

Translating Race: Simin Daneshvar's Negotiation of Blackness

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Born in 1921 in Shiraz, eight years before the formal abolition of slavery by Reza Shah in 1929, writer, intellectual, and translator Simin Daneshvar later acknowledged that many of her stories came out of her childhood. An important “clearing center” for the Persian Gulf slave trade, the Shiraz of Daneshvar’s childhood is most extensively memorialized in her first major novel, *Savushun* (1969), which is set in World War II-era Shiraz.² Daneshvar attended a British missionary school in Shiraz that enabled her to learn English at a very high

¹I wish to thank Fatemeh Shams and Ira Dworkin for their helpful comments on this essay. This essay is offered in honor of Dr. Ahmad Karimi-Hakkak, whose erudition and mentorship have guided so many of us.

²I am using Willem Floor’s expression “clearing center” from his *Encyclopaedia Iranica* article “BARDA and BARDA-DARI: From the Mongols to the Abolition of Slavery,” 2000, www.iranicaonline.org/articles/barda-iv.

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level of competency at a time when it was not common, even for affluent Iranians, to do so. She published her first collection of short stories, *Atash-e khamush (Extinguished Fire)* in 1948, but later insisted that it not be reissued; she was embarrassed by this early effort. She started work as a translator and writer of occasional pieces for newspapers and radio to earn money while she was a university student, and she would continue to be a prolific translator for the duration of her life: her translations include not only literary works such as *The Scarlet Letter*; *Cry, the Beloved Country*; and *The Human Comedy*, but also bestselling self-help works like *Men Are from Mars, Women Are from Venus*. She remained interested in the implications of translation as a profession and a practice in Iran throughout her life, but perhaps her most complicated negotiation with translation was her engagement with ideas of race between an American context and an Iranian one.

Daneshvar's first self-conscious intellectual encounters with the concept of "race" seem to have occurred during the Fulbright year she spent at Stanford University in the United States in 1952–53. Daneshvar always acknowledged the important impact the Fulbright year had on her writing, and she indeed credited one of her teachers at Stanford, Wallace Stegner (1909–93), with changing the way she wrote entirely.³ We can see the legacy of this fellowship period and Stegner's influence in her fiction, not just in the explicit ways she attributed to Stegner, but also in her deployment of Blackness and whiteness in the first story collection she published after her Fulbright, *A City like Paradise (Shahri chawn behesht, 1961)*.⁴

In *Playing in the Dark*, Toni Morrison suggests the ways in which Blackness functions as a foil for white masculinity in American fiction of the late nineteenth and the twentieth centuries.⁵ For Daneshvar, the practice

³This is on page 33 of *Honar va adabiyat-e emruz: goft o shenudi ba doktor Simin Daneshvar va Parviz Natel Khanlari (Contemporary Art and Literature: Interviews with Dr. Simin Daneshvar and Dr. Parviz Natel Khanlari)*, ed. Nasser Hariri (Babul, IR: Ketabsara-ye Babul, AH 1366/AD 1987).

⁴Simin Daneshvar, *Shahri chawn behesht* (Tehran: Kharzmi, AH 1381/AD 2002).

⁵Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (New York: Vintage, 1993).

of racial thinking and interpretation of race in her writing may have been mediated not only through Stegner's mentorship but also through her work as a translator. One of the first books she translated after her Fulbright year was William Saroyan's *The Human Comedy* (*Komedi-e ensani*, 1954).⁶ Although she did not translate any of Stegner's work, she was clearly influenced by his worldview and style, and continued to seek his patronage long after her Fulbright year ended.⁷ Aside from her adoption of the by-now hackneyed phrase associated with the American "program year," "show, don't tell," Daneshvar continued to correspond with Stegner for many years beyond the Fulbright and clearly regarded him as an important mentor.⁸ Stegner's most famous novel of the West (*Angle of Repose*, 1971) was yet to come, but he was already acknowledged by this time for a multitude of writings on the American West, including *Big Rock Candy Mountain* (1943). Among these were *One Nation* (1948), which generated an associated film focused on the "American Negro" section of that book and called by the same name. Shortly after Daneshvar's Fulbright period, Stegner also contracted to work as a propagandist for what was then the Arabian American Oil Company (ARAMCO).⁹

Daneshvar would also go on to translate other American works, with Stegner's encouragement, including *The Scarlet Letter* (*Dagh-e nang*, 1955). For Daneshvar, American literature's predilection for the "power of blackness" that Morrison critiques in *Playing in the Dark* may have come to her in part through education during the Fulbright year, and in part through translation. Stegner and Saroyan were both

⁶William Saroyan, *Payk-e marg va zendigi ya komedi-ye ensani* (*The Messenger of Life and Death, or, The Human Comedy*), trans. Simin Daneshvar (Tehran: Ibn Sina, 1954).

⁷Daneshvar's letters to Stegner are housed in the Stanford University Library. Daneshvar writes to Stegner while she is at the Harvard Seminar in 1963 to ask for his help in finding work in the United States. She also invites Stegner to visit Iran (which he does), and generally praises the positive influence he has had on her writing.

⁸See her letters in English to Stegner, which are part of the collection "Wallace Earle Stegner Creative Writing Program : correspondence and manuscripts, 1949-1992," and which are held at the Department of Special Collections, Green Library, Stanford University.

