making Iranians less religious” (p. 303) and instead, “more nationalist” (p. 313) with 89% considering themselves ‘very proud’ of their national identity. Interestingly, when they conducted the same survey asking the same questions in 2005 (Moaddel, 2010), the results showed an increase in the percentage of Iranians who identified as ‘Iranian, above all’³⁴ (42% in 2005, compared to 34% in 2000), yet a significant decrease in the percentage of Iranians who were ‘very proud’ of being Iranian (64% in 2005, compared to 89% in 2000). Moaddel concluded that this was related both to the strict social control of the Islamic regime of Iran over the past two decades as well as the post-9/11 negative attitudes toward Iranians who have been since portrayed by the Western media and thought by the Western mainstream as Islamic fundamentalists (Farhi, 2007), thus particularly exposing those living in diaspora to prejudice and discrimination in their host countries.

One of the consequences of such an increased dissatisfaction with the Islamic regime among the ‘ordinary’ Iranians both in and outside Iranian borders, was the re-rise of the Aryanist discourse that, as mentioned earlier, had already been embedded within Iranians’ national habitus to the point of becoming “the basis of Persian identity and the Iranian nation-statism in the twentieth century” (Asgharzadeh, 2007, p. 76). Thus, “In [today’s] Iran, the so-called ‘racial’ kinship of Iranians with their fellow Aryans of Europe still permeates parts of popular, cultural, political and historical discourses of identity [and] ancient bas-reliefs and linguistic similarities are cited at length to prove the point” (Zia-Ebrahimi, 2011, p. 446). Like earlier times, anti-Arab/Muslim sentiments and a rather unfavorable attitude toward them have become strong components of Iranians’ discourse and ideas (Zia-Ebrahimi, 2016). In the popular belief of many Iranians (including a number of participants of this study) Iran’s demotion from its ‘high rank’ and its downfall into ‘degeneration’ only occurred *because* the ‘desert-dwelling’ Arabs ‘invaded’ Iran and ‘forced’ their religion, Islam, onto Iranians.³⁵

This way of thinking is amplified and becomes more visible among diasporic Iranians, especially those residing in Western countries, for whom:

the identification with Aryan roots takes on renewed importance, as [diasporic] Iranians want to distance themselves from their religious background, seeing Islam as responsible for . . . all of Iran’s ills: its continuing third-world country status, its

³⁴ As opposed to ‘Muslim/Arab/Turk/Kurd/Beluch/etc., above all.’

³⁵ The quoted words were used by different participants on different occasions.

oppressive traditionalism, the Iranian revolution . . . [and the consequent] exile of hundreds of thousands of diaspora Iranians. (Wagenknecht, 2015, p. 56)

Furthermore, the stereotypical image of Iranians as Muslim fundamentalists further enforces ‘Persian identity’ discourses and ideas among the diasporic Iranians, many of whom (including the participants of this study), as a defensive strategy and coping mechanism, make conscious attempts to 1) ‘disidentify’ as Muslims and identify, instead, with Iran’s non-Islamic past; 2) distinguish and disassociate themselves from Arabs (particularly ‘Muslim’ Arabs); and 3) construct a cherished historical ‘kinship’ with Europeans. In other words, in order to ‘fit in’ and avoid being discriminated against in their diasporic lives, they develop and reconstruct identities through the purview of the identity developed throughout centuries by Iranian nationalism.

Iranian Diaspora

As mentioned in the previous section, the Iranian Revolution of 1979 can be recognized as the starting point of the contemporary Iranian diaspora, both empirically and geographically (McAuliffe, 2005). This is not to say that there were no Iranians living abroad prior to the revolution. In fact there were about 18,000 Iranians living in USA, Germany, Canada, and Sweden in the 1960s and 67,000 in the 1970s (Hakimzadeh, 2006).³⁶ However, it was only *after* the Revolution that a significant population left Iran, including military personnel, religious minorities, and families closely associated with the monarchy who fled Iran to avoid persecution. This was followed by the migration of socialist and liberal elements, young men fleeing conscription during the Iran-Iraq war, and young women (and their families), escaping overly confining gender restrictions such as forced wearing of hijab, diminished educational opportunities, and the enforcement of discriminatory laws against women (Hakimzadeh, 2006). As a result of all these factors, the population of Iranians abroad quadrupled in only ten years, reaching roughly 300,000 in the 1980s. This was followed by a third wave of immigration, beginning roughly from 1995 and continuing until present by two very distinctive populations: one cohort was a continuation of a previous trend consisting of highly-skilled and educated individuals who left Iran for the purpose of better education possibilities or doing research and teaching in foreign (mostly Western) universities (the majority of Iranians of New Zealand, and thus interlocutors of this thesis, fall under this cohort), and the other cohort consisted of economic refugees and working-class labor migrants who were mostly less educated and less

³⁶ According to the Statistical Center of Iran, the total population of Iran in the 1960s and 1970s was 18 million and 25 million respectively.

skilled than the former cohort. This wave, unlike the two previous waves, was caused by “economic crisis, deteriorating human rights record, diminishing opportunities, and the enduring tension between reformist and conservative factions” (Hakimzadeh, 2006, para. 23). As a result of these three waves of immigration, a rapid dispersal of Iranians took place worldwide in the last 35 years, creating a global population of the Iranian diaspora estimated to be between 4 to 5 million (Axworthy, 2013), with the majority concentrated in several key urban centers, namely Los Angeles, Toronto, London, Hamburg, Stockholm, Dubai, Kuala Lumpur, and Sydney (Malek, 2016). However, factors such as “inadequate national counts, the continued unofficial status of undocumented Iranians, and the challenge of how to count second- and third-generation Iranians” (Malek, 2016, p. 24) has complicated accurate population statistics and demographics on this particular diaspora. Another factor that adds to this complexity is that within the Iranian diaspora there coexist various ethnic diasporas (e.g. Armenians, Assyrians, Kurds, etc.) and religious diasporas (e.g. Baha’is, Jews, Zoroastrians, etc.) associated with multiple diasporic communities who sometimes choose to exclude themselves from an Iranian *national* diaspora and identify themselves with their ethnic or religious background (Barry, 2018; Mobasher, 2007; Rahimieh, 2015).

Studies on Iranian diaspora often name ‘longing for Iranianness’ as a constant factor in shaping the Iranian diaspora (Mostafavi Mobasher, 2018); however, there are still debates and negotiations about *what* constitutes ‘Iranianness,’ with most discussions revolving around questions of Islam and secularism which continue to divide and decide the Iranian community relations in diaspora (Spellman-Poots & Gholami, 2018). Iranianness is not anymore merely defined as *being Iranian* and speaking the Persian language, but has changed meaning from its traditional-symbolic to its emotive-symbolic form, that is *feeling Iranian* (Ansari, 2011). Today, Iranians have not only become self-aware and attuned to the immediate everyday realities of life and the influences of their ‘new homes,’ but they also have become, thanks to globalized mobility and online communication, increasingly conscious and more informed of the histories and conditions of their compatriots in other cities and countries (Mohabbat-Kar, 2015). As a result, the Iranian map today is not limited to its geographical boundaries, but beyond, spanning from the American and Canadian to European and Australasian cities and capitals, forming a newer and wider *transnational* community in which identifications are negotiated differently and the sense of belonging is not only to the nation state, but to a cross-border community outside of Iran – that is the Iranian diaspora.

An Overview of Iranians in New Zealand

According to data from the census in 2013,³⁷ the Iranian population of New Zealand has been estimated at 3,195 (M = 53.1%; F = 46.9%) with the median age of 33.2 years. The census showed that 90.2% of this population (2,886 people) lived in the North Island, mainly Auckland region (2,418 people), while 9.8% (312 people) lived in the South Island, mainly Canterbury region (225 people) where Christchurch is the regional city. The census shows 10.4% increase in Iranian population in New Zealand compared to that in 2006 which compares with an increase of 34% between 2001 and 2006.

The Iranian diaspora in New Zealand is not as large as those in the US, UK and Scandinavian countries. However, just like them it is diverse and heterogeneous in terms of religion, gender, education, and motivation and timing for departure. According to the census, while 26.7% (825 people) of Iranians stated that they had no religion and 6.7% objected to answering the religion question, the majority (68% or 2,100 people) affiliated at least with one religion, mainly Islam (45.1% or 1,392 people), followed by the Baha'i Faith (10.3% or 318 people) and Zoroastrianism (3.9% or 120 people) as well as a small number of minority religious groups such as Assyrian Christians who migrated during the 1990s.

In terms of ethnicity, the majority (86.4% or 2,760 people) identified only with an Iranian/Persian identity, while 10.5% (336 people) identified with two, and 3.2% (102 people) with three or more ethnic groups.

In terms of education,³⁸ 91.8% (2,229 people) had a formal tertiary qualification which compared with 87.9% for the total MELAA ethnic group (Middle Eastern, Latin American and African) and 79.1% for the total New Zealand population. Of those having a formal tertiary education, 38.9% had a bachelor's degree or higher, compared with 32.6% for the total MELAA ethnic group and 20% for the total New Zealand population. Furthermore, 29.3% (M = 49.8%; F = 50.2%) were also participating in either full-time or part-time study, which compared with 30% for the total MELAA ethnic group and 14.9% for the total New Zealand population.

³⁷ The *Ethnic Group Profiles* section from the 2018 census was not yet available by the time this thesis had to be submitted. All the statistics are therefore from the 2013 census archive.

³⁸ From here on, the reported statistics are only considering people aged 15 years and over.

While 9.5% were unemployed,³⁹ 60.7% (1,575 people) were in the labor force (M = 66%; F = 54.5%), of which 76.1% were employed full-time. This compared with 8.5% unemployment and 63.3% full-time employment for the total MELAA ethnic group, and 4.8% unemployment and 67.1% full-time employment for the total New Zealand population.

The most common occupations for Iranians of New Zealand were reported to be professionals (30.4%), managers (16.9%), and technicians and trades workers (15.9%), and the most common industries to work in were accommodation and food services (11.5%), education and training (11.3%), and retail trade (11.1%). The main source of income was from wages or salary for 45.6%, with the median income being \$18,200 (men's = \$21,200; women's = \$15,300). This compared with \$19,800 for the MELAA ethnic group, \$20,100 for Asians, and \$30,900 for the European ethnic group who had the highest median personal income of the major ethnic groups. Among those employed, 53.6% received an annual income of less than \$20,000 and 9.7% received an annual income of more than \$70,000.

In terms of family composition, 80.0 % lived as members of a family, of which most (59.9%) were a couple with child(ren). This compared with 82.3% for the Middle Eastern ethnic group (69.1% couples with child(ren)), and 78.6% for New Zealand European ethnic group (53.9% couple with child(ren)). Also, 74.3% of Iranians reported doing unpaid household work such as cooking, repairs, gardening, looking after a child, etc. for their own household, with women doing more unpaid work than men (85.7% compared to 73%). This compared with 75.5% for the total MELAA ethnic group and 85.7% for the total New Zealand population.

Sample

Since moving to New Zealand in 2015, I met, officially and unofficially, roughly 140 Iranian individuals across New Zealand in my personal capacity as well as a researcher, 88 of whom became involved in my research in one way or another. Of this, I recorded (either in the form of notes or digital recordings) some informal conversations with 78 (F = 47; M = 31) as well as in-depth interviews with 40 (F = 25; M = 15) individuals. I also approached a total of 31 diasporic Iranian households consisting of 62 individuals⁴⁰ either to conduct interviews, undertake participant observation, or attend private gatherings/parties, or a combination of two

³⁹ Statistics New Zealand defines an ‘unemployed’ person as someone who (1) has no paid job; (2) is working age; (3) is available for work; (4) has looked for work in the past four weeks or has a new job to start within the next four weeks. Therefore, stay-at-home parents are not considered here as ‘unemployed’ as they often do not meet the last two requirements.

⁴⁰ This includes minor (under 18) individuals.

or all of these (See [Appendix A](#)). In defining household, I borrowed Haviland's (2003) definition in which household was one or more people, living in the same dwelling, sharing meals or accommodation. The households I approached included those living or parenting solo (as a result of never getting married, divorce, separation, or death) as well as married couples with or without children (or without children at home). It also included a diverse range of families and individuals in terms of age, gender socio-economic status,⁴¹ occupation, education, religion, and the time of arrival in New Zealand (See [Appendix B](#)).

Building rapport and recruiting process

Being an ‘insider’ meant that I did not need (at least as much as an ‘outsider’ researcher would have needed) to go through formal institutional infrastructure or community leaders in order to gain access to the community. Nonetheless, I still needed to build rapport and become acquainted with ‘popular’ and trusted individuals within the Iranian community who could facilitate my move across boundaries. In order to achieve this, I initiated, in my individual capacity, a process of hanging out (Bernard, 2017) with Iranians during my first year in New Zealand. This process often involved meeting and conversing with Iranians mostly within informal settings such as parties, picnics, and dining out. There were particularly two individuals who, as a result of having lived in Canterbury region for quite a long time, were well known among the Iranian community and had a vast network of Iranian friends. Through them, and relying on my social know-how of the particular field I was situated in, I managed to establish, over the first year of my stay in New Zealand, “sufficiently close bonds to avoid mistrust and misinformation” (de Garine, 2004, p. 23).

This level of intimacy and trust was not achieved only through ‘hanging out’ with Iranians, but also through actively listening to them, showing respect and empathy, and a commitment to their well-being (Kawulich, 2005), as well as through giving something back to the community as a means of reciprocity (Kawulich, 2005; Bernard, 2017). To that end, I tried to dedicate as much time and energy as I was able to the community and offered help wherever I saw fit, be that giving brief tours around the city to the ‘newcomers,’ sharing my IT skills with those needing ‘tech support,’ volunteering in the organization of leisure activities,

⁴¹ I did not ask any of the participants at any stage of the research about their annual income as this, though producing valuable data, could jeopardize my position in the field. So, judging their socioeconomic status is simply an assumption on my part based on their employment status and the type of industry/profession in which they were employed.

making home-made cookies or Iranian sweets, or dedicating time and physical labor to preparing and serving food in gatherings and events.

I found building such rapport and involvement in the community to be of the utmost importance as I clearly observed how it could affect the generation of data; despite being an ‘insider,’ my encounters and interviews with those individuals with whom I had not built a proper rapport and trust suffered from occasional ‘tensions’; the most obvious forms of these were when participants simply refused to reveal certain information or when they implied, either verbally or non-verbally (through subtle body language), that they wished for the interviews (or merely my presence) to be over as soon as possible. This never occurred in my encounters with those individuals with whom I had a more ‘equal’ relationship (Medina, 2004) who often expressed themselves more freely and provided fuller answers and a richer anecdotal material with illustrative examples, and, in many cases, contributed to the research far beyond what I initially expected.

Data Generation

In conducting my fieldwork, I took advantage of the three primary methods in social anthropology, namely semi-structured interviews, conversational interviews, and participant observation.

i. In-depth, semi-structured interviews

During the course of my fieldwork, I conducted 28 in-depth interviews in total with 40 individuals either in joint sessions ($n = 12$) or with just a single member of the household ($n = 16$). I always suggested that interviewees choose the location of the interviews themselves to enhance both agency and convenience for them with the hope of generating fuller data. A great majority of interviews ($n = 18$) occurred in interviewees’ residences upon their invitation, while the rest took place in their work places ($n = 4$) or in public spaces ($n = 6$) including an Iranian restaurant. The interviews took an average time of two hours, with the longest one being 195 minutes and the shortest one being 58 minutes.

Using the snowball method, I simply started the interviews with those I knew and then asked those individuals to introduce me to other members and households in their networks who might be interested in taking part in my research. I kept on snowballing until I reached a point where the data was repeating itself (Mason, 2010) and thus approaching more individuals

for interviews would possibly not shed any further light on the matter as a result of data saturation (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

The majority of interview data was generated by adult, married females between the age of 24 and 34 who had arrived in New Zealand sometime between 2006 and 2015 (See [Appendix C](#)). That women formed the main source of the generated data had to do with the fact that they were usually the ones in charge of cooking and shopping and were thus more informed and had more insight on food-related aspects of their households. Minor individuals (those under 18) were rarely present during interview sessions, or even if they were present (or passing by) during some parts of the interview, I did not engage them in my interviews as I had not cleared this with the UC Human Ethics Committee. However, on a very few occasions, parents themselves engaged their children in the interviews or children commented on their own when they heard that certain issues that were related or interesting to them were being discussed.

Using semi-structured interviews provided me with several methodological advantages. Firstly, I had a face-to-face interaction with participants creating the opportunity to clear up any misunderstanding and confusion instantly and efficiently, and helping me gain a deeper understanding of the validity of response as, for example, the interviewees' body language could, in many occasions, offer additional clues to what I was looking for. Secondly, depending on participants' answers, I was able to pose certain questions differently or even formulate new ones along the way to stress one or another aspect during later interviews. Thirdly, I was able to hear examples and stories based on subjects' memories and narratives of actual experiences and obtain information that I could have never known by using a questionnaire or survey. Finally, the data I generated through these interviews indirectly gave me information that I had not envisaged at the beginning and provided me with a wider framework, on which I could rely to compare my participants' statement with other data generated with participant-observation and from secondary sources such as apposite ethnographic and historical texts. All these factors enabled me to elaborate on particular points at the time or later and put them into appropriate ethnographic, historical, and analytical contexts in the later stages of my research.

For my pilot interviews, I used Hubert's (2004) interview guide ([Appendix D](#)) as a starting point, in which he mentions the most appropriate and relevant attributes that should be covered in interviews within the field of anthropology of food. I then developed and adjusted the questions so they accorded with my Iranian interlocutors and fitted the purposes of my

thesis. Since my thesis deals with diaspora and migration, I was interested in both the present and the past of interviewees, so the first part of the interviews typically dealt with the past, memories of food and eating in Iran, while the later part of the interview focused on early years in New Zealand and present-day food practices. I usually began the first part of interviews by asking interviewees to describe the food-related and eating events of a typical day when they were still living in Iran, and started the second part by asking them to describe the same in New Zealand. Although I had posed the questions about interviewees' past with a focus on their adulthood past (that is just before migration to New Zealand), many went further back in time, to their childhood days which allowed me (though I had not intended for it) to see how food habits and practices had changed and evolved in Iran. In most cases, the interviews flowed intuitively from one subject to the other without me having to instigate too much, which also determined which questions I would address next and which ones needed to be skipped altogether. Joint sessions were more dynamic (and generally more productive, too) and at times I could retreat to the background, allowing subjects to exchange views, interact, and debate with each other.

Though using semi-structured interviews proved a very valuable useful tool to me, it posed certain difficulties during the analysis stage of my thesis; for instance, comparing interviewees' answers to each other was, at times, quite difficult as they might have been asked different follow-up questions due to their different answers to the main questions. Also, the personal and biographical nature of these interviews as well as the fact that the main topic was about food, a topic that was quite varied in the particular experience of each Iranian individual, made the task of interpreting and comparing the findings rather challenging at some points.

At the beginning of each interview, I briefly explained the purpose of the interview to participants to ensure that they were fully informed of the aims and objectives of the study and asked them whether or not they were willing to participate to which they verbally consented.⁴² All interviews were recorded, labelled with name and date with their information written down in my field journal, and transcribed as soon as possible as I knew postponing transcription until the completion of the fieldwork would not allow for development of new queries as the fieldwork develops (Hubert, 2004). I also labelled my notebook with the appropriate identification code and wrote down in it all the relevant information obtained from these interviews.

⁴² The reason for this will be discussed later in this chapter under 'Ethical Issues.'

ii. Conversational interviews

As stated, I have met more than 140 Iranian individuals⁴³ across New Zealand in different capacities. Since it was neither feasible nor necessary to conduct official, in-depth, semi-structured interviews with all of these individuals, I interviewed 40 (see previous section); however, I put a great emphasis on informal exchange and conversations as they are the basis of good qualitative data recording (Hubert, 2004). These conversations took place in hugely diverse contexts ranging from private parties and public gatherings, to more ‘unofficial’ contexts⁴⁴ such as, just to name a few, the unplanned conversation I once had at a bus stop with an Iranian mother who was on her way to a supermarket, the one I had with an Iranian guest who was staying at the hotel where I worked as a receptionist, or the ones I had at the university when having lunch with fellow Iranian students. At times, these were lengthy conversations, while at other times they lasted only for a few minutes. However, what was common in all these conversational and informal exchanges was that they were always unanticipated and unstructured, with questions being generated intuitively and spontaneously from the course of discussion. I always let participants talk about food freely and informally from any angle they preferred, which resulted in generation of some of the most valuable data of my thesis. At the end, the number of adult (= above 18 years of age) individuals with whom I had notes or recording from such informal conversations reached 78 (F = 47; M = 31),⁴⁵ the views and comments of some have been included in the final draft of this thesis.⁴⁶

At the earlier stages of my research when I was not known within the local Iranian community, people participating in such informal conversation were sometimes not aware that their comments might end up in research; so whenever an important or interesting idea was raised that I thought I may want to use later, I obtained consent from participants to include their comments if necessary, to which they often agreed.⁴⁷ By the end of the second year of my research, I was fairly known by the Iranian community both in my personal capacity (i.e. an Iranian, non-religious, male PhD student in his early 30s) as well as my ‘scholarly’ capacity as a ‘food researcher,’ which rendered obtaining consent unnecessary as the subjects were then fully aware of my ongoing research and had already stated that they would not mind at all if

⁴³ Minors under 18 included

⁴⁴ Though ‘unofficial,’ these were always consented as I will explain in the next paragraph.

⁴⁵ This included some individuals with whom I also had a semi-structured interview.

⁴⁶ I also recorded (in notes or recording) occasional comments by minor (under 18) individuals (F = 3), though these were always self-generated comments or probed by their parents.

⁴⁷ In those rare cases where they objected, their comments have obviously not been mentioned anywhere in the thesis.

their comments were to appear in the research. Such a level of awareness of my research notably worked in my advantage with conversational interviews, providing me with a wealth of comments that I had not even asked for. For instance, in the later stages of my fieldwork, it was fairly common that if I greeted an Iranian acquaintance in a social situation and asked how they had been doing (even without any research-related intentions) I would hear the response ‘Not anything that could interest you!’ followed by a comment such as ‘but let me tell you something you could use in your research’ or ‘I can talk about the other day when I had some Iranian dish’ thus providing me with some ‘serendipitous’ data.

Since recording conversational interviews, given their often unanticipated nature, was not practical and at times was not even possible, I usually wrote down just a few keywords on my mobile phone to remind me later about the conversation, and wrote down detailed notes ideally not long after the conversation in order to recall the details as accurately as possible. It was at this stage that I also conducted first-level analysis and documented it in my field notes, which enabled me to theorize at the same time the data was generated, which consequently enabled me to probe the emergent themes.

iii. Participant observation

One of the main disadvantages of interviews, semi-structured or otherwise, is the issue of accuracy of the information provided. As Bernard (2017) notes, there are many reasons that people would intentionally (e.g. presenting themselves in better lights, etc.) and/or unintentionally (e.g. forgetfulness, etc.) provide inaccurate information about their practices that is not the true reflection of their actual practices. In order to analyze participants’ perspective in practice and recognize the potential gap(s) between their rhetoric/narratives and their actual practices, interviews and conversations often need to be complemented by participant observation. In participant observation, the researcher can choose to be either a complete participant, a participant observer, or a complete observer. During the course of my fieldwork I mostly took up the role of a participant observer; in this, I was either an ‘observing participant’ (for example during rituals and events where I was fully involved in the setting and had an existing role) or a ‘participating observant’ (for example during my fieldwork in homes and kitchens where I was only marginally involved in the food preparation and serving practices often with ‘minor’ tasks such as setting/cleaning the plates on/off the table). In all these situations, permission was obtained from relevant gatekeepers and my role as a researcher was explained to participants and confidentiality was ensured (Kawulich, 2005).

Since homes are considered vital sites of everyday life, around which a great part of people's lives (including migrants') is organized, I spent some of my fieldwork at Iranian homes. Such domestic settings, as Valentine (1999) notes, are sites of "individual and collective consumption, where the goods purchased and the meanings and uses ascribed to them are negotiated, and sometimes contested, between household members" (p. 492), thus are deemed "appropriate places from which to investigate how mobile individuals negotiate their identities" (Hatfield, 2010, p. 54). During the course of my fieldwork, I managed to spend days with some of the families in the form of daily or nearly-daily visits mainly around mealtime and mostly in the kitchen. This enabled me to observe *in situ* their cooking activities, facilities and instruments. On most occasions, I took part, either voluntarily or upon household members' request, in meal-related activities myself – whether it was helping with the cooking, making a side salad or simply setting the table. Occasionally, I accompanied them to Middle Eastern grocery shops observing patterns of purchasing food items, as well as to their small gardens in which they grew their own foodstuffs. I also shared meals with them mostly at their homes, but also in restaurants, to observe the whole dining settings/manners in and outside the household during consumption of a meal. Since participants' time was an issue, I could not conduct participant observation in all households in such manner, but surveyed at least six in this way. Obtaining access to domestic homes was not as easy as obtaining access to public spaces (such as restaurants and ethnic stores), but my prior relationship with Iranians considerably facilitated my entrance to such domestic settings. Despite this, for a few of these visits, my partner accompanied me to the field upon the informant's permission/invitation. As Kanuha (2000) notes, "the role and relationship between the researcher and researched are not as fixed or well demarcated as we are sometimes led to believe by more 'objective' methods" (pp. 443–444). Thus, in my case, although I was aware of the methodological and ethical issues that the presence of my partner may have posed, I felt that advantages of her presence would outweigh the liabilities as it would create a more congenial and comfortable atmosphere for both the participants (especially female participants) and myself.

Iranians celebrated national, and to a lesser extent, religious events, a number of which ($n = 13$) I attended during the course of my fieldwork. These were held both privately as well as publicly, in private homes as well as in public sites such as restaurants. My main method of documenting data in such occasions was making notes on my phone and then transferring them with details to my computer within 24 hours. There were also occasions where I used my phone to record certain conversations and speeches, though only with prior permission of participants.

There were also gatherings of a more private nature (called ‘*mehmuni*’ or ‘*dore-hami*’) which were semi-structured, reciprocal, by-invitation-only visits among close friends held every, or every other, week in one’s home in a rotational manner. I was invited to and attended forty-plus of these gatherings in my individual capacity (as I would have even if I was not conducting this research), but only in a very few of them (at early stages of my research) was I in my capacity *solely* as a researcher; in these few occasions I had a brief and limited interaction with the subjects and was more an observer and less a participant. However, this soon proved to be an unsuitable approach in such situations as it created a certain sense of uneasiness among guests who were there, as one of the participants put it, “to have a good time, not to be studied.” This was easily resolved as soon as I changed my approach toward being an observing participant, which made participants adjust to my presence, not anymore objecting to my proceeding with any ethnographic activities (note-taking, recording, etc.) as long as I was, as the same participant noted, “acting like a normal person.”

With regard to my participant observation and fieldwork in restaurants I chose five restaurants in Christchurch, all of which served Middle Eastern, including Iranian food. These places were chosen after several visits as a customer in 2015 and 2016, at which point I had some brief interviews with staff and owners, with the exception of one restaurant whose owner did not agree to meet with me or to grant me permission to conduct any research-related activity in their restaurant, limiting the number of eating outlets to four. Of this, two were take-away outlets and two had proper dining settings. I spent one week in each of these establishments, spending almost two hours per day, preferably in peak hours so I could interact with their Iranian clients. Hanging out in take-away places (as opposed to dining settings) was particularly productive as clients often visited these places alone and did not have any objections toward, and were even interested in, having a short conversation about food until their orders were ready. This was in contrast with restaurants which were frequented usually by families who understandably preferred to spend time with each other rather than answering questions, however briefly. In order to return the favor of restaurant owners for their agreeing to my fieldwork in their place of business as well as to make myself less ‘visible’ to the eyes of their other clients, I always ordered something small. However, this should not be viewed as a sort of compensation for the restaurant owners’ cooperation; they even told me frequently that I should not feel the need to buy something as they were just doing that to “help a compatriot out.”

I also visited, multiple times, the two main Middle Eastern grocery stores in Christchurch (*Maihan* and *MEFCO*), both of which had a great deal of Iranian foodstuff, thus were frequented by Iranians a lot. However, I did not conduct extensive fieldwork in these shops as the main reason to visit these shops was providing background information for the study. I spent most my time in these shops chatting to customers, looking for some basic information on patterns of choice and consumption, and it was during these conversations that customers narrated some interesting, short food stories, from which a number of important themes of this study (such as nationality and memory) emerged. Of course, such narratives are not always “transparent renditions of truth,” but they nevertheless “reflect a dynamic interplay between life, experience and story” (Nayel, 2017, p. 42), thus they should be treated as a part of everyday life that “constitutes means for actors to express and negotiate experience,” providing researchers with “a site to examine the meanings people, individually or collectively, ascribe to lived experience” (Eastmond, 2007, p. 248).

What made these ‘sites’ particularly significant was the fact that my attempts to extract such biographical accounts in situations where respondents were in close proximity to the materiality of food were often more productive than situations in which participants talked about food at a physical distance from it (for example the interviews in participants’ office or workplace). In this way, food proved to be “not only an important aspect of diasporic lives, but a way of making people open up and talk about their personal and collective experiences” (Brightwell, 2012, p. 46). Having noticed this, I tried to employ it, as much as possible, in my other methods of data generation as well, for example by holding the interviews *inside* kitchens or next to pantries where interviewees were surrounded by personal and everyday food and cooking items. This served as a means of obtaining complimentary information as well as formulating some new questions.

Doing participant observation gave me a clearer perspective as well as a broader range of information, and made the interpretation and analysis of participants’ discourse easier. Although spending an intensive continuous period of time with the Iranian population and participating in their activities, combined with other qualitative techniques, allowed me to address any data biases generated by the different methods, I am aware that the very same fact might have also added and enhanced the bias, as is usually the case with research that is conducted by ‘insider’ researchers (Medina, 2004).

During participant observation, all my observations as well as any data obtained through questions and conversation were recorded in situ in my fieldwork notebook, and were later (within 24 hours) completed in more detail and filed under the section coded for that specific household or outlet. There were also times that, upon obtaining permission from participants, I would leave my phone's recording app on to record all conversations as this allowed me to concentrate and listen better rather than having to keep notes or worrying about missing bits or forgetting them after leaving the field.

Analysis of the Data

The recorded semi-structured interviews were fully transcribed with notes from fieldwork typed up and organized along similar lines. All this was done in the original language of interviews – which was Persian.⁴⁸ For my analysis, I did not use any qualitative data analysis software such as *NVivo*, *Atlas.ti*, etc., because all these software packages were either incompatible with or had difficulty parsing right-to-left languages – including Persian. Therefore, I heavily relied on sorting, categorizing, coding and analyzing my data manually by chopping up those parts of the transcribed conversations/interviews and the field notes that I thought to be of importance/relevance into 3x5 centimeters index cards, giving them identification codes, laying the cards on the floor, sorting them into packages of similar quotes, naming each package, and finally naming significant potential themes (Hubert, 2004; Bernard, 2017). My coding was somewhere between inductive and deductive, meaning that I initially had some general thoughts and ‘hypotheses’ on the general theme of ‘[food and] national identity’ that I had developed from my prior observation and reading the literature, but I also allowed new themes to emerge from the interviews, conversations, and fieldwork as I went along. In this, I mostly looked for repetitions (Bernard, 2017) in the discourse of participants, looking for words or meaning-making that I kept hearing again and again; for instance, with regard to my anticipated theme of national identity, I kept hearing words and phrases such as ‘ancient’ (*‘bastan/bastani’*), ‘pre-Islamic’ (*‘ghabl-e eslam’*), ‘historic’ (*‘tarikhi’*), ‘our nation’ (*‘mamlekat-e ma’*) or noticed certain nationalist patterns when people talked about ‘Persian’ food, all of which, in one way or another, ‘confirmed’ the preliminary theme derived from the literature on the Iranian diaspora. However, at the same time, when discussing their experiences with regard to food at both home and diaspora, people also frequently used words/phrases such as ‘exile’ (*‘ghorbat’*), ‘nostomania’ (*‘deltangi’*), ‘home’ (*‘vatan’*), or ‘reminiscence’

⁴⁸ The translation of interviews into English only occurred after coding and selecting the quotes; translation of sections that seemed marginal to my concerns did not occur.

(‘*khatereh*’), as well as words/phrases such as ‘household chore(s)’ (‘*kar(ay)-e khooneh*’), ‘work outside the home’ (‘*kar-e biroon*’), ‘female’s/male’s domain/duties’ (‘*kar-e/vazayef-e khanooma/aghayoon*’), ‘constraints’ (‘*mahdoodiyat*’), ‘(in)equality’ (‘*(na)barabari*’)) all pointing in the direction of a number of emerging themes (namely memory and gender) and subthemes that I had not initially anticipated. After numerous times of counting, reading and thinking, I wound up with three major themes (namely nationality, gender, and memory) and sub-themes, all of which were outlined and coded. The themes were then validated through regular discussions with my supervisory team to ensure the rigorousness of the process. Upon agreeing on major themes, all significant statements and observations related to specific themes (including their sub-themes) were coded, and formulated meanings were developed for each of them (Gaudet & Robert, 2018) which, at the end, accumulated voluminous and varied data on both material and immaterial aspects of social life surrounding food and food behavior (Hubert, 2004). Moreover, and in order to validate the results, the findings accumulated from different methods and sources were regularly compared to each other as well as to findings of other studies conducted on the Iranian diaspora which, in both cases, showed certain similarities, and thus indicated a defensible degree of validity (Flick, 2018).

Field notes were written in English or Persian (depending on which was easier and faster at that moment) either during the observation or, if that was not possible, as soon as possible, and were then typed up within the next 24 hours. The same procedure was adopted for recorded conversations. While typing up, and later in the process of drafting and redrafting, some additional reflective commentaries were also generated which enabled me to enhance my level of immersion into data and helped me further in making sense of them. This means that the analysis of data was an ongoing, nonlinear, cyclical process, although the ‘final’ analysis only took place after the data generation phase was over.

Ethical Issues

This thesis sought and received approval from Human Ethics Committee (HEC) at University of Canterbury, after which it was registered with University of Canterbury Postgraduate Office.

The consent of participants was sought and obtained at all stages of their participation. This was always done verbally, as participants usually showed some degree of reluctance

toward filling in or signing ‘official’ forms,⁴⁹ and stated that all they needed was ‘my word’ assuring their anonymity.⁵⁰ Participants were always given full information about the aims and objectives of the study and were informed that their participation was absolutely voluntary and that their withdrawal at any stage would be fully understandable and would not disadvantage them in any way. They were also given the chance to ask questions, see or have a copy of their own interview transcripts, and make corrective changes if necessary.

Confidentiality was maintained during the course of the study through some routine practices such as substituting real names and personal identifiers with pseudonyms and codes, properly disposing of/securingly storing computer files and papers containing personal identifiers, limiting access to identified data, and reporting the data in a way that would ensure untraceability of individuals and events.

Positionality

The idea of positionality and the ‘insider’ versus ‘outsider’ debate has been discussed extensively within the field of anthropology (e.g. Narayan, 1993). As the researcher, I realize that I shared many common characteristics with the population of this study, such as shared cultural identity, shared citizenship, and shared language, and, in some cases, shared ethnic, religious, and gender(ed) identity. As a result of this, I had a number of advantages such as having no language barrier with participants; having prior knowledge of the culture and thus understanding cultural references and nuances; obtaining relatively easy access to research population as well as events and gatherings; forging strong rapport with participants rapidly; enjoying a high degree of trust among participants and, therefore, their revealing and sharing more intimate details; and finally an ability to assess the honesty and accuracy of responses and see through any ‘performances’ that might have been put up for my benefit (as the researcher) and that of participants (for example to present themselves in a positive light). Apart from a shared ‘background’, I also shared another similar status with my participants – that of a ‘migrant’ or an ‘expat,’ meaning that the challenges and complexities of migration and its relationship with different aspects of identity had long been an integral part of my everyday life for the past ten years, which meant a further, enhanced understanding of their identities and practices.

⁴⁹ This was particularly (though not exclusively) the case with those participants who had fled Iran for political or religious reasons and had come to New Zealand as asylum seekers.

⁵⁰ Voloder and Kirpitchenko (2014) point to the issues and difficulties involved in obtaining written consent for participation from migrants.

However, as much as my being an ‘insider’ made certain aspects of the research easier, it also shaped my research process in other ways; I acknowledge that my status as a member of the Iranian community may have unknowingly biased my views at some point or influenced the ways data was dialogically generated, analyzed, or presented. I am also aware that certain concepts and notions may have been left unexplored due to my ‘over-familiarity’ with them, whereas they could have been easily observed and detected by the eyes of an ‘outsider.’ For the same reason, participants might have assumed that certain notions or routine practices were self-evident to me, thus removing the need to report them.

In order to address such issues, instead of defining my position vis-à-vis participants through the unambiguous ‘outsider vs. insider’ classification, I tried to deploy a more dynamic approach in which my boundary with participants was not formulated based on ‘static’ markers of commonality, but on “moments of insiderness and outsiderness” (Baser & Toivanen, 2016, p. 2069) – that is, as Merton (1972) notes, being an insider at one moment and an outsider at another. This meant that I played an ever shifting role between an insider and an outsider, purposely negotiating proximity and distance depending on the given context. For instance, one of the situations that happened rather frequently during interviews, conversations and participant observation (and one that is prevalent in many researches done by ‘insiders’) was that the informants and participants assumed that I, being an Iranian myself, must be aware of certain culturally-specific information or should ‘naturally’ know the answer to some questions that I asked. During my first couple of interviews/conversation, there were, for example, a number of instances where I heard comments such as “you know how it is with us Iranians when we make food for the guests” or “you know the Iranian way of eating kebab,” presuming (and presuming correctly, indeed) that I knew exactly what they meant. It was only after transcribing these interviews/conversations that I realized the indefiniteness and incompleteness of some important pieces of information that had remained unsaid in the absence of my requesting for clarification, which rendered particular chunks of data almost unusable, due to them being too vague for a reader, particularly the non-Iranian reader. Fortunately, I discovered this soon enough to be able to prevent its occurrence in future interviews/conversations, so from then on, upon facing situations like this I would move from an insider to an outsider position and ask for further elaboration and clarification on the subject, though being mindful at all times that my probing for detail would not aggravate the interviewee (DeLyser, 2001). Thus, for instance, instead of directly asking for further elaboration on the ingredients of a certain dish that I, as an Iranian, was assumed to be already

aware of, I asked something along the lines of “you know that in some regions they would make that dish slightly differently. What ingredients would *you* use to make this dish?” Using such techniques, in the end, produced more fruitful data compared to my first couple of interviews/conversations when portions of data were generated through presumptive, coded communication. Despite all this, my position still remained, for the most part, more of an insider than an outsider, yet I maintain that I was determined, at all stages of this research, to give room to whatever outcomes the data revealed.

That the topic of food and foodways within its Iranian context was the main theme of this study meant that the major part of my interaction would have to be with female participants. Being an ‘unmarried’ male, I initially perceived my ‘gendered’ position within the field as potentially problematic as I assumed there would be cultural reasons that may preclude productive sessions, meaningful rapports, and significant fieldwork with female participants. However, for the most part, this did not turn out to be a major obstacle. Nonetheless, I always gave careful consideration to such delicate cultural issues around gender, especially in the earlier stages of the research. Some ways to achieve this were, for instance, ensuring that we met in public places; preferably visiting homes in the evenings when I knew husbands were home; or using the formal, distancing, polite, plural language at all times (unless permitted to switch to the single-person language). Age, social status and religious status did not pose any significant limitations over the course of the study.

Limitations

Despite having built a strong rapport and being trusted by members of the community, there were still occasions (though very few) where participants seemed to have offered deliberately wrong information, possibly because they did not feel comfortable, for any number of reasons, to share some more intimate aspects of their lives with me. This voluntary conscious distortion of information also occurred when some participants intended to offer a positive image of themselves. For instance, there was a couple who had a firm emphasis on ‘ethical eating’ and claimed that they would always purchase their foodstuffs from ‘gourmet’ food stores and refuse to consume conventionally-grown produce or eat frozen or ready-/half-cooked meals, both for health and environmental reasons. They expressed disapproval of shopping at supermarkets such as *Pak'nSave* and maintained that most of their shopping would occur at farmer’s markets or at *Wholefoods*.⁵¹ However, a few days later, my partner and I ran

⁵¹ One of Christchurch’s health food stores.

into them by accident in the very same supermarket they had criticized (*Pak'nSave*), carrying in their shopping trolley the very same products they had claimed to be against (e.g. ‘caged’ supplies; canned, inorganic foodstuffs; frozen vegetables; processed food; etc.). Given the awkwardness of the situation, they just smiled nervously, said they were in a hurry and left. I never confronted them even in our later encounters, so I never learned the real reasons or motivations behind this deliberate concealment of information;⁵² what I *did* learn, however, was that the information given to me by participants can, at times, be partially or wholly misleading.

I also became aware, during my further encounters with ‘false’ statements, that these were not always deliberate and might have simply been the genuine perception of the participant about a particular fact which, nonetheless, may have resulted in a gap between participants’ discourse and their actual practices. For instance, one participant defined her family of two to be ‘highly concerned’ about their nutrition and their food choices, opting only for ‘good food,’ whereas it turned out later in my participant observation at their residence that what *she* perceived as a healthy, wholesome diet was, in fact, highly refined and/or processed, synthetic, or with little-to-no nutritional value.⁵³ In this instance, however, although the information I had initially recorded based on our interview proved to be ‘false,’ it cannot be concluded that such false information was provided with some ulterior motive.

In any case, I was not able to confirm and verify the *whole* data generated from *all* participants, nor could I rely on always discovering the ‘truth’ the way I did in the case of the aforementioned couple – that was purely by chance. Therefore, a surer empirical technique seemed to be combining the interviews with participant observation which placed my interaction(s) with participants within a wider context and beyond the narrative register which, in turn, enabled me to analyze the various situations and the oral information about them more critically (Medina, 2004) and validate and verify some of the initial data I had gathered during interviews and conversations (like the example mentioned in paragraph above).

In an ideal situation, I would have developed a multidisciplinary and more holistic approach, perhaps carrying out quantitative research focusing on nutritional and dietary aspects of food in the first year of fieldwork covering the full year cycle, and then spending the second year collecting qualitative data on cultural aspects of food. However, neither the financial

⁵² Common limitations of interviews such as participants sometimes presenting selves in the ideal light under which they wish to be seen would come to mind.

⁵³ Examples of foods she considered healthy and/or nutritious were flavored oatmeal, sugary breakfast cereals, fruit snacks, fruit chips, fruit drinks, nut bars, and crackers.

means nor my knowledge in the field of biology and nutrition allowed me to conduct such research, not to mention time limitations that a four-year PhD program poses. A practical solution in this situation may have been consulting the existing quantitative nutritional surveys, national statistics, consumer surveys or the literature in the field of biological/nutritional anthropology for the defined population (Chrzan & Brett, 2017); however, after a thorough search, I found no available quantitative data on the nutritional aspects of food among the Iranian population in New Zealand (or in any other diaspora) nor any quantitative epidemiological or economic data for that matter; the former could have been useful for “defining geographical areas, marked differences in food-related pathologies and general nutritional status” and the latter for “further general information on food consumption, food production and distribution” (Hubert, 2004, p. 43). Moreover, the data generated in this thesis was geographically restricted mainly to the Canterbury region in New Zealand. Therefore, it is not clear whether many of the trends discussed are also true in larger cities/countries where the Iranian diaspora is not as small.

Finally, I should note that although all the above limitations have been experienced to some degree over the course of my fieldwork, many of them did not have a notable impact on methodological issues and, in most cases, have only caused a reconsideration of initial methods or questions to ensure that the final results are relevant and informative.

Conclusion

The research that forms the foundation of this thesis was accomplished using qualitative methods which corresponds to the main objective of the thesis whose focus is on exploring further the role of food and foodways in (re)construction of a diasporic identity, (re)creation of a sense of belonging, and (re)building the feelings of ‘home.’ Using ethnographic fieldwork including semi-structured, in-depth interviews (with 40 individuals), informal conversations (with 78 people), and participant observation (in 31 households, 13 public events, and more than 40 private gatherings) provides the thesis with a comprehensive range of ethnographic material. Each of these data generation methods, if used solely, could pose its own limitations. However, combining them together, I was able firstly to generate rich and varied data, and secondly to increase the level of reliability and validity of the data generated by each of the methods. For instance, interviews and conversations especially in the earlier stages of the research gave me food for thought for things that are essential to observe; participant observation, in turn, reflected and complemented the data generated through interviews and conversations.

The interpretative findings forming each chapter work together to provide a wider picture of practices of food provision and consumption among diasporic Iranians of New Zealand in their everyday lives and explore how these practices are fused with broader issues of identity construction in relation to both Self and the ‘Other.’ I present this thesis in six chapters. In this introductory chapter, I presented an overview of the thesis and a background on Iranian identity and migration history to the West. I then turned to a methodological discussion including the specific methods I used for this research while addressing the sample, recruitment methods, and data generation methods including their advantages and limitation, my positionality as an ‘insider’ researcher, the process of data analysis, research ethics, and finally the limitations that I faced during the research – methodological or otherwise.

In ‘Chapter 2: Theory,’ I provide a review of food studies and anthropology of food, establishing the growing importance of food in the experience of migrants and diasporic people and their sense of belonging. I situate my thesis, in that chapter, within wider debates on diaspora – particularly on the Iranian diaspora – and within broader theories on gender, nation, and memory, and bring all these together by outlining Pierre Bourdieu’s conceptual framework and his ‘thinking tools’ that I am going to employ throughout the thesis as a means to access the complexity of transnational settings and diasporic subjects.

In ‘[Chapter 3: Nation](#),’ I investigate the link between food and national identity and the ways in which Iranians of New Zealand relate to the idea of ‘nation,’ with a focus on their practices revolving around food. I demonstrate that diasporic Iranians’ engagement with the notion of nation, both in monumental and mundane context(s) where food is involved, is usually framed within a sort of Iranian nationalist narrative and discourse, manifested both in the usually unreflexive banal food practices of everyday life as well as in performative culinary practices of celebration and rituals. I demonstrate how (and why) for my interlocutors, such previously taken-for-granted, non-reflexive, ‘doxic’ national structures become reflected upon, and give rise to highly conscious forms of strategizing as well as new/transformed/reaffirmed practical outcomes – many of which involve, in one way or another, their food and foodways.

In ‘[Chapter 4: Gender](#),’ I examine the relationship between food and gender within the Iranian community of New Zealand. I demonstrate that in the context of the Iranian diaspora in New Zealand, food and food practices become means through which a shift in gender expectations and roles can be explored. Through looking at practices and performances of food in both domestic and public arenas, I argue that the social and cultural gendered meanings

acquired at home in Iran are entangled in diaspora with different cultural and social meanings, giving both women and men more room for maneuver within their gendered boundaries, though in rather different directions. In the first part of the chapter, I examine food and food practices within the diasporic domestic arena, and explore how through engaging in and/or disengaging with domestic foodwork both women and men express and reconstruct their gender identity. In the second part of the chapter, I shift my focus from the domestic arena to a wider space of the Iranian community, where culinary skills and knowledge of Persian cooking were means through which status and power within the Iranian community were conferred.

In ‘[Chapter 5: Memory](#),’ I analyze the relationship between food and memory (both collective and individual) and discuss how food (in particular Iranian food) – and memories associated with it – can be central to understanding the processes by which Iranian migrants build and feel at home, however far away from it. In order to do so, I deploy Hage’s (1997; 2010) notion of ‘home-building’ and his theoretical framework around nostalgia, and analyze the experiences of diasporic Iranians through Hage’s four key feelings of familiarity, community, security, and sense of opportunity and hope.

