

## **Iranian-American Identity and the Spirit of Ethno-Futurism**

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America is obsessed with race, and Iranian-Americans have long been a casualty of that obsession. There is an idea of us as a cultural group, but whether or not our lived truths align with that idea is a matter of perspective and debate. Regardless of our individual ethnic backgrounds, politics or religious beliefs, Iranians in the United States are unified by the common experience of being fundamentally alienated – legally white, but socially brown.

Division as a practice is a natural human tendency. Creating categories and classifications allows us to better organize objects and ideas, and simplify the world around us. Division helps us to learn, predict, infer, make decisions, and generally interact with our environment more effectively. Division also serves to protect the status quo – America’s various ethnic minority groups united under a common ideology could potentially have the social, economic, and political power to upset ruling class interests, but a divided society is easier to control. Division can be tremendously harmful. As evidenced by the events of Jan. 6, 2020, an us-vs-them mentality manufactured for the purpose of political control has the potential to become violent and threaten democratic systems.

When it comes to our national fixation with race, the need to define and categorize nationality and ethnicity is especially problematic for Iranian-Americans, for whom legal status does not reflect social status. Never are we fully considered to be authentically white, yet in being legally classified as such we are conveniently jumbled together with miscellaneous Arab nationalities, our truth essentially erased. It is symbolically fitting that a hyphen separates our two cultural affiliations, because our lives are interrupted by a symbolic racialization that places us between the traditional binaries of whiteness and blackness. Despite the browning that our national identity endures in the United States, Iranian-Americans are staunchly rooted in a racially liminal territory, occupying a unique cultural space of our own that exists simultaneously on both sides of the threshold of whiteness.

The power of whiteness in America is ubiquitous and makes its presence felt in many forms – when we apply for jobs and loans, attempt to purchase homes, or seek out the best opportunities for our children. Many Iranians covet white privilege. The golden generation of Iranian-Americans remembers abruptly being targeted and othered after the hostage crisis in 1979. My generation reached

adulthood in the post-9/11 zeitgeist, where our nationality has drawn renewed scrutiny and activities that were once simple and straightforward – like passing through customs – have become crucibles gatekept by whiteness. But what good is obligatory classification when the identity thrust upon us not only distorts who we are, it is a form of coercion – or worse yet, deletion? The ironic harms of misrepresentation and under-counting are well documented – Iranians are removed from consideration for minority scholarships, and deprived of essential services and rights because we are legally white. How can we address the discrimination we face when our own diversity is not legally recognized? We are forcibly assimilated into the very cultural paradigms that oppress us.

Precious little research has been done to offer insight into the Iranian-American experience or explore the ways in which our lives are haunted by the microaggressive revenants of America’s colonial antecedent. Ours is a world where “Where are you from?” is always potentially much more than a friendly icebreaker; it is the gateway to disaffection, estrangement, and animosity over politics, religion, and a multitude of other manufactured differences. There is currently only one existing text – *The Limits of Whiteness: Iranian-Americans and the Everyday Politics of Race* by Neda Maghbouleh<sup>1</sup> – that attempts to define the complexities and paradoxes of the Iranian-American identity through first-hand accounts of second-generation Iranians in the United States. It thoroughly documents the browning experienced by Iranian-Americans that is inconsistent with our legal racial categorization of white and all that it signifies. Moreover, it affirms our alienation as a widely-shared communal experience which, although singular to each of us, is not unique among Iranians. This shared reality is symbolically powerful, for it signifies that there may be hope for a cohesive sense of identity among the Iranian-American community.

Defining a person is inherently complex. Identity is an elastic dynamic of polymorphic values that can be interpreted through the lenses of race, culture, geography, language, or religion. The development and application of ethno-racial socialization and identification is spread across a spectrum of environments: the home, the classroom, commercial, community and recreational spaces. For Iranian-Americans, who are a diverse group in terms of ethnicity, religion, and social class, and who are alienated for numerous political, geographic, and pseudo-scientific reasons, a cohesive or unified sense of identity is not only convoluted, it seems impossible.

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<sup>1</sup> 2017, Stanford University Press. ISBN: 9781503603370

For most Iranian-Americans, any claim to whiteness is a revolving door. Whiteness is less a legal classification than a shifting identity politic – a socially constructed designation that can be circumstantially or arbitrarily activated and revoked. If the paradox of being Iranian-American lies in liminal racialization, then the paradox of whiteness is that it derives power from the constantly shifting ground upon which it sits. In the United States, the inherent privilege of whiteness derives its strength not only through sheer hegemonic force, but also through a resilient flexibility; it ebbs and flows, it adapts over time, evolves, and defines itself by distinguishing itself from what it is not. Every non-white ethnic group is subjugated by the power of this exclusion. For some second-generation Iranians, the alienation runs even deeper, as the lack of full fluency in Farsi or first-hand knowledge of Iran leaves them estranged from their Iranian peers as much as being othered separates them from whiteness.