⁹The story of Stegner's association with ARAMCO is itself a fascinating story, as told by Robert Vitalis in "Wallace Stegner's Arabian *Discovery*: Imperial Blind Spots in a Continental Vision," *Pacific Historical Review*, no. 3 (August 2007): 405-38.

important architects in the development of a masculine mythology of the New West, and Stegner's work has been both celebrated and critiqued for its depiction of the American West and of white masculinity.¹⁰

Daneshvar's observations in her letters to her husband, Jalal Al-e Ahmad, complicate some of the accepted views about this remarkable writer, and shed a different light on her political affiliations and impressions of coeval political movements.¹¹ Her engagement with race is of particular interest, not just because of contemporary debates and attention to race globally as a consequence of police brutality in the United States, but also because it has been so much overlooked in her work. The way that she saw (or didn't see) race is notable—not because, as many Iranian scholars and scholars of Iran erroneously suggest, Iranians are effectively color blind, but because Daneshvar's understanding of and engagement with race reflects an attempt to grapple with a different racial paradigm in the United States. There, she witnessed some of the aspects of life that gave rise to the Civil Rights Movement, and later witnessed some of the major protests involved with that movement. Also, Daneshvar herself dealt in her own writing with race in ways that are at times profoundly troubling.

Unfortunately, scholars of Iran to date have also not been able to fully face the complicated ways in which Iranian intellectuals have negotiated race and the legacy of slavery in Iran, either in terms of its connections to race or in terms of the way that they viewed racial thinking and slavery in other contexts, especially in the United States. In her dissertation, *Seeing Race* (2018), Beeta Baghoolizadeh suggests that the move to preemptively distance and separate Iran's history of slavery from any association with other histories of slavery was in effect an attempt to whitewash Iran's past.¹² As Baghoolizadeh shows, this

¹⁰*Why I Can't Read Wallace Stegner and Other Essays: A Tribal Voice* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1996) by Elizabeth Cook-Lynn is one such work.

¹¹Simin Daneshvar, *Nameh-ha-ye Simin Daneshvar va Jalal Al-e Ahmad (The Letters of Simin Daneshvar and Jalal Al-e Ahmad)*, vols. 1 and 3, ed. Mas'ud Ja'fari Jazi (Tehran: Nilufar, AH 1385/AD 2006).

¹²Beeta Baghoolizadeh, "Seeing Race and Erasing Slavery: Media and the Construction of Blackness in Iran, 1830–1960" (PhD diss., University of Pennsylvania, 2018).

was a self-conscious national effort during the Pahlavi period, but one which continues into the present, and with which Iranian scholars have to some extent collaborated.

This discomfort with the legacy of slavery in Iran's past is evident in Behnaz Mirzai's *A History of Slavery and Emancipation in Iran 1800-1929* (2017).¹³ The result of extensive archival research by Mirzai, this monograph nonetheless teleologically reads the story of slavery and its abolition as the inevitable triumph of the secular nation-state in Iran. Consequently, Mirzai spends little time considering the painful and enduring effects or consequences of the enslavement of Africans on their descendants. Moreover, Mirzai declines to engage the issue of racism, selectively citing the work of other scholars to insist on a distinction between the American history and experience of slavery and the history of slavery in the Islamic world.¹⁴ Regrettably, this denial is a trope of the genre of Iranian writing on the history of slavery.

In a similar vein to Mirzai's approach, Haleh Afshar's uncomfortable essay "Age, Gender and Slavery in and out of the Persian Harem: A Different Story" (2000) remembers the "freed" slave who lived in the Afshar home, a woman who had originally been bought for the harem of Muzaffar al-Din Shah Qajar.¹⁵ When she was "freed" (i.e., the harem could no longer support so many slaves), this woman, called only Sonbol Baji (Sister Hyacinth), became Afshar's nanny.¹⁶ Afshar uses what she says is a framework drawn from Audre Lorde's notion of "bio-mythography," and describes the impulse for this article

¹³Behnaz Mirzai, *A History of Slavery and Emancipation in Iran 1800-1929* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2017).

¹⁴Mirzai, *History of Slavery*, 19–25.

¹⁵Haleh Afshar, "Age, Gender and Slavery in and out of the Persian Harem: A Different Story," *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, no. 5 (2000): 905–16.

¹⁶African slaves in Iran were often given the names of flowers or gems, possibly to connote value or beauty; these were not their birth names, which are most frequently erased from history. For a historical attestation to this practice, see Bahman Katira'i, "Yaddasht-hayi darbarezeh-ye *Emsal o hekam* (ta'lif 'Ali Akbar Dehkoda)" ("Some Notes on the Proverbs and Wise Sayings [Written by 'Ali Akbar Dehkoda]"), in *Miyān-e reshteh-ha: daneshkadeh-ye adabiyat va 'olum-e ensāni-ye daneshgah-e Tehran* (*Between Fields: The Faculty of Literature and Humanities of the University of Tehran*), nos. 5–6 (AH 1347/AD 1968): 505–32.

as the desire to give voice to someone who never acquired the necessary literacy to write her own story. Yet Afshar struggles to reconcile this personal history of her family's slaveholding with the liberal racial politics required of her in her adopted country (the United Kingdom). Instead, she relies on odd assertions that suggest Sonbol Baji found her time as a slave "empowering,"¹⁷ and that "for Sonbol Baji her colour had been one of her major attractions. The king had wished for a beautiful 'black' girl in his entourage and had acquired Sonbol when she was a small child."¹⁸ Throughout the essay, Afshar deploys the words *slave* and *black* in quotation marks, and indicates that she finds these terms insufficient and possibly foreign to the context of Iran, even though the word commonly used in Persian to describe Afro-Iranians is *siah* (Black).¹⁹

An unintended visual critique of the history that Afshar offers comes in Pedram Khosronejad's collection of Qajar photographs, *Qajar African Nannies* (2017), in which a photograph of Afshar and her brother Kamran with Sonbol Baji is published.²⁰ Although we cannot extrapolate too much from a single photograph, I believe we can see the photograph as a critique of Afshar's characterization. The photo shows an Afro-Iranian woman holding a large Iranian boy, perhaps two years old; a plump little Iranian girl wearing a European dress and bow in her hair is posed in front of the woman, and a (white) doll is posed at the girl's feet. The woman's face is shadowed, but it is weary and expresses sadness, possibly even fear. As Khosronejad observes in his introduction to the volume, "The faces of all the Africans in the

¹⁷Afshar, "Age, Gender and Slavery," 905.

