

**Citizenship, Meaning, Belonging and Identity:
A Case Study of First-Generation Iranian
Immigrants in Vancouver**

by

Parisa Yazdi

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Approval

Name: Parisa Yazdi

Degree: Master of Arts (Anthropology)

Title of Thesis: *Citizenship, Belonging, Meaning and Identity: A Case Study of First-Generation Iranian Immigrants in Vancouver*

Examining Committee: **Chair:** Dr. Barbara Mitchell
Professor, Department of Sociology and Anthropology, Simon Fraser University

Dr. Cindy Patton
Senior Supervisor
Professor

Dr. Dany Lacombe
Supervisor
Professor

Dr. Sharalyn Jordan
External Examiner
Associate Professor
Faculty of Education

Date Defended/Approved: July 30, 2013

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Abstract

This thesis explores what it means to be an ethnic minority and a gang member in the course of becoming a *Canadian*. It is based on narratives of first-generation Iranian immigrant youths who migrated to Vancouver, British Columbia, in the 1990s and created a gang called Persian Pride.

The aim of this research is to explore how identities are constructed within the realms of meaning, representation and identification. It is premised on the argument that identities are social constructs, always stemming from historical and social relations of any given time and space. Here, identity is explored beyond mere personal choices; rather, it is conceptualized as a construct within relations of power and discourse, all of which had a profound impact on these young individuals' understanding of their lives in the midst of exclusion and in their attempt to belong.

Keywords: Identity; identification; representation; first-generation; Iranian immigrants; gang-identity

To my mother, father, and brother—I love you.
This became my possibility because of you.

~J~

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Chapter 1.

Prologue

They named us and we embraced that name. Eighteen years later, I can still remember how it started. In what seemed like an ordinary place and an ordinary time, we had an identity defined for us. They laid the path for this type of identity before us and we walked through it painting it along the way with them. We give this identity its own colours, lingo, territory and textures of reality without ever realizing its gravity and how it was going to unfold within our lives.

This is a story about a story, based on my field research where I interviewed Ex-Persian Pride gang members to recall and share their stories of migration and gang membership. This is a past that I had also experienced growing up with them. I collected these stories—about the mid-1990s to the early 2000s—in 2006.

This is a multilayered story that includes voices of my participants, as well as my own recollections. Another layer within it is the way I have reconsidered and retold these stories during my fieldwork. Between the start of my research and this moment I have had time to reflect on my assumptions about identity (see Appendix A: Literature Review) and to reconsider my original research project about what it means to be an immigrant and, more particularly in relation to this research, what it means to be an ethnic minority and its connection to becoming a gang member.

It was the 1993 school year and we were in grade ten. Four of us decided to skip class as usual to go to a park adjacent to our high school. We felt no shame in our skipping and we didn't care if the teachers or the school staff caught us. As far as we were concerned we'd be in some kind of a trouble whether we were inside or outside of the classroom. Besides, we felt there was much more life outside in the park and in our pack of cigarettes than inside the claustrophobic classrooms that sucked the zest for life and living right out of us.

While we were being loud and rowdy like typical teenagers, a police car pulled up right next to us. We saw them coming, we saw them pull up to us. We saw the typical white car they drove with "POLICE" printed across the hood and its siren light fixture on top. There was no mistaking who they were and that they were there, but they had to make an extra effort to *really* let us know they had arrived. As the cop car stopped in front of us, its siren started flashing in blue and red, echoing its defining sound for a couple of rounds. One of the guys said, "Look at 'em...He's probably thinking while I'm at it, let me REALLY scare these shits... What fucking idiots! Does he think we can't see him or is this the part where we're supposed to start running?" This was not our first encounter with the police, nor would it be the last.

The cop got out of the car with a very serious look on his face. There was the same kind of intensity in his arms and hands that were hovering around his heavy belt as if he was reminding himself not to touch the gun protruding out of the strap. His partner started walking behind him. They looked like they were made from the same cookie cutter: the same posture, the same expression and the same clothes; they were almost the same height. They even seemed as if they were having an identical thought. As they got closer we became quieter, acting aloof and almost oblivious to why they were there, but we were just waiting to see what they had to say this time.

Before the two officers reached where we were sitting on a park bench, one of them shouted, "Why are you here?" Our friend Maz, who happened to be with us that day, was the rowdiest of the group. He was always a little too fearless for his own good. Maz had no sense of danger or what one would call a *filter*. At this point he had been in Canada for about eight months. He always felt extra brave when approached by any form of authority and today was no exception. Maz shouted back with his broken English and thick accent: "What, Mr. Occifer, there is problem here or something? Why? You don't see it's a park! Why don't you go ask that white guy with a dog why he's here?" The cop was far from amused or impressed by his outburst. He got a little closer to Maz's face and said, "I particularly want to know why YOU'RE here." At that moment we all had a collective thought of "*Oh shit!*" Of course "*Oh shit!*" probably never crossed Maz's mind and even if it did, it was not a good enough reason for him to back down. He moved his body to the edge of the bench, leaned his face forward so he was now looking the cop square in the eyes and said, "What, in the park or in Canada?" A

sarcastic smirk appeared on the police officer's face as he tilted his head to the side and said, "BOTH." I knew what was coming; we were going to be in a lot of trouble very quickly because of Maz.

Maz jumped off the bench to his feet and bounced up and down for a couple of seconds in one spot, like a boxer getting psyched to start a match—and then came to an abrupt stop. His pause was instantly followed by, "Well Mr. Occifer, let me tell you both reasons. I'm in the park 'cause I hate school and wanted a smoke. My bitch teacher doesn't let me smoke in there so I came out here—and the reason for why I'm in Canada is the same. But don't get me wrong—I'd rather have this smoke in Iran than in your shit country, but what can you do, right?" The officer responded immediately with an expression of *"this explains it"* when he said, "So another Persian, ha?" Maz responded without delay, "Better fucking believe it, Persian all the way, forever—and I'm proud of it." The officer looked at his partner and said, "He is a proud Persian in Canada—far from home, isn't he?" The officer's partner made an erupt sarcastic chuckle sound and said, "Yeah, Persian Pride. Sounds like a gang to me." None of us said anything, not even Maz. We were shocked by being called a gang and at the same time dazzled by the sound of it.

We were escorted back to school to pay our dues for skipping class and smoking, but the catalytic effect of this encounter with the police made this episode of skipping class different from the ones before: the cops had given us a *cool* name. We instantly took ownership of it and it spread like wildfire: *Persian Pride*.

The label and the idea might have died quietly in the fantasy lives of a group of tenth graders, but shortly after our park incident there was a violent fight between the Iranian and the First Nation youths. This fight caught the attention of the media, where the Iranian youths were identified as dangerous gang members. In less than a week a quasi-gang who called themselves *Persian Pride*, with their so-called affiliates who claimed certain parts of North Vancouver as their territory, was born. There was a gang colour—white—chosen for the group. White bandanas quickly became the decorative feature of many Iranian youths in North Vancouver, regardless of whether they were officially or unofficially in the gang. Persian Pride was on its way to becoming an actual gang and the claim to their imaginary geographical boundary and clothing marked their

identification, which very much mirrored the claim to space, use of uniforms and power of the police officers encountered not too long before in the park.

Even after these youths identified themselves as Persian Pride, it took about two years for the group to become a full-fledged gang with its own rituals of initiation and a clear hierarchal structure of who was who and who would fill in what position. Initially this gang was composed of a number of young first-generation Iranian immigrant males who became friends during their early high school years. At the outset their main purpose for getting together was to hang out, which often entailed causing havoc, getting into fights, throwing wild parties and smoking weed (marijuana). Even after clear self-identification as gang members, the idea of making a profit from their status lagged behind their group identification. It was not until their final high school years that it caught up and ran parallel with their gang activities. By this time many had gotten involved in what my participants called “the grind” or “the street hustle.”

Their self-identification as gangsters with self-claimed territories demanded certain exclusive privileges, which placed them in direct conflict with other gangs, as well as with the authorities. The notion of conflict is a requisite for the construction and internalization of gangs’ self-identification, a close analysis of which demonstrates that it always takes shape and form in relation to circumstances external to it. This too was an inevitable outcome in the formation of Persian Pride. Conflict was a necessary process to create the hierarchal grids and linkages within and between gangs, which allowed for the sustenance of Persian Pride’s dynamic and activities. The constant state of conflict allowed Persian Pride members to find the resources they needed to make money and profit from their illegal activities, which grew in severity over the years. One of my participants expressed his dismay at the transformation of their activities from being “shit disturbers to a full blown gangster life.” He explained,

It started with selling a gram of weed here and there and disturbing the peace—in no time it turned to moving hard drugs, extortion, kidnapping and murder...you name it. What’s even worse, once we made the connections the gang fell apart but most of the guys became educated criminals who actually did things in a much larger scale...I think it was around this time in the early 2000s so many of us started turning against each other and a couple of guys actually killed each other...in the end over money and shit.

By the early 2000s Persian Pride had received much media attention for their criminal activities. A number of its youths had been killed, some received lengthy prison sentences—one with a sentence of life in prison without parole—and many others were deported. For example, related to the time of this cohort, it was reported, “in 1996...Mani Rezaei, now 32 pleaded guilty to shooting Siamak Zahedi, now 36. Zahedi was in bed with two girls at the time he was shot.... Months later fate caught up with Rezaei. He was seated in his car outside a dance hall when someone walked up, put a gun to the back of his neck and fired once. Rezaei spent months in a coma” (Free Library, 2012, Nov 04). In another report, “in 1997, another gangster, Mohammad Mirhadi, who was 21 years at the time was shot to death at point blank range while watching a gangster film, *Donni Brasco*, at a movie theater with his girlfriend” (Free Library, 2012, Nov 04). The same source announced, “many Iranian immigrants have been locked into gang activity and drug trafficking. At least five Iranians have been killed in such gangland executions over the last 15 years, with another two seriously injured and now confined to wheel chairs” (Free Library, 2012, Nov 04).

While Persian Pride no longer exists and there are no other recognized Iranian gangs in Vancouver at this time, there are still many first-generation Iranian immigrants who become involved in criminal activities. It was recently reported, “An Iranian-Canadian who was a convicted murderer has been shot to death in gangland targeted killing near Vancouver” (Free Library, 2012, November 04). In another news within the past few years, it was reported, “Milad Saffari, was killed...in his Mercedes in a parking lot of Coquitlam British Columbia as he was leaving the gym” (Free Library, 2012, November 04).

These are only a few reports to demonstrate the extent and breadth of young Iranians’ involvement in gang and criminal activities throughout the years. None of the sources that I have had access to covered the lengthy prison sentences and deportations of individuals associated with gangs; nor are there any reports on personal struggles such as drug addictions, broken kinship and other hardships these individuals and their families had to endure.

While the media and the authorities represented Persian Pride as a coherent and thoughtfully constructed criminal group, a deeper look into the formation of this gang

exposes another kind of story. To understand the underlying reasons for the conception of this gang it is imperative to recognize that the rise of Persian Pride was an organic occurrence and in some respects an inevitable one; this was a kind of microcosm-combustion of relations related to these young people's time, location and position. Unfortunately a blind eye was turned to their daily realities and they were reduced to gangster caricatures without depth or reason for the violent lifestyle they were involved in. This short sightedness took over the imagination of many witnessing the trials and tribulations of these young people as they struggled to find a way through their new lives.

The common surface analysis that generally gazes from a distance constructs scapegoats by placing the onus of responsibility purely on individual choices. Perhaps this construct is to fill the spaces in between the gazer and the gazed where details cannot be seen. For example, one prevalent form of justifications has been to blame movies for their teaching of the *gangster-blueprints* in gangster movies. In this line of reasoning it is contended that this is where the *bad-apples* learn how to be bad. What is generally missing from this surface analysis is that representation of *money, power and respect*, which is sacred in the *gangster mind*, is a prevalent message in all forms of media. It is a construct and the foreground not only for the *gangster wannabe* or the *bad apple*, rather it is a representation of social values with its prescribed formula of an *attitude-type*, which is a requirement for all who aspire to *move up* within society. During the most active time of Persian Pride there was the same claim, which was to blame the ever growing *Gangsta Movies* of that particular time,¹ specifically with their portrayal of young marginalized Black Americans as gangsters.

However, this common-sense explanation loses its appeal when such tragedies hit close to home. The distance and the gap in one's gaze closes and the onlooker is forced to sit back and reflect on the gravity of the reasons beneath such atrocities. One

¹ (1991) *Hangin' with the Homeboys, Straight Out of Brooklyn, Boys n the Hood, New Jack City*; (1992) *South Central, Deep Cover, Juice, Reservoir Dogs, American Me*; (1993) *Carlito's Way, Suger Hill, Strapped, Poetic Justice, Menace II Society, Blood In Blood Out, A Bronx Tale, Kalifornia, CB4*; (1994) *Above the Rim, Jason's Lyric*; (1995) *Clockers, New Jersey Drive, Higher Learning, Dangerous Minds, Friday, Casino, Dead Presidents*; (1996) *Set It Off, Bullet, Don't Be a Menace to South Central While Drinking Your Juice in the Hood*; (1997) *One Eight Seven, Gridlock'd, Gang Related, First Time Felons, Donnie Brasco, Hoodlum, I'm Bout It*; (1998) *He Got Game, The Players Club, Belly*.

is forced to ask whether these events and losses were due to mere imitation of media representation or if there was more to it. Even if it is assumed that this phenomenon is strictly due to media representation, two primary questions remain: first, why is there a gangster movie phenomenon in the first place and second, why did its imageries and values resonate at all with this cohort? After all, not everyone watches such movies and certainly not everyone becomes a gangster after being exposed to them—and to go even further, not every Iranian youth of that time who watched such movies joined Persian Pride or any other gang.

The Questions

Questions such as the ones expressed above were raised throughout the entire process of this thesis, which I have tried to address within different chapters. However, such inquiries were subsets of four primary questions within this research: What is identity? Second, what is gang-identity? Third, how and where is gang-identity constructed, identified with, represented, internalized and ultimately enacted? And lastly, what are the relationships between the individual choices in becoming a gang member and its relation to the external world? That is, how are they related and interconnected? And how do they inform each other in the production and reproduction of identity?

The Immigrant Dream

Persian Pride was not created in a void; rather, the conception of this gang can be connected to many historical events prior to it. One such instance is the 1979 Iranian Revolution, a tumultuous historical moment which forever altered the direction of Iran and its citizens and especially this particular generation of immigrant youth. The revolution and its aftermath uprooted millions of Iranian citizens over the last 34 years. Some fled to escape persecution and others merely to seek the rights and opportunities they felt were denied to them by the new government.

The *immigrant dream*, as it is understood in the West, is a stereotype worth breaking apart to expose its conditions. It is worth examining this dream up close and in a personal manner beyond the distance of social policy and media sound bites that often construct and represent a glossed-over black and white image of immigrant lives.

Every now and then an *immigrant story* takes centre stage in the media. The portrayal is generally of an individual or a family who changed their life by migrating to *the land of opportunity* in the midst of utter fatigue and defeat to seek out a *better life*. It is at this juncture that the camera shifts to the next scene showing a family gathered around a table indulging in their own traditional foods. The standard story line of the successful immigrant is about *coming up from nothing* in the land of opportunity. The next sequence in this story is set up to *reveal* how the immigrant made something of his/herself—and of course, this theme is always articulated with the general reference pointing to these newcomers' *ability* to adopt their host country's culture, which happens to be benevolent and accessibly multicultural. Yet in this heart-warming story of triumph, the daily realities of struggles and constant compromise of one's dignity and integrity remain blacked out; they seldom find their way into the frame of representation. It is rare to hear that the immigrant in focus left behind many valuable facets of his/her life—such as education, financial stability, hard-won social positions and well-earned occupations, all which are lost due to the established social and structural climate created for immigrants in the host country. There is little room in the stereotypical representation of the better life to show the gaps between the social relationships left behind in Iran and those that became the primary sources of self-identification for these new immigrants in Canada.

In fairness, many immigrants also believe these stories before they migrate to other countries. My participants and my own family made these life-changing decisions in search of better conditions. Most of us knew a better life meant something other than the kinds of lives we were living. We believed a better life was somewhere out there. We could not have imagined what the process and the details of a better life, far away from home could have entailed, as the distance was too great in this case for us to see the details as well.

Many Iranian families left Iran as the result of real fears and concerns about their children becoming casualties of the then-present² and possible future wars. For others, there was concern about the drastic ideological changes that took place within the new state of the Islamic Republic after the 1979 Revolution. Other reasons arose from evaluating the Iranian state's lack of global economic and political standing. Many

² Iran-Iraq War.

Iranians estimated a sharp decline in their future prospects in respect to education and employment opportunities for themselves and their children. Virtually they all left home for a better life. The hope has always been expressed for something greater; however, as their stories were told, it quickly became visible that the reality of their dreams sometimes unfolded like nightmares. Some stories are laced with genuinely unpleasant surprises in how long it took some of them and their families to come to terms with departing from their homeland and to adopt a new foreign and often alien nation as a home. For many, this was a departure from the self in search of another self.

A Historical Rewind

All of my participants who migrated to Canada in the 1990's, in their teenage years, were the children of the 1979 Iranian Revolution. Many of us witnessed our families and their friends participate in the protests, shouting slogans of freedom and independence for Iran. After successfully toppling the monarchs, Iranians got new rulers who implemented overwhelming constitutional, political, economic and social changes that took hold quickly and swiftly. The structural and the ideological changes swept the entire country within a matter of months and were fully solidified and legitimized in to place as a government that is still in power today. We experienced these changes firsthand on a daily basis. The newly implemented structural and ideological rules of law were enforced in an aggressive and a repressive manner, often through overt use of violence. The objective of this method of governance was to gain and sustain full control of the public and the private spheres of life within Iran.

