

# Journalist Memoirs and the Iranian Diaspora: Truth, Professional Ethics, and Objectivity between Political and Personal Narratives

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## Introduction

While interviewing Jon Stewart for Voice of America upon the release of Stewart's adaptation of journalist Maziar Bahari's *Rosewater* (2014),<sup>1</sup> Iranian-American blogger Saman Arbabi asks, "So, in a story, like, about Iran, how do you find the truth? I mean who decides what the truth is? And how do *you* find it?" Stewart admits that he

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<sup>1</sup>*Rosewater* was originally published in 2011 as *Then They Came for Me: A Family's Story of Love, Captivity, and Survival*.

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doesn't know what the truth is: "Well, I don't. [...] I have to own my inauthenticity; I'm not Iranian. So, no matter what I do, for someone who lives there, this will be a simplistic and reductive version of their life. But hopefully, from a Western performer for a Western audience, it's a more nuanced look into a country that we've called evil."<sup>2</sup> Stewart adds that for him, "the film is just a reflection of Maziar's book, which is again an interpretation of his experience. So within that, truth is probably a pretty elusive figure in all this. But I think the film is true to his reflection of his experience. And I think that's probably as close as I can get to what I wanted to achieve."<sup>3</sup>

This exchange between an Iranian blogger and an American satirist about how close an Iranian-Canadian journalist's memoir can get to the "truth" is emblematic of the complex ways in which journalism has been transformed by social media, by the increased legitimacy of satire as alternative journalism, and by the blurring of the line between personal experience and public information. Stewart is suggesting that average Americans are twice removed from the truth in other countries. They must settle for his cinematic interpretation of Bahari's narrated experience. This double remove from the truth raises important questions about the function of memoirs in the broader media landscape, especially in an era of displacement and diaspora.

This paper asks how diasporic Iranian prison memoirs penned by journalists deal with "the truth" as a moral, ethical, political, and professional category. At this intersection—of journalism, diaspora, prison narrative, and memoir—a number of important questions converge. How do memoirs function in contexts where the nature of truth is ideologically overdetermined by state propaganda on one side, and stereotypes about dissimulating non-Western cultures on the other? How is the nature of "truth" in memoirs, or the status of "objectivity" in journalism affected by the dual experience of diaspora and cap-

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<sup>2</sup>Saman Arbadi, "What Jon Stewart Learned about Iran from Rosewater," *Voice of America*, 14 November 2014, [www.voanews.com/media/video/what-jon-stewart-learned-about-iran-from-rosewater/2520986.html](http://www.voanews.com/media/video/what-jon-stewart-learned-about-iran-from-rosewater/2520986.html).

<sup>3</sup>Arbadi, "What Jon Stewart Learned..."

tivity that these journalists' memoirs relate? What is the best way to classify certain memoirs in terms of genre when they can fall into more than one category? Specifically, we focus on two memoirs by journalists in the Iranian diaspora, *Between Two Worlds* by Roxana Saberi, and *Rosewater* by Maziar Bahari. Both books largely recall the journalists' experiences in captivity in the period surrounding the 2009 presidential election and the "Green Movement" in which there were mass protests against what many saw as a rigged election. In both books the journalists frame their personal and professional experiences as a quest for "truth." This quest for the truth is not a simple uncovering of an objective reality that is already "there," but rather, a search for the strength to speak the truth in a context that militates against it in several ways ranging from the power of propaganda in Iran to the prevailing and similarly propagandistic stereotypes about Iranians in the U.S. media.

Theorists of and practicing commentators on the memoir focus on "truth" not as "information" but as "meaning," and this creation of meaning is self-referential (for the memoirist as author and memoirists as subject) as well as relational between memoirist and reader. Vivian Gornick, for example, describes memoir as a set of "fragmentary memories" rather than a "transmission" of facts. These memories are not "invented" but "composed" and the reader bears some responsibility in creating "meaning" rather than consuming information.<sup>4</sup> Similarly, in their guide to reading autobiography, Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson ask readers of autobiography and memoir not merely to seek "evidence," but to ask about the nature of truth. They urge us as readers to ask, "What's at stake for the narrator in persuading you of the truth of his story? What's at stake historically (in the larger society) in having this text accepted as a 'truthful' account of a life? What difference would it make to learn that the narrative is a fabrication?"<sup>5</sup> Both at the level of

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<sup>4</sup>Vivian Gornick, "Truth in Personal Narrative," in *Truth in Nonfiction: Essays*, ed. David Lazar (Iowa City: U of Iowa Press, 2008), 10.

<sup>5</sup>Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, *Reading Autobiography* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010), 242.

theory in Smith and Watson's work, and for practitioners like Gornick, then, the key to understanding "truth" in memoirs is how it functions relationally between memoirist and reader. Similarly, Philippe Lejeune defines the "autobiographical pact" between memoirist and reader as a "contract between author and reader in which the autobiographer explicitly commits himself or herself not to some impossible historical exactitude but rather to the sincere effort to come to terms with and to understand his or her own life."<sup>6</sup> However, the "truth" of referential discourse in the autobiography is different from science, history, or journalism. In autobiography, the pact covers truth "such as it appears to me, inasmuch as I know it, etc."<sup>7</sup> The difference between journalistic truth and autobiographical truth, according to Lejeune is the distinction between information and meaning, between accuracy and fidelity: "Accuracy involves *information*, fidelity *meaning*."<sup>8</sup> Information is transmitted, but meaning must be constructed.

