U.S. Immigration and Education
Cultural and Policy Issues Across the Lifespan

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Editor
U.S. Immigration and Education
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# Contents

*Contributors*  
vii  

*Foreword*  
Anne Louise Blanchard, JD  ix  

*Preface*  

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>Transculturation: The Dichotomous Journey of an International Student From Iran</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Flora Keshishian</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Jeanne Batalova and Aaron Terrazas</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>Integration as a Mode of Immigrant Acculturation</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>John W. Berry</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td>Parent and Child Citizenship Status and Youth Development in the United States</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Xu Zhao and Hirokazu Yoshikawa</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.</td>
<td>The Immigration–Crime Relationship: Segmented Assimilation Helps Explain the Low Rates of Second-Generation Immigrant Offending</td>
<td>77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Harald E. Weiss</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.</td>
<td>Ambivalence Toward Immigrants: Invaders or Allies?</td>
<td>97</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Verónica Sevillano and Susan T. Fiske</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
   Ramaswami Mahalingam

   Krista M. Perreira, Lisa Kiang, and Stephanie Potochnick

9. Mental Health Issues for Immigrant Adolescents: Research and Practice  163  
   Richard C. Cervantes and Tiffany M. Shelby

10. Immigrant and Refugee Families Raising Children With Disabling Conditions: A Review of the International Literature on Service Access, Service Utilization, and Service Care Experiences  179  
     Gillian A. King, Victoria M. Esses, and Nassisse Solomon

11. School or Home? Where Early Education of Young Immigrants Works Best  207  
     Cathy Van Tuijl and P. P. M. Leseman

12. Age and Second Language Acquisition Among Immigrants  235  
     Gillian Stevens

13. Bilingual Language Development and Academic Achievement Among Language Minority Students  249  
     Natalia Rakblin

     Jennifer E. Glick, Haruna M. Fukui, and Michael J. White

15. Bridging Multiple Worlds: Helping Immigrant Youth From Africa, Asia, and Latin America on Their Pathways to College Identities  301  
     Catherine R. Cooper, Robert G. Cooper, Nancy M. Trinh, Antoinette Wilson, and Elizabeth Gonzalez

16. Education of Newly Arrived Older Immigrants  323  
     Sunha Choi

17. Chinese Immigrant Parents’ Perspectives on Literacy Learning, Homework, and School–Home Communication  337  
     Guofang Li and Jiawen Wang

18. Immigration and Education for Pacific Island Children and Their Families: A Unique Challenge  355  
     Katherine T. Ratliffe

Index  379
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Liza Justina spent most of her children’s lives fleeing across the United States, from one domestic violence shelter to another. Each time the children’s father was released from prison, he would locate the family through relatives or mutual acquaintances and threaten them again. Liza had suffered a traumatic brain injury due to the domestic violence, did not have access to stable housing or food, and her children had rarely been able to live in any one location for more than a few months at a time. The day we met with her, however, her main concern was not for food or shelter or her medical condition—it was how she could best advocate for her son in his school program so that he could receive “good” education.

An individual’s or family’s wish to become well educated is a universal desire among immigrant and nonimmigrant families alike. The hope of good education is often an important part of a family’s decision to immigrate to the United States and is a common theme throughout this book. Yet, issues regarding education for immigrants in the United States remain unsettled today.

As early as 1923, the United States Supreme Court addressed issues related to immigration and education by finding unconstitutional a state law that criminalized the simple act of teaching a foreign language to a young child. In upholding the right of an individual to teach a foreign language to a child, the court noted the importance of education in the United States, stating, “American

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Name and minimal facts were altered to protect confidentiality.
people have always regarded education and [the] acquisition of knowledge as matters of supreme importance” (*Meyer v. Nebraska*, 262 U.S. 390, 400, 1923).²

Most immigrants who entered the United States legally could access public education after this time. But it was not until 1982 that the Supreme Court addressed the issue of whether a state must provide free public education to immigrant children who had *not* entered the United States legally. In *Plyler v. Doe*, the Supreme Court weighed fiscal issues, the best interests of children, and the fact that the children themselves had not entered the country voluntarily in determining that undocumented children should not be denied entrance to public schools (*Plyler v. Doe*, 457 U.S. 202, 1982). In its decision, the Court reasoned that the “[s]tigma of illiteracy will mark [immigrant children] for the rest of their lives. By denying these children a basic education, we deny them the ability to live within the structure of our civic institutions, and foreclose any realistic possibility that they will contribute in even the smallest way to the progress of our Nation” (*Plyler*, 457 U.S. at 223).³

Today, more than 30 years later, immigration and education issues remain at the forefront of the popular debate. In 2011, state legislators introduced over 1500 bills and resolutions related to immigration (National Conference of State Legislators, August 9, 2011). Several states have passed laws permitting unauthorized immigrant children to be considered eligible for in-state college tuition.⁴ Other states have declined to enact similar legislation⁵ and one state (Oklahoma) both enacted and later rescinded its law permitting in-state college tuition eligibility for unauthorized immigrant students (National Conference of State Legislatures, July 8, 2011). Nationally, Congress has debated various versions of legislation addressing in-state college tuition eligibility for unauthorized immigrant children since 2001.⁶

While many students encounter a variety of difficulties in school, immigrant students face the same difficulties while also handling issues related to poverty, language barriers, cultural differences, family illiteracy, or while escaping violence. This book contains the cultural psychology of immigration and education

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²The *Meyer* case involved the arrest and conviction of a teacher in Nebraska for the crime of teaching German in a parochial school (*Meyer*, 262 U.S. at 400). Nebraska had criminalized the teaching of Spanish, Italian, German, and French to children who had not attained eighth grade (*Meyer*, 262 U.S. at 401).

³The *Plyler* case involved the constitutionality of a decision by Texas to refuse public school entry to undocumented children from Mexico (*Plyler*, 457 U.S. 202, 1982).

⁴Connecticut, California, Illinois, Maryland, Wisconsin, Washington, Texas, Kansas, Nebraska, New Mexico, New York, and Utah (National Conference of State Legislators, July 8, 2011).

⁵Arizona, South Carolina, Indiana, Colorado, and Georgia (National Conference of State Legislators, July 8, 2011).