My own experiences were probably typical and I can still remember a number of them vividly. In one instance, while in grade one, my mother had promised to take me out for pizza after school. I watched the clock tick so I could run out at the sound of the bell. I made my way to the outside gates of my elementary school only to stand there for an hour waiting for my mother with an unbelievable sensation of hunger. I eventually sat myself down at a step outside the gates and surrendered to the hunger. I pulled my bright green backpack in front of me, opened the zipper and reached my hand deep inside the bag. I dug in it aggressively, shuffling what was in there, looking for something to eat. While continuing my exploration for food, I looked up and saw a woman walking towards me with a stern look in her eyes. Her gaze stopped me in my tracks. In no time

she was standing above me like a dark tower, covered from head to toe in black. Black veil, long plain black uniform, black pants that seemed just as loose as the top overcoat-style uniform. She even had black shoes with black laces. The only thing that was not black was the crest of her face and her hands from her wrist to the tip of her fingers where her sleeves ended. She reached for my hand and commanded me to follow her, saying “Stand up, I’m going to take you to your mother.” At that moment my heart started to pound in my chest. I felt fear unlike any other time in my life. That was the female moral police (Komiteh/Khaharha’e Zaynab). She took me to a van across the street and opened the back door. I climbed my way into the van to find my mother sitting at the other end with her eyeliner and mascara running down to her face and her fingertips were all bloody. When she saw me she broke down in tears and uttered my voice with sounds of pain and suffering. Not the kind you hear caused by physical pain, but the sort that is caused by remorse; it was the agony of having her seven-year-old daughter witness her humiliation. While in the van, she just held me—to hold me and maybe to ease her pain. We didn’t say much, she wrapped her beautiful hands that were mutilated around my waist and kept kissing the side of my head. They kept us there for a while, telling my mom what she needed to do to be a *better Muslim*. Later I found out that she was pulled over for wearing makeup and red nail polish. They decided to rid her of her sin and to help her in becoming a better Muslim by cleaning her makeup with their spit and by shaving the surface of her nails off with a razor.

Other people my own age had relatives who were tortured, served prison sentences while innocent and lost their family members in the eight-year war. All of us experienced the relentless Iraqi bombers over our skies virtually every night. Poverty, scarcity, war, death, dying and constant fears of uncertainty for our lives and safety were our common experiences, which many Iranians thought they could escape by leaving Iran.

From our daily lives we explicitly knew what better was. We felt that at worst, better would be the absence of these atrocities, but most could not have imagined the kinds of hardships they were making an exchange for. This is how many of us Iranians learned the hard lesson of *details* and *context*.

Prelude to Canada

My participants explained the often-confusing process of navigation through the private and the public spheres of life in Canada. This perplexity was often related to the gaps and discrepancies between the various Canadian constitutional and immigration laws. They explained that while they understood the Multicultural Act as a constitutional law that was meant to provide rights and freedom for ethnic minorities, immigration laws in contrast were a mechanism to reduce these rights through the constant identification of the ethnic minority as the *other* who needed to be controlled and monitored in the process of *becoming* a Canadian citizen.

The ambiguities that arise from the Multicultural Act are in its encouragement for immigrants to hold on to their ethnic identity while they are simultaneously expected to become Canadians. It was extraordinarily difficult, if not impossible, for my participants to know what the *right amount of Iranian-ness* entailed in *becoming* Canadian and, for that matter, there was much confusion in what this *Canadian-ness* was. On a number of occasions my participants expressed their constant uncertainty as to where they could belong. There was this feeling of obligation to remain an Iranian in the midst of becoming a Canadian. Many of them felt that they could not become Canadian enough if they did not relinquish that which was Iranian about them. In this regard, there was an immense amount of pressure and stress in navigating through what it meant to become a Canadian and to be a Canadian beyond mere legal documents while remaining an Iranian.

The ambiguities and contradictions related to the immigration policies and the Multicultural Act are in many respects advantageous in the assimilation of immigrants. This ambiguity, which is the outcome of interaction between the Canadian majority and ethnic minorities, prevents immigrants from clearly distinguishing how or why they have come to occupy certain positions within any given circumstance. Because of this opacity, many immigrants are unsure of the source for this feeling of *lack* within their new lives. For example, at the beginning of their arrival many were uncertain as to where they should point the finger of blame for their struggles. Many of my participants expressed that for the first few years of being in Canada it was extraordinarily difficult to distinguish whether their problems were due to their own shortcomings, such as not knowing

English, or if it was the structural barriers that held them back from learning the language efficiently and in a timely manner, which would have allowed their parents to use the professional degrees they had earned in Iran. They expressed an ever-present sense of hopelessness and this feeling of being *stuck* in a vicious circle, with their fingers pointing at themselves.

What made a clear form of distinction hard for many of my participants were the mask of multiculturalism and its motto of tolerance. They expressed that they were given the appearance of having many choices within the realm of becoming a Canadian-Iranian while having very limited number of undesirable choices in their daily lives, such as what occupations they could attain. It was a complex location for them to occupy and even more complicated to learn how to navigate through and out of it.

Being The Other

Our first introduction to what it meant to be the *other* took place upon our arrival at the Canadian airport. Perhaps the introductory interactions here should have been a clue as to how our lives would unfold from there, but most of us did not think much of it. We understood this first encounter as *procedure*. It is only in hindsight that we came to see how the lines of distinction and difference regarding ethnicity, race and nationality were drawn at this first encounter. Some came as political refugees who had to surrender forged documents with hopes of being granted the right to stay and others came as permanent residents, also known as landed immigrants. These legal documents defined and set parameters for what we had to do in Canada in order to eventually become Canadians. For the first time in our lives we were identified as ethnic minorities and had a nationality without a nation. We were told we had to pay our dues and in time we could possibly earn our citizenship. We were mere arrivals and landers like cargo who had to be sorted into the right categories in the years ahead.

We no longer matched the descriptions we had identified with for most of our lives. Being a Muslim in the context of Islam as a matter of religious faith and as a form of a cultural identity was translated back to us in a Western tone to mean fanaticism, dogma, propaganda, violence and backwardness. We learned that being an Iranian was synonymous with lack of order, lawlessness and instability. Also, coming from this region

had a connection to terrorism, as the Middle East was recited back to us to be the most fertile land for it. In sum, our religious, cultural, social and political-identity was interpreted to us in a foreign language that did not resonate. We were identified and represented in ways we could have never conjured up by ourselves and for ourselves as Iranians who happened to be from the continent of Asia.

This was just the beginning. Our next lesson on the shores of Canada, away from the waters of familiarity, was the riddle of language. It is beyond the scope of this project to examine and to explain in detail what language barrier means in being human and the profound impact it has on the way one experiences life. What I can briefly articulate from my participants' and my own experience, as well as those I have seen throughout my life who have struggled with this, is that not knowing the language of the majority and being unable to communicate one's position in life is one of the most painful, terrifying and lonely experiences one can endure. Not to speak a language is to be without voice and when in distress and pain and in need of desperate help, the echoes of silence and the absence of a helping hand are an overwhelming condition of suffering and despair. The sound of one's own voice might as well be the silence that is in the in-between breaths before or after the utterance of joy, pain or a scream for help before that last breath.

To be and to remain voiceless gives those with a voice a lot of leverage to interpret who the voiceless are, what their needs are, what they ought to do, how they should be in the world and who they ought to become. These articulations are more than mere wishes; once expressed, they become standards of experience for the voiceless. The voiceless must then live in these constructed actualities built for them as their daily reality. It is in the realm of these experiences and in relation to it that the voiceless negotiate with their host country.

Somewhere between learning and wishing of becoming we learned the hard lessons of what we were not. We learned this from our everyday interactions and relationships with our peers, teachers and the education system. We learned it from the media, the police, immigration, government policies and other institutions. We learned what this translated into for our parents in terms of work, economic standing and future prospects. We experienced Canada's pride and joy, this idea of human rights, which was

continuously violated, as we could not defend ours. In a sense, most of the opportunities our parents were searching for got lost somewhere in the *translation*—in the transition from Farsi to English, in the gaps of the language that demanded a process of relinquishing to become.

Our parents' education was of the other kind that was deemed worthless. Amongst us first-generation migrant Iranian friends, most of our parents had exceptional educational backgrounds compared to the Canadian norm and standard. All of our fathers without exception had to turn away from their education and training upon their arrival to Canada and many had to give in to any random jobs they could get to make ends meet. My father went from working as an experienced accountant to driving a taxi. Another friend's father who was a doctor had to settle for work at a pizza shop. Another who was an engineer had to settle for driving trucks. The immigrants' life work and life experiences were deemed worthless by the voice of the majority in Canada.

Most of our parents miscalculated this part. They thought they would come to Canada, learn the language within a year, upgrade their degrees and soon thereafter be the people they were back in Iran in their new country. This could not have been further from their lived experience. They came here to find themselves stuck in a system constructed and organized in a way to keep them in perpetual low-paying waged jobs. They came to realize the obstacles were set in front of them strategically to stunt their ability to learn the language fluently and in a timely manner. Upgrading their education was in the range of tens of thousands of dollars with unrealistic debts and years of schooling, which required them to start from a beginning they had successfully completed years ago. For many families this was not an option. This would have meant absolute prolonged poverty for their families and lost opportunities for the children of these families. They immediately learned that their work in minimum wage jobs, even if they were dead-end jobs with no prospect for future growth, would at least generate enough income to get by from one week to the next, which at the very least ensured the family's survival.

The majority voice portrays the immigrant as lazy, which is an observation of the *lack* in forward movement within the immigrant's career and hence its perpetual situation of poverty. The regurgitation of this portrayal as an *immigrant-fact* fails to see that for

many immigrants the bottom of the ladder is the top, there is no distance to travel, there is nowhere to go and this was not any different for our parents. The question of how to thrive quickly dissipated as a distant dream and what remained in this Canadian veracity became daily struggles of how to survive.

Our parents soon came to realize that their life's work, as well as everything they had learned to value in Iran, was void of merit and significance in Canada. This left them feeling helpless and out of control in their daily lives, even with the most mundane occurrences and events. Virtually every interaction with the outside world, whether it was dealing with immigration, the bank, or a sales associate would begin and end with "sorry, I don't understand what you're saying." The language barrier forced our parents to repeatedly reply in a self-apologetic manner. I have watched many new Iranian migrants say this and the common reaction they receive back from their Canadian counterpart is often a well-intended advice of, "you should learn, you should take some classes." The native English-speaking person gives this advice from her vantage point. She is unaware of this Iranian's struggle for survival. She cannot know the inner voice of that struggling immigrant who screams within, in Farsi, "but you won't let me." The distinction of *us* and *them*, *them* and *us* is continuously constructed in a seamless manner across the entire fabric of this new life—even when good advice is given with the best of intents.

As time passed, many Iranian parents felt they were losing control over every facet of their lives. Day by day they witnessed their authority and voice fade into indecipherable background noise. Somehow the downward spiral of exclusion from the public sphere had managed to find its way within their homes, creating a cleft between them and their spouse and, even more detrimentally, between them and their children.

Over time, many of us found it difficult to find a meaningful place in our parents' world. Over time, their narratives and struggles resonated less and less with us. Being young and still in the process of finding ourselves, our vantage point and hence our narratives became very different from our parents'. In fact, we had diverged so severely and deeply that many of us perceived our parents' perception and viewpoint as our primary obstacle in *fitting-in* and belonging. Many of us believed they were not allowing us to become the people they had brought us here to be.

Similar to our parents, we had hardships that were particular to our own

circumstances, which our parents could not fully grasp. These emerging differences between family members were exacerbated, as for many struggles for control became a common theme, creating familial misunderstandings and hence immense amounts of conflict.

One of the primary influences on why our narratives became so significantly different from our parents' was our type and frequency of interaction with the Canadian society. This had a profound impact on how the Western narrative of the self, in regards to gender, ethnicity, race, religion, citizenship, age and other factors, became intermingled with our narratives of the Persian self. These themes came into our lives in the form of ideology, but equally, as the material condition of our daily experiences. The way this narrative was dictated and prescribed to us and how we interpreted it to ourselves, as well as to each other, fundamentally required us to separate ourselves from our parents' narratives, as theirs placed greater emphasis on maintaining our Iranian heritage. We had to exclude ourselves from that story, which meant exclusion of our parents' lives and the pride in the roots they cherished so much—all so that we could find a way to belong in our new environment.

One of the usual topics of our discussion was to complain about our parents, as is common with most teenagers; however, we had a common thread in our story that is generally absent in the stories of non-immigrants. This common thread demonstrates how differing narratives of time and space can overlap and collapse onto each other to reconstruct the relations of us and them that are already present in the dominant narrative of a society. We had internalized Western narrative lines such as *pulling your self up by your own bootstrap* and *the lazy immigrant* long before our parents had a chance to understand what we had come to internalize in Canada.

Initially when we arrived in Canada we were the spectators, just like our parents, but very soon, we saw our parents' dream for a better life as an *immigrant sham* since they could not move up to get out of the dead-end, minimum paying jobs we felt they had chosen for themselves. We saw their lack of effort to upgrade their education as making lazy choices. We interpreted their caution and consideration for their family as their weakness and backwardness to try new opportunities. For many of us, the grandest of all shams was our parents' failure to become more Canadian as they spent

tremendous amounts of energy in trying to maintain—what we believed to be—their outdated and out-of-place heritage. On many levels, we became the perpetrators of their exclusion as we internalized the dominant narrative of our new society and our parents became the spectators of children who came to resemble that *other*.

And of course, learning the English language at a faster rate was one of the primary reasons for the exclusion and separations that occurred with many families. The first-generation Iranian youths learned English at a much faster rate than their parents and, as all of my participants pointed out, there was a lot of pressure from their parents to speak Farsi at home.

And the gap between who we were and who we had become continued to grow in every facet of our lives. When we sat amongst ourselves in Canada we would talk about our memories back at *home* in Iran, as if they were actual objects we had left behind with their shadows following us halfway across the world. Many of our expressed memories were pleasant, fun and funny. All of us talked about it with a sense of reverence and a romantic nostalgia. We would also talk about the dead bodies that were carried down our streets, passed from one hand to another while people shouted, “he is a martyr” and so on. It was someone’s son, brother, husband, or other relative who became the casualty of war. We used to ask each other about the original street-name of their home and what martyr’s name it had been changed to. The exchange of context within our stories was from *home* about *home*, which looked and felt different in this new home. We were becoming more and more detached from our stories while desperately trying to hold on to them—as an attempt to hold on to ourselves. As time passed in Canada it became harder to take ownership of these stories; we were telling them as if we were now observing them as outsiders, from a distance as if we were telling stories of other people.

The Story in the Context of the Research

Central to my research interest is the concept of identity. When addressing my research questions regarding identity I was constantly forced in the direction of asking what about them/us as Iranians? What does it mean to be an Iranian? What does it mean to live in Canada? To be an immigrant? What is being a Canadian or an Iranian-

Canadian? What does it mean to be a gangster? An Iranian gangster? Then there were some secondary questions that became the building blocks for understanding the above questions. These were questions of what about the historical moment of their migration? What about the location of their arrival in Canada? How much of who they became was shaped within the private sphere as a personal choice and how much of it was related to the societies they have lived in? What made them view the world the way they did? What inspired them to become gangsters? These are some of the questions that I have tried to explicitly address throughout the thesis, as they were common themes that emerged within my field research.

As I dove deeper into the subject matter the less clear the entire concept of identity became. It was unclear what it might be in the literature and even less clear in the field, as it is impossible to bluntly ask someone “who are you?” and get a straight answer. I realized that the articulation of identity is difficult because it is not something that can be pinned down. Identity remains indiscernible since it can only define itself when it is put into relation against another phenomenon. “Who are you?” is a daunting question to answer since in that moment the individual is asked to define him/her self in relation to itself and there is not much to say. The best we seem to be able to do under the pressure of this inquiry is to relate the self to our ascribed and achieved statuses, social positions and personal preferences. It was through this simple, yet most complex question that I understood that articulation of identity requires the self to juxtapose itself with the world and vice versa. And it is precisely for this reason that it is difficult to pin down and answer the question of identity as something innate that belongs to and within the individual self. The world is big and the individual’s perception of it is just as grand and as complex, which makes the entangled identity even more complicated.

Through my field research and the literature in focus I came to see the connection and the commonalities between that which is called gang-identity and that which is being an Iranian-Canadian. Both of these hyphenated identities are notations of category that hold within them worlds of meanings, as well as social relations, discursive practices and techniques for different positions we occupy. It is the interplay of world histories and individual biographies that allows an individual to articulate his/her identity. Hyphenated identities—the articulation of two nations that are laid side-by-side separated by a hyphen—are representations of distances and differences that

simultaneously bring into relation historical trajectories of time and space as past reflections and future possibilities. This movement and overlapping of time and space that is constantly intersecting with the particularities of the present are junctures where the individual *becomes* and it is precisely within the process of becoming that individuals articulate their identity, always in terms of where s/he belongs in the midst of the world. The process of being, becoming and belonging requires navigation and movement and it is precisely for this reason that I argue identity is a *method of navigation*.

My use of identity as a method of navigation requires a brief explanation in order to make clear the logic behind my usage of this particular type of language in this thesis. Here I am using the word *method* to imply ways of understanding, relating, articulating and accomplishing through time and space that is organized into pockets of constructed positions with their own techniques for understanding, the meaning-making process and course of action. This is a web of relations between time, space, position and circumstance. In this sense identity as a method implies that both the subjective self and that which lays external to it possess a kind of identity; they are historically constructed fields of knowledge that allow the subjective and the external world to be in inter-exchangeable modes of interaction and connection.

In the case of my participants, gang-identity was a method of resolving their feelings of being disconnected from their home and roots as they strived to create a bridge between the gaps. Becoming a gang member was a method of utilizing tools and techniques available to them in navigating their way through this new location, with its different set of relations, positions and circumstances, as well as multiple forms of representation and identification of who they were and where they could belong.

The intent here is to show that the individual is a microcosm of the world it lives in, always existing in its realm of possibility, which is directly connected to personal and collective histories stretching to the present circumstances it finds itself in. In many respects, what the individual projects outward is a variation of what was projected onto it as a representation of itself and its circumstances. In other words, the individual embodies the sum total of the relations within its realm of possibility. Where the individual is unique, as all participants are, is in the sequences of experience within particular times and spaces, which have a profound influence in the particularities of its

own meaning-making process and how it represents and projects itself back to the world.

Chapter 2.

In the Beginning It Was All About...

Who Are You?

As stated in the previous chapter, I could not blatantly ask my participants about their identity in terms of “who are you?” or “how would you describe your identity?” At the outset I did ask these questions and for the most part the responses were uncertain and at times answered with much resistance. The difficulty in articulating one’s own sense of identity is complex since the response is not merely about who one is in the realm of thought and ideas; rather, as Grossberg (1996) explains, “question of identity is one of social power and its articulation” (p. 98). To ask someone who they are is a loaded question that demands to know much more than one is able to articulate. For example, in my first interview Roha said, “I don’t know, I’ve always been the same person.” In subsequent interviews, when more specific questions were asked, he was able to explain who this self is by pointing to the positions he has come to occupy throughout his life in different times. In this way, he was able to clearly express the changes he experienced within the gang and in other facets of his life. He was also able to explain how different social relations, times and locations had transformed his view of himself and the world around him, as well as what he felt became viable forms of coping mechanisms in difficult circumstances.