In journalism studies, as Juan Ramón Muñoz-Torrez has observed, "truth" is often conflated with "objectivity."<sup>9</sup> Despite the increasing prominence and popularity of news satire and punditry like Jon Stewart,<sup>10</sup> the perception and performance of objectivity is still seen as the hallmark of "good" journalism.<sup>11</sup> In the pursuit of objectivity, journalists employ strategies and routines which can shelter them from

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<sup>6</sup>Paul John Eakin, Foreword to *On Autobiography*, ed. Philippe Lejeune, trans. Katherine Leary (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota Press, 1989), ix.

<sup>7</sup>Lejuene, *On Autobiography*, 22.

<sup>8</sup>Lejuene, *On Autobiography*, 23.

<sup>9</sup>Juan Ramón Muñoz-Torrez, "Truth and Objectivity in Journalism: Anatomy of an Endless Misunderstanding," *Journalism Studies* 13, no. 4 (2012): 566-582.

<sup>10</sup>Lauren Feldman, "The News about Comedy: Young Audiences, The Daily Show, and Evolving Notions of Journalism," *Journalism* 8, no. 4 (2007): 406-427, 409-410.

<sup>11</sup>See, for example, Wolfgang Donsbach and Bettina Klett, "Subjective Objectivity: How Journalists in Four Countries Define a Key Term of Their Profession," *International Communication Gazette* 51, no.1 (1993), 53-83; Michael Schudson, "The Objectivity Norm in American Journalism," *Journalism* 2, no. 2 (2001): 149-171; Merton Skovsgaard et al., "A Reality Check: How Journalists' Role Perceptions Impact Their Implementation of the Objectivity Norm," *Journalism* 14, no.1 (2012): 22-42; Gaye Tuchman, "Objectivity as Strategic Ritual," *American Journal of Sociology* 77, no. 4 (1972): 660-679.

claims of bias. Strategies include reporting conflicting claims, excluding opinion, and using quotes.<sup>12</sup> Journalists also tend to omit personal details, instead focusing on generic, episodic facts conveying the impression of dispassionate observers.

Scholars continue to argue that the routine insistence on objectivity transcends culture and nationality. Surveys of journalists across national cultures show it is highly valued, even if journalists have different ways of defining and practicing it (Donsbach & Klett, 1993; Post, 2015; Skovsgaard et al., 2013).<sup>13</sup> Drawing on Donsbach & Klett, Skovsgaard et al. identified possible measures related to objectivity: no subjectivity, balance, hard facts, and value judgments. They argued that journalists may favor one aspect over another based on their perception of the role journalists should play in supporting democracy. They tested how whether or not journalists perceived their role as either a “passive mirror,” “watch dog,” “public forum,” or “public mobilizer” correlated with their assessments of objectivity. Their results suggest objectivity is “more important with role perceptions that emphasize a representative conception of democracy in which journalists inform citizens about society, whereas it is less important when they emphasize the inclusion of citizens in a public, democratic debate.”<sup>14</sup>

Indeed, not all believe objectivity is possible or desirable, as Michael Ryan explains.<sup>15</sup> James Brian McPherson, for example, argues that the journalistic devotion to achieving “balance” in every story leads to polarization and false equivalence.<sup>16</sup> Furthermore, he contends the

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<sup>12</sup>See Pamela Schoemaker and Stephen Reese, *Mediating the Message: Theories of Influences on Mass Media Content* (White Plains: Longman, 2006); Tuchman, “Objectivity as Strategic Ritual.”

<sup>13</sup>See, for example Senja Post, “Scientific Objectivity in Journalism? How Journalists and Academics Define Objectivity, Assess Its Attainability, and Rate its Desirability,” *Journalism* 16, no. 6 (2015): 730-749;

Donsbach and Klett, “Subjective Objectivity;” Skovsgaard et al., “A Reality Check.”

<sup>14</sup>Skovsgaard, et al., “A Reality Check: How Journalists’ Role Perceptions Impact Their Implementation of the Objectivity,” 36.

<sup>15</sup>See Ryan’s “Journalistic Ethics, Objectivity, Existential Journalism, Standpoint Epistemology, and Public Journalism,” *Journal of Mass Media Ethics* 16, no. 1 (2001): 149-171.

<sup>16</sup>James Brian McPherson, *The Conservative Resurgence of the Press: The Media’s Role in the*

overwhelming number of commercially successful conservative pundits on TV and radio in the United States has forced the mainstream media further to the right politically, as they attempt to appeal to and put themselves in conversation with conservative audiences. Arguably, this has created a vacuum whereby activist and satirists like John Oliver and Trevor Noah, both free from the constraints of objectivity in their satirical genre, find resonance with audiences looking for “truth” outside the mainstream media, and questioning an uncritical “objectivity” that subjects even the facts to contrasting opinion. Owing to their life experiences rather than their satirical stance, diasporic journalists find themselves at the center of a dynamic tension between subjectivity and objectivity. Diasporic journalists are widely considered experts on international news because of their experiences in countries with restricted access to Western journalists; yet, their personal histories are often characterized by emotional and sometimes physical upheaval, suggestive, perhaps superficially, of experiential bias.

In contrast to the sometimes formulaic and rigid structure of hard news stories, journalists are increasingly penning memoirs and autobiographies. Michelle Weldon speculates that a rise in journalist memoirs may be related to a general subjective turn in journalism coinciding with the popularity of social media and blogs.<sup>17</sup> Weldon, who conducts workshops for journalists looking to write memoirs reminds journalists not to stray from basic facts. “The urge to write a personal story cannot eclipse the need to fully report,” she advises.<sup>18</sup> Analyzing memoirs and interviews with war correspondents, Howard Tumber and Michael Webster probed for details; Weldon’s notes are typically accounted for in the journalist-memoir genre, namely the motivations and sentiments behind journalists’ chosen occupation. Journalists often articulate an adventurous spirit and the desire to “bear witness.” The authors further observed that journalists’ “as-

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*Rise of the Right* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2008.), 11.