In ‘Chapter 6: Conclusion,’ I conclude the thesis and consider the main findings, answering the main objectives set out in this opening chapter, and explore the broader contributions (theoretical or otherwise) that this thesis makes to migration/diaspora studies as well as to anthropological studies of food and foodways.

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Chapter 2: Literature Review and the Theoretical Framework

Introduction

My aim in this chapter is to provide a focused review of food studies and anthropology of food, establishing the growing importance (i) of food in the experience of migrants and diasporic people, and (ii) of diasporic cultures to contemporary anthropology of food. I begin this theory chapter by broadly reviewing existing literature and theories of diaspora, migration, and transnationalism and situate my thesis within wider debates on diaspora, particularly on the Iranian diaspora. I explore how Iranian diasporic identities have been analyzed in academic studies, especially in New Zealand and Australia. I then investigate ‘foodways’ within diasporic contexts and its relationship with different aspects of migrants’ identity and their sense of belonging. This sets out the arguments to be developed in the next three sections, in which I explore food and foodways in relation to, and situate my own thesis within, broader theories on gender, nation, and memory. Finally, I bring all these together by outlining Bourdieu’s conceptual framework and his ‘thinking tools’ that can be employed to access the complexity of transnational settings and diasporic subjects. I conclude by highlighting some of the main contributions this thesis brings to existing literature.

My analysis of food and foodways among the diasporic the Iranians of New Zealand draws upon several interdisciplinary fields of studies within anthropology and sociology, namely gender studies, nationalism studies, and memory studies – for *gender*, *nation*, and *memory* were the three respective main themes that emerged from my ethnographic observation and my interviews with field actors. What I use as a glue for the theories employed in this thesis are Bourdieu’s theories of habitus, capital, practice, and field. I understand migration partly as a disruption of practice that occurs due to lack of ‘fit’ and ‘misalignments’ between habitus and field that can fabricate a fragmented self and lead to a heightened reflexivity and consciousness and associated modes of self-refashioning. I demonstrate that diasporic Iranians develop multiple, shifting, and evolving capital configurations that lead to experiences of dissonant fragmentation of identity and the internalization of conflicting dispositions, which Bourdieu described in terms of a cleft habitus – or habitus clivé (Bourdieu 2000, 2004; Friedman, 2016) which reflect Iranians’ different practices in and between different social fields. The development of habitus clivé enables Iranian migrants to effectively and strategically generate a fit between their habitus and their new sociocultural conditions, and to both consciously and

unconsciously negotiate multiple, and at times contradictory, aspects of their gender and/or national identities. I analyze how, in this way, food and food practices are deployed by them as a means of attempting to create a comfortable ‘fit’ between field, capitals, dispositions, reflexivity, practice (including identity performances) and thus habitus and thereby striving to achieve a sense of belonging and feelings of ‘being at home’ both in their new residence in New Zealand and in their memories and ongoing engagements of Iran.

Diaspora

The use of the term ‘diaspora’ – as both concept and social practice – has become very common recently, not only in academia but also in non-academic texts like newspaper articles in which it is used to describe almost anyone going anywhere (Mintz, 2008). The appearance of interdisciplinary journals and academic fields of studies dedicated to the topic (Waldinger, 2008), the existence of more than 7,500 book/article/dissertation titles (in English only) in the World Catalogue published in the last four years (2015-2019) with the term diaspora in their titles, and a rich theoretical and substantive literature on the topic all suggest a mounting popularity of the subject. The term has been so widely used that for academic purposes, as Waldinger (2008) suggested, “to say migration is now to say diaspora” (p. xi).

The word diaspora is derived from the ancient Greek *diaspeirō*, a combination of the prefix *dia*, meaning ‘through,’ ‘over’ or ‘across,’ and the verb *speirō*, meaning ‘to sow’ or ‘to scatter’ (Dufoix, 2008). Historically, the term was mainly used in biblical and religious contexts, either referring to the multitude of communities – including Jews, Benjaminites, and Levites – who were forcibly relocated during the Assyrian captivity of the 8th century BC and the Babylonian captivity of the 6th century BC (Baumann, 2000), or to the situations of the Christian church (especially Moravian) scattered among heathens (Dufoix, 2008).

Starting from the 1950s and the 1960s, the term experienced a further broadening. Having departed from its primarily religious connotations, it started to include numerous communities with distinctive religious, ethnic, geographic, and political identities living outside their homeland (Tölölyan, 1996). However, despite the clear shift in the ways ‘diaspora’ was employed in the social sciences during this time, no real attempt had been made to define the term as a ‘concept’ until the mid-1980s when the field started to shift to a more theoretical approach, especially following the works of Sheffer (1986), Safran (1991), Tölölyan (1996), and Cohen (1997), all of whom proposed ‘typological’ approaches to diaspora. This was accompanied with, and followed by, the works of Hall (1990), Clifford (1994), Gilroy

(1994), and Brah (1996) who mostly considered diasporas as ‘conditions’ (rather than the properties of a group), characterized by fluid identities and hybridity, movement, routes, and displacement. In the past two decades, diaspora scholarship has moved away from conventional approaches to more modern and constructivist approaches (e.g. Dufoix, 2008; Gamlen, 2008; Adamson, 2012) which highlight the fact that “diasporas are of importance to a broad range of interested parties, including the state apparatuses of the countries of origin . . . and the migrants themselves whose views on their own identity do not necessarily coincide with the perspective of the sending state” (Müller-Funk, 2018, p. 10). By putting more emphasis on generational continuation, mobilization, and enduring attachment to the homeland (Baser, 2014), such modern views are also more compatible, and at times paralleled, with the views of scholars with a transnational perspective. These scholars maintain that immigrants simultaneously participate in multiple transnational settings and social fields, establishing and maintaining socio-culturo-political ties in both their home and host societies (Faist, 2010), thus continuously converting their various capitals acquired in one field (i.e. the home/host country) into capitals in another (Levitt & Schiller, 2004).

Following such views and building on the strong inter-connectivity between diaspora and transnationalism (Hornberger, 2007), I switch between using the term diaspora/diasporic and notions such as exile/exilic, transnational(ism), or (im)migration/migrants to describe the experience of Iranians. In fact, at times, I even prioritize these other notions to the term diaspora/diasporic as they may sometimes “more clearly identif[y] the ways in which Iranians at home and abroad establish a global cultural identity across borders” (Bozorgmehr in Elahi & Karim, 2011, p. 382). However, the reason I use the term ‘diaspora’ most frequently is mainly to situate the study in the continuum of more global diasporic consciousness, including in the field of Iranian studies where the use of the terms diaspora/diasporic, at least in the past fifteen years, has generally been viewed as more theoretically appropriate in describing the global dispersal of Iranians abroad, and has been largely favored above terms such as ‘exile’ or ‘transnational’ in the works of editors, scholars, and authors working on Iranians abroad (e.g. Dabashi, 1993; Karim, 2006; Mostofi, 2003; Sullivan, 2010).

Iranian Diaspora

The first applications of the term ‘diaspora’ to the Iranian contexts can be seen in the works of scholars as early as the 1980s (e.g. Dabashi, 1993; Sreberny-Mohammadi & Mohammadi, 1987). However, after the Iranian Revolution of 1979 and the consequent Iran-

Iraq war of 1980–1988, the notion of diaspora was used with increasing frequency to describe Iranians abroad. As Malek (2016) explains:

As the condition of Iranian communities abroad shifted, so too did scholarly classifications of them: while originally considered as exiles, Iranians became more frequently described as part of a diaspora, reflecting the growth of Iranian communities and institutions, and shifts in their self-identifications in the intervening years. Regardless of whether Iranians living outside of Iran travelled to Iran regularly or not, or whether they desired to do so or not, strong connections to fellow Iranians were maintained across generations and across borders. (p. 26)

Various topics within different geographical contexts have been researched on the Iranian diaspora – including internal diversity within the Iranian communities in diaspora (McAuliffe, 2008) and their religious identities (McAuliffe, 2007), Iranian diasporic websites (Graham & Khosravi, 2002; van den Bos, 2006) and blogs (Alinejad, 2010, 2017), Iranian identity's transformation and construction (Ghorashi & Boersma, 2009; Rahimieh 2015) and its public performance in diaspora (Malek, 2011), and the values and ideas of Iranian women of diaspora as reflected in their writings (Darznik, 2007; Fotouhi, 2015; Sullivan, 2010), to name but a few. Occasionally, there have also been special issues devoted exclusively to the topic of Iranian diaspora, such as in the journal *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* (2011, Vol. 31, No. 2), in the *Journal of the International Society for Iranian Studies* (2013, Vol. 46, No. 1),⁵⁴ and in *Heinrich Böll Stiftung's Publication Series on Democracy* (2015, Vol. 40),⁵⁵ in which academic scholars from different disciplines including anthropology, sociology, history, political science, geography, literature, and art, among others, analyze the identities and positions of Iranians by examining various dimensions of their lived experiences of displacement and resettlements in diaspora.

Many of these studies have given attention to the ways in which the ‘authentic’ Iranian culture is nostalgically produced, consumed, performed, and practiced by diasporic Iranians as a form of compensation for longing for their home country (Mohabbat-Kar, 2015). They have shown that cultural and nostalgic connections with home among diasporic Iranians have been maintained through, for instance, watching Iranian television programs and movies (Naficy, 1993), listening to Iranian music (Aidani, 2010), reading Persian classical poetry (Fotouhi,

⁵⁴ Now called *The Association for Iranian Studies (AIS)*.

⁵⁵ Titled ‘Identity and Exile: The Iranian Diaspora between Solidarity and Difference.’

2018), reading contemporary diasporic literature (Abbasi, 2018), engaging with Iranian artwork (Rakhsha, 2016), attending Iranian festivals (Miggiano, 2018), or participating in rituals and ceremonies (Ghorashi, 2002).

However, Iranian food and food-related practices in diaspora have been largely absent from any critical discussions within Iranian studies. This is quite surprising, firstly due to the prominent role regarded for food within Iranian culture and traditions (as almost every diasporic cookbook reminds us), and secondly because of the established link between the movement of people and their food-related behaviors (Mintz, 2008). Besides Lynn Harbottle's *Food for Health, Food for Wealth* (2000) – that is, to date, the only detailed work dedicated to the subject of food within the Iranian diaspora – less than a handful of papers⁵⁶ have taken notice of Iranians' food and foodways in diaspora, though even in these the attention given to food as a marker of identity and a reminder of home remains, for the most part, only marginal or trivial.

In examining the experience of Iranian migrants, what should be constantly kept in view is the significant influence of global political forces as well as the diplomatic tensions between Iran (as the home country) and Western nations (as host countries), in affecting the ways in which Iranians (re)form and (re)construct their identity in diaspora (Mostafavi Mobasher, 2018). Such tensions between Iran and the West became increasingly intensified following the Iranian Revolution (1978-1979) and the consequent American hostage crisis (1979-1981), after which the host societies' perception of Iranians transformed as a result of the media's portrayal of Iranians as religious zealots and illiterate peasants (Harbottle, 2000). The situation worsened after the events of September 11, 2001, which resulted in a further decline of the international image of Iran which was now recognized as part of an 'axis of evil' and as a 'terrorist state' by the United States and its allies (Heradstveit & Bonham, 2007). The construction of such negative political discourse and narrative around Iran as a state sponsor of terrorism brought about a more persistent prejudice, discrimination, and social injustice against diasporic Iranians who were now viewed within a widely negative and hostile public context.⁵⁷ This, in turn, discredited and distorted Iranians' social identity and had a consequential impact on their process of integration as it generated feelings of isolation and pushed them even further to the margins of their host societies (Mostafavi Mobasher, 2018). It also led to a conscious

⁵⁶ Namely Chehabi (2003) and Sanadjian (2015)

⁵⁷ A survey conducted by the Pew Research Center (2013) showed that Iran is viewed unfavorably by at least eight-in-ten in Western Europe, and seven-in-ten in the US.

“metamorphosis of identity” (Harbottle, 2000, p. 93) among many Iranians of diaspora, evident, for instance, in the self-identification of many Iranians with their *cultural* heritage (i.e. ‘Persians’) rather than their citizenship status (i.e. ‘Iranians’); the manufacture, revitalization, and promotion of a ‘non-Islamic’ Persian culture and emergence of nationalist ideas and discourses and adopting Western names as an attempt to mask religious or national identities; or openly opposing Islamic beliefs and values and, at times, publicly renouncing Islam for other religions – though mainly for Christianity due to its ‘appropriateness’ in the West (Mostafavi Mobasher, 2018). Diasporic Iranians developed these as defensive strategies in order to cope with anxieties and challenges and to minimize the injuries caused by the stigmas and prejudices they have been experiencing in their Western host countries since the revolution (Fotouhi, 2015).

Such conditions keep leading many Iranians, including participants of this research, to intentionally deploy multiple and hybridized identities (Ghorashi, 2002): thus, on the one hand, they exercise their Iranianness and emphasize practicing ‘authentic’ Iranian culture within their own community to overcome their sense of loss and the feelings of longing for their home and home culture, while on the other hand, they have the tendency to mask, or even fake, their national identity in their interactions with non-Iranians to protect themselves from potential prejudices and discriminations associated with stereotypes of ‘Middle-eastern’ peoples (Mobasher, 2012). In this sense, Iranians of diaspora develop two distinct, yet dialogic personas, informing and generating each other: one is the ‘authentic persona,’ lived and practiced in the privacy of the home (and, in a broader sense, among their ‘own’) and the other is a ‘public persona,’ lived and practiced in the public sphere(s) of the country of residence (i.e. among the ‘Other’) (Mohabbat-Kar, 2015). Iranians of New Zealand, as I show in the consequent chapters of this thesis, are no exception in this regard, in that they, too, consciously shift between their ‘personas’ depending on the context. This is perhaps most clearly manifested, as I observed and discuss throughout this thesis, in their foodways and culinary practices, through which Iranians maintain, construct, and perform multiple (and sometimes conflicting) identities and maneuver between them contextually.

Foodways and Diaspora

Food has long been linked to the notion of identity as attested by the writings of the enlightenment period such as that of Rousseau⁵⁸ or Brillat-Savarin⁵⁹ who speciously argued that the nature of people can be found in the food they prefer to eat. As Fischler (1988) noted, although humans are biologically omnivores, every culture is different in its rendering some foods edible and some others inedible. Through asserting such specificities, human beings not only mark their membership in a group or culture, but, more precisely, define self and otherness. For example, the religiously-inspired practices of avoiding certain foodstuffs, or the ways in which the members of one nation (or region) refer to the members of another by highlighting, often in peculiarly loathsome ways, the others' dietary practices⁶⁰ are among the well-known examples of such an identity-marking function of food that confirms the distinction between *Us* and *Them*. As such, food, as a site of self-identification, is very much connected to describing migration processes where marking differentiation and expressing ideas about the relationship between the 'self' and the 'other' are constantly occurring (Pető, 2007).

The connection between food and the maintenance, expression, and (re)construction of identity among diasporic populations has now been well established by many studies.⁶¹ As Gabaccia (2009) noted in her work on the history of ethnic food in the US, ethnic groups and immigrants have rarely abandoned their food traditions completely for the food of their host society, because doing so, at least in the mind of many of them, was interpreted as abandoning community, family, and religion, too. Instead, they have often "sought to maintain their familiar foodways because food initiated and maintained traditional relationships, expressed the extent of social distance between people, [and] demonstrated status and prestige" (p. 51).

One of the pitfalls of researching the food of migrants and diasporic populations is to bind their food cultures to discrete spheres – that is to treat them only as reflections of core identities tied to the lives *behind*, and ignore the dialectic fashion through which diasporic food

⁵⁸ In his 1761 work, *Julie, ou la nouvelle Héloïse* (Julie, or the New Heloise).

⁵⁹ Epitomized in the often-quoted aphorism 'tell me what you eat, and I will tell you who you are' from his 1825 essay, *La Physiologie du Goût* (The Physiology of Taste).

⁶⁰ The English calling the French 'frogs', or the French calling the English 'roast beef' (les rosbifs) / 'beefsteak' (le bifteck), and both of them calling the Italian 'macaroni,' just to name a few.

⁶¹ For instance, Douglas (1984); Gutierrez (1984); Jochnowitz (2014); Jonsson, Hallberg and Gustafsson (2002); Koc and Welsh (2002); Rearick (2009); Renzaho and Burns (2006); Sullivan (2004); Svederberg (1996); Tuomainen (2009); Vallianatos and Raine (2008); Weller and Turkon (2015); or Williams-Forson (2014); to name but a few.

practices evolve and make for new foods, tastes, and ways of eating (Joassart-Marcelli, Salim & Vu, 2017). The term ‘foodways,’ if used to refer to the food of contemporary diasporic and ethnic groups, may pose such problem. While earlier definitions of foodways – often proposed by folklorists – regarded foodways as “the whole interrelated system of food conceptualization and evaluation, procurement, preservation, preparation, consumption, and nutrition shared by all the members of a society” (Anderson, 1971, p. 161), current understanding of foodways particularly emphasizes the new ways in which people and foods travel in an increasingly globalized world, *influencing* and *being influenced* on the go. In this sense, foodways should not be viewed merely as static culinary pasts of a dispersed group, but should be regarded as “less a reflection of pre-existing cultures and more as a means through which the cultural identities of people and places are invented and performed” (Crang, 2000, p. 247). It is precisely because of such fluidity that scholars have called attention to the study of foodways, especially in the context of migration and diaspora, as each migration scenario allows, encourages or hinders the development of specific foodscapes (Codesal, 2010).

As a result, there has been an increasing interest in researching foodways within the context of migration and diaspora, as witnessed by the publication of an increasing number of edited volumes or journals’ special issues on the topic.⁶² Drawing on both recent and classic socio-anthropological studies of food and diaspora, I demonstrate in this thesis how the foodways of migrants, as an everyday diasporic experience, can shed light on the lived experiences of migrants in general, and Iranian migrants in particular, therefore contributing both to current understanding of the diaspora-identity relationship as well as to one of the least investigated aspects of diaspora studies – that is “the manufacturing of diasporic subjects” (Fortier, 2005, p. 185). Since such manufacturing processes, as Fortier (2005) notes, can be closely related to practices of remembering (and *re-membering*) that may repeat nationalist biopolitics which themselves are often bound by fixed gendered encoding of culture, exploring nation, gender, and memory among the diasporic allows for evaluating the formation of diasporic identities in their numerous local/global, real/imagined, and spatial/territorial manifestation.

⁶² For instance, the journal of *Anthropology of Food* dedicated two issues to the subject, one examining migration, food practices and social relations (2010) and another investigating food, migration and multiculturalism (2018). The journal of *Food, Culture & Society* similarly had a special issue on food, migration and diaspora (2011), or *The Handbook of Food and Anthropology* (Klein and Watson, 2016) allocated a full section to papers on food and foodways in the context of migration and diaspora.

Diasporic Identities: Nation, Gender, Memory

I had originally intended this thesis to investigate the relationship between food and national identity, firstly because national identity is often regarded, among all collective identities, to be the most fundamental and inclusive (Smith, 1991), and secondly due to the many studies that have established the strong link between food and national identity in general (e.g. Counihan, 2004; Cwiertka, 2006; Ichijo & Ranta, 2016) and in the context of diaspora in particular (e.g. D'Sylva & Beagan, 2011; Rabikowska, 2010; Wilk, 1999). However, I could not ignore the notion of ‘gender,’ because for my participants both national and gender identity were being dialogically generated within a range of overlapping contexts; thus expressions of national identity, as I expected, often involved, in one way or another, the negotiation of an existing and evolving set of gendered identities that were culturally defined. After all, in Middle Eastern context, gender relations and social positions of men and women have often been foundational elements in (re)defining nationhood and the nation state, and feminist movements have historically been connected to movements that were ‘national’ (Marecek, 2000). Furthermore, migration/diaspora studies, especially those focusing on non-white migrants, have frequently identified changes in gender relations after migration (e.g. Harbottle, 2000; Mahalingam, 2012; Timmerman et al., 2015), often pointing to women’s elevated status and newfound autonomy, and men’s loss of monopolistic control and patriarchal privileges, within family (e.g. Darvishpour, 2002; Hondagneu-Sotelo, 1994; Sassen, 2005) – which I observed among diasporic Iranians of New Zealand, as well.

What made it even more imperative to include the gendered aspects of identity was the fact that foodwork has long been treated as a gendered task; gender roles have historically, and almost universally, viewed cooking as women’s duty, while having considered such domestic provisioning of food to be unfitting for men (Inness, 2001a). This has been the case in the Iranian context, too, where the historically-revered role of women in the domestic sphere (Milani, 2002) was converted, after the Iranian Revolution of 1979, to strict gender ideologies (some of which found their material expression in legislation and policy) which radically emphasized women’s domesticity and their primary roles as wives, mothers, and cooks, thus confining many women to private spheres (Shahidian, 2000). Although in the last three decades many have moved out of such preordained cultural frames and territories⁶³ (Milani, 2011), the

⁶³ Triggered first by Iran’s eight-year war with Iraq which, just as World War II had done in the West, pushed a large number of women out of homes to earn a living (Milani, 2011), and then followed by the reform era marked by the two-term presidency of Mohammad Khatami (1997-2005), during which gender politics were changed and women’s rights were promoted (Tazmini, 2009).

normative system of gender relations in Iran still dictates that foodwork (as well as other domestic tasks) is women's responsibility, and that the participation of men in the kitchen diminishes masculinity⁶⁴ (Bauer, 1985; Teherani-Kronner, 1999). Examining how such gender norms, roles, and expectations undergo reconfiguration and reconstruction (if they are not sustained) within Iranians' new arenas of belonging (i.e. New Zealand) where they are not constrained as much by the home's dominant boundaries of gender identification seemed of significant relevance to the goals of my research. I discuss both notions of national and gender identity with regard to diasporic Iranians of New Zealand in [Chapter 3](#) and [Chapter 4](#), respectively.

What activated both national and gendered aspects of Iranians' identities in New Zealand and affected the ways in which they participated and engaged in their host society, and more importantly gave them a sense of belonging, were *memories* of home. As much as these memories were personal and stemmed from the biographical account of individuals about their past home in Iran, they were also collective (Halbwachs, 1992) – in that they were conceived and mediated by, and were stemmed from, a shared understanding of belonging to a distinct society and culture, relating memory, culture, and people to each other. These memories were articulated either in individual practices of food in domestic space; in a group with other diasporic Iranians through ritual enactments (e.g. Persian New Year or other national celebrations) of an *imagined* home (akin to Assmann's (1995) 'cultural memory'); or expressed within one's social circles (e.g. private gatherings among close friends) and one's family to remind one of the *real* home which was left behind (akin to Assmann's (1995) 'communicative memory'). Through performances of various kinds (including culinary performances) Iranians also reproduced a need to *feel at home*, without necessarily *being at home*, or, in some cases, without even *wanting to be at home*.

As Brah (1996) notes, maintaining an identification with one's original homeland does not necessarily mean that those who have left it desire to return to it. Other diaspora studies have also recognized that migrants maintain multiple links across more than one nation; they may feel at home in their host country, but still have longing and attachment to their homeland too (Clifford, 1997; Vertovec, 1999). Therefore, recent diaspora studies have given special attention to "the relationship of home and homeland . . . and the intersections of home, memory, identity and belonging" (Blunt & Dowling; 2006, p. 199), and have appreciated that there may

⁶⁴ In today's Iran, the bulk of household work including more than 90 percent of cooking tasks is done by women (Maroofi, 1997).

exist, for migrants, multiple homes through which multiple senses of belonging and attachment are negotiated and forged (Jazeel, 2006). For the Iranian diaspora of New Zealand, the complex relationships between their multiple homes were manifested most clearly through a wide range of food practices. For them, certain foods, foodways, and food rituals become, in many ways, sites of memory and can be understood as performative vehicles, through which both individual and collective connections to their real and/or imagined homes are embodied, enacted, and reworked.

In the following sections, I review the main literature and theories with regard to the three aforementioned emerged themes of this thesis – namely nation, gender, and memory – in their relations with both food and diaspora, and situate my thesis and my arguments within these literature and theories.

Nation, food, diaspora

The importance of food to national identity is neither new nor is limited to a particular group or a geographical area; food, or more precisely food culture, has long built and sustained a meaningful relationship between people and their nations (Ichijo & Ranta, 2016). However, and despite the emergence of food studies as a ‘mainstream’ topic of research with established merit across various fields such as anthropology, sociology, and cultural studies (Counihan & Van Estrik, 1997), the number of references to food and foodways in studies of nation and nationalism remain comparatively few, with the evident relationship between food culture and national identity relatively unexplored. The “largely overlooked” (Avieli, 2005, p. 168) role of food with regard to imagining, constructing, and (re)producing nation, as Ichijo and Ranta (2016) note:

is true not only with regard to historical, institutional, social and cultural accounts of nations but also regarding the manifestation, imagination and expression of nationalism in popular culture and everyday life. In other words, there seems to be a discrepancy between what appears to be a cultural and anthropological truism regarding the importance of food to studies of identity and its relative absence from research on nationalism and national identity. (p. 3)

Among those who have discussed food and nationalism are Palmer (1998) who viewed food (along with ‘body’ and ‘landscape’) as banal symbols of national belonging; Avieli (2005) who saw ethnic dishes as “powerful markers of national identity” (p. 168); Mennell (1985) who

linked the appearance of national cuisines to the emergence of modern nation-state; or Bell and Valentine (1997) who argued that “the history of any nation’s diet is the history of the nation itself” (p. 168). However, not too many studies have systematically examined the role of food in constructing and maintaining national identity; and the few that have, often tended to adopt a top-down approach, focusing on the role of state, the elite or people with power in defining what is (or is not) *national* in terms of food, reflecting a conventional approach to the study of nationalism (Ichijo, 2017). For example, many of these studies are concerned with notions such as national branding of cuisine,⁶⁵ or gastrodiplomacy,⁶⁶ both of which are, by-definition, state-led initiatives. Similar top-down approaches have been taken by scholars such as Appadurai (1988) who focused on how, in the post-independent India, the consumption needs of a then newly emerged middle class (beyond that of the caste system) who were mobile, educated, and employed were catered for by the Indian publishing industry, in particular with publication of cookbooks which created an Indian national cuisine by bringing together regional and ethnic cuisine. That being said, there are also studies (though even fewer in number) that instead of taking a macro-level approach focusing on states and elite actors, have employed a micro-level analysis by examining how food is experienced at an *everyday* level by the *ordinary*, comparatively highlighting how such seemingly “banal practices of everyday life” (Lupton, 1996, p. 1) shape and maintain national identity from the bottom-up.⁶⁷

In examining the relationship between food and national identity, I, too, take a similar bottom-up approach in [Chapter 3: Nation](#), looking at food ‘from below’ as a powerful medium in the *everyday* imagination, construction, and reproduction of nation and nationalism by Iranians, through the lens of ‘everyday nationhood’ (Fox & Miller-Idriss, 2008a). The original contribution of my chapter on nation mainly lies in the fact that no study, to the date, has thoroughly investigated the food-and-nationalism axis among Iranians abroad, despite a very strong and fairly visible association between the two in the context of Iranian diaspora.

Building on the seminal works of Billig’s *Banal Nationalism* (1995) – which considered how the nation is produced and reproduced in the banal realms of the everyday – and Edensor’s *National Identity and Popular Culture and Everyday Life* (2002) – which examined the

⁶⁵ See for example: Aronczyk (2008); Byrkjeflot and Pedersen (2013); Chuang (2009); Hall and Mitchell (2003); Hashimoto and Telfer (2006); Nwokorie (2015), etc.

⁶⁶ See for example: Nirwandy and Awang (2014); Rockower (2012, 2014); Spence (2016); Suntikul (2017); Wilson (2011); Zhang (2015), etc.

⁶⁷ See for example: Avieli (2005, 2012, 2017); Chee-Beng (2015); Hiroko (2008); le Grand (2015); Nell (2015); Wilson (2013); Wise (2011).

dynamic ways in which the nation and national identity are understood, materialized, performed, spatialized, and represented through a range of routine everyday practices – Fox and Miller-Idriss (2008a) proposed an effective research agenda that would address nationalism from below by examining the ways in which the nation is produced and reproduced in the *ordinary* people's everyday discourse, performances, consumption, and choices. For instance, Miller-Idriss (2009) showed that the *discursive* ways in which working-class students at German vocational schools express their 'national' selves are quite different, and at times contradictory, to the 'official' expressions of German national sentiment. Similarly, Fox (2004) demonstrated how the Hungarian minority in Romania would imply – and at times explicitly debate, reject, and reflect upon – their national belonging by, for example, *choosing* whether to send their children to a Romanian/Hungarian school, to get married in a Romanian/Hungarian church, or to enroll in a Romanian/Hungarian line of study. In this sense, "the nation . . . is not simply the product of macro-structural forces; it is simultaneously the practical accomplishment of ordinary people engaging in routine activities" (p. 537). Thus, ordinary people are not only passive recipients of national meanings that are transmitted to them from above, but are simultaneously their contingent producers, able to exercise their own agency.

As Antonsich and Skey (2017) note, 'banal' and 'everyday' should not be considered synonymous when it comes to the theoretical understanding of the nation, despite their close resemblance in common discourse. In this vein, the concept of 'everyday nationhood' as explored by Fox and Miller-Idriss should not be equated with Billig's 'banal nationalism,' although both perspectives accentuate the significance of the *banal* in how the idea of nation is constructed and maintained. In the perspective of banal nationalism, the focus is mainly on the ways in which the elite and the state repeatedly transmit and propagate, on a regular basis, *their* idea of what the nation is until those specific aspects of the everyday (which may or may not contain hot forms of nationalism) become so embedded in routines of life that they go unnoticed, at which point the idea of nation as transmitted 'from above' is taken for granted and unreflectively accepted by the ordinary people. Such "top-down, state-centric conception of nationhood" (Antonsich & Skey, 2017, p. 5) is distinguished from the "bottom up, agency-centered" (p. 5) perspective of everyday nationhood which tends to emphasize how ordinary people, through their own agency (rather than through the elite's propagations), subjectively reproduce and attach meanings to nation through their everyday acts in their everyday lives. In this sense, while "the perspective of banal nationalism is a more appropriate tool for

investigating the *political*, . . . the idea of everyday nationhood is more useful in helping us understand how the social world is constructed, experienced and understood by actors called ordinary people” (Ichijo, 2017, p. 261).

To this end, food and food practices provide a perfect analytical tool because of food’s direct link to both the everyday *and* nationhood. This link is especially apparent in diasporas where the everyday food-related practices are “often used to define and maintain boundaries of identity; boundaries that serve to define the identity of a minority community from the dominant core identity of the nation within which it resides” (Palmer, 1998, p. 189). Through their everyday (as well as ritual) food and food practices, Iranians constantly assert their ‘Iranianness’ and their connection to their home and homeland, both in their real and imagined sense, and bring to light the significance of the relationship between food and nationhood in a diasporic context where home and nation are constantly enacted and negotiated, and where national identity and national belonging are continuously constructed, reworked, and re-imagined.

Gender, food, diaspora

Although domestic food-work is an important arena of cultural maintenance, its significance and impact is often trivialized in society as well as the academia due to, among other factors, the mundane and routine nature of everyday food preparation and consumption, and its connection with women’s work (Narayan, 1997). It is the association of such an ‘unimportant’ task with women that reinforces the low-status of domestic food-work (Inness, 2001b). Such association, in particular societal expectations of women fulfilling this role, has been identified by feminist scholars to be a site for women’s oppression (Beagan et al., 2008; Charles & Kerr, 1988; DeVault, 1991; Lupton, 1996; Murcott, 1983; Thébaud, 2010).

There are many studies, especially in feminist scholarship, which explore how the social and cultural meanings attached to food can serve to perpetuate unequal gender relations. These studies, as Cairns, Johnston and Bauman (2010) state, “interrogate the historically naturalized connection between food and femininity that has served to legitimize women’s disproportionate food labor and to reproduce gendered divisions between the public and private spheres” (p. 592). For instance, DeVault (1991) demonstrates how women’s caring attention and skilled work, especially with regard to cooking, can produce not only family meals, but also family life. She explains that although creating an ‘ideal’ family meal is a thoughtful effort involving many complicated tasks (e.g. remembering family members’ schedules and food

preferences, planning meals that can make everyone pleased, monitoring supplies, being able to improvise and respond to family members' wishes and moods while maintaining order and creating pleasant sociability at the table), it is typically interpreted by family members as an expression of women's personalities. Even women themselves, as DeVault (1991) notes, dismiss their exertions as 'no trouble, really' and claim that if this work is skillfully done, it hardly seems to be work at all and can even become a source of pleasure. Such emotional significance attached to food coupled with the complex relationship between caring/pleasure and subordination has been discussed by numerous feminist scholars – for instance in the work of Cairns and Johnston (2015) who combine a feminist perspective with the Bourdiesuan concept of habitus to understand the manifestation of 'doing gender' in a range of domestic food practices such as food shopping. Habitus, in the discourse of feminist scholars, provides a way of understanding how gender structures become internalized and how gendered norms are "set up for the individual about what matters, what is noticed, how one comports oneself physically, socially, emotionally, and much more . . . in quite subtle ways, through discourse, practices, and institutions, and through interactions with others in their environment (McLeod & Yates, 2006, p. 90). Central to feminist scholars' utilization of habitus is an emphasis on embodied ways of being (Krais, 2006). As Reay (2004b) notes, "Bourdieu has developed the concept of habitus to demonstrate the ways in which, not only is the body in the social world, but also, the ways in which the social world is in the body" (p. 432). Therefore, while such accounts demonstrate the acceptance and even embrace of 'caring' duties by women, they also reveal that their actions tend to reproduce dominant categorizations and valuations of gender, together with associated gendered divisions of labor and patterns of inequality, and thus contribute to their oppression.

Following DeVault (1991), studies of food and gender also explore the significance of emotional satisfaction that women get from caring and working for their loved ones (Bentley, 1998; Lupton, 1996; Weinreb, 2017) and the long-standing relationship between gendered expectations and the caring dimensions of women's roles, whether as housewives (Charles & Kerr, 1988; Neuhaus, 2011) or, in ideal forms of femininity, as mothers (Hollows, 2003). Contemporary scholarship shows that even in Nordic countries where the degree of equality, in terms of both labor and domestic work, is at its highest (Aarseth & Olsen, 2008), the majority of food-related domestic tasks are done by women. Such disproportionate engagement of women in food work is rationalized, as Beagan et al. (2008) state, through unspoken, implicit

assumptions about gender roles, such as women's availability, schedules, standards for family care and desire to reduce conflict.

Food is also discussed, in relation to gender, as a source of power and/or powerlessness (e.g. Counihan, 1999; D'Sylva & Beagan, 2011; Holtzman, 2002). This may be the power that society allocates or denies to men and women through their access to and control of food, or the 'personal power' through which the relationship and meanings of food contributes to a valued sense of self in either gender (Counihan, 1998). Classic studies of food have demonstrated how differential access to, and control over, food can generate and maintain gender hierarchies not only in macro, but also in micro level (Goody, 1982; Mintz, 1985) where women's role as 'gatekeepers' (Lewin, 1951) supposedly grant them more power over control and distribution of food. However, *being responsible* for provisioning food does not necessarily mean *being in control* of it (McIntosh & Zey, 1989), for it is often still men who would eventually determine what is purchased, prepared, and served (Schafer & Bohlen, 1977). Therefore, women's provisioning of food can be interpreted as both a source of influence and power, while at the same time, as a source of subordination and powerlessness.

This is also true with regard to migrant women who live in their respective diasporas. Studies of gender and migration have demonstrated that in diasporic contexts and transnational migrant communities the role of women in maintaining a connection to the culture of origin and keeping and promoting traditions, both in their families and in the larger community, is amplified and is more influential than previously evident in their original/home settings (D'Sylva & Beagan, 2011). This is particularly so when women of diaspora cook traditional ethnic or national food from home. As D'Sylva and Beagan (2011) note:

When a group is marginalized by race, ethnicity, language or religion, food often takes on distinct meaning as a vehicle for transmitting cultural traditions and identities. . . . Thus the work of food preparation, in particular producing traditional ethnic cuisines, may become simultaneously an aspect of patriarchal oppression and a source of power or authority. . . . When 'home' is far away, when daily life is rife with accommodating others who do not understand your language, appreciate your culture or support your values, then food in the privacy of your home may have the ability to confirm the familiar, reinforce belonging and strengthen ties to a distant place or past. (p. 281)

In such contexts, food practices take on a considerable significance as they are central to the practices and values of cultural transposability, transmission, and transformation. Furthermore, the changes and limitations provoked by any forces such as migration to the previously mundane and unreflective practices of cooking and eating food “may explicate and transform values and practices central to individual, social and cultural existence, as they become challenged and taken up for reconsideration” (Nielsen & Holm, 2016, p. 63). Women, who often continue to remain in charge of these food practices in diaspora, will therefore become (or are expected to become), in such context, the *purveyors* of culture. As a result of this, their domestic foodwork may impose on them a greater pressure (rather than men) to uphold idealized cultural identities, but, at the same time, may grant them symbolic power, too. Avakian (2005) shows this double-fold aspect of cooking among diasporic women who at times showed contradictory responses to the relationship of food practices and women’s oppression. She argues that while these women can fully understand the role of food-work in maintaining and constructing gender oppression, they also appreciate the authority and power they have been creating in their kitchen and through their daily cooking. She further states that cooking can become for women also a source of enjoyment and a means of serving one’s psychological needs.

She adds, however, that this often happens when cooking is no longer compulsory in the lives of women – that is when women are not *expected* to cook. In such situations the meaning of cooking subverts into “an act of pleasing oneself” (2005, p. 264). Many of the Iranian women who participated in this study also expressed enjoyment in doing the cooking for their families, firstly because this was now viewed as an ‘optional pursuit’ that was *chosen* to be performed rather than an ‘obligatory chore’ that was *expected* of them, and secondly because as a result of cooking Iranian dishes nostalgic memories of home were invoked which, in return, brought about family members’ greater appreciation of women’s effort/time which consequently enhanced a private influence and status, and afforded women a sense of “power that comes from being needed” (Counihan, 1999, p. 53). In this sense, domestic foodwork was discussed by Iranian women in light of a transformation from a means of oppression at home to a means of empowerment in diaspora, creating a “vehicle for . . . creative expressions” (Avakian & Haber, 2005, p. 2), and one to “reclaim, proclaim, and enact a transformed . . . womanhood” (Avakian, 2005, p. 261).

I also note that ethnographic and grounded studies of food and gender are, for the most part, based on Western societies.⁶⁸ Although in the past three decades more has been written on feminism and gender than on any other subject within Middle Eastern studies (Meriwether & Tucker, 2018), there are no more than a handful of studies that have investigated the relations of gender with food and food practices. This is a little surprising given the dominant cultural assumption in the Middle East that associates food preparation and culinary knowledge with a female-gendered sphere,⁶⁹ and the ‘maternal’ with nurturing and providing nourishment. There is, however, a relatively, though not significantly, greater number of studies focusing on food and gender when it comes to Middle Easterners who live *within* Western contexts. Of the very few in-depth studies that have examined food and gender in relation to each other in a Middle Eastern context, one of the most notable is Lynn Harbottle’s *Food for Health, Food for Wealth* (2000) in which she closely examined the assertion of gender identities (both male and female) through the medium of food among diasporic Iranians in Britain. She specifically emphasized the significant role of migration in relative shifts in gender status often resulting in “a partial and ongoing transformation of gender roles and identities” (p. 121) for diasporic Iranians of Britain. Building on this, Harbottle maintained that migration would “create new opportunities for the negotiation of gender and familial power relations’ which can subvert ‘any simplistic notions of a clear association between public/private, male/female and high/low status” (p. 13). The scarcity of scholarly works that deal with men’s roles is even greater, and current prominent publications on sociological and anthropological aspects of gender in Middle Eastern contexts have rarely dealt with or even paid much attention to the notion of

⁶⁸ Though some key ethnographic references on food and gender from anthropological and/or ethnographic perspective should not be ignored: Laura Gvion’s (2012) *Beyond Hummus and Falafel* (with David and Elana Wesley) – which similarly is on a Middle Eastern society, and about the importance of women’s control of culinary knowledge; Joy Adapon’s (2008) *Culinary Art and Anthropology*; Maria Elisa Christie’s (2008) *Kitchenspace* both on Mexico and in different ways on women’s control of the kitchen and/or cooking and the power derived from that); Carol Counihan’s (2009) *A Tortilla is Like Life*; David Sutton’s (2001, 2008) multiple ethnography works on cooking, especially in relation to grandmother-mother-daughter power relations *Secrets from the Greek Kitchen*; Brett Williams’ (1984) *Why Migrant Women Feed Their Husbands Tamales* – which deals most explicitly with the question of the social capital that can be derived from cooking as well as the much broader kinship ties that are activated through cooking; and Anne Allison’s (1991) *Japanese Women and Obentos* which discusses how women are more isolated in cooking (and must conform to demands to cook), but also find meaning and identity through cooking. There is also a growing literature on men and cooking in terms of ethnography including Matthew Guttman’s (1996) *The Meanings of Macho* – which considers the idea of cooking and masculinity in a number of chapters; Joelle Bahloul’s (1999) *On Cabbages and Kings* and also her (2018) *The Embodied Republic: Colonial and Postcolonial French Sephardic Taste* on the foodways of French Jews from North Africa – which discusses informants often showing off their assimilation in similar ways to what my Iranian participants did. There are also a couple of short pieces on food and gender in Muslim societies (Yemen, Morocco) in Leo Coleman’s (2011) *Food: Ethnographic Encounters*.

⁶⁹ Though this is quite a universal cultural assumption and not limited only to the Middle East, as many scholars in food and gender studies have acknowledged.

masculinity,⁷⁰ – which is why I have allocated a part of the [Chapter 4: Gender](#) of this thesis to shed some light on the topic, however briefly.

Memory, food, diaspora

There is a powerful relationship between food and memory. Both food and memory are clearly linked to issues of identity, and both of them can generate subjective, popular interest and commentary, while also encoding powerful, and sometimes hidden, meanings (Sutton, 2001, p. 6). Food's tastes, smells, textures, and sights can be extraordinarily evocative of not only of the memory of the food itself, but also of both reassuring and vexed memories of the places and settings in which that particular food was consumed. For instance, family meals can be remembered both as a site of peaceful commensality as well as of intense conflicts (Jackson, 2013). As Allen (2012) reminds us:

Beyond memories of taste and place, food is effective as a trigger of even deeper memories of feelings and emotions, internal states of the mind and body. These kinds of memories can sneak up on you: they have the power to derail a current train of thought and replace it with one both unexpected and unexpectedly potent. (p. 150).

Despite such a strong link, the topic of food and memory remains, to date, relatively unexplored in anthropology. Holtzman (2006; 2009) believes that this is partly due to food and memory both being “something of a floating signifier” (2006, p. 362) – a factor that contributes to the complexity of exploring their relationship as objects of study: as for food it is because “we may readily define it in a strictly realist sense – that stuff that we as organisms consume by virtue of requiring energy. Yet it is an intrinsically multilayered and multidimensional subject – with social, psychological, physiological, symbolic dimensions, to name merely a few” (2006, p. 362). As for memory, it is because “very different phenomena come to be homonymically labeled ‘memory,’ although they are grounded in very different processes, in very different sites of agency, and with very different kinds of social importance” (2009, p. 30). Reviewing the existing literature on anthropological aspects of food and memory, Holtzman (2006) identifies eight themes, namely food and sensuous memory; food and ethnic identity; the gastronomic memory of diaspora; gustatory nostalgia experienced and invented; food, nationalism, and invented traditions; food, gender, and the agents of memory; food as the

⁷⁰ Some examples include *Gendering the Middle East: Emerging Perspectives* (Kandiyoti, 1996), *Gender and Citizenship in the Middle East* (Joseph, 2000), or *A Social History of Women and Gender in the Modern Middle East* (Meriwether and Tucker, 2018).

marker of epochal transformations; and finally rituals of remembering and forgetting through food. He maintains that while there exists a “rich and engaging” (p. 366) literature in some of these areas, they often tend toward the atheoretical, relying mainly on popular constructions rather than on detailed empirical research.

There are only a handful of notable book-length anthropological works that have explicitly framed their focus on food and memory. Among them is Holtzman’s *Uncertain Tastes* (2009) in which he interweaves themes of food and memory by exploring the ways in which Samburu herders in Northern Kenya construct and evaluate both their past and present through their food preferences, food availability, and food consumption, highlighting the particularly salient role of food in relation to memory and historical consciousness. For Holtzman, what makes food “a particularly compelling site for the construction of complex, contradictory, forms of memory and the ambivalent subjectivities that arise from them [is] the way food in general condenses independent but intersecting strands—sensual, symbolic, psychological, social, material, and so on” (pp. 5–6). Carol Counihan’s *Around the Tuscan Table* (2004), also demonstrated how food memories and the way individuals remember the changes they experienced in life with regard to their diet, cuisine, meal routines, and food labor can embody epochal transformations such as war and modernity and symbolize identity politics.

But, to date, perhaps the most substantial in-depth study of the relationship between food and memory from an anthropological perspective – and one that also accords with the central themes of this thesis (i.e. diaspora and migration) – is David Sutton’s *Remembrance of Repast* (2001) in which the privileged position of food in conveying the memory of experiences is explored from a variety of perspectives. Focusing on the inhabitants of the Greek Island of Kalymnos, Sutton demonstrates how food and sensory properties of food, in their liminal connection with both body and mind, with both individual survival and social symbolism, with both personal and cultural identities, are important practices of memory provocation. Invoking the idea of “prospective memory” (p. 19), Sutton suggests that food and eating practices not only construct memories in the immediate present and invoke memories from the past, but also orient people toward memories in the future – in that past joyous experiences of food consumption are, at times, eagerly-awaited and looked forward to.

Sutton’s arguments with regard to capacity of food to make ‘worlds’ also highlights the power of tangible everyday food experience in evoking the memories on which identities are

formed, yet are still becoming. At the beginning of his book, he talks of a recent migrant from Greece who, upon smelling a pot of basil in London, makes immediate connections with, and feels a strong sense of belonging to, the nation. He argues that such association suggests firstly “the importance of the sensory in reconnecting and remembering experiences and places one has left behind for short- or long-term migration,” and secondly that “objects can shift levels of identity when experienced in new contexts, becoming a symbol not just of home or local place, but of countries or perhaps regions” (p. 74). Building on this, he concludes that eating can transport migrants across place and time, adding “there is an imagined community implied in the act of eating ‘food from home’ while in exile, in the embodied knowledge that others are eating the same food” (p. 84). In this way, eating becomes a strongly emotional experience for the geographically distant and the culturally displaced whose embodied “burning desire” (p. 81) for food-from-home is satisfied only through the sensory experience of eating it.

Recent concerns with diasporic and transnational identities has also brought the issue of *nostalgia* to attention, with many studies regarding foodways as a nexus of nostalgia and diasporic identity, and highlighting the eminent role of food preparation and consumption in maintenance of identity and reconstruction of home in diasporic conditions. Such prominence of food in eliciting nostalgic memories – whether memories of good old days (Sutton, 2008, p. 170) or bad old days (Duruz, 1999, p. 239) – is owed to food’s ability to create a combination of nostalgic emotions – such as tastes, smells, sights, touches and sounds – sometimes all at once (Hawley, 2016). In this sense, the desire to remember home can be sought in the reflectively nostalgic gesture of re-creating culinary practices of the past home (Mannur, 2009) and creating new ones in the present diasporic home (Ray 2004; Roy 2002; Mankekar, 2002).

