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Checking White, Feeling Brown: Iranian-American Racial Ambiguity in Relation to Whiteness and Blackness

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Checking White, Feeling Brown

Iranian-American Racial Ambiguity in Relation to Whiteness and Blackness

Senior Project Submitted to
The Division of Social Studies
of Bard College

by
Lily Yasmin Moghtader Mojdehi

Annandale-on-Hudson, New York
May 2019

To three *fershtehs dar behesht* (Persian lit. 'angels in heaven')
My grandparents, Lily Farahi and Mohammad Massoud, and my wise friend and teacher,
Wakil

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PROLOGUE

It was a Sunday afternoon in Red Hook and I was sitting in a room with my co-facilitator, four security guards, and six young boys. One of my extracurricular activities in college was facilitating art workshops at a low security Residential Center for incarcerated youth. Most of the boys were teenagers, so it was common that we would get off topic and talk about our lives. This day was especially memorable, when one of our students, who was white, said the N word. My co-facilitator (who was also white) and I paused, as we attempted to explain why he should never say that word. He then responded to defend his stance: “I was told by one of my Black teachers that I am so ‘black on the inside’ that it’s almost as if someone had poured bleach on me to make my skin white.” He added that on one occasion, a Black mother told him that he is Blacker than her own son. To this, I was speechless. To him, using the N word was almost second nature, because he grew up in a predominantly Black community.

In spite of his explanation, my senses had been offended by his usage of the word, still trying to explain the historical implications of the term and in particular its usage by a white person. More students, including Black students, joined the conversation. One passionately explained that saying the full N word, ending in “er,” is “messed up” however “it’s not a big deal” if he says the abbreviated version: “nigga.” I started to zoom out and for a moment take note of my own identity: I am a second generation Iranian-American telling a group of primarily Black students who can and cannot use the N word. I am a woman from an upper-class background, attending a fancy liberal arts school and I am frequently seen as racially and ethnically ambiguous. Who am I to tell them what to say or not say? They answered this question for me.

“Do you say the N word?” one of my students asked.

“No,” I said.

“But you are Black!”

“No, I am not” I responded, shocked and a little amused.

All of the boys were confused. Then the guessing game began:

“Dominican!”

“No.”

“Puerto Rican!”

“No.”

“El Salvadorian!”

“No.”

I ended the game by sharing that I am Middle Eastern. Again, everyone looked shocked.

“Like... from Egypt,” I said, “Sort of but my family is from Iran.”

“Eye-ran?” One of my students asked.

“No, Eeee-ran.” I said.

“Ohhhh she is like an ock!”¹

“Yeah pretty close,” I said.

As we were packing up, the student who told me I was Black came up to me and said:

“So you’re not white, then?”

“No, I’m not.”

“But if you’re not white, you must be Black!” He replied.

Amused by his deduction, I responded that there are actually many people who are “in between.”

Although this was my first experience discussing my race with the boys at the correctional center, it was by no means unusual for me. I am quite frequently asked where I am from, and depending on my environment, asked if I am white or if I am Black, Puerto Rican, Mexican, Dominican, Asian. This was just another moment where I thought about and tried to understand the polarizing paradigm of whiteness or blackness, one that dominates how we perceive race in our society.

¹ According to Urban Dictionary which is not a reputable source “Ock” is a “Middle Eastern/Arab dude that runs the corner store.” This was definition was by “Real New Yorker” in May 2018

INTRODUCTION

Ali Reza² is a 58-year old first-generation Iranian-American man who has lived in the U.S. for 41 years. He first moved here in 1978, a year before the Iranian Revolution, to study at an American college. As is the case with most Iranian-American immigrants, Ali Reza holds a master's degree. Currently, he is the HR manager at a large tech company. Initially his move to the U.S. was intended to be temporary, and upon completing his Bachelor of Science degree, he was to return to Iran and reunite with his family. However, due to the immense socio-political upheaval caused by the Islamic Revolution, his family departed Iran to join him in the U.S., only a few months following his own migration. After two years in the U.S., Ali Reza and his family obtained Green Cards, rendering them the status of "lawful permanent residents." Upon the completion of the mandatory five-year period as permanent residents, they all became naturalized U.S. citizens.

One of the conditions of U.S. citizenship is completion of the United States Census Bureau's official survey.³ I asked Ali Reza which racial category he chooses when filling out the census, and similar questionnaires. His response revealed the complexities he encounters when faced with such a question: "It is hard for me to answer that question, because technically I am Asian, as Iran is in Asia." He elaborated, "when

² I have given all Iranian pseudonyms to the participants in my study in order to respect their anonymity and protect their privacies.

³ The Census is a survey which provides a tool for the government to determine which communities will get federal funding and how much. It gathers information about one's race, gender, geography, income, etc. The information obtained also determines the number of seats for each state's members of the U.S. Congress. See <https://www.census.gov/about/what.html>

you hear the word ‘Asian’ in the context of U.S demographics, it means Southeast Asia, not the Middle East.” He continued, “I don’t think I would consider myself white, because typically that means European-white. But in Iran we call ourselves *sefeed poost* (Persian, lit. ‘white-skinned’; a qualifying expression denoting whiteness). Having provided this elaborate response, he paused to contemplate. He then concluded that he has always been “confused” as to which category he belongs to on the census, as well as any other form that requires him to designate his race. Needless to say, the ambiguity of how Iranians are racially categorized by the state and society raises questions about racial identity formation in general.