<sup>17</sup>Michelle Weldon, “Journalists and Memoir: Reporting + Memory,” *Nieman Reports*, Winter 2011: 20 – 23, <http://niemanreports.org/articles/journalists-and-memoir-reporting-memory/>.

<sup>18</sup>Weldon, “Journalism and Memoir,” 23.

pirations to report truthfully are couched in language of objectivity.”<sup>19</sup> Pointing to Tuchman’s conceptualization of objectivity as a “strategic ritual,”<sup>20</sup> Tumber and Webster suggest some journalists stress balancing differing viewpoints almost to the point of absurdity. They write, for example, “Inside a military unit as an embed, it is hard to imagine how the inescapable reliance on the limited sources available could even approximate to objectivity.”<sup>21</sup> In contrast to the war correspondents, historically, African American journalists in the U.S. used their memoirs to counter stereotypes and challenge dominant narratives in the mainstream press. Calvin Hall suggests these memoirs are born out of the tradition of slave narratives, and that they provided a space for marginalized African American journalists to “challenge the status quo” and describe the institutional racism they faced on the job.<sup>22</sup> In his analysis of four autobiographies of African American journalists, Hall argues each functions as a “manifesto” or a “combative document whose purpose is to allow its subject to assert him- or herself in the locale of the universal subject.”<sup>23</sup> Theoretically, Hall draws heavily on Gigi Durham’s work and her argument for using standpoint theory as a counterpoint to objectivity. Durham argues objectivity is a form of “epistemic relativism” such that the norms associated with the practice ignore and perpetuate socio-cultural inequities by not acknowledging the marginalized standpoint of minority groups.<sup>24</sup> Hall extends Durham to journalistic memoirs and notes how in each of the memoirs he studied, the journalists make a conscious “statement” about the “complexities of being black in America.”<sup>25</sup> In other words, writers foreground their standpoint, their difference and opposition to

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<sup>19</sup>Howard Tumber and Frank Webster, *Journalists Under Fire: Information War and Journalistic Practices* (London: Sage, 2006), 169.

<sup>20</sup>Gaye Tuchman, “Objectivity as Strategic Ritual,” 660.

<sup>21</sup>Tumber and Webster, *Journalists Under Fire*, 169.

<sup>22</sup>Calvin L. Hall, *African American Journalists: Autobiography as Memoir and Manifesto* (Lanham, Md.: Scarecrow, 2009), x.

<sup>23</sup>Hall, *African American Journalists*, xviii.

<sup>24</sup>Meenakshi Gigi Durham, “On the Relevance of Standpoint Epistemology to the Practice of Journalism: the Case for ‘Strong Objectivity,’” *Communication Theory* 8, no. 2 (1998): 117-140.

<sup>25</sup>Hall, *African American Journalists*, 11.

mainstream practice, explicitly in their work.

Whether or not diasporic journalists working in mainstream media would articulate a similar stance to the satirist, the war reporter or African American reporters is unknown. On the one hand, journalists in diaspora are extreme outsiders, marginalized by two cultures, not one. They occupy a liminal space. At the same time, journalists living in diaspora are privileged by their ability to pass between cultures. Diasporic journalists working in mainstream media are successful because of their personal histories, not despite them. So, then, what happens when diasporic journalists relay their personal histories in memoirs? Stéphane Dufoix defines diaspora as an “analytical framework that takes into account the structuring of the collective experience abroad based on the link maintained with the referent-origin and the community stance this creates.”<sup>26</sup> Much of the literature on the Iranian diaspora focuses on life-writing, but not specifically on journalist memoirs, even though many of the best known Iranian writers in the West have worked as journalists, including Tara Bahrapour, Roya Hakkakian, and Azadeh Moaveni, to name but a few.

A number of articles and special issues have been published since the mid-2000s focusing on Iranian diasporic memoir, though not always explicitly identifying the writers as journalists by training, nor considering the implications of such memoirs being penned by journalists.<sup>27</sup> More recently, Nima Naghibi builds on this earlier work, broadening its scope to address other media, including documentary film and social media as forums for self-narration. The critical discourse seems to have shifted away from questions of departure to those of return, and from the affective mode of nostalgia to that of engagement. Ba-

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<sup>26</sup>Stéphane Dufoix, *Diasporas*, trans. Roger Waldinger (Berkeley: UC Press, 2008), 3.