In dealing with nostalgia, Ghassan Hage (2010), on whose work I build my analysis in [Chapter 5](#), raises concerns about equating nostalgia with homesickness when it comes to migrants, and criticizes migration and diaspora studies for an existing “miserabilist tendency” (p. 417) in the study of migration which makes migrants look “passive pained people at all costs” (p. 417) whose only sentiment is a ‘painful’ yearning for home. He maintains that nostalgia and homesickness are very different concepts and should not be interpreted under the same light; while homesickness is inhabiting memories – in the sense of being stuck within memory in some way and not developing new ones in the new country that are satisfying – nostalgia is “an enabling memory...an active insertion of memory in the construction of the present and the future” (p.417) that can lead to a certain sense of familiarity, security, community, and hope – which eventually leads to a future-oriented sense of homeliness away

from the origin home in the here and now of diaspora. Hage acknowledges, nevertheless, that diasporic nostalgia *can*, under certain circumstances, take the form of homesickness, especially at times of experiencing a sense of disempowerment and an inability to do certain things such as speaking properly or socializing suitably; times that one feels that the control that one once had over one's life is significantly diminished.

Whereas nostalgic food remembrance is often thought to be revealing a “contrast between a golden past and a present loss” (Chan, 2010, p. 206) in which psychological and emotional comfort is attained by the means of remembering an idealized past that was lived and experienced, Appadurai (1996) points out that nostalgia is not always a desire to *re*-experience and/or *re*-live an idealized past – for that past may have never been experienced or lived in the first place, thus is only imagined. Although such “armchair nostalgia” (Appadurai, 1996, p. 78) is apparent in Iranians’ food-related acts of remembering and forgetting where they not only practice “the habits of the past,” but also “the habits of the *restoration* of the past” (Boym, 2001, p. 41, emphasis added), it is also apparent, to a greater extent, in their dealing with their national aspects of identity where some of them express memories for a loss they have never suffered, and lives they have never experienced (e.g. drinking wine to ‘remember’ the loss of ‘Persian Empire’ or ancient/mythical kings) – which highlights the construction of national identity through the mirror of imagined memory and imagined nostalgia.

In this sense, nostalgia for food is often in line with an idealized memory and construction of nation, and is firmly linked to the constructions of migrants’ national identity. For example, Holtzman (2006) maintained that ethnic and national identity are a “central arena in which food is tied to notions of memory” (p. 366), while Sebastia (2016) showed that traditional “foods from motherland” (p. 12) are regarded by migrants to be fairly superior and highly preferable to the foods of the host country. Mannur (2009) also described how the remembrance and performance of culinary practices from home evoke a sense of national unity, a sense of “culinary citizenship – that which grants subjects the ability to articulate national identity via food” (p. 20).

Such interrelationship between memory and national identity – that raised in the mid-1980s when anthropological interest in nationalism and in memory was developing concurrently – turns one’s attention not only to what is remembered individually, but also what is remembered collectively (Sutton, 2001). While works of scholars such as Maurice Halbwachs

(1980), complemented by the likes of Jan and Aleida Assmann in the 1990s, provided an important theoretical groundwork for the study of collective memory, they have usually had a tendency to focus on the *content* rather than the *form* of memories and the ways in which these forms might be culturally shaped (Sutton, 2001, p. 10). One of the first works that drew attention to the form rather than content of memories – to *how* rather than *what* – was Connerton's *How Societies Remember* (1989). Like Halbwachs, Connerton, too, regards collective or social memories to have been created and transmitted through social practices, with an emphasis on ritual performances and re-enactments, through which memories of groups are conveyed and sustained. Other scholars also have pointed to the mnemonic power of rituals, especially in ‘changed’ situations – such as migration – where ritual performances become an important source for identifying with a real or imagined originary past that also enforces expectations of continuity with and possibility for the future (Feuchtwang, 2010). In the context of migration, the interrelation of change and continuity that is inherent in rituals and their power to create new meanings and structures (Bell, 1992; Kapferer, 2004) are used by migrants to negotiate and (re)construct new identities and status (Gardner & Grillo 2002), as observed in the ritual performances of Iranians of New Zealand on the day of Ashura, which, though perceived by them as sort of a ‘reenactment’ and ‘recreation’ of a time and space in the past, was performed in rather different ways than before – with ‘selective attention’ given to particular sensory experiences and bodily practices which could invoke ‘relevant’ memories and imagination, while consciously ignoring those unable to do so. Such changes, as I show in [Chapter 5: Memory](#), did not only involve different ‘ways,’ but also different meanings which had become “integrated into personal biographies [and] family networks” (Pedersen & Rytter, 2018, p. 2608), giving rise to invented traditions (Hobsbawm & Ranger, 1983), though these newly-invented meanings and forms of expressions were always interrelated with old ones at home. In this sense, while such performances provided a sense of continuity with an often idealized past for Iranians, they were also means to forge transitions and transformations, acting as “vital conjunctures” (Johnson-Hanks, 2002, p. 871), urging migrants to “reflect on, renegotiate and question notions of identity, affiliation and belonging both locally and transnationally (Pedersen & Rytter, 2018, p. 2609), thus not only potentially encompassing the “ways of being and ways of belonging” (Levitt & Schiller, 2004, p. 1002), but also the transformative ways of “becoming[s]” (Biehl & Locke, 2010, p. 317).

The Relevance of Bourdieu

Central to Bourdieu's theories is the notion of 'habitus'. Bourdieu (1977) defines habitus as a "structured structure" (p. 72) – in that it is shaped by one's past experiences particularly the evolving processes, social interactions and status negotiations of foundational familial socialization, formal education and occupational/ consumerist experiences – and "structuring structure" (p. 72) – in that it shapes our practices in the now and future. Such *structure* – in that it is predominantly (but not wholly) non-random, patterned and systematically ordered – evokes a system of psycho-social, embodied dispositions that are aggregated into practices that are *durable* in that they endure with relative stability over time and are also *transposable* or can be analogically transferred from one social sphere to another. The way one walks, stands, eats, or speaks are all embedded and embodied components of one's habitus, reflecting and, at the same time, reproducing (sometimes changing) aspects of the social environment. Habitus, however, does not function in isolation, but has "an unconscious relationship" (Bourdieu, 1993, p. 76) with, what Bourdieu calls *field* that is itself composed of the power relations or the distribution of types of what he calls *capital*. In short, *field* is the social arena in which agents maneuver to acquire, generate, improve, maintain or change their positions (i.e. their social roles and associated status); while *capital* is whatever is socially valued by, and within, a particular field. Bourdieu identifies four types of capital, namely economic (money, property, etc.), cultural (tastes, education, socially legitimated skills that provide the ability to produce culture or cultural production, etc.), social (network), and symbolic (honor, prestige, reputation). He illustrates the interlocking and interplaying nature of these three "thinking tools" (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 50) in a formula: [(habitus)(capital)] + field = practice (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 101). Thus, practices should not be inferred merely "from the present conditions which seem to have provoked them or from the past conditions which have produced habitus," but should be deduced from their "interrelationship" (Bourdieu, 1990, p. 56). In other words, practices do not simply emerge from one's habitus, but from the structural forces situated within a given field interacting with habitus and capital.

To explain his logic of practice, Bourdieu uses the metaphor of a game. For example, in a game of football (i.e. *field*), there are certain rules (e.g. only the goalkeeper is allowed to handle the obligatory round ball with their hands) that determine what the 'regular' way of playing is, deciding what players can do and where they can go and assigning values (i.e. *capital*) to some certain actions such as scoring a goal or committing a foul by tripping an

opponent. During the game, players make certain choices and take certain actions (i.e. *practices*) that are based on several factors. First is the position of that player in the game. For example, the fact that a goalkeeper can choose to clear the ball using his hands whereas the same option is not available to any other player is precisely because of their determined positions in the field. Similarly, the choices that are available to an individual (based on which he/she takes action) is also structurally determined (though only partly) by that individual's social position in a given social arena. Second are 'the rules of the game' which are reflected in the regularities of the game (i.e. *doxa*). These regularities, as Bourdieu argues, are internalized and partly generate players' disposition to function in a particular way (i.e. *habitus*). Third are the previous experiences of the player in other fields. For example, the ability of a football player to control the ball in a wet and muddy field is partly attributed to that player's previous experience in similar conditions. These experiences, as Bourdieu notes, also partly shape individuals dispositions. Finally there is the players' subjective agency – that is their desires, their personality, and their beliefs. Only by taking into account the interrelationship between all these four components can social practice be adequately modelled.

In fact, Bourdieu (1979), elaborates on these concepts by – appropriately enough for us here – deploying food and eating in his elaborate discussion of taste, highlighting food as an arena in which hierarchies of value exist amongst choices. Regarding taste as a multifaceted concept, he argues that the manner in which the formation of tastes is articulated depends heavily on the particular social structure of the field which affects the range of food and food practices that are available to the individual. Thus, for instance, the working class, due to being pressured by material necessity, may not have facilitated as much cultural and economic capital formation as the bourgeois, and is therefore presumably predisposed to consume different foods (namely greasy, heavy, filling, fattening food) in a different manner (namely in abundance, and in unrestraint and informal settings). In contrast, the bourgeois, due to being born into a habitus that is not constrained by material necessity (if anything, their habitus is defined by *distance* from it), possess the freedoms resulting from possession of capital. This, therefore, generates a different set of dispositions toward their food, manifested in renouncing the 'immediate' pleasures of food and eating and their 'biological' aspects, in an inclination toward lean, light, and cultivated food such as individual portions of fish, meat, vegetables, and desserts that are served much more formally, ceremoniously, and with aesthetic presentation being paramount. In this sense, capital and habitus lead to specific food practices and preferences while, at the same time, tend to discourage others. Meanwhile, it is the field that designates the range of

settings, leading people to engage in the food practices that express *their* habitus and to deploy their various forms of capital. The food practices of individuals are therefore the result of the interaction of the habitus and capital(s) and the nature and structure of the field in which they are placed; in other words, individuals choose the food practices available to them within their field. Other scholars have borrowed these analytical tools and employed them in the field of food studies, as simply witnessed by the development of conceptual frameworks such as ‘culinary field’ (Hollows & Jones, 2010; Leschziner, 2010; Warde, 2004) and ‘culinary capital’ (de Solier, 2005; LeBesco & Naccarato, 2012), or by the numerous contemporary analyses of food choices, provisioning, practices, and consumptions in different contexts as means to express class identity and achieve distinction (e.g. Johnston & Baumann, 2007; McIntosh, 1996; Paddock, 2015; Power, 1999; Wilk, 1999).

For Bourdieu, habitus is mainly unconscious, with agents acting without necessarily being aware of their actions. Understood in this way, habitus can be thought of as the source of individuals’ practices, ensuring or even determining their presumably predictable behaviors and actions. The mechanically deterministic character of habitus has been pointed out by some to be problematic as it renders the actual and conscious role of agency unclear (e.g. Jenkins, 2002; Mouzelis, 2007; Throop & Murphy, 2002). However, in strongly rejecting the deterministic interpretations of his concept that are used in their schema, Bourdieu notes that “circular and mechanical models of this kind are precisely what the notion of habitus is designed to help us destroy” (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992, p. 134).⁷¹ He goes on to say that:

through the habitus, the structure of which it is the product governs practice, not along the paths of mechanical determinism, but within the constraints and limits initially set on its inventions. . . . We can always say that individuals make choices as long as we do not forget that they do not choose the principles of these choices. (Bourdieu, 1980, p. 55; Wacquant, 1989, p. 45)

Thus, habitus does not *dictate* a course of action, but rather sets forth a flexible range of possible actions and associated social consequences (rewards, punishments, etc), thereby ensuring that any transcendence of comfortable habits will likely be both self-consciously and socially acute. As Mouzelis (2008) notes, “it is precisely this inventive flexibility that allows the habitus carrier, when s/he enters a specific field, to cope with the varied requirements that

⁷¹ More recently, scholars such as Barrett and Martina (2012), Hilgers (2009), Reay (2004b) Sweetman (2003), among others, have also rejected the deterministic interpretations of habitus.

‘positions’ entail” (p. 132). Though maintaining that habitus is “beyond the grasp of consciousness” (Bourdieu, 1977, p. 94), Bourdieu himself emphasizes the generative character and thus potential flexibility of habitus and acknowledges the possibility of becoming aware of, and even gradually changing, one’s habitus through new experiences as well as reflexive deliberation and conscious evaluation of the situation – or what he calls *reflexivity*. However, he maintains that such reflexivity mostly arises either in specific social positions in which reflexivity is an important practice (e.g. artists and sociologists) or where an individual experiences significant upward social mobility and in times of crisis⁷² when there is a temporary mismatch between habitus and field, between dispositions and positions. Such *hysteresis* between habitus and field fabricates a *cleft* habitus and a likewise fragmented self “torn by contradiction and internal division” (Bourdieu, 2004, p. 160).

Migrants’ experience can then offer an interesting perspective in this regard; having encountered a dramatic interruption in their socio-cultural continuum after migration, migrants may find operationalizing their habitus challenging in a new social field where *doxic* order changes, and where cultural, symbolic, economic and social capitals and associated embodied dispositions and practices may be significantly different from that of home (Bravo-Moreno, 2016). During the course of this research, Iranians sometimes spoke about similarities between the Iranian (food) *way of things* and that of New Zealand, and expressed comfort and confidence when it came to practices that involved those (food) *ways*. But what they spoke about *most* often were not such *similarities*, but, in fact, those (food) *ways* of things which were *different* and the consequent challenges they faced not only in the process of adapting to these new (food) *ways*, but also in the process of rejecting or resisting them. In Bourdieusian terms, in their experience of migration, Iranians’ habitus often at times lacked a certain unity with itself and/or the new field (i.e. their host country, New Zealand), and in this lack of unity registered some of the meanings within the new field while simultaneously clinging to key dispositions structured primarily by the habitus acquired in their field of origin (i.e. their home country, Iran). As Bourdieu notes, although habitus as a socially embedded, generative, albeit conservative, element in this process has the capacity to adjust when encountering a new and rather different field, individuals have to battle “negative sanctions” (1977, p. 78) of their original field as the primary habitus of individuals always “tends to ensure its own constancy and its defense against change” (1990, p. 60).

⁷² He also assigns this type of habitus reflexivity/self-consciousness to the liberally educated bourgeois.

A situation such as migration where such disarray in habitus occurs can be extremely uneasy and destabilizing (Friedman, 2016; Ingram, 2011; Reay, 2013) due to exposing individuals (i.e. migrants) to prolonged distress (Bourdieu, 2000), possibly even resulting to serious ‘psychic costs’ (Reay, 2001). In such situations and in order to respond to difficulties of destabilization of the new field, habitus tends to be reinforced and reaffirmed – by individuals privileging prior (and particularly) foundational dispositions and practices – rather than challenged (Stahl, 2016; Thorpe, 2011); thus individuals, such as participants of this study, prefer to “remain within compatible fields most of the time” (Chambers, 2005, p. 340) where there is a comfortable fit between field and habitus, where they know and are reflexively attuned to the rules of the game, but also to its capitals and the ways they should be ideally (even romantically and nostalgically) operationalized in order to generate ‘secure’ positionalities (gendered, cultural, ethnic, religious, national identity) in the new field. This is, as I discuss in length in this thesis, reflected in foodways of Iranians of New Zealand who adhered to the food and food practices of their land of origin while simultaneously adjusting, though only partly, to those of their host country, and in this way, consciously and unconsciously negotiated multiple, and at times contradictory, aspects of their gender, religious, ethnic and/or national identities in order to belong both within the diasporic and host communities.

I view the culinary principles and taste preferences of Iranians of this study as the reflexive objectification of their habitus – in that they are a set of enduring, embodied predispositions which structure their food practices both within their old and new homes. In other words, their habitus finds tangible material expression in the ways they prepare and consume food, forming a certain ‘culinary habitus.’ For Iranians of New Zealand, some of these have changed over time as a result of being exposed to new experiences (e.g. migration to New Zealand and differently configured and enacted gender roles), but these changes have often been quite gradual – as for migrants food practices are the factor most resistant to change (Derkas, 2015; Gabaccia, 2009). These changes would sometimes occur without the conscious awareness of individuals, but would also take place through reflexive agency, through effort and practice, to the point that the conscious reflection on those practices would itself become habitual.

From this perspective, the changes in food practices of Iranians after migration to New Zealand illustrates what Sweetman (2003) calls a ‘reflexive habitus.’ In his attempt to bridge the gap between Bourdieu’s habitus and theories of reflexive modernization, Sweetman maintains that “a reflexive orientation toward the contemporary environment may itself be

regarded as a form of habitus, itself the outcome of an adaptation to – rather than a distanciation from – the changing nature of the social terrain” (p. 543). He notes that unlike what Bourdieu had asserted in his work, a ‘major crisis’ is not necessarily a ‘requirement’ for changes in habitus in contemporary society; rather in conditions of late-, high- or reflexive-modernity where we witness increasingly rapid economic, cultural, social, and technological shifts, the disruption of our past habitual routines and the consequent ongoing negotiation of values, morality, identities, technologies, or occupational practices is “more or less permanent” (p. 541) and the disjunction between habitus and field “more or less constant” (p. 541). Thus:

in this context reflexivity ceases to reflect a temporary lack of fit between habitus and field but itself becomes habitual, and is thus incorporated into the habitus in the form of the flexible or *reflexive* habitus. (p. 541, emphasis in original)

Crossley (2001, 2003) similarly argues that conscious reflection on habitus in itself can be thought of as an acquired disposition or habit; Sayer (2005) also suggests that through the everyday, tacit understandings and evaluations of one’s conduct, reflexivity itself can become an everyday practice, what he refers to as ‘mundane reflexivity’: “once learned they change from something we struggle to grasp to something we can think *with*, without thinking *about* them” (Sayer, 2005, p. 27, emphasis in original). In the context of this study, I translate this to the newly-practiced foodways of Iranians which they had to learn and adapt to at first, but, over time, became like a ‘second nature’ for many, indicating a change in their habitus. Shaped by their ongoing engagement – both instrumental and/or memory-based, particularly in regard to their origin foodways in Iran – in two social fields that involved practices and relations that crossed borders with different rules and values for different types of capital, Iranians seemed to develop a set of “dualistic dispositions” (Guarnizo, 1997, p. 311), a “contrapuntal scheme” (McKay, 2005, p. 85). This has travelled with them into diaspora and has combined dispositions of their place of origin (i.e. Iran) with those of the place of settlement (i.e. New Zealand), leading to the formation of a transnational/diasporic habitus (Guarnizo, 1997; Parker, 2000).

Such transnationalization/diasporization of habitus has been discussed in recent years by several migration scholars whose main argument, in short, has been that the process of migration and ongoing connections to original homeland and the experience of “living simultaneously in two countries” (Friedmann, 2002, p. 311) as a result of intersectionality of different elements such as space, gender, ethnicity, to name a few, are strongly influential in habitus of migrants and renders its “transformation both possible and necessary” (Thieme,

2008, p. 59). For example, McKay (2001), emphasizing Bourdieu's embodied cultural capital and employing the notion of "habitus as bodily history" (p. 44), shows that Filipino migrants, as a result of engaging with transnational and diasporic contexts, self-awarely transformed their habitus to one that encompassed new bodily dispositions, generating different practices of gender. Kelly and Lusis (2006) similarly argue that migrants develop multiply-layered habitus that is not necessarily confined to only one place, and encompasses elements from both home and host countries, which may lead to migrants' continuing to react to new conditions of the new field using the rules of the game of the field of origin. They conclude that the "lived spaces that contain the habitus are . . . more social than physical" (p. 845). In this sense, these lived spaces, as Zeitlyn (2014) notes, "could be described as transnational social fields, not [exclusively] linked to a place, but [also] to experiences and histories that straddle two or more locations" (p. 10). In a similar vein, Ngan (2012) illustrates how one-point-five⁷³ generation Hong Kong Chinese return migrants from Australia constantly navigate dissonance between the norms and practices acquired in their adopted 'foreign' home (i.e. Australia) and those attained in their place of origin (i.e. Hong Kong) in order for their habitus to become 'congruent' and 'compatible' to their familiar, yet new field. She concludes that the intersection between the internalized disposition from 'foreign habitus' with different expectations of a familiar yet 'new' habitus of her interlocutors' origin, often produced a complex combination of effects that, although leading to a feeling of belonging in both Australia and Hong Kong, simultaneously generated feelings of dislocation in both. I observed this also among my interlocutors, many of whom reported a certain feeling of out-of-placeness 'catching them off-guard' whenever they travelled back to Iran for visit, arguably as a result of bringing their post-migration habitus into conflict with their pre-migration field which itself might have significantly changed while they were away. This was, for instance, manifested in one participants' loss in the ability to sit cross-legged on the floor during meal times (as is traditionally customary in Iran and not in New Zealand), and consequently being criticized by his family as having become 'too foreign.' Such conflicts and adjustment of habitus, post and pre-migratory, were most visible when it came to gender roles and their constant shift (particularly in the kitchen) depending on the changing logic of the gender field in New Zealand and Iran. I further discuss these notions in [Chapter 4: Gender](#) and [Chapter 5: Memory](#).

Like most of these studies, I, too, build my arguments based on an understanding of habitus as a set of dispositions which are durable and hard to change, but changeable

⁷³ Refers to individuals who migrate to a new country before or during their early teens.

nonetheless when exposed to new environments and new experiences (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992) that lead to a lack of ‘fit’ between origin habitus and host/migrant field, causing individuals to fashion emergent reflexivities, practices, dispositions, capitals, and thus their habitus itself evolves as migrants generate new diasporic fields that are congruent and compatible. Although it has now been established by many studies that migration is a key process that is able to change and transform habitus⁷⁴ – due to exposing migrants to new impressions and activities and a generally less familiar cultural environment – less attention has been given to the fact that the ways in which migrants’ habitus (and consequently their behavior and practices) would change, heavily depends on their ‘histories.’ This includes where and what conditions they have come from, what motivated their migration, or how they are received in the host country. I give attention to all of these in the following chapters of this thesis.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I surveyed a body of literature with regard to food, diaspora, and different aspects of migrant identity and habitus / field experiences to arrive at the theoretical framework for this thesis, and, in doing so, mapped the concepts for analytically interpreting the ethnographic material.

Due to the highly interdisciplinary nature of both food studies and migration studies that inevitably draws on a diversity of fields and represents an overlapping of disciplinary discourses, my discussions throughout the three main chapters of this thesis additionally draw on an array of theories from nationalism studies ([Chapter 3](#)), gender studies ([Chapter 4](#)), and memory studies ([Chapter 5](#)), in order to understand more thoroughly and more conclusively how migrants and diasporic people, in particular diasporic Iranians of New Zealand, experience and evaluate different aspects of their identities and associated food and food practices in generating and responding to the new conditionings of diaspora. Despite such diversity, Bourdieu remains, if I may use a culinary analogy, the ‘gravy’ that makes the ‘meat-and-two-veg’ of the thesis a ‘proper meal’ (Murcott, 1982).

Looking through the lens of food and foodways, I mainly build the theoretical framing of this thesis on Bourdieu’s concern with the configuration of capital (particularly cultural and symbolic) and migrants’ deployment of practice that underpins the generative relationship

⁷⁴ For example: Bauder (2003, 2004); Friedmann (2002); Gidwani and Sivaramakrishnan (2003); Hughes (2015); Kelly and Lusis (2006); Marshall and Foster (2002); McKay (2001, 2005, 2016); Nedelcu (2012); Noble (2013); Nowicka (2015); Thieme (2008); Zeitlyn (2014).

between field and habitus, and builds on the idea of transnationalism and diasporism, involving different rules, values and capitals in two cross-border spaces and feeling at home in more than one place (Levitt, 2001). Using such a framework, I discuss Iranians' national and gender identities in the new field, both of which have their distinctive practices with diverse social, emotional and behavioral dispositions which sometimes reproduce old and already-internalized practices obtained at home, sometimes produce completely new practices, and sometimes transform old existing practices and adapt them to the new sociocultural conditioning of diaspora. Understanding the notion of habitus as the generative scheme that is constituted by the 'past,' I also pay attention to its 'mnemonic' aspects as an embodied memory which can allow for conscious and unconscious remembering and forgetting, thus a distinct mode of memory while a specific form of forgetting, too.

I argue that for Iranians what maintains a sense of Iranianness in their state of displacement is developing a transnational or diasporic habitus, resulting from a confrontation between two different geocultural spaces connected to two different times (one in the past and one in the present) which have caused, at times, a habitus-field disjuncture and led to a heightened awareness. As a result some individuals, while experiencing a continuing influence of their habitual disposition acquired at home(land), also became subject to self-refashioning and habitual reflexivity in their diasporic home. Through such "mobile, portable, transformative orientations" (Parker, 2000, p. 84), Iranians transmit and reinvent distinctive cultural forms and practices, including foodways, and become masters "of several cultural repertoires that they can selectively deploy in response to the opportunities and challenges they face" (Levitt, 2009, p. 1226). In other words, as a result of being exposed to quite a few fields and taking up multiple dispositions, practices and social positions through their exchanges between the home and host country, they develop habitus clivé (Bourdieu, 2004; also Friedman, 2016) or imbricated, multi-layered, fragmented habitus and move between these different social fields, generating 'appropriate' practices to ensure conformity with the requirements of identifiable positions within each field.

Chapter 3: Nation

Introduction

In this chapter, I investigate the link between food and national identity and the ways in which Iranians of New Zealand relate to the idea of ‘nation,’ with a focus on their practices revolving around food. I argue that diasporic Iranians’ engagement with the notion of nation, both in monumental and mundane contexts, is usually framed within a sort of Iranian nationalist narrative and discourse that has been deeply embedded in the ‘Iranian psyche,’ and has become a part of what Elias (1939) calls ‘national habitus,’ manifested both in the usually unreflexive banal practices of everyday life (Billig, 1995, Edensor, 2006) as well as in performative practices of national celebration and rituals (Connerton, 1989; Eriksen, 1993). I demonstrate in this chapter how for my interlocutors, such previously taken-for-granted, non-reflexive, ‘doxic’ national structures – as a result of encountering different racial schemas predominating in the new society (i.e. different field positions/structures) – become reflected upon, giving rise to highly conscious forms of strategizing as well as new/transformed/reaffirmed practical outcomes, many of which involve, in one way or another, food and foodways. As Elias (1939 [1996]) notes, a transformation that causes the disturbance of a national image embedded in the self-image of people, “always leads to reorientation of behavior and feelings,” thus brings on “a reassessment of a person’s values and beliefs and a reorganization of their perception of self and others” (p. 356).

Although much of the scholarship studying nationalism has taken a macro-analytical approach focusing on state-sponsored construction of the notion of nation/nationhood, there has been an increase in the number of studies that focus on how nation/nationhood is negotiated and reproduced in everyday life and by ordinary people, highlighting the importance of examining the topic ‘from below.’ As Hobsbawm (1990) notes, while nationalism is “constructed essentially from above, . . . [it]cannot be understood unless also analyzed from below, that is in terms of the assumptions, hopes, needs, longings and interests of ordinary people, which are not necessarily national and still less nationalist” (p. 10). Thus, nation, as much as being produced by political, bureaucratic, corporate, educational, and scholarly elites, is also produced and reproduced, as Billig (1995) states, by ordinary people in their everyday and seemingly banal situations, thus becoming the ubiquitous *doxa* and discourse that we use in order to make sense of our everyday lives. Partly building on Billig’s account, Edensor

(2002, 2006) similarly recognizes the mundaneness, rather than remarkableness, of nationhood due to seeing nation through the common-sense lens of a national habitus that encompasses everyday practical knowledge, embodied habits, and the enduring repetition of quotidian rituals and routines of everyday life. However, in contrast to Billig, Edensor draws particular attention to the dynamic and reflexive quality of national identities, underlining that national habitus can become challenged and reworked, especially in unfamiliar situations such as moving to another country, when consciousness becomes heightened and reflexivity increased:

The invisible pervasiveness of national habits and routines becomes immediately apparent when we move to another country and are dumbfounded by the range of everyday competencies which we do not possess, where people do not do things the way we do them. . . . Movement through unfamiliar cultural settings, including through other national spaces, can starkly reveal that such unreflexive practices are culturally situated and not part of universal common sense. (Edensor, 2006, p. 533)

Although the dynamic nature of nationhood has been confirmed by more recent scholarship, most compellingly by the works of Brubaker (1996, 2002, 2006), they have called into question the ‘pervasiveness’ of nationhood in everyday life, maintaining that nationhood is rather “only intermittently salient in everyday life” (Brubaker et al., 2006, p. 363) and, therefore, should be conceptualized as a contingent phenomenon rather than a continuous, substantial entity (Brubaker, 2002); not as something that *develops*, but as something that *happens*, thus not in demand of a *developmentalist*, but rather a theoretically sophisticated *eventful* analysis (Brubaker, 1996) that can capably delineate the situational context of nationhood’s mobilization. Thus, instead of treating nationhood as a category of analysis, it should be viewed as a category of practice: “a way of talking, a way of acting; a skilled practical accomplishment: a cognitive, discursive, or pragmatic frame; a way of understanding and interpreting experience” (Brubaker et al., 2006, p. 207); the *object*, not the *tool* of analysis (Brubaker, 2002).

Drawing on such interventions, analysts such as Jon Fox and Cynthia Miller-Idriss have attempted, in recent years, to fine-tune a methodological approach for studying what they call ‘everyday nationhood’ which would focus attention on ordinary people (i.e. the non-elite) as active producers, and not just passive consumers, of nation. In this, they introduce four modalities through which ordinary people actively, though not always self-consciously or reflectively, participate in the quotidian production and reproduction of the nation, or in other

words, “become national” (2008a, p. 543). These four modalities include “talking the nation” (2008a, p. 537) – that is the ways in which nation is invoked and constituted in the routine and everyday discourse of ordinary people; “choosing the nation” (2008a, p. 537) – that is nationhood as it is implicated in choices that ordinary individuals make; “consuming the nation” (2008a, p. 538) – that is the production of nationhood and expression of belonging by ordinary people through their everyday acts of consumption; and “performing the nation” (2008a, p. 538) – that is the ritualized enactment of nationhood by ordinary people and their construing a feeling of national cohesion through relating to national symbols.

As Fox and Miller-Idriss (2008a) mention, none of these categories are new and each of them has been discussed in length in numerous studies of nation and nationalism; what *is* new, they note, is an attempt to establish a separate field of inquiry into the often macro-structural, top-down, elite-centered approaches to nationalism. Their approach is, in fact, an expansion to Billig’s seminal thesis which, as numerous scholars have discussed, firstly tends to overlook human agency in its methodology (because ‘banal’, as Antonsich (2016a) notes, implies unreflexivity) and secondly deploys a top-down, state/elite-centric approach, thus ignoring how ‘ordinary people,’ through their everyday practices, engage with the subjective (re)production and maintenance of nation in ways that may not necessarily be congruent with those national meanings that the state/elite is trying to propagate (Antonsich, 2016a; Ichijo, 2017; Jones & Merriman, 2009; Skey, 2011). Thus, for a study like mine whose primary focus is not investigating the *political*, and whose ‘ordinary’ subjects, as I show throughout the chapter, seem to have become highly-reflexive (perhaps even hyper-reflexive) social agents in their particular diasporic context, looking through the more bottom-up, agency-centered lens of the ‘everyday’ may prove more fruitful than viewing things from the top-down, state-centric lens of the ‘banal.’ This is not to say that I shall (or can) completely set aside the banal perspective, because there is much that is banal in everyday life; the banal is, indeed, integrated in the everyday (Jones & Merriman, 2009). Rather, I focus on the everyday in the same manner that some other notable studies of nationalism previously have (Brubaker, 2006; Edensor, 2002, Skey, 2011) – that is, as an avenue for investigating the practices and discourses through which “different perspectives on difference are experienced and articulated, ignored and neglected” (Fox & Jones, 2013, p. 395); practices through which “people make sense or consume various kinds of knowledge [and] rationalities” (Jones & Merriman, 2009, p. 167). In this sense, the everyday is “a place, not spatially or temporally circumscribed, but imperfectly delineated by the individuals who people it” (Fox & Jones, 2013, p. 396).

Furthermore, Fox and Miller-Idriss's (2008a) individual-oriented analysis, as well as their context-sensitive approach, fully acknowledges the notion of individuals' 'lived experience' as well as the situational contextuality of identification processes. Both of these are integral to the studies of a phenomenon such as migration which often causes considerable reformation and reconstruction of individuals' understanding of self and others, place, and community. Additionally, the subtle relationship between nation in its banal form and nation in its everyday form is, in fact, the subtle relationship between unconscious dispositions and conscious strategies of national belonging (Wallem, 2017). Therefore, by taking a practice-based approach that would emphasize the practical dimension(s) of nationalism (Hage, 1998), and how this manifests in the everyday and episodic (especially celebratory or monumental) foodways of my diasporic Iranian interlocutors, one can not only bridge the gap between the banal and everyday (Goode, 2017), but also better understand the intertwined link between the institutionalized national structures and the reflexive practices that emerge in response to them in a 'crisis' situation such as migration where the previously taken-for-granted qualities of membership and belonging becomes reflected upon and reexamined. Finally, using the perspective of everyday nationhood, I can demonstrate nationalism's salience (and/or the lack thereof) in everyday interactions and, in that, examine how nationalist beliefs can manifest themselves in other domains of social life. After all, the everyday is not an object of investigation, but simply a domain of enquiry into other social phenomena (Fox & Miller-Idriss, 2008a, p. 557).

Though Fox and Miller-Idriss's (2008a) *Everyday Nationhood* offers a quite useful horizon for the study of nationalism, it has also been criticized, most famously by Anthony Smith (2008), who argues that 'history' is conspicuously absent in the "here-and-now conceptual apparatus" (p. 565) of Fox and Miller-Idriss's prospectus that firstly fails to consider the heritage or traditions of the previous generations of 'ordinary people,' on whose history and communities the groundwork of the nation might have been built (or destroyed); and secondly fails to acknowledge the non-elite's interactions with the elite during, or prior to, the *formation* of nation. Thus:

it is only *modern* national states that can furnish the necessary arena for the study of everyday nationhood, and so 'everyday nationhood' is revealed as another species of modernism. Once again, we are locked into the present epoch in the name of ordinary people. (Smith, 2008, p. 567, emphasis in original)

Such an attempt to separate ‘everyday nationhood’ from ‘historic nationhood’ would also lead, as Smith (2008) further notes, to the conceptual and practical confinement of the study of nationalism to the democratic West, leaving not much room for its application to less democratic nations where their less liberal regimes may only grant their citizens the right to talk, choose, consume, and perform in certain ‘prescribed’ national ways. All these, in Smith’s (2008) view, give Fox and Miller-Idriss’s everyday nationhood a static aspect and restrict it the “micro-analytical and descriptive rather than the casual and sociohistorical” (p. 567).

In response, Fox and Miller-Idriss (2008b) object to Smith’s notions, maintaining that their lack of elaboration on an exclusively historical approach should not limit their work to being regarded as ‘ahistorical.’ They acknowledge that today’s everyday representations of nationhood encompass multiple layers of meaning established and appropriated through the years, but refuse to presuppose the contemporary salience of these historical meanings. Rather, their research agenda intends to specify these meanings empirically by proposing “a context-sensitive approach to the study of nationhood where context is understood in multiple temporal and spatial dimensions” (Fox & Miller-Idriss, 2008b, p. 574). They also refuse to accept Smith’s contention that their approach is not applicable to less democratic nations where ordinary people would talk, choose, consume, and perform in certain ‘prescribed’ ways. In fact, using Smith’s own argument, Fox and Miller-Idriss (2008b) conclude that the very fact that ordinary people in less democratic nations may be acting in certain prescribed ways in their everyday lives *confirms* the linkage between the political and the national in the realm of ordinary everyday discourses, consumptions, choices, and performance of ordinary people – as I show in the rather different discourse, consumptions, choices, and performances of nation and nationhood by my Iranian interlocutors with those of the ‘official’ and state-defined forms of belonging.

Looking through the lens of banal nationalism and everyday nationhood, recent scholarship has applied the idea of banal nationalism to practices of food (e.g. Laudan, 2016; Mendel & Ranta, 2016; Ranta & Mendel, 2014; Skey & Antonsich, 2017) and in this way has, at times, deployed Fox and Miller-Idriss’s (2008a) analytic dimensions to emphasize the reproduction of nation and nationhood through the agency of ordinary people who, depending on the context, “creatively and self-consciously mobilise nationhood in their social interactions” (Antonsich, 2016b, p. 33) and their everyday practices – including practices of food. For instance, focusing on ‘Japanese-style’ pasta recipes shared online in a Japanese recipe site that collects recipes from the public, Ichijo and Ranta (2016) deploy Fox and Miller-Idriss’s

(2008a) analytical tools to explore the ways in which ordinary people actively create national meanings and express their national selves through *talking about/with* Japanese food and cooking. They also regard everyday food and food practices as a means to *perform the nation*, not only in the ‘invisible’ space of the home (e.g. Thanksgiving for the American) or the mundane and everyday situations (e.g. consuming curry with lager, going to the pub, etc. for the English), but also in the context of rituals and traditions that, though may be invented (Hobsbawm, 1983), have become, nonetheless, “part of cultural hegemony of the nation” (Ichijo & Ranta, 2016, p. 9), providing a site for “anchoring the imagined national community in daily practice” (Foster, 1991, p. 250). As an example of such performances, they discuss the Scottish ‘Burns Night,’ during which specific food-based vocabulary, discourse, and practices are performed. Rituals and traditional events like this, as Ichijo and Ranta (2016) state, would provide “an opportunity to imagine the nation while locating the ‘performers’ in a familiar setting within the boundaries of [one’s] national identity” (p. 9). Ichijo and Ranta (2016) finally note that Smith’s (2008) reservation about the ‘here and now’ focus of everyday nationhood can be addressed by situating the study of everyday nationhood in a wider socio-historical context – an approach that I, too, have employed in this chapter by examining everyday food and food practices among ‘ordinary’ Iranians in a diasporic context, without losing focus on the bottom-up dynamic of Iranian nationalism since the 19th century. While I acknowledge the importance of macro-structural forces, my attention in this chapter is mainly on how nation and nationhood are manifested in diasporic Iranians’ everyday lives, examining the topic ‘from below’ and approaching the analysis by way of the four modalities proposed by Fox and Miller-Idriss (2008a) – that is talking, choosing, consuming, and performing the nation. I discuss each of these modalities and their application to my case in the following sections.

Talking the Nation

Talking food among the ‘own’

During the course of this research, I observed that Iranians of New Zealand would discursively (re)construct their nation in one way or another in almost any context where food, in particular Iranian food (whether everyday or celebratory), was somehow involved (e.g. practiced, discussed, displayed, etc.). This did not come as a surprise, firstly due to food being a crucially inseparable component of Iranian national events as well as an integral element of everyday lives of Iranians of New Zealand, and secondly due to the increased importance of food and foodways as expressions of national identity in contexts such as diaspora (Murcott, 1996) where maintaining social cohesion and connection to the homeland is sought often

through a variety of modalities, including the visceral materiality, sensuality, and sociality of food production and consumption.

Such discursive constructions of nation were both conscious and unconscious, and included both conspicuous and inconspicuous references to the nation, depending on the context in which the conversation took place. For instance, during events such as *Nowruz* (the Persian New Year) or *Yalda* (winter solstice celebration) where a sense of national consciousness was assumed and indeed heightened, national identity and national feelings were expressed quite explicitly, whereas in ‘ordinary’ contexts, reflections of such kind often remained implicit in the discourse, and were sometimes surfaced without participants being aware of the impression they were giving off.

For instance, in many of the spontaneous conversations I had with participants (or the ones I listened to in gatherings, etc.) Iranian food was often distinguished, quite clearly, from non-Iranian food by the use – and perhaps overuse – of the determiners/possessive pronouns ‘our/ours’ and ‘their/theirs.’ Iranian food was often prioritized over, and superior to, non-Iranian food in terms of look, smell, taste, and healthiness. Thus, while ‘our food’ was mainly described as being ‘decent,’ ‘tasty,’ ‘healthy,’ and ‘aromatic,’ ‘their food’ (or ‘foreigners’ food⁷⁵) was usually characterized as ‘bland,’ ‘strange-smelling,’ ‘funny-tasting,’ ‘greasy,’ ‘processed,’ or ‘pre-made.’ The account of Sahar who, at a small gathering, was responding to an earlier comment made by a second-generation-13-year-old who had claimed that she was not ‘that big a fan of Iranian cuisine,’ reflects some of these points:

Our food and cuisine is much better and richer than theirs. . . . We also have greater variety. . . . Especially in New Zealand they don’t have anything (any food) of their own; it’s mostly British, and you know how bland and unhealthy British food is. . . . Our food is also healthier. . . . Their food is prepared in less than 15 minutes; because it’s all been prepared before in factories. I don’t call that proper food. Proper food takes time and requires patience . . . [it is] also nutritious.

Sahar’s account was approved and followed by a number of other guests who made comments of their own, all of which had a similar ‘us vs. them’ tone, though in neither of the comments that followed, national concerns were expressed explicitly, nor were they necessarily conscious. Instead of being an *object* of the talks, idealized nationhood was implicitly

⁷⁵ ‘ghaza-ye khareji-ha’

informing the talk (Fox & Miller-Idriss, 2008a), through constant exchanges between the food of *own* and of the *other*, giving superiority to the former and undermining the latter.

The implicit ‘nationalness’ of such discourses was further indicated by the way participants treated Iranian regional and ethnic cuisine in their discourse. While the regional and local cuisines of Iran and their somewhat contrasting cooking processes, ingredients, and flavor principles⁷⁶ often work out as strong identity markers that provide particularly rich materials for defining self and otherness in Iran (Bromberger, 2000), such regional distinctions rarely emerged in the discourse of participants when talking about these foods. For instance, foods such as ‘*kabab-torsh*’ (lamb kebab in pomegranate and walnut marinate), ‘*kalam-polow*’ (cabbage and rice pilaf), or ‘*ghelyeh-mahi*’ (fish stew) which are often referred to in Iran as ‘ghaza shomali’ (the food of North), ‘*ghaza shirazi*’ (the food of Shiraz), or ‘*ghaza jonubi*’ (the food of South) respectively, were all branded as ‘Iranian’ by participants, often without any indications as to their places of origin, suggesting their being viewed as from a national whole. In this sense, when talking about ‘own food,’ the discourse of the participant who was, for example, born and bred in Southwest of Iran – known for its spicy cuisine similar to the cuisine of the Gulf region and India – and that of the participant who, for example, came from Northwest of Iran – known for a cuisine similar to that of South Caucasia – both appeared to illustrate key elements required to satisfy ‘national’ tastes rather than ‘regional’ ones. In other words, the regional, local and ethnic differences in Iranian cuisine became, in the context of diaspora, “subservient to, and part of, the greater national identity” (Edensor, 2002, p. 66).

Apart from the implicit ways of constructing nation and national feelings through an unconscious discourse of membership and belonging, Iranians, more often than not, expressed their national identity quite explicitly and in strict national terms. As Fox and Miller-Idriss (2008a) note, national events provide extremely important contexts for articulation of nation by ordinary people who may, due to the extraordinariness of the situation, express their national feelings in explicitly national terms. This was also true for the participants of my study whose articulation of nation reached its peak at national ceremonies such as *Nowruz* (the Persian New Year) or *Yalda* (winter solstice celebration). Given the historical centrality of food to these events and the popularity that food has as a topic of everyday conversation, discourses around food in such national ceremonies was rather revealing.

⁷⁶ Due to quite different geographical and climate conditions in different regions of Iran, cooking techniques, ingredients, and taste themes are quite distinctive in each region. See Bromberger (2000, p. 185–204), and Harbottle (2000, p. 41–44).

During these national events, “our own Iranian foods” or “our national foods” were frequently used in a praising manner, and were often contrasted with “foreign foods” or “their foods” that were considered “not as good” or “at odds with our traditional Iranian norms and culture.” The dominant discourse mainly stressed on ‘authenticity’ of foods and their being rooted in “long-standing traditions” that have been practiced by “our ancestors,” and are being practiced by “our compatriots all over the world at this very moment.” Serving and eating foods⁷⁷ that were recognized by the majority as “authentically Iranian” (*‘asil-e Irani’*) was encouraged at these events, just as serving and eating foods that were not approved as such⁷⁸ was discouraged. For example, while explaining the menu of the night during her opening speech of one of these gatherings, the event’s Iranian head-chef stressed that the menu consisted of “only authentically Iranian dishes” due to the gathering being “an Iranian national occasion.” She elaborated further on such ‘Iranianness’ of the dishes with regard to some items on the night’s menu: for instance, ‘*chelo kabab*’ (minced lamb kebab with plain rice) was said to be included in the menu due to its being “our national dish,” or ‘*sabzi-polo ba mahi*’ (herb rice with fish) and ‘*ash-e reshte*’ (Persian vegetable and noodle thick soup) for their being “rooted deeply in our traditions,” adding “no matter where we are, we should cherish our national traditions.” She added, toward the end of her speech, that despite some earlier thoughts to include *falafel* in the menu for vegetarians, the organizers of the gathering had decided against it, because falafel was “not originally Iranian” and its presence in the menu would have reduced the harmony of “our national occasion,” and that instead of falafel, “some of our *own* traditional Iranian foods” had been offered on the menu.

In general, Iranians’ food discourse, when it was happening among ‘the own’ (i.e. other Iranians) often used collective rather than personal pronouns, reminisced about a highly selective and ‘invented’ culinary past, and frequently distinguished ‘own’ food from the food of ‘other’; in this sense, ‘our’ Iranian foods and cuisine were viewed as authentic, innovative, diverse, rich, full-flavored, proper, and healthy, and were contrasted to the tasteless, boring, bland, and unhealthy cuisine of the ‘other.’ Through such discursive acts, the shared values, boundaries, and history of the nation were imagined, and ideas about the dimensions and particularities of the nation were conveyed (Fox & Miller-Idriss, 2008a).

⁷⁷ ‘Food’ here also includes Iranian snacks and drinks.

⁷⁸ Often labelled ‘*ghaza khareji*’ or ‘*ghaza farangi*’ (both meaning ‘foreign food’)

Talking food among the ‘other’

The discursive constructions of nation and expressions of nationalistic character were most visible when Iranian food as “one of the most important elements of Persian culture” was talked about in front of a non-Iranian (read: Western) audience. For example, in the same event that I discussed above, after explaining the menu to Iranians, the head-chef presented it once again in English for a number of non-Iranian guests present at the event,⁷⁹ though this time with some alterations. For example, she said that ‘*chelo kebab*,’ apart from being the “*Persian* national dish,” was also “a source of inspiration for the cuisine of Turks and Greeks,” and that ‘*sabzi polo ba mahi*’ had “roots in 2500 years of ancient traditions of us *Persians*.” She also provided some “fun facts” with regard to ‘*ash-e reshte*’ (which is made of noodles), saying that “Persians, not Chinese, were the first nation to invent noodles and pasta.” A more striking discourse of such kind was provided when she explained, just as she had explained to the Iranian guests, the reason as to why *falafel* was excluded from the menu:

We have some vegetarian options, too. Some of you, when you think about vegetarian foods from that part of the world, you think of falafel, probably because it is many shops in New Zealand that sell falafel. But we don’t have falafel tonight, because, you know, this is an ancient Persian night so we want you to have, you know, ancient Persian food, and, you know, falafel is not Persian; it’s Arabic food. . . . Some people think we are Arabs, but we are not. Our language is different, our culture is very different from them, also our food is very different, and also better and more delicious I think (laughs) . . . although you probably haven’t tasted our food, but I’m sure you’ll like it because, you know, Persian food is not hot or spicy or with strong odor like many people think . . . it’s more like European foods, for example Greek foods, Italian foods, French foods, so it’s not very strange for you.

