Mediating Possibility after Suffering: Meaning Making of the Micro-Political through Digital Media

Photo credit: Gary Knight
It is my honor to share CARGC Paper 9, “Mediating Possibility after Suffering: Meaning Making of the Micro-political through Digital Media,” by Samira Rajabi, a Postdoctoral Fellow at the Center for Advanced Research in Global Communication. Dr. Rajabi envisioned, drafted, presented, and revised this paper while in residence at CARGC.

As we conclude our fifth year, we at CARGC are happy to announce that we have recruited four outstanding new postdoctoral fellows, bringing the total number of postdocs in AY 2018-2019 to six. They will be working with CARGC Doctoral, Undergraduate, and Faculty Fellows on individual and collaborative research projects. Of particular note is the inaugural edition of South by Southeast: the CARGC Fellows Biennial Conference, which will be held in March 2019. You can read more about our established and new initiatives in CARGC@5, a detailed report about our first five years, published in summer 2018.

“Mediating Possibility after Suffering: Meaning Making of the Micro-political through Digital Media” marks a decisive move into trauma and affect, areas that have not been at the center of global media and communication scholarship. Dr. Rajabi’s contribution tackles the overlap of two CARGC Research Groups. The first, History and Theory in Global Media Studies, is dedicated to articulating our subfield with areas of inquiry that have not been fully explored and that we feel are important for the development of global media studies, trauma being one such area. In the second research group, Geopolitics and the Popular, we focus on the myriad ways in which popular culture and politics mesh and amplify each other, and in this case, how the affordances of platforms like Instagram effect the popular-political nexus.

By tackling affect and trauma in the context of the Iranian diaspora and the United States administration of President Donald Trump’s so-called “Muslim Ban,” Dr. Rajabi beautifully blends the study of individual suffering and expression with nationalism, immigration, and geopolitics. Trained in media studies, Dr. Rajabi brings to her topic a potent blend of disability studies, feminist approaches, and critical race theory, to provide a novel approach to trauma and its mediation.

Focusing on how digital communication enables the expression and coping with trauma, Dr. Rajabi develops the notion of symbolic trauma to understand how Iranian-Americans experienced the travel ban. She uses three empirical case studies from Instagram to probe how Iranian-Americans mediated the travel ban’s effects in ways that re-made or re-constituted meaning, a process that allowed them to exist tactically after suffering a symbolic trauma. Rajabi shows how, through Instagram, Iranian-American individuals and groups participated in broader geopolitical conversations in ways that humanized the Other and mobilized a community against symbolic violence.

I hope you enjoy reading CARGC Paper 9 as much as I did, and that you engage Dr. Rajabi’s work and join the fray of debate about theoretical developments in global media studies. While you are at it, please check out our other CARGC Papers, CARGC Briefs, and special issues of journal articles co-published by CARGC Press. If you like what you read, please spread the word about us, and help us fulfill our mission in nurturing emerging scholars worldwide.

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INTRODUCTION

This CARGC Paper examines the Trump administration’s 2017 travel ban as a traumatic experience and its digital mediation. In the pages that follow, I analyze the trauma of the travel ban and its mediations through a new theoretical frame, which I call symbolic trauma. Using three empirical case studies from the social media photo-sharing platform, Instagram, I examine how Iranian-Americans mediated the travel ban’s effects in ways that re-made or re-constituted meaning and that allowed them to exist tactically after suffering a symbolic trauma.

The concept “trauma” captures those catastrophic life events and experiences that remain with a person, manifesting over time as we walk through life and respond each day to the broader social, cultural, and political world. Upon experiencing trauma, a person’s meaning-making schema is altered and needs to be remade. Digital media are playful, liminal spaces that offer traumatized subjects platforms through which to negotiate meaning and situate themselves in their world. Meaning-making processes are more than just cultural and social process for coping with the effects of trauma, they are also micro-political tactics of everyday life for oppressed populations. Because of the way trauma forces people to need to remake meaning for survival, it imbues that process with a sense of urgency, thus, it is a useful optic to study mediation on social media (Scolari 2015).

While trauma is one lens, among others, that enables a focus on meaning production in digital media, this project is fundamentally about global media and meaning making. With digital communication rapidly shifting the ways in which citizens inhabit their national boundaries, recognizing how various actors imagine themselves locally has broader implications for understanding global geopolitics. In addition to being a policy, the travel ban was also a “hypermedia event” in the way it caused both “political turbulence and social fragmentation” (Kraidy 2009, 187). Hypermedia events never function in isolation, they are connected to their broader contexts, existing in myriad ways in various social locations with a diverse array of consequences. These events have “virtual durations” that are “creative, disruptive, and productive” of meaning (Kraidy 2017b, 6). I offer trauma as a way to reimagine the parameters of mediation to include processes of meaning making that are tactical in their response to culture, society, and power. In this CARGC Paper, I trace the mediation of a particular type of trauma, symbolic trauma, attend to the way users take advantage of media affordances, and answer the question: How are these traumas mediated?

To analyze these traumas, I build a working definition of symbolic trauma from Bourdieu’s concept of symbolic violence (Bourdieu 1979). Symbolic violence is predicated on symbolic power. Symbolic power is a concept that accounts for modes of social and cultural
domination, that are tacitly imposed, and that people accept (Bourdieu 1991, 51). Ultimately symbolic power is, according to Bourdieu, “the power to make visible and explicit social divisions that are implicit” (Bourdieu 1989, 23). Thompson (1991) elaborates on Bourdieu, noting the way symbolic power functions by presupposing subjects have “a kind of active complicity” in regimes of power (24). In order for this kind of power to succeed, the subjects of symbolic power “must believe in the legitimacy of power and the legitimacy of those who wield it” (Thompson 1991, 23). This leads to symbolic violence: a “gentle, invisible violence unrecognized as such, chosen as much as undergone” (Thompson 1991, 24). Symbolic violence is the imposition of symbolic power on groups, it is an instrument of social control. Symbolic trauma is the effect of this violence, it is the particular moment that is ingrained in a person or collectivities’ memory, that refuses to allow them to keep living as they were before experiencing the violence. Symbolic trauma becomes a part of memory, arising in flashpoints in unexpected ways, and thus modifies everyday life by shifting the way a person inhabits their world.

On January 27, 2017, Donald Trump, the newly inaugurated president of the United States, signed a document that barred travel entry for citizens from seven majority Muslim nations for ninety days, suspended the US Refugee Admissions Program for 120 days, and barred entry of Syrian refugees indefinitely (Trump 2017). Among the listed countries was Iran, the country my family immigrated from forty-three years ago. Immediately after the rash implementation of the travel ban, the stories of unsuspecting travelers victimized by the uneven and unclear enforcement of the ban in airports around the globe appeared in legacy and social media. In this CARGC Paper, I empirically examine social media related to Trump’s immigration policy, specifically Executive Order 13769, to trace mediations of the symbolic trauma it caused.

I first assumed that there would be a transition period during which this policy’s practical implications would be borne out. Yet, horror stories of people held at airports quickly took over social media feeds. People were being held without due process, even those with green cards and legal documentation to enter the country. I was astonished to witness the speed with which this policy was implemented (Walters, Helmore, and Dehghan 2017). Given the inefficient rolling out of the policy, the speedy enforcement was hardly uniform. At some airports, people were held for hours on end with no access to legal counsel. US officials barred green card holders from getting on planes, simply telling them that their entry would be refused once they arrived at their destination. Alongside harrowing journeys into and out of airports, there was an uptick in hate speech against Muslims across the US (Mayberry 2017).