<sup>27</sup>See, for example, Babak Elahi, “Translating the Self: Language and Identity in Iranian-American Women’s Memoirs,” *Iranian Studies* 39, no. 4 (2006) 461-481; Amy Motlagh, “Towards a Theory of Iranian American Life Writing,” *MELUS* 33, no. 2 (2008): 17-36; Manijeh Nasrabadi, “In Search of Iran: Resistant Melancholia in Iranian American Memoirs of Return,” *Comparative Studies in South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 31, no. 2 (2011): 487-97; Marie Ostby, “De-Censoring an Iranian-American Memoir: Authorship and Synchronicity in Shahriar Madanipour’s *Censoring an Iranian Love Story*,” *Iranian Studies* 46, no. 1 (2013): 73-93.



bak Elahi and Persis Karim gesture towards this shift, suggesting that diasporic Iranian writers and artists view their own “work, and praxis as related to the future of Iran.”<sup>28</sup> Naghibi makes a similar case by contrasting memoirists who remain fixated on the individual memoirist’s nostalgia for a lost childhood with other writers who challenge their readers to bear witness to violations of human rights. While we focus on a very specific sub-genre—the journalist prison memoirs—we see Naghibi’s framing of the question useful: documentary writing negotiates the nostalgic memorializing of the Persian prerevolutionary past with the act of witnessing the present in Iran and the United States towards the overall goal of testifying, allowing for empathy through a form of transmitted affect.<sup>29</sup> Ervand Abrahamian focuses not on memoirs, *per se*, but on a variety of forms that forced confessions took in Iran, ranging from written recantations to kangaroo courts to videotaped and televised self-recriminations. Nevertheless, we find his concepts useful in analyzing Saberi and Bahari’s work. However, we wish to narrow the focus even further on diasporic prison memoir, a subgenre Naghibi also discusses.

For example, among the forms confessions took in Iran, Abrahamian includes the “*mea culpa* memoirs.”<sup>30</sup> Indeed, Saberi references Abrahamian in the Epilogue to her memoir, saying that in a conversation with the scholar, he tells her that Iranian interrogators force prisoners to write confessions out in their own words (like a memoir) so that these are more believable when released to the press.<sup>31</sup> If forced confessions can be called *mea culpa* memoirs, perhaps the memoirs written by Iranian journalists who were held and then released based partly on such confessions might be called *mea innocentia* memoirs or memoirs of

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<sup>28</sup>Babak Elahi and Persis Karim, “Introduction,” *Comparative Studies in South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* (special issue on Iranian diaspora) 3, no. 2 (2011): 386.

<sup>29</sup>Nima Naghibi, *Women Write Iran: Nostalgia and Human Rights from the Diaspora* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2016), 10, 19.

<sup>30</sup>Ervand Abrahamian, *Tortured Confessions: Prisons and Public Recantations in Modern Iran* (Berkeley: UC Press, 1999), 4.

<sup>31</sup>Roxane Saberi, *Between Two Worlds: My Life and Captivity in Iran* (New York: Harper, 2010), 299.

political absolution—a journalist asking absolution from his readers for the sin of having made false confessions, a rhetorical stance similar to the apology. At the same time, whether intended on the part of the authors or not, these memoirs also function as challenges to Iranian propaganda about journalism as a form of espionage. They specifically address the question of why the memoirist lied to gain his or her freedom, and how the memoir we are reading is an attempt to redeem the author’s personal, political, and professional ethos by telling the truth about the lies they’ve had to tell to save themselves. The memoirist’s central motive becomes the journey from falsehood to fact. By focusing on Saberi and Bahari, we hope to tease out this narrative structure of memoirs of political absolution or *mea innocentia* statements: the struggle to regain the truth from the political necessity to lie. Put more formally and in conversation with the previous literature we summarized relating to the genres of journalism, memoir, and journalistic-memoir, we ask: how does the process of meaning-making rather than information-reporting in memoir *and* journalism affect our understanding of Iranian diasporic prison memoirs?

### Analysis

At the beginning of her captivity, Saberi is coerced into a false confession that she is a spy funneling information to an outside—presumably American—contact, causing her to waiver on both professional ethics and personal morality. Hoping that once released she will be free to set the record straight and vindicate anyone she might have implicated, she succumbs to pressure:

It was then that I came to a terrible realization: The truth meant nothing here. Only lies could save my family and me. My only way out was to admit to a crime I did not commit and to ask for forgiveness. ... I could always, like many before me, recant my lies once I was freed.<sup>32</sup>

However, she soon realizes lies lead to more lies, and might ulti-

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<sup>32</sup>Saberi, *Between Two Worlds*, 58. [See n. 30.]

mately hurt both herself and others. In a concise Orwellian equation, Saberi sums up how her axiology of truth-telling was turned upside down by the trauma of imprisonment: “In sum: Truth = Prison. Lies = Freedom.”<sup>33</sup> The memoir can be read as Saberi’s attempt to turn this formula right side up into the adage, “the truth shall set you free.” In fact, about half way through the memoir, after witnessing the courage of some of her fellow prisoners who refuse to sign false confessions, she redefines “freedom” as spiritual rather than physical. Saberi seeks religious (Biblical as well as Koranic), cultural, political, and professional paths back to truth, but what ultimately persuades her is the example of fellow prisoners who refuse to give false confessions. Because the voices of fellow prisoners guide her to the truth, her narrative can be characterized by what Naghibi calls transmitted affect—a function of *testimonio* that allows the memoirist to speak for the voiceless, in this case Iranian women in prison who do not have the platform on which to speak that Saberi does. In this sense, Saberi’s memoir defines journalism as a balance between objectivity and advocacy, and it is in that overlap where she finds “truth.”<sup>34</sup>

One of Saberi’s touchstones for the value of truth is religion. She turns to “God,” an entity she defines in a distinctly agnostic way as “a Higher Power to which all major religions pointed in one way or another.”<sup>35</sup> She even asks explicitly for dispensation to deceive: “*God, I asked for help, but you did not rescue me. And if you don’t save me, who will? I have no choice left but to lie for my life.*”<sup>36</sup> The example of at least one of her fellow prisoners is distinctly Christian;<sup>37</sup> Saberi explicitly quotes from Matthew 6:31,<sup>38</sup> emphasizing trust in God, and the memoir itself might be read as an instantiation of the Biblical adage from John 8:32, “the truth shall set you free.” Much later in the memoir, she balances these agnostic or Christian religious frame-

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<sup>33</sup>Saberi, *Between Two Worlds*, 168. [See n. 30.]