Ali Reza’s confusion is widespread amongst a large number of Middle Eastern-Americans, who remain conflicted in regards to which racial category accurately represents them. Within most official survey forms, in a set of parentheses adjacent to the label “White,” is a brief line explicating that this category *also* includes those of “Middle Eastern or North African” descent. This classification, coupled with its accompanying explanation, reveal the perplexity and contradiction underlying its conceptualization. A crucial issue that fails to be acknowledged is the reality that people of Middle Eastern descent, who are officially classified as “white”, *do not* socially experience life as a white person in the U.S.⁴ The socio-political climate during which Ali Reza immigrated to the U.S. prevented him from navigating the public sphere as a white person. A few months after his arrival for college, hostile tensions began to surface between Iran and United States stemming from the Iran Hostage Crisis—a term propagated by the American media—between 1979-1981.⁵ The Hostage Crisis refers to the occasion in which a group

⁴ John Tehranian, *Whitewashed: America’s Invisible Middle Eastern Minority*, Critical America (New York: New York University Press, 2009), 1–11.

⁵ Discussing former president of ABC Sports and ABC News, journalist Marc Gunter, writes: “Roone Arledge looked at that footage and he saw drama. He ordered the news division to air an Iranian

of university students occupied the U.S. Embassy in Tehran over the course of 444 days and held fifty-two American staff members prisoner.⁶ This was a pivotal point for U.S. and Iran, not only because it severed their respective diplomatic relations with one another, but also because it propagated hostile, and even dangerous, conditions for Iranians residing in the United States.⁷ During this tumultuous period, Iranians, and by virtue anyone who resembled them, such as other Middle Easterners and even Latinx people, experienced overt discrimination that in a number of cases took the form of violent hate crimes.⁸

special after the local late night news show. Working fast, the World News Tonight producer pulled together a team. He summarized the potential news hook: ‘Look what’s happening to the psyche of the American people. We really are being held hostage by this thing’...For one segment of the show they did man-in-the-street interviews. The last man interviewed put an exclamation mark to the unfolding events: ‘When I watch TV, the news, and I see what they do to that flag, it gets me in the heart.’ Roone Arledge heard Americans make that same angry, emotional declaration everywhere he went. He went back to the brass at ABC, made his pitch, and he got the late-night news show for which he had been lobbying. Eleven days after the American hostages had been taken, ABC began regular, unrelenting late-night coverage of ‘America Held Hostage.’ Attached to the title, that night and every night for the next many months, was the number of days the hostages had been held. Each show opened with a heartbreaking still shot of a blindfolded American hostage... The bad guys did their part by burning American flags, hanging effigies of the president, and screaming, on cue for the cameras, ‘*Marg bar Amrika!*’ (sometimes they even yelled out their anti-American chants in English). The only question was when were the good guys going to ride to the rescue? The drama was set.” See Marc Gunther, *The House That Roone Built: The inside Story of ABC News*, 1st ed (Boston: Little, Brown, 1994), 18.

⁶ What is customarily omitted in this narrative as told by Euroamerica—like for instance Ben Affleck’s historically inaccurate film *Argo*, which received the 2012 Academy Award for Best Picture—are the decades of unsolicited and highly problematic involvement of the U.S. in Iranian affairs. As Nikki Keddie, one of the foremost historians of modern Iran states, “When influential Americans convinced President Carter to allow the ex-Shah to come to the United States from Mexico for cancer treatment despite the [Iranian] provisional government’s warnings, the relationship between the two countries changed forever.” See Nikki R. Keddie, *Modern Iran: Roots And Results Of Revolution*, Revised (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2006), 248. As the “straw that broke the camel’s back”, Medea Benjamin refers to this event as the culminating factor that led to the student siege of the U.S. Embassy: “The public was incensed. Passions previously directed entirely at the Shah were suddenly redirected against the United States, reminding Iranians of the U.S. role in the 1953 coup and raising fears that the CIA station in the U.S. Embassy was once again plotting to impose an autocratic monarchy on Iran.” See Medea Benjamin, *Inside Iran: The Real History and Politics of the Islamic Republic of Iran* (New York: OR Books, 2018), 248.

⁷ In 1979 the number of Iranian students registered in American universities was at its peak nearing 50,000. However, because of the additional scrutiny, thousands of them were deported back to Iran. See Mehdi Bozorgmehr, “Iran,” in *The New Americans: A Guide to Immigration since 1965*, ed. Mary C. Waters, Reed Ueda, and Helen B. Marrow, Harvard University Press Reference Library 2 (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2007), 469–478.

⁸ Maghbouleh, *The Limits of Whiteness*, 26–29.

Out of concern for the safety of himself and his family, Ali Reza revealed that after the hostage-taking, he concealed his Iranian identity because “it was downright dangerous to say I am Iranian.” Immediately following the capture of the hostages, President Carter required all Iranian-American students to once again present their already verified immigration documents and to submit to further rounds of screening.⁹ Demonstrations were held across the country, where banners with slogans such as: “Deport all Iranians, Get the Hell out of my Country,” “Iranians are SAND NIGGERS,” and “Piss on Iran” were paraded through the streets.¹⁰ This hostility had become so severe that in 1980, Harvard University professor Dr. Richard N. Frye—one of the top scholars of Iranian Studies—warned his students, “Don’t advertise that you are Iranian, you may be beaten.”¹¹ The events that unfolded following the Hostage Crisis and the ensuing political relations between Iran and the U.S. have influenced how Iranian-Americans are perceived, and especially treated, as *non-white people* in the U.S. Commenting further on his racial identity, Ali Reza noted, that “based on the fact that the government of Iran is a claimed official enemy of the government of the U.S., issues of politics and race are intermingled.”

Despite identifying as non-white, Ali Reza recognizes that in comparison to the majority of Iranians, he retains a greater level of light skin privilege.¹² The ability to obscure his Iranianness on the basis of his lighter complexion, which in turn afforded him a sense of protection, is an example of his privilege. It is significant to note the

⁹ Benjamin, *Inside Iran*, 146.

