

*Generation: Youth, Rights, and Solidarity in the War on Terror; Missing: Youth, Citizenship, and Empire after 9/11; and Jil [Generation] Oslo: Palestinian Hip Hop, Youth Culture, and the Youth Movement.* Maira recently coedited a special forum on activist scholarship with Roozbeh Shirazi for the *Journal of Asian American Studies* that focused on SWANA diaspora studies.

## Notes

1. Maira and Shirazi, "Thinking SWANA." Also see Moradian's essay in this special coedited forum on activist scholarship.
2. Moradian, *This Flame Within*, 7. Hereafter cited in the text.
3. Okihiro, *Third World Studies*.
4. "Revolt in Iran."
5. Feminists for Jina, "Statement for 8th of March, 2023"; Ali and Käser, "Beyond Feminism?"; Evans, "Women, Life, Freedom."

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## THE SUBSTANCE OF SOLIDARITY

Alex Lubin

Historians of the US Third World Left often overlook the contributions of Iranian students in the United States to US-based social movements against imperialism. One possible reason for the absence of Iranian students in scholarship on the US Third World Left is the predominance of US racial formations in shaping the discipline of ethnic studies. In privileging US-based racial forma-

tions over more internationalist and "Third Worldist" constructions of racial capitalism and colonialism, ethnic studies sometimes narrows its focus to the United States, thereby deemphasizing analyses of diasporic, refugee, and exilic communities not at the center of US multiculturalism. Another possible reason for Iranian students' elision from accounts of the US Third World Left is that Iranian Americans and Iranian students in the United States are often understood through the prism of the geopolitical relationship between Iran and the United States, and this relationship overdetermines analysis of the ways that Iranian students in the United States engaged demands for racial justice. During the era of US imperial sponsorship of the shah's regime in Iran, for example, the US state understood Iranian students as complicit with US geopolitical interests. But after the 1978 Iranian Revolution, Iranian Americans were racialized through Islamophobic tropes as security threats to US interests. Iranian students themselves have had to negotiate a plethora of misrepresentations in order to forge a radical future beyond imperialistic or nationalistic horizons.

Manijeh Moradian's lively and prodigiously researched book, *This Flame Within*, places Iranian students at the center of the US Third World Left and suggests a more complex understanding of Iranian political consciousness than previously offered. Moradian develops a transnational analysis focused on diasporic communities of Iranian students in the United States beginning in the 1960s and continuing through the 1978–80 Iranian Revolution, and beyond. The communities at the center of Moradian's book became students in the United States in part to aid in a modernization and westernization project in Iran. A relatively privileged group, Iranian students in the United States were recruited to the United States in an effort at soft-power educational diplomacy. Linked, at least through citizenship, to the US-backed Iranian regime of the shah, these students were not regarded as subversive but as allies to US state projects. Yet Moradian shows that Iranian students in the United States were not compliant pawns of either US or Iranian state interests; they criticized US imperialism and ultimately opposed the conservatism that came to shape the Iranian revolution. Iranian students forged identities, Moradian argues, that were not shaped primarily by nationalism but instead were shaped by internationalism, solidarity, and exile. Indeed, echoing the nonaligned politics of the global Third World movement, Iranian students in the United States sought to articulate anti-imperialist

politics unaligned with either United States or Iranian state projects.

*This Flame Within* offers several important theoretical and methodological interventions. First, Moradian's careful attention to Iranian students' complex identifications and disidentifications with US and Iranian state projects helps readers understand the possibilities and complexities of nonalignment and anti-imperialist political activism within the geopolitical context of the Cold War and the Iranian Revolution. As Moradian demonstrates, Iranian students in the United States faced complex political attachments. During the era of the shah, the Iranian students challenged their status as diplomatic pawns of US/Iranian soft power, and they challenged the politics of US imperial sponsorship of the shah's regime. However, at the time of the Iranian Revolution, some Iranian students criticized the patriarchal currents of the revolution, as well as the making of Iranians as "terrorists" in the American imagination. In order to limn the complexities of Iranian students' identities within shifting geopolitical contexts, Moradian focuses her analysis on the memories and feelings that former members of the Iranian Students Association (ISA) hold about these experiences. A key archival source for Moradian's analysis is a series of detailed interviews Moradian conducted with former ISA members.

In order to reconstruct the history of how and why Iranian students came to the United States to study and how they imagined their future, Moradian conducted thirty interviews and oral histories with former ISA activists. Moradian, serving as an intrepid listener and witness, used these interviews as a research method to help reconstruct interlocutors' memories. More than oral history, Moradian's interview methodology serves as critical participant witnessing. Moradian's invitation to former ISA members opens up reservoirs of memories on the part of participants, many of whom longed to relive their participation in the ISA while also hoping to challenge the racialization of Iranians in America as terrorists. Moradian places herself as an active interlocutor in the interview process, which yields a modicum of trust, intimacy, and deep insight often missing from oral histories. Yet Moradian doesn't merely receive interview transcripts as objective truth; she also theorizes the contingency of memory in order to comprehend how all memories are shaped by present contexts. Moradian reminds readers that her interlocutors construct memories of a revolutionary moment that turned out differently than they had hoped. Moreover, Moradian's witnessing takes place after the elision of ISA

members from the US Third World Left and in an era of violent relations between (and within) the United States and Iran. More than any book I've encountered, Moradian's witnessing offers a stunning analysis of how the past informs the present and how the present recasts the past.