⁶DREAM (Development, Relief and Education for Alien Minors) Act 107th Congress: HR 1918; S. 1291 (2001); 108th Congress S. 1545, 109th Congress S. 2075; S. 774 (110th Congress), and S. 2205 (110th Congress). In the House: H.R. 1684 (108th Congress), H.R. 5131 (109th Congress), and H.R. 1275 (110th Congress).
issues, studies that examine the education success of immigrants as impacted on by their age, disability, family issues, or ethnicity, and a mix of personal stories illustrating the struggles faced by immigrants in the U.S. education system. Throughout each chapter, you will find reference to the universal theme of the high value that immigrants and their families place on education.

As legal aid lawyers, we see the effects of unsuccessful education experiences on our immigrant and nonimmigrant clients daily. If our client cannot read, he would not understand that he is signing a lease for illegal and unsafe housing for his family and he is less likely to challenge an employer who refuses to pay his wages after he has worked for months. A domestic violence victim who is in the United States legally but has little education is much less likely to go to a domestic violence shelter if she cannot understand the shelter literature or believes her abuser when he threatens to cause her to be deported if she leaves him, even though she is in the country legally.

As you explore immigration and education issues, keep in mind that these topics are not abstract academic debates, but rather important matters that heavily influence the lives of many families in the United States today—both immigrants and their children, as well as the communities they live in. Immigration and education topics remain in the news almost daily. As this Foreword was prepared, for example, Hispanic students began disappearing from schools in Alabama after a local court upheld the state law requiring schools to report the number of undocumented students. (Jay Reeves, *Hispanic students vanish from Alabama schools*, The Associated Press, September 30, 2011). The court’s ruling has had a profound effect not only on those children and families but also on their teachers, other students, and the local businesses that employ their parents. Consequently, I believe you will find the data and discussions in this volume to be timely and essential material if you wish to enter the immigration and education arena well informed.

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As I was preparing to write this Preface, an old issue of *Newsweek* came across my desk. Apparently, on May 12, 1947—that is, 65 years ago—*Newsweek* published an issue with a cover that featured Alice and Rosemary Landau (a mother and her little daughter), on the ship that brought them from Europe. Mrs. Landau’s native tongue was German (not Spanish or Chinese), but she arrived in the States in between two recessions (that of 1945 and 1948–49) and was greeted, as were and are now many other immigrants, by a heated debate about immigrants taking jobs away from Americans (Transatlantic Trends, 2010).

Not much has changed in this regard during the last 65 years, although the demographic make-up of both the society as a whole and its immigrant population have been transformed (Passel & Cohn, 2012). The subpopulation of immigrants to the United States today speak an estimated 460 languages in households across the country (Kindler, 2002). There is also an ever-increasing number of children speaking in their home an additional language to English; it has been estimated that over the last decade this number grew from 9% to 21% (U.S. Department of Education, 2010). Among these individuals, whose home language is not English, 62% speak Spanish, 19% some other Indo-European language, 15% some Asian or Pacific Island language, and the remaining 4% some other language (Shin & Komiski, 2010).

What has remained constant, however, is the diversity of the immigrant population. One of the dimensions of this diversity is education, which is greatly polarized. One pole is represented by highly educated immigrant adults, who constitute ~25% of the nation’s medical doctors, ~24% of college-educated science and engineering workers, and ~47% of scientists with high-level degrees (Portes & Rumbaut, 2006). The other pole represented by immigrant adults whose educational levels are substantially lower than those
of most U.S.-born members of their generation (Portes & Rumbaut, 2006). A substantial portion of the U.S. labor market (e.g., agriculture, service, construction) is hugely dependent on immigrants who are willing to accept “low-skill” jobs (Schumacher-Matos, 2011). And the scale between these poles is characterized by everything in between, with the tendency, however, for skilled immigrant adults to face dramatically decreasing employment opportunities and to experience unemployment, underemployment, and downward mobility (Davila, 2008; Lee & Westwood, 1996; Yakushko, Backhaus, Watson, Ngaruiya, & Gonzalez, 2008; Yost & Lucas, 2002). This tendency is even more pronounced among ethnic or racial minority adults (Catanzarite & Aguilera, 2002; Fernandez, 1998; Morales, 2009).

A sizable amount of variability in educational patterns and attainment is also present among children of immigrants (García Coll & Marks, 2011; Suárez-Orozco, Suárez-Orozco, & Todorova, 2008; Suárez-Orozco & Suárez-Orozco, 1995). It has been reported (Migration Policy Institute, 2011) that ~24% of school-age children in the United States are children of immigrants, with ~77% of them being U.S.-born (i.e., second-generation-citizen children) and the remaining 23% foreign-born (Mather, 2009). Of note also is that ~11% of U.S. public school students are classified as students for whom English is a second language (Migration Policy Institute, 2011).

This volume is situated at the junction of the issues related to immigration and education. It opens with an autobiographical essay, a personal account of a life journey, by an immigrant to the States, Dr. Flora Keshishian. In a marvelous way, this essay sets the scene and draws the reader into the essential story of this collection by providing a personal context for every scientific theme that is to follow.

Dr. Jeanne Batalova and Aaron Terrazas establish the discourse by considering the historical fluctuations of U.S. immigration policy. The chapter also presents the general profile of immigrants in the United States and outlines the major contemporary debates on current immigration policy.

Dr. John Berry’s chapter constructs a theoretical framework for considering immigration in the context of psychological science. The chapter discusses the concepts of acculturation and integration and presents analyses of related strategies and policies.

Drs. Xu Zhao and Hirokazu Yoshikawa continue the discourse on immigration in the context of psychology, providing, in particular, a developmentalist perspective to this discourse. Specifically, it focuses on how citizenship status affects the development of immigrant youth and investigates the impact of different legal statuses on family environments and the educational opportunities of young immigrants.

The chapter by Dr. Harald Weiss considers the immigration–crime relationship. This piece both widens the discussion by introducing a sociological perspective and narrows it by focusing on the issue of crime.

The understanding of the relationships between immigrants and U.S. society at large is further developed in the chapter by Drs. Verónica Sevillano
and Susan Fiske. They contextualize the discussion within the current economic climate and help the reader to contemplate the many factors that shape perceptions of immigrant groups.

Dr. Ramaswami Mahalingam’s contribution to the volume changes the plane of the discussion by refocusing it from immigrants in general to Asian immigrants in particular. In the course of his discussion of the model minority myth, Mahalingam outlines a framework for the psychology of immigrants with an emphasis on the psychological impact of idealized representations.

