

Halleh Ghorashi

Cultural anthropologist Halleh Ghorashi, Ph.D., is a full professor of diversity and integration in the Sociology Department of the Free University in Amsterdam. In 2006 she became the first holder of the chair for Management of Diversity and Integration, endowed by PAVEM, the Dutch government's Committee for Participation of Women of Ethnic Minority Groups. She is the author of *Ways to Survive, Battles to Win: Iranian Women Exiles in the Netherlands and the United States* (Nova Science Publishers, 2003) and co-editor of edited volumes such as *Paradoxes of Cultural Recognition: Perspectives from Northern Europe* (together with S. Alghasi and T.H. Erikson, Ashgate 2009) and *Muslim Diaspora in the West: Negotiating Gender, Home and Belonging* (together with H. Moghissi, Surrey, Ashgate 2010). She has published extensively on topics such as identity, diasporic positioning, cultural diversity, and emancipation, with particular focus on narratives of identity, migration, and belonging in the context of growing multiculturalism. In 2008 she was awarded the Triumph Prize in recognition of her contribution to the position of black, migrant, and refugee women in the Netherlands. She has also received the VU Senior Societal Impact award (2007), and was named one of the 100 most influential women in the Netherlands by *Magazine Opzij* (2010).

Here she tells a story richly layered story, touching and impressive in several ways. She draws equally on science and on her personal life, recounting times of joy and of pain, describing the existential need to reclaim her life after fleeing from Iran. She was targeted for her political activities, and some of her friends were executed for the same reason. Having relocated to the Netherlands, she completed a study in cultural anthropology and then devoted her dissertation to Iranian communities abroad. Gradually she developed a more refined language and discovered the resonant texture of reflection, where once her life had been mainly geared to political activism. Gradually she changed personally as well. The Iranian community in Los Angeles, where she conducted part of her field research, first exhilarated her, but then began to seem oppressive: along with the recognition that community provided, she felt a suffocating social pressure. Thus she discovered the relative joy of finding home in a private life free of interference and hospitable to the rewards of reflective thought.

8 - A SHIFTING QUEST

FOR A SENSE OF HOME

Halleh Ghorashi

Where do I belong? Ever since 1988, when I was forced to leave Iran, the country of my birth, that question has often played through my mind. Though I had occasionally felt homeless in Iran as well, the question of belonging has never been so open-ended as it is now.

I felt homeless in Iran at times, as when I was beaten by armed groups of Islamic fanatics or in the nights when I did not dare to go home because I was afraid the police were lying in wait for me there. I felt a stranger in my own country in the period full of violence and oppression after 1980, but there was not a doubt in my mind where I would belong: in a democratic Iran.

As a seventeen-year-old girl, like so many of my peers at the time of the 1979 Iranian revolution I felt drawn to politics. I was one of the most fervent supporters of the left-wing organization I had joined, and I dreamed of one day becoming a full member of this organization as a partisan. Everything I did was filled with conviction and dedication. I felt completely at home in my new political identity and just as homeless when the utopia of a democratic Iran proved to be a thing of the past. Yet never did I lose hope that this sense of home would one day return.

When I fled Iran and entered the Netherlands, the country that I would come to consider my new home in due time, the question "Where do I actually belong?" took on a new meaning. It became that question without a clear answer, a question that, more than ever before, revealed a deep sense of uprootedness. My flight had destroyed the innocence of a self-evident sense of home. When the roots have lost their self-evidentness, so has the notion of home been lost.

In this chapter I outline the way in which, step by step, issues of my identity and my sense of home got intertwined with my academic career. I distinguish several steps on that path:

- 1 Gaining academic distance to be able to analyze my revolutionary experiences. This was the first step in finding a balance between involvement and distance.
- 2 Experiences during the first stage of my Ph.D. project in the Netherlands and the confrontation with my own positioning regarding my sense of home.
- 3 Experiences during the second stage of my Ph.D. project in the U.S. and a new positioning regarding my sense of home.
- 4 Reflection on those experiences and analysis of the empirical data in this Ph.D. project, and how those translated into theoretical depth and personal growth.