Later that night, each non-Iranian guest was gifted, as a token of appreciation for their participation in Iranians’ New Year ceremony, a copy of *The New Persian Kitchen* (Shafia, 2013), a cookbook filled with romanticized (and, at times, fictional) representation of Persian culture, highly promoting a historic construction of the nation and its food culture by repeatedly giving superiority to “Persian way of life” (p. 5) and undermining certain cultures – especially those who had played a role in the decline of the Persian empire, namely Greeks, Arabs, Turks,

⁷⁹ Invited by their Iranian friends, there were four New Zealanders, one Italian, one Australian couple, and one Canadian couple present at the event.

Mongols, and Uzbeks. The book would also lay claim to much of the world's culinary repertoire, cooking styles, and ingredients being of Persian origin:

When Alexander and his army headed home to Greece, they took care to stuff their sacks with Iran's most iconic native ingredients, including pistachios, saffron, and, of course, pomegranates. . . . After the Muslim conquest of Iran in the mid-700s, the Arabs imported Persian tastes and techniques to the countries they conquered: thus, *khoresh* stew became *tagine* in Morocco; saffron *polo*, rice cooked with meat, became paella in Spain; and preserved quinces and bitter oranges reached England . . . to become marmalade . . . *Polo, nan* (bread), and *tanur* . . . would become the *pilaf, naan*, and *tandoori*. Farther east, . . . Persian staples like eggplant, sesame seeds, and even Garlic [were taken] to China. The kebab, Iran's greatest contribution to the world catalog of handheld foods, would become a perennial American barbecue favorite starting in the late twentieth century. (Shafia, 2013, pp. 4–6)

Gifting the cookbook to the non-Iranian guests was the idea of Shamim, one of the party organizers whom I had previously interviewed. In my earlier encounter with her in her house, I had observed a few cookbooks on her coffee table including the very same one that was gifted to guests. This had led to a rather lengthy conversation regarding cookbooks in general and those cookbooks in particular. Flipping through one of the cookbooks, Shamim commented:

I've never used it . . . [cause] it's impossible. It has made recipes too complicated. It has exaggerated the recipes for no reason. . . . Some [of the recipes] are not even correct. I know no Iranian that would cook *tahchin* (baked rice cake), for example, like the way described in this cookbook. Even my grandmother who used to cook the most traditional and extravagant *tahchins* wouldn't do it like this.

Despite acknowledging the 'inauthenticity' of recipes in those cookbooks and rendering them 'impractical,' Shamim had decided to buy some of them and display them on her coffee table, nonetheless. She elaborated further on her logic to do so:

It's just for display, you know? It's beautiful. . . . We sometimes have foreign guests coming over for dinner . . . and especially if it's their first time, food is obviously one of the topics that is discussed at some point. They usually have no idea what Iranian food is like. . . . They think it's spicy like those Indian or Pakistani dishes . . . whereas it's more similar to Mediterranean cuisine like Greek and Italian. . . . Sometimes I feel

that I can't do the justice. So I show them these [cook]books. . . . Amazing photos of Iranian dishes and excellent description of *true* Persian culture.

A national(ist) discourse

As the examples above demonstrate, in the food-related discourse of Iranians, several themes emerged. Firstly, their food-related discourse was always seasoned with a tendency to promote elements of an Iranian distant past and magnify the achievements of that particular era. This was apparent, in its most obvious form, in the way Iranians associated their food with antiquity or ‘Persian Empire,’ rendering their food as “a gift from [our] ancestors” (*‘armaghan-e gozashtegan’*). This was so important for Iranians that on one occasion I was even corrected for it: while I was trying to explain the ingredients of a certain ‘Iranian’ dish to a Canadian guest who was present, I was subtly reminded by an Iranian gentleman that “it’s *Persian* food, not *Iranian* food! Don’t sell our food short, young man!” clearly assuming a higher status for the *Persian* side of things.⁸⁰

Secondly, there were often subtle, yet frequent, references to similar ‘roots’ of Persian cuisine with ‘European cuisines’ while, at the same time, clear emphases on its fundamental differences from cuisines of South Asia and the rest of Middle East. Particularly when presenting their cuisine and culinary culture to a Western audience, Iranians rarely failed to mention the uncanny resemblance of Persian cuisine to ‘Mediterranean cuisine’ as the latter was ‘inspired’ by the former, inferring that Persian taste principles would be very ‘familiar’ to the European ones. As a ‘proof’ to such claims, Iranians often mentioned the linguistic similarities between the name of food items⁸¹ or dishes⁸² in Persian and English (and occasionally other European languages, as well), interpreting this as the two cuisines – and in a broader sense, the two peoples – having a common ‘root.’ They also asserted that many of the dishes of European cuisine (particularly those of Greece, Italy, and France) can be found in Persian culinary repertoire as well: thus, for example, ‘*yatimcheh*’ (eggplant and/or zucchini casserole) was affectionately introduced to a non-Iranian guest at a party as “Persian-style

⁸⁰ This was also a very recognizable trend within the restaurants and take-away businesses owned by Iranians, all of which strictly avoided using ‘Iran’ or ‘Iranians’ in their names or on their menus, and instead emphasized on ‘Persian’ and ‘ancient’ sides of things. Some Iranians in the food business had even chosen to give no indications whatsoever as to their ethnic affiliations or, at times, even disguised or denied their ethnicity as they believed that by advertising their nationality as Iranians, they would subject their business to negative public perceptions and stereotypes, particularly of Islamic fundamentalism, which could consequently negatively affect their business.

⁸¹ For example: *Esfenaj* and spinach; *badenjan* and aubergine; *ghandi* and candy; *khavier* and caviar; *limoo* and lemon; *naranj* and orange; *zaferan* and saffron; to name a few.

⁸² For example: *Polo* and pilaf; *koofteh* and kofta; to name a few.

ratatouille,” ‘*mast-o-khiar*’ (yogurt and cucumber dip) as “tzatziki, only a bit better,” and ‘*polow*’ (stuffed rice) as ‘Persian paella.’

Such ‘equivalent-finding’ routines and obsession with ‘common roots’ between Persian and European dishes never occurred when an Iranian dish was similar to, for example, a South-Asian or Middle Eastern (i.e. *non-European*) dish. The type of discourse used toward such cuisines was often cautious and, in some cases, even hostile, with an attempt to keep a certain distance from linking Persian cuisine to any of these cuisines, often by contrasting supposedly ‘undesired’⁸³ features of these cuisines (e.g. ‘hot’, ‘spicy’, ‘strong odor’) with those of Persian cuisine, asserting superiority to the latter. For example, during a brunch party, upon being offered ‘*halim*’ (wheat-and-meat porridge) which was introduced by the host as “one of our most popular breakfasts in Iran” and promoted by other guests as a “true Persian breakfast,” the Australian guest merely pointed out to the fact that she had eaten something very similar in Dubai called ‘*al-harees*’⁸⁴ which was very popular with the locals there. Her comments were immediately opposed by the host who firmly stated that “I don’t think these [two] have anything to do with each other!” This was approved, almost unanimously, by other Iranians, too, who regarded the two dishes – and in a broader sense the two cuisines – “completely different things,”⁸⁵ despite the two objectively being quite similar.⁸⁶ There was also no cross-linguistic comparison whatsoever (such as that mentioned in the above paragraph) between the name of food items or dishes in Persian and those in Urdu, Indian, or Arabic despite the fact that modern Persian has far more words in common with *these* languages rather than ‘European’ ones. On the few occasions that such linguistic similarities were inevitably mentioned,⁸⁷ they were interpreted as the historical ‘Persian influence’ over the people of the East, rather than as having ‘common roots’ with them, unlike that seen earlier with the case of Europeans.

This very much resembled the narrative of Iranian nationalism and its Aryanist discourse which – as described earlier in [Chapter 1: Introduction](#) – similarly stressed a certain ‘kinship’ with Europe and considered Iranians the distant cousins of Europeans and “racially

⁸³ Presumably undesired for the European taste

⁸⁴ Fairly similar to the aforementioned *Haleem*. *Harees* is particularly popular in Arab states of the Persian Gulf, but also the Southern provinces of Iran (called *Harisseh* in Iran).

⁸⁵ It turned out later that some of those opposing the similarity between *halim* and *harees*, were hearing of the latter for the first time. However, the use of the definite article ‘al’ before the name of the dish by the Australian, had immediately indicated the ‘Arabness’ of the dish, hence Iranians mindlessly rejecting any similarities between the two.

⁸⁶ Both are wheat-based dishes mixed with meat.

⁸⁷ For example: *sambooseh* and *samosa*; *dolmeh* and *dolmades*; to name a few.

quite separate” (Pahlavi, 1961, p. 18) from, and superior to, Arabs, Indians, and Pakistanis. Even the ways in which Iranians of New Zealand attempted to ‘prove’ the supposedly similar roots between their own and European cuisine through cross-linguistic comparison (and to avoid such comparisons with South Asian/Arabic languages) strikingly resembled Iranian nationalism that asserted Iranians and Europeans, due to their linguistic affinity, proceeded from a common root and thus share the same racial origin.⁸⁸

Thirdly, similar to the narrative of Iranian nationalism, the glorified past that Iranians often identified with, and within which they often situated their *true* nation, was devoid of Islamic roots that were ‘forced’ onto Persians by ‘Arab invaders.’ Islam and its ‘Arab’ carriers, in the discourse of many participants, were the cause of Iran’s fall from ancient glory and grace and the destroyer of Persians’ supposedly superior civilization. Such narrative was intensified in Iranian’s conditioning of diaspora where they felt that their being viewed as ‘Muslims’ or ‘Arabs’ would expose them to even more racial prejudice and discrimination. Therefore, their discourse especially among the Western ‘other’ often explicitly drew on ‘major’ differences between ‘Persian’ and other Middle Eastern cuisines, with an emphasis on differentiating it with Arab cuisine. Thus, although many expressed that the increasing sophistication of Persian cuisine throughout centuries was partly due to embracing foreign ingredients and adopting their best features, such alleged receptiveness to foreign culinary cultures was not extended to Arabs. Arab cuisine, in the discourse of Iranians, had been ‘primitive’ and ‘benighted’ before its 7th century encounter with the ‘elegant’ and ‘refined’ cuisine of Iran which, in the words of one participant, “taught Arabs that there were other things to eat, too, other than camel’s milk and lizards.” Thus, any influence from, or association with, Arab cuisine or Arab food was often refuted, as was apparent with falafel whose mere status as ‘Arab food’ simply disqualified it from being on the menu – a point that loudly and clearly was pointed out to the attendees, particularly to the non-Iranian audience, for whom not only the superiority of Iranian food was underlined (albeit as a supposedly amusing remark), but also dissociation from Arabs was eventually spelled out in the most definite manner by stating “we are not Arabs.”

Although one can argue that the anti-Arab discourse such as this is not limited to the discourse of *diasporic* Iranians and can be observed among the Iranians of Iran too, I argue that the extent that such discourses became embodied in material practices (in this case, foodways) was certainly greater in diaspora. A dish such as *falafel* that was labelled by some Iranians of

⁸⁸ The rise of ‘Aryan myth’ is itself owed to such linguistic similarities and is often associated with Sir William Jones who took notice in 1786 that Greek, Latin, Sanskrit and Persian had derived from common roots. This was later developed and misinterpreted as racial kinship, leading to what would later become the ideology of Nazism.

New Zealand as ‘Arab food’ and resulted in certain feelings of reluctance toward its consumption, is never labelled or treated as such in Iran, as is evident in its being arguably the most popular street food widely consumed by millions in Iran every day. This suggests that Iranian’s post-migration reluctance toward consuming falafel⁸⁹ in New Zealand is due to falafel’s clearer association with ‘Arabs’ and ‘Muslims’ in New Zealand, from both of which Iranians of diaspora often attempt to distinguish themselves. Other studies on the Iranian diaspora (e.g. Graham & Khosravi, 1997; Gholami, 2015) have also demonstrated diasporic Iranians’ avoidance of associating with Muslims and Arabs in order to avoid the prejudices or stereotypes that they have experienced as a result of such associations. For Iranians, such a situation seemed to have given rise to certain embedded national “patterns of thought” (Bourdieu, 1977, p. 194), a certain national habitus shaped by centuries of “historical practices” (p. 83), and reflected upon in the new field in order to create an “ontological complicity” (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 20) that is structured by the existing racial hierarchy of their diasporic conditioning. Having been exposed to a new field, such national habitus seemed to have invented “new ways of fulfilling the old functions” (Bourdieu, 1990, p. 55) which was observed in the discursive ways in which Iranians not only constructed nation and national meanings through food, but also invented them.

Choosing the Nation

During the course of my fieldwork, I observed that there was a strong relationship between national identity and the ways in which Iranians classified and categorized food, and the decisions and choices they made in terms of *what* ingredients to buy and *where* to buy those ingredients from, what foods to cook in private/public space and in everyday/celebratory contexts, what restaurants to dine in, etc. However, in this section I just focus on the aspect which I observed to be the most apparent among other aspects – that is where Iranians choose to *shop* for foodstuffs and how this can be linked to the idea of nation and national identity.

There were various factors such as more appealing deals, more variety, cheaper prices, better quality, and proximity to home residence that influenced where Iranians choose to do their ‘general’ shopping. However, when it came to shopping for *food items*, an interesting

⁸⁹ Falafel was not the only ‘Arab food’ toward which Iranians showed reluctance, but due to its vast popularity in Iran, the contrast between the way it was treated back in Iran and in New Zealand was certainly the most visible. Other dishes such as *hummus*, *baba ghanoush*, and *tabbouleh* were treated, in a few occasions, with the same degree of disfavor.

pattern emerged that was absent in shopping for non-food items – which, as I discuss in the following section, had a ‘national’ ring to it.

Mefco vs. Maihan

Foodstuffs were often categorized by Iranians into two simple groups: the first group, usually described as ‘basic’ or ‘normal,’ were those that were used in cooking and baking in general, such as salt, pepper, oil, mayonnaise, mustard, flour, sugar, butter, milk, cornstarch, or baking powder, to name a few. When talking about ingredients such as these, Iranians would normally not attach any significance to the store from which these were purchased. However, the location of purchase seemed to become a more serious concern when the second group of foodstuffs that were often described as ‘important’ were involved. This group consisted of foodstuffs that were more or less fundamental to Persian cuisine and appeared quite often in Iranian dishes. Some of these ingredients such as dried lime, barberries, rosewater, pomegranate paste, or saffron were very hard, if not impossible, to find in New Zealand supermarkets, in which case Iranians’ choice to purchase them at certain international stores was justified by their unavailability at other supermarkets. However, even in case of other ‘important’ food items such as, for instance, lime juice, cardamom, coriander, nutmeg, or various kinds of legumes and nuts that could easily be found in other supermarkets and grocery stores, there was still a clear and strong preference to purchase them at international stores due to, for example, a “more familiar setting” at these stores. As one woman commented when talking about one of the international grocery stores that had Iranian products available, “I get satisfaction just by *seeing* the abundance of familiar labels, familiar packaging, that familiar [Iranian] standard logo on the [Iranian] products,⁹⁰ . . . and the Persian writings on packages.” The taste of the ‘important’ food items available at international stores was also said to be closer to that of home, compared to those sold at mainstream supermarkets.

Thus, for the most part, Iranians’ preference to shop for certain foodstuffs at international stores (rather than mainstream supermarkets) served practical purposes (more familiar taste, more familiar products, etc.), though many also understandably expressed certain nostalgic feelings for home due to having encountered familiar sights, smells, or tastes at such stores. However, it is not the choosing of *international over mainstream stores* that I consider to be ‘national’ but rather the choosing of *one particular international store over another*.

⁹⁰ ISIRI (Institute of Standards and Industrial Research of Iran) logo was the first standardization mark on Iranian products and was often promoted in TV and radio commercials in the 70s and 80s, hence was viewed sometimes as ‘nostalgic’.

At the time that this research was conducted, there were two Middle Eastern international grocery stores in Christchurch: one was *Maihan*, a store owned and mainly operated by Afghan nationals, and the other one *Mefco*, a store owned and mainly operated by Palestinian nationals. These two were the primary locations for Iranians to shop for *important* foodstuffs and specialties.

During the course of my fieldwork, it became apparent to me that *Maihan* was much more popular among Iranians over its main rival, *Mefco*. I was told by an Iranian, during my early days of residence in New Zealand, that I would not need to even visit *Mefco*, because “whatever one needs, one can find at *Maihan*, and more,” so I assumed that favoring one store over another was simply due to a larger and more varied inventory. So I visited both stores multiple times to see if this was true only to find out that not only the store’s inventory, but also the price range and quality of products were almost identical in these two shops. There were, of course, some items that were available at *Maihan* and not at *Mefco*, but this was also true the other way around. This made me inquire more about the reason(s) Iranians favor *Maihan* over *Mefco*.

One aspect that Iranians frequently talked about which seemed to be heavily affecting their decision to shop at *Maihan*, was the fact that *Maihan* was owned and operated by Afghans. Afghans, in Iranians’ perspective, were almost treated as ‘own’ – in that they spoke the same language and were culturally close to Iranians due to their nation once being a part of ‘our’ greater nation (i.e. ‘Persian empire’):

Hani – I buy my foodstuff only from *Maihan*. He (the owner) is a very nice man . . . and things at his store are more akin to our Iranian ways. . . . He speaks Persian of course, and we always chat about different things when I go there. . . . Did you know he’d been in Iran for some years? . . . He loved it . . . and always talks about Iran with passion and interest. . . . After all, Afghanistan was once part of the Greater Persia. They have borrowed many of our traditions and practice them still. . . . They celebrate our new year . . . and many of our poets and figures are known there.

Despite the fact that many Iranians, like Hani, invoked the two nations’ shared historical and cultural heritage to justify their choice of store, the dominant narrative was still unconsciously assuming superiority by stating that Afghans speak *our* language, practice *our* culture, perform *our* traditions, celebrate *our* holidays, and enjoy *our* literature (as opposed to speaking, practicing, performing, celebrating, and enjoying their own), reflecting a rather

strong sense of separation of ‘us’ from ‘them,’ and putting emphasis, once again, on a distant, imagined past of a once-great ‘nation of Persia’ whose cultural and historical influence has spanned the region and whose traditions have been ‘borrowed’ by others.

Just as *Maihan* was ‘approved’ by Iranians as the go-to store when it came to shopping for important foodstuffs, shopping at *Mefco*, on the other hand, was disapproved by some partly because *Mefco*, in the view of Iranians, mainly targeted an Arab clientele due to the store’s ownership and operation by ‘Arabs,’⁹¹ thus it offered too few Iranian foodstuffs and too much ‘Arab food,’⁹² toward which Iranians often showed a certain sense of mistrust and misgiving, treating it as inferior to Iranian food:

Sami: I’ve visited both stores . . . I must admit that I prefer *Maihan* over *Mefco*. . . . *Maihan*’s stuff are much closer to how I and the wife and the children like it. They import many of their food items directly from Iran. . . . They have, for example, Persian rice, Persian dates, Persian dairy products, even Persian[-style] plates, cups and saucers. . . . I mean, *Mefco* has these too, but it’s Arab dates for example, which is a knock off of Iranian dates, of course. I haven’t tried their dates, but I don’t wanna, anyway. Just a look at them and I’d know they’re not the real deal.

Just as conversations about *Maihan* often led to a discourse emphasizing cultural similarities and linguistic unity of Iranians with one group (i.e. Afghans), conversations about *Mefco* often led to a discourse that categorically distinguished and differentiated them from another (i.e. Arabs). Arabs’ culture, including their cuisine, was stated to be “hugely different” with, or “not even close” to, that of Iranians. As Sami went on to say, Iranians and Arabs “don’t really understand each other’s language. . . . They don’t get our things surely . . . and we don’t get theirs.” This was more loudly pronounced in certain situations such as when Iranians encountered a Westerner in the store:

I remember I was shopping there (*Mefco*) once and there was this very friendly Kiwi lady who was standing next to me in the line and said ‘happy New Year’ to me because she had seen this Happy-New-Year sticker on the cashier’s counter, and she had assumed that I [being non-white and shopping there,] was an Arab or something; I told her I had no idea myself that it was *their* New Year, cause I am not an Arab and

⁹¹ In the discourse of Iranians of this study, ‘Arab’ primarily referred to any individual whose first language was Arabic.

⁹² As I stated earlier both *Mefco* and *Maihan* offered, at the time of my visits to both stores, almost the identical inventory when it came to Iranian products.

we Persians have our own New Year and our own calendar which is completely different from their Islamic calendar.

During the course of my fieldwork, many Iranians pointed to the fact that the average Westerner, upon realizing that a person is from Iran (or generally Middle East), would immediately assume that he/she is Arab, and also a fundamentalist and devout Muslim, which would subject them to prejudice, discrimination, or various forms of racism. This, for the respondents of my study, was a major source of frustration that they constantly, either consciously or unconsciously, tried to overcome, as observed in many of their everyday decisions such as the choice of grocery store. Such amplification of ethno-nationalist identities among diasporic Iranians and their enmity toward Arabs is not limited to New Zealand, and has been discussed in reference with other Iranian diasporas elsewhere. For instance, focusing on Iranians of London, Gholami (2015) coins the term ‘non-Islamiosity’ to address Iranians’ tendency to distance themselves from Islam and Muslims who, in the discourse of Iranians, are more often than not equated with Arabs. Graham and Khosravi (1997) also discussed how Iranians of Sweden make attempts to ‘escape’ Islamic aspects of their identity through various strategies such as changing their Arabic names to ‘Persian’ or Western ones. Even memoirs and biographical accounts of the second-generation Iranians of diaspora frequently point out to such misidentifications, for example in a passage in Darznik’s *The Good Daughter* (2011) where her Iranian classmate is called “smelly A-rab” (p. 279) or Bahrampour’s *To See and See Again* (1999) where Iranians’ distance from their Islamic image and deliberate differentiation from Arabs could help them look “less terroristic” (p. 192).

In my interlocutors’ case, this was manifested in their preference to visit *Maihan* and their reluctance to frequent *Mefco* as much as they otherwise might have. Although this was sometimes justified because of the unavailability of certain ingredients at *Mefco*, this seemed to have more to do with Iranians’ historically-acquired national habitus that was coupled with the discriminating patterns they had experienced in the host society. Triggered by an encounter with a new field – that was diaspora in the West – this habitus became even more acutely conscious and restructured as a reaction to a field in which being a Muslim (or being perceived as such) or simply being attached to a ‘Muslim image’ could expose one to prejudice, discrimination, or racial profiling. Thus, the ‘historical’ nationalist disposition of Iranians that already urged them to distinguish themselves from Arabs (and an Islamic image) was additionally provoked in diaspora, making them to consciously avoid what they perceive as an

Arab-associated space, in order to ‘protect’ themselves from Arab/Muslim-associated stereotypes.

Maihan, on the other hand, was not perceived by Iranians as an ‘Arab space,’ due to its ownership and operation by non-Arabs who, being considered to have taken a ‘more inclusive’ approach, were believed to offer an inventory that served a wider range of clientele – which had led Iranians to believe that *Maihan* was also “more favorable among Kiwis than *Mefco*.⁹³ Such supposedly more visible presence of Westerners in *Maihan* seemed to have become a justification of its own for Iranians to frequent *Maihan*:

Shapoor – I see more Kiwis in *Maihan* rather than *Mefco*. . . . I get kinda excited when I see they’re shopping Iranian foodstuff; it’s really interesting. . . . Can’t help but start talking to them, asking them what they’re going to make with those and I’m shocked when I realize they know and like our foods . . . and telling them about all things we, in fact, have in common with them.

Miad – there’s often at least one Kiwi in *Maihan* whenever I’m shopping there, but seldom in *Mefco* . . . which is usually frequented by Arabs. . . . I like it when I see Kiwi people there (at *Maihan*). . . . I usually start a conversation with them, cause I’m curious as to how familiar they’re with our Iran and what Persian foods they’re aware of, etc. . . . Some of them have travelled to Iran, even. . . . Those of them who’ve travelled to Iran before revolution know how European, for example, Tehran or Abadan once were.

Nazgol – It’s good to see Kiwi people there. . . . Most of these people are quite well-informed and know about our history . . . and like our culture, our people, our foods. . . . I don’t even have to tell them we’re not Arabs . . . or that we’re okay with pork and wine just like them, cause most of them already know these simple things.

Judging from such comments (and many similar to these), it seemed that encountering Westerners in a setting surrounded by Middle Eastern/Iranian food items served a rather deep socio-psychological desire for Iranians as it provided them with a number of opportunities, the most important of which was putting them in touch with “the open-minded Westerners”⁹⁴ who would be presumably already interested in the food and culture of Iran. The fact that many of

⁹³ This is merely the reflection of respondents’ views, and I have no evidence showing which store is more popular among the white population of Christchurch.

⁹⁴ As I was reminded by one participant, “If they were racist or didn’t like us, they wouldn’t step inside [the shop].”

these Westerners, especially the ones who had visited Iran firsthand, saw Iran in the light that Iranians *wished* all Westerners did – that is Iran as a secular, non-Arab, historic nation – was a huge relief and reassurance to many Iranians who, in another context (such as *Mefco*), were often perceived by the host society merely as fundamentalist Arab Muslims coming from a Muslim country. This appeared to secure Iranians with a sense of cognizant recognition from ‘the other,’ coupled with temporary assurance and belongingness that they did not necessarily always experience in their diasporic conditioning, where they are usually viewed in a negative light due to negative stereotypes of their larger group membership (i.e. Muslims and/or Middle-Easterners). In this sense, *Maihan*, apart from being a sociocultural space through which Iranians encounter the ‘familiar’ and the ‘nostalgic,’ became also a site, an enchanted oasis in a foreign land, where downplaying their Iranianness in front of the Westerners was not rendered so necessary as much. In fact, many took this opportunity to even *advertise* their Iranianness (a very rare occurrence in diaspora, indeed) by introducing themselves and starting conversations with the Western customers about Iran and Iranians – which, in one way or another, often included an arguably unconscious mention of a ‘common root’ between Iranians and Europeans, suggesting how Iranian nationalism has embedded itself within the national habitus of Iranians and has culminated in contemporary diasporic situation. As such, *Maihan* had what Foucault (1966 [1970]) call a ‘heterotopian’ quality, as it provided Iranians with a physical approximation of a utopian parallel space where the prevalent discourses and assumptions about them could be suspended, neutralized, contested, and inverted.

Fox and Miller-Idriss (2008a) maintain that choosing the nation is an unreflective and automatic process that operates as an unselfconscious disposition, due to which people make choices without having a self-conscious decisive role in making those choices, because in their mind making those choices, as a result of having been hegemonically naturalized by circumstances (social, cultural, political, religious, etc.), appear to be self-/socially-evident or, in Bourdieu’s terms, “goes without saying” (1977, p. 166). However, Iranians’ choosing the nation seemed to be highly conscious (though partly, but not entirely, unconscious too), giving rise to identity constructions and performances that were both reflective and reflexive. Furthermore, Fox and Miller-Idriss’s (2008a) approach was mainly focused on institutionally-mediated choices people make, for example, what school to enroll in, what university to apply for, what church to marry in, etc., where ‘*who gets what* can be determined (or perceived to be determined) by *who is what* in ethnonational terms’ (p. 543, emphasis mine). However, the experience of Iranians suggests that choosing the nation can be examined in a broader and more expansive way, through looking at a wider range of mundane choices and decisions made by

ordinary people in their everyday lives. In this way, food and foodways present themselves as one of the most obvious ways in which nation is chosen.

Consuming the Nation

In investigating how Iranians consumed the nation through food, the first obvious place to look was their everyday meals. It was not surprising that the majority of Iranians had at least one meal they identified as an ‘Iranian meal’ during the day (mostly dinner). Most stated that the daily consumption or preparation of Iranian meals was firstly because they were ‘used to’ preparation or taste of those meals, and secondly because preparing or consuming those meals was, in fact, a path to familiarity and maintaining a certain degree of ‘normalcy’ within their diasporic condition. While I acknowledge the ‘national’ in the preparation and consumption of ‘food from home,’ I would like to turn my focus in this section specifically to two food items, namely pork and alcohol, which, although not being ‘from home’ or considered ‘national products,’ were consumed, and also intentionally avoided, in uniquely national ways in diaspora, giving rise to explicit expressions of cohesive national feelings and (re)production of nation and nationhood.

I eat pork and drink alcohol, therefore I am

When it came to consuming alcohol and pork, the majority of Iranians I encountered during the course of my fieldwork (including those I interviewed and had casual interactions with) leaned toward avoiding pork. Initially, this would seem to be primarily due to religious dietary requirements as is the case with Muslim population who often avoid pig-products as a “sign of submission to divine will” (Harris, 1985, p. 70). However, Iranians rarely based their avoidance of pork on religious grounds and seldom talked about haram/halal concepts. In the rare cases they *did* talk about halal/haram, these were almost immediately followed by some sort of justification that explicitly undermined the religious aspects and highlighted, instead, other features such as taste (“we always buy halal meat, but only because we’ve got used to its *taste*. Nothing else!”), texture (“non-halal meats here are full of blood, otherwise I couldn’t care less about their being halal or not”), or healthiness (“not that I care much about it being halal, but it’s much healthier and cleaner that way”). The following comments by Mojtaba can represent the majority of these views:

It’s the *taste* of pork I can’t stand. It’s fatty. It tastes like pure fat. Once we ate some sort of pork sausage that [our] children liked. That tasted less like fat . . . although I prefer to have something else. . . . It’s pig, you know? It’s filthy . . . and it can make

worm in your body or brain.⁹⁵ . . . I just don't want to enter that into my body. . . . Sometimes they (Western non-Iranians) think I don't eat pork because of being Muslim. . . . they (Westerners) mistaken us with Arab Muslims, you know, which is a whole different kind of Muslim. . . . Our office outings are the only times I eat pork . . . just so they stop assuming *that*. . . . I've tried to explain to them before that the reason we Iranians don't eat pork is not mainly Islam, but because we always had a better choice like lamb and mutton which we've been eating from 2500 years ago . . . [and are] more delicious and more nutritious than the cheap, fatty pork.

Comments such as these were made not only by those who considered themselves 'secular,' but also by those who held relatively firm religious beliefs. For example, Mojtaba who made the comments above was, in fact, often described by other Iranians as *momen* (pious) and was even partly in charge of arranging religious events for the Iranian community. Yet, he, and some religiously like-minded Iranians, based their non-consumption of pork/ham due to 'being Iranians' rather than 'being Muslims,' justifying it on 'cultural' rather than 'religious' grounds. The emphasis was particularly on Iranians being 'cultural Muslims,' and also on a difference between an 'Iranian Islam' which was viewed as "a secular and relaxed Islam" and an 'Arab Islam' that was often described as 'rigid' or 'inflexible.' Iranians even showed, at times, a hostile attitude toward the latter. For example, on one occasion, when I had attended a food fair with a couple of Iranians, Mousa, who would self-identify as *motaghehd* (believer), drew my attention to a group of hijab-wearing women who were standing in line in front of a stall selling Chinese food and said:

What do *they* want from a Chinese stall? As if they *can* eat anything from there. Don't they know it's all pork? They probably don't, otherwise they would have freaked out, these people. They're afraid even of the sight of it. . . . And what bugs me even more is that as soon as they (non-Iranian Muslims) realize I'm from Iran, they want to stop me from eating it, too, as if it's their God-given duty. I've seen them trying to impose their dietary beliefs on poor Westerners too. If you're so upset about it, why are you *here*? Quran says itself don't poke your nose into other people's business⁹⁶ and don't impose your beliefs into others.⁹⁷ I mean, suppose I *like* pork; how is it *your* business, anyway? Though, I don't like it; cause you know, we Iranians aren't used to

⁹⁵ Referring to *Taenia solium* (the pork tapeworm) that could cause *Cysticercosis*, a parasitic disease caused by ingesting raw or undercooked pork.

⁹⁶ Referring to Quran (49:12): ". . . do not spy or backbite each other . . ."

⁹⁷ Referring to Quran (2:256): ". . . there is no compulsion in religion . . ."

the taste of it. . . . I eat occasionally just a little at our staff parties or Christmas parties at work.

Here, once again, being perceived as Muslims and/or Arabs seemed to be the main concern of Iranians, as evident in the statement of both Mousa and Mojtaba. Despite their self-identification as Muslims (and devoted ones, at that) and avoiding pork products ordinarily, they consumed pork/ham in certain occasions, namely ‘staff parties or Christmas parties’ or ‘office outings,’ where there was a Western public present. In such instances, through public consumption of pork – which is one of the most ‘famous’ Islamic taboos – Iranians would loudly and clearly undermine, and even jettison if necessary, the Islamic aspect of their identity in order to deal with the pressure and consequences of being perceived as Muslims, to ‘fit’ better in their Western society and to performatively reassert their distinctive Iranian identity.

The experience of Iranians of other diasporas is more or less in line with my findings. For example, in expanding his concept of ‘non-Islamiosity’ of Iranians of Britain (a secular diasporic mode by which Iranians eradicate ‘the Islamic’ from ‘the Iranian’), Gholami (2015) talks of an occasion when he was driving with one of his interlocutors (Siamak):

At a red light, Siamak drew my attention to a bus stop where three men, who looked to be of Somali origin, were waiting. They had long beards and were dressed in their traditional long, white attire, which conspicuously marked them as Muslims in the crowd. Siamak frowned, shook his head in contempt and said: “Look at these people. They make me sick. They shouldn’t be allowed to dress like this in this country. I say they should be thrown out. These people are the cause of so much trouble, especially for the rest of the foreign population here.” (p. 77)

Focusing on Iranians of Germany, Sadeghi (2018) discusses similar distinction-seeking comments made by her interlocutors:

I don’t ever see Iranians wearing headscarves. . . . Iranians dress well, are pretty, dance and laugh, and Germans like that about us. “They are like Europeans, they are not that Muslim, they eat pepperoni pizza as well.” The Muslim thing is important in Germany because it’s different, its’ strange to them. We drink our wine, smoke our cigarettes, dance, we wear makeup, they see us like them, and then we are a bit exotic. . . . [But Muslims] sit there and say, “We won’t eat pork, we won’t drink, we won’t dance to this, we pray and go to the mosque, we praise our own culture,” and sometimes they don’t even know one word of German. (p. 65)

Such comments, which resemble earlier comments made by Mousa in my case, suggest a direct correlation between the challenges of being a Muslim in contemporary West and the choice of Iranians to deploy discourses and practices that can mark them as a “non-Islamious” (Gholami, 2015, p. 37) and thus a “good foreigner” (Sadeghi, 2018, p. 62) that is not *too* different from the hosts. In many of these studies food enters the discussion at some point, though it is always treated only briefly and with not much significance attached to it. For example, in the quote above, the interviewee regarded eating pepperoni as one of the things that marks Iranians as ‘good foreigners,’ distinguishing them from supposedly bad foreigners who, in her view, are Muslims who refuse to eat pork or drink alcohol. Gholami (2015) also points, though only trivially, to the consumption of pork and alcohol among Iranians of Britain who equate consumption of such food items with integration and with cultural fitness in the host society. This brings me to the second food item which diasporic Iranians of New Zealand deployed to consume the nation – that is alcohol.

Like pork, alcohol was avoided (though not as strictly) by at least half of the Iranians with whom I interacted, and just like pork, the justifications of alcohol’s avoidance were also based on non-religious aspects such as its “unpleasant taste” or the fact that “it doesn’t go well with Persian food.” Moreover, alcohol was also consumed by Iranians in certain public situations – especially when a Western audience was present – mostly as an attempt to stop the Western ‘other’ making undesired identity assumptions about Iranians. For example, Khalil who had generally identified himself as a “non-drinker” due to “culturo-religious reasons,” described that he *would* drink when and if he was out with his [primarily Western] colleagues or when he and his wife were invited to their places or hosting a dinner party for them as he thought it would be ‘impolite’ not to drink in such situations, adding:

They (his Western colleagues) always wonder when they see me drinking wine, because they see me as this ‘Muslim fellow’ who shouldn’t drink, because those other Muslims always make a big fuss about not drinking alcohol, right? So they (the colleagues) get confused, you know? . . . Sometimes they joke with me as they see me drinking wine and tell me ‘what kind of Muslim are you, Khalil?’ and I tell them ‘an Iranian one’ which is of course very different with what they see in the news and the media especially in this last couple of decades, so they like me.

Unlike some other instances when Iranians had become frustrated or uncomfortable when they were asked brash questions about their religious beliefs, the alcohol-drinking instances (which generated the same type of questions, as the example above shows) did not

typically cause as much uneasiness. In fact, at moments like this, such questions were even *embraced* as they provided Iranians with an opportunity to communicate to their desired audience the clear-cut, even if imagined, distinctions between themselves and other Muslims, thus enabling them to further distance themselves from the stereotypical (and often negative) Muslim image they faced in New Zealand. In this, Iranians did not necessarily conceal or deny the Islamic dimensions of their identity, as they sometimes do (Harbottle, 2000; Sadeghi, 2018), but rather put emphasis on a strong contrast between their own version of Islam (an ‘Iranian Islam’ that is ‘open to other cultures,’ ‘flexible’ and ‘adaptable to change’) and the ‘Arab’ or ‘mainstream’ Islam which was often described as ‘rigid,’ ‘primitive,’ and against ‘freedom’ and ‘everything joyful.’

In their attempts to distinguish themselves from ‘typical’ Muslims through the use of alcohol, I came to realize that Iranians did not deploy just *any* alcoholic drinks, but almost exclusively utilized *wine* to make such points. They generally treated wine rather differently from most of other alcoholic drinks. Unlike other types of alcoholic drinks such as spirits and beer, wine was consumed relatively widely among Iranians, its taste was never criticized, and it was never considered to be at odds with Persian culture; if anything, it was rendered ‘already-familiar’ and was even embraced as a valued “part of the Iranian culture.” Yet, such alleged ‘familiarity’ did not appear to be a gustatory familiarity (like that which can be experienced, for instance, upon eating a childhood dish), as many of those who were now rendering wine ‘familiar,’ also stated that, despite regularly drinking beers and liquors back in Iran, their first experience of drinking wine had been in New Zealand,⁹⁸ which posed the question *why* had wine become, in New Zealand, the more favorite?

Apart from being an *alcoholic* drink, drinking of which implies at least some degree of ‘non-Islamicness’ (just like eating pork does, as discussed above), wine was also strongly associated by Iranians with Iran’s pre-Islamic past, thus fostering a hyper-nostalgic feeling. This provided Iranians with yet another opportunity to reflect upon the positive aspects of Iranianness with which they desired to be identified by the host society:

Fariborz: Wine, we drink, though. That’s different. It’s nothing that we [Iranians] are stranger with. . . . [Because] we have always had it . . . from those ancient times . . . even after Arabs and Islam. . . . Look at poems of Hafez, Khayyam, and Rumi . . . They call his (Rumi’s) book the second Quran, yet it’s filled with poems about wine.

⁹⁸ Due to wine’s relative scarcity and beer’s/liquor’s abundance in the Iranian underground alcohol market, the latter would appear more frequently in social situations while the former is mostly absent from such occasions.

That shows the two, though a taboo for other Muslims, have never been mutually exclusive for us.

Akbar: When I drink, I only drink red wine, because it's not just a drink that you get drunk with. For us [Iranians] it also has some sort of connection, perhaps because of many great Iranian poets such as Khayyam who they call 'poet of wine' or Ferdowsi whose *Shahnameh* has pretty important mentions of wine, and many others...it's always been an important part of our Iranian culture, except after the revolution when we've suddenly decided to turn our backs upon our Iran and Iranianness...I'm a decedent of those Iranians, after all. They were Muslims, too, but saw wine as a gift from God and have praised it left and right in their poems.

One of the themes that emerged in the discourse of Iranians with regard to wine, evident in comments above, was frequent references to works of celebrated Iranian classical poets, especially *Shahnameh* (the Book of Kings) of Ferdowsi – an 11th century epic poem that consisted of roughly 50,000 rhyming couplets, detailing the mythical and historical past of the Persian Empire from the first king until the Arab conquest of Iran. The association of Persian classic literature with Iranians' consumption of wine was so strong that even the more religious individuals saw wine as an exception to any other alcoholic drinks and believed that wine would bring spiritual, rather than physical, inebriation, backing such claims by referring to the long tradition of Perso-Islamic wine poetry. Some went as far as to view the consumption of wine as "religiously permissible" and, despite self-identifying as devout Iranian Muslims who completely avoided alcohol, drank only wine, more specifically red wine, and more particularly *Shiraz* wine, as Shiraz wine was often thought to have originated in the Iranian city of Shiraz⁹⁹ – which, as it happens, is not only home to some important pre-Islamic imperial dynasties, but also to some prominent literary figures. This had granted an ultra-national significance to Shiraz wine whose consumption was now seen as embodiment of the true Iranian nation to the point that it had been incorporated, at times, as an inseparable 'Iranian element' in national events such as *Yalda* and *Nowruz* in New Zealand. Such a rather newly invented tradition (Hobsbawm, 1983) of including wine in events of profoundly national significance was often justified by participants through yet another invented myth that alleged that wine (and

⁹⁹ This is merely reflecting participants' statements. Shiraz wines were, in fact, white. Current Shiraz/Syrah red wines originated in France (Robinson & Harding, 2015). Thus, such claims can be viewed as prime examples of invention of traditions/myths.

viticulture, too) had originated in the Iranian plateau,¹⁰⁰ and was thus “Iranian by origin” and, therefore, “should feature in any Iranian events.” Citing as ‘evidence,’ Iranians mostly referred to “stories of *Shahnameh*” that credit a mythical king of Iran with the discovery of wine,¹⁰¹ and also talked about other literary figures who have praised wine, wine-drinking, and intoxication both materially and metaphorically in their poems.

All this, with regard to both wine and pork, seemed to be operating on both a conscious and an unconscious level. On a conscious level, wine and pork, as two ‘un-Islamic’ food items, were consumed in public settings to purposefully highlight the non-Islaminess, and thus Iranianness, of my interlocutors’ identity as part of a defensive strategy to cope with the West’s image of contemporary Iran as a pariah Islamic state and Iranians as religious fanatics. In a situation when being associated with both Iran and Islam caused prejudice and discrimination, taking refuge in the memory of a glorified non-Islamic, or at least less-Islamic ‘Persian’ past, was understandable. However, apart from being conscious attempts to express a diasporic mode of belonging, such attempts were also unconscious, for they often overlapped and intersected with the narrative of Iranian nationalism, especially those national elements established during the Pahlavi regime – including drawing upon the glories of an ancient, pre-Islamic past; making historical connections with and embracing all things Western (historical and current); making a clear-cut distinction between Islam in its Iranian expressions and orientations as distinct from, and opposed to, Islamic;¹⁰² and finally the celebration of classic Persian poetry, especially the glorification of *Shahnameh*, and framing this as an important part of the contemporary nation-building project, all of which were manifested in the consumption practices of Iranians in relation to both wine and pork.

Performing the Nation

Iranian individuals’ confrontation with the new sociocultural conditioning of diaspora prompted them into performing of nation in various situations. Being one of the most serious national symbols, ‘Iranian food’ played a crucially important part in this – for culinary practices

¹⁰⁰ This is merely reflecting participants’ statements. Current archaeological evidence has suggested that domesticated grape wine originated in the South Caucasus in what is now Georgia (c. 6000 BC), predating the archaeological evidence found in Iran by a thousand years (McGovern, 2003). However, much more archeological work remains to be undertaken in the other likely origin place – the Fertile Crescent, which stretches from contemporary Israel and Lebanon through Syria, Turkey, and Iran.

¹⁰¹ This is merely reflecting participants’ statements. Such a story has never appeared in *Shahnameh*. It has, however, appeared in other literary sources such as Aufi’s 13th-century *Jawami ul-Hikayat* (‘Collection of Stories’).

¹⁰² According to the Shah, Iranian Islam sought peace and brotherhood, whereas Islam in the purported interpretation of Arab nations only sought incitement and bloodletting (Zimmt, 2017, p. 134).

and food performances were deployed by many, either consciously or unconsciously, as a means of expressing national sentiments and belonging to a diasporic mode of Iranianess. While this was done both in private and Iranian public spheres, it was mostly the latter context within which a sense of national belonging was most visibly and dramatically performed. As Fox and Miller-Idriss (2008a) also note, although performing the nation can occur in everyday and ordinary contexts in which the nation may be “performed mindlessly and dispassionately” (2008a, p. 549), it is most importantly done during extraordinary or non-everyday contexts such as rituals and events where a heightened national cohesion and national awareness is both crystalized and constituted through collective performances of national symbols. For Iranians of New Zealand, there were in particular two national events, namely *Yalda* (winter solstice celebration) and *Nowruz* (the Persian New Year) that constituted perfect platforms for observing how an Iranian diasporic population consumed, perceived, interpreted, and negotiated the meanings of national symbols differently in New Zealand, and also how they invented *new* national meanings through the medium of ritualized food – which happens to be at the core of both of these national events.

Yalda & Nowruz: Platforms for performing the nation

Yalda and *Nowruz* can be considered the two most nationally focused celebrations for Iranians and certainly the two most important ones in diaspora. *Yalda*¹⁰³ is celebrated on the longest night of the year – that is the night of the winter solstice.¹⁰⁴ According to Zoroastrian beliefs and traditions, evil forces were at peak of their strength in the longest and darkest night of the year; thus, to avoid the risk of misfortune befalling people, they were advised to stay awake all night long, gathering in the safety of family and friends until the sunrise would ensure the defeat of the forces of evil, and the victory of light over darkness would become apparent (Razi, 2013). In today’s Iran, *Yalda* remains a night of celebration and gathering, during which family members come together and stay up through the night, doing activities such as fortune-telling (by the poem of *Hafez*) and storytelling.

Nowruz is the Iranian New Year which coincides with the day of the vernal equinox, marking the beginning of spring in the Northern Hemisphere (and the beginning of fall in the Southern Hemisphere).¹⁰⁵ In the animistic perspective of Zoroastrianism, return of spring represented the victory of the Spirit of the sun over winter’s cold and darkness, thus a symbol

¹⁰³ Also known as ‘*shab-e Yalda*’ (the night of birth) or ‘*shab-e chelleh*’ (the night of forty).

¹⁰⁴ Usually falling on either 20, 21, or 22 of December.

¹⁰⁵ Usually falling on either 20, 21, or 22 of March.

of the hope for a more glorious victory of the forces of good to come (Boyce, 2009). Today, the celebration of *Nowruz* occurs over a period of two weeks,¹⁰⁶ with the first day being by far the most significant¹⁰⁷ both in Iran and in diaspora, including in New Zealand. Both of these events are also significantly associated with ritualized food and collective eating traditions (though with slight regional variations), all of which carry great symbolic significance.

As for *Yalda*, the night usually begins with sharing a meal (no particular dish) in the domestic home and thus in the safety of family and relatives, making the shared food a symbol of love and security (Mehran, 2019). It continues by eating fruits, particularly watermelons and pomegranates: watermelon, being a typical summer fruit, is believed to protect individuals from the disease and coldness of the coming winter, as well as ensuring their health from the excessive heat or any disease produced by hot humors during the hot months of the coming summer (Enjavi, 1973), whereas pomegranate is taken as a “reminder of the cycle of life – the rebirth and revival of generations” (Mirrazavi, 2015, para. 9). Also, the red color of both of these fruits is believed to symbolize “the crimson hues of dawn and the glow of life” (Nabarz, 2005, p. 148). Other fruits (either fresh or dried) are also eaten as a reminiscence of the ancient feasts that were held to ensure the protection of the winter crops by praying to the deities (Price, 2001). Nuts, too, are passed around, believed to be bringing prosperity in the lives of those munching on them throughout the night (Nabarz, 2005).