The exploration of the role of race and ethnicity in the subjective experiences of immigrants is continued by Drs. Krista Perreira, Lisa Kiang, and Stephanie Potochnick. These authors summarize the literature on ethnic discrimination in the United States and its impact on the education of immigrant children. They define discrimination, describe methods that are used and/or can be used to “detect” it, as well as its direct and indirect effects.

The mental health of U.S. immigrants, touched on earlier by Perreira and colleagues, is developed further in the chapter by Drs. Richard Cervantes and Tiffany Shelby. These authors select Latinos as their population of particular interest. They also identify barriers and concerns that arise in the process of providing care for middle- and high-school students.

Drs. Gillian King, Victoria Esses, and Nassisse Solomon further develop the issue of immigrant physical and mental health, putting a special emphasis on meeting children’s special needs.

Drs. Van Tuijl and P. P. M. (Paul) Leseman continue and intensify the focus on children. They are particularly interested in both the use and effects of care and educational provision. Moreover, these authors are particularly interested in studying the school context for immigrant children—the resources, the cultural sensitivity of teachers, parent involvement, and teacher–parent partnerships.

Dr. Gillian Stevens returns the discourse to a large unit of analyses—that is, adult immigrants. She explores the connection between age and foreign language acquisition and discusses the two major ways in which the implications of learning English as a second language can materialize.

Dr. Natalia Rakhlin retains the readers’ attention on the issue of bilingualism. In her chapter, Dr. Rakhlin reviews the literature on bilingual language development and academic achievement.

Drs. Jennifer Glick, Haruna Fukui, and Michael White continue to focus on education, but now—post-secondary. While maintaining this focus, the authors differentiate post-secondary trends using demographic characteristics of immigrants from national datasets.

Drs. Catherine Cooper, Robert Cooper, Nancy Trinh, Antoinette Wilson, and Elizabeth Gonzalez keep the discussion on post-secondary education going, but focus in particular on exploring the college identities of immigrants from particular parts of the world—Africa, Asia, and Latin America.

Dr. Sunha Choi takes the discussion to a new layer in her chapter, which is about newly arrived older immigrants in the United States. The chapter illustrates both the stress and excitement of arriving in the United States later in life.
Dr. Guofang Li and Jiawen Wang re-set the discourse of the book into an as yet undiscussed portion of an immigrant child’s life—an overview of Chinese immigrant parents’ perspectives on their children’s education. Thus, the volume makes another age-related jump, now focusing on pre-K and K levels of education.

Finally, in the last chapter of the book, Dr. Katherine Ratcliffe offers a discussion of immigration and education for Pacific Island children and their families.

Together, these chapters provide a cohesive collection and a strong contribution to the field—something that we all hope for. The volume is also complementary to the APA’s Presidential Task Force Report on Immigration (American Psychological Association & Presidential Task Force on Immigration, 2012).

Working on this book was a wonderful learning experience, inspired by, in particular, the Foundation for Child Development and its former president, Dr. Ruby Takanishi. It is with gratitude to the Foundation and to Ruby that I present this book to its readership.

Elena L. Grigorenko

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REFERENCES


U.S. Immigration and Education
CHAPTER 1

Transculturation: The Dichotomous Journey of an International Student From Iran

FLORA KESHISHIAN

A GLIMPSE OF MY LIFE IN IRAN

I was born an immigrant, in Abadan, a city in the province of Khuzestan in south-western Iran near the Persian Gulf.

Iran is a multicultural society composed of many religious, ethnic, and national groups. These include Afghans, Bakhtyaris, Baluchis, Kurds, Persians, Turks, and Turkmens; as well as non-Muslim groups such as Arabs, Armenians, Assyrians, Baha’is, Jews, and Zoroastrians.¹ I am Armenian by ethnicity, a descendant of Christian Armenians who immigrated to Iran in the early 17th century during the reign of Shah Abbas.² Growing up, I only read or heard about Armenia, to me a close yet faraway homeland.³ In 2001, about a decade after its independence from the Soviet Union, I visited the Republic of Armenia for the first time as a tourist. The moment I stood on Armenian soil and heard my mother tongue spoken all around me (although somewhat more sophisticated than my version of it) and saw the street signs mainly in Armenian, I felt at home instantly; I felt safe.

³Armenia was one of the republics of the former Soviet Union for nearly 70 years (1921–1991) and, as such, traveling to and from Armenia was not allowed.
I am also Iranian by nationality. I have one brother and eight sisters, two of whom were married before I was born. I am the second to last child in the family. My father was a chef at the oil company where many British and Americans worked, and where he learned to speak a smattering of English. He had a few years of education, some in culinary school. My mother, a homemaker, was non-literate until the age of 64 when she learned to write Armenian, her mother tongue. She was an oral poet. Blending her subtle sense of humor with her poetic skills, she improvised verses reflecting her difficult though colorful life. Borrowing words from the Armenian language and a few others spoken in Iran, including Kurdish and Lori, she created fascinating and engaging poems for different occasions. Her poems, which never failed to rhyme, gave significance to otherwise insignificant moments.

Some of our neighbors in Abadan were Arabs, mostly Muslim and some Christian. Owing to the nature of my father’s job we lived in different parts of the country. When I was 6 we moved to Tehran, the capital, to a lower-middle-class/poor neighborhood, predominantly Armenian, with a few neighbors of Arab, Azerbaijani, and Kurdish backgrounds as well. Some of our Persian neighbors spoke fluent Armenian. All the kids played together on a street called Bebboudi (the Persian word for “well-being”).

I received my elementary education at the neighborhood Armenian school called Nyri (the ancient name for Armenia). There, I studied in my native Armenian, as well as Farsi, or Persian, the official language of Iran. I walked to school with my sisters and friends, and on the way we bought all sorts of goodies such as dried fruits, nuts, and dried chickpeas with raisins, tamarind, and sunflower seeds. We wore navy blue uniforms with white collars, and every morning we would line up in the schoolyard to do warm-up exercises before marching to our classrooms. In the first and second grades we would present our hands, palms down, to show the teacher that our nails were clipped and clean. In many of the classes the teachers, all Armenian-speaking, taught us in Persian. In classes such as Armenian History or Armenian Grammar teachers spoke Armenian only. We revered our teachers and highly valued their opinions of us. In a way, we considered them our school parents. I really wanted to make them proud of me, just as I wanted my parents to be; so I tried to do well in school.

