

REVIEW ESSAY

## Remembering Revolution

**This Flame Within: Iranian Revolutionaries in the United States.** Manijeh Moradian (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2022). 352 pp. \$28.95 paper. ISBN 9781478018810

**When Skateboards Will Be Free: A Memoir of a Political Childhood.** Saïd Sayrafiezadeh (Dial Press, 2009). 304 pp. \$25.99 hardcover. ISBN 9780385340687

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Manijeh Moradian published a memoir essay in 2009 under the penname Nasrabadi in which she described her relationship with her father. The essay appeared in *Callaloo*—a journal dedicated to “matters pertinent to African American and African Diaspora Studies worldwide.”<sup>1</sup> It was a fitting venue given the elder Moradian’s years of service as a professor of architecture at Howard University, an HBCU (historically Black colleges and universities) where during the 1970s he sympathized with and supported student activists in the Iranian Students Association (ISA).<sup>2</sup> The venue is all the more fitting given the younger Moradian’s recent monograph which, among many groundbreaking contributions, demonstrates “affects of solidarity” between Iranian and Black American student activists in the 1970s.

Moradian’s essay recalls the longing she felt for her father’s affection as he turned away from his nuclear family, distracted by the dizzying events of the 1979 revolution in Iran, and then inward as political events eluded his dreams and aspirations. The three-year-old Moradian watched her father leave for an ecstatic visit to his home country. Basking in the fervor of revolutionary possibilities, he implored his American Jewish wife to join him with their two small children. The mother refused, compelling her father to return to the United States, where a backlash to the seizure of the US embassy in Tehran made life inhospitable. The elder Moradian told his family the decision to live in exile was solely for their sake. His air was melancholic and detached, only interrupted by eccentric forays in his children’s upbringing. If he could not participate in the reconstruction of Iranian society, he decided, he would raise a pair of revolutionaries from afar. The younger Moradian recounts with vivid prose her earnest efforts to fill the gap in the elder Moradian’s heart, to recover the father she once had by performing as best she could his quasi-Maoist training regimen.

<sup>1</sup> See “About Callaloo,” *Callaloo*, n.d., <https://www.callalooliteraryjournal.com/about-callaloo>.

<sup>2</sup> See “In Conversation: Manijeh Moradian with Golnar Adili,” *Brooklyn Rail*, February 2023, <https://brooklynrail.org/2023/02/books/Manijeh-Moradian-in-conversation-with-Golnar-Adili>.

When she fell short or delivered some perceived slight, her father turned on her, at times resorting to physical violence.

The essay bears resemblance to another touching, at-times humorous, and also painful memoir published that same year, Saïd Sayrafiezadeh's *When Skateboards Will Be Free*.<sup>3</sup> Sayrafiezadeh recounts a similarly fraught relationship with an absent father—a man who never seemed ready to accept the loss associated with the 1979 revolution and who abandoned his familial responsibilities in stubborn pursuit of communist liberation as it faded from view. Mahmoud Sayrafiezadeh also was a professor, of mathematics, and at one time a member of the Society for Iranian Studies, the precursor to today's Association for Iranian Studies.<sup>4</sup> He was a prominent figure in the Socialist Workers Party, established the first Trotskyist party in postrevolutionary Iran, and ran a negligible campaign to become president of the Islamic Republic in 1980. He would later staff the booth for Pathfinder Press at Iran's annual book fair. All the while, his son endured a difficult upbringing in the care of a single mother who struggled to provide for him while maintaining her commitments to the party and the cause. An American Jewish woman with a privileged upbringing, she refused to pursue her dreams and individual pleasures (or even the semblance of an orderly life) despite access to considerable educational and financial resources, all in a vain attempt to identify with the working class.

*When Skateboards Will Be Free* delivers sharp criticism of leftist organizational politics, drawing a portrait of people hopelessly out of touch with reality. Sayrafiezadeh reserves special ire for the selfishness and hypocrisy of his father, a man who proclaimed to dedicate his life to fighting for a just world while neglecting to treat his wife and his child with dignity. Readers are invited to reject the grand prescriptions and empty gestures of ideological purity espoused by Sayrafiezadeh's parents and instead celebrate the virtues of a simple and honest living embodied by his American in-laws. One cannot help but empathize given the absurd challenges Sayrafiezadeh faced on account of the party's mandates. The mere act of publishing such an intimate account breaks ground rules that prohibit against airing "dirty laundry." *When Skateboards Will Be Free* severs Sayrafiezadeh's already strained relationship with his father, and the party, for good.