The travel ban, once a campaign promise, was now a reality. Many termed this a “Muslim ban,” highlighting the way the first iteration of this law apparently targeted Muslims, thus reasserting problematic frameworks of counterterrorism and the ways in which bodies have to “struggle, survive, and resist” within them (Puar 2002, 117). The decision on the part of protestors to call it a “Muslim ban” was a significant rhetorical choice that allowed both for mobilization across the countries listed in the ban (Iran, Iraq, Syria, Yemen, Libya, Sudan, and Somalia), as well as opposition to the ban’s constitutionality (Amur 2018).
As calls to protest grew louder, so too did legal mobilization efforts. The travel ban was quickly tangled up in court battles as protestors organized peaceful protests at airports (Walters, Helmore, and Dehghan 2017). Immigration lawyers camped out at airports to support travelers while litigation of the constitutionality of the law began almost immediately (Bromwich 2017). During the initial flurry of enforcement of the executive order, there was a specific type of mediation taking place on social media, one that was familiar to me from doctoral research I had done on the trauma and media. Individuals and groups mediated the travel ban as something traumatic. 

This was both an individual trauma that sought to control their bodies, but also a collective trauma that symbolically marked their bodies in society, stripping them of power, and disallowing them from rights that many had worked hard to attain. Social media networks functioned as a repository of the suffering the ban had caused. Digital media were brimming with tactical responses to political and symbolic violence that threatened, harmed, and oppressed those impacted by the travel ban, and the hateful rhetoric that circulated around it.

At the time of this writing, in April 2018, the US Supreme Court was hearing the third version of the travel ban (signed on September 24, 2017) after it had been deemed unconstitutional by the Court of Appeals for the Fourth Circuit (Amdur 2018). The latest ban has slightly changed the landscape of who is barred from entry, changing the list of countries to Chad, Iran, Libya, Syria, Yemen, Somalia, North Korea, and Venezuela. Critics of this latest version of the ban argue that North Korea and Venezuela were added to dismantle arguments against the ban as unjustly targeting Muslim migrants (Laughland 2017).

In this CARGC Paper, I first explore a general understanding of trauma as it relates to global media studies. I then put forth a new theoretical framework for looking at mediations of trauma on the symbolic level using Bourdieu’s concept of symbolic power. Finally, I ground this theory using three key examples of the way this trauma was mediated on Instagram. Instagram is particularly situated to creating a particular archive of trauma – the visuality of the platform, the searchability, and the ephemerality yet endurance of shared images enables creative meaning making. The use of images, specifically for media users in the diaspora, facilitates the overcoming of boundaries created by language and rhetoric and thus mobilizes various cross-cultural signs, symbols, and gestures to make meaning. The three case studies are based on three Instagram accounts: Maz Jobrani’s Instagram page in conjunction with his Netflix comedy special, Immigrant; an artist’s Instagram page of her drawings called Diaspora Letters; and a curated Instagram called Banned Grandmas. Each of these cases highlights the way Iranian-Americans and Iranian immigrants resistively mediated the ban as trauma and produced new meaning in response to it.
Mediating Possibility after Suffering: Meaning Making of the Micro-Political through Digital Media

CARGC PAPER 9

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ORIENTING GLOBAL MEDIA STUDIES TOWARDS TRAUMA AND TRAUMA TOWARDS GLOBAL MEDIA STUDIES

Trauma and media are intimately connected through the concepts of representation, meaning, memory, and mediation. However, previous scholarship on trauma and media confines itself to large-scale traumas such as 9/11 and the Holocaust. While the study of those events is important, they should not eclipse the importance of studying trauma in the everyday. In this section, I examine trauma and its politics with attention to the body, mediated culture, and the legibility of suffering in everyday contexts. I also introduce symbolic trauma as a conceptual framing that situates suffering in a broad political context. At its most fundamental level, trauma is the condition of suffering that people experience when bad things happen. It can cause feelings of anxiety, confusion, helplessness, or depression (Janoff-Bulman 1989, 113). Central to any analysis of meaning and trauma is the way trauma dismantles ways of knowing the world and how trauma contributes to the way the world understands suffering (Janoff-Bulman 1989, 121).

Trauma dismantles ways of knowing the world, or the schema people use to make sense of day-to-day life. This is a crisis of meaning (Egnew 2009, 171). Traumatic experiences cause suffering, in part from the sense that the world no longer makes sense the way it did prior to the traumatic event. Trauma operates through systems of meaning and thus the traumatic experience is always contextual and situated. In this way, identity, bodies, and normative frameworks that discipline and regulate these inflect traumatic experience. Social constructs around who is eligible to suffer, what suffering is supposed to look like, as well as notions of who makes an acceptable victim inform the ways in which people experience trauma (Young 1997, 245). These boundaries are based on constructed systems of classification such as race, gender, religion, class, or ability. In this way, traumatic experiences are always political. While the particularities of the politics of trauma are not always the same across diverse locales, there is a ubiquitous politics of trauma that operates from the local to the global, the “tactical dimension” of which “recognizes the social intelligence of the actors involved” (Fassin and Rechtman 2009, 11).

I situate this research within feminist disability studies and feminist media studies frameworks that resist narratives of disabled, sick, traumatized, or female bodies as lacking. Echoing feminist disability studies, the framework elaborated in this paper explores mediation using the politics of trauma as a lens invested in highlighting that “without the monstrous body to demarcate the borders of the generic…the taxonomies of value that underlie the political, social, and economic arrangements would collapse” (Garland-Thomson 2011, 4). Socially, culturally, and politically there is an idealized suffering subject, often constructed through media representation, which a politics of trauma can resist by reframing everyday disabled subjects as capable and not in need of fixing, regulating, or erasing. Cvetkovich (2003), Scarry (1985), and Durham (2011) discuss the way trauma is embedded in everyday experiences while being simultaneously unrepresentable. Feminist disability studies – with its dual investment in contesting social formations that interpret culture and bodily difference and the materiality of the body – thus
facilitates a development of a non-therapeutic interpretation of trauma that focuses on culture and cultural institutions, rather than medicalization. In an embodied politics of trauma, analysis benefits from recognizing trauma as disabling, piggybacking on the lineages of resistance in feminist disability scholarship.

Cvetkovich (2003) argues that trauma “as a name for experiences of socially situated political violence, forges overt connections between politics and emotion” (3). My intervention sits at this intersection of affect and politics, recognizing that affective reactions to difficult events are based on a political sense of who is legible as a sufferer in society and who is disallowed from the expression of their suffering. A politics of trauma highlights the construction of trauma, but also how trauma is lived, felt, and remembered “in relation to a whole series of interconnected events and political forces” (Bennett 2005, 18). Media are institutionally-inflected spaces where digital users actively engage their traumatic experience. Using digital media to name trauma is a politically resistive action for trauma sufferers. Naming functions as the first step in resistive meaning making; often trauma sufferers are erased in political and social discourse. Those who suffer risk being relegated to the corners of society. In naming trauma, however, sufferers reclaim the taken-for-granted social, cultural, and political spaces that are domains of able, untraumatized, normative subjects. In this process of naming, these sufferers carve out space for alternative communities and discourses to exist.

Recognizing that trauma is a complex interaction of feelings, politics, and cultural constructions around identity and experience allows for an important intellectual shift. Like Salcedo (quoted in Bennett, 2005) and Edkins (2003), I reposition trauma as an experience that cannot be read outside of politics, including mediations of identity and representation. According to Bennett (2005), when trauma is moved to the realm of geopolitics, rather than being seen as “embodied in an atomized subject” (18), it can be an important marker of how national and cultural boundaries have been drawn and policies enacted. Therefore, any analysis of trauma needs to be textured by readings of “global and micro-politics” (Bennett 2005, 18). Within this framework, the body of the traumatized sufferer is contingent, as is the body politic. Symbolic trauma has material consequences for individual and collective bodies as they exist in social spaces. Bodies who suffer symbolic traumas become contingent. This contingency is akin to what Merleau-Ponty (1996) calls the phantom limb. He argues that just as the object of the body and the emotion of the soul cannot be separated from one another, neither can scholarship separate discourses that hail bodies from their lived, material realities (Merleau-Ponty 1996, 84). The travel ban shifts the way discourses interpolate immigrant bodies of color and the way bodies are allowed to exist within geographical and social borders (Althusser 1971, 109).