For the Iranian immigrants who arrive in America with an inherent sense of white identity, the contradiction and resulting ambiguity of being legally white but socially brown can be especially confounding. Iranians meet the traditional criteria of acceptability in white America; generally speaking, they are highly educated, work white collar jobs, and live middle-class lifestyles. Iranians hold prominent positions in government, industry, and academia. Yet we remain othered. The ramifications of marginalization ripple through generations, contradicting theories of race and assimilation that claim that successive immigrant generations will develop stronger attachments to whiteness as a social identity. Instead, first-generation Iranian parents are raising a second generation of hyphenated individuals who are increasingly aware that Iranians are not white. Not quite. Not in America.

The foundational idea that there is a group of original, ancestral Whites or Aryans – the Caucasians who descended from the Caucasus mountains – is ineffectual in any practical application, and potentially harmful to subsequent generations of Iranian-Americans. No matter how precisely we frame our Aryan cultural heritage, Caucasian geographic origin and Indo-European language, or how strongly we desire the concomitance of a white racial identity, or how passionately we covet the acceptance of hegemonic white groups, these beliefs are not transmutable to life in the United States unless they are accepted by the hegemony and integrated into the status quo. Until then, Iranians will be perpetually negotiating and renegotiating our position on the periphery of whiteness.

There are ways in which we can help or hurt ourselves. It is problematic when Iranians selectively link to the ancestral Aryan narrative as a means to elevate their social status and separate themselves from stigmatized groups, especially if this separation is negotiated as being distinct from the racist identity framing used by white supremacists. Given the inherent anti-Black sentiment that is prevalent in Iranian culture, any attempt by Iranians to claim Aryan heritage is vulnerable to being interpreted as a poorly-veiled if not transparent attempt to illegitimately secure the prestige of white privilege, and therefore labeled as a form of internal whitewashing that utilizes the same logical mechanisms that uphold white supremacy.

If we are to navigate America's racialized rhetoric with integrity, we should acknowledge that whiteness and the privilege it espouses comes at the expense of a multitude of racialized groups – which could accurately be characterized as *everyone else including ourselves*. While we may take comfort in being legally included in the definition of white, American mainstream media continues to demonize Iran and Iranians. As a result, American whiteness – its values, connotations, and all that it signifies – must remain incongruent with who we are. This is why, for myself and many of my peers, our identities align less with whiteness and more with other racialized groups.

En route to defining what it means to be Iranian-American there is a proximal objective of also describing what it means to be American. America, as a nation, is more than a geographic location or political entity. It is more than a combination of values. America is an idea. For many, that idea is rooted in the belief that anything is possible, and that perseverance and hard work can lead to immense achievement, material success, and social recognition. To the Iranian immigrants who fled the Islamic Republic, America might represent a safe harbor for human and civil rights, or the potential to enjoy cultural, religious, or political freedom. Franklin D. Roosevelt famously said that “Americanism is a matter of the mind and the heart; Americanism is not and never was, a matter of race and ancestry. A good American is one who is loyal to this country and to our creed of liberty and democracy<sup>2</sup>.” This rings true to many of us second-generation Iranians, for whom identity is a permutation of traditional cultural family values intertwined with American conceptions of personal liberty.

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<sup>2</sup> Attributed to Roosevelt from an official government poster dated February 1, 1943. Propaganda Poster Collection, Washington State University Libraries MASC.

America is often characterized a melting pot – an experiment where a plethora of different traditions come together to form a common theme. In becoming American, we detach from our native cultures. We no longer have ancestors. We submit to the hegemonic nature of American popular culture and its shifting definitions of who we are. America’s own identity is an inherently transitional and divided one, and so concordantly in tempo we follow, ceaselessly diverging and melding, never coming to rest, and remaining forever divided within ourselves. As our identities are perpetually being negotiated and re-negotiated with each new interaction, how many hands touch us and influence our being? By the time we reach adulthood, our fully formed selves, are we truly any longer our own?

A humanistic democratic culture should respect individual ethnic identities and encourage different cultural traditions to develop fully their potential for expression of the democratic ideals of freedom and equality. The ideal form of multiculturalism attempts to promote a changing understanding of our nation, its values, and its faults – but to what purpose? Iranian-American identity represents a form of ethno-futurism in that is inherently liminal, transitional and therefore not easily defined. An ethno-futurist perspective asks: Who are we? Where do we come from? Where are we going? It seeks to answer these questions by creating a bridge between the national and the international, between and beyond the collective pasts and futures of our ethnic cultures as Iranians. It recognizes that we live in a fragmented space in-between Iran and America, and encourages us to create our own authentic cultures and identities, simply by being. Framing the discussion of identity politics through ethno-futuristic contexts gives us Iranian-Americans an opportunity to define ourselves in innovative ways that are authentic and independent of any prior connotations or restrictions surrounding race, culture or politics. To resolve the scrutiny of “Where are you from?” the ethno-futurist posits simply, “I am.”

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