Nowruz foods also varied regionally, but in general they include dishes containing fresh herbs and greens as well as noodle-based dishes – as herbs and greens are believed to symbolize rebirth and new life, and noodles to symbolize good fortune and longevity. Among the most popular of such dishes are ‘*sabzi-polo-ba-mahi*’ (herb rice with fish), *kuku sabzi* (herb frittata), ‘*ash-e reshteh*’ (noodle thick soup), and ‘*reshteh-polow*’ (noodles and rice pilaf). ‘*Ajil*’ (trail mix) as well as various range of specialty sweets such as ‘*noghl*’ (sugar-coated almonds), ‘*nan-berenji*’ (rice-floor cookies), ‘*shirini nokhodchi*’ (chickpea cookies), ‘*sohan*’ (saffron brittle toffee) and ‘*nan-gerdooyi*’ (walnut cookies), all of which are believed to be symbolizing joy and affluence, are also widely found during *Nowruz* period in the homes of most Iranians – including Iranians of New Zealand.

In diaspora, *Yalda* is widely celebrated among Iranians (Fotouhi, 2018; Moghadam, 2007) and Iranians of New Zealand were no exception to this. While in Iran *Yalda* is often celebrated in the private sphere with family members, in New Zealand it was often held as a

¹⁰⁶ Rather similar to ‘Christmastide’

¹⁰⁷ Rather similar to the significance of the 25th of December or the 1st of January.

public event either in a restaurant or at a function venue where Iranians participated in what could be seen as a prime example of performing the nation. The *Yalda* celebrations in which I participated in New Zealand¹⁰⁸ were quite different from the ones I had participated back in Iran, in that they were only two to three hours in early evening and held in a public venue with other Iranians as well as non-Iranians (as opposed to taking all night long in private homes with family and friends), highlighting a significant shift from the core narrative of *Yalda* in Iran and suggesting that the diasporic *Yalda* was more about publicly performing the nation, and thus organized with maximal degrees of ‘nationalization.’

For example, all these gatherings featured an Iranian flag, though not the current flag, but either a pre-Revolution flag decorated with the ‘Lion-and-Sun’ emblem,¹⁰⁹ or a simple tricolor flag without the current Islamic crescent in the middle,¹¹⁰ both loudly and clearly celebrating ‘the Iranian,’ while undermining ‘the Islamic.’ Similar to this was the collective singing of the song ‘Ey Iran’ (Oh Iran!) – a highly patriotic anthem that was often described as the ‘real’ or ‘true’ national anthem of Iran¹¹¹ and was said to elicit the love of homeland and evoke strong feelings of national pride in many. Furthermore, reading out the *Book of Hafez* which is one of the customary rituals of *Yalda* in Iran had been replaced, at times, by reading out selective parts of *Shahnameh*, in particular those parts that were devoted to the courage of Iranian heroes as well as the parts that gave an account of Iranians’ defeat by Arabs, prophesying the ‘misfortune’ that was brought into the country for hundreds of years following this conquest. What was apparent in all this was a focus on pre-Islamic and ‘origin-based’ myths, almost as though settling away from the contemporary realities had enabled or created the space where the enactment of a lost golden era of Persia or undiluted Iranianness could be generated. Many of these centuries-old, yet fairly ‘new’ traditions are either subject to sanction in contemporary Iran (i.e. lion-and-sun flag) whereas others (i.e. ‘*Ey Iran*’ anthem) are often deliberately ignored, though not necessarily sanctioned. In this, diaspora presents an idealized

¹⁰⁸ I participated in two: one in 2016 and another in 2017

¹⁰⁹ One of the main emblems of Iran throughout history, which acquired nationalistic meanings during the 19th century. Later during the Pahlavi regime, the motif was further associated with Persian symbolism and was heavily promoted as the symbol of Iranian nation and Persian identity, with the Lion believed to be symbolizing *Rostam* and the Sun symbolizing *Jamshid*, both mythical heroes of the pre-Islamic Iranian nation.

¹¹⁰ Having become strongly associated with the Pahlavi and monarchy, the Lion-and-Sun was eliminated as a national symbol after the Revolution and was replaced with an Islam-inspired emblem that symbolically de-emphasized the ‘Iranianness’ and undermined the national aspects of the Iranian identity and prioritized, instead, Iranians’ newly-acquired Islamic identity. It is due to such hostility and aversion by the Islamic Republic toward the Lion-and-Sun symbol that today a large segment of diasporic Iranians use the pre-revolutionary flag as a symbol of opposition to the current Islamic Republic.

¹¹¹ Though this was never the official national anthem of Iran, it was approved by the majority of participants as such, as opposed to the current official national anthem of Iran, the lines of which speak of ‘the true Religion’ (i.e. Islam), ‘the brilliance of our faith’ and the ‘message [of] Imam’ (i.e. Khomeini).

space or ‘field’ for new sorts of ‘freedom,’ a notion that, as Gholami (2015) notes, is “one of the most commonly spoken words in the vocabulary of diasporic Iranians” that is “related to certain key processes and trajectories that punctuate and run through the history of modern Iran and continue right up to the present day” (p. 12).

Seeing the ways rituals of *Yalda* had been given new, ‘invented’ national meanings or in New Zealand, it was not a surprise then to see that the same had happened to *Yalda* food and food rituals also, as food has always been one of the inseparable elements of any celebrations of *Yalda*.

For example, pomegranate, which is one of the two fruits occupying the center stage of the occasion, was seen by Iranians to be “representing Iranianness,” because, as many believed, it “originated in ancient Iran” and “was cultivated there since ancient times.” It was also mentioned to be “the fruit that *Esfandiyar*¹¹² ate and became invincible.” Moreover, having been frequently mentioned by participants as one of the “distinction-making ingredients” in Iranian cuisine – including some ‘ancient’ dishes – seems to have added to pomegranate’s inherent symbolic national significance. Fruits such as kiwifruits, oranges, bananas, pears, and cucumbers that are nowadays usually seen in every ‘fruit bowl’¹¹³ in homes in Iran, were absent in almost all of these gatherings, having been replaced by some other fruits such as muskmelons, quinces, apricots, grapes, and figs, all of which were considered to have “originated in Iran” or “been introduced to the world by Iranians.” Similar origin-based arguments (like the ones seen with Shiraz wine in previous section) were used to justify the presence of walnuts, almonds, or pistachio. Even watermelon, the other indispensable fruit to *Yalda* rites – which does not happen to have any historical origin in Iran – was linked somehow by many participants to the concept of nation, though in a peculiar, witty way. Although I had never heard the joke prior to these gatherings, I heard it at least once in each *Yalda* celebration I attended during the course of my fieldwork:

Why do we have watermelons at *Yalda*? Because 1) just like Iranian flag, it’s green, white and red; 2) just like an Iranian person, it’s such a *bleeding-heart*,¹¹⁴ but

¹¹² The legendary mythological hero and one of the mighty warriors of Iranian national epic.

¹¹³ A decorative and often luxury pedestal overflowing with ripe fruit; displaying a ‘fruit bowl’ and offering it to guests can be considered one of the pillars of Iranian hospitality.

¹¹⁴ ‘delesh khoone’

doesn't show it because it's *thick-skinned*;¹¹⁵ and 3) just like Iranian politics, it's *nuclear*.¹¹⁶

Such remarks, though intended as a joke, attached a meaning to certain aspects of the nation through food. Those food items that were considered to have 'origins' in ancient Iran often evoked powerful and treasured historical memories and emotions and generated feelings of nostalgia for an imagined past that was never experienced. Those food items (such as watermelon) that were not seen as such, however, seemed to be associated with quite a contemporary collective memory; from the tricolor flag of Iran which became official only in the 19th century, to the 'thick skin' that Iranians have allegedly grown during the last four decades with so many ups and downs both in their homeland and diaspora, to Iran's nuclear programs which started only after the revolution, all were relatively recent, yet critical events in the nation's contemporary history. Food items in such a context become an integral part of performing Iranianness by means of being part and parcel of rituals.

Unlike *Yalda*, which was highly nationalized in New Zealand with rather different practices from those practiced back in Iran, *Nowruz* was celebrated in more or less the same fashion as in Iran with very few post-migratory, newly-invented traditions. Diasporic Iranians of New Zealand, like their counterparts in Iran, still ate *Nowruz* specialty meals, visited each other's homes gifting boxes of *Nowruz* sweets, and hosted guests offering them trail mix in 'ajil khori' (the trail-mix-eating bowl¹¹⁷). Although Iranians considered *Nowruz* as one of their most important national celebrations, the way they linked *Nowruz* to their national identity was no different to the way they did back home. This was unlike *Yalda* which was often viewed as a chance to express a tangible national unity and create national bonds by imagining a collective yet 'unlived' and distant past of a *homeland*. *Nowruz*, as national as it was considered, was more about connecting to the lived experienced of a *home* left behind.

What was most notable in the culinary performances and food practices of Iranians of New Zealand when it came to foods and edibles of *Nowruz* was a firm emphasis on authenticity of foods and ingredients, or as some participants put it, being 'originally Iranian' ('asl-e Iran'). This was not the same notion that was a focal point with edibles of *Yalda* where what was key was their being 'originated in Iran,' referring to foodstuffs' place of origin where they were

¹¹⁵ 'poost kolof'

¹¹⁶ The word 'hasteh' translates to both 'nucleus' (the very dense central region of an atom) and 'seed' (inside a fruit). Its adjective form, "Hasteh-ee" can be translated to both "nuclear" and "full of seeds," used as a form of word-play to create ambiguity and humor, similar to puns.

¹¹⁷ A bowl specifically designed for the purpose of eating trail mix, especially during *Nowruz* and *Yalda*.

believed to be cultivated for the first time. Rather, it meant that the edibles of *Nowruz* and the ingredients with which they were prepared had to preferably have *come from* Iran, either brought by individuals themselves or by friends and family who have brought or sent them from home – which seemed like a distinction between the sympathetic (resemblance) and the contagious (contact).

For instance, although ‘*sabzi-polo-ba-mahi*’ (herb rice with fish) – which was considered by many participants as the ‘official food of *Nowruz*’ – was ordinarily (that is throughout the year in non-*Nowruz* period) prepared using chopped dried or fresh herbs bought from a supermarket or an international store, the one prepared for *Nowruz* had to be prepared with “the proper chopped herb [brought] from home” that were often saved for the occasion in freezers, sometimes for months, and was only used in the *sabzi-polo* of *Nowruz*. Similarly, although ‘*reshteh*’ (Persian noodles) was readily available in Middle Eastern grocery stores (*Maihan* and *Mefco*), the ‘*ash-e reshteh*’ (noodle thick soup) or ‘*reshteh-polo*’ (rice with noodles) of *Nowruz* was made using the ‘*reshteh*’ that were brought from Iran. Such acts, if looked from a nostalgia-for-home perspective, suggest that the food coming from home was valued more highly among diasporic Iranians. This was partly due to those foods having been carefully packed and sent/brought by loved ones from Iran which stressed material distance and yet proximate affinities, thus conveying a sense of uninterrupted care and relationship with family and home. Such concerns, though not limited only to *Nowruz*, were most overwhelmingly emphasized during the period in a rather unitary manner, conveying an intensified emotive value during a national celebration such as *Nowruz*, thus can be viewed as a measure of identification with home in a collective national sense. Furthermore, when displayed and performed for other diasporic individuals to witness, they became a means to validate and affirm that they were still cared for by those back home.

National Identity: Counter-effects

Before summing up, I would note that national identity was not always performed in its ‘usual’ way by Iranians; it was also performed in a reverse direction, demonstrating a counter effect. A few Iranian individuals deployed strategies to denounce attachment from both their past and their Iranian culture, replacing their old habits with the new ones they had ‘achieved’ in the west. I observed this particularly in one individual, Sasan, a 34-year-old who had come to New Zealand through the skilled-worker program in 2009. Stating “I wouldn’t have moved to New Zealand if I liked how things were in Iran,” Sasan often asserted that he had not participated in any events that Iranians have held during his residence in New Zealand. The

first time I wanted to meet him, I asked if he wanted to meet in an Iranian restaurant, to which he objected by saying “anywhere but,” and asked if it was possible to meet at his place, to which I agreed. We talked about this later in our interview and he said that the reason he did not want to meet in an Iranian restaurant was that he did not want to be in a place reminding him of the past, from which he tried to get away.

Sasan also stated that he had no taste for Iranian food anymore, after having moved to New Zealand. He said that he was never a fan of the “Iranian greasy and unhealthy cuisine” and that he had developed a taste for “Kiwi cuisine,” especially after his New-Zealander girlfriend who “did not like our food” had moved in with him. He frequently mentioned his full adaption with Western lifestyle and how Westerners could enjoy little, simple things, and contrasted this with Iranians who “overcomplicate things,” backing up his argument by talking about Iranian foods, among other things. For instance, he questioned the ‘unnecessary’ time and effort Iranians put in their food preparation and showed his dislike toward a “national culture of extravagancy” prevalent in Iran and among Iranians when it came to food. He showed interest in ‘exotic cuisines’ and frequented Asian restaurants which, as he highlighted, “are not usually popular among Iranians . . . as Asian food is not to *their* taste.” He also engaged in other activities such as attending poker nights or bar-hopping on a weekly basis which, as he described, were “very non-Iranian activities.” Thus, for him, ‘adapting’ meant doing everything contrary to the way it was done back home, and opposite to the way he thought the majority of Iranians do in their diaspora in New Zealand.

Due to the small size of the Iranian community in Christchurch, it was not surprising that Sasan was rather reputed among Iranians; in fact, vague or clear references to him even came up a few times in interviews or conversations as someone who has “lost himself and his Iranianness” or as someone who now pretended to be “Kiwier than Kiwis.” Sasan himself was well aware of how he was thought and talked about amongst the Iranian community, but interestingly found these derisive remarks quite self-comforting as they meant to him an indication of his full adaption to his host society.

Later, in more informal encounters at his home when I was invited for lunch (which was pork stir fry and a six-pack of Tui beer), my attention was drawn to his pantry in which he kept a considerable amount of food items which, having Iranian labels, could have only been brought from Iran or bought from a Middle Eastern grocery store which would sell Iranian foodstuff (i.e. *Maihan* or *Mefco*). When I inquired about these foodstuffs, he told me that those were sent over from Iran by his family, “the one and only attachment [he had] to Iran.” He

claimed that these “basic stuff” were sent to him only because his family had heard from other parents-with-children-abroad that those particular items might be hard to find overseas:

I never asked for these . . . , but, my family has kindly sent them to me anyway, thinking that these would make me happy. And, to be honest, they would; not because they are *from* Iran or are what I liked or used to eat when I was there, but only because they are sent by my family whom I love. . . . It reminds me of *them*, not Iran. I can happily live without these.

Even the manner he applied these typical Iranian foodstuffs to his cooking was an attempt to detach any national or patriotic meaning from them; for instance, while saffron was frequently mentioned as one of the most-commonly used ingredients by Iranians in making ‘*polow-zaferooni*’ (saffronned rice) and ‘*shole zard*’ (saffron rice pudding), Sasan mentioned using it when he and his girlfriend make [the Spanish] *Paella*. Similarly, turmeric, a very typical ingredient in Persian cuisine especially in making ‘*gheimeh*’ (meat and split peas stew), was considered and used by him as a key element in his making [Indian] curries. This suggests that national identity can be performed in a reversed way by detaching from any practice that may signify Iranianness, producing a counter effect.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I investigated the relationship between foodways of Iranians and their national identity through a micro-analytical approach that looked at how the notion of nation is embedded in the routine food practices of everyday (and not-so-everyday) life of Iranians of New Zealand. Given the everyday nature of the food, I borrowed Fox and Miller-Idriss’s (2008a) everyday nationhood and its four modalities, namely talking the nation, choosing the nation, consuming the nation, and performing the nation. In the diasporic lives of Iranians of New Zealand, these aspects of everyday nationhood were very visible, as Iranians discursively distinguished Iranian from non-Iranian food (talking the nation), clearly opted for certain food items and grocery stores that could connect them to their sense of home and of Iranianness (choosing the nation), insisted on eating and drinking certain food items (consuming the nation), and invented new national meanings through the medium of ritualized food (performing the nation). Taking such a bottom-up approach and examining the topic ‘from below,’ I showed how Iranians’ discourses, consumptions, choices, and performances with respect to food were mostly shaped and conditioned by the framework of diasporic Iranian

nationalism and its main components which seemed to have endured and embedded in Iranian sensibilities throughout history, having formed a certain national habitus.

This national habitus at times had an embodied, unconscious hue and was only tacitly at work (Bourdieu, 1990), yet was significantly influencing individuals' (i.e. Iranians') practices and beliefs (Bourdieu, 1977). This, in my case, was observed most notably when the food was practiced among the *own* (i.e. other Iranians) where my interlocutors' actions appeared intuitive and dispositional. However, having grasped a 'sense' of the game and a social sense of how to play it (Bourdieu, 1990) in their new social context of diaspora, Iranians had become constantly aware of their field as a whole and anticipated the actions required in different social situations, thus purposefully reflected upon their national habitus through continual self-monitoring and "mundane everyday reflexivity" (Reay, 2004b, p. 435). This was observed most notably in food practices among the *other* (i.e. Western audience, in my case) where my interlocutors' actions and practices were performed quite self-consciously and with conscious deliberation. In both of these, however, central components of Iranian nationalism were apparent, namely glorification of an ancient past, antipathy toward Arabs and Islam, and an emphasis on common roots with Europeans, all of which being an outcome of a collective national history and the product of the past national practices of previous generations (Bourdieu, 1980), that had "continuously carried forward in a process of production and reproduction in the practices of everyday life" (Jenkins, 1992 , p. 80). As Elias (1939) notes, nations preserve memories of an historical and mythical past to which they resort in order to deal with contemporary events, especially in identity-threatening situations such as that in which my interlocutors were situated.

The main factor that caused Iranians to resort to a self-conscious reflexivity seemed to be their conditioning of diaspora (i.e. their new field), in particular the ways in which they were (mis)identified/(mis)understood in accordance with stereotypical Western discourses as fundamentalist Muslims or 'Arabs coming from a Muslim country.' This situation often created a strong discrepancy between their normative national habitus as Iranians and their experiences with the new, identity-threatening social field and accordingly generated pressure for conscious reflections on (and at times reconstructions of), together with articulations and affirming practices of, historically-imagined and idealized national traditions. This, coupled with the rather unfavorable views toward Muslims in the West which had caused many to experience instances of discrimination, prejudice, or racism gave rise to a double consciousness of their national habitus which manifested itself in the seemingly banal everyday (and not-so-everyday)

food practices and discourses, which often evinced, quite explicitly, a strong desire to distinguish and distance themselves from the mainstream and stereotypical images of Muslims/Arabs.

This was apparent, for example, in the ways Iranians talked about or consumed pork and wine, two food items whose avoidance can be considered as one of the important sources of keeping a distinct Muslim identity. Thus, by *avoiding the avoidance* (i.e. by drinking wine and eating pork) Iranians underplayed or even denied the Islamic aspect of their identity with which they were often ‘misidentified’ by Westerners. Even the more religious individuals who did not want to completely deny or conceal the Islamic aspect of their identity, emphasized a certain distinction between an ‘Iranian Islam’ and a ‘completely different kind of Islam’ to which ‘other Muslims’ adhere. As such, they granted a self-assertive superiority to the former and rendering it adaptable and compatible to a Western society, whilst dismissing the latter as such and occasionally even showing discontent with and intolerance toward notions of haram/halal food, insisting that Iranians’ avoidance of pork was mainly based on ‘cultural’ rather than ‘religious’ (i.e. Islamic) grounds. As most of the respondents had an emphasis on *correcting* Westerners’ perception about Iranians (which implies that there was a *wrong* perception, rather than *no* perception), it would only seem intuitive that their alcohol-drinking and pork-eating instances rarely occurred in private spheres (where there was no one whose perception needed to be *corrected*), but were rather limited mostly to occasions where a Western audience was present, such as staff parties, Christmas parties, or work outings.

At the same time that Iranians distance themselves from a presently ‘negative’ image of Muslims in their diasporic condition, they also attempted to draw attention to the glorified past of their nation and its alleged contributions to the world (another principal of Iranian nationalism) and project themselves under a ‘true’ *Persian* identity which had roots in antiquity. This was most notably seen in the way they self-allegedly regarded wine as an ‘Iranian invention,’ thus an important part of the Iranian culture. They rendered wine fairly ‘familiar’ due to its prominent position in the mythology and classic poetry of Iran (two crucial elements in Iranian nationalism) and even expressed feelings of ‘nostalgia’ upon drinking it. However, the nostalgic feelings of familiarity that they often associated with wine were not gustatory in nature – but were rather generated with relation to another time and another period in history which, although it had never been lived or experienced, was now yearned for: a feeling of ‘armchair nostalgia’ (Appadurai, 1996, p. 78).

Although Iranians' talking, consuming, and choosing the nation manifested itself in more or less mundane food practices of the 'everyday,' performing the nation mostly presented itself within extra-ordinary and non-everyday contexts such as rituals, where a sense of a perennial aspect of the Iranian nation and a feeling of solidarity was produced *in situ*. It was during such events when a heightened national cohesion and national awareness was both crystalized and constituted in the "choreographed exhibition and collective performance of national symbols" (Fox & Miller-Idriss, 2008a, p. 545). In this, food and food-based rituals and traditions were monumental to the feeling of Iranianness and were used on many national events, such as *Yalda* and *Nowruz*, as a symbol of nation. For example, while the presence of pomegranate, nuts, or certain foods and food items in these events were not usually viewed from a 'national' perspective back in Iran and prior to migration, they were given rather explicit and newly invented national meanings in diaspora. These meanings, more often than not, corresponded to Iranians' diasporic conditioning, drawing attention to an historical imagined past as an attempt to project Iran and Iranians under the positive light with which Iranians wish to be, but are often not, recognized and identified by their host society. This not only highlights the constantly evolving nature of rituals, but also illustrates that symbolism of food associated with such events can be highly contextualized. Nonetheless, food items, seen from this angle, form "an integral part of performing the nation by virtue of being part and parcel of rituals" (Ichijo & Ranta, 2016).

Finally, I showed that food can be deployed to perform national identity in a reverse way, by detaching from any practice that may signify Iranianness, observed in the last case which, demonstrating an interesting negotiation between home, nation and identity, an oscillation between rejection and acceptance, between the conscious and the unconscious, showed that national identity for migrants can be performed not only by *maintaining* familiar ways of the old home, but also by *ridding* oneself of those past habitual practices and adapting the new ones in the new home, with the final ambition of becoming an 'invisible migrant' in the sense that the migrant so readily fits in and is blended into the host society that she or he is not viewed as an outsider anymore, but as one of the *own*.

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Chapter 4: Gender

Introduction

In this chapter, I examine the relationship between food and gender within the Iranian community of New Zealand. I demonstrate that in the context of the Iranian diaspora of New Zealand, food and food practices become means through which a shift in gender expectations and roles can be explored. Through looking at practices and performances of food in both domestic and public arena, I argue that the social and cultural gendered meanings acquired at home in Iran are entangled in diaspora with different cultural and social meanings, giving both women and men more room for maneuver within their gendered boundaries, though in rather different directions.

In the first part of the chapter, I examine food and food practices within the diasporic *domestic* arena, and explore how through engaging in and/or disengaging with domestic foodwork both women and men express and reconstruct their gender identity. For women, domestic foodwork was often taken as one of the most important means through which their chosen responsibilities for the health and cultural integrity of the diasporic family were maintained and improved, as a result of which positions of respect, status, and power were obtained. While women talked about a social and cultural obligation attached to the notion of domestic foodwork back in Iran, in New Zealand these were rarely mentioned to be at play, and domestic foodwork was viewed, for the most part, as an ‘optional pursuit’ which, though still mainly *performed* by women, should not be *expected* of them. In this sense, domestic foodwork was discussed by Iranian women in light of a transformation from a means of oppression at home to a means of empowerment in diaspora, creating a “vehicle for . . . creative expressions” (Avakian & Haber, 2005, p. 2). Many women expressed enjoyment in doing the cooking for their families, especially when making Iranian dishes as these, fostering “positive intimations” (Hage, 1997, p. 105), could invoke nostalgic memories of home for family members (Avakian, 1997) which, in turn, would produce family members’ greater appreciation of women’s effort/time and consequently bring about a private influence and status, and a sense of “power that comes from being needed” (Counihan, 1999, p. 53), leading to a construction of a sense of self and social worth.

Women reported that migration to New Zealand had also made their husbands (and Iranian men in general) equality-conscious, causing them to display egalitarian attitudes and to help out more in the kitchen as a result of a post-migratory-founded belief that the household

division of labor should not be based on gender. However, they also pointed to a certain ‘randomness’ with regard to these practices and attitudes which would “come and go,” depending on the context in which they were being practiced/expressed. I examine, in this chapter, these post-migratory-adopted attitudes and practices by Iranian men regarding foodwork, in particular cooking. In doing so, I draw on Bourdieu and his conceptualization of habitus as the relationship between cultural disposition of individuals and the context of their daily lives. As Bourdieu mentions, habitus is intimately conditioned by one’s history of socialization and practices of daily life. He describes habitus as more obstinate than fluid; thus, changing it requires repeated and lengthy exposure to circumstances. Obtaining a “genuine conversion, a *metanoia*, a mental revolution” (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 251) to reshape one’s disposition takes time, prolonged practice and intimate relations with the surrounding environment. Nonetheless, habitus is not unchangeable nor static; rather it changes throughout one’s life depending on the forms and structures of the fields of practice in specific conjuncture with one’s life history. Social mobility, for example, can transform habitus. If migration, as Friedmann (2002) argues, is a form of social mobility, a form of social change, it can then bring about significant adjustments to migrants’ habitus.

Through migration, migrants may enter and face new social fields which invoke, among a number of things, a heightened consciousness of one’s previously embodied dispositions, capitals, practice and habitus. However, although some migrants, once entering into new social fields of the host society, exit the previous social field(s) in which they were previously embedded (Benson, 2014), they never *fully* leave behind their embodied dispositions, capital orientations, and habitus; some migrants’ entry into the social space of their new residential environment may only be *partial*, which is reflected in their practices. As I argue in this chapter, there is at least some evidence for thinking of Iranians’ views and actions on gender norms in terms of what Bourdieu (1977) calls *hysteresis* of the habitus (p. 83) when one’s dispositions, despite changed circumstances, remained unchanged. I also show that Iranian men experience more hysteresis than their female counterparts due to being forced into a conscious awareness of a relatively more equal set of gender relations in the new field, thus feeling displaced (at least partially) from the position of power and social status they used to have in their previous patriarchal field, experiencing a “displaced masculinity” (Khosravi, 2009, p. 591). According to Bourdieu (1977), habitus is subject to constant change in response to new experiences and new conditions resulting from evolutions within existing fields (e.g. structural, institutional, technological, social, etc.) or through the emergence or encountering of new fields. When changes in the field are experienced in times of personal and social stability where habitus and

field are well-matched, the adjustment of habitus to the field is not only simple, but even anticipated. However, there are also times in which the change in the field is radical, times that individuals are suddenly faced with an environment or situation that is *too* different from the one in which they were ‘naturally’ fitted. In such circumstances, where there is radical mismatch between habitus and the field, where new and stable field structures have yet to emerge, and where the consequences for an individual’s field positioning are yet to be determined, what comes into being is novel, unpredictable, and often transitory field opportunities (Hardy, 2008, p. 127). Such disruption between habitus and field was seen among Iranians, more particularly among Iranian men who had just migrated to New Zealand, who at times became caught between the gendered dispositions they had acquired in Iran (habitus) and the somewhat different diasporic spaces with different gender expectations (new capitals, capital configurations and capital values; new fields; emergent habitus).

In the second part of this chapter, I shift my focus from the domestic arena to a wider space of the Iranian community, where culinary skills and knowledge on Persian cooking were means through which status and power within the Iranian community was conferred. In examining this, I draw on Bourdieu (1984) again and his discussion of multiple forms of *capital*. Bourdieu argues that individuals acquire status not only through financial means (i.e. economic capital), but also through immaterial means (i.e. cultural, social, and symbolic capital) they have accumulated and deploy. Such non-financial assets are sought after and valued in particular contexts, because upon their generation and acquisition, individuals can effectively mobilize through a given social realm (e.g. competently fulfil social roles, generate recognized and valued social personas, pursue social distinction and advancement, acquire increased quantities of capital, etc.) and obtain power and status. Bourdieu also argues that the value of any given cultural capital is dependent upon the field of interactions and the social realm in which it is generated and deployed. This means that the same cultural capital that may be highly valued in one field, may be essentially meaningless in another – like the chips of a casino that, though easily cashable into money or credit in that same casino, would be worthless in another casino (Winkle-Wagner, 2010).

In addition to the interconnectedness of capitals, Bourdieu envisages also a process through which one form of capital can be transformed into another. For example, economic capital can generate cultural capital or cultural capital can be converted into social capital. As I demonstrate in the second part of this chapter with regard to a number of Iranians of New Zealand (two women in particular) what seemed to have been translated into social, symbolic,

and in some cases economic capital, was culinary capital – a specific form of cultural and symbolic capital, amplified by the particular circumstances of migration and diaspora. What was often the case was that having an advanced culinary knowledge of the traditional Persian cuisine and being able to produce complex Persian dishes was proven a relatively rare quality among members of the Iranian diaspora of New Zealand, thus made those women with extensive knowledge and superior cooking skills (i.e. high culinary capital) rather ‘well-known’ individuals in the community, allowing them to enjoy a significantly larger social circle and finer social relations.

Deploying Bourdieu’s concept of capital, LeBesco and Naccarto (2012) explore the notion of culinary capital to investigate “how and why certain foods and food-related practices connote, and by extension, confer status and power on those who know about them and enjoy them” (p. 4). They note that culinary capital does not always “circulate in a fixed and predictable pattern [. . . but functions in] multiple and potentially contradictory ways” (p. 4). Therefore, just as food and food practices can be a constraining and repressive vehicle, they can simultaneously be enabling and productive, in the sense that they “create and structure possible fields of thought and action at every level and in every niche, . . . shape relations, ritual, and reality, individual, identities and bodies and challenge all of these categories and ways of thinking” (Martschukat & Simon, 2017, p. 3). De Solier (2005) had earlier used the term culinary capital and distinguished between two different kinds of culinary capital, namely *aesthetic* culinary capital, and *practical* culinary capital.¹¹⁸ In my discussion of Iranian women’s culinary capital, I mainly engage with the latter as my focus in this chapter is not on food consumption and taste (i.e. aesthetic culinary capital), as much as it is on production and skills involved in food and food-making (i.e. practical culinary capital). In this regard, I first examine food and gender within the domestic sphere.

Food and Gender within the Domestic Sphere

When discussing the gendered division of labor (in particular foodwork) in domestic sphere as it was back in Iran, it was often the case that female participants brought up traditional gender norms, according to which men had no responsibility other than their income-earning jobs outside the home and their familial responsibilities ended by their returning home from work, while women’s jobs never stopped, and even those women who had full-time jobs

¹¹⁸ “Practical culinary capital...involves the accumulation of cookery skills [whereas] . . . aesthetic culinary capital...involves the accumulation of culturally legitimate systems of food taste” (p. 471).

outside the home were held solely responsible for cooking – and by extension other domestic chores, including childcare. Women often criticized such norms and stated that because of feeling such obligations involved in foodwork, cooking had become, for them, coterminous with oppression, routine, or drudgery.

Such gendered assumptions were said to be relatively alleviated in New Zealand where women reportedly enjoyed less societal and familial pressure to be ‘responsible’ for housework or childcare. They even stated that their husbands, due to exposure to a more gender-equal society such as New Zealand, have adopted more pro-gender equality views, as a result of which they were not “as demanding as they once were” or “fussing as much” when it came to food, and that they had become, instead, “more flexible” and “less difficult” with food, and would even participate, every now and then, in the kitchen. Comparing this to how things were back home in Iran where men’s participation in the kitchen was often said to be nil, their present participation, though highly occasional (I will come back to this), was considered by women as an ‘improvement.’ Despite such ‘improved’ views of gender norms, the division of foodwork (and other domestic tasks) within Iranian families in New Zealand was, for the most part, strikingly similar to that in Iran – in that it was still clearly gender-based, with women having disproportionately greater degrees of involvement in the kitchen and the domestic space. Despite this, men’s comparatively minimal contribution to foodwork was not necessarily perceived by women as unfair (unlike Iran where they were often perceived as such), and was, at times, even encouraged, with women saying that they would now *prefer* to be in charge of the kitchen, both due to ‘practical’ (i.e. men’s lack of culinary skills, etc.) and conceptual justifications (construction of self, etc.).

‘Practical’ justifications of domestic cooking

In my discussions with men regarding their involvement in foodwork, in particular cooking, one of the comments that I often heard was that they had been usually criticized by their wives at home (i.e. Iran) for “not helping out enough” around the house and for their lack of participation with foodwork. By contrast in New Zealand where men were said to be now *willing* to help with the foodwork, their offers of assistance were often rejected by women. Acknowledging this, women often justified their demurral by talking about men’s lack of culinary skills and their lack of enough attention to, or knowledge of, “things that matter” when it came to food preparation. For instance, a few women reported that their husbands had bought, in the past, low-quality ingredients (especially fruits and vegetables) that would not have been

bought if the women themselves had gone shopping. Some others focused on cooking skills and stated that their husbands were not able to cook at all, or were unskillful or “clumsy” cooks whose cooking in the kitchen would usually “make a mess” that was not “cleaned up properly” (or at all). In this sense, their husbands’ help was not regarded as “actual help,” but “extra work” for women – which could have been avoided altogether if women did the work all by themselves in the first place: “If I cook, I just cook; it’s only *one* job: cooking. But when *he* cooks, I have to watch him, explain things to him, right his wrongs, and also constantly clean up after him. . . . It is twice as much work for me, both physically and mentally”; “What takes 20 minutes for me to prepare, takes him two hours! . . . So we’re all better off if *I* do it!” Men’s “ways of cooking” were also regarded by women to be relatively unhealthier due to men’s tendency to overuse certain ingredients in their food to enhance the flavor. This, too, was considered by some women as a way of compensating for lack of enough culinary skills, because “*anything* would taste better if you’re generous with butter or salt or oil, but what would be skillful is cooking *without* too much of them and still making a tasty meal. . . . They (men) don’t know how to do that, so they compensate with adding butter or loads of oil.”

Women’s concerns over health-related aspects of men’s cooking became even more intense in times of sickness of family members. In the event of sickness, women (especially mothers) typically applied traditional home remedies prior to consulting a medical professional, or made special foods to cure or fight mild illnesses such as common cold. For example, some stated that they would fight a cold by making their “medicinal soups” or that their first response when stomach-ache or diarrhea affected a family member would be making ‘*chayi-nabat*’ (tea with sugar candy) and ‘*aragh-e nana*’ (distilled mint extract), respectively.¹¹⁹ Given men’s lack of enough culinary skills as well as their lack of enough knowledge when

¹¹⁹ A few women (mostly mothers), associated being informed about such remedies and the capability of concocting them in times of sickness with “being caring” and viewed such capacity as “things every mother and wife should know.” Yet, they all admitted that they have become, after migration, extremely mindful not to reveal, in front of their Kiwi peers, their occasional adherence to traditional remedies, as these have, in the past and on multiple occasions, been judged by New Zealanders as “unseemly”:

[If you tell them that] my kid had a stomach-ache and I made him *chayi-nabat* instead of taking him to a doctor immediately. . . . They judge you, . . . look[ing] at you strangely, thinking perhaps that ‘she is coming from a backward society where there are no doctors and clinics and whatnot,’ and then they start giving you obvious, annoying advice with a patronizing tone like ‘you should have taken him to the doctor, dear!’ As if I don’t know that; as if they’re more concerned about my child than I am.

This was echoed by other Iranian women and was contrasted with how things were in Iran, where not only there was no shame attached to adhering to traditional remedies in dealing with mild, non-life-threatening illnesses, but one could also gain praise or status for having the knowledge and ability to successfully ameliorate such situations.

it came to traditional remedies, it was not surprising that women “wouldn’t trust men” in these situations and considered themselves to be “the only one in the family able to rectify such situations.”

Men usually reacted disapprovingly to such criticism and said that their wives were rather “impatient” and often “too controlling” when it came to their cooking or their attempts to improve their culinary skills: “Instead of telling me *what* I’m doing wrong so that I can learn, she just tells me ‘you’re doing it wrong!’ and then takes over herself. . . . So, after a while, I just give up!” Men saw their lack of culinary skills “only natural” because they were not “trained for it” but added that they have been eager to learn and participate more after having moved to New Zealand; what they saw as a burden in their way was women’s exacting standards which were, at times, said to be simply unattainable “as if they (women) are intentionally trying to make it look harder so *they* could remain in charge.”

In response to this, women sometimes acknowledged that their husbands, and generally ‘Iranian men’ they knew, have become more ‘receptive’ and ‘open’ to things they were not as receptive and open to when living in Iran. For instance, one woman who worked as an engineer in a male-dominated field in Iran said that her husband used to be hypersensitive when it came to her monthly work outings with her mostly-male colleagues in Iran, whereas in New Zealand this, for her husband, became a non-issue, although her working conditions did not change much in New Zealand (in that she was still working in a male-dominated field and had regular work outings with mostly-male colleagues). Similar views were echoed by a few other women, too, who believed that their husbands had become more gender-equality-conscious in New Zealand, and viewed one of the byproducts of such gender-equality-consciousness the willingness that men now showed to participate in some of the domestic housework, including cooking.

This also became evident in my discussions and interviews with men who often expressed serious concerns regarding gender equality, and the necessity of a fair household division of labor with an emphasis on foodwork. For example, showing a strong distaste for “men who do not treat their wives as their equal,” Pedram stated that he did not want to be mistaken for this ‘kind.’ He exemplified this by describing a colleague¹²⁰ who had admitted to be “expect[ing] his wife to prepare a different food for him every single day” and how this had become ‘watercooler chatter’ for a couple of days among their colleagues, one of whom had

¹²⁰ Non-Iranian, but Middle Eastern.

showed curiosity as to whether or not Pedram was the “same way” (a curiosity that was not extended to any of the Western colleagues). Soheil similarly talked of a couple of colleagues of his own who had moved to New Zealand from a rather similar cultural background as he did,¹²¹ but would “still see their wives as their personal cook . . . even after all these years [of living] in New Zealand.” What was prevalent in the discourse of Pedram and Soheil and other men expressing similar explicit views was their being motivated by a sense of equity, but more so by a desire to be perceived by New Zealanders as progressive and different from the stereotypical negative image of the ‘Middle Eastern man’ or the ‘Muslim man’ with which they were at times associated and identified.

That said, a number of women pointed to a certain ‘mix-and-match’ (‘*sava-kon-joda-kon*’) approach attached to such ‘liberal’ attitudes of Iranian men and said that their attitudes and practices can be contradictory at times, depending on the context within which, and the audience in front of whom, such views were being put into action. A few women went even further by saying that Iranian men only *act* equality-conscious in New Zealand, and still have their patriarchal tendencies at root. For instance, in a separate interview with Pedram and Soheil’s wives – Fariba and Hilda – who were very close friends, they first confirmed and acknowledged that after migration their husbands genuinely “*tried* to be of help in the kitchen,” though “there wasn’t much they *could* do” because their culinary skills “lacked much beyond scrambled eggs, a mushy pasta and a plain rice.” They even noted that their husbands’ occasional, well-meant presence in the kitchen was sometimes a “burden” because it disrupted their routine and consequently resulted in the lowering of the quality of the outcome. However, though appreciating their husbands’ willingness to help with the foodwork, they did not perceive these efforts entirely as concern over gender equality, because such concerns, in their experience, did not seem to be extended over too wide an area other than helping in the kitchen; for example, the main reason that neither of the two women were in paid employment (despite their willingness to work, and their being qualified and educated with no language barriers) was that their husbands had shown or implied disinclination toward the notion, holding the belief that working outside home for their wives when their own job brought enough economic capital to the household could only negatively affect raising the children and taking care of the family. Based on similar grounds, Fariba also mentioned that after she had applied and been accepted to a post-graduate program at one of New Zealand’s universities, she and her husband

¹²¹ Non-Iranian, but Middle Eastern

had a long-running dispute over whether she should accept the offer or not. At the end, she had decided to decline the offer to avoid any further conflicts.

Such ‘contradictory’ and ‘confusing’ behaviors on the part of Iranian men were also observed in the case of Hadi and Mehrdad, and what their wives, Nastaran and Somayeh, noted. For example, in one conversation I had with Hadi, he expressed similar egalitarian attitudes (similar to Pedram and Soheil) and stated that he would not consider it fair to his wife to go through the bother of everyday preparation of a cooked meal just for him to take to work, and that he would rather get a ready-made meal from his workplace’s cafeteria to “save her (his wife) the trouble.” However, what made his wife, Nastaran, question the genuineness of his egalitarian attitude was the fact that Hadi had come to this decision only *after* he had been transferred to a new office which happened to have a common eating area in which he was joined for lunch by other male colleagues (mostly-New Zealanders), all of whom would buy ready-made meals or sandwiches from the cafeteria rather than bring their own from home. She also noted that Hadi had no objection to her cooking lunch for him every day back when he worked in his previous office where he used to eat in the office just by himself, and that he even “*kind of expected it*” (*yejoorayi entezar ham dasht*). Mehrdad also considered himself as “pro-gender equality,” basing his claim on the fact that, after migration, he would “take charge of the kitchen every now and then” in order to “give the wife a break.” His wife, Somayeh, agreed with her husband’s statement regarding his post-migratory, occasional taking charge of food preparation, but added that “the only food he *does* and *can* prepare is kebab on ‘*manghal*’ (outdoor grill).” Preparing kebab on ‘*manghal*’ was, in fact, an area in which other Iranian men, too, were said to be taking a rather more active role after migration. Although most of the male participants, including Mehrdad, considered this occasional preparation of kebab as ‘helping out,’ women did not see these occasions exactly as such, for these occasions were often recreational for men that happened “in his own time, his own ways, and his own terms” which at times not only was not helpful to their wives, but even added to their workload. Somayeh, for instance, challenged Mehrdad’s earlier comments, albeit in a playful manner, by adding that her husband’s ‘cooking’:

would only happen when we have guests over or when we go picnicking with other Iranians. . . . Although he *is* doing the cooking part, I’m not exactly ‘having a break’ cause I’m constantly busy with other tasks . . . [as well as] most of the work before the guests would arrive and after they’d leave. . . . [So] it is not exactly a ‘break’ for me, is it?

An important theme that emerged from the discourse of women such as, but not limited to, Somayeh and Nastaran was that the degree and the type of participation of Iranian men in foodwork in New Zealand was highly affected by the *context* in which, and the *audience* in front of whom, these participations would take place. For instance, Hadi's acknowledgment of an 'unfair' division of labor between husbands and wives can be interpreted as his developing a certain gender consciousness which changed his scope of practice, but then again this heightened consciousness was only put into practice in very specific situations and in front of a very specific audience (that is when he was eating with his male peers, all of whom bought their meals/sandwiches at work). Mehrdad's engaging in foodwork was similarly said to be performed only during picnics with other Iranians or during their guest-hosting (the keyword here is *during*). Furthermore, his engagement was only limited to preparing kebab and working the grill and, in a broader sense, 'outdoor cooking,' notions that are often viewed as masculine cooking activities, not only in Iranian culture, but universally (Innesss, 2001a; Inness, 2001b; Neuhaus, 2003; Ridgeway, 2011).¹²² I specifically observed this in a few public picnics that I attended during my fieldwork, where the masculinity of those men (myself included) who were not skilled enough to "skewer kebab"¹²³ (*kabab sikh zadan*) or not knowledgeable enough to "handle the grill" ('*manghal-kari*') was questioned, supposedly in a joking manner.¹²⁴

What shed further light on such heavily-context-dependent engagement of Iranian men in foodwork was the comments of Sarvenaz who would often host a small dinner party, inviting, in a monthly rotation, either Iranian friends or non-Iranian (read: Western) colleagues. Having hosted both types of guests for more than five years (at the time of interview), she described a certain pattern in terms of her husband's helping out with foodwork:

Since we've come to New Zealand . . . he (her husband) usually helps in the kitchen but only when it's just the two of us. . . . He also cooks occasionally depending on his mood, but [again] only for us two. There are some exceptions, too. For example, he's actually very active in the kitchen when we have our [work] colleagues over for dinner. . . . He's even cooked for them a few times, though mostly it have been [Iranian]

¹²² This is also true in Western culture where 'steak' and 'barbecuing meat' are often assigned to and associated with men (see, for example, Neuhaus, 2003, Chapter 9: Food and Cookery Instruction for Men).

¹²³ The skill of getting the ground meat onto a skewer and having it stay put or not fall apart during the cooking process.

¹²⁴ Just to name a few: "What type of man are you if you don't know how to skewer kebab, bro?" ("*dadash che mardi hasti balad nisti kabab sikh bezani?*"); "A [true] man must make mean kebabs!" ("*mard bayad kabab-e mashti betuneh dorost kone*"), "Come handle the manghal, mate! Don't be afraid to get your bangles broken!" ("*bia yekam manghal-kari kon, baba. Natars, alangoohat nemishkaneh!*").

desserts. . . . He also cooked [for them] ‘*mirza-ghaesmi*’¹²⁵ once which was not that bad, actually. . . . He was walking in an apron even, bragging about his ‘culinary signature’ (‘*dastpokht*’), trying to look like a chef (laughs) in front of our guests. . . . [But] he doesn’t like me to tell these to anyone. . . . [When hosting Iranian friends] he doesn’t even enter the kitchen, let alone helping with anything. . . . Just sits there, not lifting a finger like he’s a guest himself.

Such adamantine noncooperation when hosting Iranian friends would also arise, as Sarvenaz went on to say, whenever they would visit Iran. These were the times that her husband’s post-migratory attitude toward gender norms would get “reset to default”:

all of these [helps with foodwork] mysteriously stop when we go to Iran. . . . He becomes like his old self. . . . No helping out, no cooking, no setting the table, no washing the dishes, no nothing. . . . The only thing he does there that is related to food is eating it.

Sarvenaz’s experience gave further substance to other women’s experience with regard to the contexts and audiences which would encourage/discourage men’s participation in the kitchen. Factoring in Sarvenaz’s experience and integrating it with similar experiences of other women, there forms a pattern: Iranian men became generally more active in the kitchen after migration; however, their domestic foodwork (which was *still* viewed as ‘feminine foodwork,’ the retention of which is itself very telling) occurred mostly either in the private space (where there was no audience) or, if displayed publicly, in front of a ‘Kiwi’ audience – who, in the view and experience of my participants, did not attach any stigma to a man who engages in domestic cooking and were even *for* it. Such ‘feminine foodwork,’ however, was rarely performed in front of an Iranian audience who, in the view and experience of my participants, *did* attach a certain stigma to men who engage in domestic cooking,¹²⁶ which also explains why such participations in the kitchen could be stopped to altogether when visiting home – that is a reproduction of the *original* field where Iranian men’s primary and secondary practices had formed. Of the few occasions in which men *did* publicly participate in cooking in front of an Iranian audience, they engaged in ‘masculine foodwork’ – that was making kebab and working the grill, the performance of which was not only not stigmatized, but also taken as a resource

¹²⁵ Barbecued eggplant, mashed and cooked with garlic and tomato.