My best friend since second grade was Ashkhen (the name of a queen in ancient Armenia). She lived nearby so we spent a lot of time at each other’s house, more so as our parents also were friends. Her father had his own store where he sold Persian carpets. As we grew older, we began hanging out with other teenage girls in the neighborhood. Since we had hardly any extracurricular activities, unlike many kids in rich neighborhoods, we would loiter on the street to joke around, talk about school, or subtly glance at boys as they marched by.

Premarital sex was frowned upon in Iran, so we did not even think about it. Those who had a boyfriend or girlfriend would hardly ever kiss in public, even if they knew they were going to marry. This strict social environment helped many of us to discover the power and beauty of platonic love.

After graduating from sixth grade, I attended an all-girls Persian high school called Dara (Persian for “wealthy”) about a mile from my house in a predominantly Muslim neighborhood. Our classes were all in Persian, although the curriculum also included English and Arabic languages, as well as religion (Islam) lessons for Muslim students. The classes consisted of about 30 students, primarily Muslim Shiite, some Sunni, as well as Zoroastrian, Baha’i, Christian (Armenian or Assyrian), and a few Jewish. My best friends in high school were Ashkhen and Azar Haghighatgoo (whose first name is ancient Persian for “fire,” her last name “one who speaks the truth”). Azar’s mother was an immigrant from Ganja, Azerbaijan, and her father a native Iranian. We spoke Farsi with each other. Many people thought that she and I were sisters, as we looked alike and spent a lot of time together.

Soon after graduating from high school in Tehran, I began working as a translator and interpreter at an embassy at age 18. I secured a job easily, since I had also studied English in high school, as well as at the Iran–America Society, for 3 years, and earned a Senior Proficiency. My next and last job in Tehran was executive secretary at a travel agency, with a good salary. Although I enjoyed working and having financial independence, my main goal was to continue education. To attend university in Iran, I had to achieve a high score in Konekoor, a nationwide university acceptance test taken by students in the field they wished to pursue. I failed the test; but even if I had not, considering that there were way too many applicants and few universities at the time (mostly government-owned and therefore free of charge), I am not sure how much chance I had of being admitted. So to reach my goal I continued working for a few years to earn enough money to at least begin studying abroad. I came to the United States as an international student in 1978, became a resident in 1994, a naturalized citizen in 2001, earned a PhD in 1995, and have been teaching Communication since 1989.

A GLIMPSE OF MY LIFE AS AN INTERNATIONAL STUDENT IN THE UNITED STATES

Queens College of the City University of New York was the school I chose to attend, mainly for practical reasons: It was a block away from where my maternal relatives lived, and the only place I had applied to and been admitted. For the first 2 months, I stayed at my uncle’s single bedroom apartment where he, my aunt, and their two sons lived. Since they were kind enough not to charge me rent, I tried to compensate by doing chores around the house and paying my aunt a small amount for food. My cousins slept on the couch in the living room and I on the floor. Once school started and I needed more quiet time to study, I had to move out. I rented a small room with two windows in a one-bedroom apartment where a 78-year-old Russian-Armenian woman lived. The room I rented
was actually her bedroom. A few months later, I began sharing the room with Soussan (“Lily of the Valley” in Persian), a Persian student I had just met on campus. We were roommates for close to a year. In that tiny room we had everything we needed to live: two beds given to us by friends, a three-shelf bookcase, a small table with four chairs, a coat hanger, a tiny black-and-white television placed on top of a small pantry, and a mirror. We did not have any closet so we kept our extra clothes in our suitcases under our beds. It was as if we were always ready to move to yet another apartment. We shared the kitchen and the bathroom with our landlady. The apartment had roaches, but we sprinkled boric acid powder all around our room to prevent them from coming in, and always kept our place clean.

Once I had secured a place to live, I had to think about making some money, for the few thousand dollars that I had saved in Iran would last me only so long. I had to pay tuition and doctors’ bills and buy food, among other expenses. Considering that my parents could not financially support me—nor would I expect them to—I was willing to take almost any job in order to survive. I worked at the coat checkroom of a restaurant/nightclub owned by a distant relative where my salary was the tips I received, sometimes $3.00 for a 7-hour shift (5:00 p.m. to 1:00 a.m.). I then began teaching the Persian language to two U.S.-born Iranian boys. One day I walked into their apartment, located on the 12th floor of an apartment building, to find the younger boy dressed as Superman and announcing to the world that he was going to jump out the window. The mother was in bed each time I went there; I think she was suffering from depression. Fearing the possible consequences of the boy’s powerful imagination, I quit the job that day. Then, for a month, I worked as a salesperson at a fast-food restaurant selling fried chicken and ice cream. I also worked as a delivery person at a jewelry company in Manhattan in the summer. Once school resumed, Barbara, at the time my best American friend who worked at a large bookstore in Manhattan, helped me to get a job there as a salesperson. This lasted for 7\(\frac{1}{2}\) years, until the second year of my doctoral studies. There, I mostly stocked books, dusted the shelves, or worked as a cashier. Once Maureen, my very kind manager, was convinced that my accent would not deter any customers (and after I refused to work as a cashier because a robber nearly killed me before he robbed my register), she let me work at the information desk, which I felt was quite an achievement. I liked the job both because I worked with Barbara and many other well-read and good-natured people, and because being surrounded by books helped me feel intellectually satisfied.

Eventually, my friend and roommate, Soussan, two other Iranian friends, Soheila (“star,” a girl’s name in Persian) and Mariam (in reference to the Biblical figures, Mary [mother of Christ] and Mary Magdalene [disciple of Jesus], and “Tuberose” in Persian) and I moved into a one-bedroom garden-apartment near Queens College. For us it was yet another step toward independence. We all slept in the bedroom, three of us in our own beds and one on the floor. Although we had all grown up in Tehran, we were all from different parts of the country. My roommates were Muslims, I Christian, and none of us religious.
Every night, we sat on our beds for a while to unwind and chat in Persian, sometimes adorned with mispronounced English words, about the day—school, family, job, boyfriend…. We laughed a lot together, often at ourselves and daily incidents that had to do with our language deficiencies or misunderstandings about the culture. One such incident occurred when I tried to call the maintenance office to report that the fuse in the outlet blew out when I had tried to plug in the iron. Since the words “outlet” and “blow out” were not yet in my English vocabulary, I described the situation as “fire came out of the holes in the wall,” until the person on the phone said: “Oh, you mean the outlet blew out?” Soussan and I laughed a lot. I did not mind making a fool of myself but was happy about learning the two new words. Laughing at ourselves helped us to reassure each other and ease the pain of the stress we were silently enduring, as well as helping to thicken our skins against possible harsh comments by others about our cultural “deficiencies.”