It was only through hearing my participants’ full stories and details of how they understood and connected to the world that I was able to learn about how they identified themselves. Identity could be seen as a method, as the go-between in the relations we have to others, to the world and ourselves. In this respect, identity is more a mechanism we utilize in different times and spaces to tell one continuous and coherent story of our life and our sense of who we are within it.

It is not so much the identity of my participants that allowed them to feel a sense

of unity in the midst of disconnects and discords, but rather how they were able to reconnect a lifetime of experiences, construct new meanings for them and relate them to other relationships, which enabled them to identify with an identity. Maz articulated this as,

I do know one thing, I was a much tougher dude in Canada than Iran. This place made me grow up fast and made me rough around the edges. I ended up being that dude you wouldn't wanna fuck with. Compared to a lot of other "good" Persian guys I was rough and I guess like they said more violent, but I'd say still the same guy from Iran. So maybe rough around the edges but still the same dude.

The Narrative

Ree (1990) suggests that "narrative is 'the unity of life', not something achieved through some essential continuity but rather through a 'recurring belief' in personal coherence, a belief necessary 'reviewed in the telling of tales'" (p. 110). It was through observing ex-gang members' ways of connecting the most intricate nuances of their experiences within their stories that I was able to understand who they were, who they had become and who they are now.

Through participants' stories I had to figure out how they had located themselves in different times, spaces and circumstances, since there was a back and forth comparing and contrasting of them within their stories. I had to puzzle together how they constructed their sense of continuity in their world of fragments, departures and disconnected personal and collective histories. Firth (1996) argues, "the concept of narrative...is not so much a justification of the idea of personal identity, as an elucidation of its structure as an inescapable piece of make-believe" (p. 109). This is not to say their stories are fictitious; rather, the connections they have made in comparing different times, spaces and circumstances are unique to the sequences of their own individual lives. For instance, Farz constantly drew connections between family and friends when he was explaining his feelings of being *different* and the *other-kind* in Canada, while for Nav this feeling was related and articulated in connection to teachers and his Canadian peers. All of these unique and distinct ways of making connections and conclusions construct a type of story where the self becomes a certain kind of an actor within the personal and the collective story.

Another comparison that solidified this point for me was the sense of romanticism about Iran. When my participants were expressing their hardship within Canada and comparing it to their memories in Iran, they had great difficulty recalling times when they felt any form of exclusion within their homeland. It was only when we got to the details of their experiences back at home that they were able to convey occasions of exclusion within the public and the private spheres of their lives. For example Farz explained, “I swear I was becoming too religious in my views, ’cause I was being brainwashed at school and my parents hated this...we used to argue a lot.” Their sense of self and how they related to themselves and their life stories were fluid and changing, contingent on what they were bringing into relation with each other to retell their stories.

Constructing Meaning

From the field research and the literature under review I came to understand that identity is a process for the self that allows recognition and acknowledgment of itself through fragments of time and space within its differing circumstances. This is a kind of continuity that always strives to portray, perceive and maintain through synchronization. In this manner, identity is where the unity of all those fragments through the course of meaning-making process ensues. Hall (1997) makes this point by stating:

The one thing we are not is *one*, only one thing. What we are, are those different ways in which at different historical moments people address us, have called us and the recognition this implies. *Yes, that’s me*. That is the moment of identity and identification. (p. 11)

It is through these meaning-making and meaning-giving processes that the individual self is constructed, realized and re-realized. This recognition demands that the individual constantly knit the events and the interpretations of its past to its present and ultimately to its future projections of what it can imagine as its possibilities.

When these points are taken into consideration, it can be argued that identity is not about identical states of being, such as one’s ethnicity, nationality, ideological beliefs, or even actions one has taken throughout a life-time. It is about the process of bringing different facets of life into relation, which gives them meaning as it generates and gives a sense of significance to one’s life. My participants were able to make sense of the world and paint it with gradation of certain values as they learned to decipher the

historical meanings that were embedded within how they were represented and identified in different times and locations, which brought them into a specific set of life circumstances with particular social patterns, positions and forms of practice. One of my participants explained this in the following way:

I came from a family where I was expected to go to university—it was the norm. As a kid I always imagined myself as a wrestler champion and having a PhD or something. Back home I had my parents, sisters, grandparents, uncle, aunts and cousins, not to mention friends around me all the time. We all came from money and good educated families, so there was no confusion in my life about how life was supposed to pan out...but here...holy shit! I had no role models, no friends, no family support, no way to communicate with people.... Everything they wanted me to do or thought how things were was the opposite of what was going on in my life back home. I don't know what happened, but somehow all those expectations changed here.

Sources of Meaning

The participants in this research came to identify with particular positions they had to occupy in Canada as males, immigrants, ethnic minorities, Middle Easterners, Muslims and other forms of identifications, each of which came with its own set of historical relations, as well as its own kind of representation. It defined what type of human being they were expected to be and possibly become. That is, all of the positions came fully loaded with meaning, practice and techniques. Hall and du Gay (1996) articulate this point through their explanation of the production of the self as an object:

There is the *production* of the self as an object in the world, the practice of self constitution, recognition and reflection, the relation to the rule, alongside scrupulous attention to normative regulation and the constraints of the rules through which no subjectification is produced. (p. 13)

Through their stories, my participants also voiced how they embodied and enacted the representation and identification they deemed as the most vulgar and subjugated depiction of them. What they exposed in their stories was more than just their identity; they unveiled the discursive practices and their history, as well as their ambitions in production and reproduction of the *other*, and the dominant social script that is perpetuated and practised within different spheres of life. This process was expressed as an enactment of life circumstance that had less to do with well-calculated personal choices. Arash articulated this when he explained,

Do you know what we had in common? We all wanted money, power and respect, 'cause we all know it's necessary and we didn't have an ounce of it here. That's what it all boiled down to. We all wanted to be something and someone special in the middle of being nothing...and we wanted to escape who we were constantly being told we were. We were somebody....We learned quickly here what to do...we had a lot of things out there to relate to and to help us out...gangster movies, gangster rap...even regular TV and the news. This is where we learned to become the outlaws we were here. We learned making money is in making fear and half the job was done for us by them anyway, we were already feared. We learned to become gangsters in Canada and acted exactly like those blacks who lived in the ghettos...being Middle Eastern is like being black.

My participants' world, which was their understanding of who they were and how they belonged to the world, went through a grinder once they arrived in Canada. Most social identifications they had related to in Iran, as well as the positions they had occupied, identified them as the *other* in Canada. In this respect they belonged to the Canadian society as the other via distinct forms of representation that defined what it meant to be this other kind of human being. My participants discovered the other had a position that came fully loaded with its own practices and techniques. Being in a gang and becoming a gangster are very closely related to the positions constructed for the other who is pushed to the margins of the society.

The one story that was explicit in discussing these changing relations and their consequences was Shah's account of his everyday life in Iran and Canada. In this extended excerpt he effectively and beautifully expresses the changes he found in his life circumstances and his ruminations on his understanding of that difference, which ultimately *changed* him as a human being:

There was a big, big difference how we lived there and what happened here. Back in Iran every morning I woke up and got dressed in my school uniform...same colour and style as all the other kids. I'd get dressed stand in front of the mirror to make sure I looked slick. You know what I saw? I saw myself: a guy with shaved head like all my other friends at school. I had their dark hair, dark olive skin, thick-ass Persian eyebrows. After getting dressed I'd go into the kitchen and my mom would hand me my lunch. She'd pack my lunch every single day, even when she was super sick. We had instructions for what we could bring to school. I remember we weren't allowed to bring cucumbers or anything else that had a strong scent. It was to keep an eye out for the poor kids in school who couldn't afford to buy everything. Thinking

back, that was a cool thing to consider. That's the kind of place we came from...anyway, I'd grab my lunch and I'd get dropped off.

In school I'd hook up with friends...doing the friend things...crack jokes, laugh...give one of them the back of the hand to head smack, play around, you know...we'd talk about what went down on the weekend or the night before, stories about girls or whatever. I used to love getting to school early just for that kind of mess. Then we go through the bullshit routine of the bell when it rang...we'd all scam to find our classmates to line up in the yard. We were like trained soldiers man. We'd line up quickly AND IN HEIGHT. Since I was a tall kid, I'd always be in the back of the line. I liked it that way 'cause I didn't wanna be short or in the front. We were so used to this, I mean we had practised this drill for 10 years now. Anyway, we'd all stand there and then the principal would come on the speaker with his spiel speech. No joke, every time he'd tap on the mic and make this obnoxious noise then he'd say "one two, one two." Anyway, he'd say a short prayer and we'd follow it by mumbling...most of us meant it. Then he'd pause and start his speech about what it means to be a good citizen, to be a Muslim with responsibilities for other Muslims, brothers and sisters. It was value reminder time, you know...to be good students, to one day give back to the country, people and family...our duty to the country to fight and protect it...respect for our teachers, parents... all that kind of thing...things we were told since we were in our diapers. As soon as his speech finished we'd go to first class...and after school I'd head home to have dinner with parents. Then hang out with friends...homework, then repeat. I was a good student and a good kid back there. Life was good man. Then we came to Canada and it was like all the stuff that I told you was from a life on planet Mars...a time bomb.

I remember waking up here every morning, man, just wishing I was dead. Now is stupid to think about it, but I'd rampaging through my closet every morning as if some new pants or shirt was to magically grow out of it overnight. I tried to look cool you know. I'd wake up late every morning, get dressed but I never thought I looked the part. I remember looking in the mirror every morning and seeing that damn Middle Eastern thing they talked about, those damn thick eyebrows and the skin colour was a give away—the nose too. Anyway, there was no lunch business here. Mom would get up before all of us and go to work—dad just lounged around on the couch staring at a turned off TV. Weird man. I'd ask him for five bucks in the morning. He'd give it but it always came with a speech: "son, I can't give you five dollars every day of the week. You don't understand the financial problem of this family. I'm not working and your poor mom is supporting the whole family. You have to start waking up early to pack your food...your mother doesn't have time and I don't have the money to give you." I hated that speech. I'd look at him and in my head be like, why don't you get off your ass and get a job so mom could be the lady of the house like the way she was. At first I'd just think these things, but never said it—but one day I just exploded and just gave

him a piece of my mind. I told him, "Why don't you get off this couch and get a job since you're not doing anything, better yet why don't you do something and pack my lunch." Dude he looked at me like he was gonna kill me, he gave me that whole speech of not understanding and that he raised us better than how I was disrespecting him...he kept saying this place was making us to little demons. Now I know he was hurt and in some ways he was right, but after that time, man, everything changed. I rarely saw them, didn't really talked to them, or ate with 'em—or anything. I felt they didn't get me and I definitely didn't get him back then.

After a few months me and my bro always spoke English at home and they really didn't understand us anymore. I'd say a lot of stupid shit to him in English and he'd always say, "don't speak English in this house" and I'd always just slam the door on him and leave.

School was even worse, man. I'd walk through those hallways like a ghost. I didn't know anyone and from the looks of it no one wanted to know me either. I had no one other than my bro to share things or to do things. This one time I went to my history class and there was this ugly-ass white kid, he had blue eyes and the typical white people blond hair. He walked up to me and said something like "Why are you people so fucking stupid? Why the fuck do all of you look like murderers, huh? Where the fuck do you shop anyway, Wal-Mart? What a fucking loser." I didn't know what his beef was but I knew I wanted to kill him. I still didn't know English that good to really defend myself with words but I knew I could kill him in a fight—still, I just told him to fuck off. He wouldn't back off, he stuck his white-ass finger up to my face and started cracking up...you know that stupid white forced laugh...all sarcastically with a whiny voice, "fuck you ESL, go learn English first, now get the fuck out of my seat." I was new, I didn't know shit and didn't wanna start shit, so I got up and went to another seat. They all laughed. You know that shit wouldn't faze me today, but when you're a kid in a new place like this, those things are the only thing that count.... The teachers weren't any better either, man. Racist stupid comments would slip out of their mouth all the time. They accuse us of cheating, lying, you name it. Just stupid craziness.

And what did I want at the beginning? To fit in with that white asshole. To dress like them, to drive cars like them, gettin' with girls. I wanted some respect. Thank god for rap. We learned some valuable lessons from black rappers on how to get money, power and respect. That became my motto way before Persian Pride, to get money, power and respect. That became my only goal in life, 'cause I thought that was my way to have a normal life.

Then I met other Persians. That was great...a lifesaver, man. I know you probably think not, but we had each other's back, we needed that. We had the same problems at home and school, with other kids, with immigration, with the police... We could talk Farsi,

English, Finglish, gangster, whatever...we got each other. I remember the day I met my first Persian buddy here. I nodded at him and said "yo...he nodded back "yo." That's all we needed man. Anyway, we became really tight that day...we sat down and talked for a long time. I swear it was that day I realized I wasn't the problem, this fucking place was the problem, 'cause we had everything in common back home and here. That day changed my life.... When I was walking away that day he screamed at me with his thick-ass accent "me against the world" and I waved the Westside in the air and said, "Tu Pac all the way."

As much as none of it makes sense, all of it makes sense to me...man this was my life back in the day. (Shah)

Shah and most of my participants did not need theoretical frameworks to inform them of the impact of the changes they experienced in Canada. They distinctly knew that they had come to occupy very different positions, all of which had a momentous impact on how they understood and interpreted what it meant to be a son, a father, a mother, students, a friend, to have a nationality and to speak a particular kind of language. They learned that geography, region, religion and politics matter and that the history they had learned about themselves in Iran was very different from the history that informed this side of the globe. They quickly learned that the global relations between the East and the West influenced much of their personal experience. Rose (1996) articulates this when he says, "relations are constructed and historical, not a amorphous domain of culture...[that is] our relationship to ourselves is due to a verity of rationalized schemes which have shaped our ways of understanding and enacting in the name of certain objectives" (p. 130).

It was not my participants' identity, as in their sense of self, that changed—that part is in a constant state of movement, juxtaposing different parts to form a kind of a unity of the self; rather, the change was related to where they came to locate themselves and what they identified with guided how they interpreted their world and even the very meanings they were able to give their own lives. One of my participants explained:

Yeah we were born Muslims but we weren't one of those Muslims. Being a Muslim in Iran just goes hand in hand...it's just part of our culture. But white people here don't understand it like that. They have this fucked up reason where they always wanna associate it with terrorism, even before 9/11. I mean I came to Canada in 1991, way before 9/11 and they were calling us terrorists then. Seriously they didn't and still don't know the difference between Iran and Iraq,

between Persians and Arabs but they knew we're Muslims and from the Middle East which for them means terrorist and sand niggers. Anyway, yeah, lots of racist stuff based on this religion and the Middle East issue.

They could clearly speak about the often-conflicting spaces where the contrasts of difference and being the other were well highlighted in the representation of what it meant to be a citizen in relation to the immigrant, as well as in the difference between the White Anglo Canadian and the narrow category of ethnic minority. These are some of the elements that my participants found in their daily lives, all of which were part of the discursive repertoire that constantly appeared in great repetition in all spheres of their lives. They quickly learned and mastered the roles they had to play within this new space and its positions they had come to inherit.

The Whole Story

For my participants, migration to Canada was something like a drift away from the shores of stability on an unstable piece of driftwood along rushing rivers. While drifting away from their pasts, what they could see ahead was a crash land into their future; they knew they had to make their way back to a shoreline. The way they did this was to hold on to other drifters, the dangling vines of who they were and what was left of that here. This group of youth had drifted away from everything that meant something to their sense of being and belonging and ultimately their well-being. There was a drift from their homeland, from their legal status as citizens, from having full rights as citizens and the ability to express and relate to the world around them. For a while they were unable to understand the language, or apply the customs and the general cultural mores and rhythm of their new home.

They also drifted from their families due to different rates of assimilation to the new culture. Within the family unit, language and communication gaps grew at an exponential rate, which created a rift between its members. They internalized the ideologies of what it meant to be perceived as second-class citizens and lazy immigrants. This internalization was extended to a point where a number of my participants began perceiving their parents in this negative immigrant paradigm. There was also a drift away from peers who could not accept them as who they believed

themselves to have been in Iran.

All of my participants were constantly shunned and labelled as F.O.B. (fresh off the boat) or just another immigrant with *immigrant qualities*. Such instances were moments of disconnect from themselves and the world external to them. In every possible way they were drifting away from who they thought they were while being pushed forward into their new positions without a clear vision of where they were going. Their experiences were a kind of social death that was impossible for many of them to accept when their deepest desire was to be who they believed themselves to have been all of their lives.

The drift and the diverging locations of their lives were also the beginning of a new kind of self-understanding and narrative in their quest to become and belong. They were in pursuit of inclusion and coherency within their lives. As many of them expressed, they were willing to achieve this “by any means necessary.”

And it was precisely for this reason that these young Iranian youths came together as friends and later on as a gang. This was a means for them to find what they had in common with people in the same life circumstances as themselves. The initial attraction among these Iranian youths and their sense of affiliation started from the need to find an *us* in the face of being an outcast and the other—all before they became outlaws.

Chapter 3.

The Arrival

Believe me, I didn't wake up one morning and said to myself, hey I'm gonna be a gangster today. No, we became gangsters outta necessity not because that's what we wanted. It's hard being a nobody, especially when somewhere, at some point you were a somebody. Coming to this place was like being erased. We were invisible man. We had to do what we had to do to make it in this doggy dog world. It's like that thing Tu Pac said once, we kept knocking when we were hungry and they didn't let us in, so you better believe we'd either break in through the front door or force our way through the back of this bitch. If you must know—in a nutshell, that's why we became gangsters, we had to become gangsters, our situation was gangster. (Roha)

In North Vancouver

The formation of Persian Pride occurred shortly after a time where there was an increase in the migration of Iranians to North Vancouver from the early to mid-1990s. Up to this point North Vancouver was a municipality primarily composed of white Anglo Canadian middle-class neighbourhoods. This type of change in population demographic has been described in the gang literature as *period effects* and *generation effect*. It is explained that,

social changes occur incrementally, with the accumulation of these increments producing significant and unique changes in people, groups, institutions...the social condition of a particular time in history matters in societal form of development. Thus to fully understand gangs in a particular era, one must consider the broad social changes that have affected them at a specific time. (Sanchez-Jankowski, 2003, p. 202)

It is important to make a clear point that the analysis here does not say that what Iranians experienced upon their arrival to the North Shore was caused by their own arrival, which then led to social change. The argument here is that those changes

occurred in a certain manner because of the existing relations that were extensions of the local and the global relations that were historically connected to one another. That is to say, how Iranians were dealt with and how Iranians themselves dealt with their experiences remains a complex phenomenon, and there are no simple correlations of cause and effect as the interactions and the dynamics of the public and the private spheres were multi-levelled. Another contributing factor that adds to the complexity of this analysis are the nuances related to the subjective interpretation of experiences for each individual who came from a variety of life events that were always unique in their qualitative and quantitative sequences and circumstances.