Like Sayrafiezadeh, Moradian harbors resentment. Unlike him, she directs the sentiment to the pursuit of liberation, mixing bitter memories with reverence for the promise of the Left. Hers is an upbringing in diaspora marked by continued engagement with Iranian politics, including a trip to Iran—a reflection perhaps of her relationship with her father who, despite his emotional absence, remained physically present in her life. Moradian's memoir ends with a different sort of longing.

Now I can't help but wonder, if my father could've grieved openly for the death of the revolution, what kind of a man he might have been. I imagine a support group for Iranian leftists like him, men and women who'd spent years organizing on their campuses in America and who'd thought, at first, that the revolution was a step forward on the path to socialism. A place of shelter from suspicion, where he wouldn't have to be defensive, where he could sit with his former comrades and show how broken he was as his country was torn apart by bombs made in the USA. But of course, there was no such place.

Both the Iranian and the American governments would write the secular, democratic chapters out of official histories of the revolution and sum everything up with the word Islamic.

And I would forget for almost thirty years that I'd sung ballads in Persian, that I'd taken enemy hills and tackled my father on the Chinese grasslands of our backyard. I

<sup>3</sup> I am grateful to Alexander Jabbari for bringing the resonances between these books to my attention.

<sup>4</sup> Society for Iranian Studies, *S.I.S. Newsletter* 6, no. 1 (1974): 15.

would forget all about the days before the magic had faded, when we'd tried our best to hold on to something good.<sup>5</sup>

Moradian's 2022 monograph is one such place, a shelter for people mired in the disenchantment that follows revolution. *This Flame Within: Iranian Revolutionaries in the United States* reconstructs the story of the ISA, the North American affiliate of the Confederation of Iranian Students, National Union (CISNU). Moradian takes the memories of Iranian student activists who adopted a nationalist, radical leftist, and secular brand of politics, united by a shared desire to precipitate revolution in Iran, and recasts their efforts as a diasporic vision for Iranian politics of enduring relevance today.

Face-to-face with the event they spent years trying to ignite, members of the ISA were surprised to find themselves shunned from all sides—by the Islamic Republic for the secular orientation of their revolutionary politics, by fellow Iranians in America for having been revolutionaries in the first place, and by the hostility of the American populace at large. *This Flame Within* responds to the second of these critics, the “mainstream Iranian diaspora” comprised of emigres who arrived on American shores after 1979 harboring near-fascist nostalgia for the Pahlavi state. They set the tenor for political discourse, blaming Iran's demise on leftist miscalculations with equal vigor as racist tropes about Islam. Their version of public memory made it taboo to recall with fondness revolutionary pasts, relegating to whispers the feeling of ecstasy ISA members like Moradian's father experienced on their returns to Iran in the early months of the postrevolutionary order. Indeed, the mainstream diaspora has been so constitutionally averse to the prospect they opted to stage demonstrations for “regime change” during 2022's “Women, Life, Freedom” movement, avoiding the word revolution in blatant defiance of activists on the ground who insisted theirs was a revolutionary cause.<sup>6</sup>

Moradian's book is a rejoinder and an attempt to thread an almost impossible needle. She rebukes the endorsement of the “progressive clergy” adopted by most ISA members, and yet she embraces the visions they espoused as a template for politics now. In other words, she sketches a posture of dual opposition to the Islamic Republic and the US, anti-dictatorship and anti-imperialism. *This Flame Within* ingeniously reclaims nostalgia to make the case. It refuses descriptions of melancholic attachment as pathology—a despondent longing for what could have been, cured if only we could relinquish the past and accept present-day realities for what they are. The book is equally averse to melancholia as disavowal—out-of-touch images of grandeur about the Pahlavi monarchy and pre-Islamic Iran meant to temper the harshness of life in exile. Instead, Moradian offers a concept of “resistant nostalgia” according to which melancholy serves as a reservoir for militancy against the odds. Resistant nostalgia affirms the past despite the pain it brought ISA members. When yesterday's leftists nurture “this flame within” through hidden melancholic attachments, they maintain a tradition of resistance for later generations poised to redefine it in response to emergent historical circumstances of their own accord. Moradian performs the relay, bringing back in “the secular, democratic chapters” left “out of official histories,” giving her father the recognition he lacked, mitigating the hurt that led him to hurt her.