<sup>34</sup>See Naghibi, *Women Write Iran*, 67-8.

<sup>35</sup>Saberi, *Between Two Worlds*, 14.

<sup>36</sup>*Ibid.*, 61.

<sup>37</sup>*Ibid.*, 139.

<sup>38</sup>*Ibid.*, 195.

works for truth with a specifically Koranic axiology. In response to a question from the judge in her case, she says, “I recanted [the false confession] after I realized it is better to tell the truth late than never, and the Koran told me to tell the truth because even if you suffer, in the end you will prevail.”<sup>39</sup> Clearly, then, one way that Saberi negotiates the truth is through appeals to religious belief and scriptural doctrine.

In addition to religion, Saberi also turns to culture to contextualize her negotiation of falsehood and truth. First, she points to *taqīya*,<sup>40</sup> or “dissimulation,” which she associates with Shiism. This form of cultural discourse “allowed and even encouraged Shiites to conceal their faith to protect their property or themselves.”<sup>41</sup> Secondly, she links this Shiite form of strategic dissimulation to something that pre-dates and transcends Islamic influence: the practice of *tā’rof*, which Saberi describes as “a complex system of formalized curtesy—which could often make social interactions seem insincere, for example, when a shopkeeper refused payment although he actually expected it.”<sup>42</sup> As one friend tells her, “lying was not only expedient but also often necessary for survival in the Islamic Republic.”<sup>43</sup> *Taqīya* and *tā’rof*, however, are balanced with Saberi’s reference to everyday Iranian wisdom that values principled honesty: “lies were harder to remember than the truth. As the Iranian saying went, *Durugh-gu kam hâfezeh ast*, ‘The liar has a short memory.’”<sup>44</sup> Thus, Saberi finds a tension in Iranian culture between truth and dissimulation.

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<sup>39</sup>Saberi, *Between Two Worlds*, 230. [See n.30.]

<sup>40</sup>Abdulaziz Sachedina, Chair in Islamic Studies at George Mason University, connects *taqīya* to political quietism among Shiite communities living in Sunni majority countries. He defines *taqīya* as “prudential concealment” or “precautionary dissimulation.” Sachedina limits the concept to the practice of not divulging one’s beliefs and practices rather than lying about specific actions. See Sachedina, “Prudential Concealment in Shi’ite Islam: A Strategy of Survival or a Principle?” *Common Knowledge* 16, no. 2 (2009): 223-246.

<sup>41</sup>Saberi, *Between Two Worlds*, 70.

<sup>42</sup>Ibid., 70.

<sup>43</sup>Ibid., 70.

<sup>44</sup>Saberi, *Between Two Worlds*, 84. [See n. 30.]

At the political level, Saberi identifies a moral dilemma in Iranian culture between strategic deception and principled veracity. She avers that like “people all over the world, Iranians often felt compelled to tell lies to get out of danger.”<sup>45</sup> Interestingly, this seems to challenge the stereotype that Iranians or Middle Easterners are particularly prone to mendacity. She speculates that for Iranians duplicity is one of the bitter fruits of “various authoritarian regimes.”<sup>46</sup> As some “cynically claimed,” Iranians were “right to spin tales because their country’s rulers themselves were so adept at it.”<sup>47</sup> Thus, Saberi explains that she lied under pressure as a function of Iran’s widespread culture of deception.

The moral dilemma between strategic deception and principled truth-telling is complicated by another ethical conflict: the erosion of journalistic truth in Iran. In Iran, reporters must find ways around the regime’s regulations. This set of expectations around censorship and self-censorship rejiggers Saberi’s journalistic ethics, including notions of truth and objectivity: “It was then I understood that to report in the Islamic Republic, I would have to balance the expectations of the regime, my employer, interviewees, and my own conscience to do my job.”<sup>48</sup> Rather than relying on her formal training in the West, Saberi learns from local Iranian journalists who “had become experts at ... working within the regime’s often arbitrary and unclear boundaries, while still offering a measure of serious discussion and criticism through their work.”<sup>49</sup> Here, again, the journalist’s commitment to the truth is replaced with a negotiation between the regime, her professional “conscience,” and her sources—interviewees. The value of the truth becomes less clear.

Ultimately, Saberi’s “truth” comes neither through religious morality, nor in the nuances of culture, nor out of political expediency, and not

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<sup>45</sup>Ibid., 69.

<sup>46</sup>Ibid., 69.

<sup>47</sup>Ibid., 69.

<sup>48</sup>Ibid., 146.

<sup>49</sup>Saberi, *Between Two Worlds*, 147. [See n. 30.]

even from journalistic ethos, but, rather, through solidarity with fellow prisoners—a dialogic truth or truth as social justice. Through the example of others Saberi begins to realize that she can speak truth to power: “The women I had met over the previous several days defied *their* interrogators demands to lie, while I had abided by many orders that were in conflict with my conscience.”<sup>50</sup> One of these new friends, Nargess, tells Saberi “I am glad I didn’t succumb to these people’s threats to tell lies.”<sup>51</sup> It is these appeals to the axiology of truth that persuade Saberi to change tack from dissimulation to veracity, with the exception of one white lie that she explains will secure her freedom while retaining her integrity.