Let me first briefly narrate my experiences during the Iranian revolution to embed my story in its proper context.

A self-evident sense of home

The Iranian revolution of 1979 was a watershed in the lives of the people of Iran. In the first year and a half after the revolution, which many of us called "the spring of freedom", we proudly called ourselves "the children of the revolution", a name that to us was very precious indeed. Initially I was not so aware of all the events that had led up to the revolution. I was also very young in 1978, only sixteen when the first protests made themselves heard loud and clear. I was critical of the then-regime, although my criticism, I felt, was not so essential as to warrant a revolution. But it would not take long for revolutionary fever to infect me.

As a schoolgirl I got involved in protests against the Pahlavi dynasty (1925-1979). Politics was often the subject of debate in our home, and these debates became more vehement when two of my aunts returned to Iran from Italy; where they had been students, to take part in the surging protests. They were soon feeding me books, such as *Marxism for Dummies*. I was hungry for new knowledge and rapidly devoured many books on topics such as the history of oppression in Iran, or on a variety of politico-philosophical controversies. I took to it like a duck to water and soon realized that the combination of theoretical knowledge and passionate action for a just world was one that held a lot of appeal to me. I felt at home in the books I read and in the feeling of fellowship in the streets, with everyone full of ideals for a better world.

Those intense years are the ones I consider the best years of my life. I felt connected with my fellow countrymen and women in our dream for a better Iran, and together we felt connected with other countries in the world where similar movements were taking place. Besides politico-philosophical writings, I was also inspired in those days by Latin-American protest literature and music by Federico García Lorca, Pablo Neruda, and Víctor Jara, and by the novels of Russian and French authors. I was brimming with energy then, and very aware that I was fortunate to be witnessing one of the most extraordinary events of the century. Sometimes I was actually afraid to go to sleep and miss out on these moments. I was engaged in politics from early morning until late at night. I became our school's student leader, put on political exhibitions, mobilized students for rallies and demonstrations in and out of school, and joined the student branch of one of the most popular political organizations of the day: a Marxist-Leninist organization. From a fairly shy girl I was growing into a fanatical political activist, dedicated to her ideals with heart and soul.

In those days filled with of hope, I was convinced that the years of oppression were over and that a glorious future was dawning. There was not a doubt in my mind. This was a revolution, after all, and we were taking our fate into our own hands. Whenever anyone voiced any doubt, we would be quick to reply: "Nothing can be worse than the previous regime." The years of dictatorship were over, or so we thought.

The first two years of the revolution were so beautiful, so alive. All those books that had been censored and hidden in basements for ages were allowed out on the market. Out they came, thousands of new books in a single day, without cover, in any shape whatever, and yet everyone was buying them. Everyone was hungry for knowledge. Bookshelves were filled, and people were pouring into the streets to discuss those books. The streets became universities. The University of Tehran, always the site for protests of many kinds, was not big enough for such numbers of new and inquisitive students. Everyone was a student, an acquirer of knowledge, gathering the bricks to build a new society in which liberty, equality, and solidarity would come into their own. Every ideology interpreted this utopia in a different way.

Freedom crushed

It did not take long for this faith in utopia to end in disillusionment. People with different political convictions turned against each other. Different ideologies that, united, had given rise to the revolution were now confronting each other. In the streets of Iran, a bloody battle ensued among people who had put up a united front during the revolution. It was not long before all the books that had been bought with so much love and hope ended up in fireplaces and rubbish bins. The canals of Tehran were afloat with the jetsam of discarded books.

A heavy fog of fear and despair had driven away the sunny days of hope and joy. Anything that might possibly be considered a token of freedom came under attack, including the universities. When I heard rumors about universities being attacked, I rushed over to the University of Tehran. I saw masses of people, young and old, sitting down in the middle of the street. I joined in. We sat out in the streets; that's where we slept, that's where we ate, and that's where we talked about the future of our country.