¹²⁶ Even a few *women* preferred their husband to help “only in their privacy” (‘*khalvat*’) as they had heard in the past (not necessarily in New Zealand) remarks or jokes that underscored the masculinity of their husbands as a result of his engaging in ‘feminine’ foodwork.

for validation of manliness. Such a strong contrast in men's participation in foodwork within Iranian private and public sphere was also visible, for example, in the official social network channel for Iranians of Christchurch, in which the organizers of the Persian New Year *called for* the cooperation of "tasteful ('*khosh saligheh*')¹²⁷ women" *before, during and after* the party, while only *hoping* for "men's cooperation *at home*."

In this sense Iranian men were operating under a heightened state of field and status consciousness, as opposed to functioning "without any deliberate pursuit of coherence . . . without any conscious concentration," (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 170). In this regard, they had become conscious of their gendered habitus and realized that the practices arising from their original habitus (which was working 'fine' in their original Iranian domestic and broader social fields) could expose them to undesirable positions in their new field (e.g. the case of Perdram and Soheil's Middle-Eastern colleagues) where women were no longer *expected* to be in charge of household chores (including cooking). This new field was also where some of their [Western] male peers were actively engaged in the kitchen and even bragged about, and were praised for, their culinary skills without necessarily being stigmatized as much by society for engagement in 'women's work.' Having come to realize the different 'rules of the game,' and in order to claim a more desirable position in the new field (or at least distance themselves from an undesirable stereotypical position attached to Middle-Eastern men in the new field), they had developed, a certain reflexive desire, compulsion and will to revise their habitual, non-conscious ways of seeing/perceiving (in the form of expressing more egalitarian attitudes and practices). This, in turn, had brought about a desire to revise their habitual, non-conscious ways doing/performing by 'helping out' within the 'woman's domains,' in particular foodwork.

However, the dramatic context-dependency of this suggests a partial engagement with, and a strategic enactment of, the dominant social norms of the host society, negotiating between their foundational habitus ways of thinking/behaving developed in their home(land), and the differently intuitive ways of thinking/behaving in the new social positions and cultural contexts of diaspora. On the one hand, the trace of their original dispositions have been maintained, "reflecting the entire history of the group" (Nash, 2003, p. 191); on the other hand, their habitus has developed new practices and values as a result of migration and being placed in a different sociocultural field. Thus, their habitus can be seen as hybrid with different dimensions, not only working against, but also reinforcing each other, forming a habitus clivé, "a product of

¹²⁷ A 'gendered' adjective itself, as it is often used to describe women. If used to describe a man, it is most likely connoting effeminacy.

conciliation of contradiction” (Bourdieu, 2004, p. 111) that is a discrepancy between the field of primary socialization and the latter field of diaspora.

‘Conceptual’ justifications of domestic cooking

As mentioned earlier, when discussing foodwork back home, women usually brought up the familial and societal pressure in terms of being *expected* to cook, imposed upon them by what they often characterized as a ‘patriarchal structure.’¹²⁸ As a couple of woman mentioned, having failed to cook for their husbands in the past had created situations in which they were judged negatively both by their own family as well as others. For instance, Masoumeh (a then mother of one who was also working outside the home) remembered that because she always used to wrap a small sandwich in a plastic bag for her husband to take to work as lunch, his husband’s male co-workers – whose wives supposedly made them a ‘home-made’ meal in a lunchbox – would make a crack about his lunch, insinuating that he must have “troubles at home.”¹²⁹ Recalling her first few months of marriage, she also narrated how her mother (who was living in the same block) would check on her in order to make sure that “everything is in order” regarding her son-in-law’s dinner, adding “feed him right and he’ll always be yours!”

However, having moved to New Zealand and feeling that they were subjected to relatively less societal pressure to undertake domestic tasks particularly cooking, women also rationalized this using a ‘discourse of choice,’ stating that post-migration cooking had been “less of a burden” and that it was, in part, for their own interests, enjoyment, and sense of self and social worth that they now cooked. According to Zari, this was because “before [migration] you cooked out of *obligation* . . . [as] women, in our culture, are *expected* to cook [in Iran]. . . . When you look at something as a *chore*, you don’t wanna do it . . . [whereas] when you know you are doing it because you’ve *chosen* to, you’ll do it happily,” highlighting the importance of individual agency as her dominant morality and ethical practice.

Deploying foodwork, especially meal preparation for family as a means of construction of a sense of self and social worth was more visible, though not limited to, full-time homemakers who often saw their cooking as an expression of caring for their family which reportedly resulted in a sense of fulfillment and satisfaction on their own part. However, caring

¹²⁸ “Nezame mard-salaraneh”

¹²⁹ Compare the implications of this to the case of Hadi and how taking home-made/ready-made lunch could communicate a completely different message in a different cultural setting.

was acted out not only through women's practical activity of cooking 'proper meals' and bringing together the family to eat to ensure their physical health and emotional well-being, but also through subordinating their own tastes and preferences to those of their spouses and children. Most women stated that the dishes they cooked most often, were those favored by their husbands and children, and that their own favorite dishes were seldom or never cooked, stating "what's the joy in cooking something only I, and nobody else, like?" In this sense, the enjoyment of cooking was closely associated with whether or not the final outcome facilitated the desires and expectations of intimate others and whether it was consequently also liked or appreciated by them. This became clearer when a number of women (either without children or without children at home) stated that when their husbands were away, they would stop cooking altogether and would make themselves "cold sandwiches" instead, because, as one woman said, "I don't really enjoy it (cooking) without him . . . [as] cooking is a loving gesture." Such practices, regardless of how 'subordinating' they may seem, were the main focus of long-term identity-formation for some women and the source of invoking emotional security and a sense of social belonging in the conditioning of diaspora. Therefore, while they may hint to a rather subordinate position for women due to an absence of gender equity, they appear, at the same time, as practical and immediate reflections and reproductions of self – as self is always being constructed through the successful fulfilment of caring roles within intimate kin-based social relationships – thus quite socially constructive, pointing to the fact that both factors are simultaneously and irrevocably at play.

Women's own preference for being in charge of the kitchen was also linked to a sense of familiarity and safety that they reportedly experienced while cooking for their family. Cooking familiar foods and performing familiar culinary practices often produced a feeling of being at home, and were especially sought at times when women felt a longing for home. For example, a number of women stated that whenever they miss Iran or their friends and family there, it was, above all, through engaging in familiar food practices that they truly feel at home again. For some, such feelings were produced only upon cooking traditional Iranian foods ("It gives me joy . . . especially when I miss home . . . to make traditional Iranian dishes from scratch."), while for some others, it was *familiar practices*, rather than *familiar dishes*, that played a more important role in the remembering of home ("One food that I really like to cook when I long for home is *lasagna* which was like my signature dish when hosting parties at home. . . . It was also the first recipe my mother taught me."). In this sense, the same gendered practices that were once thought as a means of oppression back in Iran, were now sought, by

some women in diaspora, as a means of agentic liberation and also of ameliorating the “sorrow of exile” (*‘gham-e ghorbat’*). This also explains women’s reluctance to give away such practices to men (a reluctance that was picked up and mentioned by men, too) for whom performing such practices in diaspora lacked the element of reproduced familiarity (due to men’s not being dispositionally habituated to the sociocultural space of the kitchen) and were thus no reminder of home.

Food and Gender within the Community

In contemporary Iranian urban society (where most participants of this study originally came from), having culinary knowledge and skills is not typically considered as ‘highly-valued’ cultural capital that could be ‘invested’ to yield enhanced social capital or status within that particular geographic and cultural space. This is firstly because having culinary knowledge lacks the logic of social scarcity that potentially increases the value of any already-valued cultural capital within a given field, and secondly because cooking skills are rarely associated with the upper-class and do not transmute into high-status, thus their ownership cannot usually yield profits of distinction. One young woman even mentioned that she always tried to *hide* her cooking knowledge when she was at high school because she feared that her “well-off classmates¹³⁰ would judge her as ‘*dahati*’ (rural) or ‘*bi-kelas*’ (classless).” She added that as students, they were constantly reminded by the school’s “bright-minded principal” (*‘modir-e roshanfekr’*) that “*everyone* can cook and sew” and that instead of learning such “useless things,” they should focus on their education and pursue things such as art, IT skills, or a foreign language that could pay off financially and/or socially in the future.

However, in New Zealand, things were quite different, and at times even completely opposite to how they were back home. Knowing how to cook was now valued very highly among Iranians of New Zealand, with women valuing it much more highly than men. Women now viewed cooking as a ‘talent’ and a ‘skill’ that “even men should have,” though it appeared that they expected themselves to have a relatively higher culinary knowledge and cooking skills than men. This was evident, for example, in their discourses that typically suggested that women should have ‘mastered’ cookery skills or be an ‘expert’ in all things culinary, while the same was never expected when talking about culinary knowledge of men who were often

¹³⁰ Though self-allegedly belonging to the lower end of the economic spectrum, she attended an expensive, private high school in Tehran’s ‘uptown’ (*‘bala-shahr’*), because of her mother who was a teacher at that school.

expected to only have learnt it (cooking) ‘to some degree,’ or as one woman put it, “that much that they don’t die of hunger if they’re left alone for a couple days!”

Aside from the everyday domestic foodwork which women were often in charge of, there was also celebratory foodwork (either at Iranian community gatherings and celebrations or at private parties) that had women at its core. Given the centrality of food to Iranian gatherings and celebrations, this was quite an important, conspicuous, and performative arena for women, through which they could gain status by showcasing their culinary talents. Being able to produce fine dishes fully in accord with traditional Iranian culinary principles was seen, by other women (and men as well), as a source of pride, influence and, at times, power, particularly when dishes of great complexity were concocted. For example, in potlucks or other bring-your-own-food type of gatherings, it was often the case that certain dishes would attract more attention than the others, and the women who had cooked those dishes were commended, both by men and other women, for their culinary dexterity as well as the effort they had put into preparing those dishes. The opposite also seemed to be true; a few women mentioned that they had, in the past, felt embarrassed in some of these gatherings because of ‘too simple a dish’ they had contributed. In some cases, they had even heard joking remarks, with their dishes having been labeled as ‘*ghaza hazeri*’¹³¹ (quickly-assembled dishes) and their culinary skills rendered meagre. This whole situation, as a female informant said, had created rivalry and encouraged a culture of ‘*cheshm o ham cheshmi*’¹³² (competition) among women, because now “nobody wanted to be outdone.”¹³³

According to this informant, there were, in particular, two women whose cooking had always caught attention in these gatherings because they were, from the beginning, in the habit of contributing very refined dishes. These two women – Tooran and Molook, both in their early sixties – were talked about by other members of community as well, and were often described to be ‘master(s)’ in their cooking¹³⁴ and considered the ‘go-to’ of the community when it came to anything related to the cooking, especially Persian food. Their opinion mattered and whether or not they complimented one’s ‘*dastpokht*’ (cooking abilities and qualities), could, and had in the past, become a point of pride or embarrassment.

¹³¹ ‘Ghaza hazeri’ usually refers to dishes that require minimum amount of time and minimum sets of skills.

¹³² A concept similar to ‘keeping up with the Joneses.’

¹³³ “*Hishki nemikhad az ghafeleh aghab bemoone.*”

¹³⁴ “*Too ashpazi ostade.*”

Tooran & Molook

The position of Tooran and Molook in the Iranian community was, in some ways, similar to that of celebrity chefs. Apart from being known as masters of cooking, they had also acquired a cultural-intermediary role (Mentinis, 2016), similar to that of celebrity chefs, and were in the possession of a particular form of cultural (as well as symbolic) capital – that is practical culinary capital (de Solier, 2005) – via which the basis of their legitimacy as arbiters of culinary skills and taste (Bell, 2002) was formed. Just like celebrity chefs, Tooran and Molook, too, were seen to perform a number of functions ranging from influencing the way other women cooked; establishing and maintaining the hierarchy of evaluations of fine, good, or bad Persian food/cooking; and providing women with opportunity to acquire practical culinary capital themselves (for example, in the form of giving tips and advice, or inviting them over for cooking together). Molook was even offered a ‘job,’ as a private Persian cooking tutor by a number of Iranians, which she would occasionally do in exchange for financial recompense.

Tooran and Molook approximated to celebrity chefs also in terms of endorsing a product brand or becoming a brand themselves. For example, Molook mentioned once that a particular brand of tomato paste had been one of the ‘secrets’ of her praised cooking – for “a spoon of it gives the dish just the right amount of flavor, texture, aroma, and color.” However, being unable to find this particular brand of tomato paste in Middle Eastern shops of New Zealand (especially Christchurch), she would always bring a couple of cans on her way back from Australia whenever she travelled there to visit her daughter (which was at least once a year). Later in my fieldwork, and upon encountering the same brand of tomato paste in other women’s pantries, I enquired as to the location of purchase and found out that, following Molook’s recommending the brand, other women, too, would bring with them that particular brand of tomato paste either on their trip back from Australia, and, at times, even from Iran.

Tooran’s recommendation on brands was also very influential, but what was more interesting about her was the fact that *she herself* had become a brand. In her early years in New Zealand, she had made a few jars of home-made pickles for a community food fair, where she not only managed to sell them all (mostly to Iranians) but also received ‘orders’ for more. After a while, although she had not named or labelled her pickles and had simply called them “home-made pickles” (*‘torshi khoonegi’*), they became known and were referred to as “Aunt Tooran’s pickles” (*‘torshi-ye khaleh Tooran’*). Seeing how well her pickles were received, she had decided to keep making pickles and sold these successfully. She then extended her line of

production to make a wider variety of pickles as well as other home-made ‘Persian’ products such as different kinds of jams and compotes. These products were collectively labelled by other Iranians as “Aunt Tooran’s Products” (*‘mahsoolat-e khaleh Tooran’*). Interestingly, similar types of products were, at times, rated by Iranians depending on the degree of (dis)similarity between the taste of that product with that of Aunt Tooran’s. At one gathering, for example, the homemade pickles made by a young women were complimented upon, because their taste were said by one individual bringing to mind *Aunt Tooran’s Pickles*. Similarly, later in one private dinner party, a man said that his wife had given up making jams in New Zealand because after her first (and only) attempt of doing so, the outcome had not come even close to that of Aunt Tooran. In this sense, it seemed as if Tooran had become herself a cultural figure with embodied symbolic capital whose name, partly consciously and partly unconsciously, had become a brand with her own distinct image and appeal which distinguished her in some ways from other members of the Iranian community.

In general, it seemed that Molook and Tooran’s cultural capital, their remarkable cooking skills and their ability to produce to perfection fairly complicated dishes and products that other women were unable to produce, had granted them a position of symbolic capital and power within the Iranian community. This had occasionally raised feelings of competition among women to the point that they were motivated to acquire a more advanced set of culinary knowledge and skills, because they thought that by doing so, they, too, could gain a capital of some sort, whether in the form of gaining influence, power and status, obtaining financial means, or enjoying a larger social circle and better social relations.

On such grounds, Molook and Tooran were both asked by other Iranian women (and in one case an Iranian man), on multiple occasions, to give private lessons in Iranian cookery. Although Molook had accepted and occasionally taught privately to some young women who wished to improve their Persian cooking skills, she agreed with Tooran’s perception that the culinary skills required for cooking (in particular, for cooking Iranian dishes) should have been learnt from an early age. She interestingly analogized this to one’s accent that is hard to change after a certain age, no matter how hard one tries, thereby astutely pointing to her (and Tooran’s) embodied dispositional character after much foundational and enduring practice: “the only way to master an accent is if you hear it in childhood or in early teen age, latest . . . though with the cooking it’s not hearing but observing it from an early age.” They both explained how they used to watch their mothers or grandmothers in the kitchen, sometimes for hours, and contrasted this learning experience with that of younger generations:

Tooran – I used to stay with my grandmother a lot . . . [and] watch her when she was cooking. . . . She wouldn't like it if I asked too many questions . . . she would say: 'just watch and learn' . . . and believe it or not, most of what I know today is from those 'watchings.' . . . They don't teach you those things at cooking schools or on the internet or even in the cookbooks . . . [or by] watching cooking shows. . . . Young ones today don't want to even lift a finger, let alone learn to cook. They won't do that until after they get married or just before, which is too late for becoming a decent cook, or cooking Persian food proficiently. . . . I can tell you that the first meal I cooked – and I was only thirteen then – was much better than what many young ones today cook in their twenties and thirties. . . . They may know how to cook, but they don't *understand* cooking, because they haven't experienced in their childhood what we have in ours.

Watching mothers and grandmothers in the kitchen did not only teach these women how to cook, but also showed them how to appreciate cooking and view foodwork as a means of caring for family as well as a way to exercise influence and obtain status in the household. As Molook stated, her mother treated her kitchen "as it were a holy site with its own rituals" and always told her that cooking is not a burden, but a privilege; Tooran also added that it was her grandmother's "cooking with love" and her outstanding cooking skills that always gathered the family around her and brought her respect and authority.

What was notable was that tangible recipes were never passed on and the process of learning always took place through the act of observation. For Molook, the first time she cooked a meal all by herself – when she was eleven – was also the first time she was allowed to touch any of the kitchen utensils, so there was no prior practice whatsoever; nonetheless, her food had turned out great because she "had watched enough to learn it by rote." Cooking and culinary knowledge had clearly been inductively acquired and thus provided the foundations of an embodied state of cultural capital for both Molook and Tooran, for it was learnt without them exactly realizing it and "in the absence of any deliberate inculcation and therefore quite unconsciously" (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 245). Apart from intangible cooking knowledge, cultural and social values were also transmitted to these women through a process of gradual embodiment of dispositions that had largely taken place in early stages of life and formed their foundational habitus. Such cultural transmission had created "a sense of importance about the task, establishing the persona of a 'good cook,' who is elevated to special status within the family," (D'Sylva and Beagan, 2001, p. 284) and especially so if situated in a migratory context and within a diasporic community.

Through their relatively unparalleled cooking skills in New Zealand (i.e. their practical culinary capital), Tooran and Molook had gained status, prestige, and respect among the community, especially among women, and were consulted about cooking-related matters. Interestingly, although Molook and Tooran were in possession of such culinary knowledge and skills for years prior to migration, their current position as the ‘culinary gurus’ of the community was gained only post-migration. This was because having such high culinary skills and knowledge back at home(land) were not scarce, as they were possessed by numerous individuals, especially those of the same age and generation as Tooran and Molook’s. However, in the absence of similar culinary ‘competency’ in New Zealand (due to a relatively younger population), the skills and knowledge of these women had become scarce, hence more valued and appreciated.¹³⁵ As Tooran humbly stated herself “I’m not as good [in cooking] as everybody says I am; but as the saying goes, the one-eyed is the king among the blind.”¹³⁶ In other words, it was the scarcity of such cultural capital (in its embodied form and as enacted practice) in diasporic context that “yield[ed] profits of distinction” (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 228) for these women and resulted in their “feeling justified in being (what one is), being what it is right to be” (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 228). Cultural capital, as Bourdieu argues, can be ‘cashed in’ best within fields of culture in which particular cultural skills, due to a particular social formation, “present themselves as rare and worthy of being sought after” (Bourdieu, 1977, p. 178). In such context, “cultural capital acts as a social relation within a system of exchange that includes the accumulated cultural knowledge that confers power and status” (Barker, 2004, p. 37) as was demonstrated by the case of Tooran and Molook.

Conclusion

It was often the case that Iranian women discussed the division of domestic labor at home (in Iran) in terms of historical and cultural gender norms established by a traditional patriarchal system, which viewed women as the primary ‘keepers of the home,’ and consequently expected them to do everything (most importantly cooking, child-care, and

¹³⁵ The change in the status of Tooran and Molook does not necessarily represent a shift in their *class* status in diaspora, mainly due to a very specific understanding of 'class' in Iranian society that divides things/people/jobs/etc. into two very broad categories of “ba kelas” (=with class) and “bi kelas” (=without class), each with its own definitions and characteristics. According to Iran’s mainstream class identities and class relations, *cooking* rarely falls under the latter category. Thus, although class and class mobilities have been shown to be local and situated with regard to Iranians of larger diasporas such as those in the UK (Fathi, 2015) or Australia (McAuliffe, 2008), for my interlocutors who were mostly coming from a more or less homogeneous social class background (that is lower-middle class), having high culinary knowledge/skills had not brought about a brought a shift in their 'class status' (in its explicit academic sense) though it has certainly brought about popularity and wider social circles for those in possession of it in the conditioning of diaspora.

¹³⁶ “miyoon-e koora ye[k]-chesh[m] padeshafe!”

domestic cleaning) around the house while the same was never expected of men and was even discouraged. The byproduct of this was a perceived unequal and unfair domestic division of labor which was, as admitted also by men, a major source of frustration for many women. However, moving to New Zealand and being exposed to a more equal set of gender relations in the host community reportedly created a shift in the perceptions of Iranians (especially Iranian men) who no longer perceived cooking as a ‘duty’ but rather an optional pursuit; this left open the option of women opting out of cooking and men opting in. Despite this, within the domestic spheres of Iranian families in New Zealand, the division of labor, in particular foodwork and cooking, was not that different from Iran – it was still clearly gender-based, with women having disproportionately greater degrees of involvement in the kitchen.

What *was* different, however, was that historical and cultural gender ideologies (which were often regarded as the perpetuator of an existing inequality in the division of labor back home and also a source of frustration on the part of women) were rarely expressed to justify a very similar type of unequal division of labor that continued to exist in diasporic homes, indicating the partial retention of a dominant and thus, unmarked, hegemony. Rather, women – despite their continued substantial contribution to household chores, accompanied by men’s minimal-to-no contribution – often deployed a discourse of agentic choice at the center of their narrative that rationalized their voluntary dominance in the kitchen either based on practical reasons such as their being in possession of a generally higher culinary competency and a more informed nutritional knowledge (compared to men’s lack thereof) which, in fact, meant *less* work for them and could prevent lots of unnecessary conflicts in the home), or on non-practical and ideological reasons such as enjoyment emanating from cooking and bringing the family together to eat, which brought them status, respect, and a sense of self. In none of these occasions, did women consider their larger contribution to foodwork as ‘unfair’ or subordinating. As Reay (2004a) notes, the gender inequalities with which one grows up not only shape the habitus, but are also reproduced through the daily interactions and embodiment within the habitus in later stages of life. Furthermore, empirical research has shown that women tend to attribute gender inequality in the kitchen to their individual circumstances rather than perceiving them as collective normative constraints of gender itself (Beagan, et al., 2008; Everingham, Stevenson & Warner-Smith, 2007), thus concealing and protecting the systematic working of gender ideology behind a personalized experience of inequality (Cox, 2017). In a similar sense, Iranian women, who were reportedly no longer *expected* to engage in gendered roles after migration, expressed less disagreeable attitudes toward cooking and, at times, even

gained enjoyment in performing such tasks by avoiding confrontation with the reality of a continuing gender inequality in the kitchens of diaspora, where despite taking new *forms*, its *content* was rather similar to that of home. In such situations where individual choice still results in unequal sharing of roles, one may view “new norms exclusively as transgressions or transcendence of hegemonic ideology rather than compliance with it” (Cox, 2017, p. 244).

Furthermore, domestic foodwork, especially among the women who were not employed outside the home, seemed to have become a very significant means from which they obtained status and identity and, more importantly power (not only in terms of gender, but also because of distance from home and wishing to actively and nostalgically recreate home – which implies a different, but significant source of status). As a result, these women were usually reluctant to give up their dominance in kitchen to men who were, in most cases, already acquiring status and identity from their income-earning power ('breadwinning') through their paid work outside the home. The post-migratory, intensified desire of Iranian women to maintain control over the kitchen even when a more equal division of foodwork labor had become available can be an indicator that cooking and food preparation in diaspora was now practiced not simply as a culturally determined gender role, but also as a platform to exercise power and status within the diasporic family and community, especially in terms of maintaining the culinary ideals and practices of their origin home and actively and nostalgically recreating *that* home through its food practices. In this sense, cooking, for these women, had become both a powerful and a sensuous tool, through which they could assert their role as keepers of family as well as cultural traditions in diaspora.

The different gender relations in the new home of New Zealand also brought change to the gendered views and practices of men who had now become (either by their own, or their wife's, assertion) more equality-conscious, manifesting this either in a more active participation in foodwork (compared to home which was often said to be nil), or through expressing egalitarian attitudes. However, as I demonstrated in this chapter, such egalitarian gender attitudes and practices were, for the most part, only put into practice in very specific contexts, especially in public contexts where the need to perform 'Kiwi-norms' were most likely felt (which also explains why men participated more readily in *cooking* rather than other domestic tasks – such as cleaning, laundry, etc., because those tasks cannot be performed as publicly), or in contexts where engaging in the 'feminine domain' could not jeopardize masculinity (i.e. in private sphere where there was no 'audience'). Most interestingly, these egalitarian practices and attitudes, as one women noted, would temporarily get reset to a default

(i.e. non-egalitarian) mode, during visits back to Iran, when men would become their ‘old selves’ again.

I understood this as an adjustment of Iranian men’s habitus to their new sociocultural field. Having moved to a new and somewhat different sociocultural space with different gender expectations (i.e. new field), the social and cultural gendered dispositions (i.e. habitus) they had acquired back home (i.e. primary field) with its clear-cut gender roles and sex hierarchies was not as much applicable in their new field and was, therefore, in need of reconsideration. In such heightened state of reflexive and social consciousness, Iranian men first obtained an approximate ‘feel for the game’ and a sense of how to play it, and created a ‘fit’ between their habitus and the field. Such fit, however partial, was often quite enabling, and essentially enabled individuals to recreate domestic/private spaces as were back home (though tensions between the two was often apparent and disruptive) which consequently led to a certain sense of belonging.

This is not to say that Iranian men’s given social position now corresponded with the ‘fitted’ dimensions of their habitus. Rather, as a result of being exposed to quite a few fields and taking up multiple positions through their exchanges between the home and host country, between the domestic and public sphere, Iranian men’s habitus essentially moved between three fields of ‘home’: one back in Iran that encompasses many fields (e.g. work, education, domesticity, etc.); one in New Zealand’s public sites (e.g. new sites of work, new gender norms, etc.); and one in New Zealand’s domestic sphere. Their multi-practice and gender-specific ‘habitus clivé’ thus moved and changed between these different homes, spheres, and social fields, and generated the ‘appropriate’ practices to ensure conformity with the requirements of identifiable positions within each field in which they contemporaneously performed. Understandably, since changes to the habitus requires lengthy exposure to circumstances due to the inertia of habitus, those who lived in New Zealand longer were able to move between their multiple gender-specific forms of habitus more smoothly as they had more time to reflect on their habitus, to the point that their reflexivity itself became habitual (Sweetman, 2003).

Finally, in the Iranian diasporic context within New Zealand, being knowledgeable of Persian cooking skills and able to produce complex Persian dishes was considered as a sort of cultural and even symbolic (in respect of particularly refined dishes or cooks) capital, more precisely a “practical culinary capital” (de Solier, 2005, p. 471), the possession of which could signify and solidify women’s status and be used as a source of distinction. This was particularly demonstrated in the case of two women, Tooran and Molook, whose culinary capital’s value

was increased as it had become scarce in the conditioning of diaspora, and was translated into specific privileges (both symbolic and economic) over other members of the Iranian community, and a source for constructions of the self and social identity. It was by means of sharing recipes and cooking and baking tips that these women (and any other women who possessed such culinary capital) could easily create bonds and build relationships within the community; in other words, the manifesting of their culinary capital exposed them to a larger social circle and helped them access some of the social resources enshrined in the community network, thus cultural capital converted into social capital, symbolic, and, in some cases, even economic capital.

Chapter 5: Memory

Introduction

In this chapter, I investigate the relationship between food and memory (both collective and individual) and discuss how food (in particular Iranian food) – and memories associated with it – can be central to understanding the processes by which Iranian migrants build and feel at home, however far away from it. In order to do so, I deploy Hage's (1997; 2010) notion of 'home-building' and his theoretical framework around nostalgia, and analyze the experiences of diasporic Iranians through Hage's four key feelings of familiarity, community, security, and sense of opportunity and hope. I show how for Iranians of New Zealand, home-building practices, on many occasions, are focused on the production and consumption of Iranian food, both individually and collectively. I also argue that Iranians engage in several forms of memory registers that simultaneously remediate negative experiences of the origin home by selectively highlighting 'the positive' in order to generate a better home in the diasporic present (and as part of an aspirational future). As part of this process, they not only validate their diaspora and diasporic status, but also articulate an idealized genuineness of their pre-migratory Iranian ways of life that is now pragmatically adapted to the material and sociocultural norms of their current home.

The strong relationship between food and memory has been shown in numerous studies. As Lupton (1996) states, food is "an element of the material world which embodies and organizes our relationship with the past in socially significant ways" (p. 32). Thus, food and our food experiences/preferences share a symbiotic relationship with our memory. Bourdieu (1997) argues that the effects of memory are "inscribed in human bodies" (p. 138) and thus memory is an embodied practice. This embodied memory is encoded in the ways that one walks, talks, sits, and in my interlocutors' case, in the way one desires food and the way one eats, and is often elicited by sensory stimuli such as taste and smell. Food experiences of the present can therefore trigger the memories of the past while, at the same time, memories of the past can, consciously and unconsciously, generate food experiences of the present and even future, further highlighting a dynamic connection between food and memory.

In investigating the relationship between food and memory among the Iranian diaspora of New Zealand, the main theme formed around the notions of 'home,' a notion that many diasporic and migration studies have dealt with. Diasporic Iranians, perhaps just like many other diasporic groups or cohorts, had a longing for home and in this way both purposefully and unconsciously utilized numerous familiar food practices to *feel* at home. Their desire for

home, however, was not a “desire for a homeland,” but a “homing desire” (Brah, 1996, p. 16), and a nostalgia for a homely feeling of familiarity. What they sought was not returning to, but a re-imagining and a re-experiencing of an often idealized homeland – either directly as quintessential statements and/or as problematic negations that should be avoided – away from home through a series of home-building’ practices (Hage, 1997; 2010), among which food practices appeared to be one of the (if not *the*) most prominent modalities. I expand upon this in this chapter, drawing on Hage’s (1997; 2010) notion of home-building as well as on Bourdieu’s (1977) notion of habitus – for home-building can be viewed as (re)building a space in which various capital-based dispositions (individual and social), practices, roles, and institutions can be intuitively and/or strategically deployed.

I begin with a brief discussion of the relationship between home and memory.

Home and Memory

During the course of my fieldwork, people expressed their feelings toward, and explained their experiences with ‘home’ quite differently from each other; some considered home as a place of origin where one was born and grew up (i.e. Iran), while some regarded it as a place in which one resides (i.e. New Zealand), with quite a few people believing in having multiple homes (i.e. both Iran and New Zealand). Of those who regarded Iran as ‘home,’ some had left just recently and some had done so years ago; some would travel home regularly and some have not been home for years; the thought of returning to home was the cause of nightmare for some, but a locus of nostalgia for others; upon returning to home, some felt welcomed and ‘normal’ whereas others felt estranged and ‘out of place’; for some, home was a geographical space and/or a historical space, while for others it was also an emotional and/or a sensory space. That the remembered experiences of many individuals and their images of home were different from, and at times even contradictory to, others highlights the very varied and complex relationship between homeland and diaspora as emphasized in many studies (e.g. Alajaji, 2015; Blunt & Dowling, 2006; Jain, 2017).

What makes the memories of home complex in the lived experience of diaspora is that these memories are not necessarily “factual reproductions of a fixed past” (Stock, 2010, p. 24), but rather “fluid reconstructions set against the backdrop of the remembering subject’s current positionings and conceptualizations of home” (p. 24). These conceptualizations encompass not only relations to ‘homeland’ – that is linked to a *physical* space in the past and often based on *national* boundaries – but also to ‘feeling at home’ – that is a *metaphysical* and socio-emotional

construct generated in the *transnational* space in the present. What adds even more complexity to this is the divergence in the experience between first-generation migrants for whom home is both a nostalgic space which relates to the memories of a “lived experience of a locality” (Brah, 1996, p. 192), and that of the second-and-later generations whose ideas of homeland are essentially narrative-based and often transmitted to them as storied memories from their (grand)parents, depending on the space/time continuum from which their parents have migrated to the new land. In this sense, later generations of migrants are only “heirs to diasporic memories” (Stock, 2010, p. 26).¹³⁷ It is such layeredness of contemporary perceptions of home that contribute to the complexity of how the ‘original home’ is remembered. As Stock (2010) notes:

Through complex dynamics of meaning-making, home memories both inform and are informed by the positions individuals and groups occupy in the here and now. Paradoxically, the deep contextuality of diasporic perceptions of a remembered ‘original’ home, together with its remoteness in time and space as well of competition from other possible home spaces, make ‘home’ a concept that is far from self-evident, while at the same time carrying strong connotation of exactly such self-evidence. It is this tension which makes home such a compelling notion both for those who study diaspora and those who live in it. (pp. 24–25)

Thus, with memories of the new ‘home’ (in its both physical and metaphysical sense) in diaspora, and in the process of moving across geographical and cultural boundaries, *what* is remembered of home as well as *how* it is remembered can and will be dynamically generated (Salih, 2003).

The notion of home has been synonym both to one’s ‘homeland’ as well as to a place where one would feel a sense of belonging – that is ‘feeling at home.’ Diaspora studies and studies dealing with transnational migration and territorial dispersion have particularly paid attention to these two main ontologies of home. For example, Ghorashi (2002, p. 189) argues that while home *can* be discussed in relation to roots and origins, it is not necessarily *linked* to a certain physical space if discussed in its diasporic sense; in such a context, home is rather a position in life and is about feeling at home, however away from it in space or time. Brah (1996) also notes that home in diasporic contexts can be “a mythic place of desire; . . . a place of no return; . . . the place of origin” (p. 192) while, at the same time, it can also be “the lived

¹³⁷ I did not deal with this kind of complexity as I did not include in my sample any second-generation Iranians.

experience of a locality” (p. 192). In her view, “homing desire” is not the same thing as “desire for a homeland” (p. 16) as it is possible for one to feel at home outside one’s physical home.¹³⁸ This was one of the most apparent themes to emerge during my fieldwork with Iranians of New Zealand and one of the key ideas on which I draw in this chapter.

‘Gharibi’ vs. ‘Ghorbat’: Not feeling at home vs. not being at home in the Iranian diasporic context

In Iranian culture, the experience of ‘being away from one’s home country’ is elaborated under the concept of ‘*ghorbat*.’ There is not an exact English equivalent for the term, but it refers to the state of unfamiliarity induced by being away from home or land, and has often been translated in various contexts as ‘exile.’¹³⁹ The term is traced etymologically to the word ‘*ghorb*’ meaning ‘away’ or ‘far from home’; the adjective ‘*gharib*’ – meaning ‘stranger’ or ‘unfamiliar’ – and its noun ‘*gharibi*’ – meaning ‘strangeness’ or ‘unfamiliarity’ – are derived from the same root.

However, while *gharibi* can be used to refer to *any* context in which one is unfamiliar with and/or strange to her/his surrounding area/situation (be that an unfamiliar country, unfamiliar city, unfamiliar neighborhood, or even an unfamiliar working place), ‘*ghorbat*,’ in today’s Persian, is usually used to refer to an unfamiliar ‘country’ other than one’s own (hence its translation to ‘exile’), thus it is used most in *transnational* contexts.¹⁴⁰ This means that one does not necessarily endure feelings of strangeness/unfamiliarity (*‘gharibi’*) if situated in the strange/unfamiliar land (*‘ghorbat’*); similarly one is not immune to such feelings even when situated in one’s own familiar land. In other words, for Iranians, their feelings of ‘*ghorbat*’ (i.e. their exilic feelings) were not treated quite the same as their feelings of *gharibi* (feelings of unfamiliarity). This was seen, for instance, in the comment of one interlocutor who was trying to comfort a recently-migrated, homesick Iranian who had attended his first Iranian gathering in New Zealand: “true, you’re in ‘*ghorbat*.’ We can’t do anything about that, can we? But do you really feel ‘*gharib*’ here with all these [Iranian] people . . . surrounded with these many Persian dishes?” In this sense, in order to escape from feelings of ‘*ghorbat*’ one must only *physically return to the homeland* (i.e. *be at home*), whereas feelings of ‘*gharibi*’ can easily be

¹³⁸ Other authors have similarly discussed and referred to home both as an actual place of living experience, and as a metaphorical or discursive space of belonging and identification (see for example: Armbruster, 2002; Blunt & Dowling, 2006; Rapport & Dawson, 1998).

¹³⁹ For example: Blaim and Sella, 2015; Ghamoonparvar, 2002; Ghardashkhani, 2017; Gholami, 2016. It has also been translated, in fewer works, to ‘Strange land’ or ‘strangerhood.’

¹⁴⁰ This is even apparent, long before the emergence of national and transnational concepts, in Persian classic literature and the works of *Sa’di*, *Khaqani*, *Naser Khosrow* and *Manuchehri*, in which ‘*ghorbat*’ often meant a ‘land other than one’s own.’

soothed by either *familiarizing oneself with the surrounding* or *surrounding oneself with the familiar*, both of which were deployed by Iranians of New Zealand: the former through expanding their diasporic social networks and developing intra-diaspora relations, and the latter through encircling themselves with familiar objects (e.g. Iranian art, home ornaments, music, movies, food, etc.) and familiar practices (e.g. speaking Persian, celebrating Iranian events, practicing Iranian foodways, etc.), resulting in the creation of a visceral association between the past and the present home – or *feel at home*.

Ghorbat from the Bourdieusian perspective

Feeling at home is, in many ways, the outcome of living in an environment that is socially familiar (Sørensen, 1996) where “personal and social meaning are grounded” (Papastergiadis, 1998, p. 2). As Rapport and Overing (2000) state:

One is at home when one inhabits a cognitive environment in which one can undertake the routines of daily life and through which one finds one’s identity best mediated – and homeless when such a cognitive environment is eschewed. (p. 161)

Viewing home from such an angle brings to mind Bourdieu’s habitus – that is a “socialized subjectivity” (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 126) stemming from a system of durable, transposable dispositions which acts as “principles which generate and organize practices and representations” (Bourdieu, 1990, p. 53). Therefore, our daily and repeated actions and interactions socialize us into a routine mode of behavior that is considered ‘typical’ and ‘normal’ within our community or group (Taylor, 2015).

According to Bourdieu (1977; 1990), habitus generates the dispositions, attitudes, values and practices we acquire foundationally through family and education, and then later on through the fulfillment of different roles, and the associated possession and deployment of economic, social, cultural and symbolic capitals, within various occupational, recreational, consumerist, and other fields. Habitus – like dispositions, practices, and capital configurations/deployments – can, however, be modified or consciously reflected upon via, for instance, inhabiting a reflexive habitus (Sweetman, 2003) that is particularly amplified in new conditions such as encountering an unfamiliar field (i.e. ‘*ghorbat*’) where old strategies no longer work, thus generating additional motives for reflexivity and reflection. As Bottomley (1992) notes, “each of us carries with her the collective history of her group or class, the sense of one’s place. . . . The social world therefore appears as a symbolic system that is apparently self-evident” (p. 38).

Habitus is “history turned into nature” (Bourdieu, 1977, p. 78); what is considered ‘natural’ in an environment is, in fact, historically reproduced by the individual and collective day-to-day actions, interactions, and practices of those living in a given environment. This means that as long as the habitus is aligned with the sociocultural or technological world of which it both generates and is a product of, there will be little to no tension or disjuncture, just like “a fish in water” (Bourdieu & Wacquant 1992, p. 127) that “does not feel the weight of the water and . . . takes the world about itself for granted” (p. 127). However, within a destabilizing context such as ‘*ghorbat*,’ the individuals’ habitus may be in constant conflict with the fields to which they have been exposed. This often leads individuals to feel they do not belong, like the feeling of a “fish out of water” (p. 127). For Iranians, this was particularly experienced in, though not limited to, the early stages of their moving to New Zealand which had confronted them with practices and social norms that were unfamiliar to them, thus generating a certain sense of discomfort for at finding themselves out of place, both physically – due to being away from home (i.e. feelings of ‘*ghorbat*’) – and emotionally – due to lacking the required ‘feel for the game’ (i.e. feelings of ‘*gharibi*’) in their new situation.

Of course, habitus is never static, but under constant transformation and modification, but often this process is a gradual one and requires a great deal of time and effort (Bourdieu, 1994), though for many migrants this would be abrupt, thus destabilizing. Migrants, especially those moving between spaces with notably different sociocultural ‘fields’ (such as Iranians moving to New Zealand), may find it difficult at first – or may need more time to – adapt to the new situation. This often caused many of my Iranian interlocutors to find themselves at cross purposes as their bodily dispositions and embodied (often unconscious) values, which reflected their prior habitus and which had provided them with appropriate actions in their previous home (i.e. Iran), appeared to have become obsolete and irrelevant in the new social field in which they were now situated. Having left a familiar environment, a familiar culture, and a familiar way of thinking and acting within which their knowledge and operational competencies were often likely maximal, diasporic Iranians, at least at some stages, found their power to act to have been compromised in their new home in New Zealand. As such, the forms of capital which they had accumulated back in Iran were in various diasporic contexts either not recognized or could not be readily translated into an equivalent status in their receiving community – for different capitals may have different values in different fields.¹⁴¹ This often

¹⁴¹ On a few occasions, even those previously-accumulated capitals which *would* maintain their values in the new field (i.e. New Zealand) were not recognized due to those capitals being possessed (and embodied) by Iranians. For example, one Iranian who was an experienced, certified firearms instructor back in Iran said that shooting

led to their losing their sense of emotional security and confidence. What additionally contributed to this emotional pressure was the disruption and distancing of, an often vast, social network of family and friends at home, replaced by impersonal and transitory friendships that often lacked the intimacy that the migrants once enjoyed within their prior web of social relationships. Nonetheless, they were often in search of a sense of community and building up relationships with as many fellow Iranian migrants as they could as an attempt to simulate the sense of community they once enjoyed. Such sense of community and the interaction with fellow migrants through shared activities contributed significantly to mitigating feelings of being away from home and brought about, to a certain extent, feelings of security and familiarity, like that experienced at home.

However, despite a continued sense of ‘loss,’ Iranians were not usually discontented with their diasporic status; rather, the majority of them admitted that their life in New Zealand became better in general as it had brought about more opportunities (educational, occupational, economic, etc.) for them and their children. It was mainly such hope for a better future that made them part ways with their familiar life, and with their fields of routinely deep cultural capital and rich social capital deployment, and start engaging in a process of ‘home-building’ in their new residence.

Home-building and Nostalgia

Hage (2010) defines home-building as “the building of the feeling of being at home” (p. 417) and suggests that for such an “affective structure” (p. 418) to come into being, four key feelings should be provided singularly or in combination with each other. First is the feeling of security – that is not only *having*, but also *feeling empowered to seek* the satisfaction of one’s basic needs and remove or exclude threatening otherness, making home a place that is governed by what we consider “our law” (p. 418). Second is the feeling of familiarity – that is generated in a space and contexts where one possesses significant practical competencies and control. This is where we feel in possession of what Bourdieu (1977, 1990) calls a well-adjusted habitus where our dispositions can be strategically deployed as acknowledged and valued practice. Such a sense of implicit familiar knowledge will also, in turn, generate a sense of security. Third is the feeling of community – that is the feeling of recognizing people as

clubs in New Zealand have ‘refused to even sign me up, let alone consider my application for a job. . . . They often say we don’t accept new members, or something like that, but they only say that when they see me in person or when they see my name on my ID’. This demonstrates how social structures, in this case racial/ethnic hierarchy, can assign different values to, or completely devalue, a certain capital contingent upon the capital-possessor’s positioning in the racial/ethnic hierarchy in that particular field.

‘one’s own’ and the feeling of being recognized by them as such through shared morality, values, and most significantly language. Here, Bourdieu’s (1977, 1990) theory of habitus comes to the fore again as home is often imagined as a space where one is in possession of maximal communicative power, a socio-linguistic habitus, through which one can speak appropriately to, and be understood perfectly by, surrounding individuals and institutions – indeed, even where one’s silences are considered appropriate and meaningful. Last, and extremely crucial (but often forgotten in theorizations of the home, specifically of diasporic home building) is the feeling of opportunities and hope, through which home becomes not only a familiar, secure, and communal shelter, but also a launching pad for the self and intimate others (e.g. family and friends), providing possibilities for developing new social, monetary, cultural, and symbolic capitals, and in general for progressively ‘moving upward.’

Hage (1997) regards food, in particular ‘home-food’ of great significance to feeling ‘homely’ in the context of diaspora and migration, – for home-food provides facsimiles of security in that it “represents a culturally determined basic need for nutrition” (p. 109), facsimiles of familiarity in that “one knows what to do with it, how to cook it, how to present it and how to eat it, thus promoting a multitude of homely practices” (p. 109), and practices of community mostly seen in collective eating, all of which amount to a homely space in which one can perceive and enact opportunities of a ‘better life’ which would allow one to ‘advance’ socially and emotionally.

Another point that Hage (2010) raises in his discussion of memory in diaspora, and one that I, too, deploy in this chapter, is the notion of nostalgia and differentiating it from homesickness, which is, as its name suggest a ‘sickness’ thus an incapacitating notion, whereas nostalgia is, in fact, an “enabling memory” (p. 416). Hage acknowledges that diasporic nostalgia *can*, of course, take the form of incapacitating homesickness under certain circumstances, especially at times of experiencing destabilizing and disempowering inability to do certain things (such as speaking or being understood properly or socializing suitably); times that one feels that the competency and control that one once had over one’s life is significantly diminished. He interprets this state of homesickness from a Bourdieusian perspective, “as a state emanating from a dysfunctional habitus, that is, a habitus that finds itself unable to strategize and improvise in the face of a radical newness” (p. 417). Finding oneself unable to act in this “unbridgeable fissure opened between the self and the environment” (p. 417) one refuses to engage with the present and its potentially traumatizing

circumstances and takes refuge, instead, in the memories of an imaginary homely past – and, in other words, becomes homesick.

Hage (2010) critiques migration and diaspora studies for their conceptualizing nostalgia as being akin to homesickness, and for an existing “miserabilist tendency” (p. 417) in the study of migration that frames migrants as suffering, acquiescent individuals whose only sentiment is a painful yearning for the home they have left behind. Homesickness, in Hage’s view, is “inhabiting memories” (p. 417), whereas nostalgia is “an active insertion of memory in the construction of the present and the future” (p. 417). Nostalgia and nostalgic feelings are, indeed, affective blocks in, and one of the main aspects of, the process of home-building which are particularly deployed to cope with a new place and a new time and to nurture the kind of homely feeling with which one is familiar. Therefore, equating nostalgia with homesickness is assuming nostalgia to be the exact opposite of home-building.

Fostering nostalgic feelings, however, may seem difficult, and at times impossible, especially at earlier stages of migration when the migrant has not yet developed abilities to effectively engage in home-building processes through fostering nostalgic feelings and practices; it is in this type of situation that nostalgia may deteriorate into an enfeebling homesickness. In such occasions, nostalgic feelings are often triggered by an absence or a lack of homely feeling, what Hage calls a “negative intimation” (p. 421) as opposed to a “positive intimation” (p. 421) – which is triggered by the presence of a feeling that comes to fill an existing lack and reminds the individual of a pleasant homely experience in the past, an experience of ‘back home’.