What can be stated with certainty is that there was a change in the *feel* of the municipality with the arrival of the Iranian population. This change in the feel was related to a shift within the social structure brought on by the alteration of North Vancouver's demographic and landscape imagery. This was an alteration to its racial and ethnic composition, languages spoken publicly and increasing variation in cultural modes of behaviour, as well as a change in the economic and class structure of families and individuals within the neighbourhoods. Even the very streets were becoming more unfamiliar-looking, as Farsi-scripted storefronts were beginning to dominate Lonsdale Street.

This sudden change in the municipality caused a call from the public for effective and quick ways to control this growing ethnic population. There was an outcry for implementation of overt methods of integration and assimilation for the newcomers through increased surveillance and police presence, none of which created a fluid or an easy transition for the North Shore residents or the newly arrived Iranians. Farz, who still lives on the North Shore, compared the municipality of now to how it used to be in the early 1990s:

I think there was deeper division between the mainstream and the Iranians at that time. Iranians are the prominent group here now days. We have a way bigger support system. You can go eat somewhere and speak your language, go to the bank and speak Farsi with the teller, go to Persian concerts. There are even professionals to buy homes from and invest your money with. There are probably some Iranian teachers in the schools now. There is way more understanding and acceptance of our culture and who we are now. I guess number is power. We were trouble twenty years ago, cause we were too few changing too much too fast. Now it's a different story.

Sina explained his experience by stating:

I don't know if you remember, but one Persian store started popping up after another on Lonsdale. I remember white people going crazy talking about "Persian Invasion." That was funny. They hated us. I remember when I went anywhere, from McDonalds to White Spot I'd always hear a white person making some racist comment and they'd say it loud enough for us to hear—that we were ruining North Van. Not as bad now, but back then everyone was a racist, from teachers to kids in school. They hated our kind coming here and changing things up the way we did.

A Collective Position with Personal Hardships

My participants experienced many hardships within their families, which Gordon explains as a common phenomenon: "Many street gang members wanted to escape from and find rewarding alternatives to exceedingly unpleasant family life" (2000, p. 51). This analysis is one I could also make about my research participants. Many aspects of daily life, such as language and cultural differences, were major factors in determining the social and economic well-being of their family life. These elements had a tremendous impact on their experiences in Canada, which contributed to how they understood their position and what they believed they needed or could do to improve their life circumstances. In many ways becoming involved in a gang was a form of remedy for the broken ties and the *lack* they felt at home. Their association with their Iranian peers was also a form of recompense for the support system they came to lack at home and within the larger society. Maz explained his disconnection with his family as gradual but something that occurred quickly:

Everything changed when we came here. I think one of the first crazy things me and my brother noticed is that we didn't have supervision at home anymore—and no money...me and my brother always joked about how we were demoted from kingdom to peasant farms. At first I hated the fact that my mom had to work and me and my brother had to come back home to an empty place. No mom, no dad, no food, nothing to do, nowhere to go, no friends to hang out with.

Later on he recalled his efforts to become more Canadian-like and his parents' resistance, which he explained created a lot of confusion and tension within the family:

Me and my brother really started growing apart from my parents. They weren't home and we just starting doing our own things. We wanted to

fit in with other kids, so we started dressing like them, listening to their music and for some reason picked up some of their worst attitude and manners. This used to drive my parents crazy. I remember my mom always saying, "I brought two aghas [respectable men] and now I have to luts [hoodlums or hooligans]." Seriously we weren't luts we were just trying to fit in but they didn't get it. My dad kept saying, "sonat'e iranitoono az dast dadied [you've lost your Iranian traditions]" or he'd say "khodetoono goum kardied [you've lost your selves—referring to losing one's sense of self-identity]." Maybe they were right, but seriously, were trying to find ourselves 'cause we weren't the same Iranian kids back in Iran. We were Iranians somewhere else and we were trying to find out how to be that and not be so Iranian at the same time.

Farz explained his experience and reflection by saying:

I think the biggest problem I had with my family was how fast we kids were able to assimilate. We had the advantage of peer pressure to blend in fast. We adapted to their value system a lot faster—for better or worse. It was as if we were better able to read what they were trying to tell us. This changed how I went about living my everyday life, my ideas about myself and family started to change, the way I expressed myself started to change...me and my siblings changed our parents seemed so different to us and I'm sure we seemed like different kids to them. They really wanted to relate to us and for them that meant staying Iranian, but that was a problem here. It was hard times. I felt very far away from my family even though I was with them every day. My parents became strangers to me and I know they felt the same. They really lost control over me. And the saddest part was that even though I didn't want to be like those Canadian kids I was acting more like them and worse, I was starting to see my parents the way they saw me. All of it was so damn confusing.

For many Iranians who migrated to Canada there was a sudden and sharp decline in social status and economic standing. The lower levels of employment available to them generally translated to lower incomes and also changed the general familial and interpersonal structure of interaction for many individuals and families. All of my participants, with the exception of one, had this experience of financial hardship and economic decline upon their arrival to Canada, which had a profound impact on their familial relationships.

It was pretty bad. We came with good amounts of cash to Canada, but my parents lost everything pretty fast paying for this bill and that and they lost a big chunk opening a shop. They had no idea how business worked here. My poor mom, I can still feel her stress about making

money when we were short for rent and that was every month, for years. (Nav)

Money situation was hella tight here. My dad stopped working 'cause he thought he didn't wanna lower himself to some minimum wage job with all his education, so my mom worked and ran the family. She worked in the back at some restaurant. I had to go there every pay week and get her wages from her boss, 'cause he was always short-changing her. It was rough. (Farz)

One of the primary factors that my participants connected to their hardship and lower social standing in Canada and to their families' inability to obtain better paying occupations was their lack of fluency in English and their inability to express and defend themselves in their new cultural milieu. Gordon (2000) explains this is a common experience among new immigrants. He found that "members constantly stated that on arrival to Canada, there was a lack of resources and employment opportunities available to them...and [they] experienced significant difficulties in obtaining rewarding, legitimate employment because of language barriers" (p. 50). This lack of know-how in navigating through daily life as the result of their inability to speak English had an overwhelming impact on my participants' lives. They felt a sense of helplessness in being voiceless and as a result many expressed a sense of violation of what they believed were promoted as rights within Canada.

Many new Iranian immigrants faced constant blocks, obstacles and opposition in gaining better occupational and social positions. The prospect of upward movement in the economic, social, political and other domains of daily life remained elusive and yet necessary. Gordon (2000) explains his research analysis of this topic by explaining,

a disproportionate number of individuals from visible ethnic minorities is a product of the lack of rewarding (materially and emotionally) economic opportunities for these individuals. This is an especially compelling explanation in the cases of those who were not born in Canada and who face significant language and skills barriers. (p. 55)

Along with their parents, my participants also faced these obstacles in their daily lives. Roha explained his own personal experience of language barriers by saying:

Language was huge. Looking back we were screwed everywhere because we didn't speak it properly. We were screwed by the schools, banks, immigration, grocery stores, clothing stores, buying electronics,

buying a car and anything else you can think of—why? Because we couldn't fight for our right. Immigration fucked us so many times at the beginning because we didn't know our rights and they knew that. Same thing with cops and when we ended up in court and juvie. They straight up lie to us about procedure and the law because we didn't know better then. Honestly, the only time I served time in jail was as a juvie for something I didn't do. We didn't even know how to go about getting a decent lawyer 'cause no one spoke Farsi back in the day. They just took advantage knowing we couldn't understand them.

All of these barriers left my participants feeling a sense of loneliness. It created a need within them to feel a sense of belonging, as well as the need to be seen and heard.

My participants claim that the creation of Persian Pride as a street gang in the early 1990s was not a spontaneous or conscious course of action; rather, identifying as gang members and becoming involved in gang activities were part of the process of finding and locating themselves within their new environment. Who they became was a way to navigate through particularities of the changes they experienced in migrating from Iran to Canada.

It was not an easy journey for my participants to cross the gaps between the two places, with each having their own set of social structures, historical relations and discursive practices within the bounds of their own national borders—and once they were crossed, they came into tumultuous and conflicting relation with one another in the midst of belonging neither here nor there. In this light it could be said that their experiences were not strictly of their own making due to mere individuated internal tensions; rather, their environment caused much of the psychological friction. In other words, their individual choices were the embodiment and enactment of the conflicts they experienced in crossing between the two worlds. Their physical movement through geographical boundaries that had their own sets of relations defined and determined the meaning they were able to give to the world and how they could interpret their sense of belonging within it.

As I considered the role of geographical place in the process of meaning-making, it became evident that their move and the changes it brought in their lives was never about *being* something or someone in a fixed and a static manner. It was not about the desire to be one person here and a different person there; nor was it about being an

Iranian, a Canadian, a gangster or any other form of static identification. It was always about that relentless process of locating oneself in the changing tides of life.

Once the emergence of a particular identity, such as gang-identity is analyzed within the context of specific times and locations, a more comprehensive understanding of these emerging identities as a social construct comes to the forefront. In this light this chapter is about the investigation of details related to my participants' locations and positions they had come to occupy in different times. It is also an inquiry into what is demanded of individuals in practice within the social positions they had come to occupy. As Sanchez-Jankowski (2003) argues, "gangs require us to take into consideration complex interrelationship between individuals, dynamics of collective behaviour and processes of social change" (p. 192).

Representation and Identification

Representations and identifications of the ethnic minority immigrant are constructed within domains of unequal power relations. In practice, social structures are organized in a way to act as a constant reminder of the minority identification, which hinders their movement and elevation beyond the paradigm of the dominant discourse. In this regard, what appears to be constant contestation and resistance from the ethnic minority groups towards the dominant majority culture is not strictly a form of resistance to, or the rejection of the structure itself; rather, it is a form of striving-to-overcome the sense of powerlessness which is experienced from lack of access and perpetual exclusion within all facets of daily life. The resistance is more akin to struggles for gaining greater power and control over life's circumstances. The struggle is to gain access to and to be included within the centres of power in terms of pushing out what it means to be an immigrant and on the other hand to push through towards more control and power. Grossberg (2006) articulates this as intentionality and agency in moving to site of activity of power within the position of other.

The coming together of these Iranian youths and later on as Persian Pride, was more an act of struggle in navigating their way through as the other in order to escape being this other. Their only active and explicit act of resistance was their refusal to accept their social status and lower socio-economic position in the future. For my

participants there was a clear rejection of compliance with these future prospects, which they believed they had to move beyond. Arash expressed this feeling when he stated:

Hard to explain, I felt poor and dirty—like that dirty immigrant you see in movies. I felt that every day of my life for three years. I hated it. I hated it so much that I kinda liked it when they started calling me a gangster, cause being a gangster means getting what's rightfully yours by any means necessary—and money was necessary. This is crazy to admit, but sometimes, even now, I would rather be called a gangster in how I go after life than a broke immigrant. A broke immigrant [he laughed and shook his head], do you know how fucking bad and low that is?

Farz also explained:

We did so many stupid things to survive. There was no dignity in being an immigrant. No one was going to say, "Oh hey, it's so great that you're Persian, respect!" No, it wasn't like that at all. We couldn't even earn our respect from people our own age—or even the teachers—even when we were good. We had to fight for this respect thing...no one wanted to treat us good...it was always us against them...we had to fight for it, but unfortunately our fight for respect included a whole lot of nonsense activities. Some of it was to keep face, some of it to create fear, some just about money...bottom-line, we wanted to be more—had to—way more!

My participants explicitly felt and experienced what it meant to be the other, which left them feeling trapped in the vicious repetition of that identification that followed them in every sphere of their lives. The escape from this and the struggles against it were their form of resistance. The coming together of these youths and the conception of Persian Pride occurred somewhere between the struggle to overcome and the struggle to be more. According to Hall (1991),

identity is a structured representation, which only achieves its positive through the narrow eye of the negative. It has to go through the eye of the needle of the other before it can construct itself. Identity is always a temporary and unstable effect of relations, which define identities by marking differences. Thus the emphasis here is on the multiplicity of identities and differences rather than on a singular identity and on the connections or articulations between the fragments or differences. (p. 21)

Roha's excerpt at the beginning of this chapter demonstrates how he and my other participants understood this process of becoming gang members, which was

related to circumstances they felt were beyond their control. Roha described his life circumstances as a *situation*. The use of this word, which indicates a lack of control, was a form of expression used by all of my participants, hinting at their lack of power and limitations within their choices.

Conversely, I would like to point out that this chapter is not attempting to posit Persian Pride's gang activities as unconscious or devoid of aware choices. In fact, many decisions regarding the types of gang activities my participants took part in were made with awareness of their intent to achieve particular desired ends. The discussion here is an effort to explore the pretext for the emergence of this gang and how such identities were socialized. In this respect I am interested in understanding a statement such as the one articulated by Sina, when he expressed his confusion and motivation in the same breath:

But I clearly understood I was a nobody here and had to carve out a place for myself and become somebody quick. By any means necessary. Honestly, at the beginning I tried to be like them, you know, all Canadian and shit, but that didn't fly. I think at some point I figured if you can't join them, beat them. Literally I was going to get my respect—even though I had no idea how.

The trajectory and the reasons underlying the change in their self-identification from “good students” and “typical teenagers” in Iran to becoming gang members in Canada are similar to many first-generation immigrant youths discussed in the literature about Canadian Gangs. Gordon (2000) explains this phenomenon in his research on gangs in Vancouver: “there was a social and cultural bond which attracted individuals to organizations and that addressed their sense of ethnic and cultural marginality in a predominantly Euro-Canadian environment” (p. 50). He goes on to say,

there is a common tendency on the part of adolescents and young adults to group together and the main difference with respect to street gang members appears to be their choice of “gang.” This choice is to some extent a function of the opportunities available in communities [and] individuals become involved with gangs for a variety of interconnected reasons...peer group attraction...[they] want to belong to a friendly, supportive group...to be individuals from the same cultural background and ethnic group; gang members felt ethnically marginalized. (Gordon, 2000, pp. 51–2)

Maz articulates this by expressing:

We had a lot of things in common. We related to each other. We were homies and had each others' back. I guess as far as what it did for me, it gave me people to be with and homies that understood what I was going through in life—I understood them too.

Nav provided an insightful response in regards to the common experiences of being an ethnic minority youth and becoming a gang member when he said:

It's not like this is a "Iranian" type of problem, this is a problem in the system, 'cause you see it taking place in every race and group of people here—with the Chinese, brown people, blacks, white people too. I'm guessing its happening all over again with Persian and other minority kids today because the system hasn't changed. Kids still wanna live like other Canadian kids and at the same time find themselves fighting for that. We were trying to be more like them while every step of the way they told us and showed us we weren't one of them. This is one of the reasons why you see minority gangs popping up all over Canada to this day—if you ask me, this is why we did it.

My participants followed the general protocol of what was expected of them, as their self-image corresponded to their external identification and representation within the private and the public sphere. In many ways they became the product of the circumstances that became their lived reality. Goffman (1959), Baumeister and Tice (1984), Stretesky and Pogrebin (1995) and Holstein and Gubrium (2003) all argue that identities are social and they are hallmarks of our inner lives that take shape in relation to others. They explain that we establish who and what we are through social interaction, as identities are the shared labels given to the self. We come to know ourselves in terms of the categories that are socially available to us. For this reason, self-perception is a constant process of reorienting the self to how one is able to visualize his/her world. Hall and du Gay (1996) explain this process of identity as something that is always becoming and always related to one's environment. They explain,

Identities are strategic and positional, increasingly fragmented and fractured as they multiply and are constructed across intersecting and antagonistic discourses, practices and positions. They are always subject to radical historicization and are always in constant state of change and transformation. (p. 5)

For my participants these factors contributed to how they identified themselves as a particular kind of human being in relation to themselves, other Iranians and Canadians. It also had a profound impact on how they recalled and reflected upon their past, as well as how they wished to project themselves into the future. Roha expressed this by stating:

When you call someone a dog and treat them like a dog you gotta know you can't expect more than a dog. They saw us as thugs, troublemakers, low lives, violent, cheaters and every other negative image you can think of. So what did we do? We started acting like it. I guess in the long run we got what we deserved and they got theirs.

Sina articulated this by saying:

Now that I know better, I think this was part of our coping or something. I'm not saying we didn't know better, but I'm saying we were acting out what was expected of us. And sometimes we thought we were rebelling against it. I mean, we became gangsters because that was what was expected of us—it was more about their perception they had of us—and put on us than we had of ourselves. We were just who they thought we were in Canada—gangsters instead of terrorists cause we were too young—and they probably thought too stupid to be that, yet.

Most of my participants followed the protocols of the expectations that were embedded within their representation of who they were and how they were identified. They became the corroborators in how they were categorized and portrayed.

Who my participants became was related to the lines that once ran parallel to each other, which come to cross as they met and intersected each other. In the interviews it was expressed that while in Iran, they were all aware of what a gangster was, but becoming a gang member was not within their realms of possibility since they did not relate to that identification. However, upon their arrival to Canada these lines began to meet, crossing the grids of their meaning-making process as they repeatedly encountered representation of the Iranian as terrorists, violent, backwards, uncivilized, disorderly and lawless. This was a process of amalgamation of their earlier knowledge and awareness of who they were with the new forms of representation they encountered within their lives, as this was a factor in the construction of their gang identity as gangsters.