Although the ISA was launched initially with CIA sponsorship at a time when the US and Iranian states were allied, it ultimately proclaimed its independence and became oriented toward Third World liberation movements. Moradian demonstrates that the ISA became radicalized within US universities even as institutions of higher education were meant to foster better diplomatic ties between the United States and Iran. For example, in 1968 several members of the ISA affiliated with the Third World Liberation Front went on strike at San Francisco State University. Moradian argues that "affects of solidarity," grounded in embodied memories of home, explain how and why Iranian students saw the Third World Liberation Front struggle as their own.

A signal achievement of *This Flame Within* is Moradian's theory of "revolutionary affect," through which readers learn about the importance of affect (feelings and emotions) in uniting communities and retaining histories in bodily and psychic forms. Drawing on theories of affect deployed by scholars ranging from Raymond Williams to Sarah Ahmed, Moradian demonstrates how emotions register not only harms and damages, but also aspirations and dreams. By focusing on affect produced in the breach between US support for dictatorship and later Iranian authoritarianism, Moradian identifies the structures of feeling that knit the ISA together and that enabled identification with the broader Third World Left. In this way Moradian contributes to studies of transnational, diasporic, exilic solidarity movements by identifying the connective tissue that builds solidarity. Moradian's focus on affect allows for an analysis that moves beyond identification and similarity as the basis for transnational solidarity, and instead asks readers to consider the ISA's revolutionary affect as a particular experience of displacement and exile, but one that was in harmony with other Third World movements. Moreover, Moradian's use of revolutionary affect helps her to theorize internationalist feminism as a movement rooted in shared liberatory dreams and not merely in identitarian categories imposed by nation-states. "The ISA became compelling because it offered an explanation of the affective states of Iranian students who had trouble accepting a US worldview that hinged on support for dictatorship and because it provided a plan for

action. Affect thus became a conduit toward new political horizons, new ideas about what kinds of feelings and actions were permissible and desirable” (8). In 1978 Iranian students in the United States had the opportunity to witness what they thought was the fulfillment of their revolutionary desires. The Iranian Revolution began as a struggle to throw off the chains of US imperialism and CIA-sponsored political rule in Iran. Several Iranian students in the United States returned to Iran at the beginning of the revolution with the hopes of contributing to the building of a new society. These reverse migrations are the subject of Moradian’s sixth chapter, “Intersectional Anti-Imperialism.” Nearly all of Moradian’s interviewees (twenty-six of thirty) returned to Iran at some point during the revolution, and each described feelings of “euphoria” at the outset of the revolution. Yet Moradian witnesses how her interlocutors diverged in offering explanations for why the revolution failed to realize its initial potential. Just six days following the removal of the shah, the new Iranian regime imposed restrictions on women’s freedoms. In order to analyze the politics of feminism and antifeminism within the context of the Iranian Revolution, Moradian had to confront how US imperialism is often framed as a project to save oppressed women. In order to avoid orientalist assumptions about the problems of Islam with regard to women and sexual minorities, Moradian developed a theory of “intersectional anti-imperialism” as a politics of refusal of imperialism and dictatorship as the only available options for struggle. As Moradian notes, within the context of increasing authoritarianism in Iran that targeted women’s freedoms, in 1979 an Iranian women’s uprising took place.

Moradian is careful to identify the 1979 Iranian women’s uprising as an act of intersectional anti-imperialist activism, rather than a reproduction of Western feminism in an Iranian context. The modifier “intersectional” enables an analysis of anti-imperialism that shares structures of feelings with other global feminist movements but that is also specific to the contingencies of the time and place of Iran in 1979. In this way, the deployment of “intersectional anti-imperialism” allows Moradian, like her interviewees, to navigate between US-imposed and Iranian-imposed notions of feminist politics and to postulate a global, transnational feminist struggle that was both particular to the participants of the women’s uprising but also in harmony with global feminist movements. In other words, the women’s uprising shared structures of feeling without mimicking Western-centric notions of rights and freedom.

*This Flame Within* contributes to our understanding of transnational solidarity movements by identifying the substance, or “conduits,” of transnational solidarity, revealing its composition in affective attachments. Yet, as Moradian shows, the dreams and possibilities of revolutionary affect frequently do not realize victory; rather, revolutions are based in the struggle rather than in the realization of political outcomes. What happens to memory after a revolutionary project concludes without fulfilling its vision? What remains of revolutionary affect?