¹⁰ 6/1/19 1:24:00 PM

¹¹ Marco Brunner, “During the 1979 Hostage Crisis, Iranians in the U.S. Lived in Fear of Deportation,” News site, Timeline, January 2018, <https://timeline.com/1979-hostage-crisis-iranians-in-us-lived-in-fear-of-deportation-97c450f3b7b3>.

¹² Light skin privilege is a term that acknowledges the racial privileges which come with lighter skin being more favored because they are closer to a white phenotype. See Ashley W. Doane, “Rethinking Whiteness Studies,” in *White Out: The Continuing Significance of Racism*, ed. Eduardo Bonilla-Silva and Ashley W. Doane (New York: Routledge, 2003), 3–18.

substantial variation in the physical features and skin color of Iranians. This variation in skin color, complexion, and features is based on the ethnic and geographic diversity of a country, with a history of over two and a half millennia.¹³ This is, in part, why so many Iranians are generally deemed to be racially ambiguous in the U.S. Despite being able to hide the fact that he was Iranian, Ali Reza felt “personally attacked.” He still recalls, the pain he felt looking outside the window of his university’s library, where protestors were shouting and holding posters proclaiming, “Fuck Iran” and “Go Home Camel Jock.”

Certain identity markers, including but not limited to race, ethnicity, sexuality, ability, and education, describe the multifaceted nature of the human condition. In his 2012 book, *Encountering American Faultlines: Race, Class and the Dominican Experience in Providence*, sociologist Jose Itzigsohn writes, “people identify with certain labels that they then use for self-definition and self-description. These labels function as cognitive schema through which people understand themselves and those who surround them.”¹⁴ Employing this framework as a point of departure, in this paper I analyze the various nuances of how different Iranian-Americans conceptualize and understand their own racial and ethnic identities within the context of American society.

Accordingly, I will explore complex questions of racial identity formation through the experiences of first-generation Iranian-Americans who have immigrated and incorporated into American culture. I will also explore these questions through the experiences of second-generation Iranian-Americans who are navigating their identities as children of immigrants. Throughout this thesis, I plan to explore questions that help identify why Iranian-American racial identity is complicated as it exists between the

¹³ Neda Maghbouleh, “From White to What? MENA and Iranian American Non-White Reflected Race,” *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, April 2019, 12–15.

¹⁴ Khodamhosseini and Mostashari, “An Overview of Socioeconomic Characteristics of the Iranian-American Community Based on the 2000 U.S. Census,” 4.

spectrum of whiteness and blackness. How are Iranian-Americans discriminated against in American society? How and to what extent do perspectives pertaining to identity, change or stay the same across two generations of Iranian-Americans? How should an immigrant community that is on the one hand atypically economically prosperous, but on the other experiences both overt and covert forms of racism and discrimination on the basis of their identities, be racially identified? Over the course of this study, attention will be drawn to the extreme nuances of what it means to be “white,” “non-white,” “immigrant” and “Black.” In an analysis of the complexities surrounding Iranian-American racial identity, I question the static definitions of race. Throughout the paper, I assert that race is in fact dynamic and not static.

In an attempt to elicit meaningful answers to these questions outlined above, I examine how different Iranian-Americans self-categorize themselves into different identity markers. These questions investigated not only how Iranian-Americans perceive their own racial identities, but also how outsiders discern their racial and ethnic identities. My research is based on twenty-one in-depth interviews of first and second-generation Iranian-Americans. This chapter contains a literature review and methodologies section situating my next three chapters that outline my empirical and theoretical findings. I explore how Iranian-American racial identity connects to sociological research on immigration/incorporation, and racial theories on whiteness and blackness.

This chapter begins with a section reviewing the body of literature that I have primarily drawn upon in formulating the theoretical frameworks of my analyses. It is followed by a section outlining the methodologies on the basis of which I conducted my own case studies: twenty-one interviews with first and second-generation Iranian-

Americans. These are the basis of my qualitative and quantitative findings that I present throughout the rest of the chapters.

My findings are organized into the three following empirical chapters. Chapter two further discusses the ambiguous nature of Iranian-American racial identity. I will examine my participants' different definitions of race and ethnicity based on their experiences defining themselves and being defined by others. In chapter three, I will discuss Iranian-Americans' proximity to whiteness. In chapter four, I will discuss Iranian-American proximity to blackness.

CHAPTER 1: LITERATURE, TERMS, AND METHODS

I. Defining Whiteness

Iranian-American identity exists in a racial paradox of being legally classified as white and socially perceived as non-white. This paradox questions what it means to fit in the category of being “white.” Sociologist and author of “Rethinking Whiteness Studies,” Ashley “Woody” Doane defines whiteness: “In the context of the U.S. racial system, whiteness evolved from a relatively nebulous descriptive term to a basis for the rights and privileges of citizenship and with the rise of scientific racism a claim to superiority on the basis of biological differences.”¹⁵ The ideology of whiteness was constructed as a political tool to maintain the social order of white as one belonging to the superior race. This ideology has been used to justify a racialized society organized by “in-group” and “out-group” members of society that are socially and historically marginalized. I found that many of my first-generation participants embraced their own proximity to whiteness and are comfortable identifying as white whereas many second-generation participants understood their ethnic identities privileged status in society, and yet are are uncomfortable identifying as white.