Further, the enactment and the embodiment of this identification did not merely occur in the realm of the imaginary. There was repetition and practice of it within all of their social conditions, which became their sense of the self; hence, their identity. This socialization of gang-identification allowed my participants to construct and relate to their gang-identities as gangsters and members of their gang. Nav expressed this as:

I do know this, none of us who became friends here were "bad kids" to begin with or when we were in Iran. Most of us were good students back home and a lot of us actually loved being in school. I used to look forward to every September to go back to when we were in Iran—a "straight A" student. If I was a lunatic then I should have been one there too, but no, there's something about our environment here that made us to what we became...and I guess different situations make different people. But this is how we were affected—how I was affected. I honestly can't see how I could've fought back without giving in and accepting what they thought of us and how I was feeling everyday. Personally, I didn't know how to rise above it all back then.

Grossberg (1996) explains the self as two interrelated parts, the subject and the subjective, both which are constructed within the phenomenological field of experience: "although everyone exists within the strata of subjectivity, they are also located at particular positions, each of which enables and constrains the possibilities of experience, of representing those experiences and of legitimizing those representations" (p. 99). Perhaps most important for my participants was the way Iranians were identified as Middle Easterners and how this was represented. Other factors included the identifications given to them by their peer groups, educational institutions, law enforcement and the media. All of this had a great impact on their self-understanding of who they were as they were categorized to be second-class citizens, intruders and those who disturbed the social order. This aided in what kinds of meaning they could construct, which also shaped their subjective interpretation of the world and who they could become in it. In this regard, Shibutani (1961) explains, "people see themselves from the standpoint of their group and appropriate action in relation to those groups becomes a source of pride" (p. 436). Berger (1963) supports this by stating, "identities are socially bestowed, socially maintained, and socially transformed" (p. 92).

The way my participants were identified, represented and perceived became a point of contention for them far before the formation of Persian Pride and in its aftermath. These clashes and contradictions within their lives required constant expression of force,

intimidation and coercion towards centres of power. Some of their understanding of this was expressed in subtle ways as they shared their experiences. For example Farz said:

Why was my behaviour wrong when I wasn't doing anything wrong? Why was the Canadian way better? To be frank with you, I still don't get what this "Canadian way" was or is, but as a kid I internalized being different. I internalized the bad and how I was always called backwards, you know, being less than them. I don't remember ever being praised for being good at math, just accused of cheating. I experienced the same thing on the wrestling mat. I think that's what turned me off from sports and I was good at it. In practice the Canadian kids were encouraged to be aggressive, but when I would move forward that way, he'd [wrestling coach] say to me, "You can only make mistakes like that in Iran, not here...quit the violence and have some sportsmanship." It's mind-boggling when I think about it now.

Sina articulated this by stating:

The police didn't trust or believe us any different either. They always pulled us over when we walked in groups assuming we were criminals, before we were. Every time they approached us they acted as if we had just finished a bank robbery or committing murder or something. I can't tell you how many good Iranian kids who were never affiliated with gangs were treated like dirty criminals by the cops.

As stated earlier, identity as something that belongs to the self is connected to the need for a sense of unity and continuity that connects the self to different times and spaces. The type of identification and representation my participants encountered in every sphere of life affected how they perceived themselves in relation to their past, their present and how they imagined themselves into the future. For many, this process of reflection about the past and the projection of the self into the future involved the same kinds of conflict and uncertainty they faced on a daily basis. Creating a gang was a means of resolving this conflict, a means of expanding their realm of possibility for the persons they imagined themselves to be in the future. This was done in terms of ideas about their individual self as well as within the context of their material conditions. The conception of this gang, in many ways, was a coping mechanism to withstand the circumstances they faced on a daily basis while moving forward. Roha explained:

I think if I have to think about it now, I'd say we became who they thought we were. I think they wanted it that way. We played into their fear and then played with it. We became softer version of the

terrorists, shit disturbers and killers they made us to be. We really did act out what the teachers were saying about us. The Canadian kids too, they definitely became scared of us and learned to give respect. I know they think we were outta control but by the time Persian Pride came around we were in full control—material things, cars, clothes, bling, parties, freedom to do whatever. I know it wasn't the best way, but we found our way out.

Fighting to be Seen and Heard

The literature regarding deviance by scholars such as Horwitz (1984), Vigil (1988) and Kiego (1988), argues that gang activity stems from negative personal attitudes while the sociological tradition argues that these individuals are looking for an alternative to social identity due to their weak egos that are looking to build a sense of self-identity. These viewpoints are problematic as they gravitate towards individualized behaviour and psychological explanations that describe understanding, motive and action in a vacuum devoid of social context. They depict these behaviours as something that is related to one's disposition to violence, to psychological maladies and to characters that are prone to violence. Sanchez-Jankowski (2003) argues that gangs have to be understood within the context of their time and location, as gangs "operate in society and societies remain in constant process of social change; both alter dialectally in relation to one another" (p. 202). It is therefore necessary to see the underlying reasons for the progression towards the conception of gangs within the context of existing social conditions that individuals and groups experience as their own life narratives.

My participants became gang members because there was a progression towards the viability of this identity through their everyday experiences. These youths continually found themselves in circumstances where physical altercation was a viable mode of action in order to voice their presence, their dislikes and what they believed was about fighting for their rights. Many felt the only mode of defence available to them within their circumstances, where they were left voiceless, was to create spaces of access through intimidation, physical altercations and violence—in general through force, which they felt had the ability to make noise.

There were lots of fights at the beginning because we came from Iran but not when we were seen as gangsters. No one stepped to us. The only people that tried were other gangsters and that was always about

money and respect. I don't know it's different when people know you're connected and not scared of them, you know. When I used to walk around school hallways when I came to Vancouver and didn't speak English I was scared and people were like animals, they smell the fear and they played on that. I don't know, I think the only people who would try to step were some teacher, but even they were scared by the end of it. All of them were like their own gang against us until we became one too. (Sina)

Physical violence was used as a means of being heard and seen, as well as a way to align their actions with how they were generally perceived, identified and represented. In some respects they sought out their sense of identity and belonging where they were excluded and felt left out. Arash articulated this by saying:

At first it was all about skipping class and hanging out with our own kind 'cause there was no point in being around those teachers and the rest of the students. Then it was after-school fights 'cause some white dude would be screaming go back to your fucking country you fucking terrorist F.O.B or the native kids screaming get of my country you fucking immigrant. It all started with those kind of daily altercation, but we quickly found out how to be who they wanted us to be and get our respect, not just on the schoolyard—in life!

These initial acts of violence were a means of self-preservation and also a means to being seen and heard. Nav articulated this when he said:

Everywhere we went, everywhere we looked we were reminded that we were different than them. We were constantly told we were the bad apples, that we were ruining the city. We were constantly told were less than and backward. These kinds of things affected us. I didn't realize how much it was damaging us as kids, but now I see it. Seriously, they created the little monsters we became—we became those people they kept drilling in our heads we were. You know it's weird, 'cause on one hand we had to do what they said we did 'cause there wasn't much left to be and at the same time we became violent and that way they saw us, so we could stand up to them.

Conclusion

My participants were assimilated and socialized to positions where acts of violence and identification with such pretences became the norm for how they dealt with their life circumstances, as they were required to remain in a constant state of struggle and *fight* for their rights. They had to fight for where they were from, which simultaneously demanded them to relinquish those roots over time. They had to struggle

against their ethnic identification, which they had not yet fully grasped at the time of Persian Pride. In addition, they had to take a stance for their presence within Canada in the absence of feeling at home, as well as for being immigrants, which for many meant loss of dignity. Lastly, they had to wrestle with maintaining their social connections in the midst of much turmoil and conflict. In sum, they had to fight for all of their rights and what they deemed to be that *better life*.

The constant negative representation and identifications of them as terrorists, second-class citizens, backward, and violent individuals, as well as constant encounters with racist labelling, exclusion and lack of access in every facet of their life created a need for strong social bonds, which they generally found amongst other Iranian youths who were having similar life experiences. Not only they were assimilated and socialized to positions of violence, their common positions also reinforced this violence as a lifestyle, which fostered the need for these young people to group together as a gang under the banner of Persian Pride.

Chapter 4.

The Navigation

Belonging Among *Them*

Perhaps one way to understand the existence of gangs is to understand the dominant discourse and the existing relations within its time and also within the context of its history. The notion of human rights and equality, with its full spectrum of what it means to be a human is constructed within both ideology and practice, which has become the core value of our recent history. This value dictates how one ought to exist within a society and how a society should be organized in relation to its individuals. These assembled rights have become the values that are now most fundamental and cherished in what it means to be a human and in particular, a human living life with dignity in a nation-state that is assigned to protect and enforce these rights. And it was precisely the internalization of our time's dominant discourse of human rights that propelled many of my participants' families to leave Iran in search for a *better life*.

For my participants to have had these rights in Canada would have required their new home to provide them with a space where they could belong with a sense of inclusion, beyond the marginal positions they had come to occupy in the Iranian nation-state and later on in Canada. Dignity also requires recognition, respect—and for these youths, functional family units that could have supported their immediate needs, as well as their future opportunities to flourish was a requirement. These main ingredients embedded within the idea of rights and dignity was scarce and at times non-existent within my participants' lives upon their arrival to Canada. For my participants the idea of dignity meant protection from explicit exclusion, racism and discrimination, which they constantly felt within every facet of their daily lives. It also meant having support and meaningful human relationships, friendships and companionships that were reciprocal—all of which seem to have existed in contradictory fragments and at times even as

nonexistence within the marginal positions they had come to occupy in their new home. What was unanimously expressed was this sense of *lack* that is constructed and translated as fundamental to one's sense of dignity that was missing from my participants' lives. These are some of the stories my participants shared in regards to this topic:

For a long time when we came here I thought I was going insane. Home front was just insane with my parents scrambling for rent and food...I had no friends or anyone for that to talk to. You know there were days and days I wouldn't talk, 'cause there was no one to talk to...the last thing I wanted at home was talk with my parents 'cause they were acting so crazy.... I really didn't understand much English so school was a ride-off too, not to mention no one wanted to talk to me 'cause I was considered one of the F.O.B kids. The teachers pretended I didn't even exist. I was just lonely all the time man. Now when I think back I feel sad for that guy. (Roha)

My dad didn't work—correction, he didn't want to work. He always say, "I'm not going to work at some gas station or drive a cab." He had too much pride and ego man...my poor mom, it was a shame. He say to her, "I'm a respected man and I'm not going to do these dirty jobs." But he didn't care if my mom had to ...she was what? Making less than six bucks an hour, worked six days, every damn week, always tired, always stressed and we still didn't have money for shit. We were broke as a joke. It was tiring man. I was tired. (Maz)

I still hate thinking and talking about those days. I remember the first time my mom cried over money. It was the first time in my life I asked for something and she couldn't do it...she couldn't do it cause we had no money. I don't even know why I asked. My dad worked like a dog, not to mention they treated him like it at work too. Poor guy worked at Panago Pizza kitchen by day, Tim Horton's by night. You want working hard? That's working hard. I watched how it didn't get him anywhere. (Sina)

Me and my brother always just came home to a empty home—no mom, no dad, no food, no friends, nothing to do, nowhere to go...we just come home with our dumb-down ESL homework after a day of being treated like idiots at school. Seriously being an ESL student was pretty degrading. They stuck this shack in the back of our school where we had to do the walk of shame. That was where all the F.O.B's went to go to school...there was no way to fit in with the jocks; they had their own little world. Couldn't fit with the white kids, no matter what we did. Couldn't fit with Iranians that were here for a while 'cause they didn't wanna hang around F.O.B's, they had already moved up the world. I just didn't fit in, till I had my first after-school fight. (Arash)

All of my participants expressed that the only time they felt at *home* with a sense of dignity, and in control of their lives was when they were with other Iranian youths who were facing the same predicaments and obstacles.

All of us were experiencing the same things...we could talk to each other and make sure we weren't alone. If something went down or was about to go down we'd protect each other...our lingo, our style and the hard times we were going through at home and in school, we understood each other...they had my back like that. (Nav)

It was this need for dignity and belonging that contributed to the formation of this group as an *us*. However, the construction of *us* among these Iranian youths in form of friendships was meant to fulfil more than their need for what they felt was lacking within their lives as the other.

This was also an edifice in the notion of *us* that later on became about *us-against-them*. The transition in this process was related to one that stemmed from the existing social relations. This was an attempt by these youths to create a sense of belonging not only among themselves, but to belong amid them and to ultimately one day belong with and among them as citizens.

While there were clear lines of *us-against-them*, especially by the time of Persian Pride, their life's mantra and hermeneutics regarding their most desired goals were very much the same as the dominant values of the society, where it is the general belief that the ultimate human dignity can be sought in possession of money and power, which will *naturally* bring about respect. Maz explained his thoughts on this by stating:

It was about money, power and respect, you know. No one stepped to us. There were lots of fights at the beginning 'cause we came from Iran but not when we were gangsters. I know what you're thinking, but we had to scare them to impress 'em—and they were scared and impressed. Scared 'cause we were us, impressed 'cause we made money. We had cars with rims and boom boxes, tinted windows all by 18...it was like a rap video, you know, it's cool when you're a kid. Everyone wanted that—we had it. Some people respect because of that. And then there were girls. The ugliest guy in our crew had a girl looking much better than the most popular kid's girlfriend. You know, it doesn't matter if you're a gangster or a doctor. We live in that kind of world. These stories I'm telling you are from almost twenty years ago, but nothing's changed in the world. It's still all about power and respect. How do you get those? Well, money and more money...and if you can get people scared while you're doin' it, you have it made...you

can keep your power and respect. I'm not saying it's right, I'm just sayin' the world works like that you know. We got that way back in the day. Really, the only difference is what the title of your job is, but we all want the same thing. Our job title was gangster. Maybe it doesn't have the nice ring like a doctor, engineer or a president, but whatever, we all do the same things for the same thing anyway...that's all we were doing.

To add to this, the immediate choices that were available to them during that time were closely connected to how they understood the world and the limitations it had set on them in terms of how they could project and imagine themselves into the future. All of them without exception resisted the very idea of their than-present circumstances reoccurring in their futures. What they all experienced as their primary need, which they felt had to manifest was a better future was a *better life*. Their creation of a gang served this need and the missing link to their ultimate desires. In this respect Grossberg (1996) explains a means to reach beyond:

such places are temporary points of belonging and identification, of orientation and installation, creating sites of strategic historical possibilities and activities, and as such they are always contextually defined. They define the forms of empowerment or agency which are available to particular groups as ways of going on and of going out." (p. 102)

Ethnic Minority Identification

My participants came to be known as part of the *ethnic minority* group upon their arrival to Canada, as they entered a paradigm of social relations that was in place far before their arrival. Rose (1996) explains the concept of our social relations as both constructed and historical, which he argues are not amorphous domains of culture. The ethnic minority status as an identification is a construct that produces and reproduces the existing social relations through categories of *us* and *them* via the ideological discourse and practices employed within particular social positions one comes to occupy.

The category of the ethnic minority is comprised of a particular set of rights that the immigrant must earn over time through the course of becoming a citizen. It is the status of the citizen that retains certain rights and accesses to the Canadian culture; and

is hence vital for belonging within it. Grimson (2010) argues, “a culture is a configuration that is made up of countless diverse elements that are complementary, oppositional and hierarchically interrelated. As a sense of belonging, an identity associated with a particular category is a key element in a culture” (p. 75).

This transition from being the *other* to a citizen is generally implemented in subtle ways through means of assimilation and control in representation and identification of minority ethnic groups as *them* or the *other*. Roha articulated the dilemma in navigating through this uncertainty about what it means to be an ethnic minority:

There were lots of changes in my family situation when we came to Canada that invited all this stuff I've been telling you, it was a way to make it through life and at the same time I was trying to protect myself, you know. We all had to find our way and not be left out everywhere and be disrespected because we were Iranian.... I mean look, in school no matter how good I did I was still in ESL, always treated like someone who was way less than Joe and Tom. I really wanted to be like Joe and Tom but Joe and Tom kept saying to me I was more like some Arab Mohammad who bombed somewhere. You know what? I tried to be like the old white guy who owned the coffee shop by my house too, but he kept saying my kind was making his country dirty. Then there was the good ol' police! If they saw three of us walking down the street they would pull us over and accuse us of being in a gang. My parents wanted me to be all Iranian and the next minute they would lose it and say you have to do as good as the Canadians...immigration had a tap on where we went, when and why...there was this constant fear of being deported back home—and we were supposed to call this place home? Go figure. It was a confusing time man. In one way we had to make our place here so we could be treated good—not this Persian monster by what they said—and in another ways we had to fight them. There was so much to deal with. I mean as far as they were concerned we were just Iranians and immigrants, so they treated us like shit and they made us feel like shit, but in our hearts we knew we weren't.

The multicultural policies in Canada are series of relations that are promoted on the premise of *tolerance* for the ethnic minority groups. Through my research it became clear that this notion of tolerance is not so much about acceptance of who the ethnic minority is; rather it is more about the way the ethnic minority identity is constructed as a human being who is *different* than the majority and must be tolerated for its differences. Multiculturalism is an ideological construct that is implemented as a comprehensive tool in practice of daily life. It is able to both construct and distinguish lack and differentiation of the minority in relation to the constructed qualities of the majority. Hall and Jefferson

(1996) argue,

Groups which exist within the same society and share some of the same material and historical conditions no doubt also understand and to a certain extent share each others' "culture." But just as different groups and classes are unequally ranked in relation to one another, in terms of their productive relations, wealth, power, so cultures are differently ranked and stand in opposition to one another, in relation of domination and subordination, along the scale of "cultural power." (p. 5)

On this topic, the most ardent response was from Farz, who shared his thoughts on what it meant for him to be seen as this different kind of human being with lack and likeness to the majority amongst them:

I always felt like someone who wasn't supposed to be here. It really gets under my skin and honestly, last nerve. Who're they to say we're different than them? Who're they to decide that anyway? If you're white and you're born in this country—people that don't even originally belong to this place, they feel they have more of a right than a person who comes from somewhere else? That they're more of a person? Who said someone has to earn their way to become a Canadian? What the hell does that mean anyway? What I want to know, who drew these little lines around the world and said, this one's ours, we're this way and if you're not from here you're not one of us and you're that way, one of them? Even as a grown man I still don't get what is wrong with human beings. Sorry this just gets on my nerves. Racism gets under my skin...seriously, they actually think if their skin is white and they're Canadian, they're better? What does that mean? I was treated like an alien from outer space when I came here because I didn't have a piece of paper that said some white guy, in some courtroom decided I was good enough to have the permission to live here...really! You tell me, they're human, I'm human....What's really the difference?