¹⁸Afshar, "Age, Gender and Slavery," 909. For a fuller discussion of how liberalism in the United States and Europe has been practiced as "racial liberalism," see Charles Mills's *Black Rights/White Wrongs: The Critique of Racial Liberalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).

¹⁹Many words are used in Persian for *slave*, but not all of them have the same historical connotation relating to enslavement of Africans. Some terms used to denote African slaves include *bardeh*, *dadeh siah*, *kaka siah*, *gholam*, and *khvajeh*. As in English, "I am your servant [slave]" (*bandeh-ye shoma hastam*) is a common polite expression, and *bandeh* is used as a polite personal pronoun in certain types of discourse. For one discussion in English of this form of discourse, see William O. Beeman's useful (if now dated) *Politics of Language and Status in Iran* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986).

²⁰Pedram Khosronejad, *Qajar African Nannies* (Stillwater: Dr. Ali Fazel Visual Archive, Media Collection and Digital Resources, University of Oklahoma, 2018). Exhibition catalog.

photographs of this collection confirm their deep sadness and the horror that encapsulated their entire lives.”²¹

The introduction aside, this volume does not attempt to interpret the photographs deeply. Khosronejad has indeed largely eschewed critical engagement with these photographs, saying that he sees his role largely as an archivist gathering material for others to interpret.²² His discomfort with some aspects of this process is evident, and he has commented on the fact that these photographs of enslaved persons were taken without the consent of the subjects, but would theoretically belong to the descendants of the subjects, who, in his view, are impossible to locate owing to the destruction of documents related to their ancestors’ enslavement. Instead, the photographs have become the subject of dispute between different “owners”—the Qajar families, who claim them by right of inheritance, and the Iranian government, which confiscated them during the revolution.²³

Other evidence also points to a discomfort with a critical scrutiny of the legacy of slavery, particularly enslavement of Africans, in Iran. Even a book ostensibly dedicated to the study of race, Reza Zia-Ebrahimi’s 2017 *The Emergence of Iranian Nationalism: Race and the Politics of Dislocation*,²⁴ which focuses on the development of an Aryanist-inflected Iranian nationalism, elides the way in which Aryanism was not simply staged at the expense of other “white” minorities in Iran, but also and in ironic ways, at the cost of effacing the history of slavery and its aftermath.²⁵ Anthony A. Lee, in a preface to his work recovering the history of the enslaved individual Fezzeh Khanom in nineteenth-century Shiraz, notes the results of the 1868 census, which showed that in Teh-

²¹Khosronejad, *Qajar African Nannies*, vi.

²²Pedram Khosronejad (lecture associated with photo exhibition “Qajar African Nannies” at UC Davis Alumni Center, Davis, CA, 10 May 2018).

²³Khosronejad, lecture.

²⁴Reza Zia-Ebrahimi, *The Emergence of Iranian Nationalism: Race and the Politics of Dislocation* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017).

²⁵Akhundzadeh, a major focus of Zia-Ebrahimi’s study, was himself a person of partially African descent through his mother (H. Algar, “AKUNDZADA,” *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, 2011, www.iranicaonline.org/articles/akundzada-playwright).

ran, the population of Afro-Iranians was then 12%, a fact that has been ignored or glossed over in the historiography of the period.²⁶ In his portrait of Fezzeh Khanom, Lee draws on Bahai historiography, which constitutes one of the few sources to record even obliquely the lives of these slaves, but notes, “while it is commendable that the presence of these African slaves is acknowledged, their significance to history is ignored.”²⁷

On the evidence presented by Daneshvar herself, her family likely enslaved people. Daneshvar never (to my knowledge) discussed this fact directly or put it in any explicit comparative framework with the legacy of slavery she saw in the United States. Yet she acknowledged that a character from the story “A City like Paradise” (“Shahri chawn behesht,” from the collection by the same name), Mehrangiz, was based on her own *dadeh siah* (Black nanny), an Afro-Iranian slave-cum-servant, who lived with her own family.²⁸ Elsewhere, I have argued that this figure of the freed-slave-cum-female-domestic functions in Daneshvar’s work, and in the imaginary of Iranian modernity, as a sign of a disjuncture, an irreconcilability.²⁹ In particular, I have focused on the way in which even as women’s rights and status came to the fore of public attention as important aspects of Iran’s modernization, neither reformist Iranians, including feminists like Daneshvar, nor the law itself could acknowledge female domestic servants (including former enslaved persons like Mehrangiz or Sonbol Baji) as women. Mehrangiz is perhaps the closest Daneshvar comes to showing real sympathy for a female domestic, and this attitude is clearly derived from Mehrangiz’s helpless abjection in the household.

Even for feminists, the personhood of servants existed outside the law, and the status of manumitted slaves who had become, perforce, domestic

²⁶Anthony A. Lee, “Enslaved African Women in Nineteenth-Century Iran: The Life of Fezzeh Khanom of Shiraz,” *Iranian Studies*, no. 3 (2012): 417–37.

²⁷Lee, “Enslaved African Women,” 429.

²⁸*Honar va adabiyat-e emruz*, 11.

²⁹Amy Motlagh, *Burying the Beloved: Gender, Fiction and Reform in Modern Iran* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2012).

servants was particularly precarious. Yet in spite (or perhaps because) of this denial of their personhood, the figure of the servant persists in important ways in modern Iranian fiction. In my book, I argue that this trace in the literature is as important as any legal document. In literary texts as well as in political discourse, female domestic workers would increasingly become the Other to the imagination of a central, dominant Iranian womanhood, which defined itself not only in contrast to the traditional wife, but also to the household servants.

