




I have a few minor criticisms to mention in closing. There are some small oversights in the bibliography of *The Rebellion of Forms*, which does not include some of the books cited in the footnotes, Sirius Tāhbāz's edition of Nimā's *Majmu'eh* and Kamran Rastegar's *Literary Modernity between the Middle East and Europe* among them. Although the book's inclusion of Persian text for poetry citations is to be commended, there are inconsistencies in the translation of Persian terms from time to time: *monāzereh* is "argumentation" on page 25 but "poetic debate" on page 59—I should think "poetic debate" preferable. Although most of the transliteration is well done, some mistakes remain. On page 27, the *nisbah* endings on "Bahārieh" and "Khazāniyeh" are inconsistent, and "*moshabah* and *moshabah-beh*" on page 31 ought to be "*moshabbah* and *moshabbah-beh*." These slight issues aside, Sonboldel deftly translates the poetry he analyzes, and readers unfamiliar with or unable to read the Persian will find them an excellent substitute for the originals.

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Review Response. Feeding Iran: Shi'i Families and the Making of the Islamic Republic. Rose Wellman (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2021). Pp. 262. \$34.95. ISBN 9780520376878

Reviewed by Rose Wellman , University of Michigan-Dearborn, Dearborn, United States

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I would like to begin my response by thanking the reviewer for engaging with my book, *Feeding Iran*. I am appreciative of his recognition of the in-depth ethnographic fieldwork I conducted with my hosts, their extended family, and their neighbors, which forms the core of the monograph. As an author of a first book based on dissertation research, I have very much appreciated those scholars in anthropology, Iranian studies, and adjacent disciplines who have read my work and provided thoughtful and critical feedback at book talks and other events, much of which I have taken to heart. A book is never done, and I am always learning.

I am compelled to write a response to the reviewer, a senior male scholar in a different academic discipline, for two reasons. First, there are several points within the review that are baseless, misrepresentative of my text, or demeaning to the people with whom I conducted research. Perhaps most harmful is the author's gender-biased, mischaracterization of my host and mother of four children, Nushin, as "over anxious" and "on the verge of a nervous breakdown." *Feeding Iran* is a testament to Nushin's unflappable resilience, strength of character, leadership, hospitality, and care for her family. Other inaccuracies in the review take the form of quotations taken out of context. To give three examples, the reference to eating pomegranate on a Thursday night in my book (p. 97) is specifically attributed to an individual and is not a general claim. Similarly, the reviewer states I write that my hosts' kitchen practices are "typical across the region" (p. 86). In fact, I state in the very same sentence that "the precise way in which they saw food as potent vehicle for danger, transformation, protection, and resilience was shaped by *their location* in a small factory town surrounded by farmland; *their personal metaphysical beliefs* about food, prayer, and ill intention; and their family's politics and membership in the Basij" (p. 86, emphasis added). Furthermore, I do not claim anywhere in my text that Fars-Abad is, in his words,

“a bastion” of Islamic Republic state supporters: instead, in my subsection, “Writing Basiji Lives,” I explain the difficulty of providing a singular characterization of my hosts due to the multiple ways they self-identify. In *Feeding Iran*, I also make it a point to acknowledge the multiple ways in which my own positionality as a woman and an American researcher in Iran during the presidency of Ahmedinejad shaped my research, offering both opportunities and constraints (p. 10).

The second reason I am responding to this review is to initiate a conversation about how different disciplinary lenses shape research and academic writing. Most critically, like many scholars of anthropology, I do not claim representation. Based on the ethnographic method, anthropological writing is fundamentally interpretive. As João Biehl puts it, the exploration of “life as it is lived and adjudicated by people in their realities produces a multiplicity of approaches, critical moves and countermoves, an array of interpretive angles.”¹ This recognition has been long-standing in the discipline.² Moreover, the aim of ethnography is to contextualize specific meaning-making practices.³ This (hopefully) takes place within a framework of coparticipation that does not elevate the ethnographer’s own values above those of others. In *Feeding Iran*, this means that I prioritize people’s own (emic) understandings of their lives. Edith Turner wrote about this brilliantly in her article “Reality of Spirits”, citing the anti-imperialist significance of foregrounding “the people’s own view.”⁴ In other words, in ethnographic rendering, people’s own theories about their worlds can and must be centered.