The pain of the travel ban does not exist solely in the suffering of those held at borders, but also in the loss of a sense of reality, a sense of the way things are and should be in society. If a politics of trauma is centered in how trauma is lived and remembered, then memory, as “a socially-framed property” (Bell 2003, 64), captures the active process innate to mediating and remembering trauma. Memory is full of possibility: the way it is constantly negotiated as part of
a society’s cohesive identity making means it carries great potential as “a counter-hegemonic site of resistance” (Bell 2003, 66). Benjamin (2006) tells us that “memory is not an instrument for surveying the past but its theater... He who seeks to approach his own buried past must conduct himself like a man digging” (xii). Trauma sufferers who go online to mediate what they have suffered are “digging” through flashpoints that arise unexpectedly and beg to be seen. The negotiation of memory that digital users publicly engage in online uses lived material realities as markers of meaning. Politics located in a particular place and time powerfully impacts memory, whereas trauma challenges linear time, emerging and reemerging in different ways throughout a sufferer’s life (Edkins 2003, 16). Memory then is an active repository that creates an archive of suffering for individuals and collectives. These archives carry material suffering and in identifying them users can create alternative discourses around what it means to suffer and the policies that led to their suffering.

Digital mediation is one form through which people negotiate feelings of trauma and the resistive processes of remembering, mediating, and re-mediating. This non-linear process is part of a complex digital gesture that captures the way trauma both silences bodies in making them feel contingent but forces the need to speak. Herman identifies the central conflict in psychological trauma as a fraught negotiation between silence and speech (1997, 1). Given the current mediatic moment, social, digital spaces offer trauma sufferers a place through which to negotiate the dialectic of trauma: to share one’s suffering or deny its gravity.

Working from this understanding of trauma, I want to put forth another way of thinking about suffering that can capture a larger register of meaning than the one covered in current trauma studies. I do this by taking the orientation towards the political described above and pushing it further to recognize systems-level symbolic injustices and their attendant material, embodied consequences. Fassin notes the body is both the site of “foundational violence of the state” (2011, 282) and as such, the site of opposition and resistance, thus firmly planting embodied experience in a politics of suffering and trauma. People who encountered discrimination and suffered because of the 2017 travel ban were victims of state violence. The certainty people had in the systems and structures they had built their lives around now disallowed their existence within certain borders. Immigrants living and working in the United States that hail from the countries listed in the various versions of the executive orders were suddenly told that they did not belong in the society in which they had worked so hard to be a part. These types of experiences are traumatic, though the medical and psychological language of trauma threatens the erasure of these traumas because they may not be read as such. Conceptually, a new category is needed to articulate the unique kind of trauma people experience through the institutionalization of symbolic power and violence, to capture how and why they mediate their lived experiences.

When someone is physically injured, the physical and mental suffering is generally acknowledged, and appropriate steps are taken. However, when the suffering is invisible, and the physical damage is caused by symbolic violence, the accordant trauma goes unrecognized and is always unresolved. Thus, the actions taken by sufferers of symbolic trauma often go
unseen or are collapsed into instrumental actions of a disaffected political group. I propose identifying symbolic trauma as an intervention that designates symbolic violence as a political and cultural violence that causes real, embodied suffering. Symbolic trauma recognizes and names the politics of trauma, symbolic suffering, and the material consequences of symbolic violence (Bourdieu 1991), while calling attention to the need to de-medicalize trauma narratives and re-orient study of trauma towards cultural systems. Refusing the medicalization of trauma is not enough, it must be interrogated at the level of social signification. This gesture, adapted from Linton’s disability studies, reframes trauma as primarily socially and politically significant, a significance that is lost when medicine is the sole framework for understanding (Linton 1998, 2).

Symbolic trauma occurs when agents can no longer accept systems of symbolic power and the violence related to it. In other words, when people have been oppressed or dominated to a degree that is no longer tenable in their day-to-day existence, they are traumatized and choose to reverse their previous complicity with systems of power in favor of change. Symbolic trauma requires some recognition of the structures of symbolic power and a degree of discord with those structures. Users, the sufferers of symbolic trauma that go online, recognize they have been subjected to and embedded in a system of power in which they may have had some complicity and they are forced to remake meaning to mitigate their suffering and break with their previous tacit acknowledgement of power.

The act of meaning making after an encounter with symbolic violence indicates the violence was severe enough to traumatize, thus dismantling the fragile relationship between oppressor and oppressed. It also indicates that the traumatic experience dismantled the meaning-making schema that enabled that world and its structures to operate. The status quo that dictates and organizes so much of social, cultural, and political life no longer functions. For example, bodies that felt safe to exist in the United States, despite recognizing the imperfections of immigration laws, now find themselves threatened to a new and untenable degree by policies, institutions, political rhetoric, and social/cultural norms and discourse. Importantly, a suffering body may not recognize or explicitly name their suffering for it to have occurred or for them to make new meanings.

Those that mediate their suffering often do so without realizing that this is what they are doing. As symbolic power systems are so effectively engrained into everyday culture and normative behaviors, meaning making is not always an explicit and self-reflexive resistive process, users often do it as a matter of survival. Mediation of trauma does not require an overt naming of the traumatic experience, just as suffering from symbolic violence does not require the suffering body to name or acknowledge their suffering. However, as the case studies in this paper will highlight, the digital mediations of symbolic sufferers indicate sense-making practices that make manifest a visceral response to the symbolic violence levied by institutions that wield power, in the case of the travel ban, the state. The following section introduces the case studies by way of media tactics. Media tactics are any digital media posts that function politically, from art, to memes, to collaborative movements built around hashtags, media tactics are those quick,
Mediating Possibility after Suffering: Meaning Making of the Micro-Political through Digital Media

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MEDIATING SYMBOLIC TRAUMA

To live in the world as an oppressed subject is to exist tactically in the everyday (De Certeau 1985). It is those subjects with the least symbolic power that are left to enact media rituals to contend with their symbolic traumas (Sumiala 2013, 35). The ritualization of sharing becomes a recognized space of meaning making and one that users and producers of media recognize and know how to navigate. This section examines the way digital media affordances enable creative, everyday resistance. Using De Certeau (1984), I consider that marginality is “massive and pervasive” and that everyday practices of the weak are tactical in nature. Media that are fast-paced, temporary, and function to articulate and elaborate a resistive politics are also tactical in nature. Raley (2009) identifies a tactical digital and social media user as someone who uses the digital platform’s mundane affordances to say, “See how I try to manage the ties that bind and produce me” (2).

The Instagram posts that function as media tactics in the data that follows are temporary, ephemeral, and open to the unexpected. Tactical media operate in the symbolic, “the site of power in postindustrial society” (Raley 2009, 6). In other words, tactical media take advantage of the ambivalent space enabled by the culture of digital media and “aims to create situations ‘where criticality can occur’” (Raley 2009, 9). Theses mediations are micro-political actions that have no revolutionary expectations, meaning tactical media work within the parameters of the structural systems. Raley (2009) argues these media “critique and resist the new world order” but from within “by intervening on the site of symbolic systems of power” (11).