Tolerance is a kind of a waiting process, a form of patience for the ethnic minority to become less ethnic in its differences to resemble the majority's ways of being, generally implemented through methods of control and assimilation. In the statement above, Roha expressed this type of interaction that is related to the process of assimilation with the police, educational institutions and immigration. Farz also articulates a similar experience regarding court proceedings with immigration. Hall and Jefferson (1996) relate this to construction of human relations within the context of the dominant culture, explaining:

The dominant culture represents itself as the culture. It tries to define and contain all other cultures within its inclusive range. *Its* views of the world, unless challenged, will stand as the most natural, all-embracing, universal culture. Other cultural configurations will not only be subordinate to this dominant order: they will enter into struggle with it, seek to modify it, negotiate, resist or even overthrow its reign—*hegemony*. (pp. 5–6)

The notion of tolerance as prescribed by the idea of multiculturalism is a contradictory expectation, as there is no escape from being identified as the other based on one's ethnic background. My participants could not hide the phenotype expression of their genes in their physical appearance, nor could they escape it by becoming citizens. The identification of them as an ethnic minority remained in their Canadian passports, citizenship cards and other legal documents. These issued legal identifications always distinguish the ethnic minority at national borders, within schools and in every other institution they may have to interact with. While there is no issue with a form of identification verification in itself, it must be stated that this is not a value-free method of procedure; rather, it has been constructed within the context of historical relations where the ethnic minority is constructed, understood, represented and identified as the other, as someone different than the majority. Farz explained his experience of this by stating:

We're reminded every day of our lives that the best we can ever do is to eventually be this Iranian-Canadian person, but never in a million years a Canadian and all of us had a proof of that...citizenship cards and our Canadian passports with that special little box that says "Place of Birth—Iran." All these documents we had to run after—even after all these years—they're nothing but reminders of who we really are and where on their ladder we're at. This is why I said to you I'm always going to be a second-class citizen...when I cross the border, even with my Canadian passport, it tells the guy on the other side of the desk I'm not one of them and all of the sudden it's okay for him to pull me aside to search me and ask, "Sir, when was the last time you were in Iran?" What does that have anything to do with anything when I'm using my Canadian passport to come back to Canada from London? And it gets even worse if we choose not to give our place of birth, I know friends who look like us and they went through hell by not putting place of birth. They treated them as if they were hiding something. Too many reminders and nonsense.

Power in Constructing Identities

Even though none of my participants explicitly articulated their identity as being constructed in relation to power structures within place, they clearly expressed this in the

description of their daily experiences. This play of power is discussed by Hall and du Gay (1996), who argue that this is because “identities are constructed within, not outside discourse, we need to understand them as production in specific historical and institutional sites within specific discursive formation and practices, by specific denunciative strategies” (p. 4). Maz articulated how he perceived himself and what he felt he needed to do to gain some power and control over his life in the face of obstacles he felt as an ethnic minority immigrant:

At the beginning I really did try to be all Canadian and shit, but that didn't work too good. At some point I figured if you can't join 'em beat 'em. Seriously, I was set out to get my respect. I'm a grown-ass man now and I understand this respect thing differently, but back then I saw respect as something I had to take cause the way I saw it, no one was gonna give it to a Muslim immigrant. They took it 'cause we were Iranians—Muslim immigrants, and on the flipside, I took it 'cause I was an Iranian immigrant.

One necessity that was constantly articulated was the need for personal power, which emerged regularly within our interview conversations. My participants perceived this need as the greatest obstacle and their most desired goal. One participant explained, “we didn't have the tools or the power to deal with those issues and be diplomatic about it. We used our fist...and my involvement with the group probably had something to do with this. We needed some power.” Another participant's response was, “There is always power in numbers. I can say that we had way less power and say than your average white Canadian,” and another participant said, “Money was the smoke screen, bottom-line it was about power and high status we wanted to get it—needed it. Grossberg (1996) explains this in terms of maps of identification and belonging, as “operations of power, planes of identification and belonging and how they are articulated into the structure of individuality (pp. 97–98).

This need for power was an expression of the existing social relations within Canada that took hold in every facet of my participants' lives. In every sphere, they were reminded that they lacked power because of their own lack of likeness to their Canadian counterparts. In a number of ways this was the precursor for their often *mixed* actions and reactions to their life circumstances. I say mixed because on one hand they had to submit and assimilate by internalizing the way they were represented and identified in order to belong, and conversely such representations and identifications had to be

rejected in order for them to construct a representation of themselves that was more positive and empowering. Simultaneous acceptance and rejections, as counterintuitive as it may seem, were necessary means of interpretation and manoeuvring for them to have a sense of belonging to the persons they were becoming in their lives.

“By any means necessary” was a common expression among my participants; it was an articulation of how much they were willing to give of themselves and to take from others in order to gain power within their lives. This was often achieved through the perpetuation of negative representation that in actuality corresponded with the paradigm of the other who needs to be normalized and controlled. That is, they embodied and enacted the very paradigm they associated with their greatest struggles, while they rejected its persistence within their immediate life circumstances and its continuation into their future. They felt a strong need to overcome it and this is precisely what the statement of simultaneous acceptance and rejection has indicated earlier. Hall (1996) articulates this paradox as a perpetual discipline and normalization of the institutionalization of differences in class, gender, sexuality, race and ethnicity. In many respects, my participants gradually internalized the depiction of the ethnic minority other as their identity, which can explain the paradox occurring within the dominant ideological discourse as well as its mode of practice, propagating itself in every sphere of their lives. For example, Sina explained:

If you ask me, by being gangsters we made ourselves fit the type a little too perfectly with their stereotypes, but on the flip side, we became gangsters to have money and power, two things that my family totally lost when we came here. I don't know if you can see the back and forth war I'm talking about. We were what they wanted us to be, but then we fought against the things they really wanted us to be too—like broke, workers, low-class immigrants. They need to use us to our last breath...personally I just couldn't sit back and have that be my life.

Identity in Practice

In order for my participants to function within this new society as ethnic minorities, they had to learn how to decipher the meanings embedded within their identification and perhaps even more importantly, how to put that identification into practice within the social positions they had come to occupy. This was something new and novel in their lives as they did not feel ethnic or as minorities in Iran. This shift in

self-identification was something that required learning and socialization towards the ethnic identity. The solidification of these ethnic identities came about through the constant process of learning, interpretation, internalization and the enactment of their representations as the minority other. The practice and the repetition became part of how they experienced this new world. It also had a tremendous impact on their sense of exclusion and what they felt they had to do in order to overcome it.

Grossberg (1996) explains this in terms of the relations between the *subject* and *subjective* as something that is “always inscribed within cultural codes of difference that organize subjects by defining social identities— where we have particular position within the field of subjectivity, which legitimizes the representations” (p. 99). It is precisely in this type of flux that identity can be seen as a method of navigation through the world instead of a stable quality that is in one’s possession from within. Nav explained this course of learning and socialization in the following terms:

I don’t even think it’s just because we were Persians, they do this to everyone. They show all of us this way in the media. I think Asian, brown, natives and black kids go through the same thing...all of it because we weren’t white, not Canadian. Now that I’m wiser and know better, I think this gang business was our coping mechanism. We didn’t create all these images and situations. We just acted out how we were supposed to be like...how we didn’t like being like that. I don’t know, to think back, we screwed up a lot, but I think it’s all how they wanted it to be anyway.

While development of friendships among these Iranian youths occurred within the realm of their private lives—which could have transpired under many different circumstances—the change in the undercurrents of these companionships into a gang dynamic was solidified within the context of the public sphere. The existing relations within the majority-minority paradigm contributed to this shift.

This process of becoming and being the other translated into real-life experiences through persistent racial and ethnic profiling, which became a form of socialization that was also a source of stigmatization. For my participants this enforced the internalization of self-inferiority regarding their ethnicity as Iranians. As one of my participants reflected,

We were constantly told we were less than them and not forward thinking and doing the right things like them. Come to think of it we did start to act and think backwards. It's like self-fulfilling prophecy. It's sad to say but we fit their image of us. We ended up being who they said we were.

It is easy to *spot* the other based on its stereotypical profile, especially one related to physical attributes, which makes the imaginary construction of categories visible and *real* in all spheres of society. This profiling process is not a benign form of identification as it is about control of difference that is generally represented to the majority society within the fear paradigm that requires regulation and control. Containment and control of differences becomes an imaginary necessity to maintain order and what is deemed as the *norm* and *normal* standards, which is an idea that is continuously constructed in opposition to those who must be controlled.

It is precisely in this light that the ethnic minority is constructed in opposition to what is deemed as *normal* and states of *stability* and it is at this juncture that they are deemed as the other who poses a threat to the political, economic and social order of the majority society. Generally the profile of the ethnic minority is a representation of someone who threatens stability. This is a representation that is directly connected to the global politics that informs every sphere of the society and the relations that are constructed within it—the learning and the socialization of the ethnic minority identity takes shape and becomes animated amidst reaction and action within this context. Hall and du Gay (1996) articulate this best when they explain the concept of identities in representation:

Identities are therefore constituted within, not outside representation. They relate to the invention of tradition as much as to tradition itself, which they oblige us to read not as an endless reiteration but as “the changing same,” not the so-called return to roots but a coming-to-terms-with our “routes.” (p. 4)

Roha expressed this sense by reflecting,

I swear every week in the news there was a connection between crime and Middle Eastern people somewhere. I don't know maybe that's true, but they should at least tell the people why. Maybe it's because they start wars on them, steal every country's wealth. People just don't act up unless they're crazy, but that's exactly what they do to

us. They show us as if we're crazy mental cases who just do random violent stupid things. They screw with that region so much and don't show any of it. It's really brutal man, they create wars and madness and then they say something stupid like, we did it 'cause these people need to learn about democracy. They destroy countries and say we're backwards. It's a loopy system.

While friendships among these youths was an act of coming-together and belonging, one of the reasons behind the creation of Persian Pride was a form of opposition to the possibilities related to their future and what that might have entailed for an ethnic minority immigrant. For them this meant finding new ways, "by any means necessary" to create centres of power amongst the majority, as expressed by Maz earlier when he said "if you can't beat them, join them."

Along these lines of unequal power relations, a gang was a perfect middle ground for a sense of uniqueness and difference most individuals, especially teenagers' desire. They achieved this through rerating the difference in how they were represented and identified. It was also a means to amplify their difference and uniqueness from the lump sum and undifferentiated category of ethnic minority. Hall (2007) explains this play of difference in terms of being an open invitation to power, which my participants were able to internalize and act upon. In this regard, Hall argues, "as soon as power sees differences, it knows it can begin to classify them and us, into the brown eyes and the blue eyes, the black eyes and the white.... Difference is the play of power" (p. 14). This play on difference allowed my participants to gain greater control and power within their lives. Their meaning-making process and their interpretation of the world was informed by the social script of their time, which contributed to the very construction of their much anticipated desires for money, power and respect. The achievement of such goals was interpreted as the only means and the only path to a future with greater possibilities.

I would like to conclude this section on navigation of the self through the fabric of social life by stating that belonging was the most common and explicit theme expressed in my field research, which is in line with Grimson's (2010) analysis when he states, "while culture alludes to our routine of strongly sediment practices, beliefs and meanings, identity refers to our feelings of belonging and a collective" (p. 63). My participants expressed this need for belonging as something that would allow them to imagine themselves beyond the immediate circumstances they were experiencing,

which meant everything to them as human beings, especially as youths growing up in unfamiliar and isolated locations of exclusion.

Chapter 5.

Persian Pride

Honestly, we didn't see ourselves as criminals. Gangsters? Yes. Criminals? No. Criminal is how they saw us and let me tell you the difference. Criminal is that guy who takes something that doesn't belong to him, a gangster is that dude who reclaims what was rightfully his. Do you understand?...You know what's criminal the way my parents' dignity went up in smoke when he went from all that education to some guy earning six buck an hour doing some dirty job. Criminal is the how they treated us kids as criminals because we were Middle Easterners...by immigration, police, teachers...we weren't treated good, man, it was dirty, that was criminal. Now a gangster in our case was a person who did what he had to do to get his dignity back. Someone who could get some respect and have self-respect...someone who's not paralyzed by their way to get from point A to B. (Farz)

The Citizen

Persian Pride offered its members an alternative form of citizenship as it created a space where these young individuals could come together as a collective with a more empowered sense of themselves and who they could become in Canada. Sina's explanation of this was:

The only place I found where I felt I could be myself was with friends at the time. I didn't find it in the teachers, other kids, my sport, or anywhere else, only with these friends I had it. I don't think I was bad by nature, I just really believe that was the only place I could find some comfort to be myself. It was relaxed, not confusing.

Their personal histories from Iran as well as their position within the historical moment of their migration to Canada contributed to the formation of this gang. The particularities and circumstances of their time of arrival contributed to the emergence of new self-identification for these first-generation Iranian immigrant youths. This site of

meeting and relating was a location of belonging in the absence of other options for these youths. Farz articulated this feeling by saying:

My friends became more like my family. We were all dealing with the same things. It was a nice skipping class with 'em and just share things. We related. When someone said, "Mr. So-and-So is a dick," or "Dad did that," or "My immigration letter said this," it actually made sense, it was actually good to know someone understood how I felt. It was cool to know we were okay as the people we were...we could think back to home and plan a future, we talked a lot about our dreams...I had a lot of 'em.

The motive behind these friendships was the need for creation of a safe space where they could reflect on their past with out disdain and to also project themselves into the future beyond the limits set for them as immigrants. This was a site for them to reach further out beyond the boundaries of their marginalized positions. However, the reflection and the imagination was always constructed and enacted in relation to what laid external to this site.

While they could not have had an impactful voice as individual Iranian immigrants, in this space they could have it as a collective, especially under the gang banner. In a sense the individual identity of these young people was built on the collective identity of their group and later on within the context of the gang. Their friendships and connections were the greatest source of location of power for these young Iranians. Roha articulated his feelings about this by stating:

When people would find out we were in Persian Pride no one stood up in our face and say "Why don't you go back to your fucking country." As far as we were concerned that person was in our territory. People were too scared to confront us with things like that. That kind of blunt bullshit comments completely disappeared from my life when I was in Persian Pride. I mean I still heard things like "Yeah, he's a gangster cause he's an immigrant" but they knew better, they couldn't say it in my face. The way I digested the whole thing was, we immigrants don't take crap, we make our own ways, we have power. We took pride in that. The way I saw it, we didn't need a handout or need to be accepted. We had each other and we were the ones initiating people...if they said or did anything out of line, we had the power to shut them up this time.

Becoming a Member of Persian Pride

Persian Pride was a location for the emergence of new norms and values, which was an amalgamation of who they were in Iran and who they were becoming in Canada. Much as there was a need for assimilation and socialization of ethnic minority identity, the same process had to take place within the gang for its values to become the normative practices for its members. There was great repetition in how the gang identity was enacted in every facet of their daily life. Farz explained his understanding of becoming and being a gangster in this way:

I guess for us gangster was a code of conduct, it's just how you carry yourself, what you do when you need something or when someone stand in your way...when you trying to get somewhere. It's the way you talk, what you're willing to do for what you want. So yeah, we were gangster about life. We had to get ours and being an outcast everywhere doesn't help, you know...this meant the gangster swag had to be present all day everyday, there was no time to relax—anywhere.

The Symbolic

The primary reason for discussing the notion of the symbolic in this chapter is to come back to the significance of the construction of us and them, discussed in the previous chapter. The visual and the overt symbols of representation were not only a means of displaying their sameness in terms of being Iranians, but were also a form of representation of the difference these first-generation Iranian immigrant youths had come to identify with. This was partly an expression of their internalization of their socialization as the other. As *others* they came together in the form of *us* and through visual modes of representation of this *us* they recreated the notion of *them* and the other who was not an Iranian. In this sense they never escaped the paradigm of the social relations they were in contact with. Their meaning-making and producing process, as well as how they represented themselves and what they identified with, remained grounded in the dominant discourse. In a number of ways there was an overt reconstruction of the dominant discourse and the dynamics of the general society within the gang structure. Many of these reconstructions become part of the gang's repertoire for constructing itself.

For my participants the gang-identity was socialized through routines of daily life, which was encoded by acceptable modes of behaviour, such as self-policing, wearing symbolic colours, *throwing* gang signs, creating or emulating gang art, tattoos, and also through initiation rituals and practices related to codes of honour, which included collective engagement in violent acts as proof of loyalty for protection of each other. All of these practices of identity are described in the gang literature as common gang patterns and behaviours. Persian Pride members were not exempt from this process, nor any different to other immigrant gangs that preceded them or have come after them.

Their socialization into the gang required both ideological and material representations. These depictions of their identity through gang symbols were means of communicating both position and location of Persian Pride members in relation to one another within the gang and to other gangs, as well to the larger Canadian society. While it is beyond the scope of this research to provide a comprehensive analysis of the importance of the symbolic, I would like to discuss a few key features, which are extraordinarily telling about the subjective and the meaning-making process.

The symbolic expressions and representations created a means to simultaneously communicate sameness and difference. All Persian Pride members understood gang symbols as a means of communicating solidarity in their sameness, which was very much related to their internalization process of what it meant to be ethnic. It was also meant to communicate their difference from other ethnic minority groups, in particularly other immigrant gangs as a form of their authenticity.

Another intriguing facet of their symbolic representation was the replication of the dominant discourse within their own practices. Persian Pride replicated and created boundary systems that claimed parts of North Vancouver as its territory. The symbolic representation also expressed a strong sense of nationalism as an opposition to the rejection of their nationality within the Canadian nation. In this regard, they could have named their gang anything, yet they chose Persian Pride, which was an expression of their nationality and how they identified with it.

For example the choice of a white bandana as a decorative item of clothing, which was often tied around their head, worn around their wrist or hanging out of their back pocket, could be connected to how they related to and interpreted their past and

present understanding of themselves. In many ways these white bandanas were also a visual means of contextualizing themselves in the spectrum of their time; that is white bandanas were not only a means of distinguishing themselves from the other, but to also mark their *sameness* within their group. The colour white was meant to represent the Iranian *race*, which my participants commonly expressed was a branch of Indo-European race, known as the Arian race, which the white bandanas were meant to represent. They also articulated that this distinguished them from other ethnicities they felt the general Canadian population often confused them with, such as other middle Easterners and East Indians. Related to this need for distinction from other ethnic minority groups, Shah explained, “Dude, you know what I hated? When they thought we were brown...the white bandanas were good 'cause everyone knew it meant Persian.”

