Summary

This is an ethnography of Web 2.0 usage by the children of Iranian immigrants in Los Angeles. As Web 2.0 applications advance, diversify, and become part of daily life for many, it becomes important to understand how these developments shape the formation of contemporary identities. This ethnography hones in on how people use specific web applications in the context of their everyday lives. For migrant web users, advancements in communication technologies mean increased channels of staying in touch with their country of origin. This is often studied in terms of the endurance of national homelands through the long-distance attachments that internet communications help to create. However, as new technologies become increasingly commonplace, migrants also come to use internet for a range of purposes that also allow them to express their embedded-ness within their county of settlement. This is especially pertinent in the case of second-generation migrants (or children of migrants) who are raised, if not born, in the country of settlement, many of whom are coming of age in conjunction with these communications technologies.

Although the importance of transnational theoretical perspectives on migrant identities (which emphasize both long-distance and host country attachments) has been established in the social sciences, relatively little is still known about how migrants indeed combine, on the one hand, the long-distance attachments they sustain via their web use, and, on the other hand, other types of internet use that exemplify their societal engagement within the countries where they live. Hence, the in-depth perspective I offer on Iranian Americans in Los Angeles engages with and sheds light on how this long-distance communication with Iran takes shape alongside a variety of other kinds of web use.
The research I conducted is specifically interested in web use by second-generation migrants. How do children of migrants from Iran to the US fashion ways of being Iranian American through their internet usage? The thesis addresses this question from an anthropological perspective. This called for ethnographic fieldwork in the city of Los Angeles, California for a period of approximately one year, and consisted of conducting formal and informal interviews with a set of young adults of the second-generation, as well as conducting participant observation at a range of group events. It also consisted of observing some respondents interfacing with certain websites, following certain websites myself, documenting and producing certain web content, and communicating with people online. That is, I used conventional ethnographic methods to study the varied uses of internet through web applications such as social media platforms, websites, mobile web apps, and email. In this way, I joined scholars who are contributing to the burgeoning subfield of digital anthropology, which is defined by its approach to studying internet usage practices as an entwined part of the practices of everyday life.

This thesis draws upon broader theories from media anthropology and media studies that highlight how both the content and the material form of media shape the way people interpret messages and experience communication. As is bolstered by existing theories of media and identity, notions of Iranian American-ness and processes of identification rely on such experiences and interpretations. I investigate my respondents’ particular interpretations and experiences with the specific web applications they use in order to understand how their identities are formed with and through media, and how they come to have a sense of belonging as Iranian Americans. My work, therefore, adds to the body of work on internet as it helps build an understanding of how Iranian American-ness comes to be experienced as such through people’s everyday media usage.

By focusing on Iranian diaspora in the US this research contributes to the existing body of work that has engaged with questions of self and identity formation in the context of the Iranian diaspora in the West. Los Angeles in particular is well-known as a hub for Iranian exile
migration, and has attracted much scholarly attention, also with regard to exile media production in the city. However, as the causes, demographics, and policies shaping migration from Iran have transformed over the years, research that explores the changing nature of diaspora identifications becomes very important. More specifically, with the relatively recent rise of internet technologies and the coming of age of a new generation of Iranian Americans, the question of how important the concept of exile (and its associations with longing from afar) still is for understanding identity formation among Iranian diaspora comes to the fore even more clearly.

Through conducting fieldwork, I found that specific themes and topics were of particular importance for people regarding how they talked about and put into practice their senses of belonging. These included notions of home, modes of remembering the past, ways of engaging with racial difference, and narratives of connecting with Iran’s Green Movement. This last topic was significant as the field research was primarily carried out during 2009, the year of the Iranian Presidential elections and the rise of the Green Movement as a protest movement in the wake of these elections that summer. Each of the ethnographic chapters of this thesis is devoted, respectively, to discussing each one of these themes.

Chapter 1 draws on key notions of diaspora home. Home is conceptualized as being formed through social processes rather than being located in a given place (such as a distant homeland). However, physical places are still very important for formations of home — even in the context of web usage — as people create changing, diasporic attachments to new places both in Iran and the US. Scholars of Iranian diaspora in Los Angeles have shown how place is important for formations of home as people make new places into home as they live their lives there. The chapter builds on this idea, showing how places themselves also responsible for how people come to be at home there. Specifically, this chapter focuses on three kinds of places that I found to be important to my respondents when talking about home: 1. the family house, 2. the city of Los Angles, and 3. sites of return inside Iran.
I argue that the use of web applications plays a role in processes of home formation in these places, as web usage fosters certain ways of being in, moving between, and developing relationships to places. I demonstrate that formations of home for my respondents depend on a combination of the places in question and ways in which they put specific web applications to use. In being at home, my respondents seek out emotional, experiential, and personalized approaches to representing and engaging with places that have relevance to their second-generation lives. While they do this in ways that at times invoke and build upon the first generation’s movements and traces, my respondents’ own practices of living in particular places crisscross the places that their parents’ generation bestow(ed) with meaning through their (continued) inhabitation. It is in this way that they re-shape diaspora home as a new generation.