Many of Daneshvar's short stories and novels prominently feature domesticservants, especially women, and Daneshvar often thematizes their position in the household in her stories. Only the eponymous story in *A City like Paradise*, however, thematizes the status of a former female Afro-Iranian slave. As alluded to above, this story follows the life and finally the death of Mehrangiz, who is now serving as a nanny, maid-of-all-work, and de facto concubine in the middle-class home of her former master's daughter, to whom she was given as a wedding gift.³⁰ With the onset of modernity and Reza Shah's reforms, which included land reforms and the Manumission Law of 1929, elite slaveholders saw a rearrangement of their fortunes. Here, we see that dramatized in the case of this married daughter, who cannot afford another person in her household, resents Mehrangiz's sanctioned intimacy with her children (and unsanctioned intimacy with her husband), and treats her as subhuman and with immense cruelty. Although the story clearly evinces sympathy for Mehrangiz, the character portrayed as the true victim is Ali, the son of Mehrangiz's mistress, who loves Mehrangiz more than he does his mother, and whose inability to achieve the signposts of manhood (e.g., employment, marriage) is obviously signaled as the true tragedy of the story, even though it concludes with Mehrangiz's abject death.

If Daneshvar and other leftist and feminist intellectuals had difficulty seeing domestic servants as having souls—in other words, as “real”

³⁰Daneshvar acknowledged in several interviews that Mehrangiz was based on her own nanny. See, for example, p. 11 of her interview with Hariri.

people³¹—we might also say that she had difficulty seeing the problems with the deployment of Blackness as abasement.³² In the two additional stories in *A City like Paradise* that also foreground race, “The Iranians’ New Year” (“Ayd-e iraniha”) and “The Playhouse” (“Suratkhaneh”), Daneshvar deploys the use of blackface in two Iranian cultural traditions to comment on the situation of the (non-Black) Iranian. “The Iranians’ New Year” tells the story of an American expatriate family living in Iran and their two young sons’ naïve fascination with a young man whose occupation is playing the Hajji Firuz character associated with the Persian New Year, Nowruz, while “The Playhouse” revolves around an actor playing the *siah* in a traditional theater.

In “The Iranians’ New Year,” the mediating sensibility is that of two American expatriate children in Iran in the 1950s, when Americans were beginning to be present in Iran in larger numbers, but the site of sympathy is the Iranian young man they patronize. The two children, Ted and John Michaelson, are fascinated by the blackface Hajji Firuz character, which is an important ritual aspect of the Nowruz holiday, and they become by extension fascinated by the young man living on the margins of their neighborhood who plays this character professionally. The boys adopt a charitable attitude toward the young man and his father, who is a shoeshiner, and build, unbidden, a kiosk shack for the men, decorating it with American symbols, such as the American flag and Mickey Mouse. When one day they find the shack abandoned and open to the rain and wind, which has destroyed their decorations, the younger boy

³¹Manijeh Nasrabadi deploys the terminology of affect, as articulated by Deborah Gould, to discuss the complicated engagement of Iranian feminists in the pre-revolutionary educational diaspora with leftist politics. Of woman members of the Iranian Student Association (ISA) in the United States, she notes, “women in the ISA were deeply invested in human liberation, including their own” (131). Some of what she attributes to these activists in that movement can also be said of Daneshvar, who, by virtue of her age, was not part of the wave of student mobilization abroad but may have anticipated some of their experiences. Manijeh Nasrabadi, “‘Women Can Do Anything Men Can Do:’ Gender and the Affects of Solidarity in the U.S. Iranian Student Movement, 1961–1979,” *WSQ: Women’s Studies Quarterly*, nos. 3 & 4 (Fall/Winter 2014): 127–45.

³²For an important reading of the notion of “abjection” in Black diaspora discourse, see Darieck Scott, *Extravagant Abjection: Blackness, Power, and Sexuality in the African American Literary Imagination* (New York: New York University Press, 2010).

first imagines that “red Indians” have attacked the place; then, when his brother pooh-poohs this idea, insists that it must have been “black men with masks” and that they must be “lynched.”³³ The story is very obviously a critique of American expatriates in Iran in the 1950s, when they had begun to look like representatives of a colonial presence, especially after the 1953 coup engineered by the CIA and MI6. The evocation of Blackness here comes in the form of the Hajji Firuz character, as well as in the comments made by the two boys in their mistaken understanding of what has happened in the kiosk. The young man’s father has died, and the boys do not understand the reasons for the poverty in which the young man and his father lived, or that their “help” does not in fact save a man who has spent his life shining shoes by the side of the road.

As in “A City like Paradise,” here it is not the plight of any Black person that is dramatized (or a critique of the strangeness of the Hajji Firuz blackface tradition), but rather, the abased condition of non-Black male Iranians. The boys are foolish (if naïve) white Americans, but in the story, they take on sinister qualities nonetheless: their innocence, which is protected by their whiteness and their privilege as Americans, enables them to feel self-satisfied at the pathetic help they offer impoverished members of a society whose language they don’t speak and whose customs they don’t understand. Yet Daneshvar does not attempt to unpack the Hajji Firuz tradition at all. Here, as in “The Playhouse,” she deploys blackface but does not interrogate it as a problematic or dehumanizing practice. Hajji Firuz, like *Zwarte Piet* in the Netherlands, is a historically mysterious and contested aspect of the Nowruz celebration. Explaining the origins of this figure has become part of an apologia related to contemporary Iranian negotiations of race.³⁴

³³Simin Daneshvar, “The Iranians’ New Year” (“‘Ayd-e iraniha”), in *Shahri chawn behesht* (Tehran: Kharzmi, AH 1381/AD 2002): 37–44. Quote on p. 42. All translations are my own.