It was not long before we were attacked by armed groups. We tried hard to fight back, but it was no good: they had knives, chains and canes; we just had our hands. I saw people going down wounded. Everyone was crying out with fear. I was also crying out. I was terrified to see the attackers lashing out at us with knives and other weapons. I saw their faces: they were enraged and nothing stopped them from killing people. I was also stunned: how had this come to pass? We had been side by side with these very same people in demonstrations, shouting freedom slogans together, fighting for a better Iran. Where had this hatred come from?

As these thoughts were going through my mind and as I was shouting them loud, I felt my head being hit. I raised my hand to my head: there was a gaping wound. My white jumper suddenly turned all red. I fell down and heard people shouting: "Quick, she's dying". I could not walk but noted how two people were helping me, putting me on a bike and taking me to a hospital. Once I got there, I felt better. I had a head wound that required nine stitches. There was a doctor who mentioned the courage of young people. My father, filled with anxiety and amazement, came to pick me up.

None of this could stop me from rejoining the protest. After two days, with my head bandaged, I was back on the streets. I was determined to preserve the freedom that the revolution had attained.

It was not to be. The dictatorial regime returned, in a different guise this time.

Homeless: the first years in the Netherlands

The most difficult challenge during those years of despair and fear in Iran was the huge contrast with the few precious years of freedom that had preceded them. Once you have savored the sweet taste of freedom, it is unbearable to see it vanish. In the years that followed in Iran, I felt like a zombie, doing all sorts of things but lacking the vigor to be truly alive. I was breathing but not really living.

Having arrived in the Netherlands, I regained my zest for life. Here was a new purpose: to give my all to the effort to turn this new opportunity in my life into a resounding success.

More than anything, I wanted to enjoy freedom and acquire as much knowledge as possible to answer the questions that my revolutionary experiences had raised. I also wanted to tell the stories of my generation so they would never be forgotten: stories of loved ones full of ideals who had met their death, but also stories of many of my contemporaries who had no choice but to get on with their zombie-like existence without any prospect of a better future. I felt like a coiled spring that had been compressed for ages and suddenly, in the Netherlands, had been set free, releasing all its energy and curiosity.

I set out at once to learn the Dutch language, and a year after my arrival in the country, much to my own amazement, I enrolled in a cultural anthropology program at the Free University (Vrije University or VU) in Amsterdam. Study in another language and admission to the university seemed so unreal that I could not quite believe that this dream had come true, until I actually found myself next to fellow students in lecture halls.

I was hoping that the social sciences could help me get some answers to my questions. I wanted to know, for instance, how such

a broad-based political revolution could have led to an Islamic republic. How could it be that people with such high-minded ideals had been unable to establish a democratic republic founded on a multi-party system? My studies helped me tremendously to understand Iran's past and to analyze how political revolutions take place in wider social power structures. In my Master's thesis, I re-examined my experiences during the years of the revolution and linked them to theoretical insights I had gained in my studies (Ghorashi 1994). I learned to understand how the crimes of the Islamic regime had arisen from conditions that had prevailed in a country ruled by dictatorial powers for many years. It led me to conclude that it was not a political movement or Islam as such that had made it impossible to bring a broad-based political coalition to power. It was rather the lack of a democratic foundation, the dominance of dogmatism, and the persistence of intolerance of differences that reproduced the suppressive structures.

My academic training put things into perspective, and slowly but surely that new perspective led me to reflect on my own past. It was by no means an easy matter to admit shades of grey into my black-and-white account of a past that held such painful memories, for when you feel pain all you want to do is to accuse those who are to blame for causing it. To put the past into perspective and context just seems to weaken it. Yet gradually I was drawn to reassess my normative judgment of the past, which helped me to acquire an important academic skill: to step back and give my involvement an academic translation.