A global media studies analysis of media tactics benefits from the concept of symbolic trauma because this intersection allows scholarship to account for the way people suffer in everyday experiences and explore the everyday tactics they deploy as a result of this suffering. In addition, it opens space for scholarship to thoughtfully engage the politics behind suffering and mediation. When relegated to the medical domain, boundaries of psychological diagnostics isolate trauma sufferers without medical knowledge. In medical discourse, trauma requires a cure. Furthermore, when politics and trauma are treated as separate domains, the traumatic consequences of political action become invisible. In contrast, trauma in culture is something without a cure, something that enters into memory, time, and space, shifting ways of existing in the world. In culture, trauma should be “treated” but can never be cured, it can never be erased. This project does not look for the curative properties of media; rather it looks at meaning making as offering a possibility of discursive progress to trauma sufferers. Identifying symbolic trauma as I propose here is non-therapeutic and can look at cultural systems (such as media
systems) to determine how these function to maintain, interrupt, resist, erase, or make meanings from traumatic experiences. These mediations use everyday language and formats to position the traumatized body as oppressed because it no longer, in some ways, fits into the broader world. These bodies then use those same formats to make new meaning by taking advantage of certain affordances of technological platforms.

The following section offers background on the Iranian diaspora to provide context for the empirical data that follows. As a group that has a contested history in and with the United States, Iranian-Americans often narrate symbolic suffering in the media. To dissect those mediations using the theories outlined, I provide a brief overview of Iranian identity politics and positionality with a primary focus on Iranians living in or immigrating to the United States.

THE IRANIAN DIASPORA IN THE UNITED STATES

When the travel ban took effect, members of the Iranian diaspora were struck by this capstone in a long succession of problematic policies and rhetoric from a country in which we had worked hard to be a part. To pursue the line of thinking in this scholarship, I started to ask the following questions about trauma and the ban: Was the travel ban traumatic? How? For who? And finally, what is gained in this distinction of symbolic trauma?

To answer these questions, I first situate the Iranian diaspora within their immigrant narrative and the current political moment. Several authors including Mobasher (2006), Maghbouleh (2017), and Alinejad (2017) allude to the way Iranians living in the diaspora have been traumatized by the circumstances of their immigration trajectories. From the political situation in Iran, to the way Iranians have been demonized since the hostage crisis, many Iranians’ identity negotiations are tinged by symbolic trauma that stems from the 1979 Iranian Revolution, the conditions of exile or immigration, and events that stigmatize the Middle Eastern people as “terrorists.”

Arguing that Iranians are suffering is not to argue that other groups are not, nor am I attempting to position all Iranians as traumatized. Rather, the identification of symbolic trauma enables me to think about the systematic ways in which symbolic violence is quietly and subtly enacted on people in ways that can cause material suffering to their bodies. As a participant observer in this community, I see and feel the symbolic suffering that Iranians face each day in the US, but I also see how the unique assimilation and nationalisms Iranians have perpetuated, discussed by Maghbouleh (2017) and Akhavan (2014), have exacerbated this experience.

I want to acknowledge that many people from many ethnic, social, and cultural backgrounds suffered because of this travel ban, not just Iranians. This paper looks specifically at just one group to perform an in-depth case study and discourse analysis. My selection of this group is also a methodological one, because of my access to this group as a participant observer, I can access and interrogate these meaning-making processes in a situated way. I also want to acknowledge that though I define and outline a general sense of Iranian identity making in the US, it would be difficult to account for all the various identity markers that inflect Iranian diasporic culture, and I do not intend to exclude those who may define their Iranian identity differently.

Akhavan (2014) and Maghbouleh (2017) both discuss how Iranians in Iran and Iranian immigrants to the United States, respectively, have perpetrated an Iranian nationalism that recalls a pre-Islamic ideal that espouses an Aryan myth. This myth making positions Iranians, particularly those living in the United States as Caucasian, thus foreclosing on the possibility for social justice narratives because of an implied allegiance to privileged race and class narratives. For everyday Iranian-Americans, inhabiting this space has caused symbolic suffering.
Production of identity for Iranians has always been part of a complex negotiation of self that, for those in the diaspora, is predicated on a multifaceted relationship with race, histories of empire, and the disaffection of being an often-persecuted population despite the ability to prosper socially and financially. Iranians have long used digital technologies as part of this negotiation process (Akhavan 2014). Notably, much Iranian-American symbolic suffering since the late 1970s has been erased due to their ability to ameliorate to middle-upper social class sensibilities. Their unique case highlights that while capital accumulation can be a class equalizer, it cannot wholly eliminate other cultural, social, and symbolic systems of oppression. Tehranian (2009), in his analysis of the racial classification of the broader group, “Middle Eastern” as Caucasian, highlights the way this designation precludes oppressed groups from seeking legal redress. Similarly, in her recent book, *The Limits of Whiteness*, Maghbouleh (2017) highlights the way Iranians in the United States have been used as “hinges” that open or close the door to whiteness as necessary. This positioning leads to Iranian-Americans constantly butting up to what she terms “the limits of whiteness.” This is one of many symbolic traumas Iranian immigrants in the United States have faced since their arrival. Iranian identity in the United States is always in question, always debated, and always inflected by geopolitical power relations. For average Iranians living in the US, this identity is one fueled by narratives of assimilation and a degree of pride many Iranians carry in being an affluent and successful social class. These narratives, often perpetuated by Iranians themselves serve to erase injustice and oppression of this group, both in social environments and in terms of legal redress.

In considering tactics Iranians use in negotiating identity online, specifically as they relate to trauma, the language provided by queer theory, disability studies, and crip studies is useful. Queer and crip theories highlight the burden of overcoming, passing as “normal” and coming out as disabled (Linton 1998, 17). Scholarship in crip studies, building from queer theory, highlights coming out, passing, or overcoming as a response to being socially or politically stigmatized. Iranian immigrants to the US often attempt to assimilate into American culture, passing as non-immigrants to avoid the symbolic violence and stigma that marks their culture. If scholarship were to queer and crip the Iranian experience, we can see that Iranian encounters with symbolic violence are disabling. After decades of subjection to symbolic violence in the US, the Iranian diaspora vacillate between efforts to assimilate to white culture versus come out as Iranian – or a certain kind of Iranian – not too Muslim, not in cahoots with the regime in power, not too conservative, but not too flashy (Maghbouleh 2017, Tehranian 2009).

On disability, Linton (1998) notes, “because it is physically impossible to overcome a disability, it seems that what is overcome is the social stigma of having a disability” (17). It makes sense that those who are perhaps not automatically given privilege in society will seek it, either consciously or subconsciously, through identity negotiation. Spade (2015) notes that access to privilege serves as buffer “from some of the violences faced by people of color, people with disabilities, immigrants” and other increasingly vulnerable populations. Privilege cannot be manufactured without power and despite the complexities of Iranian’s racial identity negotiations, certain material realities cannot often be overcome. It too is impossible.
to overcome stigma that becomes associated with cultural heritage. For Iranian-Americans, assimilation has been a way to overcome the stigma of Iranianness, making the examples of mediations of the travel ban powerful in the way they resist this narrative that says, *we’re just like you.* Even though Iranians living in the United States and Iranian-Americans are an oppressed group in many ways, it is important to note, as many of my interviewees did, they are still a very privileged group. That said, while the experience of the travel ban is both new and about more than Iranians, for Iranians it is situated in an especially complex history.

**MEDIATING THE BAN**

Rather than look at debates around the merits of the travel ban, I examine the mediation of the affective dynamic of trauma that the ban caused, illuminated, and perpetuated. I examine social media posts, primarily on Instagram, about the pain caused by the travel ban. I also look at posts that while not being directly about the ban are mediations of the trauma of the ban as it is linked to larger feelings of disenfranchisement within the Iranian diaspora. This gesture comes from Bennett (2005), who in reference to trauma art notes, “the trauma, it often seemed, was not evinced in the narrative component or in the ostensible meaning, but in a certain affective dynamic internal to the work” (1). Not every post in this data set explicitly mentions the ban but they do have the affective markers of processes of meaning making that evolve after traumatic experience.