By the end of the memoir, she sees the truth not only as the measure of her own salvation, but also as the greatest weapon against injustice, and it is here perhaps that the reader is pulled in to sign Saberi’s autobiographical pact, if you will—to reach the “truth” of Saberi’s memoir as the result of meaning-making. As she prepares for one of her many speaking engagements after her release she concludes her memoir by addressing the reader more directly and highlighting the significance and power of the “truth.”

Tonight I will speak freely, hoping to give a voice to the many Saras, Faribas, and Mahshids who are struggling to achieve their most basic rights. From them, I have learned that in the dark, there is light, and that though there will always be those who suffer, eventually the truth will prevail.<sup>52</sup>

This statement, coming as it does in a post-script in which she—now on a book tour where she literally tells her truth—echoes her fellow prisoners’ advocacy for truth-telling. Saberi embraces the truth not so much as a professional value, but something that transcends her profession, or her culture, or political expediency. She embraces truth as a way to give voice to those who were voiceless—the cellmates who

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<sup>50</sup>Ibid., 157.

<sup>51</sup>Ibid., 158.

<sup>52</sup>Saberi, *Between Two Worlds*, 303. [See n. 30.]

led her back to the truth. We, as readers, are signaled to participate in that purpose of transmitted affect.

However, there is a coda here that complicates the situation somewhat. During her final appeal, Saberi complicates truth's triumph by describing how one final tactical lie helped her protect a group with whom she had worked. When Saberi's boyfriend, Kurdish filmmaker Bahman Ghobadi, tells her that the "world knows that this regime tells lies," and her lawyers urge her to admit to and apologize for the lesser crime of unwittingly copying one classified document, she opts to go along with this white lie, justifying it to herself and her readers by saying that this would protect the moderate Iranians at the Center for Strategic Research where she obtained the documents.<sup>53</sup> When the prosecutor asks who gave her permission to copy the classified document, she once again begins to question the truth:

My mind began to spin. I didn't want to say that employees at the center let me copy materials because even though I didn't think this report was classified, if it really was, I didn't want to get anyone there in trouble. Not only was the center filled with moderates, but hard-liners had also accused one of its directors of espionage in 2007, though he was later given a suspended sentence for a lesser charge and resumed his work there. 'No one told me,' I said. 'I copied it myself...out of curiosity.'<sup>54</sup>

Thus, the line between falsehood and the truth is blurred with one last nuance. Nevertheless, this exception is still in the service of solidarity with others who share her cause.

Maziar Bahari's prison narrative also hinges on negotiations of truth and falsehood. An Iranian-Canadian journalist and filmmaker working for *Newsweek*, Bahari was arrested by Iranian authorities in June 2009 on charges of espionage and incitement of anti-Islamic and anti-government agitation following Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's re-elec-

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<sup>53</sup>Ibid., 278.

<sup>54</sup>Saberi, *Between Two Worlds*, 285. [See n. 30.]

tion to President. He was tortured for 118 days in an attempt to extract a false confession linking him to American intelligence. His interrogator, whom he nicknames Rosewater because of his sickly-sweet cologne, subjects Bahari to a combination of physical and emotional abuse. On the surface, Bahari's memoir is about how he had to lie in order to free himself from Evin Prison. However, the backdrop to this story is how Bahari views journalism as advocacy, as a set of professional principles, and as personal identity that links him to a history of activism in Iran through his family. In the context of his captivity he must defend against his captors' insistence that Western journalism is simply part of Western espionage.

Soon after protests broke out in the summer of 2009, Bahari began to see his journalistic role as one of advocacy, specifically as a key element of the process of democratization. Bahari describes crossing the line between reporter and protester, declaring that he "was not a reporter anymore" but "part of the people."<sup>55</sup> He views this as participating in democracy, or at least attempting to revive it in a country where it is limited by a religious judiciary and a Revolutionary Guard. Breaching journalistic ethics was, for him and others, a matter of participating in public discourse: "Even though we were trying our best to remain professional, I know that, like me, most others were rooting for Mousavi."<sup>56</sup> Crossing from journalism into activism elides the distinction between professional and personal aims: "Unlike many stories I had covered in the past, I cared very deeply, on a personal level, about this one."<sup>57</sup> In fact, he tries to persuade his captors that his personal stake in stories about Iran could only *help* the Iranian people and government by providing a fairer picture of Iran to the West: "I always tried to help [Iranian officials] understand that the Iranian government was, in fact, lucky that I was working for Western media. I knew my job. I knew my country. And I was a patriot. If

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<sup>55</sup>Maziar Bahari, *Rosewater: A Family's Story of Love, Captivity, and Survival* (New York: Random House, 2014), 60.

<sup>56</sup>*Ibid.*, 56.

<sup>57</sup>*Ibid.*, 64.



they stopped me, I could be replaced by someone with an ax to grind against the regime.”<sup>58</sup> Bahari’s blurring of journalism and advocacy seems to balance Rosewater’s blurring of journalism and espionage.