³⁴Several scholars have insisted that Hajji Firuz’s blackened face has nothing to do with racial signaling, but is about the fading blackness of winter, since the Iranian New Year is the vernal equinox and many of its rituals have to do with banishing winter and welcoming spring (e.g., *Chaharshanbeh suri*, or “Burning Wednesday,” when celebrants jump over bonfires and shout “My yellowness for your redness,” meaning my jaundiced [yellow] color for your ruddy [red] color). Scholarship on this topic continues to attempt to distance its racial aspects from the history of enslavement of Africans in Iran; some scholars, indeed, make no note of this possible

“The Playhouse” follows a few days in the life of Mehdi Siah (whose name essentially translates to “Mehdi the Black”), a blackface performer in the “low” dramatic tradition that was still popular at the time of the story’s creation. In this tradition, as the story confirms, the *siah* is the central character in the drama—the mediating character with whom audiences are invited to identify.³⁵ Mehdi Siah gets caught up in the tragedy of one of the other players, a young woman who has become pregnant out of wedlock and plans to ensnare the rich amateur who has recently joined the troop, wanting to “study” Mehdi Siah. Here, Mehdi Siah reluctantly chooses class solidarity by allowing the subterfuge and entrapment of the young man to progress without intervening. Here, too, as in “The Iranians’ New Year,” the reader’s sympathy is directed toward a disenfranchised Iranian male, whose condition of abasement is made manifest in both stories by wearing blackface.

Taken together, these stories suggest a significant change in Daneshvar’s sensibilities regarding race. Her previous writings show no such attention to race at all, suggesting that her time in the United States during the Fulbright fellowship radically changed her perspective on race (as well as on class). For this reason, I am suggesting the paradigm of translation to discuss Daneshvar’s negotiation of race. While translation has become so capacious a concept in contemporary scholarship that it risks the loss of any meaning at all, I believe it can be a useful metaphor here for thinking about the negotiation of “race” because it is so clearly a concept or idea that does not fully translate between languages.

connection. See, for example, Niayesh Purhassan’s “Hajji Firuz: performans: barrassi va mo’arefi-ye ‘Hajji Firuz’ va negahiye- tatbighi beh namayeshgaran az manzar va didgah-e performans” (“Hajji Firuz: Performance: Research and Introduction to ‘Hajji Firuz’ and a Comparative Look at the Performers/Actors from a Performance Perspective”), in *Me’mari va honar (Architecture and Art): Namayesh*, nos. 125–26 (AH 1388/AD 2009): 42–47. In contrast, and for an interesting discussion of the contemporary controversy in the Netherlands over Zwarte Piet and a comparison to the Hajji Nowruz tradition, see Angelita D. Reyes, “Performativity and Representation in Transnational Blackface: Mammy (USA), Zwarte Piet (Netherlands), and Hajji Firuz (Iran),” *Atlantic Studies*, no. 4 (2018): 521–50.

³⁵For discussion of this theatrical tradition, see Bahram Beyzai, *Namayesh dar Iran (Drama in Iran)* (Tehran: Chap-e Kaviyan, 1965); Baghoolizadeh, “Seeing Race”; and Maryam Khakipour’s 2010 film *Siah Bazi: The Joymakers* (New York: Icarus Films, 2010).

Although Iranians began to go to the United States and Europe for education in large numbers in the 1960s and 1970s, Daneshvar was not part of that wave, by virtue of her age.³⁶ However, she was one of the first, if not the only, Iranians to record experiences of racial encounters during the height of the civil rights movement, and the language she uses is tentative and does not conform to any preconceived or prescribed vocabulary for discussing race.³⁷ Her letters suggest her fascination with race as an operative concept in the United States that structures relations between Black and white Americans. She struggles to see how she herself is understood within this paradigm, and refers to herself as “just a shade lighter” than the African Americans she meets. Against this uncertainty about where she falls in the American color continuum, we must also acknowledge the fact that Daneshvar and Al-e Ahmad, whose family was from northern Iran, clearly had a running private joke regarding her color. He sometimes refers to her in their letters as his “black girl from Shiraz” (*dokhtar-e siah-e Shiraz*) or “my black one” (*siah sukhteh-ye man*), and she frequently signs herself in the same way, or as “your black Simin” (*Simin-e siah-e to*).³⁸ On the other hand, Daneshvar is at times patronizing toward the Black Americans she meets: she seems confused and, at times, horrified or bemused at some of the situations racism in the United States engenders. She tells Al-e Ahmad the story of Dorothy,

³⁶See, in particular, Chapter 3 of Matthew K. Shannon, *Losing Hearts and Minds: Iranian-American Relations and International Education during the Cold War* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2017) for a fuller discussion of the Iranian student movement in the United States.

³⁷The words historically used to discuss the practice of enslavement in Iran, *bardegi*; the people who were enslaved, *bardeh*, *kaniz*, *gholam*; and Afro-Iranians, *siah*, differ from the translations of terms used in the Iranian press to describe race, racism, or Black people when they occur elsewhere (*nezhad*, *nezhad parasti/garayi*, *siah pustan*). The latter terms have the quality of neologisms—they are not deployed in this way in historical documents (including literature) dealing with the trade in enslaved Africans or other peoples in Iran.

³⁸See, for example, Daneshvar, *Nameh-ha*, vol. 3, 284, 286, 291, 318. See also Judith Butler’s reading of Nella Larsen’s *Passing* for an interesting comparison: the protagonist of *Passing*, Clare, is married to a racist white man who ostensibly does not know her ancestry, but calls her by the nickname “Nig” (Butler, *Bodies That Matter* [London: Routledge, 1993], 167–86). When I presented an early version of this work at UC Irvine in 2017, a participant in the seminar took me aside and told me that he had heard that Daneshvar herself had African ancestry, and that this would explain “the way she looked.” When I asked for evidence of this, the person promised to send it to me but did not. I mention this to suggest how Daneshvar has herself been racialized in ways that do not always make it into print.