*This Flame Within* ranks among those rare scholarly monographs that address the wounds borne by people for whom politics is an intimate affair.<sup>7</sup> It should be read, alongside Moradian's poignant 2009 memoir and the recollection of her father's despair, as an ambitious and inspiring attempt to break the cycles of unacknowledged pain that afflict former

<sup>5</sup> Manijeh Nasrabadi, “A Far Corner of the Revolution,” *Callaloo* 32, no. 4 (2009): 1207.

<sup>6</sup> “Jin Jiyan Azadi as in Free Palestine,” *Jadaliyya*, November 23, 2023, <https://www.jadaliyya.com/Details/45544/Jin-Jiyan-Azadi-as-in-Free-Palestine>.

<sup>7</sup> Eleni Centime Zeleke published a comparable volume about the Ethiopian revolution in 2019. Zeleke's work is distinct insofar as she develops a theoretical and methodological approach through conversation with vernacular traditions from Ethiopia. She calls this approach “theory as memoir.” See Eleni Centime Zeleke, *Ethiopia in Theory: Revolution and Knowledge Production, 1964–2016* (Leiden: Brill, 2020).

revolutionaries and their children in the wake of mass upheaval. Her book diagnoses the loss Sayrafiezadeh's father refused to acknowledge and, by extension, his refusal to properly acknowledge his son's life. As Amy Malek notes in an astute review focused on method, Moradian constructs a "living archive of memory" and, so doing, brings that archive to life for the reader, describing with care "the gestures, facial expressions, pauses, and even flat affects she observed."<sup>8</sup>

Moradian's study draws on interviews with a representative range of figures active in the ISA, some of whom held key leadership positions. She adds to these interviews with activists from non-Iranian organizations whose lives were bound with the ISA, including one woman who went to Iran after 1979, where she was detained. These stories alone make for novel contributions to a history previously focused on Iranian students and American policy.<sup>9</sup> Moradian pairs the interviews with careful analysis of publicity documents, ephemera, and literature produced by the ISA and adjacent groups from the Black American, Arab American, and Ethiopian student movements as well as the antiwar movement against the American war in Vietnam.

To navigate this vast and unwieldy archive, *This Flame Within* invokes queer studies and affect theory. It is a diasporic choice to interpret Iran and Iranians with theoretical traditions rooted in the European and North American academy. Barring a few exceptions, Iranian studies has failed to engage these particular traditions, a glaring oversight made evident when recent Iranian social movements put the ideas to use and experimented with their forms.<sup>10</sup> In this sense, among others, *This Flame Within* builds a bridge between Iranian studies and Iranian diaspora studies.<sup>11</sup> Likewise, it builds a bridge between past and present, drawing from the history of the ISA to develop a framework for contemporary analysis and critique. Alongside "melancholic attachments as resistant nostalgia," the book's core theoretical constructs include: a "methodology of possibility" (roads not taken by past political movements that may prove useful for present-day concerns); "revolutionary affects" (the sentiments experienced in past trauma as impetus for present-day activism and the feelings of belonging that kept students engaged in shared struggle); and, finally, "affects of solidarity" (sentiments held in common with other racial and ethnic groups in America, forging a model of solidarity beyond identity politics).<sup>12</sup>

Any attempt to recover forgotten pasts is bound to create its own occlusions. One of Moradian's central interventions, "affects of solidarity," emerges through careful analysis of ISA's English language publications. Her groundbreaking research on this front prompted Afshin Matin-Asgari to recognize *This Flame Within* as a valuable addition to his 2001 book, *Iranian Student Opposition to the Shah*, the most comprehensive history of the CISNU and the ISA to date.<sup>13</sup> Yet, what *This Flame Within* gains by focusing on solidarity with non-Iranians, it loses with regard to the student movement's internal dynamics. Unlike Matin-Asgari's study, Moradian scarcely engages the immense amounts of Persian-language materials produced by the ISA, in which we see bitter ideological divides erode feelings of solidarity

<sup>8</sup> Amy Malek, "Reperiodizing, Reclassifying, and Reframing the Iranian American Diaspora in *This Flame Within*," *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa, and the Middle East* 44, no. 1 (2024): 181.