In the book, *Legacies: The Story of the Immigrant Second Generation*, Portes and Ruben investigate the lives of first and second-generation immigrants. One of the many narratives they collected was from the daughter of a Korean immigrant. She shared: “my identity is hardly clear-cut. To my parents, I am all American...I identify with American,

¹⁵ Ashley W. Doane, “Rethinking Whiteness Studies,” in *White Out: The Continuing Significance of Racism*, ed. Eduardo Bonilla-Silva and Ashley W. Doane (New York: Routledge, 2003), 11.

but Americans do not identify with me...When my parents boarded the plane, I don't think they imagined the rocks in the path of their daughter who can't even pronounce her own name."¹⁶ This narrative reflects a common disconnect between first and second-generation immigrants. While her parents were mostly concerned with her identity as an American, she was more cognizant of the fact that her Korean identity is racially seen as other in the U.S. Comparatively, a few of my second-generation participants revealed that, having grown up in the U.S., they did not conceptualize race in the same way their parents did.

Neda Maghbouleh, author of *The Limits of Whiteness: Iranian Americans and the Everyday Politics of Race* researches how race and racism form the identities of Iranian-Americans while analyzing the "limits of whiteness." She defines the terms "white" and "non-white" as "in-group/out-group dynamics with massive social, political, and economic consequences, reproduced through cognitive, moral and cultural frames" from Charles Mills's book *The Racial Contract*. Mills defines race as a category that represents "subordinate personhood."¹⁷ Using Mills' definition of race for framework, Maghbouleh coins two terms in order to describe the complexities of race and whiteness. "Racial Hinges" is a term used to describe Iranians as a group that "can be marshaled by a variety of legal and extralegal actors into a symbolic hinge that opens or closes the door to whiteness as necessary."¹⁸ "Racial loopholes" describes the experiences or contradictions of a group's racial categorization as white, misrepresenting the experience of being racialized. She describes racialized experiences as "bottom-up" racial knowledge compared to "top-down" racial knowledge that legally categorizes Iranians as white.

¹⁶ Alejandro Portes and Rubén G. Rumbaut, *Legacies: The Story of the Immigrant Second Generation* (Berkeley : New York: University of California Press ; Russell Sage Foundation, 2001), 191.

¹⁷ Charles W. Mills, *The Racial Contract*, Nachdr. (Ithaca, NY: Cornell Univ. Press, 2011).

¹⁸ Maghbouleh, *Limits of Whiteness*, 5.

Aware of the racial hinges and loopholes that exist for Iranian-Americans, my research explores how different experiences have impacted how Iranian-Americans self-identify as “white” or “non-white.”

The legal categorization of whiteness became controversial when people from Europe started immigrating to the U.S. during the nineteenth century. White hegemony is an idea that depicts how America’s culture and political interests are overpowered by the whiteness, interests of the white people and white supremacy.¹⁹ Therefore becoming American translates to assimilating into White Anglo Saxon culture. The category of whiteness was also questioned by the end of 1960s when an influx of immigrants of color migrated to the U.S. and did not fit into the white hegemony. In fact, some immigrants of color incorporated into the category of racial minorities instead of ethnic minorities, because they had more in common with Black Americans.²⁰ Iranians fit in between the category of ethnic minority and racial minority because many Iranians experienced upward mobility like other white immigrants, while also experiencing discrimination based on their racial identity.

Like Bonilla-Silva, many social scientists consider Iranians to be white because their high education and income levels have helped them incorporate into the white American mainstream. An Iranian Studies Group at MIT synthesized the findings of the 2000 U.S. census on the Iranian-American Community. Their surveys suggest that Iranians are the highest educated ethnic group in America.²¹ The average educational

¹⁹ Doane, “Rethinking Whiteness Studies”, 3–18.

²⁰ Josh DeWind and Philip Kasinitz, “Everything Old Is New Again? Processes and Theories of Immigrant Incorporation,” *The International Migration Review* 31, no. 4 (1997): 1105.

²¹ Ali Khodamhosseini and Ali Mostashari, “An Overview of Socioeconomic Characteristics of the Iranian-American Community Based on the 2000 U.S. Census,” Census Report (Cambridge, MA: Massachusetts Institute of Technology, February 2004), <http://www.rozanehmagazine.com/MayJune2006/Iranian-American%20Community%20Socio-econ%20Overview.pdf>.

attainments of Iranian-Americans greatly exceed the national average for Americans. The average income for Iranian-Americans also exceeds the average income of an average American household. According to the 2000 census, “the average value of an Iranian-American home is 2.5 times that of the average home nationally.”²² Generally most of the Iranians living in the United States are socially secure, and live amongst the upper strata of society.

Eduardo Bonilla Silva created a chart that categorizes different immigrant groups along the lines of whiteness and non-whiteness. The chart was created to predict the future of whiteness and is organized by “Whites,” “Honorary Whites” and “Collective Blacks.” These groups are categorized by: education, wealth, income, occupation, self-identification, perceptions of other racial groups, and skin tone. He also states that intermarriage could also contribute to a “dissipation of ethnicity” for “honorary white” groups. This theory is significant, because it suggests that white supremacy and racial hierarchies will exist in different forms, as the white population in the U.S. decreases in size.²³ Middle Easterners are categorized in the “Honorary Whites” section of the chart along with “light skinned Latinos, Japanese-Americans, Korean-Americans, Asian-Indians, Chinese-Americans, and most Multiracials.”²⁴

Not only have most Iranian-Americans successfully integrated into American white hegemonic society, but also many mostly—first-generations—self-identify as Aryan. This in turn, also complicates the idea that Iranians are the “non-white.” The Pahlavi regime in Iran (1925 to 1979) was motivated to compete with powerful Western

²² Khodamhosseini and Mostashari, “An Overview of Socioeconomic Characteristics of the Iranian-American Community Based on the 2000 U.S. Census”, 4.