Moradian’s study is an account of both the past and of how the past is embodied in memories in the present. Hence, when writing about revolutionary aspirations that go unfulfilled, Moradian is careful to identify how these aspirations become an organizing principle of memory and nostalgia. For example, while discussing the 1979 women’s uprising in Iran, Moradian shows how, despite the unfulfilled promise of this uprising, it nevertheless provided an archive of possibility and potential. “Using what I call a ‘methodology of possibility,’” she says, “I read the revolutionary affects that manifested in the women’s movement as an archive of possibilities and potentialities that did not come to pass but that, nonetheless, open up space for reconceiving the diasporic relationship to the 1979 revolution for current and future generations” (218). Similarly, in the final chapter of *This Flame Within*, Moradian focuses on how her interviewees regard the lost opportunities of the ISA from the vantage point of the present, especially given the contemporary context of Iranian state repression and Western imperial violence against Iran. Here Moradian returns to affect, focusing on issues of melancholy and nostalgia as potent emotions containing transgressive potential. This chapter is important to the book because it demonstrates that Iranian student activism cannot be measured merely by the success or failure of national and state geopolitical projects, or of social movements. The ultimate loss of the revolutionary project of Third World liberation does not extend to the loss of affect and memory. *This Flame Within* illustrates that Iranian student activism should be read through an analytic of possibility, rather than through an assessment of geopolitical outcomes.

In sum, *This Flame Within* places Iranian students in the United States squarely within the Third World Left in the late 1960s and 1970s. Traversing US and Iranian contexts and spanning the past and its embodiments in the present, Moradian’s important book helps locate the ISA in the US Third World Left, and it helps contextualize

Iranian feminist internationalism in the past and in the present. Throughout the book, Moradian builds an analysis of “revolutionary affect” that expertly accounts for the infrastructure of transnational solidarity while providing a model for thinking the present conjuncture.

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## FREEDOM DREAMS AND REVOLUTIONARY AFFECTS

Gayatri Gopinath

It is my great pleasure to be a part of the collective celebration of Manijeh Moradian’s *This Flame Within: Iranian Revolutionaries in the United States*, a truly stunning achievement. In bringing to the fore a submerged history of Iranian leftist student organizing in the United States prior to 1979, Manijeh importantly reperiodizes the Iranian diaspora and demands that we expand our understanding of Third World internationalism and Afro-Asian solidarity movements in particular. Most important, Manijeh’s careful archival excavation of this forgotten history, the remarkable interviews she conducts with dozens of members of the Iranian Students Association who survived that period, and her consistent attention to the deployment of discourses of gender and sexuality in nationalist and diasporic contexts give us incredible insight into the current moment. Her book allows us to make sense of the mass mobilization that began in September 2022, with women and girls once again at the forefront of the movement both in Iran and in the diaspora.

As Manijeh’s dissertation advisor at New York University (NYU), I was privileged to have been present at the birth of this project some thirteen years ago when

she first entered into our graduate program. To see what she has accomplished in the ensuing years—as the project has grown, transformed, and deepened in complexity—is nothing short of astonishing. I want to begin by remembering Manijeh as the student she was in 2009 when she first entered my office at NYU. I was immediately struck both by her openness—a willingness to learn and to listen—but also a palpable sense of quiet resolve, purpose, and determination. She entered into our graduate program as an already accomplished writer of creative nonfiction, with several publications to her name. She subsequently shared with me her own history of radical organizing as a young person in leftist organizations, and the fact that her own father had been part of a generation of radical student organizers in the United States prior to 1979.

I highlight these biographical details, which she also mentions in the book, because upon reading the book I was so struck by how she brings her full self to it: her own personal and familial history of radical organizing and activism, together with her unparalleled skills in close listening, hearing, and storytelling. The book is about what Manijeh calls “revolutionary affects,” and indeed I found reading the book itself to be a tremendously affective and affecting experience. What is so apparent from the first page to the last is how the entire book is infused with Manijeh’s deep empathy for her interviewees—for their dreams and aspirations for another, more equitable world, for the joy and delight they took in the feeling and practice of solidarity with other minoritized communities, for their excitement in creating alternative kinship networks—as well as for their profound sense of loss, heartbreak, and failure.

Manijeh deploys various key terms that resonate throughout the book: *revolutionary affect*, certainly, but also the related terms *affects of solidarity* and *resistant nostalgia*. Manijeh uses the term *resistant nostalgia*, which she borrows from Marianne Hirsch and Leo Spitzer, to name the evocation of lost revolutionary ideals that so powerfully imprint the psyches of her interviewees; she counterposes this resistant nostalgia to the normative nostalgia that typically characterizes the post-1979 Iranian diaspora. What becomes clear is that Manijeh herself, in writing this book and in resurrecting these forgotten histories, is very much an active participant in the relay of memory and resistant nostalgia that she traces for us. Manijeh approaches her interviewees with a deep sense of responsibility and care; it is equally clear how much trust they place in her to safeguard, transmit, and do justice to the stories they share with her. As