At times, my roommates and I also cried together about the difficulties of life, especially regarding family issues and relationships. I remember the indescribable devastation I felt when I heard the heart-wrenching news of my father’s death. It was the first major loss in my life. My brother had already called to inform Soussan. As soon as I opened the door, she was already crying. She mourned with me—something I desperately needed at the time. From that day on, I felt she was one of my sisters.

My roommates and I lived together for more than 2 years. Our shared lives planted the seeds of a lifelong friendship. Today I consider these friends, as well as Azita (the name of a Zoroastrian princess), another friend we met in college, as my family members in the United States. Barbara, who had bonded with my roommates as well, directly and indirectly taught us a lot about the American way of life. Sometimes she would make fun of our accents, in response to which we would get even by challenging her with Persian words. We learned from each other through laughter. During those years, since I had to work while going to school, I did most of my homework on buses and subways. To this day, I tell my students that I got my degrees on New York City public transportation.

**Language Barrier**

Since the pursuit of higher education was the main reason I had left Iran, from the beginning I made school the focus of my life, still with an incessant desire to make my parents and teachers proud of me. I was happy to start my new school life and wanted to do everything right. But happiness was soon replaced by a growing anxiety from the moment I tried to acquaint myself with the word “credit” (as in a three-credit course, for example), which sounded so abstract to me. Not being able to quite grasp the word, I felt frustrated and cried; as I did

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5As a complex concept, culture can refer to almost anything. In this essay, and borrowing from Raymond Williams, I refer to culture as a “total way of life.”
when, as a first grader, I tried to copy the Armenian and Persian alphabet but could not make them look perfect, just as the teacher had written them. When I started college, I had not even heard about or imagined the kinds of problems one might experience moving to a culture different from one’s own.

My major difficulty in school was the language, the means by which I was supposed to connect with my surroundings and have my needs met. My English seemed pretty good at Iran-America Society in Tehran, but perhaps because I was comparing myself with my non-English-speaking classmates, or because my American teachers there taught us mainly formal English and spoke slowly so we could learn the language. In any case, speaking the language with native speakers in New York was quite different. In college, on the other hand, students spoke mostly informal English and they spoke fast. My professors used more formal English, but I think I often did not understand them either because I was always so stressed. Sometimes, I understood the so-called bigger words better than the simple ones used in casual conversations (such as “outlet” or “blow out”). It used to take me a long time to read and comprehend assignments. I was so worried about schoolwork that I would take my readings with me everywhere, even when I visited a relative for dinner.

Taking notes during lectures was an ordeal because I could not understand most of the words the professor uttered; and even when I did understand them, I sometimes did not know how to take notes effectively. I wanted to write down everything, but I could not. By the time I managed to write down one idea, I had already missed the next one. I felt great agony during each class session—because I was trying to juggle learning new words, comprehending the message, and taking notes simultaneously in English, my third language. Not surprisingly, studying, too, drained a lot of my energy. When I tried to review my notes, they hardly made any sense because they mostly consisted of phrases or words, with some in Armenian or Persian in cases when I understood the English words but did not know their correct spelling, and some in drawings or my visual interpretations of the professor’s ideas; there were hardly any comprehensible complete sentences.

In the midst of all this and not always intentionally, I tried to learn other aspects of the culture by watching my classmates’ omnipresent nonverbal communicative behaviors, which further distracted and confused me. To make sense of my surroundings, I used to compare and contrast it with my only point of reference: the all-female high school I attended in Iran. In our classrooms, just as in elementary school, there were extended desks and benches on which three or four students sat. Ashkhen, Azar, and I always sat together in the front row, partly because we were shorter than many of our classmates, but mainly to be closer to our teachers. Each day, a loud bell announced the beginning of classes, signaling us to line up according to our grades and march to our respective classes. When the teacher, male or female, entered the classroom, we all rose to greet and express our respect for them. We honored our teachers, even the ones who were very strict, for their wisdom and poise. Everyone, including our parents, looked up to the teachers.
Teachers called students by their last names. In my Natural Sciences class, Ashkhen and I, who were pretty good at drawing, copied diagrams from the textbook onto the blackboard to make it easier for the teacher to lecture. My Persian Literature teacher, Mr. Haghverdi Naseri, was my favorite. I liked it when he sat near me or one of my friends in the front row as he discussed the poems and smoked cigarettes. We memorized poems in high school, just as we did in elementary school, and recited them during final exams. Today, decades later, I realize the great, though subtle, purpose those poems were meant to serve: to instill in us some of the values that the culture cherished, such as kindness, love, respect, integrity, and to celebrate the significance of the art of poetry in the society. Iranians habitually recite lines from poets such as Rumi or Hafez, in daily conversations—a tendency I have and like very much to this day.

In high school we were not allowed to wear any makeup or nail polish; those of us who did would be sent home by the superintendent. We all wore burgundy uniforms. Some of my religious friends wore a chador (veil) over their uniforms, but they took them off once they entered the schoolyard. Many of us wore the same uniform for two or three consecutive school years, or as long as the hem size allowed us to. And I did not make a fuss over the beige faded hemlines of the previous years, as long as the uniform was clean, which I made sure it always was. Most of my classmates were in the same situation anyway, though in the ninth grade two of them (sisters) never wore uniforms with faded hemlines. Their father was a high-ranking officer always dressed in military uniform and, according to some of my classmates, a relative of the Shah. They were so rich that a driver would drop them off at school every morning and pick them up in the afternoon in a shiny black stretch-limousine. Most of the teachers were quite lenient toward them and maybe that is why they often looked happy.