Instead of making representative claims, a key purpose of ethnography is to bring micro-scale analysis into conversation with theory and relations of power (for instance, institutions, political histories, empire, dominant narratives, social evolution). Sometimes this is done by denaturalizing relations of power and feminist cultural analysis.⁵ In my case, *Feeding Iran* draws from my research findings to bring ethnographic specificities of family life, political affiliation, and examples of statecraft into conversation with Western-based theories of modernity that exclude kinship and religion from politics and nation-making. My examination of several state-sponsored rituals, for example, allows me to explore how nation-states such as Iran may strive to naturalize and legitimize their power through the emotional resonances, exchanges, and materialities of (religious) kinship.

Based on these unacknowledged disciplinary differences, the reviewer reads *Feeding Iran* against the grain it was intended, as if in every quotation, story, or conversation that I share I am trying to paint broad summaries of an entire population. This is far from the case: my humble intention is instead to convey (within the context of my research) and to the extent possible, the multidimensionality of my hosts and the specific context of their lives through the lenses that were most accessible to me given my location in a provincial household—food, religion, family life, and state ritual—while foregrounding their interpretations of their world and their aspirations, hopes, and dreams. Again, this is not a work that claims representation. I describe instances of family life in the Fars Province for the audience to consider one possibility among many other diverging and different possibilities of family life in Iran.

Similarly, one of the potentials of ethnography is to reveal continuities that challenge our assumptions about past, present, and progress. Here, I must contest the reviewer’s claim that the family rituals and “customs” I discuss are from the 1800s. The black and white

¹ João Biehl, “Ethnography in the Way of Theory,” *Cultural Anthropology* 28, no. 4 (2013): 583.

² See, for instance, Roy Wagner’s *Invention of Culture*, in which he discusses the process of anthropological interpretation and the importance of recognizing, to the extent possible, how these interpretations are shaped by one’s own dispositions and assumptions; *The Invention of Culture*, 2nd ed. (University of Chicago Press [1975] 2016).

³ Arzoo Osanloo, *The Politics of Women’s Rights in Iran*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009.

⁴ Edith B. Turner, “The Reality of Spirits: A Tabooed or Permitted Field of Study?” *Anthropology of Consciousness* 4, no. 1 (1993):9-12.

⁵ Sylvia Yanagisako and Carol Delaney, *Naturalizing Power: Essays in Feminist Cultural Analysis* (New York and London: Routledge, 1995).

photographs in *Feeding Iran* are not an aesthetic choice, but a standard of academic publishing. More than that, my observations of the contemporaneity and agency of women's religious foodways do not stand alone. Many other scholars have noted the significance of women's present-day participation in rituals and piety, votive meals, the *sofreh* (dining spread), and food work.⁶ I also am not the only researcher to address the shifting yet ongoing significance of beliefs in the metaphysical or occult in Iran.⁷ Indeed, a recognition of this contemporaneity is one of the main arguments of *Feeding Iran*. Women's acts of kinship, including making votive meals or orchestrating family food practices, are not circumscribed to the past or to a domestic domain. They resonate in important ways with contemporary politics and nation-making. Nor are these the only kind of food practices discussed: see my analyses of fast food, marketing, restaurants, and factory fare, for instance.

Relatedly, assumptions about the ethnographic method need to be addressed. It is standard in anthropology to use pseudonyms in writing. Even though my hosts ultimately gave me permission to use their names and location in my book, pseudonyms are a standard method of deidentification in my discipline and their use was required by my Institutional Review Board protocol. Furthermore, the reviewer implies that I only did fieldwork within one family, and this is inaccurate. Although the heart of the book is undoubtedly and unashamedly about the comings and goings of my key hosts and their participation in religious, civic, and national life, my research was by no means limited to one household. *Feeding Iran* draws on research conducted in dozens of unrelated households within Fars-Abad, in neighboring towns in Fars Province, Tehran, and Shiraz, and at larger public commemorations, Friday prayers, rallies, pilgrimages, trips to the bazaar, interactions with strangers in graveyards, and visits to university campuses and schools, as well as some print and media analysis. Additionally, I conducted two months of research over the summer of 2007 with a group of female Basiji seminary students, including in the kitchen of Shah Abdul Azim and restaurants in Tehran, and participated in women-only votive meals in Tehran, all of which informed my ethnography.