<sup>9</sup> See, for example, Afshin Matin-Asgari, *Iranian Student Opposition to the Shah* (Washington, DC: Mazda, 2001); and Matthew Shannon, *Losing Hearts and Minds: American-Iranian Relations and International Education during the Cold War* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2017).

<sup>10</sup> See, for example, L., "Figuring a Women's Revolution: Bodies Interacting with Their Images," trans. Alireza Doostdar, *Jadaliyya*, October 5, 2022, <https://www.jadaliyya.com/Details/44479>.

<sup>11</sup> Golnar Nikpour, "On Revolutionary Possibility in the Archive of 1979," *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 44, no. 1 (2024): 176–77.

<sup>12</sup> Similar topics arose in philosophical writings by activists from the Ethiopian student movement, many of whom were in conversation with the Iranian Students Association. For reference, see Arash Davari, "Solidarity to Fraternity" (review of *Ethiopia in Theory: Revolution and Knowledge Production, 1964–2016* by Elleni Centime Zeleke), *Radical Philosophy* 2, no. 10 (2021): 87–91.

<sup>13</sup> Afshin Matin-Asgari, "Review of *This Flame Within: Iranian Revolutionaries in the United States* by Manijeh Moradian," *Diaspora: A Journal of Transnational Studies* 23, no. 1 (2023): 147–50.

among members. Matin-Asgari's signature contribution was to show how a democratic apparatus kept activists together for a time despite their pronounced ideological differences. It remains for future research to explore the "revolutionary affects" cultivated by addresses to Persian-language audiences, be it ones in Iran or other activists in America, and, further, how student activists weathered the storms of ideological dispute to maintain a shared sense of belonging among themselves while developing connections with others.<sup>14</sup>

Likewise, despite attention to the material qualities of affect, *This Flame Within* does not pay much mind to conventional class distinctions.<sup>15</sup> There were different political cultures within the ISA over its decades of existence, some of which mapped along class lines. If the 1960s saw members drawn from "imperial model minorities"—economically privileged students whose traumatic experiences of the 1953 coup inspired them to become revolutionaries against expectations to the contrary—the 1970s saw an influx of lower-middle-class students who developed cultures of belonging through relationships of mutual care shaped by economic survival abroad. Moradian aptly describes the former. How the latter shaped "affects of solidarity" remains ripe for further exploration.

A stickier problem haunts Moradian's attempts to vindicate the past in the present or, in more technical jargon, to combine a descriptive register with a prescriptive one. *This Flame Within* weaves a brilliant story about the pursuit of "gender sameness" in the ISA, an ideal that empowered women members so long as they mimicked masculine norms (chapter 5). As Moradian shows, these practices of self-cultivation left ISA members ill equipped to stand in solidarity with Iranian women on March 8, 1979, when thousands protested the state's attempt to gender citizenship and exert control over women's bodies through enforced hijab. Against the demure, veiled presentation of women's bodies expected by an emergent Islamic Republic—whose decrees paralleled sartorial choices adopted by members of the ISA, Maoists in particular—protestors asserted women's capacity to embody femininity. Consistent with a "methodology of possibility," Moradian considers roads not taken, posing an alternative to the choice between gender equality as Western imperialism and anti-imperialism as support for a patriarchal state (chapter 6).

In other words, Moradian argues for an anti-imperialist and antiauthoritarian leftist politics that would exist apart from both Islamophobia and apologia for the Islamic Republic. She builds on women of color and Third World feminist approaches to the "dirty laundry" debate. Rather than concede the idea that public expressions of internal critique endanger "oppressed and targeted groups" by giving an excuse to those who "do us harm," *This Flame Within* advances an "intersectional Iranian diaspora studies framework." Opposition to "gender and sexual oppression," Moradian argues, makes "movements against racism, economic exploitation, and imperialism . . . stronger and more effective" (pp. 19–20).