Thus, sitting in a huge lecture hall that looked like a movie at Queens College with over 300 students, girls and boys, I could not help but notice what seemed weird to me: Students walked in late, wore shorts, slammed the door behind them, put their feet up facing the professor, or ate food and read the newspaper during lectures, as though the professor did not exist. Sometimes, usually before the lecturer came in, some boys and girls kissed each other. In the beginning I was amused by all this, but slowly began feeling inadequate and depressed, because nothing they did made sense to me. And nothing I did seemed right. It was as if I were a child trying to learn to crawl all over again while everyone else seemed to be running. But crawling keeps the child/immigrant close to earth, forcing him or her to notice things about the host culture that the natives may overlook. After all, as members of culture we learn to live it rather than scrutinize it. When in a culture different from one’s own, one often dissects it.

With all these distractions around me in the classroom, it was no wonder that my lecture notes came out gibberish. It was good though that we, “foreign” students, convened daily in the school cafeteria to sort things out for
ourselves. Each round table there served as an enclave or a haven for students from a particular country—Iran, Israel, Greece, Bangladesh, just name it, where we all tried to make sense of our surroundings in our native tongues and to create a pseudo-home for ourselves. And most of us smoked cigarettes.

U.S.–Iran Political Climate, Mass Media, and Trauma

The beginning of my college life in New York coincided with the outbreak of the Islamic Revolution in Iran which ended the 2,500-year monarchy in the country, ousted the Shah, and established the Islamic Republic of Iran in early 1979. The word was that the new government did not consider Art as a legitimate major of study for Iranian students abroad, at least those who were to receive any financial support from their parents living in Iran. Although I was going to be my sole financial provider, I decided to choose another major, Communication Arts (with Cinema Studies and French Literature as minors), just in case someday I might need my parents’ help. Many of my Iranian friends opted to study Computer Science, both because the Iranian government approved it as a major and because it did not require much English writing. We hardly thought of selecting a field of study that would later bring us financial rewards, as many students tend to do nowadays.

Toward the end of my first semester I realized that these cultural differences or choosing a major of study would be the least of my concerns. On November 4, 1979, following the Islamic Revolution, 53 Americans were held hostage in Iran. Suddenly, the “hostage crisis” became the focus of the news media and thus overnight Iran became ill-famed. For 444 days we watched images of the blindfolded American hostages followed by masses of angry Iranians demonstrating on the streets of Iran shouting “Death to America!” For 444 days I watched these images and heard the media labeling Iran “evil enemy,” and Iranians “fanatic” and “backward.”

As Iranian students, we had barely begun to make sense of the revolution and the hostage incident when the war between Iran and Iraq commenced. It lasted 8 years and cost a million lives on both sides. The trauma we all experienced then was indescribable. We desperately wanted to learn the fate of our families in Iran, but relations between the two countries were cut off (at least that was the impression both governments gave the public) and so were the phone lines and mail system. Everyday, at least for a few minutes, some of us would go to the college cafeteria to seek news of the country’s situation and to indirectly console one another. In addition to my concerns about schoolwork and language difficulties, job, and obtaining a work permit, among other things, I now worried about my family members. All the horrid images I saw on TV became magnified in my subconscious. I kept having nightmares about my parents and other family members, terrified that they would be killed in the bombings. Slowly I developed depression affecting my schoolwork and making me feel even more destitute.
Desperate I found out about the counseling center on campus and took advantage of their services, which I considered indispensible. It was as if my life situation was forcing me to focus on myself before I could connect with or relate to my environment. During my counseling sessions I cried as I told the counselor my never-ending stories about my school difficulties, homesickness, alienation, childhood memories, the awkwardness I felt in my relationships, my worries about the situation in Iran, among other pressing issues. Seeing a counselor on campus became a crucial part of my life as an international student. I found having a so-called stranger patiently listen to my problems and gingerly handle my insecurities quite precious and significant to my survival in the United States. Back in Iran, when I was upset about something, I had my family and friends for support. Seeing a counselor or psychoanalyst was almost unheard of or reserved for those who were considered insane. Although I felt rather privileged to receive my counselor’s undivided attention, and had noticed that my American best friend openly talked about her therapist, I did not speak of my counseling sessions with friends and relatives; I was afraid they would think less of me. Today, decades later, my friends and I realize that many of us indeed benefited from school counseling centers. These counseling sessions helped me to maintain sanity throughout my school life in the United States. Looking back I also realize that the main underlying themes that surfaced in these sessions were homesickness and a feeling of rejection. Homesickness was what I felt emotionally, but intellectually I was unaware of it. I did not know, as I do today, that homesickness is a more or less natural part of the immigration process. And the rejection that I felt had resulted from what I perceived as anti-Iranian discrimination fueled by the mass media. Here are examples of moments when I felt discriminated as a student, an educator, and a citizen.

Soon after the hostage incident, we began hearing stories of discrimination against Iranians, which were quite serious and scary. We all lived in fear both because of the bombings in Iran and their possible consequences for our family members, and because of the constant threat of being deported. I remember that I, like the other Iranians in the United States, including students, had to go to the immigration office to prove to the authorities there that I had nothing to do with the situation in Iran. I was saddened to see various Iranian students’ intimidated faces as they responded to the officers interrogating them.

People often asked me where I was from. When I said “Iran,” they would comment, “Oh, wow!” or “You don’t look like an Iranian” (by which they probably meant I don’t wear a *chador*) or “Things must be quite different there.” Uncomfortable about these comments, I became strategic, if you will, in my daily conversations by introducing myself as “an Armenian from Iran” to separate myself from other Iranians. In this way, feeling guilt and resentment, I tried to draw the questioner’s attention more to my Armenian heritage than my Iranian nationality. I felt bad about denying the Iranian part of my identity but did not know any better way to protect myself. But soon I realized that many others did the same. Actually, to this day, one of my relatives, a hairdresser in New York who is of Assyrian heritage and was born in Iran, hides the
Iranian part of her identity (as I did as a student). She introduces herself as Russian, her parents’ nationality (though I am sure she would not have done so during the Cold War). Apparently, she had heard some of her customers openly condemning Iranians and was afraid to lose them should she reveal her true identity.

In the late 1980s during my doctoral studies, I worked as a research assistant in a center that organized presentations and workshops on AIDS in different institutions. My colleague, a young American graduate student of European descent, had been scheduled for the assignment to take place somewhere in Brooklyn. The person in charge of scheduling abruptly decided that I should do the assignment instead. I asked why the sudden change, since I had already made other commitments for the day. Her response was, “Because it’s a rough neighborhood and I’m afraid to send him there.” I suppose I could have taken her comment as a complement, meaning I was tough and strong, but I did not. I then asked her, “Are you implying that his life is more precious than mine?” She replied: “No, it’s just that he is not familiar with that kind of neighborhood.” Topping her over-generalized racist remark with a sexist one, I said: “And I’m a woman from Iran, who’s going to protect me?” It hurt me to see a colleague consider my life unworthy.