The bandanas were also a clear mark for the gang to be recognized by other gangs, as well as the mainstream society. The symbolic form and its meaning was already embedded within the decorative item in the 1990s due to its constant representation within rap music. Maz touched on this when he said, “we’d go to a party and they see that white bandana and they’d know they couldn’t fuck with. Right away, they’d know who we were...Persian Pride was in the house. Ain’t it funny what a piece of cloth can do?” The artists of this genre of music often wore bandanas to mark of their gang affiliation or as a form of acknowledgment for some existing gangs. My participants expressed a connection to rap and its gangsta subculture, which had a great influence in how they perceived themselves and how much they could connect their own life circumstances to the music’s imagery and visuals.

Another form of gang identification was tattoos, which among my participants were generally Farsi calligraphy, scripts and images related to Iran’s historical past. Many Persian Pride members had their own name tattooed on them in Farsi, which is quite telling when an individual feels the need to identify themselves by the very name they were given at birth through a permanent method in a very visible way. The permanency of tattoos in general, in whatever design they may be expressed, is a symbol of what one may wish to express about their past with its continuity to the present and the future.

On the other hand, these tattoos were also articulations of what they were not. It was a way of making that which they felt had to remain invisible were made visible through permanent imageries that they would carry on themselves at all times. In this respect, what was articulated in the previous chapter about the simultaneous acceptance and rejection that at a first glance seems to be contradictory and counterintuitive was articulated is very much present in this symbolic form of representation. Sina explained this as,

Tattoos were confusing things back in the day. It confused other Persians and it wasn't like the way it is nowadays with Canadians where everyone is rocking one. I don't know it was un-Persian and un-Canadian, but definitely more of a white thing to do...I think this was my way of saying, screw you to Iran and fuck you to Canada...For the older Iranian generation the lowest life forms get tattoos, like criminals, but it didn't help me with white people either since all my tattoos were Persian stuff...I had couple of guys call it Arab tattoos. It just fit the moment, if that makes sense. (Sina)

In many respects Persian Pride strived to create meaningful changes within their lives; however, there were no organized efforts on their part to break from the dominant social script as they merely reproduced locations and positions they felt excluded from. In this regard, one of my participants said:

Money had a lot to do with it. I don't think I was the only one who was going through financial hard times. In fact I know there was a number of us who were having rough times at home. We learned some seriously odd lessons in Canada...I learned hard work doesn't pay off, money is power, money is respect, money takes you places, money is high status—it's gold. We quickly learned that money out-valued everything. Or at least that's what we thought because of not having many experience in life. Money was really our only solution to everything...now we had a dilemma, how do you move up? How do you go and make that kind of money where it can bring you security, power and respect? Selling drugs, doing what a gang does. That's what and where. I tell you we didn't come up with these ideas, we watched the world go by us. We watched our parents and know hard work just made you tired, more in debt and broke, not to mention there is no respect in it, let alone power. We knew working at McDonalds was hard work that made the white man powerful and what he would pay me in a month I could make in a day slanging...even though there was consequences...the white man deals with the tax man and I guess we had to deal with the cops.

While I would argue that Persian Pride was not a form of organized resistance, I would make the claim it was a means to gain greater power, voice and agency over their lives. It was a fight for their dignity. What these youths were seeking was not an alternative to the system they had come to be a part of in Canada, but rather an alternative in having a different set of relations so that they could feel a sense of belonging within the margins.

Becoming an Iranian in Canada

In my analysis of Persian Pride I came to understand ethnic gangs as a site of socialization, not only towards a gang-identity but also in the process of getting closer to the multi ethnic identities, which is achieved through the hyphenated identities. Ethnic gangs' facilitation of this process is not as contradictory as it may seem at a first glance. This is the site where the Western dreams and ideals are internalized with means for action towards achieving them. It is also a site for reinforcement of the representation and identification of the other. Farz explained,

Realistically, all we wanted is what they wanted and already had. We wanted to feel secure, have some money, friends, a little respect and dignity, that all. When I couldn't get it on my own, I learned I could have it in a gang...let's be fair, we wanted the same American dream and we fought some battles for it, just like the way they fight some wars.

Persian Pride allowed my participants to be active agents of their identity, as they could hold on to that part of them that was Iranian and simultaneously move towards what it meant to them to become a Canadian.

As explained above, this gang closely reflected the general Canadian sentiments or what my participant called the American dream. The aim of ethnic gangs is generally to create a centre of belonging within the margins of being identified as the other, with the objective to move closer to the centres of power. In the words of another participant,

All the so-called gangster activity was about respect, power and status through making money. Money was magic. It magically brought us respect even if you were an asshole, it brought about fear 'cause everyone knew things could be taken care of with money and the connections money buys, it magically brought girls, cars, better clothes, which meant more girls...the circle of this day and age's

respect. I guess that's what they mean by money talks and we learned very fast about how to make it talk for us. Money was like the front man for us, the thing we could have never been by ourselves as Iranian immigrants...and off course when it didn't do what it promised, that's where violence to get more of it came in. (Farz)

Being in a gang for my participants fulfilled two criteria. First, it was a means of navigation through social relations with the continuity of the self with its past to their desired futures. Second, this identity that is related to self-identification was a form of utility in achieving their personal and social goals within the present.

While this gang started as social support for these Iranian youths, they soon realized the mere space of belonging amongst themselves would not allow them to move up. Many felt the only way up and out would be to gain greater economic security. The most instrumental reason that my participants explicitly articulated for being in a gang, after the need for a sense of belonging, was to gain greater economic position and higher status within the society.

After Persian Pride

Within five years of its conception the gang broke up and its members went their own ways. Some continued to remain involved with criminal activities while others' life directions were turned away from this lifestyle. There was another primary reason underlying the fallout of Persian Pride. At the end of each interview I asked my participants to share their thoughts about whether they thought the North Shore had changed in the past two decades in the ways it treats first-generation Iranian immigrants. It was through this question that I understood that they relinquished their gang-identity when that method of navigation through the world became unnecessary for them to feel a sense of belonging, protection, respect and having greater economic access. This correlated to the growth and the visibility of the Persian community on the North Shore. Within the past twenty years the Iranian population on the North Shore has grown rapidly and is now stretching beyond the original municipality. Due to this population increase, the very nature of relations between Iranians and non-Iranians has also changed. In a sense their identification of themselves and how they were defined externally has also changed over time. Due to these alterations they too changed how they managed their lives and their activities. It has also had a profound impact on Iranians and how they

perceive themselves within the Canadian context. What they started to identify with at the end of Persian Pride was a different set of identifications than what they had begun with. Farz articulated this when he explained,

When we came to North Van there weren't as many Iranians. Seriously we run this place now—all the way to Coquitlam. Look at all the businesses on Lonsdale from Esplanade up to the highway every other business is run by Persians. Go to a bank seven out of ten workers are Persian and speak Farsi when you deal with them. I don't think there is one white person on the North Shore who doesn't know where Iran is anymore. We run its economy and every service you can imagine is available by Persians. We had a family friend who came here three years ago, their lawyer was Persian, they had a translator for every immigration meeting and they knew all about their right, from that first week they stepped into this place and not to mention they got us to help them with this and that. We didn't have any of this. My parents had such a hard time renting a place and ended up working a lifetime of dead-end jobs. So I think things are very different for the new kids who come up here or even the one's who've grown up here now. Like my little cousin, he's been here since he was a baby. He's more Canadian than Persian. I mean the kid has a strong accent when he speaks Farsi and no accent when he speaks English. I'm pretty sure no kids are picking on him or he's getting into fights because he doesn't speak English. But I know there's a lot of these same kids getting into the lifestyle and I think it has a lot to do with the times they're living in. In my time cars and bling was important but it was nothing like what these kids are living everyday. In my time gangsta rap was just starting, now they're raised on it. So I can see how that's still a way out and I know there is still a lot of bullshit that goes on that keeps that door shut. But I'm pretty sure life is a lot easier for the newcomers now, especially the little ones who grew up here.

Over time my participants learned how to navigate being Iranians in Canada without the need for a gang. They learned how to make money through other means without the dependence on a gang or for their protection. I also believe much of their life circumstances related to their hardships, as well as being socialized through the ethnic paradigm. I also related to other experiences, related to their social interactions within different spheres, which altered their view about how they saw themselves as a different kind of Iranian in Canada. While a number of them remained in similar lifestyles, many saw their association with or pledge to a gang more as an obstacle in gaining status and moving upwards. There was a great shift in how they identified themselves and what they identified with. Nav explained this shift when he explained:

There are so many Persian businesses, real estate agents, investors...any profession that you can think of we have, all experts in it too. Since I've been back I've met engineers, doctors, lawyers, successful business people, artists, musicians, actors, comedians, you name it, all Iranians. I know you're doing your research on gangs and criminal and I get this is the kind of info you have to ask for, but I hope you don't forget about the successful Iranians in Vancouver now and even the ones who made it from our generation...so many are doing so well. We've really grown here, we've adjusted—in control of our lives now. You have to realize, all of these changes probably changed their perspective of us too. I feel we paved the way and I think the younger ones are on the right road now. I hope.

Chapter 6.

Conclusion

The intent of this research was not to glorify or to justify gang activity. I was interested in investigating the details that might have contributed to the conception of this particular ethnic minority gang. Through my field research I came to the conclusion that my participants' identities were related to complex systems and networks of relations within the Iranian and the Canadian society. It was the existence and the coherency of historical relations with dominant discourses in different places as well as the interpretation of discourse that gave birth to dynamic of different identities among my participants.

Outside the parameters of moral arguments, it could be stated that there was no deviation from the norms in the formation of Persian Pride, as this gang was a Canadian outcome connected to Canada's historical and social relations related to ethnic minorities; in fact, in many respects my participants were enacting the very positions they had come to occupy and identify with. Persian Pride corresponded to the dominant portrayal and representation of ethnic minority immigrants.

I have also argued here that gang involvement is not purely a personal choice. To address the gang phenomenon from the premise of individual choice is not a wide-ranging approach to a better understanding of the phenomenon, as personal decisions are often informed and shaped by a multitude of relations the individual comes to experience within the collective and the public sphere. This is to say, the choices made within the private sphere are not made in isolation; rather that which lays external to it shapes them—it is an extension of it. In addition, within in any given time, every individual is engaged in different sequences of life occurrences, each with its own set of relations that becomes intermingled with the individuals' intersubjective meaning-making process. For these reasons, individuals accordingly come to occupy different positions,

all of which produce unique understanding of one's place within the world and how one belongs in it. Another consideration in refuting the personal choice paradigm is that the gang phenomenon is not a one-time occurrence. It is a prevalent occurrence not only here, but worldwide, especially among the disenfranchised and those who are rendered within marginalized positions.

While all of my participants were unique with one-of-a-kind life narratives about their life events, I could not conclude anything unique about their experience as gang members when compared to other case studies. My participants' involvement in gang activity could be analyzed and explained within the context of social relations, which resembled other case studies. These similarities included their desire for belonging, struggles against their exclusion and rejection of the positions they had come to occupy based on their ethnic representation and identification, all of which contributed to the personal choices they made in their teenage years. In this sense, there was no evidence of identity outside the context of the world they were interacting with. My participants did not produce and create themselves as ethnic minorities or as members of Persian Pride in isolation and in absence of social circumstances. In fact these forms of representations and identifications were social constructs within positions they came to inherit upon their arrival to Canada.

Rose (1996) argues, "the ways humans understand themselves is through techniques [and] the understanding of the self is not transhistorical; it is embedded in being human [as] human beings are not unified subjects to begin with" (pp. 151-153). Within the relationships between different times, spaces, locations and circumstances my participants were negotiating all these different spheres of experience that were often in a constant state of flux and often in conflict with one another. They came to understand themselves in a trajectory of time past, present and imagined future, all of which were fragments of contradiction that needed a sense of continuity and coherency through time and space in order for their lives to make sense.

The very notion of belonging is constructed within one's own life narrative, which is a process of connecting fragments of different times and spaces one comes to constantly occupy and relinquish. In this way, belonging with the collective was a necessity for my participants to feel grounded within their own personal life. It was and

continues to be about the coherent unity of the self through time and space. For my participants there were too many fractures between the person they believed they had been in Iran and who they had to become in Canada; the gap and the distance between the fragments were too great. They managed to merge them within the context of Persian Pride.

This gang was a foreground in the process of making meaningful connections between their representation and identification, as well as the positions they had come to occupy—all in order to navigate through daily circumstances. Persian Pride as a collective was a process and a course of action that placed individual past, present and future projection in relation to what was decipherable and viable to them at that time of their lives. The collective here, as a gang, was a means to sort and rearrange the fragments that required interpretation. This interpretation was about who and what they were in relation to their past and present, within their personal and the collective biographies and where they could go and belong in the future. Nav articulated this constant movement and change as he explained his understanding of it, related to his own life:

Well I'm a man, someone's son, someone's brother, someone's doctor, someone's friend. I'm also someone's husband, student, teacher...someday someone's father. I know I'm not the same person when with all these different people. Why? 'Cause they all have their own issues, they all expect different things from me. I have a different role as a doctor than let's say when I'm with my dad. So obviously I'm not going to play the son role with patient and doctor with dad. You know what I mean? Different experiences, different people... Strange part is, even though I'm not that little troublemaker anymore, I can feel him. When we talk about him I find myself thinking and talking like him...sometimes I'm looking at him. And honestly, I really do think I became that young kid because they told us our kind had a criminal streak, that we were low-life, less intelligent, terrorists and so forth. I believed it back then and that was my life. Life moved on and I did different things, met different people and today I'm not that kid. All I know is I'm Nav...just a different kind of Nav.

The Future

The focus on gangs and gang-identity from the individual perspective and as something that belongs to a deviant individual misses the patterns that contribute to such behaviour and choices, which include the shared social relations and social

positions one comes to occupy and experience. It is crucial to analyze more than mere characteristics associated with deviant psyches. The aim of future studies should be towards a better understanding of gang membership among ethnic minority youths as a multifaceted process that is closely linked to their locations of departure and arrival within the context of larger social workings. A more proactive solution requires exploration of how gangs understand and internalize their position within the structure of conflict and flux they encounter and the methods viable to them in navigating their way through to where they can feel a sense of belonging. This is to say, a solution-oriented approach requires more than what determines and drives an individual to seek a gang membership and to become involved in its activities; rather, the focus must be on what these individuals are trying to achieve through this collective dynamic. This is an approach that requires a holistic look at one's life narrative and its contextualization within society.

A future study that could contribute to the body of knowledge in this manner could examine the phenomenon of multiethnic gangs, such as the more recent Canadian gangs, which is now taking centre stage within the media. The formation of the United Nations (UN) gang, for example, clearly shows that gangs are social dynamics that are an outgrowth of social relations, as UN has incorporated a more inclusive ethnic membership. It would be useful to understand the gang's dynamic and the individual motives of its members within the context of Canada's history and social relations, where the dominant political discourse is based on multiculturalism. In many respects a close study of the UN gang can expand the horizon of the argument that while gangs seem to stand in opposition to social norms as they appear to diverge from it, they are in fact part of the very processes of norm making and are very much involved in the reproduction of the dominant discourse and the existing social relations within the gang dynamic and beyond. Such future research could shed light on this homegrown phenomenon in the age of liberal democracy, globalization and multiculturalism, as these ideologies are the building blocks for this gang.

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Motion Pictures

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- Hackford, T. (Director). (2003). *Blood in, blood out* [Motion picture]. United States: Hollywood Pictures Home Video.

Hall, V. (Director). (1997). *Gridlock'd* [Motion picture]. United States: PolyGram Video.

Hughes, A. (Director). (1997). *Menace II society* [Motion picture]. United States: New Line Home Video.

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Johnson, M. (Director). (2000). *Donnie Brasco* [Motion picture]. United States: Columbia TriStar Home Video.

Jones, M. (Director). (2004). *I'm bout it* [Motion picture]. United States: Urban Works Entertainment.

Kilik, J. (Director). (1998). *He got game* [Motion picture]. United States: Touchstone Home Video.

Lee, S. (Director). (1999). *Clockers* [Motion picture]. United States: Universal Home Video.

Mancuso, F. (Director). (1997). *Hoodlum* [Motion picture]. United States: MGM Home Entertainment.

McHenry, D. (Director). (2000). *Jason's lyric* [Motion picture]. United States: MGM Home Entertainment.

Olmos, E. J. (Director). (2002). *American me* [Motion picture]. United States: Universal.

Peebles, M. (Director). (2005). *New jack city* [Motion picture]. United states: Warner Home Video.

Pitt, B. (Director). (2000). *Kalifornia* [Motion picture]. United States: MGM Home Entertainment.

Rich, M. (Director). (2003). *Straight out of Brooklyn* [Motion picture]. United States: MGM Home Entertainment.

Rock, C. (Director). (1993). *CB4* [Motion picture]. United States: MCA Universal Home Video.

Schick, E. (Director). (2011). *Sugar Hill* [Motion picture]. United States: Metro Goldwyn Mayer.

Scorsese, M. (Director). (1998/1995). *Casino* [Motion picture]. United States: Universal Home Video.

Singleton, J. (Director). (1991). *Boyz 'n the hood* [Motion picture]. United States: Columbia TriStar Home Video.

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- Woodbine, B. (Director). (2005). *Strapped* [Motion picture]. United States: Home Box Office.

Appendices

Appendix A. Literature Review

Introduction

This literature review will begin with a brief historical overview of ways in which the concept of identity has been understood by scholars in order to ground the emergence of a two-fold argument in this thesis. My primary objective here is to frame and understand the experiences of my participants, who once identified themselves as gangsters, beyond mere psychological analyses that use individualistic conceptualizations to explain particular identities as deviant, which are also often related to individuated *choices*. The second objective is to move beyond discussions of the immigrant-identity as merely a *marginalized* and as the *subjugated other*. The intent here is to examine social relations that are at play in the construction and emergences of identities within the context of history, time and location, in line with Grossberg (1996) who explains, “identities are always relational and incomplete” (p. 89).