Though this was very painful at times, the process of writing my Master's thesis and the expert and constructive comments from my supervisor, André *is*, were very useful in incorporating painful moments into a nuanced academic narrative. Along with his expert supervision, André gave me the confidence to believe in my own strengths. In one of the meetings we held to discuss my chapters, to which I had given blood, sweat, and tears in the writing, he said: "In our church, children decorate candles. We're meant to give these to people we admire greatly, and I'd like to give these candles to you, Halleh." This brought tears to my eyes; I could not believe my ears. His lovely words and the candles he gave me, literally and figuratively, brought light in my life. They gave me hope and energy to keep going.

Yet there would be many moments of despair to come. I remember vividly the abyss that followed my graduation. I was adrift in a sea of uncertainty, asking myself, "What am I doing? And what am I doing here? I have got to return to Iran and do something worthwhile." One reason for my uncertainty was my guilt to be living in freedom while many of my companions in misfortune were forced to live in want of freedom. Another reason was that I just could not conceive of my future in the Netherlands in a positive way. What was there for me to do? It was my dream to become an engaged scholar, that is, one for whom it would not do to generate new ideas behind her desk, but one who would actively involve herself in social debates. But when I looked around, I saw virtually no refugees in high positions. I would never be taken for a Dutch woman; I would always remain this Iranian woman with a funny accent, however proficiently I spoke the language.

Unnecessary doubt?

In retrospect, the Netherlands had much more to offer to me than I could see in the feeling of desperation I had at the time. Twenty years on, I have attained the highest academic position at a Dutch university and I lecture Master's students about what it means to be an engaged scholar. In doing so, I have two main sources of inspiration: Zygmunt Bauman and Edward Said.

In the view of Bauman (2010), social engagement poses the greatest challenge to sociology in late-modern societies. He is convinced that there is really no choice between engagement and neutrality, because if sociology is to have an influence, then it must be engaged. The only logical solution, therefore, is to balance engagement and detachment. He refers to the idea of exile in a way similar to Edward Said's intellectual exile (1995). Intellectual exiles are those who need to perform a continuous balancing act between involvement and marginality or distance. Bauman (2000) paints a picture of the scholar as an exile who must venture into social engagement to have an influence, while preserving the marginality of a scholar to be able to reflect and abstract. This margin where the scholar dwells is not a state of isolation but a precondition for maintaining a relative distance from being overtaken by the power of the dominant discourse. To opt for the margin is to choose to slow down while everyone else around you is running around, and to choose to raise questions while others are certain of their answers.

These academic exiles struggle to maintain their balance between the demands of social influence and scholarly production, well aware they are caught between the devil and the deep blue sea: scholars will find them “normative” or “too applied”; while society, on the other hand, will see them as “too abstract” and “theoretical.” Their position is not an undisputed one, and their struggle is tough because they are up against subtle forms of dominance. Yet they are much needed because it is precisely these exiles who can offer theoretical reflection to practice and practical translation to scholarship. This is precisely the dream I cherished for my own future before I became a social scientist. Because of my position as an endowed professor between 2005 and 2012, I know how hard, even downright impossible, it can be to aspire to serve two masters: the sciences and society. But it is a challenge worth undertaking. What helps me to stay alert to the challenge is this question by Bauman: how can we venture into social engagement while limiting contagion from the dominant discourse?

Starting all over again

For me, opting for engagement meant that I wanted to seek the answers to social questions that interested me in the shared space between my personal background and the social science issues of identity and integration. So I purposely chose themes that were close to my biography. Getting to where I have come to be has been by no means obvious or predictable. Dreaming to achieve the position I now hold was highly unrealistic if the small number of women professors at universities is taken into account, let alone women with non-Dutch ethnic backgrounds. The steps that led to a professorship, such as earning a doctoral degree, were not self-evident either. The fact of my graduating *cum laude* did nothing to dispel this uncertainty. Aware of the fierce competition for Ph.D. positions, I held little hope I would actually manage to obtain one myself.