²³ Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, *Racism without Racists: Color-Blind Racism and the Persistence of Racial Inequality in America*, Fourth edition (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2014), 279.

²⁴ Bonilla-Silva, 278.

forces and had therefore established laws and policies promoting a culture of secularization and modernization. In order to support and propagate the idea that Iran was a powerful nation, the Pahlavi regime required all schools to teach the Aryan history of Iran. This history states that European people originated from the Persian Empire and Iranians used to look like fair skinned and light eyed Europeans.²⁵ The regime's narrative that Iranians are all descendants of the Aryan people which was disseminated for 54 years, could have possibly been ingrained in the first-generation Iranians who immigrated to the U.S. conceiving of their racial identity as nothing but "white."

Despite what the data above may suggest, Neda Maghbouleh states that imagining Iranians as an ethnic group and not a race erases the experiences of many Iranians who have encountered racism based on their Iranian identity. According to Omi and Winant, ethnicity represents a group's culture and descent. Ethnic minorities are also commonly associated with white European immigrants who incorporated into America's white culture by working hard and achieving success. Examining the idea that Iranians are like European immigrants because the majority of them have achieved socio-economic success, Maghbouleh interrogates how whiteness operates. She does that by understanding how Iranians came to be legally categorized as white and analyzing if the American society actually considers them white. I also research the tension between top-down and bottom-up racial knowledge in order to understand how my participants experience their racial identity. I use theories of whiteness and blackness in order to situate the ways in which Iranian-Americans exist within the spectrum.

²⁵ Maghbouleh, *The Limits of Whiteness*, 55.

II. Defining the Color Line

Redefining Frederick Douglass' definition of the color line as a reference to racial segregation between blacks and whites, W. E. B., Du Bois defines color line as "the relation of the darker to the lighter races of men in Asia and Africa, in America and the islands of the sea."²⁶ He uses this term to emphasize the fact that race and racism shape our modern society on a global scale. The color line, with white on one side and black on the other, includes all people of color. The color line is the full spectrum of race. "People of Color" is a term that refers to people of non-white and non-European descent.²⁷ This term is complicated because there are people of non-white descent who do have white skin and also benefit from white privilege; this is one of the reasons why race is subjective, or dynamic, or an experienced phenomenon. Racial theorist Margaret Anderson defines white privilege as a means of not worrying if any of your achievements or failures "will be seen as happening *because* of their race".²⁸ In other words, having or benefiting from white privilege is a way of being "outside" of race, which is what makes it the ultimate privilege of a racialized society. The term, "people of color" was used as means of self-identification, by some of my participants who conceived of their identity as non-white and non-European descent. Iranian-Americans are an ethnic and racial population that exists between darker and lighter races.

In his article "Homeland Insecurities: Racial Violence the Day after September 11," Muneer Ahmad cites Toni Morrison's essay, in which she argued that a part of the naturalization process for immigrants in the United States is encompassing the belief that

²⁶ W. E. B. Du Bois, "The Negro and the Warsaw Ghetto," in *Jewish Life*, 1952, reprinted in *The Social Theory of W. E. B. Du Bois*, ed. Phil Zuckerman (Thousand Oaks, CA: Pine Forge Press, 2004), 45–46.

²⁷ Nadia Al-Yagout, "Who Is a 'Person of Color?,'" *Humboldt Journal of Social Relations* 39 (2017): 5–7.

²⁸ Margaret Andersen, "Whitewashing Race," in *White Out*, n.d. 26.

African Americans are subordinate. Using the color line, Ahmad suggests that after the immigration law of 1965.²⁹ Latinx and Asian immigrants not only assimilated into a society where they learned to subordinate African Americans but also, were subordinated for their own identities as well.³⁰

Also using and expanding the Black and white binary, C. Kim coined the term “racial triangulation.” This theory claims that certain racial groups can be understood and racialized in relation to each other rather than existing on a one-dimensional color line. She uses Asian Americans as an example of this notion, positioning them as inferior to whites, but superior to Blacks in terms of American stereotypes and cultural values, such as work ethic and family commitment.³¹ C. Kim rated Asian Americans low in terms of “civic acceptance” and vulnerable to powerful stereotypes such as “model minority” and “perpetual foreigner.” In their article, “The Marginalized “Model” Minority: An Empirical Examination of the Racial Triangulation of Asian Americans,” Xu and Lee state that stereotypes such as model minority hide the fact that Asian Americans’ poverty rate is actually higher than whites.³² Despite some Asian American racial groups achieving socio-economic success and stability, attitudes towards Asians in the U.S. are still tinted by racial prejudices. This theory is an attempt to expand our ideas about racial categorization and interracial power dynamics.³³

²⁹ Andersen notes that this law eliminated the quota system which resulted in a large population of Latinx and Asian immigrants moving to the U.S. and shifting a majority European immigrant population. See Andersen, 31.

³⁰ Muneer Ahmad, “Homeland Insecurities: Racial Violence the Day after September 11,” *Social Text* 20, no. 3 (72) (September 1, 2002): 102.

³¹ Ahmad, “Homeland Insecurities: Racial Violence the Day after September 11,” 102.

³² Sheila D. Ards et al., “Racialized Perceptions and Child Neglect,” *Children and Youth Services Review* 34, no. 8 (August 2012): 1483.

³³ Jun Xu and Jennifer C. Lee, “The Marginalized ‘Model’ Minority: An Empirical Examination of the Racial Triangulation of Asian Americans,” *Social Forces* 91, no. 4 (2013): 1363–97.