Finally, since my hosts were card-carrying members of the Basij, *Feeding Iran* builds on a rich body of literature on the organization to contextualize their relationship to the group and provide relevant background. Although I did not have direct access to the Basij as an institution due to acknowledged fieldwork constraints, I carefully draw from numerous sources to provide the history, context, and further details about the organization, as well as examples of dissonance and difference. This includes Bajoghli's seminal study of media producers and intergenerational differences; the very distinct experiences of urban Basiji, female seminarian students; Basiji projects of development and construction; and Golkar's analysis of the Basij as an organization and institution.⁸ See also my recognition of other scholarly work on the complicated relationships that families of martyrs can have with

⁶ Ingvild Flakerud, "Religious Rituals' Reflection of Current Social Conditions in the Middle East," *Anthropology of the Middle East* 17, no. 1 (2022): 1–7; Faegheh Shirazi, "The Sofreh: Comfort and Community among Women in Iran," *Iranian Studies* 38, no. 2 (2005): 293–309; Azam Torab, *Performing Islam: Gender and Ritual in Iran*. Vol. 4. Women and Gender: The Middle East and the Islamic World (Leiden: Brill, 2007); Sabine Kalinock, "Between Party and Devotion: Mowludi of Tehran Women," *Critique: Critical Middle Eastern Studies* 12, no. 2 (2003): 173–87; Sabine Kalinock, "Touching a Sensitive Topic: Research on Shiite Rituals of Women in Tehran," *Iranian Studies* 37, no. 4 (December 2004): 665–74; Lynn Harbottle, *Food For Health, Food For Wealth: Ethnic and Gender Identities in British Iranian Communities* (New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2000); Amir Sayadabdi and Peter J. Howland, "Foodways, Iranianness, and National Identity Habitus: The Iranian Diaspora in Aotearoa New Zealand," *Food and Foodways* 29, no. 4 (October 18, 2021): 331–54.

⁷ Alireza Doostdar, *The Iranian Metaphysicals: Explorations in Science, Islam, and the Uncanny* (Princeton University Press, 2018).

⁸ Narges Bajoghli, *Iran Reframed: Anxieties of Power in the Islamic Republic* (Stanford University Press, 2019); Amina Tawasil, "The Howzevi (Seminarian) Women in Iran: Constituting and Reconstituting Paths," *Journal of Middle East Women's Studies* 11, no. 2 (2015): 258–59; Eric Sander Lob, "An Institutional History of the Iranian Construction Jihad: From Inception to Institutionalization (1979–2011)," 2013; Eric Lob, "Development, Mobilization and War: The Iranian Construction Jihad, Construction Mobilization and Trench Builders Association (1979–2013)," *Middle*

the state and with citizenship, my descriptions of protesters against the regime (end of chapter 3 and epilogue), and my own discussion of mothers of martyrs at a commemoration who contested the state's interpretation of bodily remains (p. 148).⁹

I would like to conclude by thanking the editors of the *Journal of Iranian Studies* for giving me an opportunity to respond to this review. I hope that this exchange reveals why it is important to understand how disciplinary lenses shape what we can see (and what we cannot see) in our research and writing. Anthropology is not the work of representation, but the work of interpretation, of challenging power and dominant narratives, and of centering people's own theories about their world. This centering can be difficult. The practices, ideas, and local logics we encounter can challenge our own liberal beliefs and worldviews. But there is a place for this centering, for taking small things and connecting them to the greater landscape of the contemporary world.

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East Critique 26, no. 1 (January 2, 2017): 25–44; Saeid Golkar, *Captive Society: The Basij Militia and Social Control in Iran* (Columbia University Press, 2015).

⁹ Shirin Saeidi, "Creating the Islamic Republic of Iran: Wives and Daughters of Martyrs, and Acts of Citizenship," *Citizenship Studies* 14, no. 2 (April 1, 2010): 113–26.