a young Black woman who lives in Daneshvar's dormitory at Stanford and figures in the letters as someone who is remarkable for her beauty.³⁹ She answers a phone call intended for another girl, and when that girl is not available, the caller asks if he can take Dorothy out for a date. She accepts and waits for the caller in the dormitory's lobby. When he arrives and discovers that she is Black, he berates her and says he won't take her out. A female custodian for the dormitory, who is also Black and unnamed but frequently referred to, yells at the man and threatens him. Daneshvar ends the story by relating how she and another (white) friend intervene by coming home from the cinema and telling the custodian to stop, or she might be fired. Daneshvar sees herself as having helpfully intervened.⁴⁰

Neda Maghbouleh's important work on Iranian American racialization and racial thinking suggests some critical framework for Daneshvar's difficulty placing herself on the color spectrum, and her ambivalent (dis) identification with Black Americans: "The specter of Iran was a racial hinge between white Europe and non-white Asia: a face, a body, a culture, and a concept that could open or close the door to whiteness as needed."⁴¹ Daneshvar's descriptions of her interactions with Americans, as in the account above, show that her "blackness" is something she elects to participate in, but can step back from when she wants to do so, and take the position of whiteness.

Two comparatist Americanist scholars, Ebony Coletu and Ira Dworkin, have investigated some of the important but often overlooked moments of identification between contemporary Egyptian intellectuals, who selectively courted and rejected the idea of Egypt's status as an

³⁹Black students did not matriculate at Stanford until ten years later, in 1962. Although there was not the violent hostility to Black matriculation that occurred at southern US universities, one student in this cohort, Sandra Drake, remembers, "Once a girl came up to me and said: 'I've never talked to a Negro.' We were 'Negroes' back then." See Roy Johnson, "What It Was Like to Be an African-American Freshman in 1962," *Stanford Magazine*, September 2017, stanfordmag.org/contents/what-it-was-like-to-be-an-african-american-freshman-in-1962.

⁴⁰Daneshvar, *Nameh-ha*, vol. 1, 384–85.

⁴¹Neda Maghbouleh, *The Limits of Whiteness: Iranian Americans and the Everyday Politics of Race* (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 2017).

African nation, and Black activism in the United States. In the article “A Complicated Embrace,” Coletu examines the reception and translation of Alex Haley’s novel *Roots* in the Arab world in the 1970s and 1980s, where it was enormously popular.⁴² The plight of protagonist Kunta Kinte became a metaphor for the condition of Egyptians, especially Egyptians working in the Gulf, at the same time that Egypt was practicing racist policies directed at Sudanese refugees and Nubian Egyptians.⁴³ Coletu compares this use of *Roots* to Eve Troutt Powell’s powerful investigation of racial politics in Egypt during the period of the Sudanese condominium (1899–1956). Coletu comments that while the use of blackface in Egypt at that time was a way to “visualize stubborn resistance to the ‘civilizing mission’ of the British colonial project while reifying support for Egyptian cultural transformation under European influence [. . .] [t]he rhetorical plasticity of Kunta Kinte as a resistant figure and a slave marked by blackness resonates with this local history even as it conveys a distinct story about Atlantic slavery and diasporic survival in the United States.”⁴⁴ Coletu goes on to note that the use of *Roots* by Egyptian intellectuals such as Sonallah Ibrahim tended to exploit the metaphor of slavery elsewhere to explain the plight of intellectuals such as himself, rather than to shed light on contemporary practices of racism. She also points out that “legacies of slavery are also reworked over time and in Egypt, reference to slavery as debasement has been visually coded to blackness in the last century,”⁴⁵ a point echoed by

⁴²Ebony Coletu, “A Complicated Embrace,” *Transition*, no. 122 (2017): 138–49.

⁴³*Roots* was published in a Persian translation by Alireza Farahmand in AH 1357/AD 1978 and has never been out of print. Recently, on the occasion of the publication of a new edition of the translation by Amir Kabir Press, Farahmand was interviewed by the newspaper *Hamshahri*. He mentions his own interest in the history of slavery in the United States, and how he had the opportunity to meet Alex Haley on two occasions; according to Farahmand, Haley was interested in him as a Muslim, since Haley had written *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*. “Farahmand: Rishah-ya yeki az hezaran ast,” interview with Alireza Farahmand, *Hamshahri*, AH Azar 1392/December 2013, www.hamshahronline.ir/news/241770/%D9%81%D8%B1%D9%87%D9%85%D9%86%D8%AF-%D8%B1%DB%8C%D8%B4%D9%87-%D9%87%D8%A7-%DB%8C%DA%A9%D-B%8C-%D8%A7%D8%B2-%D9%87%D8%B2%D8%A7%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%86-%D8%A7%D8%B3%D8%AA.

⁴⁴Coletu, “Complicated Embrace,” 143.

⁴⁵Coletu, “Complicated Embrace,” 144.

Baghoolizadeh's examination of racial artifacts and discourse in Iran in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Dworkin is concerned with the personal history and writings of Radwa Ashour (1946–2014).⁴⁶ Ashour, an Egyptian intellectual and writer married to prominent Palestinian poet, writer, and activist Mourid Barghouti, had long been interested in Black political movements before she began work on a doctoral degree in 1973 at the University of Massachusetts Amherst. Dworkin argues that it was her long association with Shirley Graham Du Bois, who lived in Cairo for many years, that led her to choose UM Amherst's Department of English, where she specialized in African American literature and was closely associated with the Department of Afro-American Studies. Ashour's dissertation discussed in depth the First International Congress of Negro Writers and Artists in September 1956, and specifically, the "applicability" of the "colonial thesis," as put forward by writers like Aimé Césaire, to the situation in the United States. Dworkin uses Ashour's 1983 autobiography and the later quasi-historical novel *Siraaj: An Arab Tale* (1992), which relates the tale of a slave rebellion on a fictional east African island, to argue that Ashour's engagement of African American cultural politics influenced her fictional and autobiographical writing in Arabic in ways that had broader (but largely unexamined) consequences for the modern Arabic novel. Her profound interest in African American politics notwithstanding, Dworkin notes that Ashour was unable to endorse the critique made by her mentor and friend Du Bois of racism in contemporary Egypt. Dworkin also argues that—similar to Coletu's findings regarding *Roots* in Egypt—"the particular appeal of African American culture [for Ashour] lies more in its broad-based engagement with colonial histories of oppression than with the particular contours of racism within the modern state."⁴⁷

Something similar is at work in Daneshvar's engagement with the politics of race in the United States, and her attempt to translate what she

⁴⁶Ira Dworkin, "Radwa Ashour, African American Criticism, and the Production of Modern Arabic Literature," *Cambridge Journal of Postcolonial Literary Inquiry*, no. 1 (2018): 1–19.