Chapter 2 concerns remembering. It focuses on how the past is part of notions of belonging for my second-generation respondents. They choose and shape the narratives of the past that they want to represent based on their claims in the (diasporic) present. However, they also feel the responsibility to conserve the past as something that is not of their own making, but rather something inherited. In this way, their practices align with a notion of cultural heritage. I take this term to mean the production of the past for a collective in the present, while framing that past as inherited from antecedent others. I have focused on three main practices of remembering that emerged as important in my findings: 1. Remembering Iranian and American national pasts in overlap with one another, 2. remembering the ancient Persian (Achamaenid) period, and 3. remembering the modern pre-revolutionary past of Iran’s 60s and 70s.

Through their practices of remembering, my respondents made efforts at towards re-politicizing the past, re-educating themselves, and re-defining diaspora. I found that people’s interactions with artifacts, their bodily experiences, and their engagements with the materiality of made products all allow them to experience elements of the past through their senses. This, I argued, helped build certain shared sensibilities and styles that appeal to (sometimes specific parts of) the second generation. I also show how physical objects are seen as mediating
elements of the past in ways that the web applications they use cannot. Instead these applications facilitate access to the copies, digitizations, and networks that feed the creative processes of producing, reproducing, and bestowing importance on a past for young people to hold on to.

Chapter 3 covers the topic of race. It discusses my second-generation respondents’ diverse claims to racial difference in a context where Middle Easterners and Muslims living in the US are increasingly racialized as a group. In this chapter, I focus on my respondents’ practices of self-representation and how their web use fits into their broader media environments that include representations of Iranians and Iranian Americans. This inescapably implicates them in a wider atmosphere where Muslims and Middle Easterners are racialized as minorities in the West. With the help of web applications, they position themselves within this context and engage with categories of racial difference through projects of identity politics that set them apart from their parents’ generation and align them with other minorities. I discuss the many ways they use web applications to engage with (subverting, resisting, and appropriating) racialized ways of seeing and being seen.

This chapter argues against assumptions about the disappearing body (and with it race and gender categories) in studies of internet-mediated self-representation. The respondents use web applications as extensions of offline spaces for alternative self-representations, but face the same limitations as those face-to-face spaces when it comes to reaching wider audiences. In this chapter I discuss three ways in which my respondents engage with racial difference and dedicate a section to each of these aspects. First I discuss how whiteness is rejected and racial difference claimed in ways that are seen as contrasting with the first generation’s practices. Second I cover some of the divergences within the second generation as to how and under which circumstances such racial difference is claimed with the use of digital media. Third, I consider the gendered aspects of racialization that emerged as a significant part of my respondents’ stories and practices. I show how many of my respondents see race as located unchangingly in their bodies, while at the same time, somewhat paradoxically, there are also
those who acknowledge and advocate for the multi-vocality and dynamism of the group, which blurs the boundaries of newly-appropriated racial categories.

Chapter 4 deals with social media’s significant role for the diaspora during the 2009 post-election turmoil in Iran. This was very important for many diaspora Iranians’ sense of identification with those in Iran. Social media also took on the status of a newsworthy thing in itself. In this chapter, I highlight three main narratives that circulated in the aftermath of the hotly disputed Presidential elections of 2009 and during the protest movement that it spurred. These include 1. Narratives about possibilities of virtually “being there” or mediated presence, 2. narratives about the possibilities for “internet democracy,” and 3. narratives about social media’s ability to go beyond its own supposed “shallowness.” Underlying each of the dominant narratives I discuss is how that web usage brings people a sense of immediacy, whether this is through a sense of presence, control, or emotional connection. I argue that this sense of immediacy relies precisely on how particular messages are mediated. That is, an experience of immediacy is compelling for users in certain situations, and this primarily relies on the aesthetics of the mediated experience.

Some of my respondents were instrumental in shaping how this movement was transnationally mediated in their capacity as web media users and producers. Key actors from the second generation joined with recent migrants and activists in Iran to convey interpretations of the social and political intricacies of the Iranian context for diaspora audiences and take positions themselves. For my respondents, making sense of this movement and negotiating their own positioning in relation to these events relied inexorably on their practices of making sense of their media environment. Based on how people implement and make sense of their own practices involving social media, I argue that they develop new sensitivities, new literacies, particular creative forms of expression, and certain logics of media usage.

This thesis comes to two main conclusions. First, second-generation migrants’ transnational modes of positioning themselves towards the country of “settlement” and “origin” are intertwined with one another. They strengthen one another through long-distance belonging to
a homeland in adaptive ways, while also developing claims to rights through identity politics frameworks in the society where they live. It is clear that my respondents display various emerging ways of claiming and appropriating otherness, and that these sometimes set them apart from their parents’ generation, and other times align them with longer ancestries that include their families, immediate and distant, and also situate them with respect to the varied environments they find themselves in as Americans. Doing this is crucial for how they attain a sense of belonging as children of migrants. Second, being oneself as an Iranian American relies on mediation. Whether it is through place attachments, remembering, representing race, or relating to an uprising from afar, these ways of being Iranian American require media. Web usage becomes incorporated into second-generation migrants’ practices of self-styling, and these practices create specific modes of migrant belonging. These styles are a testament to the particularities of overlapping and multiple ways of being Iranian American.