Similar to the Asian Americans, Iranian-Americans who are among the highest educated immigrant group in the U.S. have been frequently stereotyped as high achievers and successful professionals. Maz Jobrani, a famous Iranian-American comedian, typically open his acts with the line: “if you are not a doctor, engineer or lawyer, you are not Iranian!” Similar to what Xu and Lee noted about Asian Americans and despite their high number of successful assimilations, Iranian-Americans experience racial prejudices, as a non-white ethnic group. Maghbouleh notes that it is easy to understand Iranians as proximal to whiteness because of their legal status, education and wealth, and also because they are a group of people who believe they are white. Yet, her research shows that Iranians navigate their white and non-white identities in ways that do not reflect what “official whiteness can achieve or mobilize.”³⁴ Indicative of Maghbouleh’s findings is a story shared by one of my participants, an Iranian-American physician with a thriving practice in L.A. He recalled a few instances at which his patients have requested to be seen by a doctor who is not Middle Eastern. In a light-hearted tone, he felt the urge to add: “well, someone requesting a white doctor is out of luck, because all the doctors on the hospital staff are of Middle Eastern or Southeast Asian descent!” Here the doctor’s proximity to whiteness (his status as a medical doctor and socio-economic achievements) did not exclude him from experiencing overt racial discrimination.

While discussing their racial identities, a number of my participants who identify as non-white or people of color, expressed that they are fully aware of the racial privileges they hold. Many of my participants distinguished the degree and caliber of racial discrimination they experienced from the systemic discrimination experienced by Black or Latinx people in the U.S.

³⁴ Maghbouleh, *The Limits of Whiteness*, 9.

III. Legality and Census Making vis-à-vis the Color Line

Historically in the United States, racial categories were established to create a social underclass and upper class. Due to the United States' history of slavery and genocide, racial ideologies have been constructed to legitimize exclusionary laws against Black and Indigenous people.³⁵ Sociologists Omi and Winant suggest that the state is organized through racial institutions, policies, and social relations. For example, in 1790, "The Naturalization Law" was established by Congress to define American citizenship. The Law stated that only free white immigrants would be considered citizens. With the passage of time, this law was extended to different non-white immigrants who were later granted naturalized citizenship.³⁶ During the 19th century, the three legal racial categories were "White," "Negro," and "Indian." The census discloses how society perceives race over time. For example, in 1848 Mexicans were defined as white, in 1950-1960 they were categorized as "Persons of Spanish Mother Tongue" and in 1980, "Hispanic," a new category that was created for them. Historically, immigrant groups were only able to change their racial categorization and legal rights through the legal system with cases going to the Supreme Court.³⁷

As a legal matter, Iranian-Americans do not have a distinct category that describes their racial positionality in the American society. In *The Limits of Whiteness*, Maghbouleh, outlines different legal cases that traces how historically, Iranian identity has existed between whiteness and non-whiteness. She examines federal cases, starting in

³⁵ Derrick Bell, *Race, Racism, and American Law*, 6th ed (New York: Aspen Publishers, 2008), 110–116.

³⁶ Michael Omi and Howard Winant, *Racial Formation in the United States: From the 1960s to the 1990s*, 2nd ed (New York: Routledge, 1994).

³⁷ Omi and Winant, *Racial Formation in the United States*, 82.

1909, in which Iranian whiteness or non-whiteness was used to either support or deny the whiteness of other ethnic immigrants. Linguistics, geography, religion, and other socio-historical factors were used to determine if Iranians were either white or not white.³⁸ For example, in 1909, *In re Najour* was the first case in the U.S. history which determined a Middle Easterner as “white.” In this case, Najour, a Christian Syrian immigrant from Lebanon was classified as white. The court relied on ethnographer, A.H. Keane’s theory which classifies Iranian, (as well as North African, European, Indian, Western Asian and Polynesian) people as Caucasian. Accordingly, an Iranian filing a similar claim would have been legally classified as white in 1909. However, in the same year, *In re Halladjian* claimed that Armenians were white based on the premise that Iranians (from which Armenians had to defend themselves) were foreign, non-white, monstrous invaders. While the court in *In re Najour* defined “whiteness” based on ethno-linguistic theory, the *Halladjian* court focused only on the prevalent social standards to define “whiteness.” In *Halladjian*, Iranians were looked at as “fire worshippers” because of their Zoroastrian roots while, Armenians who practiced Christianity, were viewed as more likely to assimilate because they were viewed closer to Europeans and had shared Christian values. These different court cases reveal how Iranian immigrants in the U.S. have historically moved back and forth between the white and non-white spectrum.

IV. Defining Blackness

Whiteness symbolizes safety, security, success, and power, while blackness symbolizes danger, violence, failure, and inferiority.³⁹ I situate Iranian-American racial

³⁸ Maghbouleh, *The Limits of Whiteness*, 18–19.

³⁹ Charles W. Mills, “White Supremacy as Sociopolitical System: A Philosophical Perspective,” in *White Out: The Continuing Significance of Racism*, ed. Eduardo Bonilla-Silva and Ashley W. Doane (New York: Routledge, 2003), 35–48.

identity somewhere in between whiteness and blackness, as I found that my participants' racial identities are formed in relation to both constructs. Analyzing blackness in her book *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being*, Christina Sharpe writes about how blackness itself is “the weapon” which gets Black bodies killed. She expands on the black experience by stating:

living in/wake of slavery is living “the afterlife of property” and living the afterlife of *partus sequitur ventrem* (that which is brought forth follows the womb), in which the Black child inherits the non/status, the non/being of the mother. To be in the wake is to live in those no's, to live in the no-space that the law is not bound to respect, to live in no citizenship, to live in the long time of Dred and Harriet Scott; and it is more than that.⁴⁰

Sharpe describes the true impact of what it means for Black people to live “in wake of slavery.” A Black child following their Black mother has no choice over the fact that he inevitably inherits a “non/status” position in society. Sharpe does not describe blackness as an inferior way of being, but rather as a way of non-being. Black people exist on the bottom of society's racial hierarchy and in order to understand how any person of non-white and non-black descent (like Iranian-Americans) racially identify, we must question how they relate to whiteness (superior status) and blackness (non/status).