⁴⁷Dworkin, "Radwa Ashour," 6.

sees for Al-e Ahmad. Daneshvar was not interested in opening a referendum on race in Iran, but she clearly did see the condition of Black intellectuals in the United States as having some parallel to the situation of intellectuals and artists in Pahlavi Iran, where any critique of the shah was censored and the author blacklisted or flagged for surveillance. However, insofar as Daneshvar did see the condition of Black Americans as a metaphor for some Iranian experiences, clearly Blackness for her meant degradation or abjection. While her writerly sympathies remained with the politically downtrodden, they did not always embrace those who were class or racially suppressed. Her representations of non-Persians (and specifically, Indians and Azeri Turks) in *Savushun* can be charitably described as “Othering,” and her treatment of lower-class woman, especially, was often contemptuous and deployed for satire.

In the summer of 1963, Daneshvar returned to the United States for a second extended stay, to participate in the Harvard International Seminar, and she would again record her impressions in letters to Al-e Ahmad. (The collection *A City like Paradise* had been published two years earlier, and while on her trip, she writes irritably to Al-e Ahmad of an unfavorable review of the book by a young man she doesn’t know.)⁴⁸ Notably, she writes on several occasions, and at length, about the civil rights movement in the United States, which was foregrounded in the seminar. The filmmaker Richard Leacock screened and discussed his documentary *The Chair* (1962), which follows the attempt to commute the death sentence for Paul Crump, who was convicted for his participation in the killing of a security guard during an armed robbery in Chicago. The participants were taken to a Boston “slum” (Daneshvar’s word) to see conditions of life there, and were offered social experiences in self-consciously integrated settings.⁴⁹ Daneshvar also records Ralph Ellison’s visit and presentation to the seminar, which was clearly an important part of her experience that summer.

⁴⁸Daneshvar, *Nameh-ha*, vol. 3, 257.

⁴⁹Daneshvar, *Nameh-ha*, vol. 3, 396.

Ellison, author of *Invisible Man*, made a profound impression on Daneshvar, and she speaks of his work with great respect and interest, recording quotations from his speech to the seminar, and observes that he is someone who has used literature to overcome the enormous obstacle of race, which “might otherwise have defined him.”⁵⁰ She describes to Al-e Ahmad how she has begun reading Ellison’s novel and is so impressed by it that she has ordered it for Al-e Ahmad in French (he could not read fluently in English).⁵¹ She also discusses how Ellison, in spite of being made financially comfortable by the success of *Invisible Man*, continues to teach. She clearly sees him as a kind of comrade, viewing him as a model for herself and for Al-e Ahmad; later in the letters, having finished *Invisible Man* in its entirety, she indeed compares Ellison’s style to Al-e Ahmad’s.⁵² In Ellison, the avowed engagé writer, Daneshvar recognizes a commonality.⁵³ She tries to explain how the struggle to deal with racism and the legacy of slavery in the United States is mirrored in their own struggle for greater freedoms in Iran, but falters.⁵⁴

Daneshvar also comments on James Baldwin, whose work she had already come into contact with during her Fulbright year. On this later occasion, Jack Ludwig, whom she calls “our professor” at the Harvard Seminar, has given her a copy of *The Atlantic*. While Daneshvar

⁵⁰Daneshvar, *Nameh-ha*, vol. 3, 381.

⁵¹Interestingly, Daneshvar never mentions the possibility of translating *Invisible Man* herself, though she did translate several other American novels, and Ellison’s novel has still not been translated into Persian, in spite of a flourishing translation industry in Iran that is not regulated by international copyright laws since Iran is not a signatory to the Berne Convention.

⁵²Daneshvar, *Nameh-ha*, vol. 3, 395.

⁵³An odd footnote to Daneshvar’s and Al-e Ahmad’s encounters with Ellison at the Harvard International Seminar is the fact that Ellison later dined with Mohammad Reza Pahlavi at the White House at the invitation of President Johnson. Arnold Rampersad, *Ralph Ellison: A Biography* (New York: Vintage, 2008), 447.

⁵⁴On p. 395 of vol. 3 of their letters, Daneshvar tells Al-e Ahmad that she sees Ellison as a “serious” writer. She goes on to characterize *Invisible Man* as a work that is focused on the hopelessness and exhaustion of (American) intellectuals, who are worn down by the petty battles of right and left politics, implicitly reading their own situation onto that of the protagonist in *Invisible Man*, and eliding the racial component central to the novel. Al-e Ahmad later wrote a treatise on this theme, *On the Service and Treachery of the Intellectuals* (Tehran: Ravagh, AH 1343/AD 1964).

doesn't really care for Ludwig's story, she admires a story by Baldwin in the issue (she doesn't name it, but from her description and the date, it must be "This Morning, This Evening, So Soon," 1960), calling it a "masterpiece" (*shahkar*).⁵⁵ Later, however, she compares him unfavorably to Ellison.⁵⁶ Again, both Daneshvar and Al-e Ahmad seem to admire what they see as Ellison's desire to transcend race: Al-e Ahmad comments that while he will always be Black, he doesn't have to always be a Black writer like Baldwin; he can just be a writer.⁵⁷ Both are snide and superior about Baldwin's open homosexuality, and refer to Ellison as *mardak* (little man, a derogatory term in Persian), which can simply be a highly colloquial expression, but feels unusual in Daneshvar's language (if not in Al-e Ahmad's).⁵⁸

⁵⁵Daneshvar, *Nameh-ha*, vol. 3, 366. Baldwin's "This Morning, This Evening, So Soon" first appeared in *The Atlantic* in the September 1960 issue (pp. 37–44).