In the middle of all these, I also had to cope with major family losses. In addition to worrying about my family in Iran due to the Iraq–Iran war, I became highly concerned about my father who was suffering from colon cancer. I was quite close to my father. He believed in me and appreciated my perseverance ever since I was a little girl. Growing up, I had a lot of respect for both my parents and always wanted to make them proud of me. I was truly hoping that they would live long enough to at least see me graduate. My mother passed away 3 years after I had graduated; and my father during my second year doctoral studies and 2 days prior to my comprehensive exam. On the evening that I heard the heart-wrenching news of my father’s death, I had been invited to my aunt’s house so that she and my other relatives would tactfully give me the news. First, my uncle asked me about my father’s health. As I tried to explain that I was hoping he would recover, he informed me that my father had already passed away. It was as if the world had suddenly ended. Losing a parent is hard enough, but much harder when you have not seen him for years, especially if you have no family members with whom to mourn the loss. During his illness and after his death I used to try to feel his pain, and my imagination was strong enough to make me sick for several years.

The emotions I felt affected my schoolwork. In fact, I did so poorly on my comprehensive exam that one of my professors called me into her office to express her doubts about my ability to complete my doctoral studies. She said, “Can you imagine if I were to try to get a PhD in Turkish?” Since education was the reason for which I had left Iran, and because I respected my professors and their opinions meant a lot to me, I was devastated; I felt furious, ashamed, belittled, rejected, helpless, and alienated by her remark. It was certainly different from “She is our token Iranian,” a label that another professor had bestowed
upon me when I was admitted into the program. In any case, years of hardship combined with a deep desire to be accepted gave me enough strength to reply with great conviction: “With the difference that I speak fluent English and you don’t speak a word of Turkish.” Fear of being expelled from the program, in addition to feeling like a failure as well as discriminated must have forced me to persevere because, of the nine students in my cohort, I was the fourth to earn a PhD. I still remember the joy I felt giving the news to the professor. It was as if I wanted to tell her, “You were wrong to judge me like that, but thank you for not believing in me because it inspired me to succeed.” The respect and appreciation I had for her told me to settle on, “I did it.”

I also experienced discrimination as an educator. One of my teaching jobs was at a small department at a university where most of the students came from affluent European backgrounds. Dressed in a dark green suit and a dressy black shirt, which I thought were the best in my wardrobe, I attended one of the university’s dinner parties. Noticing one of my students at a nearby table, I went to greet her and introduce myself to her parents. The mother looked at me and asked, “Could you bring us some water?” Smiling, I extended my hand and said, “Hello, I am Dr. Keshishian, your daughter’s professor.” She then replied, “Oh, I thought you were one of the servers.” In a way, her mistake did not quite surprise me, since there was hardly any person of gray shade like myself at the party, at the university, or in the neighborhood. My logic told me that she’s probably used to seeing servers as “Other.” As I went back to my table, I could not help but feel sorry for her narrow-mindedness, if it were indeed an honest mistake; but I also felt deeply saddened by it. I thought to myself, I have lived in this country for so long and have earned the highest academic degree, yet I am being mistaken for a laborer in what the society considers a menial job.

In the same department, I once met with the dean and his assistant to discuss a work-related issue. At some point, the dean made a comment I did not like. Seeing my reaction he then said to the assistant, “We shouldn’t make Flora angry because she may send some terrorists to get back at us.” Shocked, I responded, “That wasn’t nice.” He then laughed nervously saying, “Oh, I was just joking,” and instructing the assistant, “leave that part out.” I then thought of a Persian proverb, “Be har che begandad namakash zannand, vye be roozi keh begandad namak” which roughly translates: “You use salt to prevent things from rotting, but woe when the salt itself is rotten.” I felt helpless, angry, alienated, stereotyped, as well as discriminated.

And, of course, it is hard to talk about perceived discrimination without mentioning the security searching at the airport. Since the horrid September 11th attacks on the Towers, like many other airport passengers I have often been searched at the airport prior to even reaching the metal detector. Some of my American friends tell me that I should not let it bother me, because they too are searched at the airport and it does not bother them. And I try to explain that the impact of our experiences is different; that to be treated as a suspect because of your appearance or last name or because you were born in...
a country that is considered an “enemy”—in a country that you consider home—is discriminatory and alienating.

I do not blame those who, perhaps unknowingly, discriminated against me, because they were most likely influenced by the mass media’s negative images of Iran and Iranians; they too were victims. By recounting these incidents I hope to show how I, as an immigrant from a vilified country, interpreted or was affected by their words and deeds. These incidents were like a strong hand pushing me back as I tried to feel at home in my host culture.

VISITING MY FAMILY IN AUSTRALIA AND IRAN AFTER YEARS

After finishing my doctoral dissertation, I decided to reward myself with the most precious gift—a trip to Sydney, Australia, to visit five of my sisters and their families for the first time in 17 years. Most of them moved there soon after the Iranian Islamic Revolution. We had exchanged letters during those years but hardly spoke on the phone because international phone calls were quite expensive at the time. And, naturally, many changes had occurred in the family: My younger sister married and had two children, some of my nieces and nephews too had married and had their own children, two of my brothers-in-law had passed away, one of my sisters and two nieces had been divorced. The most important thing that had helped me survive on my own was my family’s love for me and my love for them. However, as I prepared for my trip (i.e., by working as an adjunct teaching five classes at three institutions), I became incredibly anxious about the visit, so much so that I developed rashes on my skin. Coming from a big family and having to learn to be independent in almost all aspects of my life had changed me. Moreover, being the only family member who went to college and whose life revolved around school, I knew no life other than academia, which I doubted they could relate to. So I began wondering whether my sisters would like the changes in me. The moment I saw them, I forgot about the hardship of my student life. I felt their unconditional love and realized that the bond between us had grown even stronger, partly because of the separation due to migration. I also realized that they too had changed, at least as far as survival in their host culture required. They actually threw a birthday party for me, the first I ever had, birthday parties for adults being uncommon in Iran (at least among the lower-middle class families and when I was growing up).