For all its insights, combining descriptive and prescriptive registers can produce uneven readings of history, which, in turn, raises unanswered questions about the prescriptions on offer and relatedly Moradian's methodology. It was commonplace in 1979 to draw

<sup>14</sup> Ali Nadimi's memoir—first published in 2017 and recently translated into English—offers clues for future research. Nadimi describes relations of solidarity between student movement activists abroad and guerrillas in Iran, paying close attention to their affective dimensions. He recounts how statements of solidarity from activists in Iran "stirred emotions and brought many participants to tears" at the fifteenth CISNU congress in Germany in January 1974. Further, Nadimi compares reception of these internal solidarity statements with reception of solidarity statements from non-Iranian organizations, "CISNU's traditional allies," and "international organizations and liberation movements from across the globe." He situates these affects of solidarity in relation to "the useless disputes and rash, unmeasured reactions" that fueled conflict among Iranian student activists. See 'Ali Nadimi, "The Confederation of Iranian Students (National Union) and the Fada'i Guerrillas," trans. Arash Davari, in *Fada'i Guerrilla Praxis in Iran (1970–1979): Narratives and Reflections on Everyday Life*, ed. Touraj Atabaki, Nasser Mohajer, and Siavush Randjbar-Daemi (London: I. B. Tauris, 2023), 203–15.

<sup>15</sup> Abdel Razzaq Takriti, "Embodying Solidarity in the Heart of Empire," *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 44, no. 1 (2024): 185.

distinctions between “feminist” activism and “political” activism.<sup>16</sup> Moradian’s prescriptive argument rebukes this divide, citing the ISA’s absence from the March 8 protests as evidence of its misguided nature, but her descriptive account of what transpired, the basis on which she advances judgment, is not entirely accurate. *This Flame Within* conflates the famous demonstration on March 8 against compulsory hijab with “six days of mass marches and sit-ins,” including the March 10 “mass sit-in outside the Ministry of Justice” (p. 227). The narrative glosses over important points of difference of consequence for Moradian’s argument. Notably, the March 10 sit-in allowed partisans to assume “gender sameness” while still taking part in the women’s uprising.

The March 10 sit-in was led by the Association of Barristers (Kanun-e Vokalā), a member of which, Parivash Khājeh-nuri, read a declaration from an organization called Women in the Court of Justice (Zanān dar Dādgostari). The statement reiterated calls for women to make their own sartorial choices, echoing the March 8 uprising, but also it demanded the preservation of “women’s present employment.”<sup>17</sup> Despite all the attention given debates about hijab and bodily autonomy today, for many the first alarms about gender equality in post-revolutionary Iran were raised by rumors about the removal of women judges and the prohibition of women from professions requiring the exercise of judgment.<sup>18</sup> In this light, one can imagine there were people who participated in the sit-in on March 10 but not the demonstration on March 8, who continued to adhere to the principle of “gender sameness,” who understood women’s equality to mean the capacity to exercise a form of disembodied judgment, and who prioritized rationality over affect, “politics” over “feminism.” How do these histories fit in Moradian’s story about “revolutionary affects”? Are they out of line with contemporary struggles against imperialism and dictatorship? Is advocacy for rational judgment through “gender sameness” the wrong sort of “melancholic attachment”? If not, where does that leave Moradian’s prescriptions for contemporary politics?

Moradian’s prescriptive arguments about Islam obscure descriptive accuracy in a different way. *This Flame Within* is entirely correct to note a lack of rapport between members of the ISA and Islamists, who comprised a separate minority of student activists in the United States. Moradian ably recovers a radical secular tradition, one that exists beyond the post-9/11 imperative that anti-imperialism should embrace Islamism to counter Islamophobia. She does not hold punches along the way, noting the ISA’s mistaken approach when it endorsed the “progressive clergy.” The argument works extremely well in response to the “mainstream Iranian diaspora,” whose Islamophobia understands any form of Islamism as noxious and who seek to undermine the Left by pegging it with the Islamic Republic. The effort to counter an Islamophobic mainstream, however, can lead the critic to overlook enduring Islamophobia within the Iranian Left.<sup>19</sup> Further, it disregards an empirical reality from the past half century: the relative effectiveness of Islamism as a rallying point for another kind of anti-imperialist politics, modular across various groups and struggles in the Middle East. The latter stands as a material fact, one that leftists must reckon with if they wish to aspire to universalism.