⁵⁶Daneshvar, *Nameh-ha*, vol. 3, 374. Both Daneshvar and Al-e Ahmad refer to Baldwin as *Jimmy* at times rather than *James*—an informality which, like their use of *mardak* to describe Ellison, may be a linguistic marker of friendly familiarity or an affectation meant to mirror American slang, but in context, reads as a kind of belittling. When I presented this work at the seminar "Roads Not Taken: Literary Translation in Iran" at UC Irvine in December 2018, it was pointed out to me that *mardak* is not always a sign of disregard, and that Al-e Ahmad often used this term much as contemporary American parlance uses *dude*. While I take the point, this is a usage unusual for Daneshvar and remarkable in her letters.

⁵⁷Daneshvar, *Nameh-ha*, vol. 3, 543–44. Al-e Ahmad would later write "The American Husband" (1966), the only short story of his to actively engage an American setting. In this story, much of the plot revolves around an Iranian woman's discovery of her American husband's actual profession as a gravedigger, which is depicted as shameful not only because of its contact with the dead—a taboo—but also because his fellow diggers are Black (p. 77). "The American Husband" ("Showhar-e amrikayi"), in *Panj dastan* (Tehran: Ravaaq, 1977), 67–82.

He would also write a series of ethnographies that included recording of racial aspects of the people of Kharg, an island in the Persian Gulf that was a major slave trading post. *Dorr-e yatim-e khalij, jazireh-ye Khark* (*The Pearl of the Gulf, the Island of Khark*) (Tehran: Majid, AH 1339/AD 1960).

⁵⁸Al-e Ahmad would later meet Ellison when he himself participated in the Harvard International Seminar in 1965. Although Roy Mottahedeh mentions this meeting in passing (and more generally attributes Al-e Ahmad's being chosen to his being one of the obvious intellectual leaders of Iran, rather than through his wife's advocacy, which is clear to anyone who reads their correspondence), he does not, in my view, read Al-e Ahmad's participation correctly and generally uses this to fit into his own view of Al-e Ahmad. Historical or biographical views of any individual may (indeed must) change over time, but I see Mottahedeh's work as feeding into the hagiographical view of Al-e Ahmad, which sees him as a prefiguring martyr of the revolution. More recent research has sought to revise these views somewhat. Golnar Nikpour's comparison of Al-e Ahmad's hajj memoir *Khasi dar miqat* (published in English under the title *Lost in the Crowd*) with the account of Malcolm X's hajj experience in *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* is an important comparative attempt, but

Daneshvar's comments also suggest a sense of being above, and separate from, what she saw as an American problem. Since a large part of the program at the Harvard Seminar was about racial conflict in the United States, Daneshvar reflects: "In summary, right now the most difficult political issue in America is the solution of the case between whites and blacks, and the Don Juans of the [American] universities and colleges are thick-necked blacks, and the white and blonde girls who don't have a black friend have lost their chance. But my dear, I'm sure you're weary of hearing my explanations. . ."⁵⁹ The casual racism in this comment is profoundly disturbing. Yet at the same time, and in spite of making light of the situation as she does above, Daneshvar cared enough about what was happening in the United States to attend (without Al-e Ahmad's permission!) the March on Washington. As she records it in the letters, she wanted to "be part of history, be a witness to history."⁶⁰ She goes on to say that it had a profound effect on her: the march was organized and peaceful, and the police, both Black and white, were helpful. She observes that "the Black race is truly a beautiful one," and that the Black and white people participating in the march, to her surprise, "were kissing each other."⁶¹

Daneshvar was a self-stated critic of the injustice she saw in the world around her, and her engagement with race, both in these letters and in her post-Fulbright collection of stories, presents some uncomfortable truths about the contradictions of the politics espoused by Daneshvar and the Iranian left in the Cold War period.⁶² She did not attempt to connect or critique her own contact with practices of enslavement, or

misses ka;kdn out on Al-e Ahmad's explicit engagement of Malcolm X's ideas in his letters to Daneshvar and elsewhere. Golnar Nikpour, "Revolutionary Journeys, Revolutionary Practice: The Hajj Writings of Jalal Al-e Ahmad and Malcolm X," *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa, and the Middle East*, no. 1 (2014): 67–85.

⁵⁹Daneshvar, *Nameh-ha*, vol. 3, 385.

⁶⁰Daneshvar, *Nameh-ha*, vol. 3, 428–29.

⁶¹Daneshvar, *Nameh-ha*, vol. 3, 428–29.

⁶²One of the most interesting implications of observing these changes in Daneshvar's work and tracing their possible sources is that it makes us look in different ways at the nativism that Al-e Ahmad came to espouse in his late work. Even before *Gharbzadegi*, it is clear that Daneshvar's accounts of the United States and race had an impact on Al-e Ahmad.

the practice of enslavement and its legacy in Iran more broadly, with what she witnessed in the United States. Rather, Daneshvar's (and Al-e Ahmad's) representations of Blackness in Iran and the United States were deployed as metaphors for the victimization of suppressed classes, including the suppression of Iranian intellectuals, at the hands of the Pahlavi state. However, their deployment of Blackness in their writing did not enable them to see or critique their own racial thinking. For Daneshvar, in both her letters and her fiction, Afro-Iranians, Africans, and Black Americans remain an Other that cannot be remediated through narration. Instead, they become a way of "playing in the dark," deploying Blackness to clarify and critique the position of non-Black Iranians in the Pahlavi era.