Methodologically, this CARGC Paper focuses on one case study from my larger CARGC Postdoctoral Fellowship book project on symbolic trauma. I developed this case study based on the framework put forth by Patton (2002), which views case studies as a heuristic means of interrogating meaning-making systems. Case studies provide spaces for in-depth inductive analysis of media spaces. The data in this paper comes from an in-depth analysis of three Instagram accounts and interviews with their creators. Using discourse analysis based on the framework from Rose (2011) in which meaning is made and analyzed at the site of production, the site of the image (or object), and the site at which it is seen by an audience, I examined the data from the three accounts. For this project, I analyze what discourses are being produced in the text itself and by the proliferation of the text (Rose 2011, 146), paying careful attention to how the images were used, hashtagged, and captioned, and noting confines of Instagram as a platform, such as limited shareability. I was deliberate in choosing the accounts included in each case study, looking for more than a discussion of the travel ban as an ideological debate. Instead, this purposive sample is made of accounts and users who spent a considerable amount of time mediating the traumatic experience of the ban.

I began my research with the hashtags #iraniandiaspora #IranianAmerican #nobannowall #notravelban and #ashgarfarahandi. These hashtags then led me to the Instagram and Twitter accounts of the following actors, organizations, or art projects that posted frequently

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4 Though the larger project this case is extracted from is beyond the scope of this CARGC Paper, the project uses various cases of trauma and symbolic trauma to recognize the way the language of trauma is used in digital media and to examine mediation with a particular attention to the politics of suffering in global media studies.
about the travel ban and the trauma it caused: Before we were Banned, Banned Grandmas, Banned Families, Diaspora Letters, Maz Jobrani, Trita Parsi, Persian Instagram, National Iranian American Council, Iranian Alliance Across Borders. While the majority of this data does not appear in this CARGC Paper, the larger data set led me to the specific accounts used here. I selected Maz Jobrani, Diaspora Letters, and Banned Grandmas from the larger sample because an in-depth analysis of these accounts reveals these users focused considerable attention towards the ban or its underlying rhetoric. Further, each of these three accounts garnered additional attention outside of social media – in other media and in offline communities. Maz Jobrani, for example, discussed the travel ban widely in news publications and on television shows such as The Late Show with Stephen Colbert. The artist behind Diaspora Letters, Beeta Baghoolizadeh, took her artwork from existing solely on digital platforms to the offline world with a local art show in Philadelphia, PA in early 2018 while Holly Dagres, the creator of Banned Grandmas was featured on websites such as Vogue and Buzzfeed. This coordination of offline and online protest in the form of art, comedy, and playful advocacy indicates the possibility inherent in tactical use of social and digital media. The following analysis will highlight the digital media produced by these media actors and in so doing will identify the way traumas lend to meaning-making and everyday media tactics in digital space.

MAKING THE WORLD MAKE SENSE AGAIN: USING SOCIAL MEDIA TO MAKE MEANING FROM SYMBOLIC TRAUMA

Maz Jobrani

Maz Jobrani is an Iranian-American comedian who immigrated from Iran as a child as a result of the Iranian Revolution (Ridner 2017). Jobrani is a prolific social media user who appears to manage his own social media presence himself despite considerable mainstream commercial success. Jobrani often posts about immigration and even called his most recent Netflix comedy special Immigrant. He frequently uses himself as an example of the quintessential immigrant story. He says, “One of the points of the special is to point out that all these people that are anti-immigrant and anti-refugee that there are kids coming, there are people trying to get away from a bad situation, and that’s what was happening with us, we were leaving the revolution in Iran, things were getting worse and worse” (Ridner 2017). In media interviews, Jobrani is vocal about his political beliefs and how badly Trump irks him.

I’ve been wondering why Trump gets so under my skin, and someone mentioned this to me the other day and I’ve talked about it before: He’s a bully. I think as a kid — back then you didn’t call it bullying, but when you got called an ‘F’ing Iranian’ by the older kid who’s popular it gets into you. You go, ‘I’m always going to fight that guy,’ so I’m always fighting Trump because he’s a bully (Ridner 2017).

1 Ashgar Farahandi was an Oscar nominated filmmaker who used his platform at the Oscars to protest the travel ban. He won the Oscar but refused to attend the ceremony to highlight the injustice of the travel ban, instead he sent a statement that was read by Anousheh Ansari, the first Iranian in space. His name and actions thus became a flashpoint for Iranian resistance to the travel ban (Miranda, 2018).
In his Netflix special, Jobrani tackles immigration policy and protests of the travel ban head on, though his special covers much more than just immigration. Jobrani narrates his experience as what he terms a non-white body in the crowd of protesters, quipping about how “white dudes” didn’t hesitate in marching forward toward riot police at anti-travel ban protests at airports, while he and other immigrants hung back. In the special he then yelled “Calm down white guy! You’re gonna get us in trouble!” (Jobrani 2017b). In other segments of the special, he mentions that immigrants love America, come to America for a reason, and contribute to society in many ways (Jobrani 2017b). Jobrani advertised his Netflix special with an image from his childhood over the American flag, the stamps advertising the date and time of his live show mimicking passport stamps. This imagery, in combination with the language he uses in his comedy, marks his body as traumatized and oppressed by the symbolic violence it has been subjected to, highlighting a desire to redeem his immigrant narrative as having value despite a policy that disallows bodies like his from entering the country he calls home. While Jobrani himself makes it clear that his career shields him from a degree of the trauma inflicted on him by the current political climate, his mediations discursively function to elaborate a narrative of trauma for a population that perhaps lacks his degree of privilege (Jobrani 2018).

Many of Jobrani’s images and media artifacts affectively indicate the political space available to Jobrani’s body and the way he purposefully stakes himself as an American subject. When I interviewed Jobrani, he indicated that these moves were deliberate; he says, “I’m not politically active all the time, but if I can shine any light on the plight of immigrants, I will” (Jobrani 2018). These overt gestures towards what Jobrani builds as an American subjectivity come across in his Instagram posts. For example, in one image Jobrani holds up his US Passport, identifying his citizenship. He then articulates his liminal American subjectivity by noting that he is going to a protest about the travel ban, and he makes all of the progressive gestures that go along with that.
The next image to appear on Jobrani’s Instagram feed features him standing in front of the protest and his caption cites the protest as a moment of “#democracy in action.” Again, Jobrani positions himself as a particular kind of American, one who espouses democracy and rises above tyranny. He again stakes his body to discursively argue for its American-ness and to put forth a deliberate narrative: a narrative he is very much seizing back from anti-immigrant rhetoric and re-making as a direct result of it. His narrative forefronts the immigrant body as belonging in America and as a protector of American values such as democracy.

Much of the advertising from Jobrani’s show juxtaposes the immigrant body against markers of American pride, prowess and power. For example, in the image below Jobrani stands proudly in front of the United States Capitol, his name and the word “Immigrant” flanking the building in all caps. Even though this is an ad for his special, as a post on his personal Instagram page, it is also significant that he is standing in front of the capitol with the word immigrant right next to him. In a way, Jobrani attempts to situate his immigrant story as the immigrant story and to use that narrative to counter the cultural stigma associated with this status.