Fortunately, my skepticism proved unfounded. A friend alerted me to a vacancy at the center for women's studies and anthropology at the University of Nijmegen. The notice about the position mentioned Professor Willy Jansen, which immediately sparked my enthusiasm, for though I did not know her personally, I found her writings very inspiring. (She was later to become one of my supervisors, along with Professor Frans Hüsken). The prospect of a personal interview with her also appealed to me. There was only one problem: I had written

next to nothing about gender, not even in my Master's dissertation. But I took the plunge. As a student, I had held a job as a secretary at the Anthropology Department of the VU University, not only to support myself but also to gain work experience. This had proven to be highly valuable because I had gotten to know my teachers as colleagues. Particularly when I was preparing my application, colleagues there who specialized in gender issues and the Islamic world were very helpful.

After a lot of hard work and preparation for the interview, I came out the top candidate for a Ph.D. position in Nijmegen. When I heard the news, I was shouting for joy, but soon after I felt weighed down with sadness: this would force me to abandon my first home in the Netherlands, the VU University, “the VU and Amsterdam,” and it felt like the toughest move I had ever had to make. It may seem odd, but after my flight from Iran nothing was more difficult than having to leave a familiar place, having to start all over again. The pain of leaving behind all of my loved ones returned. Yet the future beckoned, and after a couple of days I was ready to plan my new life.

Once in Nijmegen, I needed to find a way to settle in, to show people who I was, and to make new friends again, which did require some effort but not too much. I received a warm welcome and it did not take long for me to realize that I had ended up in a very special academic family. Since my Ph.D. position covered the two units of Women's Studies and Anthropology, I was invited to take part in the Tchanbuli study group, in which students and Ph.D. students were working on issues of experimental and feminist anthropology. I was fascinated and steeped myself in this theme. I had already taken an introductory lecture on feminist anthropology by Marion den Uyl at the VU, but I had neglected this area in the final years of my studies there. Moving to Nijmegen enabled me to pick it up again, and I was fascinated by it at once.

Since the nineteen seventies, a significant movement in anthropology has been highly critical of traditional notions of objectivity. *Writing Culture* (1986) by James Clifford and George E. Marcus sparked a revolution in anthropology, and this new field was called experimental anthropology. In his introduction to *Writing Culture*, Clifford undertakes to show how the line between science and literature is increasingly hard to draw. Ethnographies

are not free from the workings of power and conventions. As a writer, the ethnographer is always "situated" in a particular context, and far from the ivory tower fantasy of complete objectivity. Clifford (1986) even argues that ethno-graphic writing is more fiction than fact, since the ethnographer does not give a factual, objective representation of reality but instead creates a "partial reality".

Ethnography, then, should focus on the process of writing, which is governed both by external factors (conventions and power) and by internal factors (emotions, interests, dispositions). In addition, this experimental movement advocates the polyvocality (multiple voices) of anthropological research, aiming to make the voice of "the other" heard as much as possible. Seeking to find new textual strategies to represent the dialogue with the other, this approach emphasizes the use of metaphor, rhetoric, and other literary forms of expression.

The *Writing Culture* volume caused an uproar among feminist anthropologists. They were not opposed to the epistemological (postmodernist) revolution in anthropology. On the contrary, this new approach represented everything feminists had been asserting for many years: that particular forms of scientific and abstract language use (the traditional "style" of academia) were working as an exclusionary mechanism—excluding "the other" that was the object of research. What inspired their anger, though, was that this new movement ignored all of the accomplishments of the feminist critique of science. Feminist anthropologists had been experimenting with new stylistic devices for many years precisely to achieve polyvocality in their texts (Abu-Lughod 1993; Behar & Gordon 1995). What attracted me to this controversy in particular was the combination of critical scholarship, scope for textual experimentation, and the central position granted to storytelling. This combination was to become the guiding principle in my Ph.D. dissertation.