On Identity: A Brief Historical Overview

The literature on identity is widespread and from many schools of thought. One consensus is that there is no uniform conceptualization or definition of identity; rather, the most notable venture in this area has been to define what identity is *not*. Hall & du Gay (1996) make this case by stating, “the deconstruction has been conducted within a variety of disciplinary areas, all of them, in one way or another, critical of the notion of an integral, originary and unified identity” (p. 1). Despite the critique, the definition of identity as what it is *not* has been a fruitful angle for the study of identities. It has contributed to understanding how identities are constructed on the premise of *difference, otherness and lack*, as “any identity depends upon its difference from its negation of some other term, even as the identity of the latter term depends upon its difference from its negating of the former” (Grossberg, p. 89).

The more recent literature is critical of the earlier studies’ findings and analysis. For example, essentialism in classical culturalism is highly criticized by scholars today, whose emphasis is on conceptualizing beyond fixed spaces with specific practices within their confines. Grimson (2010) argues, “given the fixed nature of essentialism’s conception of borders and human groups within them, they are treated as things, which presupposes the existence of a cultural essence, thus reifying processes that are

historical in nature” (p. 64). He goes on to argue that these understandings of human relations contribute to the very construction of identities and that, from the perspective of classical culturalism, “identity is simply an outgrowth of culture: cultural identity borders lie side by side, the former implying the latter” (Grimson, 1996, p. 64).

This type of critique argues that conceptualization of culture and the way individuals belong within culture needs to be transformed in order to provide a better understanding of complexities related to the construction and production of cultures, as well as the reproduction of identities within it. For example Grossberg (1996) talks about the need for thinking beyond the older theoretical paradigms within cultural studies, explaining that “cultural studies needs to move towards a model of articulation as ‘transformative practice’, as a singular becoming of a community” (p. 88). He points out that in order to understand the phenomenon of identity within the context of culture and given locations, we cannot speak of the whole and its entire process without speaking about the parts, as they are contingent on one another. This is to say, identity is neither a result nor an effect; rather, it is about generating ways “to think about fragments whose sole relationship is sheer difference—without having recourse to any sort of original totality (not even one that has been lost), or to a subsequent totality that may not yet have come about” (Grossberg, 1996, p. 94).

The study of identity in all its efforts and leaps has contributed to the coiling and the confusion around the concept. Rose (1996) and Hall (1996) argue that these problems in the analysis of identity are due to the fact that modern theories themselves have the identity of the modern and hence it has been difficult for scholars to conceptualize identity beyond its own methodological and epistemological framework. Grossberg (1996) articulates this as “The modern itself is constituted by the logic of difference through which the modern is constructed as an ‘adversarial space’ living in ‘an anxiety of contamination by its other’” (p. 94).

Just as there has been extensive critique on the classical and modern theories of identity, there are critiques of postmodern theories as well, which are related to the deconstruction and the *over-fragmentation* of the whole. For example, one of the primary critique is of this theoretical framework is about the concept of “decentered subjects.” As Firth (1996) argues,

the postmodern problem is the threat to our sense of place—hence the mapping metaphors, the use of terms like depth and surface. What is underplayed in such discussions is the problem of process—not the positioning of the subject as such, but our experience of the movement between positions. (p. 110)

It is argued that postmodernism falls short in providing a satisfactory analysis of identities as it cannot locate the subject or the object. The general consensus on its critic is related to its refusal to pin down positions and locations, which hinders its ability to locate the very subject that is the focus of its study. Firth (1996) explains the contradiction inherent in this theoretical framework in its attempt “to locate the subject in absence of location, to represent it in absence of representation, to show its movement within location by alluding to the mobile self within the postmodern as the mobile self” (p. 110).

Even though the postmodernist critique is about distinguishing some parameters of time, location and circumstance, other scholars have criticized the “firmness” of location in the context of fleeting spaces such as the conceptualization of diasporic perspective developed by Clifford (2002) and by others regarding “culture,” “territory model,” and “travelling cultures.” Again this framework is seen as the conceptualization of the *modern logic*. It is articulated by Gordon and Anderson (1999), that “the theoretical problem is determining precisely *when* a phenomenon is diasporic, who makes it so and why” (p. 83). In line with this critique, Grimson (2010) raises the concern that, “once again the need arises to ask if subjects are in fact agents of ethnographically or historically analyzable processes of diasporic identification” (p. 67). Yelvington (2003) argues, “we must locate the diaspora in time and space, but dislocate it from ‘radicalized’ bodies and places from which it supposedly irradiates” (p. 559).

What is generally argued by some of the recent scholars on identity is that identities are relational, fluid and always in a state of flux. In this regard, Grimson (2010) argues that

detaching culture from identity was the great contribution made by the “theory of interethnic friction.” To the extent that identities are conceived and constructed, invented and manipulated, the existence of cultural frontiers that are not always empirically verifiable can be *postulated*. (p. 69)

What is argued is that a frontier and an identity are relational and contingent on one another in order for identity to *be*.

Other modern theoretical frameworks have made connections in construction of identity to modern politics of belonging, such as the analysis of hybrid identities, border crossings and conceptualizing the notion of diaspora, which has given greater attention to power relations and its impact on the construction of identities. For example, in regards to the significance of power relations in constructing identities, Grimson (2010) argues,

Social conflict that questions the very logic of existing interrelationships often generates unforeseen positions. In this case movement work at the borders; not only in relation to the significance of a particular identity or position, but also to the culture as a whole and the significance of the interrelationships. (p. 74)

He further argues that “it is somewhat ironic that just as we discover that not only particular identities but identity itself is socially constructed, we organize political struggles within the category of identity, around particular socially constructed identities” (Hall, 1996, p. 93), which he argues are essentially based on constructed differences.

Furthermore, Scholars such as Hall (2000), Rose (1996), du Gay (Hall & du Gay, 1996), Grimson (2010), Jenkins (1994) and Grossberg (1996) argue that theories themselves are engines that construct differences. For example, Hall (1996) argues that it is assumed that

difference is itself an historically produced economy, imposed in modern structures of power, on the real. Difference as much as identity is effected by power...a strong sense of otherness recognizes that others exist, in its own place as what it is, independently of any specific relation. But what is need not be defined in transcendental or essential terms; what is it can be defined by its particular (contextual) power to affect and be affected. (p. 93)

In a related point, Deleuze and Guattari (1987) observe, “modern thought is not just binary but a particular kind of binary-production machine, where binaries become constitutive differences in which the other is defined by its negativity.” (p. 42)

In regards to the concept of the *subjective*, it is argued that the analysis of the other, in terms of *differences* is a framework of analysis that reinforces the dominant discourse and the reproduction of further differences in constructing the other. For example Spivak (1988) states that such theories “seem to argue that subjectivity is itself a western category and that, in the colonial rationale, the West seeks to construct a subject as its other” (p. 285) These scholars have problematized the very notion of the subject by stating that subjectivity is not an ontological question but rather an epistemological one, since the

subject describes a position within a field of subjectivity and in a phenomenological field, produced by a particular subjectivity machine...In so far as everyone experiences the world subjectivity in some form must be a universal value. Everyone has some form of subjectivity and thus, in at least in some sense exist as a subject. (Hall, 1996, p. 98)

While Hall (1996) argues that everyone exists in a realm of subjectivity, he also states that subjectivity is not value-free, as the question of location and position within the context of power relations cannot be ignored. Hall (1996) explains this by pointing out that

each enables and constrains the possibilities of experience, of representing those experiences and of legitimizing those representation. Thus, the question of identity is one of social power and its articulation, its anchorage in, the body of the population and in itself. In this sense, the self is the material embodiment of identities, the material points at which codes of difference and distinction are inscribed upon the social [and] exists only after the inscription of historical difference. (p. 16)

Rose (1996) uses Foucault's (1966) discussion on *regimes of the person* to articulate the importance of historical context in the ways difference and other is constructed. He states, “the human being's ontology is historical” (p. 129). What is being argued here is that the construction of the self and that part of it known as identity, should not merely be viewed as historical but also understood as

the history of the relations which human beings have established with themselves...our relation with ourselves [which] has assumed the form it has because it has been the object of a whole variety of more or less rationalized schemes, which have sought to shape our ways of understanding and enacting our existence as human beings in the name of certain objectives—manliness, femininity, honor, modesty, propriety,

civility, discipline, distinction, efficiency, harmony, fulfillment, virtue, pleasure—the list is as diverse and heterogeneous as it is interminable. (Rose, 1996, p. 130).

It is also argued that subjective meaning is not a thing in itself, rather the subjective process of meaning-making has already been determined by the existing relations, which produce their own means and methods of making meaning. Joyce (1994) argues that “the way in which humans ‘give meaning to experiences have their own history. Devices of ‘meaning production’—grids of visualization, vocabularies, norms and systems of judgment—produce experience; they are not themselves produced by experience” (p. 71).

Identification and Representation

Through my literature review and field study I came to realize that in understanding identity, it is imperative to understand the significance of representation and of identification, how the very things that we identify with are constructed and represented in practice, as well as how we relate to those constructions and understand that which is external to us. In this line of argument, identities and forms of identification are always relational and connected to particularities of a historical context. Hall (1996) explains the concept of identification as follows:

In common sense language, identification is constructed on the back of recognition of some common origin or shared characteristic with another person or group, or with an ideal and with the natural closure of solidarity and allegiance established on this foundations. (p. 2)

This is related to the data I have gathered in my field research. The emerging themes of inclusion and exclusion, as well as how my participants understood themselves and their identities, were closely linked to these common understandings. Their narratives were narratives of becoming and change as their common understanding of their relationship to other Iranians and non-Iranians, as well as to Iran and Canada, changed over the years. Hall (1996) goes on to articulate,

identification is then, a process of articulation, a suturing, an over-determination of a lack, but never a proper fit, a totality. Like all signifying practices, it is subject to the ‘play’ of difference...it entails discursive work, the binding and marking of symbolic boundaries, the production of

'frontier-effects' as it requires what is left outside, its constitutive outside, the consolidate the process. (p. 4)

Hall (1996) also argues that identities are constructed on the narrativization of the self, which means identities are constructed within and not outside of discourse—they are the product of power relations and are constructed through existing difference.

Identities

are thus points of temporary attachment to the subject position which discursive practices construct for us...identities are, as it were, the positions which the subject is obliged to take up while always 'knowing' that they are representations, that representation is always constructed across a 'lack', across a division, from the place of the Other, thus can never be adequate and identical. (p. 6)

The literature under review has one common conclusion that identities are constructs: they are always related to historical relations, as well as its dominant discourse. While identities do not necessarily need to be understood in binary terms, it is argued that identity's ability to make meaning and to locate itself in the world always occurs in a relational manner.

Appendix B. Methodology

Background

I can say that my interest, as well as the informal data collection for this research, has been a life long process. I have been pondering this concept of identity and in particular identity related to the migration process, for most of my adult life. However the topic of identity and migration was too open and extensive for any kind of a meaningful examination that could be articulated in a systematic and a coherent way. I thought the best way for me to pursue this was to explore a snapshot of it, in a particular time and location, which gave rise to this study related to Persian Pride, a gang that came into being in the early to mid-1990s on the North Shore.

This is a time and a dynamic I am familiar with, as I had also moved to North Vancouver in 1991 after four years of living in Toronto, Ontario. While I shared many similar experiences as my participants, I could not point at, nor pin down, what exactly it was that drove some of this cohort to move from a group of friends to creating a gang and to eventually identify themselves as gangsters.

On the other hand, I entered this research with the assumption that even though my participants deviated from what seemed like social norms of the time, they were not *innately* deviant, nor could their choices be explained through pathology in behaviour and characteristic. The resoluteness in my assumption regarding this phenomenon was informed by my previous knowledge of my participants' sense of self prior to their arrival in Canada, which was far from the gangster identification. And it was precisely this change, from being one type of human being to becoming another kind with different values, modes of thinking and action in different times and spaces that inspired this research.

The objective of this research was to understand what contributed to the construction of this gang, how these identities were identified with, where such identifications came from and how they were embodied and enacted. The second motive was to understand the reasons for the change in my participants' ability to ultimately relinquish their gang-identity and become who they are today. I felt this understanding of

time, as in who they were in Iran, who they became in Canada and who they are today was a key component in understanding and explaining identity.

And in line with my assumptions and my chosen case study, a set of questions remained a constant that informed the research and the analysis after my field research, which was ethnographic and qualitative. Through the in-depth interviews, as well as the literature review, many of these open-ended questions were refined and narrowed down to more specific questions about my participants' experiences in relation to time, location, social relations, life circumstances and the dominant discourse. There are four core and primary questions within this thesis that were also the bases for the data collection phase: What is identity? What is this gang-identity? How and where is gang-identity constructed, identified with, represented, internalized and ultimately enacted? Lastly, what are the relationships between the individual choices in becoming a gang member and the gangster-identity in the context of the external world? That is to say, how are they related and interconnected? And how do they inform each other in the production and reproduction of identities?

The objective was to explore the experiences of this group in their transition to their new environment. I was also interested in understanding how they identified themselves within the context of their location and time of migration. Another factor that intrigued me to pursue this study was to know why so many young Iranian youths of that particular time had become involved in gang activities.

My participants were all Iranian males who were born in Iran and migrated to Canada with their families as teens and settled onto the North Shore upon their arrival to Canada. At the outset I had direct access to one participant, which led me to get in touch with the next and so forth in a *snowball effect*. The participants I was able to make contact with were also people I had known or had been friends with at some point during my teen years. By the end of this research project I had interviewed eight participants and I have used seven of the interviews for this thesis. Due to the nature of this research and my own concern for the well-being of my participants I chose to omit some dates pertaining to particular events. I have also changed all participant names as this anonymity was requested by all of them.

I believe my acquaintance and friendship with some of my participants had a profound impact on the kind of data I was able to collect. There was a very comfortable rapport and a reciprocal form of sharing between myself and the participants of this research. This allowed for lively conversations, which I believe had a positive influence on the data I was able to collect.

Methodology

The methods I have employed in gathering my data are ethnographic, in the form of in-depth interviewing. I have also employed content and discourse analysis in the interpretation of the data. The in-depth interviews allowed my participants to express their individual stories and experiences with greater depth and detail, as I did not enforce rigid structure within the interviews. I strived to keep this kind of loose structure as a means to provide a greater space and freedom for my participants to tell their stories. I believe that the availability of time for us to meet created a sense of closeness and intimacy in sharing stories.

While I facilitated each interview with questions for the purpose of staying on topic, I did not interrupt my participants when they were telling their stories. It was also important for me to show my participants that they had a very clear voice and role within this research, which this method allowed. The lack of rigidity and guidelines allowed the participant to reciprocate, empathize and communicate with me and vice versa during the data collection phase.

I chose this qualitative method as it allowed me to move beyond the position of a researcher and mere observer to also participant in the stories. It permitted me to hear their life experiences in a holistic manner, which brought to the surface the significance of nuances that were paramount in the analysis phase. This allowed for an interpretation that encompassed a wider range of complexity with its multiplicity in the realm of experience and the meaning-making process.

Intent Behind Research Questions

Once I started my fieldwork I immediately understood that I could not directly ask my participants about their identity in terms of who they thought they were in Iran, who they became upon their arrival to Canada and who they are now. Nor was I able to get an answer about what might have influenced these changes. I understood early on in

this research that I needed to investigate their life narratives and experiences in greater depth to understand their process. I had to ask question related to identity rather than directly asking questions about it. The best way I could do this was to allow my participants to tell a kind of an autobiography of their life narrative. My only task was to ask occasional questions from my list to keep the subject matter focused or to generate further discussions. The participants shared experiences about their lives in Iran and Canada as well as their transition in different spheres of social and public life within both locations. It was only through this type of inquiry that I was able to understand what they had identified with and how they lived those identifications as their identities.

Each one of the specific questions I asked gave rise to subset of other questions. It had a feel of a conversation as it all unfolded organically from one topic to another. The original and the spontaneous questions often overlapped as my participants would move back and forth through their experiences to make links, draw contrasts or to show similarities and differences in their experiences, which was another reason I had to follow a loose interview structure.

The Analysis Process

There was a commonality in the way my participants spoke about their experiences. There was a common language, tone and understanding in the way they reported certain stories and related to particular events or life circumstances. This commonality made me realize that I was dealing not only with individual stories, but also with a thread that stretched far beyond the individuals. My participants chose particular words, phrases and tones to express and explain certain events within their lives. These shared ways of articulation and understanding after close to two decades of separation between them could not have taken place in a vacuum nor could it have been spontaneously invented during the interviews. Rather, this was a language of common experience and understanding that must have been related to their particular time.

In addition, looking at the data as a whole, I noticed that all my participants had given me a non-linear life stories. The starting point of their narratives, regardless of my first questions was related to their arrival to Canada; however, they moved back and forth in time to explain and to contextualize their experiences. Not only were they telling

their stories about their lived experiences, they were also very capable of interpreting its meaning and draw very complicated connections between their actions and thoughts.

Lastly, it was imperative for me as a researcher to articulate not only what was expressed but also what was omitted and revealed through silence. I had to examine and consider who said what and for what purpose. I say this because so many of the life stories that were disclosed were not in response to questions I had asked, rather they were the stories my participants were willing to disclose in their own storytelling process. At the same time, there were instances where my participants that refused to directly answer certain questions, regardless of how many times I asked the question. I had to identify or at least make sense of what was being disclosed or omitted. I had to study these life narratives very closely to make sense of the connections and interpretations they were making of their life stories in relation to the particular time in focus.

On Reflexivity

From the beginning I understood and let my participants know the relationship between the researcher and the researched in terms of the power relations at play, which meant I was in a position to interpret that which they held as their *truth*. In this sense, I let them know that I was in the process of meaning-making, which could yield different interpretations of their experiences. On my part, I have tried my best to stay committed to their stories and to give voice to them without narrowing or pigeonholing their experiences by making them *light* and simplistic.

Another point worth discussing, which I believe had a great impact on this research, is the issue of the researcher as insider or outsider. In many ways I was an insider as I am also a first-generation Iranian immigrant of this same cohort and I have had very similar experiences with similar hardships related to my migration process. In other ways I am an outsider as a woman and an individual who was not a member of Persian Pride.

Overall, I can say that my sense of responsibility to my participants as well as the constant checking of myself against the research was constant in this entire process. This type of self-awareness allowed me to become more flexible and attentive to the complexities of my participants' lives and narratives, which allowed for greater collaborative work through our open dialogues. I believe my participants helped shape

the meaning-making process of this research, as co-creators in hopes of contributing to better understanding of the issues discussed, as well as the construction of future knowledge related to this area of study.