In the case of Iranians, while nostalgic feelings were fostered mostly by homely, positive practices which were deployed in the process of home-building in New Zealand and aided them to confront and launch themselves into life in their new home, the *remembering* that was triggered by these conscious and/or unconscious practices and eventual embodied dispositions also produced, in some cases, states of homesickness. In either case, one of the most evident triggers of such feelings was Iranian food and practices associated with it.

Iranian food, home-building and nostalgia: Experienced individually through ‘home-foods’

A topic that was often discussed in interviews or was brought up in informal conversations (even those which were not initially about food) was that of food brought back or sent from home. In fact, when returning to New Zealand from their home visits, Iranians packed their suitcases more than anything with food items, either in the form of raw ingredients

(e.g. saffron, spice mix, barberry, etc.) canned or convenience food (e.g. pomegranate molasses, pickles, canned stews) or home-made food products (e.g. dried herb, jams, home-made sweets, etc.) Food items were also the most frequently received items from home, sent by family or friends.

I realized that I could classify the home-food into three categories: (i) the food brought back by migrants themselves upon their return trip New Zealand from Iran; (ii) the food sent by migrants' family or brought with them when they came to New Zealand for a visit; (iii) the food sent to migrants by friends from Iran.

The first group of home-foods that was brought back by migrants on their return to New Zealand from their trip back home often included what they often described as "essential" ('*zaruri*') or "important" ('*mohem*') food items,¹⁴² referring to ingredients that were staples in Iranian kitchens and Persian cuisine, but were, in Iranians' point of view, either rare, expensive, or of poor quality in New Zealand. These included, for instance, dried herbs/fruits, nuts, barberry, saffron, pomegranate molasses, rosewater, and spices ('*adviyeh*').¹⁴³ The account given by Niusha, who claimed she never purchases any foodstuffs of this kind in New Zealand unless she had to, was particularly interesting:

Niusha – the only occasion I purchase them ('important foodstuffs') from supermarkets or [Middle Eastern] stores here [in New Zealand] is when I'm running low on the ones I've brought from Iran . . . although I'd try to bring enough for my one year's supply, that's not always possible due to Customs, etc. . . . Sometimes even when I do bring enough for a year, I get greedy and use too much of a good stuff [too quickly] and I run out too soon . . . It's [only] then that I have to go with the tasteless fruits and nuts in the supermarket and buy stuff . . . with a price ten times higher and the quality ten times lower than what I often bring back from Iran. . . . I hate when that happens. Call me mad, but I get stressed when my [home-brought] ingredients are running low. . . . Also my foods start tasting strange, all of a sudden. . . . perhaps [that's] because I'm only used to cooking with what I bring with myself from Iran. . . . With those I exactly know how much to use and I never go wrong. I can do it with my eyes closed. . . . But with the ones here, I have to think and constantly add-and-taste. . . . Even then, I can't always get it right in the end.

¹⁴² Iranians also talked about this group of food with regard to foods that were preferred to be bought from Middle Eastern grocery stores ([Chapter 3: Nation](#))

¹⁴³ Mostly turmeric, cinnamon, coriander, cumin, cardamom, and cloves.

Although it may seem that the quality differences asserted by Niusha were simply confined to assessments of the actual products, they also invoked a strong sentimental attachment to home. For her, even the mere presence of the brought-from-home food in the pantry could keep away feelings of anxiety and insecurity. Such food was also familiar, in that she could apply it with “eyes closed” because dealing with it had become like a habit memory, “acquired in such a way as not to require explicit reflection on their performance” (Connerton, 1989, p. 102); in this sense, she did not need to necessarily *think about* or *remember* the ‘how’ and the ‘how much,’ because this was, for her, “a remembrance in hands” (Connerton, 1989, p. 93). In the absence of such familiarity, she had to make do with what was unknown, the outcome of which tasted “strange,” too.

The second group of home-foods was that which was either sent by family members/relatives or brought with them on their visit to New Zealand. Unlike the previous group of home-foods, these were rarely raw ingredients or pantry staples of Persian cuisine. Rather, they were Persian confectionary such as ‘*gaz*’ (nougat), ‘*sohan*’ (saffron brittle toffee), ‘*pashmak*’ (cotton candy) ‘*baghlava*’ (baklava), ‘*zoolbia*’ (jalebi) and *bamiyeh* (Persian deep-fried doughnuts) as well as other traditional confectionary products. What these home-foods clearly shared in common was firstly their sweet taste, and secondly their distinctly ‘traditional’ nature, for they all came from a long-standing history of elaborate, local preparation and were entirely made with local ingredients (which could be clearly noticed on the packages, too). Both the sweetness and the traditionalness of these home-brought home-foods seemed to be serving symbolic purposes as was seen in the comment of a mother who had brought from Iran packs of Persian sweets for her son in New Zealand, in the hope that “the sweetness of them would sweeten the bitterness of exile (‘*talkhi-ye ghorbat*’).” These confectionary food items were all linked to a national territory and belonged to a national defined space, and were parts of a set of regional and national traditions transmitted between generations of Iranians which had ensured a form of continuity over centuries, making them an important part of Iranian culture, identity, and heritage. Such culturally-significant items, especially when brought from Iran by a loved one, became more than just a souvenir, as they now also carried with them an added symbolic and socio-emotional prominence, connecting migrants to home in multiple levels. These items, when being finally gifted to their receiver, were often labelled by the giver as ‘*az-ab-gozashteh*’ (travelled through the ocean), referring to the long transcontinental distance that that food item had travelled to reach its destination, highlighting the importance of the person to which the item had been gifted while asserting further sentimental and narrative

values to it, turning them into “cherished treasures” that could produce strong positive feelings of homeliness and intimate familial connectedness.

These type of home-foods, when received, were often treated as rare objects which were to “consumed with care” so that “they last longer.” For example, upon receiving a box of ‘*bamiyeh*’ (Persian deep-fried doughnuts) from his family in Iran, Sirus had decided to give himself an “allowance of only one bamiyeh a day.” This single bamiyeh was not consumed ordinarily, but in a setting that in itself had become a personal ritual: he would eat his daily ‘*bamiyeh*’ sometime between eight and nine in the evening accompanied with a cup of aromatic tea in his traditionally-patterned tea mug brought from Iran, while watching an Iranian television series on YouTube or, if it was a Friday, while Skyping with his family. During this time, he would not accept visitors/guests nor would he appreciate any type of distractions (he would even put his phone on flight mode) – for this was, as he said, the only time of the day that he could unwind and “forget about everything else” (and potentially remember home); the time of the day he would each morning “look forward to.” When he mentioned to me at a later encounter that he was finally out of *bamiyehs*, I inquired as to what he would eat now while watching the series, to which he replied: “I just stopped watching [after I ran out], for with no ‘*bamiyeh*’ it (the show) got tasteless!”¹⁴⁴

Here, nostalgia was once again guiding home-building – in that a memory of a past homely experience was being re-imagined and re-enacted in a present diasporic context. Moreover, these food scenes and performances actively and consciously triggered nostalgic homely feelings through reconstruction of similar food scenes and performances that had been experienced in an Iranian past. Accounts such as Sirus’ indicate how food, aside from a perfect modality for remembering, is also a perfect modality for *not* remembering which highlights how all memory work involves intentional and selective remembering, not-remembering, and potentially also forgetting (or at least temporarily not engaging), as a contextual dialogic. Repeating past food experiences in a simulated homely space offered Sirus a pleasant, homely feeling that helped him to “forget about everything else,” the implication being that ‘everything else’ could be the unpleasant, unhomely feelings he might be experiencing in exile that needed to be ‘forgotten’ or temporarily actively disengaged with in order to feel at home (the mother who hoped the sweetness of the food she brought would let his son override or overlook the “bitterness of exile” also contributed to this end).

¹⁴⁴ “*Digeh negah nakardam; bedune bamiye bi mazze shod!*”

Sirus, however, somewhat contradicted this by admitting that such simple re-enactments of homely scenes and homely feelings in New Zealand were sometimes even *more* enjoyable than the real experience of them at his actual home in Iran due to having a generally better-balanced life in New Zealand and not having to deal with the “instabilities” (*‘bi sabati’*) of home. This points to a ritualistic hyper-nostalgia, through which romantic and idealized feelings of being-at-home were achieved by actively (and selectively) remembering positive memories of his old home in order to ‘forget’ (or deflect attention away, not acknowledge or give saliency to) the negative aspects of both the current and old homes. Such ritualistic hyper-nostalgia was not necessarily expressing a desire to *be home* or to go back, but rather a desire to promote the positive and ideal *feelings of being home*, however far away from it – both in the present and the past. In this way, Sirus (and other Iranians, too) tried to foster positive enactments of homely feelings, and imaginatively reproduced situations they had experienced back home, by utilizing emulative modes of homeliness such as surrounding themselves with socially and culturally customary objects (e.g. tea glasses), tastes (e.g. bamiyeh), smells (e.g. tea aroma), sounds and sights (e.g. Persian-speaking shows) and having family around even if virtually (e.g. Skype video chats), all of which could be viewed as the bricks toward the building of a home in the here and now of diaspora – a home that is familiar, secure, communal and full of hopes and opportunities. The metonymic memory work of home-foods seemed indispensable to this equation as once it was removed from the scene, the other items did not perform their intended function, and consequently, lose their *raison d’être* (e.g. the ritual stopped altogether when *bamiyeh* ran out).

The third group of home-foods was that which was sent by friends from Iran. This was particularly the case with younger individuals who had moved to New Zealand in recent years and were still in close contact with their network of friends back home. These food items often included ‘*lavashak*’ (fruit leather), ‘*pofak*’ (cheese puffs), ‘*esmartiz*’ (smarties), ‘*taktak*’ (chocolate bars, similar to Kit Kat), ‘*chips falleyi*’ (bulk potato chips), ‘*tafi ghalami*’ (toffee sticks), and ‘*adams khersi*’ (Tattoo Fusen¹⁴⁵), to name a few. These items were generally categorized, both by participants and in general, under the generic term ‘*haleh hooleh*’ (junk snacks). Given that these were frequently consumed by Iranian youth in the 80s and early 90s, it was not surprising that the receivers of these food items were usually between 28 and 38 years of age, and whose childhood and teenage years were strongly associated with the

¹⁴⁵ A brand of bubble gum manufactured by Japanese confectionery manufacturer *Marukawa*, extremely popular in Iran during the 80s and early 90s. The gum was particularly notable for the water-based temporary tattoo that came in the product's wrapper.

consumption of these foods. The desire for such home-foods was sometimes referred by receivers of them as “ripening of the liver/heart” (*‘delam/jigaram lak zade’*) a Persian idiom that refers to profound longing and desire for something and missing it deeply, in this case both lost home and lost youth.

Apart from the anecdotal and mundane associations of food with memories of childhood, these foods, when received from friends, were also reminder of a shared past with someone in a shared home. Parnia used the term ‘*viyaraneh*’ (the food cravings during pregnancy) and said that her constant craving for ‘*haleh-hooleh*’ always worsened when she was away from home, telling stories about her childhood and how different sorts of ‘*haleh-hooleh*’ were, for her, reminder of a time in the past and the “good old days”:

I now receive tons of *lavashak* (fruit leather) from my friends every three – four months. . . . I eat them in monthly intervals . . . in my room . . . and each time it gets me. I get quite emotional when I’m eating them and sometimes there are tears, too. . . . But when I’m done [eating them] I’m full of positive energy. . . . I feel I’m not forgotten there, yet. . . . All I wish after receiving these is for my friends to be here with me one day so we can eat these together again and return to those days.

These home-food episodes were often experienced in terms of a desire for things past at home, evoking a sense of what Fernandez (1986) calls “a return to the whole” that is a “state of relatedness – a kind of conviviality in experience” (p. 191). He suggests that when one feels alienated and experiences a lack of relatedness due to inability to adopt to changed social condition (such as what might be experienced in migration), return to the whole is sought. This returning requires a “mutual tuning-in” (p. 192) that is based on shared sensory experiences between individuals crossing various sensory domains such as seeing, tasting, and smelling. In case of Iranians, the sensation of the ‘whole’ that was triggered by memory of sight, taste, and smell of the friend-sent ‘*haleh hooleh*’ was both temporal (i.e. lost youth) and spatial (i.e. lost home) and similarly tended to emphasize the social connections of both a past and of home – of a past home. Upon receiving the ‘*haleh-hooleh*’ parcels from friends, Parnia did not wish for *herself* to go back ‘there’ where her friends were, but for her friends to come ‘here’ so that she could relive their past homely experiences in her now-home. This indicates that her wishes to *return* was not a classic myth of *return to home*, but a desire to re-experience the “good old days” at home away from it, similarly to Sirus’ narrative.

Home-foods sent by friends established intersecting relatedness, precisely because seemingly unconnected domains were linked through these food items. The parcels in which these home-foods were received carried inside them not only food objects, but also pieces of homeland, memories of childhood, parents, and friends, and as one participant commented, “chunks of kindness and affection,” all of which restored the sensations of totality and wholeness. It was such memory that led to the emotional responses described by Parnia – a feeling of intense yearning for home upon receiving the food, followed by a sense of comfort upon consuming it, both as a result of evocation of memories of past. This, as Sutton (2001) suggests “implies that such moments of wholeness are bittersweet and temporary, a reminder of a homeland, the return to which is deferred” (p. 82). These epiphanic memories are, nonetheless, affective blocks of homely feelings; it is upon consuming such food that, as Parnia described, a “positive energy” is passed into the body and the mind of the migrant or diasporic; a sense of “emotional/embodied plenitude” (Sutton, 2001, p. 82) that gave diasporic Iranians the strength to overcome and cope with their feelings of ‘*ghorbat*’ and assisted them further in attempts of home-building.

In general, home-foods whether brought back by Iranian migrants themselves or brought/sent by their family and/or friends materially reproduced the memories of home and were used as bricks toward home-building, both temporarily and permanently. With regard to home-foods brought by Iranian migrants themselves, they were often ‘everyday’ items that were still used in a more or less everyday context. The smell, taste, and practices associated with these foodstuffs contributed to the memory work of food that provoked a sense of original home-based familiarity and security, a sense of relative normalcy in the everyday life (like that experienced in origin home) that eventually led to experiencing idealized feelings – both diasporic and remembering – of being-at-home in the face of a temporary or permanent rupture caused by migration. These foodstuffs were not easily found in New Zealand or even if they were, their supposedly ‘inferior’ quality to their home-brought equivalent did not reproduce the same taste, smell, or texture to that of back home which in turn did not reproduce the same homely feelings.

The foodstuffs brought/sent by family and friends, on the other hand, were often treated as luxury, scarce items and wholly signaled the similarly acclaimed, irreproducible and singular status of family relations. In Sirus’s private ritualistic consumption, for example, *bamiyeh* acted as the central structural element, without which the ritual lost its ‘taste,’ or ‘*haleh-hooleh*’ was similarly a key factor in Parnia’s monthly eating of ‘*lavashak*. ’ However, both ‘*bamiyeh*’ and

‘lavashak’ were everyday objects in the life of Sirus and Parnia back home, and had only turned into a ‘ritual artefact’ in their life in diaspora: imbued with symbolic and even sacred meaning, and excluded from everyday consumption. By savoring a taste from old or origin home while surrounding themselves with the security and familiarity of an idealized pre-migration past, Iranians created a reassuring and homely feel for themselves, literally a home away from, and yet embedded in and in dialogue with, home – in other words, a newly enacted yet nostalgically old home dialogically generated within an old yet newly re-imagined home.

What was interesting regarding the home-foods that were brought/sent by family and friends was that these food items could be found relatively easily in New Zealand (unlike the home-food brought by Iranian migrants themselves which were rare, expensive, and of low quality). For example, traditional Iranian confectionaries (which were often brought by family upon their visit), were found easily in any of the Middle Eastern grocery stores in Christchurch – and at a reasonable price, too. Products such as cheese puffs, smarties, or Kit Kat bars (which were often sent by friends) could similarly be obtained most conveniently in any supermarket in New Zealand with an objectively identical (if not superior) quality and taste to the ones from home. Yet, the purchasing of such items from Middle Eastern grocery stores or supermarkets was extremely rare, and even in these rare occasions, the store-bought items usually failed to evoke similar thoughts or memories in individuals who were not, I argue, consuming the *product* as much as they were consuming the *social connections* of home. For them, it was not mainly the aesthetics of taste of these food items that was valued most (as reflected in a sentence quoted by many participants “the food coming from home is somehow tastier”), but rather the authentic, origin-home-based *gesture* of carefully packing and bringing/sending these metonymic foods from home which foregrounded physical distance and individual/social memories, while simultaneously collapsing any adjunct social distance by also conveying the intimate care and uninterrupted relationship of Iranians with their family and friends of their origin homes (as well as with their sometimes new friends in their current home in New Zealand). It was upon receiving and consuming these items that Iranians felt they still belonged ‘there’ and reproduced their idealized links (food, experiential, aesthetic, social, etc.) with their origin home, while concurrently acknowledging and affirming their diasporic residence. Such foods functioned as a means of recollecting idealized memories and provided Iranians with a context in which they can be situated and self-evaluated.

Iranian food, home-building and nostalgia: Experienced collectively through ‘nazri-pazun’

Iranian food provided the basis for practices of home-building not only through individual, but also through collective memories and memory work. This was seen, for example, during *Yalda*¹⁴⁶ and the Persian New Year, among other occasions, when Iranian identity engaged a more conspicuous collective performance. However, what I found most intriguing were the home-building memories and practices built around the month of *Muharram*, particularly on the day of *Ashura*, by a group of Iranians.

Muharram, Ashura, and the rituals of nazri

Muharram is the first month in the Islamic lunar calendar and the period for the most important commemorative ceremony held in Iran, commemorating the *Battle of Karbala* in 680, during which *Hossein*, the third Shi'i imam and the grandson of Muhammad, fought against and eventually was killed by the Umayyad forces on ‘the tenth day of the month’ – henceforth referred to as *Ashura*. Thus the month, particularly its first ten days, is regarded as a mourning period, during which various sets of rituals have been practiced for centuries and are still being widely practiced in all parts of country, including public mourning processions (known as ‘*dasteh*’), the reenactment of the Battle of Karbala in the form of a drama (known as ‘*ta'zieh*’) and various public mourning ceremonies in mosques or in ‘*hosseiniyehs*.’¹⁴⁷ The practicing and observance of such commemorative rituals starts from the first day of the month, gradually increases in intensity, and reaches its climax on the tenth day, *Ashura*. Beside the many symbolically rich rituals and performances of Muharram, all of which have become embedded in the collective memory of Iran and Iranians, it is also Muharram’s food and food practices (which similarly build up to a peak and climax on *Ashura*), that have become a mainstay and one of the most popular rituals of the period.

These food-related practices include the act of freely distributing a votive meal – henceforth referred to as *nazri*¹⁴⁸ – by individuals and private groups¹⁴⁹ both to mourners in

¹⁴⁶ Winter solstice celebration and the longest night of the year – discussed in detail in [Chapter 3: Nation](#).

¹⁴⁷ Also known as ‘*tekyeh*,’ special edifices that are specifically designed for mourning ceremonies of Muharram.

¹⁴⁸ Nazr serves as a rhetorical device and/or tangible artifact in a “pious system of quid pro quo, in which a supplicant makes a request and, should the request be granted, offers thanks. As a consequence, consecrated objects (nozur [unless the consecrated object is a food item in which case it is called *nazri*]) can be offered at both ends of the votive process . . . : at its beginning, to invoke sacred presence and favor, and at its end, to express personal indebtedness and gratitude.” (Gruber, 2016, p. 250)

¹⁴⁹ In today’s Iran, *nazri* is often (though not always) distributed by the relatively more wealthy individuals and groups. However, the receiving end of *nazri* is not necessarily the less-wealthy, as *anyone* who is passing by a *nazri*-distributing location is welcome to come forward and receive the offering.

mourning ceremonies held in mosques or ‘*hosseiniyehs*,’ and to the public at street-side stands or private residences, as a way of remembering and honoring Hossein’s death. It is not only the act of donating the *nazri* that is considered a good deed, but also consuming it, for *nazri* is believed to be filled with God’s blessing, and thus having ‘magical’ quality that can prevent and even heal illnesses (Shirazi, 2015) and bring its consumers benediction (Flaskerud, 2010). What makes *nazri* even more sought-after is its distinctive taste and smell due to the generous use of top-quality and aromatic ingredients as well as the application of special, lengthy cooking techniques and its preparation by highly skilled (and often professional) cooks,¹⁵⁰ factors that are usually absent in home-made cooking. Such symbolic, social, and sensual aspects that are embedded in *nazri*, have made it extremely popular among Iranians and is the reason that every year during Muharram a large group of people regardless of age, class, status, political or religious beliefs would participate in one or more *nazri* practices, whether be its cooking, distribution, or consumption.

Iranians of New Zealand had mixed feelings about their memories of Muharram and its rituals in Iran. Some dreaded and despised a “general air of gloom” that masked the cities during a period when “fun would cease to exist” and saw Muharram rituals as “terrible inconvenience.” They viewed processional aspects of the rites as “superstitious” or “just a big show of nothing,” the mourning rituals in establishments as “annoyingly loud” or “insincere,” or the dramatic aspects as “utterly outdated.” Some, on the other hand, completely shrugged off the morbid undertones of Muharram and its rituals and considered it as “a proper festival” with “so many fun-to-watch rituals,” fondly remembering the period as a time to “socialize, laugh, and flirt.” Some viewed the rituals from a *religious* point of view, calling them “sacred” or “holy,” some emphasized the *cultural* aspects, considering the rituals as an Iranian “cultural heritage,” whereas some others were in favor of a complete discontinuance of these rituals, viewing them as a “sign of backwardness.” However, one aspect of Muharram rituals that everyone (even those opposed to Muharram rituals and/or in favor of their discontinuation) remembered fondly, associated with positive memories, and drew from when reconstructing identities in diaspora, was, as I will demonstrate below, the food-based rites – that is the rites and rituals of *nazri*.

¹⁵⁰ Not all *nazris* are prepared by professional cooks, but given the large scale in which *nazri* is often prepared (sometimes supposed to serve more than hundreds of people) and the complications that come with concocting food in such a large quantity, it is safe to assume that its preparation demands a remarkably high degree of culinary skill and knowhow.

Nazri-pazun – and the collective practice of home-building.

Before beginning my fieldwork, I was informed by a key informant on the Iranian community in New Zealand that there was no ‘official’ Muharram ceremony in New Zealand¹⁵¹ held by Iranians. He advised me, however, that there were some ‘private’ ceremonies that he knew of, but has never participated in himself. Although at the time I did not anticipate that partaking in these ceremonies could really benefit my research, I was nevertheless interested to participate in at least one of them to see, out of curiosity, how/if they were different from the ones I had seen back home.

While building up rapport with the Iranian community during the first year of my study, I came in touch (in October 2015) with Bita, a 45-year old women, who, with the help of her husband, had been holding what she said to be a small private gathering on the day of Ashura for the past 13 years at her house in Christchurch. Given the ‘private’ nature of the event, I asked if I was allowed to participate to which Bita kindly agreed.

Having attended Muharram mourning ceremonies¹⁵² back in Iran, I was expecting to face a familiar scene in which some walls of the house would be covered with black mourning cloths, decorated with flags and banners with certain texts calligraphed on them in green and red, with men dressed in black shirts and women in black scarves.¹⁵³ I had also prepared myself for an intense and emotional atmosphere of grief, with lots of weeping and crying (just as I had experienced it back home) and that at some points during the ceremony, someone who had a good voice would perhaps want to perform some eulogy singing (*‘rozeh’*) reciting the fate that befell *Hossein* and his followers on the day of *Ashura*. However, none of my expectations came true – at least in the way I had anticipated.

When giving me the address to their residence, Bita’s husband warned me about a slightly unusual house-numbering system on their street which had apparently confused many of their first-time visitors. He also told me that finding a parking spot may not be very easy on the hour I was supposed to visit (around noon). Knowing this, I parked my car in a relatively close proximity and walked the rest of the way. Upon walking through the alley and scanning the house numbers to find Bita’s residence, I was suddenly struck by a rather joyful sensation

¹⁵¹ Muharram ceremonies are held outside Iran, too, though only in large cities with a large Iranian population such as Toronto, Los Angeles, Berlin, London, etc.

¹⁵² Also known as ‘jalase’ or ‘majles.’

¹⁵³ In fact, I myself had bought a black shirt the day before, as I did not want to be deemed inappropriately-dressed for the event.

of being in a familiar territory, though I was sure that I had never been in that area before. Unable, for a few seconds, to quite put my finger on what had given rise to that familiar sense, I finally identified the source to be the aroma of *gheimeh nazri*¹⁵⁴ in the air which was signaling that I was getting closer and closer to Bita's residence. In the few seconds that followed, I could think of nothing but my father and how, during the first ten days of Muharram especially on *Ashura*, we would cruise around the town to see different Muharram rituals and, most importantly, enjoy sharing a *nazri* meal or a *nazri* drink together – a Proustian moment, indeed.

Upon entering Bita's residence and being greeted by her and her husband, the sight of two relatively large pots (one filled with rice and the other with *gheimeh* stew) on two portable gas stoves in the back of the yard emerged. Contrary to my expectations, no one had stuck to what I had assumed to be the 'proper' dress code for the event. Nor were there any signs of black mourning cloths, flags, or banners. Except the *nazri* pots, the only other sign that was somehow hinting the 'nature' of ceremony I was about to attend was the sound of a '*noheh*',¹⁵⁵ tape in the background, though it could hardly be heard as it was set to a very low volume.

I was then introduced to the other guests (who were mostly couples¹⁵⁶) and was briefed by Bita as to the 'history' of what I was about to witness, to which they often referred as '*nazri-pazun*' (nazri-cooking) – which is what I, too, use hereafter for ease in referring to the event in New Zealand. She explained that since she was nine years old, her father had been welcoming neighbors to his home for mourning ceremonies during the first ten days of Muharram which would end each night by everyone sitting together and sharing the *nazri* that was prepared by what she amusingly called a 'nazri committee' ('*komiteh-ye nazri*'), comprised of around ten members (both men and women) and headed by Bita's mother. Bita regarded the whole experience of these ceremonies as one of her most cherished memories, but there were particular bits that she enjoyed better:

[Holding the mourning ceremonies during the first ten days] has become our family tradition. . . . Almost all the neighborhood would attend, so in a way it's become also a tradition for the neighborhood as well. . . . I was always an active member in these ceremonies, . . . helping with whatever I could. I could do a little when I was a child, but I gradually got more responsibility as I grew up. . . . Most of all I enjoyed

¹⁵⁴ 'Gheimeh' is a stew made of lamb meat and split peas served on white rice. 'Gheimeh nazri' is a gheimeh that is prepared for the purpose of being donated as *nazri*, particularly during the first ten days of Muharram. The taste and the aroma of these two are often distinguishable as I have explained earlier in this chapter.

¹⁵⁵ The recitation of the [Hossein's] martyrdom in a sing-song manner.

¹⁵⁶ Four couples (including Bita and her husband), one single man, and one divorced woman.

when we would distribute *nazri*, though. . . . Not that I disliked the mourning bits, but I wasn't a fan either. You know, seeing all those people crying and beating themselves was not very pleasant, at least for a child, to see. I didn't like those parts much, . . . but I never complained, because I knew that at the end of the ceremony we would get to my favorite part (distributing and eating *nazri*). . . . When I got older I also started participating in the cooking process [of *nazri*]. . . . That was quite memorable, too. . . . All those planning, purchasing, cooking, distributing. . . . How I miss those days!

She then explained that since she and her husband moved to New Zealand some 14 years ago, nothing had hit her harder than her first experience of Muharram in *ghorbat* which, contrary to the Muharrams she had experienced since childhood, was extremely “cold and empty” (*'khoshk-o-khali'*¹⁵⁷), leaving her aching with a great internal void and making her feel utterly homesick. In order to combat such disabling feelings, she had then decided to do, from the next year on, what she otherwise would have done if she was still in Iran during Muharram – that was surrounding herself with “at least some of the things from those days.” Given that *nazri*-centered rites were, for her, the most memorable and favorite part of those days, she had decided to do just that. In this, she had deployed memory as a modality to validate the selective, idealized, and re-imagined diasporic practice. Given that cooking *nazri* for a period of ten days was not, economically and pragmatically, feasible for her in New Zealand, she had decided to cook only on the day of *Ashura*, and spend the other nine days prior to that preparing for, and looking forward to, this ritual.

Although the process of planning the meal was, for the most part, done by Bita herself,¹⁵⁸ the preparation of the meal on the day was performed by all attendees, with women being mainly in charge of the pot of stew (i.e. *gheimeh*) and men in charge of the pot of rice. Every now and then, participants took turn to stir the pot once or twice, in keeping tradition with collective *nazri* preparations, where individuals would ask God for favors (*'hajat'*) while stirring the pot of *nazri*. The participants were offered a chilled glass of a very common *nazri* drink during Muharram, ‘*tokhm-sharbati*’ (basil seed drink), as a sort of aperitif upon arrival and during the collective preparation of the meal. The drink was made in traditional pitchers and served in traditional mugs which were brought by one of the couples from Iran for the sole purpose of being used in their *nazri-pazuns*. After the meal was ready to serve, Bita spread out, on the floor, a dining cloth (*'sofreh'*) that she had recently brought from home for this very

¹⁵⁷ Lit. ‘dry and empty.’

¹⁵⁸ Though others also helped with shopping, storing, etc. sometimes.

purpose, around which we all sat and ate – exactly in the fashion of mourning ceremonies of Muharram in Iran where a long *sofreh* is spread out on the floor after the mourning service, with people sitting around it (often quite tightly) and being served the *nazri*. To add further ‘authenticity’ to the experience, Bita even served the *nazri* in foam food containers, an attempt to replicate, as much as possible, the *nazri*-eating experiences of Iran.¹⁵⁹ As a sign of respect, no one touched their food before Bita and her husband could themselves join the *sofreh*. When they did, Bita, by giving utterance to the phrase ‘besmellah,’¹⁶⁰ invited everyone to start. The meal was then consumed while talking and laughing and reciting often amusing personal memories and anecdotes of Muharram days and Ashura back in Iran. The day ended by serving some aromatic tea, another common *nazri* drink during Muharram, prepared in traditional glass cups (‘*estekan*’) that were, once again, brought from Iran to be used for *nazri-pazun*.

Nazri-pazun – and the selective remembering of an idealized past.

Bita – first year [of *nazri-pazun*] it was just me . . . which was okay, . . . but from the next year it got even better because there were a few of us, which was better in many ways. . . . It’s much more fun . . . and more importantly doing it *this* way (as a group), which is the way it’s *supposed* to be done, sometimes makes me think that I’m still doing this in Iran. I suddenly forget I’m here (in New Zealand) and get moony and stuff (laughing). . . . So, I certainly prefer doing it like this (as a group) rather than on myself in the corner of my kitchen.

The above account was given by Bita when she was talking about her first year of making *nazri* in New Zealand and how it turned from a personal to a collective project. After cooking and distributing *nazri* among a small circle of Iranian friends on the *Ashura* of the first year, she had received offers of help from a number of them who had become fond of the idea of preparing *nazri* in New Zealand and asked Bita if they, too, could somehow get involved in it. These people, some of whom were now standing around the pot that very afternoon, had experienced a nostalgic rush upon receiving Bita’s first *nazri* in New Zealand (perhaps like the one that I had experienced earlier that day). Their narratives, therefore, were mainly nostalgic ones exhibiting a strong connection between food, memory, and emotion by aligning *nazri* rituals with idealized geographical and social pasts. For instance, Amjad said that every year on *Ashura*, as well as *Tasua* (the ninth of Muharram), he and his father would “fill up the trunk of their car with pots and go for a ‘*nazri* hunt’,” an experience that I myself could easily relate

¹⁵⁹ Nazri is often served in foam containers in Iran, for it is more convenient and cost-effective.

¹⁶⁰ Literally meaning “in the name of God”, but in this context meaning “dig in.”

to. Saber also expressed similar sentiments and said that he and his father still talk about their “*nazri* trips” every now and then. Similar remarks and memories were also expressed by other attendees who, upon eating and preparing *nazri* in New Zealand, were reminded of pleasant memories, of their personal connections, of their social interactions and exchanges with others, and in general, of the ‘good old times’ that were experienced in an idealized past and were now missed and longed for in diaspora.

However, to comfort such yearning desires, what was preferred was re-living and re-experiencing those select ideal and pleasant moments of the past alongside other Iranians, rather than returning to the past in its ‘wholeness.’ The performances that emerged from such selective remembering of positive ‘chunks’ of Muharram rituals, specifically those related to food, sometimes led to feelings that were even homelier than home, although they were now being practiced outside their ‘original’ context. As one of the attendees noted:

this is just as good [as those in Iran], only much better, cause although I really liked *nazri*-cooking in Iran, here you can do it with a peace of mind and enjoy it more...[whereas] in Iran it's kinda stressful as you have to consider 1001 things in your mind at once. But here you can enjoy it better.

This was complemented by her husband who, regarding *nazri* as “one of the nicest traditions of us [Iranians] that could amaze any traveler to Iran,” added:

Also, I don't think I could deal anymore with some of the nasty things you would sometimes see in *nazri*-distribution in Iran, like people who jump the line or those who exceed their allotment. . . . Those things kinda annoy me now. But with all that, I can't say I haven't really missed those days. Though *this* (*nazri*-pazun) doesn't have anything less than those, really.

All this points to the fact that nostalgia is more than a simple, romantic longing for a lost past and it can entail complex, ambivalent, even contradictory affects, sometimes in the same individual seen for example in the above statement by the husband who expressed a sense of loss and longing for a past, but at the same time felt a sense of relief for having left that past. Secondly, they highlight the fact that nostalgia often draws on a *selective* remembering and forgetting of the past (Berdahl, 1999): while the positive chunks (in my case the positive socialness or family bond generated by engaging in *nazri* practices) are remembered in a highly idealized version of home, the negative chunks are conveniently forgotten. Such remembrance of the ‘best bits,’ such idealization and sanitization of home, not only awakens a longing for the

past which often leads to the yearning for home and its traditions, but also stimulates the idealized recreations of the familiar spaces of the home and a reflective appraisal of the homeland, its cultural values and norms (Sarwal, 2017). In this sense, Iranians' nostalgia for the past was as much about the reproduction of the *past* as it was about the production of the *present* (Berdahl, 1999), reflected in their attempt to reclaim and re-build the feelings of security and community which could, in turn, replace the feelings of '*ghorbat*' with familiar homely feelings. Such longing for the past and attempts to re-create it, however, did not necessarily mean a desire to *return* to that past, but was rather an attempt to mediate between the past and the present to achieve and create a 'better home.' Such attempts, though not always necessarily successful or ideal, were an attempt, nonetheless, that linked Iranians also to the sense of opportunity and hope that is especially crucial in the diasporic home-building process. It also helped them achieve a particular feeling, a particular point from which they made sense of their experience and identity and their sense of belonging in their particular diasporic condition.

Such re-experiencing of the homely feelings had prompted participants to now 'look forward to' *nazri-pazun* every year due to the many 'homely vibes' attached to it. They said that they would add at least one new yet familiar 'thing' or practice, however small, to the ritual every year¹⁶¹ to make it even more memorable in the future and were planning, for example, to introduce dates (an item often present in mourning ceremonies) to the occasion for the next year. Such active planning for future occasions brings to mind Sutton's "prospective memory" (2001, p. 16; also 2008, p. 164), through which people consciously plan to remember, in the future, shared meals and the tastes, smells, and practices associated with those meals. Such prospective memory that were evoked by *nazri-pazun*, had thus the power "not only to reinforce the memory of a particular food ritual or food experience but to also regenerate the desire to recreate past occurrences" (Aboubakr, 2019, p. 141).

Gheimeh: The meal of remembrance.

In Islamic traditions, there are no particular 'rules' as to what can or cannot be offered as *nazri*. In Iran, almost any edibles can be, and are, offered as *nazri* including single food items (e.g. dates, candies, plain bread, salt, etc.), drinks (e.g. water, milk, cocoa milk, tea, sherbets, etc.), sweets and desserts (e.g. halva), and meals (e.g. various rice and stews, thick soups, etc.). However, certain foods and food items have become, over time, more commonly offered as *nazri*, though what is common in one region may be uncommon in another. Thus, the

¹⁶¹ For example, '*sofreh*' (added on the 2nd year), '*tokhm-sharbati*' (added on the 3rd year), traditional cups and pitchers (added on the 5th year), '*noheh*' tape (added on the 8th year), etc.

recollections and memories of the ten attendants who were coming from five different cities were different from each other in terms of *what dish* they associated most with the *nazri* of Muharram.¹⁶² The exception to this was *gheimeh* which was associated to Muharram by *all* attendants in one way or another and was, in fact, unanimously regarded as the ‘ultimate’ *nazri* of Muharram, and the very same dish that was, not surprisingly, being prepared not only on that particular day, but also on 12 out of 13 years of *nazri-pazun*. The association of *gheimeh* to Muharram appeared to be so strong for the attendees that it was sometimes referred to as “Imam Hossein’s special food” (*‘ghaza-ye makhsus-e Imam Hossein’*). A few people even jokingly (and in what could be seen as a nice moment of inventing tradition!) traced the tradition of preparing and consuming *gheimeh* during Muharram (a tradition that is indeed relatively recent) back to the seventh century, saying that “the reason we eat *gheimeh* during Muharram is that *gheimeh* was Imam Hossein’s favorite food which he’d often ask his wife to cook for him every time he got home from work!”

A home-made *gheimeh* was often distinguished by attendees (and other Iranians, as well) from the one made as *nazri* during Muharram. This particularization was simply clear in how Iranians differentiated between the two by referring to the former simply as “*gheimeh*” and to the latter as “*gheimeh-nazri*,” treating them as almost two different dishes, with a given supremacy to the latter.¹⁶³ For example, during my fieldwork, when praising one’s cooking, I heard comments such as “she’s a fabulously good cook; her *gheimehs* tastes like *gheimeh-nazri!*”; or in one gathering where the host had prepared *gheimeh* as the main dish, one guest, upon tasting the food, said to the host, “why did you tell us you had prepared *gheimeh*, when you had, in fact, prepared *gheimeh-nazri?*” which was followed by the host’s modesty, replying, “oh, thanks, but it’s not really *that* good!” highlighting the fact that the comment was, in fact, a weighty compliment, thus indicating the assumed superiority of *gheimeh-nazri* to a home-made *gheimeh*.

The reference to *gheimeh-nazri* had also the effect of placing one in time, meaning if someone was talking about consuming or preparing *gheimeh-nazri*, it must have been a particular point in the past (i.e. Muharram).¹⁶⁴ Such association of *gheimeh* with Muharram was

¹⁶² For instance, while ‘*sholeh*’ (meat and grain pottage) was heavily associated to Muharram by one attendant coming from Mashhad (North-east of Iran), such association was unrecognized to another attendant coming from Yazd (central Iran) who associated the period with ‘*ash-e gandom*’ (wheat soup).

¹⁶³ It was also called, in other occasions, as “*gheimeh-ye Imam Hossein*” (Imam Hossein’s *gheimeh*), “*gheimeh-ye Ashura*” (Ashura’s *gheimeh*), “*gheimeh-ye Muharram*” (Muharram’s *gheimeh*).

¹⁶⁴ The same way that talking about mince pie or ginger bread could probably place a New Zealander in a particular point in time – that is the Christmas season.

so dominant that at times the period itself was referred to as “*gheimeh* time.” It was acknowledged, by attendees, that although many other dishes were nowadays being distributed as *nazri* during Muharram, it was still *gheimeh-nazri* that was considered as the “real” (*‘nazri-ye vagheyi’*) and “authentic” (*‘nazri-ye asl’*) *nazri*.

Their memories of the one year that they did *not* make and eat *gheimeh* was particularly interesting. After five years of preparing and eating *gheimeh*, they decided to diversify *nazri-pazun* and “spice things up” by trying a dish other than *gheimeh*.¹⁶⁵ After exchanging views regarding *what* should be cooked instead of *gheimeh* on that year, they came to the conclusion that ‘*adas-polow*’ (lentils and rice pilaf) could be a decent replacement, as it was associated by some (not all¹⁶⁶) to Muharram. However, that particular year was unanimously regarded as everyone’s “least favorite” *nazri-pazun* which “did not feel right” as if “something was missing.” The prepared food was also regarded as a disappointment that lacked the distinguished flavor and scent of a ‘proper’ *nazri* dish. As a result, the *nazri* of that year had failed to generate, in participants, the same pleasant, homely, nostalgic feelings that they had previously experienced upon preparation and consumption of *gheimeh*. After this, they had decided to stick every year to the “obvious” *nazri* – that was *gheimeh*. As one of the participants commented, “we thought at first ‘okay, let’s try something different this year,’ but that year with *gheimeh* gone, it felt like other things were gone, too. . . I think some customs shouldn’t be altered.” In this, engaging in the preparation of *gheimeh* was linked to a sense of familiarity – in that it generated the same familiar tastes and smells of the pre-migratory, idealized past. Its absence from the ritual and its replacement with an ‘alternative’ created a sort of discontinuity both with the past and present home and failed to evoke the same feelings of being at home – and a ‘better’ home, at that (i.e. sense of hope) – which would have otherwise been generated if the ‘reasonable’ and the ‘common sense’ choice – that is *gheimeh* – was prepared.

Although *gheimeh* was perhaps the central epiphanic object in *nazri-pazun*, it was not the only object through which Iranians fostered feelings of familiarity: stirring the pot in turn, drinking ‘*tokhm-sharbati*’¹⁶⁷ and tea, using traditional cups/glasses and pitchers, or eating in foam containers on the floor around *sofreh*, were all familiar *nazri*-related objects and practices that helped Iranians to build the feelings of being at home, even if temporarily. Interestingly

¹⁶⁵ Incidentally, they had difficulties finding dried lime (one of the main ingredients of *gheimeh*) during the very same year.

¹⁶⁶ See footnote 159.

¹⁶⁷ Just like *gheimeh* whose strong association with Muharram had synonymized it with “Imam Hossein’s special food”, *tokhm-sharbati*, too, was referred to by some participants as “*sharbat-e emam Hosseini*” (the Imam Hossein’s sherbet).

while in Iran, such elements were only *associated with* the *nazri* of Muharram (meaning that not much significance was attached to what type of food/drink was prepared/distributed/consumed as *nazri*, what type of dish it was served in, or what type of context in what consumed in), the same elements seemed to have become the *sine qua non* of the *nazri-pazun* of diaspora – meaning that now with any of them changed or removed, the tradition did not “look right” to the participants as if there was “something missing” as seen in the case of *gheimeh* whose alteration to ‘*adas-polow*’ was considered a “blow” to an otherwise performative reminiscence of home. As Connerton (1989) notes, for rituals to function effectively as mnemonic devices, they should be “organized so as to appear and be experienced as qualitatively identical” (p. 66).

However, this was clearly *not* the case with Iranians who were highly selective of which Muharram (and more specially *nazri*) rites and sub-rites to retain and which ones to relinquish. Clearly, their willingness to experiment one year yet again highlights the agentic aspects of their diasporic habitus. The ritual, however, still functioned primarily as a mnemonic device for them, perhaps because what was trying to be achieved by participants was not ‘qualitative identicalness’ to their experiences of home, but more so an ‘idealizingly identical-ness’ – that is an idealized and pragmatic nearness to their re-imagining and re-enacting of home in diaspora. Just like many other rituals practiced out of their ‘original’ context, Iranians’ *nazri-pazun*, too, had adapted to its own sociocultural situation (i.e. diasporic) with many of the rites substituted, altered, interpolated, omitted, reduplicated, and (re)invented; yet, there is often a limit to such ritual adjustments (Gutschow & Michaels, 2005) with some ‘core elements’ rarely exchanged or substituted. The way in which Iranians co-memorized Muharram suggested that for them it was food and food rites that were regarded as such core elements, thus indispensable. Through their private ritual of *nazri-pazun* and practicing its associated rites in New Zealand, Iranians maintained a sense of continuity with the past which helped them see themselves as a community that exists and endures in the present, thus affirming their importance and value in their diasporic condition and experiencing a sense of security, as well as a sense of hope for betterment in their new homes.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I showed the connection between memory and food among diasporic Iranians of New Zealand. In general, my interlocutors seemed to engage in at least three primary forms of memory work/registers with regard to individual and collective food rituals and performances. These included (i) selectively highlighting of idealized and 'positive' aspects by

simultaneously remediating their past negative experiences in Iran and working toward generating a 'better' present in New Zealand – and somehow validating their diaspora in the process; (ii) as part of this, identifying and foregrounding core aspects (re: rituals, symbols + socialness) of food preparation, sharing, and consumption – which also articulates the idealized genuineness of their pre-Iranian ways of life; and (iii) pragmatically adapting these to the material or sociocultural norms they now encounter in New Zealand. As I demonstrated in the chapter, although all of these forms are importantly individual, they are also significantly collective.

To demonstrate this, I deployed Hage's (1997; 2010) notion of home-building and his theoretical framework which analyzed the experiences of migrants through four key feelings of familiarity, community, security, and sense of opportunity and hope. For Iranians of New Zealand, home-building practices, on many occasions, were focused on the production and consumption (both collective and individual) of food, particularly Iranian food.

Sometimes, the affective blocks of home-building were the 'home-foods' which were either brought by individuals themselves or brought or sent by friends and relatives. The use of certain ingredients which were brought by individuals themselves, for example, produced feelings of familiarity and 'being in control' whereas the absence of them accompanied, at times, feelings of anxiety and insecurity. Foods that were received from home similarly produced homely feelings as they connected Iranians to home in multiple social levels and reminded them of a continuing sense of family and community. Fostering such feelings of social connectedness was also done through collective food practices and traditions, observed in the collective preparation of *nazri*, a 'homely ritual' during which a selective and idealized remembrance of home was consciously performed by Iranians through the materiality of food and food practices which fostered feelings of familiarity and community, security, and eventually a sense of hope and positive anticipation for the future.

What was a dominant narrative in both individual and collective practices of home-building was an emphasis on re-imagining and re-enacting homely feelings in the *here and now of diaspora* (i.e. New Zealand) rather than in the *boundaries of the actual homeland* (i.e. Iran). In this sense, although Iranians expressed nostalgic feelings toward idealized, pragmatic, and genuine versions of their past, this was not necessarily a feeling of homesickness or a desire to return. Rather, Iranians deployed the positive chunks of their memories of the past to foster what Hage (1997) calls "positive intimations" (p. 105) to promote a very positive assertion of being both here and there. In other words, although they were continuously re-remembering

and re-framing an idealized version of their origin home, this was often a means to craft a ‘better’ diasporic home (which, like their origin home, had both ideal and non-ideal, desired and rejected, versions); therefore, the movement was always dialogic: referring back to go forth.

This was achieved often by surrounding oneself with familiar objects, or immersing oneself in familiar practices among fellow Iranians, all giving rise to ‘feelings of being at home.’ In this way, those objects and practices not only conveyed social connectedness with the home through their previously-obtained meanings in the homeland, but also acquired new meanings in the here and now of diaspora, as was seen, for example, in the collective preparation of *nazri*, where the old home’s invented traditions were re-invented in the new home and gave rise to some new traditions which, at time, even overtook the previous ones. As Hobsbawm (1992) notes, traditions are invented and re-invented by social groups particularly at moments of crisis when sudden changes incapacitate those desired social patterns that had until then been held together by old traditions. In this way, by re-inventing *nazri* traditions, Iranians re-established a sense of continuity with those parts of past that were deemed, by participants, worthy and capable of preservation, and in so doing, built the feelings of being genuinely at home. This was particularly seen in the practices of individuals which, in some cases, had given rise to personal habits and idiosyncratic invented practices and private rituals, through which Iranians could feel ‘re-homed,’ through concurrently imaginatively re-visiting their homeland, without having to physically go back there, thus generating a new, better, hopeful home in their present diasporic condition.