Identity

In my Ph.D. research, I compared the narratives of Iranian women who had moved to the Netherlands with those who had moved to the U.S., all of whom had left-wing backgrounds. I wanted to know how those women had shaped their identity in their new country, and how this affected their sense of home. In particular I was on the lookout for the connection between the past, the present and the future in their

stories. Following the example of many other social scientists, I chose to approach identity as a dynamic, pluralistic, and contextual concept (Ewing 1990; Fischer-Rosenthal 1995; Giddens 1991; Welker 1998). From this perspective, identity is not a finished whole that can be carried around like luggage, but is mutable, ambiguous, and typically elusive in how it can take new forms in new contexts.

Yet this does not mean that identity is constantly changing: despite being a process of becoming, there is also a core of continuity, captured in the terms "habitus" or "embodied history" as used by Bourdieu (1990, p.56). Past experiences often guide people's conscious or unconscious preferences in the choices they make, and such choices may take on new forms when people face new, often unknown, possibilities. It was important for my research to look upon identity as a process that keeps taking new shapes at junctures of past and present experiences (see also Hall 1990), with a decidedly narrative character (see also Giddens 1991).

I first embarked on interviewing Iranian women in the Netherlands. I remember that the stories were pretty tough both for the women to tell and for me to hear. After a number of interviews, I fell ill. When I was processing their stories, I noticed how burdensome certain passages were. It was not so much stories about the past that felt burdensome, but, oddly enough, it was particularly their stories about the future. That is where most of the silences fell.

Contrary to common belief, as evidenced by debates on migrants, the interviewed women did not think the cultural differences between Iran and the Netherlands were very striking in the first few years of their residency: they had been raised in Western-oriented families and had spent their childhood or their adulthood in a strongly Western-oriented Iran. To them, the return to traditional Islamic values in the wake of the revolution was a greater shock than their transition to Dutch society. They experienced their first contacts with Dutch people as rather positive; but their feelings became less so over the years.

These women tried very hard to be active participants in this society: they learned the language, enrolled in courses, and looked for jobs. Despite all these attempts, however, they experienced a new kind of uprootedness. Their disappointment set in when they

wanted to be accepted as equals but were treated as exiles. This feeling of exclusion was experienced by many and is similar to other migrants' experiences in the Netherlands (Essed 1995; Lutz & Moors 1989). They were also very upset about having to dredge up their past repeatedly.

Over several years, a new sense of homelessness made itself felt in these women, as they realized they had to abandon hope of ever finding a new home. Their testimony of lost hope lay not so much in what these women told me, but in what they did not say: there was a heaviness to the interviews. Life in the Netherlands offered many Iranian women much more freedom of movement and scope to develop themselves than they had been allowed as women in post-revolutionary Iran. In spite of that, deep emotions welled up from within when I asked them about the future. Most cried and told me they would rather not think about the future and were just living from day to day.

This blend of silence and pain also characterized their memories of the "period of suppression" and indicated a well-hidden inner conflict—a contradiction between busy, ostensibly successful lives, and feelings of deep emptiness and insecurity. When I was working on the transcriptions of those interview sections, I was also crying. It made quite an emotional scene at my computer: crying and typing all at once. The interviews reminded me of my own insecurities and the lost home I had tried hard to forget. They made me aware of my own uprootedness and my feeling of homelessness in the Netherlands. What is more, the interviews showed that the women in my study were undergoing a process of identity formation characterized by a deep insecurity about the future, and that this insecurity was predicated on their insecure feelings about home. Where was home for these women? Was it in Iran, where they had been deprived of their homes, or was it in the Netherlands, which they felt they could never consider home?

"Iran-geles" as a new home?

Continuing my study with interviews of Iranian women in the U.S., I arrived in Los Angeles and was stunned to see how much "home" could be transplanted. In many ways, the Iranian community there is a re-creation of pre-revolutionary Iran—a "Little Iran" outside of Iran itself. For many Iranians who had grown up in the days of

the Shah, "Iran-geles" felt more Iranian than the post-revolutionary Islamic Republic. A fragment from my Los Angeles field notes shows how the homeland had been re-created, replacing the "real homeland" in many ways:

This morning I was listening to California-based Iranian radio. During the program an old woman called and she said that she had paid the radio subscription for six months and that she is going to Iran for a while and that she would miss the radio terribly while staying in Iran. One of the things that would make her happy to come back to the U.S. would be the existence of the radio. What was interesting for me was that an Iranian old lady would miss the Iranian radio program abroad while going back to Iran. This shows how to feel at home as a concept is separated from its original place when a concept has lost its original place and has its new form in a new re-created home. Iranians who have been brought up in the time of the Shah would hear the music of the years of their childhood. The old lifestyle is much closer in L.A. than in Iran after the revolution. Iran consistently has other elements that would attract Iranians, especially emotionally. But the fact that Los Angeles can in many ways replace Iran as a homeland creates for Iranians a known environment to deal with their new life in a new context in a less conflicting way.
(Field notes of 23 July 1997).

Los Angeles had a similar effect on me, who had left Iran eleven years before. Right away I felt at home. I saw so many images from my childhood that I had already lost while still living in Iran. This re-creation of "Little Iran" in Los Angeles was one of the reasons why most Iranian women in my study said they felt at home in the U.S.: it was not so much the American context itself in which they felt at home, it was the home they had created for themselves there, fusing elements from the past and the present. Feeling at home is not only about the conscious choices people make, but also about an environment where they can feel at ease—a familiar environment that has features of their history and habitus (Bourdieu, in Ghorashi 2003a).

My stay in the U.S. had given me the feeling of having regained my home, but back in the Netherlands I soon realized this was an illusion. I began to have nightmares, mainly about the social control mechanisms that had smothered my stay in Los Angeles. The gossip-mongering that was going on in LA came with me to haunt me in my dreams in the Netherlands. I remember vividly how someone once told me a tidbit about an Iranian lady from the Netherlands who was doing research there, without her realizing that this tidbit was about me. I also saw that the Iranian culture of ostentation was everywhere, even inflated to greater heights by the consumer-oriented California way of life, with frequent conversations about the size of someone's home or the latest cars.

Back in the Netherlands I was happy to settle back into a simple private life, neither judged nor condemned by anyone. Far from family, I relished the prospects for personal freedom and development. The nightmares of Irangenes reminded me of the downsides not only of the Iran of the past but also of the new Iran in the U.S. Those unpleasant dreams were dismantling the imaginary Iran in my mind, which had grown more and more embellished throughout my years of uprootedness. My experiences in Los Angeles made this vision truer to life by highlighting its downsides. My idea that California could be my future home sustained damage until it finally collapsed altogether.

Then I realized that my life in the Netherlands had changed my old meaning of home. What had once been so familiar now had a strangehold on me: the naive idea of a homeland that was either situated in the past or perhaps to be recovered elsewhere. Instead it was the feeling of freedom that had gained the upper hand—a freedom that comprised an awareness that the home within my mind was an illusion.

These changing meanings of home were reshaped both by my personal longings and by the theoretical insights I gained in my Ph.D. research. Theoretical approaches to the concept of home provided me with a framework in which to arrange and analyze these ideas. Among other things I read the work of Malkki, in which she criticizes a static approach to home as the country of origin where people are rooted—the supposition being that “the homeland or country of origin is not only the normal but the ideal

habitat for any person” (Malkki 1995, p.509). Malkki criticizes this so-called “sedentary bias”, in which being rooted within territorial, geographical boundaries is considered to be the most normal and natural kind of primary connection. With her criticism, she undertakes to de-territorialize the concept of “home”:

But if “home” is where one feels most safe and at ease, instead of some essentialized point on the map, then it is far from clear that returning where one fled from is the same thing as “going home” (Malkki 1995, p.509).

After I read this quotation, I was inspired to search for an alternative, non-essentialist approach to home—a far better match to my theoretical starting point that identity is a dynamic process. An essentialist approach attempts to answer this question by looking at the source (or essence) of these people's origin. A non-essentialist approach instead searches for the situational and contextual conditions that empower people to feel at home.