Let us consider the point through Moradian’s insights. *This Flame Within* demonstrates the experimentation pursued by a pioneering generation of radical and secular Iranians living

<sup>16</sup> See, for example, Mahnaz Matin and Nasser Mohajer, *Khizesh-e Zanān-e Iran dar Esfand-e 1357* (Köln, Germany: Nashr-e Noghteh, 1392/2013–14), 145, 152.

<sup>17</sup> For context and a partial reprint of the original statement in Persian, see Matin and Mohajer, *Khizesh-e Zanān*, 71–73. For an English language translation of the statement, see Janet Afary and Kevin B. Anderson, *Foucault and the Iranian Revolution: Gender and the Seductions of Islamism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 245–46. The translation does not mention who read the statement on March 10, 1979. The Persian-language reprint omits article 7, regarding the preservation of women’s “present employment.”

<sup>18</sup> For a personal account that demonstrates the point, see Matin and Mohajer, *Khizesh-e Zanān*, 144.

<sup>19</sup> Arash Davari, “Like 1979 All Over Again: Resisting Left Liberalism among Iranian Émigrés,” in *With Stones in Our Hands: Writings on Muslims, Racism, and Empire*, eds. Sohail Daulatzai and Junaid Rana, 122–35 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2018).

abroad. They took courageous steps by extracting themselves from past traditions while inventing ones of their own whole cloth, an endeavor that set them in search of political belonging.<sup>20</sup> It is not clear from Moradian's book, or from the history of the ISA, whether leftist opposition to the Islamic Republic must foreclose similar experimentation with Islamism or, at a more basic level, why opposition to dictatorship must entail revolutionary opposition to the Islamic Republic. Given the orientation of Iranian leftists who assume opposition to the Islamic Republic *prima facie*, it is uncertain whether an Iranian Left would survive the effort.<sup>21</sup> And yet still, we may hold the question open. Indeed, we must if we wish to recall the form and spirit of the past, rather than solely its content.

Here, we see a misalignment between the content of Moradian's prescriptive statements and the form of her masterly engagement with a "living archive of memory," which, as I understand, invites a continued exercise of judgment. If we read Moradian and her interlocutors as mobilizing affect in cynical fashion toward a specific political agenda, we would arrive at the conclusion that enduring attachments to a leftist cause are at odds with the unscripted possibilities implied by judgment. To end our analysis here would vindicate Sayrafiezadeh. He was right to reject his parents' leftist past and to harbor suspicion of a penchant among revolutionaries for conscripting others into their agendas, empirical fact and divergent desire be damned.

I am more convinced by Moradian's methodological approach, or at least the possibilities contained therein. She invites us to stretch our imaginations, to take an even further leap of faith. It is possible, I hear her saying, to excavate history while holding to a political telos. In fact, we should. For an archive to live, the author who invokes memory must stake her position, not retreat into the righteous comforts of personal experience and injury. And so, Moradian is correct to advance her own prescription and political vision regardless of whether the reader thinks the substance of her position is "correct." The gesture alone links past to present in unforeseeable ways. In my estimation, we should expect the gesture to be just that. It gives the reader an opportunity to exercise their own judgment and bring an archive to life in their own right. Those of us who read and write about revolution would do well to take heed, maintaining a distinction between our "resistant nostalgia" and the "resistant nostalgia" of the erstwhile revolutionaries whose lives and actions fill the books and the memories we carry. Moradian's book gives us the gift of a language to ask these questions, a way to approach the living archives within our communities.<sup>22</sup> It is, for this reason, an enormous contribution to the study of Iran.

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<sup>20</sup> Like Zeleke, Moradian's argument adds a diasporic inflection to existing scholarship about vernacular Marxism. For the latter, see Fadi A. Bardawil, *Revolution and Disenchantment: Arab Marxism and the Bonds of Emancipation* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2020).

<sup>21</sup> I am grateful to Roozbeh Shirazi for bringing this point to my attention.

<sup>22</sup> I am grateful to Amy Malek, whose feedback helped me clarify this point.