For Jobrani, these narratives existed long before the Trump administration, but their tone has shifted in notable ways (Jobrani 2018). Before the Trump administration travel ban went into effect, Jobrani starred in a film he co-produced about an Iranian immigrant who wanted to be an “Amerikan Hero.” In the film, a well-meaning immigrant finds himself in trouble at every turn, in part because of the biases of Americans against Middle Easterners. In one scene at the opening of the film, the protagonist Jamshid and his mother are on a plane when turbulence hits. When his mom exclaims “Allah Akbar,” they discuss why they shouldn’t speak in Persian on a plane and are subsequently removed by marshals and detained at the airport. While this is a familiar narrative to Iranian-Americans, the travel ban sharpened this reality. As airport detentions proliferated, the tenor of Jobrani’s negotiations did too. In one post on Instagram, he embeds video of that scene from the movie with the caption, “Last year my movie @jimmywestwood was a comedy. Now under @realdonaldtrump #trump it feels more like a documentary! #travelban #muslimban #immigrantban” (Jobrani 2017c).
Jobrani’s Instagram forms a tapestry of mediations of his various identities through various modalities and with varied outcomes. Notably, despite their playful and humorous nature, these images all have a specific affective dynamic, one that marks the bodies in the images as traumatized while simultaneously remaking the meanings that circulate around how these bodies are allowed to exist. In Jobrani’s social media, meaning is produced through a reclamation of the narrative and a staking of the self for the political. The images are a call to action but also a tactical declaration of belonging despite a concrete policy that says no you don’t. The posts are a remaking of what it means to be an immigrant in direct opposition to what the administration in power says. Recall Bennett’s (2005) argument that even for an expression to be about trauma, it doesn’t have to explicitly name the trauma, but it may have various affective markers of trauma.

The selfies Jobrani posts are mundane expressions of his everyday existence while at the same time being important everyday tactics. Selfies are a commonplace gesture, but in this context, the selfie and other digital media posts are part of an attempt to reclaim symbolic capital. In the book *Selfie Citizenship*, Kuntsman (2017) asks, “What are the conditions in which a selfie can do political work? What are the regimes of in/visibility in which such work operates? Who are the selfies made for? By whom? How are they consumed? Who has the ability and safety to star in a selfie and when is such an ability possible?” (Kuntsman 2017, 14). In asking these questions, Kuntsman (2017) reframes the selfie as something rife with power and with great consequences. The selfie helps people locate the “self” in time and place while displacing them from their material existence at the same time. Mottahedeh (2017) argues that the selfie bridges the corporeal sensing body with the material digital body (61). In other words, the selfie bridges suffering bodies, with the mimetic, digital, fast paced, hypermediated negotiation of self that take place to make sense of the suffering of the physical body. In this way selfies and other images are doing important discursive work.

Maz Jobrani attempts to inhabit the powerful discourse of the American Dream that is predicated on a narrative of Americans as immigrants, in a succession of generations of immigrants, while highlighting the fear, intimidation, and anxiety that is a part of the immigrant’s narrative. These gestures are political, they are explicit, and they are tactical attempts to highlight power inequalities and butt up against them.

**Diaspora Letters: Beeta Baghoolizadeh**

Other examples of mediations of trauma use the same platform, Instagram, but are articulated using a different format. While Jobrani uses both direct action and humor to call out the travel ban and the politics of suffering inherent in it, others use more subtle means to arise at a similar end: new meaning around what it is to be Iranian in America in today’s political climate. Beeta Baghoolizadeh’s Instagram page is a collection of black and white line drawings that articulate personal stories of her Iran, abstracted from old photographs and experiences. Baghoolizadeh, a graduate student, started drawing these images in the summer of 2017 as a response to the
Mediating Possibility after Suffering: Meaning Making of the Micro-Political through Digital Media

converging of many life circumstances. In an interview with me in early 2018, she discussed the importance to her of these drawings, citing a changing physical relationship to places in Iran during her graduate life. Between her upcoming graduation and the travel ban, her physical relationship with Iran was being forced to change: the worlds she had come to know were shifting. She described the images and posts as a “visual love letter to Iran in so many ways” (Baghoolizadeh 2018). When asked about her feelings on the travel ban, Baghoolizadeh responded by saying:

It was super traumatic.... I mean in the first one they were going after green card holders and I was like, if they’re going after green card holders the next people they’re going to go after are dual citizens and I don’t know if I want to keep my citizenship if this is where it’s going. I started debating my American identity and if it makes sense. Ali and I made a list of places we would move to fully recognizing that that is such a privileged thing to do, fully recognizing that that is not a thing we want to do, and that our parents struggled so much so that we could be established in this society and we would be uprooting ourselves after all of their zahmat, and fully recognizing that that’s not easy, we’ve seen what our parents go through, it’s not easy being an outsider so why would be outsiders somewhere else but then realizing we are already outsiders here. Um, I cried a lot (Baghoolizadeh 2018).

Baghoolizadeh (2018) describes her drawings as being about her family and their life, contrasting these representations with images of urban elite that frequently appear in US media. While mainstream media images tell a story of a certain Iran, Baghoolizadeh’s images highlight the mundane passing of every day because she deems that more powerful for her. The power of everyday expression was magnified for Baghoolizadeh in the wake of the travel ban. Baghoolizadeh was struck by the way the travel ban was forcing her and her family to shift their relationship to Iran. She said, “The people I love here are not going to be able to apply for visas as easily as they used to. My grandparents keep telling me to get pregnant and they will come to US when I have a child and I keep telling them you can’t do that anymore, like your green card is expired and that is the end of that” (Baghoolizadeh 2018).

By abstracting her family’s stories, the drawings offer Iranian-Americans and other Iranian immigrants a way to imagine themselves into the stories. The dark hair and eyes are markers of a cultural aesthetic, the chadors reminders of matriarchs, and the scenes from the street reminders of the electric buzz of Iranian thoroughfares. Baghoolizadeh notes that her images highlight a way of looking at Iran that is deeply influenced by her social location as an Iranian-American woman. She says of these drawings, “They are so defined by my frame in diaspora, they are not things my cousins find interesting, like my cousins think my drawings are quaint and they like my drawings but it’s not something they’d ever draw, it’s not their subject. I recognize I am interested in the banal, mundane everyday because it just has such a different weight for me” (Baghoolizadeh 2018).

While some of the images are about the travel ban specifically, I argue that those doing the most affective work do not mention the ban at all. For example, one image of a kitchen bears the markers of both Iran and the United States. A Persian rug sits on the ground, tea cups hang under the cabinets. In contrast, a modern farmhouse style sink sits next to a dishwasher and a fridge with English magnets on it make up the large parts of the room. The caption of this image reads, “My grandfather said this drawing can’t be of Iran, because these blinds aren’t that common there, and it can’t be the US because our watermelons are all seedless. ‘There are so many seeds!’” (Baghoolizadeh 2017).

As an image of diasporic life, this drawing of a kitchen ostensibly neither in Iran nor in America, alongside the others on the @diasporaletters Instagram page depict a liminality. This drawing is not about the ban, nor is it specifically about trauma, or immigration, or growing up in the diaspora. Nonetheless it illustrates an affective subjectivity. There are gestures that situate this post as an in-between tactic. In its quotidian subject matter, the post highlights the way that even in the simplest scene, Iranian-Americans (like so many others) are inhabiting a third space that is neither the home country nor the new space (Bhabha 1994). This image is placeless, it exists only online in this space, fostering very particular meanings about the ways immigration can cause a sense of trauma, especially in times where the place the immigrant has come to call home disallows them from existing symbolically and physically. While I am not sure that Baghoolizadeh would explicitly identify the gestures she makes in her Instagram posts as an affective expression of trauma, the way these images circulate online highlights a symbolic suffering and the complicated ways collectivities negotiate that.

In contrast to Jobrani’s Instagram mediations, Baghoolizadeh situates herself firmly in the diaspora while Jobrani claims the label of American as a way to situate his body within political discourse. Both actors are arguably engaging in an affective politics of trauma that uses their body, its positioning, and mediation to tactically posit an alternative political discourse. Though they do so using different rhetorical gestures, they use the same technological affordances. The same symbolic trauma caused suffering for both these actors to varying degrees and both went online to mediate and make meaning from that trauma. Both Jobrani and Baghoolizadeh’s Instagram posts highlight media tactics that are mundane yet indicate a material reality of their bodies that cannot be ignored. The final case study will examine the way curated posts of Iranian grandmothers performs similar everyday media tactics by showing images of grandmothers in their everyday roles.