Many of my participants spoke about experiences where they felt “dehumanized,” “demoralized,” “excluded,” and therefore more proximal to blackness. A few of my interviewees experienced overt discrimination based on their race that made them confident in defining their racial identity as non-white.

⁴⁰ Christina Elizabeth Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (Durham London: Duke University Press, 2016), 15.

V. Racial Formation/Orientalism

Sociologists Omi and Winant define racial formation as “the sociohistorical process by which racial categories are created, inhabited, transformed, and destroyed.”⁴¹ Racial formation theory is a concept highlighting the fact that race and racial inequality have shaped the social structures in American society. More importantly, they highlight that racial formation is a social, political, and cultural process. Linking historical oppression and contemporary labels of minority status, Omi and Winant state, “Native Americans faced genocide, blacks were subjected to racial slavery, Mexicans were invaded and colonized, and Asians faced exclusion.”⁴² This theory acknowledges the fact that racial categorization is dynamic and different racial groups each have their own unique historical experiences of being racialized. I question what the socio-historical process of being racialized has been and continues to be for Iranian-Americans in the U.S. Being situated between blackness and whiteness is a complicated place to exist racially, because American society functions on polarizing and concrete labels.

Instead of a black and white binary, an East vs. West binary is used to describe how Middle Easterners are racialized in America. The term Orientalism signifies the construction and classification of the East as the “orient” or the “other,” determined by the West and the dominant Western point of view. Orientalist theory translates into how Iranian people are racialized as “other” by their American peers.⁴³ A number of my participants stated their identities were met with “intrigue” and “exclusion,” because their identities appeared to be so “different and interesting” to some, as well as “different and threatening” to others.

⁴¹ Omi and Winant, *Racial Formation in the United States*, 55.

⁴² Omi and Winant, 1.

⁴³ Edward W Said, *Orientalism* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1978).

Political events that have contributed to the racialization of Iranian-Americans in the U.S. have occurred fairly recently. Examples of such events are: The Iran Hostage Crisis in 1979, The September 11 attacks in 2001, President George W. Bush identifying Iran as the “axis of evil” in 2002, and the most recent travel ban targeting Muslim countries by President Trump (of which Iran was one of the seven named countries). The consequences of these different political events have not only created a stigma for the Middle Easterners, but also constructed them as a threat to American society. As a result, Middle Easterners have experienced discrimination based on their appearances or the way they dress (e.g. hijab for women and beard for men) because they are perceived as crazy, barbaric, irrational, fundamentalist and violent people.⁴⁴ The public response to political events such as the Hostage Crisis is explained by Edward Said’s theory on how the effects of imperialism and colonialism have shaped the Euro-American conceptions of regions of the Asian continent as “other.”⁴⁵

In his book, *Covering Islam*, Edward Said writes about how, for months (444 days to be exact), the Hostage “Crisis” was discussed on television, radio and newspapers, counting the days the 52 Americans were held as hostages. The U.S. media, on a daily basis intentionally and dramatically depicted Iran as dangerous, uncivilized, militant, and anti-American.⁴⁶ Sociologist and researcher of Iranian-American racial identity, Neda Maghbouleh describes this as a public backlash and a “media panic.” For 444 days the hostage crisis was the subject of a nightly prime-time ABC program named: “The Iran Crisis: America Held Hostage.” For over a year, this nightly program, showed images of

⁴⁴ Maghbouleh, *Limits of Whiteness*, 26–31.

⁴⁵ Edward W Said, *Covering Islam* (New York: Fodor’s Travel Guides, 1996), 54–59

⁴⁶ Edward W. Said, *Covering Islam: How the Media and the Experts Determine How We See the Rest of the World*, Rev. ed., 1st Vintage Books ed (New York: Vintage Books, 1997), lxiii.

Iranian protestors burning the U.S. flag and shouting “Death to America.”⁴⁷ This image has seeped into the general American consciousness. Said states that “First of all, it seemed that ‘we’ were at bay, and with us the normal, democratic, rational order of things. Out there, writhing in self-provoked frenzy with ‘Islam’ in general, whose manifestation of the hour was a disturbingly neurotic Iran.”⁴⁸ This quote delineates the relationship between the East and the West: because, “we” refers to Western Americans who represent rational thought and livelihood, while Iran represents an Eastern “out there,” a backwards, irrational place because Islam has taken over the country. The way the American conscious views Iran as a country reflects how American people view and treat Iranians living in the U.S. The racial discrimination and prejudices Iranians face is possibly rooted in non-Iranian people viewing them as fundamentalist Muslims, terrorists, and people from an exotic and oppressive land.⁴⁹

VI. Incorporation

I use ‘incorporation’, a term used by different immigration scholars to describe the process of becoming American. Compared to “assimilation” the term incorporation is a more accurate description of becoming American, because it includes how race influences the experiences of different populations immigrating to the U.S.⁵⁰ Richard Alba and Victor Nee questioned the old functionalist and structuralist perspectives of assimilation which assume immigrant groups assimilate into a white, middle class American society. They cite various authors, such as Milton Gordon, who believed in the

⁴⁷ Maghbouleh, *The Limits of Whiteness*, 26.

⁴⁸ Said, *Covering Islam*, 83–84.

