

# Review

**My Shadow Is My Skin: Voices from the Iranian Diaspora**, Katherine Whitney and Leila Emery (eds.), Austin: University of Texas Press, 2020, ISBN 978-1-4773-2027-3 (hbk), 296 pp.

The recently published anthology *My Shadow Is My Skin: Voices from the Iranian Diaspora*, edited by Katherine Whitney and Leila Emery, boasts a uniquely heterogeneous collection of diasporic writing. Most of the thirty-two contributors are previously published authors and editors as well as scholars and teachers of creative writing. This anthology is comprised entirely of *nonfiction* stories that reflect on the contributors' own lived experience in the form of short memoir essays. The book is divided into three thematic sections—"Light/Shadow," "Coding/Decoding," "Memory/Longing"—and opens with a foreword by literary scholar Persis Karim, who also contributes a piece "in praise of big noses" (p. 112).

Storytelling persists in being one of the most effective ways to subvert the master narrative of history no matter the genre. Similarly, anthologies have served as a tool for rewriting historical archives. I thus wrestled with how to review *My Shadow Is My Skin* from the standpoint of a storyteller who believes in "[creating] dangerously, for people who read dangerously."<sup>1</sup> When I pull back and remember the power of not

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<sup>1</sup>Danticat, *Create Dangerously*, p. 10.

only telling but also curating stories, especially stories concerned with identity, I understand why this latest volume of Iranian diasporic literature demands critique: to challenge the interpretive lens through which stories are told and brought together (rather than the stories themselves).

While the title suggests work from Iranian diasporas across the globe, the anthology focuses exclusively on diasporic subjects in the US. Many of the memoir essays nevertheless move between places in order to grapple with the predominant theme of belonging. Yet the anthology continuously returns to “Iranian American” identity formation even as movement marks the question of belonging—and diaspora at large—over and over again. The editors surprisingly redefine diaspora both within and outside of identity-based categories to include, for example, white people who married into Iranian families. In this way, too, the title is misleading and calls for a reconsideration of the book’s introductory claims.

The editors, speaking in the first-person plural, ask: “where have we of the Iranian diaspora been, where are we now, and where are we headed?” (p. xviii). They frame the book project as a diversification of responses to said inquiry and, simultaneously, a counternarrative to media misrepresentations of Iranians. By showcasing a wide range of perspectives, the anthology purportedly “pulls back the curtain on a community that rarely gets to tell its own stories or write its own history” (p. xvii). Instead of engaging with the power dynamics at play in narrative production, such claims perpetuate erasure and paradoxically delegitimize the stories that have been told as well as the unspoken stories overshadowed by the assumption of lack. Such claims also reproduce Orientalist tropes of unveiling that position the book project as an opportunity for the subaltern to speak and in turn the editors as “ideal representatives,” conveyors, and dare I say saviors of otherwise silenced voices (p. xiv).

Clarifying the use of loaded terms like diaspora could have avoided some consequential pitfalls, particularly given the book’s North American and Anglo-phone audience. Perhaps diaspora, which cultural theorist Stuart Hall describes as “a never-completed process of becoming,” beyond states, nations, and territory, is an entry point to rethinking identity.<sup>2</sup> Essay after essay resists categorization and situates diasporic identity squarely within the slash that separates light and shadow, coding and decoding, memory and longing. And yet, the entry point Hall so eloquently describes is far wider than the binary Iranian-American axis around which the book revolves, despite the felt need to literally and figuratively cross borders in every one of its chapters. Many of the essays strive for complexity but end up narrating predictable conceptualizations of pre-revolutionary Iran as ideal, contemporary Iran as solely oppressive, and the US as a mixed bag for model minorities—“more free” when it comes to gender and sexuality and still unreasonable when it comes to race in spite of efforts to prove that people of Iranian descent are not Other (p. ix).

Even Dena Rod’s refreshingly intersectional essay about queerness, “Pushing the Boundaries,” slips into reductive binaries that transnational feminists have long critiqued. Rod discusses the homophobia of Iran’s current regime in opposition to the

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<sup>2</sup>Hall, *Familiar Stranger*.

US, where “vibrant queer communities in [B]lack and Latinx circles” thrive (p. 90). “Take drag ball culture,” Rod explains, “There is a distinct cultural identity. No such thing exists for Iranian queers. We simply haven’t been visible in America long enough to cultivate our own culture” (p. 90). As a fellow Iranian queer, I wonder: visible to whom? I also wonder about this essay’s romanticized yearning for the life-affirming spaces created by Black and Latinx trans activists against the backdrop of ongoing, increasing state-sanctioned violence. How might that yearning converge with US nationalist agendas or what Jasbir K. Puar calls “homonationalism?”<sup>3</sup>

For the editors, Rod’s voice is that of “younger writers with distinctly modern points of view who are contending with their more politicized identities” (p. xvii). Again, the use of dichotomies like modern versus traditional is troubling. They reify the very spatiotemporal disconnects that each narrative seeks to bridge. Few of these “modern sensibilities” represent me and my community (p. xiii). What about the voices of crips, survivors, and sex workers? Of the houseless, formerly incarcerated, and radical political activists? Kurds, Arabs, and Afro-Iranians? There is so much at stake in how diaspora is articulated. When I read work that takes up Iranian American identity as all-inclusive and claims to level up the canon but leaves out repeatedly marginalized narratives, I know that it’s actually not written for my kinfolk.

As Karim states in the foreword, “Americans need human stories to counter” propaganda. Following Karim’s call, this book writes most frequently toward the white gaze (p. xi). I am reminded of the pivotal moment in Saïd Sayrafiezadeh’s essay, “The Name on My Coffee Cup,” when a Starbucks barista spells his name right. I think of what it means for the coffee cup to symbolize recognition in a diasporic context—specifically “our belonging in multicultural America,” as Amy Malek puts it to conclude her essay—and I feel unsettled (p. 111). Rod cites Black lesbian feminist Audre Lorde, whom I turn to here in hopes of outlining a new direction for Iranian diasporic literature. Lorde wrote against the idea of America—which she spelled “amerikkka”—as a melting pot and urged us to face the legacies of colonialism, slavery, and empire that haunt contemporary Black life in particular.<sup>4</sup> Most importantly, she wrote against the neoliberal incorporation of difference.<sup>5</sup> What I gained from reading *My Shadow Is My Skin* is greater clarity on where I want to go following Lorde: further into the movement that characterizes both diaspora and justice. This anthology is a missed opportunity to do so in a critical period of social change.

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<sup>3</sup>Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages*.

<sup>4</sup>Lorde, *Sister Outsider*.

<sup>5</sup>Hong, *Death and Disavowal*.

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