In their remembrance through food, Iranians developed an active sense of nostalgia, not only realized in their looking back to the past, but also in looking forward to the future, in ‘prospective memories’ (Sutton, 2001) which triggered the past experiences, but also structured anticipatory desires of looking forward to similar consumptions in the future. Through the many Proustian moments that Iranians (myself included when encountered the smell of *gheimeh-nazri*) experienced, their sensory remembering evoked past events, persons, or situations in an involuntary and unconscious manner through the taste and smell of certain foods-from-home; however, the remembering was also generated through highly conscious processes to create, *in* the present and *for* the future, memories that are inspired by the past but are going to be prospectively celebrated.

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Chapter 6: Conclusion

In the preceding chapters of this thesis, I have examined and explored the relationship between food and identity among the Iranian diaspora of New Zealand. I have argued that food, for Iranians of New Zealand, became a means through which they have generated their place and a sense of self in their new homes – a vehicle to perform, maintain, reject, and construct different diasporic identities and signify the idealized Self from the negative Other. In this, I focused particularly on three aspects, namely (i) national identity; (ii) gender identity; (iii) and memory work.

In [Chapter 3: Nation](#), I looked at the ways in which nation is embedded in the everyday (and not-so-everyday) food and food practices of Iranians of New Zealand. Through a micro-analytical, bottom-up approach of everyday nationhood (Fox & Miller-Idriss, 2008a), I showed that Iranians' discourses, consumptions, choices, and performances with respect to food were mostly shaped and conditioned by the framework of a diasporic Iranian nationalism and its components (i.e. anti-Arab/Islamic rhetoric; drawing on an idealized ancient, pre-Islamic past, and on perceived common 'roots' with Europeans), endured and patchily embedded in Iranian sensibilities throughout history. I argued that although embodied, unconscious sets of dispositions were often tacitly at work, the conditioning of diaspora and the existing racial-ethnic hierarchy in the host country (i.e. New Zealand) had made Iranians resort to a highly self-conscious reflexivity. This was manifested, for example, in Iranians' consuming well-known Islamic food taboos such as wine and pork in front of a Western audience, reluctance to consume 'Arab food' in Iranian national celebrations, or drawing attention to supposedly historical similarities of Iranian and European cuisine (and by extension Iranians and Europeans). This was done with the intention of distancing themselves from the often negative and stereotypical perceptions of Iranians as 'Arabs' or fundamentalist Muslims and *correcting* such perceptions, with the ultimate aspiration of 'fitting in' and being recognized as a 'deserving migrant' and as a 'member' in the host society – a sense of affiliation that could give them validity and a sense of self and inclusion within the social relations of their given society (Bourdieu, 1993).

In [Chapter 4: Gender](#), I explored how the different social and cultural gendered meanings ascribed to food practices in diaspora became entangled with those acquired in the origin home(land) and consequently gave rise to different expressions and reconstructions of gender identity by women and men. For instance, I showed that on the one hand, Iranian men had become more 'equality-conscious' after migration to New Zealand (as a result of being

exposed to more equal gender relations in New Zealand and this was manifested in their increased participation in the kitchen after migration and holding egalitarian gender attitudes regarding foodwork. However, on the other hand, their egalitarian views and practices were, for the most part, put into practice only in very specific contexts – namely in public contexts where the need to perform ‘Kiwi-norms’ were most likely felt or in contexts where engaging in the ‘feminine domain’ could not jeopardize masculinity. This, I argued, was a result of Iranian men’s multi-practice and gender-specific ‘habitus clivé’ (Bourdieu, 2000; Friedman, 2016) which moved between different ‘homes,’ spheres, and social fields, and generated the ‘appropriate’ practices to ensure conformity with the requirements of identifiable positions within the particular field in which the practices were contemporaneously performed.

I further observed that the domestic food practices which were perceived by women as ‘oppressive’ prior to migration, were now regarded by them as means of agentic liberation in diaspora, due to the transformation of such practices from ‘obligatory work’ to ‘voluntary pursuit,’ thus turning these into modalities for creative expressions as well as maintaining and improving the health and cultural integrity of the diasporic family (Avakian, 1997). Furthermore, the positive nostalgic memories of home that women’s domestic foodwork fostered for the diasporic family, generated family members’ greater appreciation of women’s effort/time and consequently brought about both private and public influence and status, and a sense of power that came from being needed (Counihan, 1999), which consequently led to a construction of a highly valued sense of self and social worth. Shifting my focus to the wider context of Iranian diasporic community in New Zealand, I also argued that being knowledgeable of Persian cooking skills and able to produce complex Persian dishes was considered as a sort of cultural and even symbolic (in respect of particularly refined dishes or cooks) capital – more precisely a ‘practical culinary capital’ (de Solier, 2005) – the possession of which signified and solidified the status of those Iranian women in possession of it, and was used as a source of distinction within the community.

In [Chapter 5: Memory](#), I shifted my focus to forms of memory work/registers with regard to individual/collective food rituals and performances. I showed that ‘home-food’ (whether it be the home-food brought from Iran by the individuals themselves, or brought or sent by their friends or family) was one of the most important affective blocks (i.e. familiarity, community, security, and sense of opportunity and hope) of the process of home-building (Hage, 1997; 2010) for Iranians of New Zealand. Home-food, I argued, connected Iranians to home in multiple social levels and reminded them of a continuing sense of community,

familiarity, security, and eventually a sense of hope and positive anticipation for the future, thus promoted the feelings of generating, and being at, a better home in New Zealand. I demonstrated that while the consumption, preparation, or merely the presence of home-food produced feelings of familiarity and ‘being in control,’ its absence generated, at times, feelings of anxiety and insecurity. I also showed the promotion of such feelings of social connectedness through collective ‘homely rituals,’ during which a selective and idealized remembrance of home was consciously performed by Iranians. I particularly observed this in the collective preparation of ‘*nazri*,’ through which Iranians maintained a sense of continuity with an idealized, collective, pre-migration past and saw themselves as a community that existed and endured in the present. This affirmed their importance and value in their diasporic condition and they experienced a sense of security, as well as a sense of hope for betterment in their new homes. I finally argued that in remembrance through food, especially when collectively remembered in ritual settings, Iranians developed an active sense of nostalgia, not only realized in their looking back to the past, but also in looking forward to the future, in their ‘prospective memories’ (Sutton, 2001) which not only triggered the past experiences, but also structured desires of looking forward to similar consumptions in the future.

The highly interdisciplinary nature of both food studies and migration/diaspora studies inevitably draws on a diversity of fields and represents an overlapping of disciplinary discourses. Thus, my discussions throughout the preceding chapters of this thesis drew on an array of theories from nationalism studies ([Chapter 3: Nation](#)), gender studies ([Chapter 4: Gender](#)), and memory studies ([Chapter 5: Memory](#)). However, what I kept using throughout – as a sort of meta-frame for the various theories I used – were Bourdieu’s (1977, 1990) theories of habitus, capital, practice, and field. I understood migration, in part, as a disruption of practice and habitus that occurs due to disruptions to foundational fields and ‘misalignments’ between habitus and field, potentially fabricating a fragmented self and leading to a heightened reflexivity and consciousness and associated modes of conscious performance and intentional self-fashioning, that supplemented unconscious, embodied, and dispositional performativity (both enduring and emergent). I argued that food and food practices were deployed by my interlocutors as a means of attempting to create a ‘fit’ between field, capitals, dispositions, reflexivity, practice, identity construct, and thus habitus, especially in the process of striving to achieve a new sense of belonging and feelings of ‘being at home’ both in their new residence in New Zealand as well as in their memories and ongoing engagements of their past home, Iran – manifested in the meta-modalities of idealized nationalism and selective, idealized memory, or the highly context-dependent shifting gender practices in the kitchen. I also demonstrated

that diasporic Iranians of New Zealand developed multiple, shifting, and evolving capital configurations which reflected their different food practices in and between different social fields – in the form of ‘habitus clivé’ or ‘cleft habitus’ (Bourdieu, 2000; Friedman 2016). This development enabled diasporic Iranians to effectively and innovatively operationalize their divided habitus in new sociocultural conditions, and to negotiate, both consciously and unconsciously, multiple, and at times contradictory, aspects of their gender and/or national identities, associated capitals (including configurations), and practices.

It has been shown that identities can be multiple, ever-changing, and evolving (Markus & Wurf, 1987; Vertovec, 2001), and negotiated depending on time and space specificities, both consciously through activation of one’s subject positions/positioning (Giddens, 1984), as well as unconsciously through the intuitive deployment of internalized norms and values shaped by one’s upbringing, experience, and position (i.e. habitus – foundational and evolving) in a given community or society (Bourdieu, 1990). Although part of self-identification is related to one’s reflexive individuality, it is also constructed, to a great degree, by social interactions and social institutions. This is to say that while one can subjectively choose and assess how to self-represent and self-identify oneself (for example, in terms of gender, race, nationality, sexual orientation, etc.), one is also routinely ‘compelled’ or ‘provoked’ by external referents within the sociocultural and/or political context in which one lives, to identify with what is firstly socially ‘available’ or valued and which may not necessarily be of one’s choice. This, as I showed in this thesis, can give rise to a sort of disruption in identity formation – a sort of tension between the assigned classification and self-identification, between how Iranians perceived themselves, how they *wanted* to be perceived by others, and how they *were*, in their diasporic social reality, perceived by others.

Cross-border migration and diasporic space contribute significantly to enhancing, deepening, and intensifying such reorientations of identity. As I illustrated in the preceding chapters, as Iranians moved to the new cross-border ‘field,’ they often found old ways of doing and old ways of being learned in their origin home(land) (i.e. Iran) were in conflict with diaspora’s (i.e. New Zealand) new ways of doing and new ways of being – including how ‘Iranianess’ was perceived and especially in negative associations with ‘Arabness’ and ‘Muslimness.’ Upon encountering such conflict, many felt the need to adapt to the potentially different rules of the game in order to fit in and feel a sense of belonging in their new field. However, they simultaneously had an inclination, for staying strategically loyal to the norms

and values of their home(land), as well as of their Iranian diasporic community, in order to feel a sense of belonging to their ‘own’ group, too.

Such a highly intentional ‘keeping and letting go’ at the same time provided diasporic Iranians with an opportunity to intentionally renegotiate those aspects of ‘home’ culture/society that were less desired and less ideal and accentuate, instead, ‘positive’ aspects through, for example, idealized food memories, new food practices, and invented traditions (Hobsbawm & Ranger, 1983). I argued that Iranians continuously (re)negotiated their position versus three different fields and as ‘non-Arabs’ and ‘cultural Muslims’: one back at a remembered (sometimes idealized, sometimes demonized) home(land), one in the host country among one’s own diasporic community, and one in the host country among the ‘Other’ – as, for instance, illustrated with the case of Iranian men who, deploying food and food practices, moved with ease and changed their gender positions between three different gender fields: one back in Iran; one in New Zealand’s public sites; and one in the diasporic domestic sphere ([Chapter 4: Gender](#)). This, I argued, was a result of a both conscious reflection on, and at times intuitive adaption or re-fashioning of, practices and habitus and obtaining an approximate feel of how to play ‘the games’ in the new field which, in turn, produced new dispositions (or modified the old ones) – as manifested in the conscious and/or unconscious ‘gender-appropriate’ food-related social roles that Iranian men, in particular, strategically performed according to the field in which they found themselves in a given time and space.

Although such self-reflections had often given rise to explicit expressions of egalitarian attitudes by men and also prompted, at times, an increase in their participation in foodwork, it was rather hard to estimate with certainty the ‘genuineness’ (as women put it) of such post-migratory egalitarian practices, because, as some women noted, these egalitarian practices and performances of food were only put into action by men in certain circumstances and in front of certain audiences (i.e. in contexts where men could ‘gain’ from performing such ‘female-associated’ practices). Furthermore, performing such practices and holding such attitudes, as women added, could stop altogether when men returned to the home (i.e. to Iran for visit) – that was their primary field. Thus while it cannot be denied that for some Iranian men the reflexivity itself had become habitual – like a second nature (Sweetman, 2003) – it was hard to conclude with absolute certainty whether such reflexive gender habitus was formed through a serious questioning and reconsideration of the role of gender, or rather through an expanding apprehension of what is performatively *proper* for men/women to do in each field, seeing masculinity/femininity as a form of *capital* that should be preserved and deployed. As Adkins

(2003) notes, while the former can indicate a progressive change of gender role beliefs, the latter can only indicate the entrenchment of conventional arrangements of gender.

Just like Iranian men, Iranian women, too, experienced heightened consciousness with regard to the gendered dimension of their habitus as a result of having encountered a different diasporic field with the possibility of different gender relations and norms. For them, too, reflexivity had become, after a few years of living in New Zealand, a ‘normal’ part of their now multiple and fluid gender identities – a self-conscious artifice which they consciously managed, strategically deployed, and continuously performed. Although such reflexive processes were typically based on inter-field comparisons, often indicating women’s full realization and acknowledgment of the constraints and limitations produced by gender conditioning in their old field (i.e. Iran) and a relative ‘freedom’ that their new field (i.e. New Zealand) afforded them, these did not necessarily translate into ‘egalitarian’ practices. For the most part, women’s involvement with the foodwork was disproportionately greater than their male partners whose contribution in the kitchen remained comparatively minimal; yet, this did not particularly seem to be perceived by women as ‘unfair’ in their current diasporic situation, whereas the very similar pattern of division of foodwork back at home (i.e. Iran) was viewed by them exactly as such. In fact, the majority now *preferred* to be responsible for provisioning of food, particularly ‘home food’ (both everyday and celebratory). This, I argued, was largely due to the enhanced symbolic meaning of home-cooking and home-food in diasporic context and its transformation from a banal and taken-for-granted object into a distinct medium and powerful vehicle through which ideal forms of national and gender identities could be (re)constructed and reinforced.

With meanings of home-food changed in the diasporic context, so did the practices associated with it, the performance of which was no longer considered by women as ‘oppressive,’ but was rather viewed as empowering, as it could potentially afford Iranian diasporic women, particularly those with a relatively higher knowledge/skills of assembling ‘foods from home,’ with status, power, agency, and autonomy. In other words, the diasporic context increased the value of the previously ‘low-value’ practices of domestic foodwork and transformed them into a very particular kind of cultural capital, that is a practical culinary capital (de Solier, 2005; also LeBesco & Naccarato, 2012), the possession of which offered its possessor the chance to convert this to social and/or symbolic capital within the family and/or the larger Iranian community. This underlines the rather multiple and complex, and at times contradictory, meanings of domestic work (in particular foodwork) among diasporic women (or any other minority/non-privileged/marginalized women in a given society, for that matter),

for whom being ‘in charge of the kitchen,’ however ‘subservient’ it may appear, may simultaneously serve as practical and immediate reflections and socially-constructive reproductions of self and of gender and national identities. It further highlights the paramount importance of ‘context’ and contextual factors on which feminist and gender studies often place an emphasis when it comes to women’s lives and their lived experience.

Iranians of New Zealand, although from a multi-ethnic nation and despite varying degrees of (non)adherence to religious beliefs and practices were, at times, perceived by their host society as ‘Arabs’ (even after explaining that they, in fact, came from Iran, a non-Arab nation) and felt ‘forced’ to frame themselves first and foremost as ‘Muslims’ – and devoted, practicing ones at that. In this way, they were often defined according to another’s imagination, seen for example in frequent well-meant comments and ‘warnings’ made by New Zealanders such as ‘it’s okay for *us* to eat *that*,’ but ‘you *can’t* eat *that*,’ upon seeing Iranians’ consumption of ‘non-Islamic’ food items such as pork or alcohol. Alienated and effectively de-valued by such external definition of their foodways and, by extension, of them in a society that they now considered home, Iranians went through a crucial project of self-placing and self-defining which was constantly negotiated, via an ongoing dialectic interplay of ‘sameness’ and ‘difference,’ between internal processes and external perceptions in order to belong. This project often deployed, both consciously and unconsciously, Iranian nationalistic forms of identification – in that it was based on a prideful view of a romanticized pre-Islamic ‘Persia’ and its glorious past before the Arab-Muslim conquest in 651, as well as discourse and practices that imagined common ‘Indo-European roots’ between Iranians and Europeans. Apart from distancing themselves from Islam and Arabs (thus addressing their misidentification in the host society), deploying such national forms of identification was also an attempt to highlight the ‘positives’ of a historically imagined past in order to potentially avoid the negative social capital associated with Iranianness among the ‘mainstream,’ due to Iran’s unfavored status in contemporary geopolitics as portrayed in the Western media and public discourses. Such forms of identification became prevalent in various aspects of daily lives of Iranians of New Zealand including, as I illustrated in this thesis (particularly in [Chapter 3: Nation](#)), their food and foodways, manifested, for instance, in their buying and consuming ‘authentic’ Persian foodstuffs (including ‘Shiraz’ wine which was perceived as ‘originally Iranian’), favoring the shops that were reminding them most of their ‘Persian’ identity, or eating pork especially in public sphere and in front of the Kiwi ‘other’ where the need to disassociate from Arab Muslims, and asserting a supposedly superior ‘Persian identity,’ was most likely felt.

The complex matrix of interrelations between structure and agency, between the old and the new, between the past and the present, between the imagined and ideal, and between wanting to be ‘here’ but at the same time yearning for being ‘there,’ was also apparent in the ways diasporic Iranians remembered ‘home,’ and the practices they performed in order to build homely feelings. Many of my interlocutors expressed, at some point of the interview/fieldwork, a longing for home; however, such longing was not necessarily a desire to *return to home*, but rather a desire to re-experience the *feelings of being at home*, however far away from it. One of the keys to achieving such homely feelings in their diasporic field was increasing and maintaining familiarity through surrounding themselves with familiar home-foods or performing familiar food practices both in an everyday and ritualistic/celebratory context ([Chapter 5: Memory](#)). These familiar foods (whether sent/brought from home or purchased from local grocery stores) and the familiar practices associated with them proved to be a powerful means through which memory of the homeland and dislocation was constantly negotiated within transnational social fields as Iranians navigated their dislocations. Thus, everyday and seemingly mundane practices of food such as shopping for, cooking, or eating ‘home food’ transformed for Iranians into important vehicles of memory if/when seasoned (or concocted) with a homely familiarity. In this way, shopping at ‘ethnic’ stores, using ingredients or kitchen utensils brought or sent from home, applying cooking methods that were practiced at home, or, in its obvious form, cooking and eating dishes from home became powerful means that transformed the sensory experiences evoked by food and food-related practices into affective blocks of building homely and familiar feelings in diaspora where the process of remembering united the experience of past and present into one. In the experience of Iranians of this study, the role of home food and food practices was an integral one to their producing familiar feelings of being at home. Just like the presence and availability of food from home brought about a sense of comfort and of ‘being in control,’ its absence and unavailability produced anxiety as it made Iranians make do with what was ‘strange,’ with what was not as familiar.

Similarly, rituals and ritual performances from home also became, in my interlocutors’ diasporic field, sites of intentional, reflexive and strategic memory and remembering – for their repetition provided diasporic Iranians with a sense of continuity with their familiar, idealized past while, at the same time, forged transition and transformation to the present and a potentially better future in their new home. Such rituals were not necessarily performed or experienced exactly as they were back home; rather, many of these rituals, as well as traditions and performances associated with them, had become, along the way, invented, reinvented,

forgotten, or taken completely different meanings. But it was precisely such innovative, flexible, and multivocal dynamics of rituals that made them significant means toward creating new identities and building the feelings of being at home for diasporic Iranians. I argued that in choosing which rituals and traditions from home to remember in diaspora and which ones to actively forget, which ones to celebrate and which ones to disregard, which aspects to accentuate and which ones to downplay or alter, diasporic Iranians were reflecting the reality of their lived experiences and negotiations in diaspora, and degree to which they felt they belonged or were marginalized in their new homes, highlighting the wider reality of their identity negotiation and (re)construction in diaspora. Thus, for example, having experienced discrimination and prejudice and having faced an existing racial/religious bias between themselves and ‘mainstream’ New Zealanders (who reportedly would often reduce Iranians’ identity to a specific reading of ‘Muslims’ or at best to ‘Middle Easterners’), Iranians of this study consciously chose, for the most part, to remember those rituals and perform those traditions that could potentially falsify, contest, and ‘break’ such stereotypes. In other words, they mostly observed those rituals (such as *Nowruz*, *Yalda*, and *Mehregan*) that could celebrate the *Iranian* (or better yet, the ‘Persian’) aspect of their identity (as opposed to their ‘Islamic’ one), inventing and reinventing, along the way, traditions and meanings that could loudly and clearly assert such Iranianness/Persianness (which were oftentimes in clear ‘breach’ of Islamic codes).

Food and food practices, in this way, proved to be of paramount importance – as I illustrated with the case of wine (a ‘non-Islamic’ object) whose reinvention as a ‘Persian element’ had rendered its presence imperative in Iranians’ publicly-performed rituals and traditions (e.g. *Nowruz* parties, *Yalda* night ceremonies, etc.) held in New Zealand ([Chapter 3: Nation](#)). Similarly, those rituals and traditions that could potentially perpetuate the existing stereotypes about Iranians or ‘force’ certain identities upon them (i.e. *Ramadan*, any kinds of ‘*Eid*,’ etc.) were not remembered/actively forgotten, or at best were reserved for private spheres with their religious (read: Islamic) aspects heavily reinvented, reinterpreted, and reimaged – like the commemoration of the Shia ritual of *Muharram* ([Chapter 5: Memory](#)). Once again, what seemed to be of an integral importance in this were food and food practices (i.e. *nazri* rites) which were chosen to be remembered, and attempted to be performed, in a more or less similar fashion to Iran. In a context where all the other rites were either consciously forgotten/omitted or thoroughly reinvented during a selective and idealized process of remembrance of the past, food and food rites transformed, from being *a* part of the ritual back home, into being *the* ritual in diaspora, providing migrants, via sensory experience and

nostalgia, with a desired and pleasant feeling of an unbroken continuity, unbroken by their migration – which extends into a better future.

My thesis contributes to a more detailed understanding of migrants' identity (re)formation and (re)construction processes in diaspora. As it has been shown by numerous migration and diaspora studies, that migrants are often in negotiation with multiple positionings/identities that run parallel to, and sometimes against, each other due to their inhabiting multiple cultural and social spaces. Depending on the socio-cultural and political situation in both the origin home and the host society, migrants may consciously choose to preserve or emphasize some aspects of their original cultural identity in certain situations while ignoring and actively undermining some others in a different situation. Responding to and generating such intercultural adjustment/resistance processes which factor in elements from, as well as pragmatic opportunities in, both home and host countries, actions and practices become more consciously reflected upon by migrant individuals. This gives rise to a sort of evolving and hybrid identity that combines identification with the stereotypical norms and values in the new home while, at the same time, longing for those of the old home in a real or an imagined past. Thus, migrants' identification process is not a homogenous process, but rather a complex web of interrelationships that prompt migrants to continuously reflect on, and negotiate between, their multiple identities and constantly 'translate' one cultural language into the other.

Epilogue

Finally, I'm holding in my hands the result of the research on which I have spent the last four years; I have to admit: it is a good feeling! I still remember thinking, at the beginning of my journey, that four years is a lot of time, telling myself "I can write even *two* PhD theses in four years." It is only now that I realize that four years is, in fact, nothing when it comes to doing 'proper' research, especially one that requires extensive fieldwork. I now wish that I had at least two more years that I could spend on reading more literature, extending my thoughts further, and explore the many things that remained unexplored.

When I started my journey as a doctoral student, I was fairly new to Anthropology. However, having done my master's thesis on sociocultural significance of cookbooks had predisposed me, to some degree, to seeing food as more than just a basic physical need, but also as the undeniable foundation for extremely diverse and astoundingly complex cultural elaborations. I had also realized that in order to examine eating and drinking as social and

cultural experiences, anthropology would offer an ideal lens – as evident from the many in-depth anthropological studies that I discovered were conducted on the role of cooking in human evolution, the significance of feasting or global food trade, or the foodways of diverse societies and communities around the world, among other topics.

My position as an ‘expat’ or as a ‘migrant’ during my master’s studies also led me to see food in new lights – within the context of migration and diaspora. My interactions with my fellow Iranians living away from their ‘home’ exposed me to rather different and ‘new’ ways of being, among which practices of food and eating stood out. I soon realized that *this* (i.e. migrants’ food practice) was also a ‘theme’ in anthropology – as evident from a good many of ethnographic texts that demonstrated the significant role of food and foodways in ‘anchoring’ migrants while also allowing them to create new subjectivities and orientations. Thus, my background as an Iranian and as a migrant, alongside my life-long interest for food and food-related topics, coupled with my newly-found interest in anthropological perspectives, decided my research topic *for* me.

The first year was particularly tough, considering the amount of literature I had to read to familiarize myself with existing anthropological theories and ethnographic material not only on my topic, but also in general. I usually felt myself to be on less than solid ground when I got into discussion with my supervisors or with other students who, unlike me, did have a previous training in anthropology. Reflecting on this now, I realize that this, coupled with my lack of confidence in the field in which I was finding myself, might have been the reason that my thesis is more dominated by literature and less by bringing the ideas into readers’ consciousness by ethnographic observation.

To make up for such self-perceived ‘incompetence’ and a lack of confidence that followed, I studied all the time, weekends and evenings, until I felt (perhaps 18 months into my candidacy, though) a little more comfortable with discussing my thoughts with my supervisors or with presenting my research in anthropological seminars or conferences. By this time, I had also started to gradually get a more thorough grasp of Bourdieu’s complex theoretical mosaic, on which I based my thesis. After all, like Bourdieu who felt like a ‘fish out of water’ in the academic circle in which he found himself upon inhabiting a position that he had not inhabited before, I, too, felt out of my comfort zone a lot of the time (at least during the first two years of my studies) due to being fairly new to anthropology. Determined to self-improve through diligence and perseverance, I gradually managed to ‘adjust’ my scholastic habitus to the field in which I had found myself. However, during this process of learning and

'adjustment', there were also some setbacks that produced undesired outcomes. For example, due to sharing the same cultural/national background (Iranian) and same status (migrant/expat) with participants and informants, many of my early interactions and conversations with them were premised on an assumption of an insider status, thus blurring the boundaries between interactions that could be considered and used as 'data' and those that were only 'ordinary' membership relations. As a result of my lack of knowledge of the 'rules of engagement' within such a context and the ethical implications this created, some of my valuable conversations and discussions were rendered unusable on ethical and moral grounds. It was only after two months into my fieldwork that I began to realize and overcome the challenges of consent negotiations and create and maintain a balance between academic credibility and community accountability.

Once I found the balance between the two, and once I began to feel comfortable in my new scholastic surrounding, I felt as though I had surmounted a hill and started down the other side, with downhill all the way in front of me. I was, of course, not completely right as I encountered many an obstacle on this rather lonely journey such as the great deal of uncertainty and failures – financial and otherwise, or the death of my first supervisor at the beginning of Year Two which had its own challenges at the time. Looking back at my journey, I feel that masses of readings combined with masses of fieldwork were what helped me most. These two strands which were somehow created by chances of life, by insecurities, and by change in academic direction were what helped me overcome the obstacles and what gave me the creative impulse to come up with the process of organizing themes and putting my thesis together.

As I now, sitting by the window on a Saturday afternoon looking at my early drafts and browsing through my earlier emails to my supervisors, clearly see, I, as well as my thought processes, have evolved in the past five years; I can see the ups and downs of my journey, and the memories of the fieldwork; I can see my position both as an outsider and as an insider, and the effects it has had on the thesis; I can see my supervisors' feedback in emails and in-text comments, many of which did not make sense to me at the time but now they absolutely do; I can see the revisions I made and how the different elements developed in each stage; and most importantly I can see my fighting through the 'inactive' periods which were filled with guilt and anxiety but were also the periods during which many of my ideas came together – which, at the end, became this thesis.

Appendices

Appendix A: Composition of Households Approached

Category		%	Total %
Household Members	1	32.2	100
	2	41.9	
	3	19.5	
	4	6.4	
Gender	Including under-18	Male	48.4
		Female	51.6
	Excluding under-18	Male	48.0
		Female	52.0
Age	Under 18	16.1	100
	19-24	1.6	
	25-34	38.8	
	35-44	16.1	
	45-54	16.1	
	55-64	8.1	
	65 and above	3.2	
Occupation*	Professional ¹⁶⁸	30.8	100
	Self-employed	9.6	
	Homemakers	21.1	
	PhD Student	23.1	
	Retired	3.8	
	Unemployed	3.8	
	Other	7.8	
Education*	High School Diploma	17.3	100
	Bachelor's Degree	17.3	
	Master's Degree	51.9	
	PhD	13.5	
Religion*	Muslim	46.·	100
	'Culturally' Muslim ¹⁶⁹	38.·	
	Baha'i	13.5	
	Christian	2.0	
Year of Arrival**	1975-1985	10.4	100
	1986-1995	0.0	
	1996-2005	29.3	
	2006-2015	53.4	
	2015-2017	6.9	
Marital Status*	Married	69.3	100
	De Facto	4.0	
	Divorced	9.6	
	Widowed	1.6	
	Single	15.5	
Household location	Christchurch	48.5	100
	Lincoln	29.0	
	Rolleston	6.4	
	Timaru	6.4	
	Rangiora	6.4	
	Ashburton	3.3	

¹⁶⁸ Includes doctors and nurses, school teachers and university lecturers, lawyers, engineers, managers, artists, and administration staff.

¹⁶⁹ Those who did not identify as 'practicing/religious/' Muslims, but still expressed belonging to a 'Persian cultural Muslim' majority (discussed in detail in [Chapter 3: Nation](#)).

Appendix B: Purpose of Visit to Households

	Household code				Purpose of visit*					Household code				Purpose of visit				
	Interview	PO	Gathering		Interview	PO	Gathering			Interview	PO	Gathering		Interview	PO	Gathering		
1	x	X	X		8	x	x		15		x	22	x	X	X		29	
2	x				9	x	X	X	16		x	23	x				30	X
3	x				10	x			17	x	X	24	x	X	X		31	X
4	x		X	11			x	18		x	25			x				
5	x			12			x	19	x	x	26	x		x				
6	x			13	x		X	20	x	X	X	27			x			
7	x		X	14				21	x	x	28			x				

* The households indicated with a capital X has been approached in more than one occasion for that particular purpose.

Appendix C: Characteristics of Interviewees

Category		%	Total %
Gender	Male	37.5	100
	Female	62.5	
Age	25-34	47.5	100
	35-44	20	
	45-54	25	
	55-64	7.5	
	65 and above	0.0	
Occupation	Professional ¹⁷⁰	35	100
	Self-employed	7.5	
	Homemakers	25	
	PhD Student	22.5	
	Retired	0.0	
	Unemployed	2.5	
	Other	7.5	
Education	High School Diploma	12.5	100
	Bachelor's Degree	25	
	Master's Degree	42.5	
	PhD	20	
Religion	Muslim	42.5	100
	'Culturally' Muslim ¹⁷¹	45.0	
	Baha'i	12.5	
Year of Arrival	1975-1985	7.0	100
	1986-1995	7.0	
	1996-2005	29.0	
	2006-2015	57.0	
	2016-2017	0.0	
Marital Status	Married	70	100
	De Facto	2.5	
	Divorced	12.5	
	Widowed	2.5	
	Single	12.5	

¹⁷⁰ Includes doctors and nurses, school teachers and university lecturers, lawyers, engineers, managers, artists, and administration staff.

¹⁷¹ Those who did not identify as 'practicing/religious/' Muslims, but still expressed belonging to a 'Persian cultural Muslim' majority (discussed in detail in [Chapter 3: Nation](#)).

Appendix D: Hubert's (2004, pp. 49-54) Interview Guide for Semi-structured Interviews in Households in Anthropological Qualitative Studies of Food

Identification of the family:

Name
Members of the household
Place of residence

Type of housing

Daily life

Household organisation and schedule
Who is in charge of food shopping?
Who cooks?
Household cleaning, etc.
Meals taken at home (who eats?, when? where?)
Meals taken out of home (who eats?, when?, where?)

Food and shopping:

According to type of products

Market
Supermarket
Specialty shops
Grocery
Delicatessen
Others
Time spent for shopping and frequency
Distance covered
Is a shopping list used?

Motivation for choices

Family habit
Children's demands
Publicity (TV commercials, magazines, radio, posters, etc.; ask examples)
Price
Quality
Quantity
Other

Domestic production: today and in the past

Vegetable garden, orchard, chickens, etc.
What?
Since when?
Who is in charge?
When started or stopped, and for what reasons?
Gifts and exchanges with the family members or neighbours or friends
– for direct consumption, preserving or sale?
Gathering wild plants, hunting and fishing
Produced collected
– for direct consumption, preserving or sale?

How shopping was done before the advent of large-scale distribution (supermarket, etc.), by the preceding generation or during elderly informants' youth

Household preserves

Types of product

Where does one get them?

Types of preserves (freezing, sterilising, jams, pickles, etc.)

Estimation of quantities

Freezing

Freezer or not in the house

Types of frozen food: own production, bought, [etc.]

Estimation of frequency of consumption

Other means of keeping food: cellar, etc.

How was food preserving carried out before supermarkets

– e.g. by preceding generation or during youth of elderly informants

Food consumption: utensils, techniques and products given here should be adapted to the country of study

How is cooking organized?

Who prepares the meals?

Who decides the menus?

When is meal composition decided: by week, some days before, at the time of preparing the meal?

Time and period of day spent cooking (morning, evening, weekends)

Kitchen equipment

Cooker, ovens (microwave, etc.), gas, electricity

Mixers, and other electric equipment

Types of pots and pans

Cooking techniques

Preferred techniques and their frequency

Seasonal differences

Steaming

Stews

Boiled

Baked

Grilled

Fried

Raw

Learning how to cook

Where does one learn the recipes from?

Cookbooks? Which? Where obtained? Used when?

Types of dishes

Soups

Stews

Baked dishes and casseroles

Grilled and barbecued

Fried

Salads

Others (according to local cuisines)
Give recipes of regularly recurring dishes
Are dishes different according to season?

Spices and condiments

Spicy food, use of herbs and spices most used
Preferred tastes of the person interviewed and his/her close family

Fats

Types of oil (olive, peanut, soy, safflower, etc.) frequency of use and types used, preferences,
Margarine (which kind)
Butter
Pork fat (drippings)
Cream

'sauces' and condiments added to a meal (put on the table)

Mayonnaise
Salad cream, bottled sauces, etc.
Tomato sauce
Garlic sauce, etc.
Which are most frequently used?

Products consumed by the household:

Specify the different kinds and estimate how much and how often

Meats, fish and eggs

Meats (list according to local traditions)
Fish (list...)
Shellfish, etc.
Hams and delicatessen
Eggs

Vegetables

Greens (list...)
Other 'fruit' vegetables (tomatoes, aubergine, peppers, etc. – list ...)
Roots and tubers

Cereals (types of bread, pasta, breakfast, rice) whole or refined

Milk and milk products

Milk (whole, half fat, low calorie, plus vitamins, etc.)
Yogurt
Butter
Cream
Cheeses (list...)

Fruit (list...)

Dried fruits
Fresh fruit
Frozen fruit

Other

Beans and pulses

Pastries and sweets (home made or bought)

Other specialities

Preferred products and/or most often consumed

Why?

Products rarely consumed

Why?

Products never consumed

Why?

What are the dishes, drinks or food that you do not eat but your parents ate or eat?

Why?

What are the dishes, dtrinks, foods that you eat but your parents do not ate or eat?

Why?

Daily meals

Composition and times

Breakfast

Lunch

Tea or snacks (when?, what kind?)

Dinner

Meals eaten outside home

Who and where?

Composition

Snacks: who and what kind?

What is thought of as essential in a meal (without it would not be a meal)?

Table setting and decoration

Who serves, who is served first?

Who gets favourite treatment at table (special diet, dishes, best bite, etc.)?

Conversation or not, about what

TV or radio during meal?

Which is the most important meal of the day: for what reason?

Differences in the organization of the meal in the preceding generation (or the following)?

Give the menu of a feast, or special occasion, with the drinks. Christmas or New Year (adapt for the country/the society/the culture)

Drinks

What is drunk during meals?

If wine/beer (etc.), what kind? From where?

How much is drunbk by whom?

Do you have a cellar?

Is wine/beer (etc.) drunk mainly at home or where?

Other alcoholic drinks: sherry, port, cocktails, etc.

Drunk by whom and how much?

Drinks on special occasions

Drinks outside meals: tea, coffee, sodas, beer, etc.

Drunk by whom and how much?

Mineral water

What kind?

Interesting comparisons

Are there difference in drinking patterns and products between generations?

Remarks on the food ways of the in-laws (and taste of the spouse)

Important changes in lifestyle between generations and consequences on food habits today.

What are the new foods which have become usual?

What is a healthy diet

Is it different from a tasty or gourmet diet?

Any special diets (slimming, diabetes, etc. for what reason? For whom?)

Is beauty linked to diet?

When you look at someone, what aspects of the body makes you think they are in good health?

Give the menu of an ideal meal (without restricting of budget)

Household composition (could be done at the start of the interview)

Head of the family (male or female)

Date and place of birth

Preceding places of residence

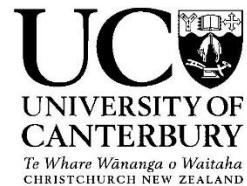
Residence today

Education

Occupation

Family situation and number of children

Appendix E: Human Ethics Committee (HEC) Approval Letter



HUMAN ETHICS COMMITTEE

Secretary, Lynda Griffioen
Email: human-ethics@canterbury.ac.nz

Ref: HEC 2015/43/LR-PS

10 August 2015

Amir Sayadabi
Anthropology Programme
UNIVERSITY OF CANTERBURY

Dear Amir

Thank you for forwarding to the Human Ethics Committee a copy of the low risk application you have recently made for your research proposal "What is the role of foodways in expression and maintenance of national identity among the Iranian community in New Zealand?".

I am pleased to advise that this application has been reviewed and I confirm support of the Department's approval for this project.

Please note that this approval is subject to the incorporation of the amendments you have provided in your email of 9 August 2015.

With best wishes for your project.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Lindsey MacDonald'.

Lindsey MacDonald
Chair, Human Ethics Committee

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Glossary

Cultural/Historical/Mythical Figures

<i>Auī</i> (1171–1242)	12 th -century Persian historian, philologist, and author.
<i>Cyrus II</i> (601–530 BC)	Commonly known as <i>Cyrus the Great</i> , the founder of the Achaemenid Empire.
<i>Dariush I</i> (550–486 BC)	Commonly known as <i>Darius the Great</i> , the fourth Persian King of the Achaemenid Empire from 522 BC to 486 BC.
<i>Esfandiyar</i>	A mighty hero in Persian mythology.
<i>Fereydun</i>	One of the Iranian mythical kings.
<i>Hafez</i> (1315 – 1390)	14 th -century Persian poet.
<i>Jamshid</i>	One of the Iranian mythical kings.
<i>Keykavus</i>	One of the Iranian mythical kings.
<i>Khaqani</i> (1120–1190)	12 th -century Persian poet and prose-writer.
<i>Khayyam</i> (1048–1131)	11 th -century Persian mathematician, astronomer, and poet.
<i>Manuchehri</i> (982–1040)	11 th -century Persian poet.
<i>Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi</i> (1919–1980)	Commonly known as ‘the Shah’ – the Shah of Iran from 16 September 1941 to 11 February 1979.
<i>Reza Shah Pahlavi</i> (1878–1944)	Commonly known as ‘Reza Shah’ – founder of Pahlavi dynasty, and the Shah of Iran from 15 December 1925 to 16 September 1941.
<i>Rostam</i>	The most celebrated legendary hero in Persian mythology.
<i>Ruhollah Khomeini</i> (1902–1989)	The founder of the Islamic Republic of Iran and the leader of the 1979 Iranian Revolution.
<i>Rumi</i> (1207–1273)	13 th -century Persian poet and Sufi mystic.
<i>Sa'di</i> (1210–1291)	13 th -century Persian poet and prose-writer.
<i>Xerxes</i> (519–465 BC)	The fifth Persian King of the Achaemenid Empire.

Dishes

<i>adas-polow</i>	Lentil and rice pilaf.
<i>ash-e gandom</i>	Wheat and vegetable thick soup.

<i>ash-e reshteh</i>	Vegetable and noodle thick soup.
<i>chelo-kabab</i>	Minced lamb kebab with plain or saffronned rice and grilled tomatoes.
<i>dolmeh</i>	Dolmades.
<i>gheimeh</i>	Stew of lamb and split peas.
<i>ghelyeh-mahi</i>	Stew of herbs and fish.
<i>halim</i>	Wheat-and-meat porridge.
<i>kabab-torsh</i>	Lamb kebab in pomegranate and walnut marinate.
<i>kalam-polow</i>	Cabbage and rice pilaf.
<i>khoresh</i>	Stew.
<i>kuku sabzi</i>	Herb frittata.
<i>mast-o-khiar</i>	Yogurt and cucumber.
<i>mirza ghasemi</i>	Barbecued eggplant, mashed and cooked with garlic and tomato.
<i>polow</i>	Persian-style steamed plain rice.
<i>polow zaferooni</i>	Saffronned rice.
<i>reshteh-polow</i>	Noodle and rice pilaf.
<i>sabzi-polow ba mahi</i>	Herb and rice pilaf with fish.
<i>sambooseh</i>	Samosa.
<i>sholeh</i>	Meat and grain pottage, popular in Eastern Iran.
<i>tahchin</i>	Savory, baked, saffronned rice cake stuffed with meat.
<i>yatimcheh</i>	Eggplant and/or zucchini casserole.

Sweets/Desserts/Drinks

<i>aragh nana</i>	Distilled mint extract.
<i>baghlava</i>	Baklava.
<i>bamiyeh</i>	Persian deep-fried dough dipped in syrup.

<i>chayi-nabat</i>	Tea with sugar candy.
<i>gaz</i>	Persian style nougat.
<i>nan-gerdooyi</i>	Walnut cookies.
<i>pashmak</i>	Cotton candy.
<i>shirini nokhodchi</i>	Chickpea cookies.
<i>shole zard</i>	Saffron rice pudding.
<i>sohan</i>	Saffron-and-pistachio brittle toffee.
<i>tokhm-sharbati</i>	Basil seed drink.
<i>zoolbia</i>	Jalebi.

Food Items

<i>ajil</i>	Trail mix.
<i>adams khersi</i>	Tattoo Fusen.
<i>adviye</i>	Spice.
<i>badenjan</i>	Eggplant.
<i>chips falleyi</i>	Bulk potato chips.
<i>esfenaj</i>	Spinach.
<i>esmartiz</i>	Smarties.
<i>haleh hooleh</i>	‘Junk’ snacks.
<i>khaviyar</i>	Caviar.
<i>koofteh</i>	Meat and rice balls with herbs (koftha).
<i>lavashak</i>	Fruit leather.
<i>limoo</i>	Lime/lemon.
<i>nan</i>	Bread.
<i>naranj</i>	Bitter orange.
<i>pofak</i>	Cheese puffs.
<i>reshteh</i>	Noodles.
<i>sharab</i>	Wine.

tafi ghalami Toffee sticks.

tak tak Chocolate bars similar to *KitKat*.

torshi Pickles.

zafaran Saffron.

Dynasties

The Abbasid The third of the Islamic caliphates to succeed Muhammad.

The Achaemenid The first Iranian empire based in Western Asia founded by Cyrus the Great in 550 BC.

The Buyyids A Persianate dynasty (of Iranian origin), ruling from 934 to 1062.

The Ghaznavids A Persianate dynasty (of Turkic mamluk origin), ruling from 977 to 1186.

The Ilkhanates A Persianate dynasty (of Mongol origin), ruling from 1256 to 1353.

The Kakuyids A Persianate dynasty (of Iranian origin), ruling from 1008 to 1141.

The Pahlavis The last ruling house of the Imperial State of Iran from 1925 until 1979.

The Safavids A Persianate dynasty (of Iranian origin), ruling from 1501 to 1736.

The Saffarids A Persianate dynasty (of Iranian origin), ruling from 861 to 1003.

The Saljuqids A Persianate dynasty (of Oghuz Turk origin), ruling from 1040 to 1194.

The Samanids A Persianate dynasty (of Iranian origin), ruling from 819 to 999.

The Sassanids A Persianate dynasty, ruling from 224 to 651 AD.

The Tahirids A Persianate dynasty (of Iranian origin), ruling from 821 to 873.

The Ziyarids A Persianate dynasty (of Iranian origin), ruling from 930 to 1090.

Others

<i>Ahura Mazda</i>	The highest spirit worshipped in Zoroastrianism, the old Mede, and Persian religion.
<i>ajil-khori</i>	The trail-mix-eating bowl.
<i>Ashura</i>	The tenth day of Muharram, and the anniversary of the death of the third Shi'ite Imam, Hussain Ibn Ali.
<i>Avesta</i>	The primary collection of religious texts of Zoroastrianism and the chief source for religious traditions of the Persian political state before Islam.
<i>cheshm o ham cheshmi</i>	Keeping up with the Joneses.
<i>dasteh</i>	Public mourning processions during Muharram.
<i>dastpokht</i>	Culinary skills; culinary signature.
<i>dor-e hami</i>	Gathering.
<i>estekan</i>	Glass tea cups.
<i>gharib</i>	Stranger; exilic; homesick.
<i>gharibi</i>	Homesickness.
<i>ghaza hazeri</i>	Quickly-assembled dishes.
<i>ghorbat</i>	Exile; stranglehold, foreign land.
<i>hajat</i>	Requests/favors put to God.
<i>hosseiniyeh</i>	Special edifices that are specifically designed for mourning ceremonies of Muharram.
<i>jalaseh/majles</i>	Religious mourning ceremonies.
<i>kabab sikh zadan</i>	Skewering kebab.
<i>manghal</i>	Outdoor grill.
<i>manghal-kari</i>	Handling the grill.
<i>mehmuni</i>	Party.
<i>Mehregan</i>	The Persian festival of fall.
<i>Muharram</i>	The first month of Hijri calendar. Among Shia population, it is the month of mourning for the death of third Shia Imam (Hossein Ibn Ali) in its tenth day.

<i>nazr</i> (<i>pl. nozur</i>)	A rhetorical device and/or tangible artefact in a pious system of quid pro quo, in which a supplicant makes a request and, should the request be granted, offers thanks.
<i>nazri</i>	An edible <i>nazr</i> (see <i>nazr</i>).
<i>noheh</i>	The recitation of the martyrdom of religious figures in a sing-song manner.
<i>Nowruz</i>	Persian New Year.
<i>Pasargadae</i>	The capital of the Achaemenid Empire under Cyrus the Great from 559 to 530 BC.
<i>Persepolis</i>	The ceremonial capital of the Achaemenid Empire.
<i>rowzeh</i>	Eulogy singing.
<i>shahadat</i>	Martyrdom.
<i>Shahnameh</i>	‘The Book of Kings,’ an epic poem written by Ferdowsi between c. 977 and 1010 CE.
<i>sofreh</i>	Dining cloth spread out on the floor.
<i>ta’ziyeh</i>	Re-enactment of the <i>Battle of Karbala</i> in the form of a drama.
<i>Tasu’a</i>	The tenth day of Muharram.
<i>tekyeh</i>	Special edifices that are specifically designed for mourning ceremonies of Muharram.
<i>vatan</i>	Homeland.
<i>Yalda</i>	Winter solstice celebration.

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