I created room for new ideas by renouncing the seemingly self-evident physical connectedness with the country of origin as home. In the “sedentary” approach criticized by Malkki, culture, identity, country of origin, and sense of home coalesce: where you come from—that simply is your home. Opposed to this is the non-territorial approach to home, which I will call the “fluid approach”, in which a sense of home is unlinked from the geographical boundaries of the country of origin; no longer tied to a given territorial space, it is tied to a diversity of spaces, physical or otherwise, in which people can shape their lives as they like. This distinction concurs with the difference introduced by Avtar Brah (1996, p.197) between “feeling at home” and staking a claim to a “place as home”.

If identities can change, why wouldn't the meaning of home be just as changeable? Yet in my research I still needed to find an answer to the question of why so many refugees were clinging to a sedentary, geographical basis for home in homesickness for the homeland.

It was precisely my comparison of the two contexts, the Netherlands and the U.S., that enabled me to show how the positioning of Iranian women was context-dependent. In the Netherlands, where the women felt uprooted, they were longing to get back to

their roots in Iran. So what I call the “process of othering” in the Netherlands was making it hard for Iranian women to establish an emotional connection with their new country. The opposite was the case in Irangels, where the development of Little Iran in the U.S., the positive approach to diversity, and the possibility of hybrid positioning (as an Iranian-American) meant that the Iranian women in my study were able to experience their new country as their home. (For a detailed account, see Ghorashi 2003a,b, 2010). They did not need to renounce their Iranian background to become an American; by positioning themselves as Iranian-Americans, they could emotionally balance their past and their present and face the future.

Back home

The conclusion of my Ph.D. dissertation is that a sense of home is not a natural given but a constructed story shaped by context. That realization has been crucial for the significant shifts in my own story. It gave me the latitude to look beyond borders to find multiple sources for belonging. The fact that I was so moved emotionally when I was processing the interviews with the Iranian women in the Netherlands, and also that I needed an imaginary Iran as the locus for my sense of home, was a consequence of the context in which I found myself. I had become, as it were, the product of the dominant way of thinking in the Netherlands about migrants and home, in which migrants’ most natural ties are located in their country of origin. I was no longer the Iranian woman who had left Iran, and yet I was under the illusion that my home had to be situated in Iran. That was just as confusing for me as it was for the women I interviewed in the Netherlands. How could a country that belonged so much to the past, and a country that had made me homeless, serve as my own source of home?

Once I had returned from the U.S., that illusion of home was shattered without a new home having yet been found to replace it. While I was absorbed in analyzing my data, I felt a deep personal sense of uprootedness. I was looking for somewhere new to take root and feel at home. The problem was that I was seeking a home in the territorial spaces of a country, either the country of origin or the country of residence. Yet both of these were actually the sources of my uprootedness: my old roots had already been pulled out of Iranian soil, and my new roots just would not take in Dutch soil. In both countries, I remained the other.

The theoretical framework I’ve described so far helped me to redefine my concept of home in a wider scope that severs it from the self-evident territory of a particular country. In this expanded approach, one’s sense of home is tied to spaces and places that can foster a feeling of security and connectedness. Such a fluid approach to home is about a diversity of spaces, physical and otherwise, in which one can feel at home. Particularly the nightmares I had after my return from the U.S. led me to accept that home is wherever I could be myself and develop myself as I wanted, without too many negative impulses and outside pressures.

Since then I have regarded as home the “place” where I am surrounded by people who give me peace and affirmation as well as the critical feedback I need to feel secure about opening up new horizons in life. I experience the strongest sense of home when I am talking about life with my nearest and dearest, when we can share the deepest emotional moments in our conversation.

The analytical skills I acquired in my study of the identity and sense of home of Iranian women in the Netherlands and the U.S. have led me to realize on a personal level that a sense of home is not connected to the territorial boundaries of this or that country but rather to the safe space in which I can be authentically who I am. Over the past few years, I have created many such safe spaces, in that way preventing negatives from affecting my choices in life. It is in such spaces, enjoying the love and trust of the people around me, where I feel I am at home.