In 1997, I went back to Iran for the first time in 19 years. It was quite a fascinating experience for a number of reasons. Unlike the United States, where I normally take a cab to and from the airport when I travel, in Tehran I had at least 20 family members welcoming me with bouquets of flowers. Also, having lived in New York for all those years must have influenced my perception about a lot of things. For example, the street of the neighborhood where I had spent the first 24 years of my life suddenly seemed so narrow. Sometimes I also felt afraid that something would happen to stop me from coming back to the United States. After all, what the American TV had taught me about Iran was
quite a scary image: for 444 days, all I had seen on American TV were masses of angry Iranians marching on the streets of Iran, chanting “Death to America!” I had also heard that women who did not follow Iran’s Islamic dress code or wore makeup would get into trouble. I dressed properly in public and, since I also speak Persian fluently, I thought I would blend in and not stand out as a “stranger.” Yet, at times, people who did not know me could tell that I had come from the west. One day I asked a Persian woman sitting next to me on the bus how she knew that I came from the United States. With a kind smile she replied, “You walk with self-confidence.” There were also times when the people I spoke with felt I had become “Americanized.” My thought at those moments was the saying in colloquial Persian, “Az indja roondeh, az oondja moondeh” which, in the context of immigration, would mean that the immigrant belongs in neither their host culture nor their home culture.

I enjoyed every second I spent in Iran. Everyday there was some event to attend (dinner party at a friend’s house, spending the weekend at a relative’s villa, going to a third cousin’s child’s christening, running into an old friend on the street, etc.). As much as I appreciated these invitations and the time with my family and friends, every now and then I also longed for solitude, so I would just sit in a quiet spot by myself—a gesture that signified sadness to them. My life in the United States had also taught me to be self-reliant and independent, another tendency my family and friends could not quite understand. One day, after I had fallen ill with the flu, one of my sisters took care of me as if I were her little child. Although not quite used to it, I accepted her kindness gratefully. She wondered what I would normally do in a similar situation back in New York. Rather moved, I told her that I would place a few glasses of hot water with lemon and honey by my bed so I would not have to get up frequently, and rest until I felt better. Tearful she could not believe that nobody would come to help me. Maybe deep down I agree with her because each time I fall ill I cry a little, wishing I had someone to take care of me. Toward the end of my one-month trip, I realized that I missed being in the United States and enjoying the little freedoms I sometimes take for granted. I missed my solitude, which gives me time to read and write, reflect, and do artwork.

IN RETROSPECT

This autobiographical essay was drawn from a previous article.6 I first wrote a draft of the paper as a doctoral student and found the process of reliving the experience so difficult that it took me a few months to actually finish writing it. Each time I sat by the computer to write, I cried. When I read it in class in front of my peers and professor, I cried. After presenting it at a conference, I put the paper aside,
partly because I found the process too draining. A few years later, the university where I used to teach at the time, asked me to mentor a group of international students who had just been admitted there. To this day, I vividly remember these students as they walked in. They looked confused, lost. I suddenly saw myself in them. It was as if they had a lot to say or ask but did not know where to begin. To me, their faces screamed alienation and thus provided me with an impetus to publish the paper no matter what. Although more than two decades have passed since I wrote the first draft of that paper and a decade since I published the article, I still felt similar emotions as I wrote this essay. At times, I found myself walking toward the TV set or trying to call a friend or relative, anything to help me escape some of the memories. But this time I realize that, even though my immigration process has been difficult, it has also been invaluable. I appreciate the precious gifts I have gained in my journey: an education that has helped increase my confidence; friends whom I consider a family; students, as well as professors, who continue to teach me priceless life lessons; and hardships that have made me resilient and have increased my understanding of, and compassion for, people in general, including students, especially international students.

My immigration process has also helped me realize that culture is like a piece of artwork, which, in order to really see, you need to look at from a distance. Thus, it helped me to not only learn about the U.S. culture by looking at it as an outsider, but to see my Armenian and Persian backgrounds more clearly and to value, and in some cases question, what they taught me. My transculturation has helped me create for myself a unique culture comprising different, somewhat selected, aspects of my three backgrounds. The way I perceive the world and conduct my life today were undoubtedly shaped by my Armenian and Persian backgrounds which bequeathed me a way of life that taught me to cherish the family and community, value education, be modest, have integrity and respect, and extend kindness to all.

Who I am today was also influenced by my American background, introducing me to precious cultural values such as independence. As difficult as it was for me to leave my big family and my familiar way of life behind, being an international student/immigrant in the United States taught me to be independent. I take pleasure in providing for myself, living by myself, living more or less as I wish, and making my own decisions. Independence has made me stronger. I have also come to value a certain degree of individualism, a manifestation of which was my going to a counselor. As an immigrant here I have also had the sweet taste of daily freedoms regarding what major of study to choose, how to dress, whom to befriend, and so on. But the freedom I have come to cherish the most, despite its limitations, is freedom of speech—one of the cornerstones of democracy. This essay itself is an illustration of such freedom.

In my study, as I sit by the computer to write a conclusion for this essay, I notice the things with which I have surrounded myself: books, some in Armenian, Persian, and French; photos of family members and friends, a couple of handmade rugs from Iran and one designed with the Armenian alphabet; and other artwork including a handmade horse and dolls my mother made when she came to the United States as well as my own creations; souvenirs from
Australia; family videotapes…. I must have collected them consciously or unconsciously because they are, in part, a reflection of my identity, and because they connect me to my family and my past. When I look out the window, the silence on the street inspires me to think about my neighbors’ children in Armenia or Iran who played ball in the street while their grandparents sat on the stoop to chat. The loud noise these children made was soft music to my ear. To me, these seemingly mundane scenes are expressions of community that bring me warmth and safety. I also miss the everyday kindness that most people in Armenia extend to one another whether they are in a minibus overloaded with passengers or in a food market. I miss the hospitality that is so common in Iran. When I am abroad, however, I miss my everyday freedoms in the United States. I long for my solitude. I am happy to be able to navigate each of my three cultures though I cannot quite settle in any of them. I feel I am whole in each of my three cultures yet fragmented in all of them. I am an immigrant in all three cultures. Paradoxically, my position of not quite belonging has a universal significance in that, ultimately, we are all visitors, guests, and migrants to this world longing to feel at home wherever we go and to feel one with the Universe, through our life journeys; but that is a topic for another essay.

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