One might argue that one of the things Bahari suffers in prison is a kind of epistemological torture—that he is forced to reconsider how his job as a journalist is connected to truth or lies, how it is connected to espionage rather than democratic discourse. According to Bahari, Rosewater saw little difference between espionage and journalism. For Rosewater and his superiors, Bahari is conducting “media espionage,” making him a “media spy” funneling information to Iran’s enemies.<sup>59</sup> In one scene, Bahari recounts a sort of distorted Socratic dialogue with Rosewater. “Maziar, what is a spy?” asks Rosewater, to which Bahari answers: “A person who passes secret information related to the national security of a country to another country.”<sup>60</sup> Rosewater continues the perverted Platonic inquiry, asking, “What is a journalist?”<sup>61</sup> Demoralized, Bahari takes his answer farther, replying that “... a spy works secretly against the national security of a country for another government, but a journalist works openly—even if he uses secret sources—to inform the public.”<sup>62</sup> Rosewater turns this back around, claiming that both journalists and spies spread information, and information could harm Iran. At this point, Bahari is not dealing with the question of “truth,” but is laying the groundwork that will allow him to return to that question later. Bahari demonstrates that the ideology and paranoid style of Iran’s hardline leaders mangle truth, democracy, and integrity.

Further complicating this epistemological torture Bahari’s growing sense that his torturer’s profession of extracting information is a twisted reflection of his own work of gathering information as a journalist. Each has his own professional code. During one interrogation session,

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<sup>58</sup>Ibid., 104.

<sup>59</sup>Maziar Bahari, *Rosewater*, 272.

<sup>60</sup>Ibid., 272.

<sup>61</sup>Ibid., 272.

<sup>62</sup>Ibid., 273.

Bahari realizes that Rosewater follows his own set of principles, as perverse as their results might be. Overhearing Rosewater complain to his wife on the phone that he gets all the difficult cases, Bahari concludes, “Rosewater was just a man. Despite the power he had over me, he was just a man with a job. Like most people, his main priority was to keep his job and provide for his family.”<sup>63</sup> Bahari relates the importance of his own professional identity as journalist to Rosewater’s professional identity as interrogator, opening up a strategy for escape: “I knew what I had to do. I had to allow him to be successful in that job.”<sup>64</sup> In some distorted way Rosewater and Bahari are engaged in a professional transaction. Ironically, Bahari knows that his deliverable in this professional exchange is information, but the truth or falsehood of that information is secondary to its usefulness to both parties in this transaction. This is a *negotiation* of truth and lies. According to Bahari himself: “I had to give him enough information so that he could prove to his bosses that he was making progress, but not so much information that I would harm my contacts or the people close to me.”<sup>65</sup>

Throughout this ordeal, Bahari is haunted by memories of his father, Akbar, and sister, Maryam, who had been tortured under the Shah and the Islamic Republic, respectively. Thus, journalism is part of Bahari’s personal and familial identity, a legacy from his sister who tells him his writing is more important than any political action he might take. After seeking ideological solutions to his and his country’s suffering, he realizes that such answers are elusive, and turns instead to a very personal definition of journalism, but one that also situates him in a history he can trace back to his sister and father: “The Islamic government had been brought to power by the people ... like Maryam. ... there was no point in blaming everything on the government; instead I should remain the person Maryam wanted me to be: a

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<sup>63</sup>Bahari, *Rosewater*, 201.

<sup>64</sup>*Ibid.*, 201.

<sup>65</sup>*Ibid.*, 202-3.

good journalist.”<sup>66</sup> Bahari recounts a dream in which Maryam and a second redemptive figure visit him on his most trying night in prison. Two angelic figures approach him, embodying sisters of mercy from Leonard Cohen’s song. On one level, this can be read in relation to Saberi’s attempts to find truth through religion, but the distinctly Catholic implications of these sisters of mercy, both with names echoing “Mary,” are much more personal. The emphasis here is not so much on religion, as it is continuity, solidarity, and what Naghibi calls transmitted affect. In his conclusion, Bahari tells us that he saw these two figures as his newborn daughter Marianna Maryam, and his deceased sister, Maryam. Through this anecdote, Bahari places journalism in a deeply personal and familial space, embracing journalism as an identity, and voicing a politics that links his sister to his daughter.

Once Bahari realizes his detention will not be brief, he also realizes that his captors’ demands cut at the very core of his sacred familial identity as a journalist. One of his interrogators—an official given the pilgrim’s honorific of Haj Agha—broaches this subject with Bahari. Haj Agha sees Western media as a “vehicle used to provoke demonstrations,” demanding that Bahari exchange his identity as journalist for his freedom. He must affirm the regime’s claims about media espionage if he wants to be free.<sup>67</sup> But he begins reasoning with himself: “I thought that I could [...] embellish and exaggerate his concepts so that they would sound more ridiculous. That way, when people heard or saw the confession, they would know it was coerced.”<sup>68</sup> Turning the term *duplicity* literal, Bahari shows himself as doubled, describing his confession with the phrase, “I heard myself saying.”<sup>69</sup> He gives his captors what they want: “One characteristic of the velvet revolutions is their relation to the media. International media pave the way for such revolutions, and without their presence, these revolutions

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<sup>66</sup>Ibid., 145.

<sup>67</sup>Bahari, *Rosewater*, 167.

<sup>68</sup>Ibid., 167.

<sup>69</sup>Ibid., 173.

cannot happen.”<sup>70</sup> The following chapter opens with Bahari describing himself banging his head against his cell wall, self-flagellation for having “betrayed my family, my colleagues, myself. My father.” He asks, “What had I admitted to?”<sup>71</sup>

Truth and lies become even more explicitly central to Bahari’s negotiation later when he compares his own situation to that of his father who was a political prisoner under the Shah in the 1950s. The difference between their experiences is that his father’s captors were attempting to extract the truth from him, while Bahari’s captors want him to lie: “I knew that what I was facing in Evin was very different from my father’s experience in the 1950s. My father had had concrete information about a number of individuals and their whereabouts. The torturers wanted him to tell the truth in order to save himself. I was being tortured to lie about myself and others to preserve the regime’s and Khamenei’s narrative about the election.”<sup>72</sup> In this key narrative moment, Bahari links his experience to a longer historical trajectory, noting the difference between the current regime and previous ones in Iran. Moreover, like his reference to his sister Maryam as a sister of mercy, this also links Bahari to his father, underscoring the personal. Like Saberi, Bahari employs a variation of distributed or transmitted affect by linking his own experience to that of his sister and his father, suggesting that tortured confessions are not limited to the Ahmadinejad era, nor even to the Islamic Republic, but were also part of the Pahlavi regime. He gives voice to the now silenced voices of his sister and his father, and invites readers to share these emotional responses to his lived truth.