**Banned Grandmas**

In contrast to the previous two cases, the case of Banned Grandmas examines an Instagram account that curates images sent in by followers. Holly Dagres is the curator of the page as well as of the Iranian news website and newsletter “The Iranist.” She started the Instagram page Banned Grandmas after seeing the popularity of an image of her late-grandmother on Twitter that she posted with the hashtag pioneered by the National Iranian American Council,
#grandparentsnotterrorists (Dagres 2018). Wanting more longevity for the image of her grandmother and other grandmothers, she moved to Instagram, using its image-centeredness to create a narrative of Iranian women as simultaneous immigrants and devoted grandmothers. It is an account that posts a curated series of images of Mamanis, as they are termed in Persian, to humanize representations of whom the travel ban is preventing from entering the United States. The images on Banned Grandmas, according to Dagres, create a visual archive of the story she was trying to tell (Dagres 2018).

The images Dagres posts to Banned Grandmas are particularly interesting because they run counter to and resist the aesthetic markers most often visible in Iranian-American social media. Past research of Iranian and Iranian-American identity from social media often presents imagery of the “urban elite” that Baghoolizadeh mentioned. In those images, you see perfectly coiffed Iranian women, heavily made up, often with dyed blond hair, designer clothing, and usually standing near a luxury car. In fact, these images are often marked with hashtags such as #richkidsofTehran, #richkidsofbeverlyhills, and #tehrangeles. While this is not the whole of Iranian engagement on Instagram, those images perpetuate stereotypes around the Iranian-American diaspora that portray an Iranian subject who is lavish, urban, secular, Western, drowning in wealth, with blond hair, heavily exoticized, while perpetuating a particular sense of what an idealized American sensibility looks like.

In contrast, Banned Grandmas brings to the fore images of average, older women in hijab, serving to normalize meanings around a more diverse, less monolithic Iranian identity that is both ordinary and tactical. In an interview, Dagres identified the importance of this for herself and her community, stating:

> For me it wasn’t fun to see grandmas who can’t come to graduation and to be trolled myself, to be sent pictures of terrorists from people who just have hate in their hearts. Will it make a difference? I don’t know, but I hope so… I was really critical of armchair activism, but after Banned Grandmas I got more hopeful about armchair activism and its ability to create awareness. When the courts in Hawaii ruled that grandparents were not a part of the ban for a little while there was this little hope that they saw this and pushed grandparents out of the ban. A lot of my work is to educate about Iran, that they’re not monolithic, they’re not all chanting Death to America (Dagres 2018).

This is why the first image on Banned Grandmas is of Dagres’ mamani and why she chooses to playfully engage outsiders with images of family matriarchs.
Dagres, like Jobrani and Baghoolizadeh, articulated a need to reestablish, or perhaps establish for the first time, a true, human narrative of Iranians. This is the meaning she tactically pursues with her posts: one that allows Iranians to exist in the United States as they are, and not as they are often (mis)represented. For Dagres, this meaning and thus these tactics begin with women, because they are a group that is misunderstood by outsiders looking at Iran. She says, “There is this infantilizing of Iranians since the ban, and Westerners look at Iranians as so helpless. They can handle themselves, they don’t need a white savior. I am painting a real image of Iran. Grandmas are badasses. They are badasses, our culture has strong women. People look at Iran and say Badbakhtah (poor things) they cover their hair and they don’t drive and vote and I’m like you don’t know anything. These are shirezan, they are lionesses” (Dagres 2018).
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For her, this was a project intended to build solidarity within a community, and to remind the community of their value and power. In addition, Dagres wanted to inform outsiders that this community was more than its common portrayal. Primarily, she wanted to humanize Iranians after they experienced what she refers to as an inhumane set of policies. She also said of her page, “thanks to social media there is this sense of solidarity. Your grandma’s banned, my grandma’s banned, this space has gotten smaller between us....” Dagres importantly contextualized a long history of Iranians being forced to make meaning around their existence, telling me, “Our generation is making up for the lost time of our parents during the hostage crisis and revolution” (Dagres 2018).

Dagres and Banned Grandmas pointedly highlight this use of the everyday image to make meaning from what they have experienced and to quickly but tactically enter a political conversation with real stakes for the people pictured. In reframing the narrative around Iranians, she is contending with the long history of symbolic trauma by making meaning. This meaning does not have to be new, for her this meaning making is about showing people who Iranians really are and a reclamation of space, even when that space is a fleeting, digital one. Her images are playful, but their language indicates a visceral need to remake the Iranian Grandma
as human, as innocent, and as having suffered. Banned Grandmas, like Baghoolizadeh’s artwork, does not offer many images of outright protest; instead, in positioning the actors in the images in everyday scenes, the images function as media tactics that articulate a need to reorient meanings around who Iranians are, especially in relation to the United States. Much like Jobrani’s posts, these posts seek to broadly humanize Iranian immigrants as American. Banned Grandmas goes even further in order to position Iranians as *normal* and as having the same needs and desires as any other family, for example, the desire to share large achievements such as graduation with your grandmother.

**MEDIA AFFORDANCES AND LIMINAL SPACES**

Key to the way that all these mediations work in digital space is the mimetic logic inherent to social media and humankind’s ability for mimicry (Benjamin 1978). Media move and change rapidly, and the affective archives are constantly shifting. Memes are based on a concept developed by evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins “to describe the natural human spreading, replication” (Chen 2012, 7). While these data are not inherently memes in the pop cultural sense, they do use the logic of memes in the way they replicate and then remix the media artifacts of a specific cultural moment.

Bhabha and Rutherford (1990) note that meaning operates through a process of translation or “a process by which, in order to objectify cultural meaning, there always has to be a process of alienation and of secondariness in relation to itself” (Bhabha and Rutherford 1990, 210). In this way, “translation is always a way of imitating, but in a mischievous, displacing sense – imitating an original in such a way that the priority of the original is not reinforced but by the very fact that it can be simulated, copied, transferred, transformed, made into a simulacrum and so on,” leaving unfinished originals, always able to be shifted, changed, and built upon (Bhabha and Rutherford 1990, 210). Multimodal internet memes and the mimetic logics that underlie so much of digital relations, are also intertextual: they constantly refer to previous texts to convey new messages and re-mediate previous ideas (Piekot 2012). I argue that these empirical cases highlight the ways meanings produced by suffering digital users can shift and resist through this principle of mediation, re-mediation, imitation, modification, and transfer. Jobrani, Baghoolizadeh, and Dagres each went online to mediate their offline existence and did so based on online cues that take disparate ideas and contexts and bring them together using a set of languages, practices, and norms that are continually evolving based on rapidly proliferating media torrents.

Symbolic traumas highlight the way discourse and culture can harm people. The mediation of symbolic trauma highlights the way the fast paced, hypermediated, highly curated but deeply ephemeral media torrent enables individuals to tactically inhabit their trauma in the everyday, and over time, create fissures in the discourse. The cases examined are practical examples of this practice at work. The actors in each of the cases deliberately evoked aesthetic and affective trends to indicate, process, and make meaning from the trauma the travel ban caused them. In
articulating their suffering through their social media, Jobrani, Baghoolizadeh, and Dagres each inhabited a third space in which their suffering could be separated from the context of the policy that produced it, and where meaning could be malleable by virtue of the playful, fast-paced nature of the digital platform.