## Conclusion

Like other Iranian diasporic memoirs, and particularly the by-now identifiable sub-genre of Iranian diasporic journalist prison memoirs, Saberi and Bahari negotiate the spaces between political, profession-

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<sup>70</sup>Ibid., 173.

<sup>71</sup>Bahari, *Rosewater*, 173.

<sup>72</sup>Ibid., 207.

al, and personal positions. Within the broader context of how scholars understand Iranian diasporic life writing, these prison narratives tap into the hybrid voice and transmitted affect identified by scholars ranging from Naficy to Naghibi. By focusing on what we see as a clearly identifiable subgenre of Iranian diasporic writing—personal memoirs by journalists (some of which deal with captivity)—we hope to add a new level of understanding of Iranian diasporic writing, and situate it among equally alternative subgenres like satire in visual and social media, reflexive war correspondence, and activist African American journalist memoirs. Like these other alternatives to standard notions of objectivity and truth, Iranian diasporic journalism challenges our accepted notions of objectivity, balance, and normative journalistic ethics. This link between the subgenre of Iranian diasporic journalist memoirs and self-conscious journalism of satirists and others can, we hope, help to illuminate a number of these alternative forms of journalistic praxis.

Thus, Bahari and Saberi do not so much use their writing of the self as an extension of activism, but rather as a negotiation of hybridity. They practice “balance,” that ideal of journalistic ethos, pointing out flaws in American and Iranian policy, despite the fact that Iran grossly mistreated them by putting them in jail. Being in jail and asked to confess, both reporters are confronted with the nuances of truth. More so than Bahari, Saberi speaks of a higher, moralistic truth. Ultimately both journalists use their profession to justify their adherence to truth and demonstrate balance and alternative perspectives. For example, they put forward truth claims that are indeed negative about Iran, arguing, for example, that the Iranian government is paranoid about journalists. Yet, they both aspire to objectivity by giving voice to officials within Iran and describing their motivations. In these ways they are more like typical war correspondents, strategically performing objectivity. The author’s emphasis on discussing and practicing objectivity in their narrative calls to mind Skovsgaard et al.’s assertion that the more journalists are preoccupied with objectivity, the more they serve as a “passive mirror” rather than an instigator of debate. In

this regard, these journalists are very different from diasporic activists working for/with other mainstream journalists.

While we have focused on two post-2009 prison memoirs, the methods we have employed here can be applied to a wider range of memoirs from the Iranian diaspora, including Tara Bahrapour's *To See and See Again* (1999), Afshin Molavi's *Persian Pilgrimages* (2002), Azadeh Moaveni's *Lipstick Jihad* (2005), and Hooman Majd's *The Ayatollah Beggars to Differ* (2008), to name only a few. A brief survey of such titles reveals at least four other memoirs that explore the dilemmas of truth, objectivity, and the politics of duplicity in the context of Iranian journalism and politics. In *The Road to Democracy in Iran*, Akbar Ganji, the jailed Iranian dissident and journalist, writes, "Authoritarian systems turn lying from a vice to a virtue."<sup>73</sup> Similarly, Ramita Navai, a British-Iranian journalist, writes in *City of Lies*, "Let's get one thing straight: in order to live in Tehran you have to lie. Morals don't come into it: lying in Tehran is about survival. ... All these lies breed new lies, mushrooming in every crack in society."<sup>74</sup> In *The Lonely War*, Nazila Fathi, who narrowly escaped imprisonment in Iran, reveals one of these cracks when describing her courtship with her husband, Babak Pasha, who had recently come to Iran after having grown up in San Diego, California: "Having lived in a free country, lying hadn't become engrained in his character the way it had become a self-protection impulse in me."<sup>75</sup> And in *Camelia, Save Yourself by Telling the Truth*, Camelia Entekhabifard writes, "Affectation and lying were the first things we learned in school, along with great caution in the questions we asked, and the answers we gave."<sup>76</sup> These editorial and observations about the prevalence of dissimulation in Iran's public sphere raise the question of how a variety of forces impinge

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<sup>73</sup>Akbar Ganji, *The Road to Democracy in Iran*, trans. Abbas Milani (Boston: MIT, 2008), xvii.

<sup>74</sup>Ramita Navai, *City of Lies: Love, Sex, Death and the Search for Truth in Tehran* (New York: Public Affairs, 2014), xi.

<sup>75</sup>Nazila Fathi, *The Lonely War: One Woman's Account of the Struggle for Modern Iran* (New York: Basic Books, 2014), 149.

<sup>76</sup>Camelia Entekhabifard, *Camelia, Save Yourself by Telling the Truth*, trans. George Mürer (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2007), 92.

upon truth and lies in the context of life-writing by Iranian journalists in diaspora. Future work on these materials could deepen our understanding of how journalists work in the context of various forms of political pressure, particularly under the paranoid style of power at work in Iran.