Bhabha (1994) talks of a third space as an in between space where new “strategies of self-hood” emerge, overlap with, and displace previous ways of knowing, cultural values or domains of difference (2). The Iranian diaspora is very much situated in an in-between space, one that is amplified and made critical with the passage of the travel ban. Thus, their mediations of suffering caused by the ban function within a liminal, diffuse, third space that exists online: a space where identity is curated online, and offline material reality. This in-between existence is most apparent in Baghoolizadeh’s Instagram artwork but is also apparent in both Jobrani and Dagres’ posts. Jobrani highlights his liminality by articulating his body and his subjectivity as American, in a space that does not automatically read his identity in that way. For Dagres, this liminality is highlighted by the various visual markers of Iranian-American female aesthetics, from the wearing of hijab to captions that espouse a “we’re just like you” mentality. These posts then become tactical “strategies of self-hood” (Bhabha 1994, 2). Based on Bhabha’s (1994) third space, the “moment of transit” leads to a production of an in-between space in which people and culture go “beyond” in ways that are unrepresentable without the present (2, 4).

Media scholars Hoover and Echchaibi (2012) examine what they term “digital third space,” paying attention to how this space allows for rapid, simple, and easy-to-access platforms through which to displace old ideas with new mediations. These re-mediations can be as simple as re-captioning an image or sharing it to a different network. Digital space is embedded in larger “hypermedia space” that is transnational, convergent, ubiquitous, fast, intertextual, and fluid (Kraidy and Mourad 2010, 2). In this space, people have access to a host of political and social communication across global boundaries. The playfulness of the hypermedia space, particularly the digital, encourages negotiative mediation that transcends time and is ever changeable, never fixed. The liminality of digital spaces and platforms allow for playful social interactions and negotiations of discourses and identities (Hoover and Echchaibi 2012; Willett, Robinson, and Marsh 2009). Important and resistive meanings made for and by contingent bodies are created and perpetuated because of the playfulness of the space. Digital and new media therefore allow groups who suffer from trauma in their everyday lives an opportunity to negotiate that suffering collectively yet through individual entry points.

In looking at this imagery, there is a certain affect – a playfulness and a humor, an ordinariness, and an oppositionality – which stems from the trauma and the process of grappling with it in and through media. While I do not know that the users who produce this media would necessarily note the same affect, what is important in the digital mediation is less the intent of the producer but the way these media circulate as part of a broader discourse steeped in an unjust system. Within these media, this affective dimension, an affect that situates a politics of trauma within its gestures, is apparent. Of the research subjects, both Baghoolizadeh and Dagres called the ban traumatic. That said, even if they had not espoused the ban as trauma, to not recognize
their Instagram posts as mediations of trauma would be to erase a long history of suffering that takes its current instantiation and isolates it from politics, from history, and from its crucial context. These are media tactics, everyday tactics of the oppressed to be seen.

Beyond the examples given in this paper, some trends in the language and tenor of the larger data set bear out this analysis. For example, posts articulate pain, inhumanity, a need to humanize, humor and art as ways to cope, and mediation as a way through challenging political, social, and cultural climates. None of the people interviewed indicated that they thought their mediations would overturn the ban or spur a revolution, but they expressed hope that their activism and mediation would lead to awareness, fostering some meaning for their community. For some of them, this meaning-making process is just that, a way to make sense of the travel ban and its trauma, to exist in spite of it, and to have their world-making schema rebuilt.

There is also a sense within these posts that the crisis of meaning, discussed at the beginning of this paper, is what forces identity, discourse, and representation to be mediated and negotiated. Meaning made by trauma sufferers is full of possibility because it enables creative remaking of discourse overtime. Creative acts online, that are often tactical, create meaning. Banet-Weiser (2012) argues that within digital spaces, individuals are participating in an “identity construction and creative production” in which they are in a market space where there is “always a possibility and a refusal, but the nature of its possibilities and kinds of refusals depend on the larger cultural context of technology, politics and the construction of individual identity” (49).

The boundaries of possibility and refusal are inherent in the concept of the micro-political act of resistance, or what I have been discussing as tactical media. Scholarship frequently bears witness to instances of small scale dissent or “bottom-up resistance.” In this resistance, those who feel disenfranchised in some way attempt to regain control and interrupt dominant ideas of identity, ableism, mourning, violence, illness, martyrdom, or any other cultural construct that functions normatively (Raley 2009, 2). Tactical media, like ambivalence, obtains its power from its instability. Instability, after all, opens up space in culture for contestation. Within tactical media, the political criticism is subtle or even oftentimes covert (Raley 2009, 15). In the struggle for coherent meaning, tactical media enables users to resist and become conscious of their own oppression and the symbolic violence they have been subjected to (Raley 2009, 18).

Users in communities that loosely form around traumatic events encode cultural information and give way to evolving meaning. I do not want to produce false ideas that this mediation is fundamentally changing Iran, the US, or the relationship of the two, but it is doing something for the people who do it. It is helping them rebuild meaning-making schema and engendering shifts in broader cross-cultural discourses. Bourdieu (1989) says, “To change the world, one has to change the ways of world making” (23). Recently scholarship in disability studies has attempted to de-medicalize resilience in the same way I attempt to de-medicalize trauma. In this context, an unfinished resilience is “always in a process of remaking or becoming” (Aranda et al. 2012,
CONCLUSIONS

Global media studies has long argued for a reimagining of its research agenda. This work is one attempt to answer that call and “revisit how the universal relates to the particular, the global to the local, the digital to the material” without fetishizing the digital (Kraidy 2017a, 3809). Trauma provides a useful lens as to what happens when a political crisis of meaning creates and perpetuates real suffering for collective suffering bodies. These cases, while deeply individualistic, speak to broader discourses that have impacted Iranians in the diaspora as well as Iranians in Iran and around the world, seeking to negotiate their identities in polarizing times and, in part, through digital technologies. Using a globalist approach towards hypermediated, digital spaces, this work highlights the way diasporic media studies can imagine identity politics across and within borders. The Iranian people have long suffered symbolic trauma in the United States, as racial hinges, and as a consistently demonized ethnic group. In highlighting the meaning making that resulted from the suffering inflicted by the travel ban, this CARGC Paper has shown one way that Iranian-Americans participate in geopolitics, negotiating the very discourses that hail them in order to find ways to tactically exist and mobilize against violent state actors. In recognizing digital mediations in the everyday as resistive acts, this paper has indicated the way social media use can cause fissures in problematic discourses and allow victims of symbolic trauma to engage in larger geopolitical conversations.

Symbolic trauma is mediated in banal and common everyday tactics, but the mediations made by suffering bodies in digital space are anything but common. In creating new meaning, these tactics enter a discursive circulation of representation and meanings that have real and material consequences for global geopolitics. Through the everyday creation of imagined, global, and political communities, the media users I examine inhabit a transnational politics in two distinct ways. The first is that of a transnational identity making that is both intensely local but implicated in the global (Sassen 2004, 663). Iranian-Americans are politically isolated as neither Iranian nor American. Their liminal position in the United States means that their digital mediations about their suffering speak both to the Iranian and American context while also creating a new, transnational space and context unique to their immigrant experience. The media produced in and by the new space engendered by a suffering immigrant group then circulates with digital media produced in Iran and in the US. These media are part of a global performative media sphere, where contention with the status quo is negotiated and put in conversation with legacy media sources, political actors, and social and cultural institutions. The second transnational politics examined is an affective politics around identity that pays attention to the ways bodies are allowed to exist and the legibility of victims of trauma. Importantly, in this case specifically and for diasporic media studies more broadly, this affective politics examines how symbolic
trauma is used to regulate bodies but also functions to simultaneously force meaning making that is political and resistive by foregrounding individual testimonies that contribute to global flows of information. While global media studies still must grapple with the ever-changing and rapidly proliferating new media environment, I offer symbolic trauma as a way to connect individual suffering with global geopolitics.

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