⁴⁹ Said, 84.

⁵⁰ Itzigsohn, *Encountering American Faultlines*, 5.

idea that black Americans and racial minorities needed to work harder to assimilate and become more like middle class Protestant whites.⁵¹

It seems that the pattern of Iranians' assimilation is consistent with Milton Gordon's structural assimilation theory that states "the entry of members of an ethnic minority into primary relations with the majority group."⁵² The majority of Iranians *did* reach economic upward mobility in the U.S. As an immigrant group, Iranians are unique in that the majority of them were recent college students who went into high income earning professions such as engineering or medicine.⁵³ Itzigsohn introduced a theoretical approach called "ethnoracial incorporation" that is aimed to encompass the complex nature of immigrant incorporation and the importance of class stratification and racialization.⁵⁴ A majority of Iranian-Americans entered the U.S. with their race, being categorized as legally white, and with socioeconomic privileges that have created a trajectory of success for themselves and future generations. Their process of incorporating will tell us something about America's racial and class stratifications. What does the fact that Iranians have incorporated into a high level of society tell us about how American society perceives Iranians?

Omi and Winant state that 'structural assimilation' is assumed to take place as immigrant groups pass beyond their 'fresh off the boat' status and gain the acceptance of the majority."⁵⁵ This outdated theory of assimilation poses the question of whether Iranians have gained "the acceptance of the majority." These questions are complicated,

⁵¹ Richard Alba and Victor Nee, "Rethinking Assimilation Theory for a New Era of Immigration," *The International Migration Review* 31, no. 4 (1997): 826–874.

⁵² Richard Alba and Victor Nee, "Rethinking Assimilation Theory for a New Era of Immigration", 830.

⁵³ Mehdi Bozorgmehr, "From Iranian Studies to Studies of Iranians in the United States," *Iranian Studies* 31, no. 1 (1998): 19.

⁵⁴ Itzigsohn, *Encountering American Faultlines*, 14.

⁵⁵ Omi and Winant, *Racial Formation in the United States*, 21.

because while Iranian immigrants are navigating economic and educational privileges, they are also going through non-white social and racial experiences.

Author of the book, *Encountering American Faultlines*, Jose Itzigsohn uses the experience of Dominican immigrants in Providence, Rhode Island as a case study to question what it means to be an immigrant of color in American society. He states that inequality in America is significantly high and it is imperative to consider how immigrants incorporate themselves into a society organized by unequal racial and class boundaries. One of the arguments he makes is that immigrants of color often experience a path of incorporation which involves poverty and racial discrimination. According to Itzigsohn, “Immigrant groups without strong ethnic communities and without economic or educational resources suffer the full impact of poverty and discrimination.”⁵⁶ Iranian-Americans, in general, can be considered a group with a strong ethnic community, economic and educational resources, because they are an immigrant group that has not experienced the full impact of poverty or discrimination. According to Itzigsohn, if being an immigrant of color means incorporating into America’s racial and class stratifications, does this mean that Iranians are not immigrants of color? It is important to ask this question, because understanding how immigrant populations incorporate into society reflects how they are racialized in American society.

In summary, these theories are intended to support the question of how do the experiences of Iranian-Americans impact their racial identities. Before this question is answered, it is important to analyze the different definitions of whiteness, blackness, race, and how Iranian-American identity has complicated these categories and ideologies.

⁵⁶ Itzigsohn, *Encountering American Faultlines*, 9.

VII. The Three Waves of Iranian Immigration

Historically, Western powers such as Britain and the U.S. have been involved in Iranian politics for their own economic interest in the revenues from Iran's oil production. One such example is the covert intervention by the CIA in 1953 resulting in a coup d'état in Iran. As a consequence of this American intervention, the democratically elected Iranian prime minister, Mohammad Mosaddegh was overthrown. Mossadegh, who had nationalized Iran's oil industry, for the first time, was considered a serious threat to the economic and strategic interest of the U.S. and Britain.⁵⁷ The CIA removed Mossadegh, a nationalist figure, by staging a coup which led to the death of a few hundred and a regime change. It also leads to the imprisonment and eventual death of Mossadegh, who became known as a national hero. The U.S. reinstated Mohammad Reza Shah, who had fled to Switzerland, back to power. He, in turn, recreated an even stronger monarchy and ruled Iran for 26 years, until he was overthrown in 1979. This marks the beginning of the anti-American sentiment that surfaced in Iran.

Prioritizing modernization, the Shah's government sponsored middle class families to send their children, (mostly sons), to universities abroad.⁵⁸ As a result, a large number of Iranian students claimed a student visa and immigrated to the U.S. to obtain higher education between 1960-1970s. With the large number of admissions to the U.S., many young Iranian college students became permanent residents and set roots in the U.S.⁵⁹.

⁵⁷ Keddie, *Modern Iran*, 234–37.

⁵⁸ Maghbouleh, *The Limits of Whiteness*, 25.

⁵⁹ "Iranian Immigration to the United States: 2006-2016," Demographic Report (Washington D.C.: Public Affairs Alliance of Iranian Americans, 2014), 3.
<https://paaia.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/iranian-americans-immigration-and-assimilation.pdf>.

The second wave of Iranians immigrated to the U.S. just prior to and immediately following the 1979 revolution. The number of immigrants tripled during the decade of the 1970s.⁶⁰ Second wave immigrants consisted of religious minorities fearing persecution, upper- and middle-class families escaping political instability, conscripts escaping the Iran-Iraq war, and students adjusting their status to permanent residents. Furthermore, for many immigrants who were already here, the establishment of an Islamic Republic of Iran represented an unfamiliar country that they did not want to return to, adding to the growth of the diaspora in the U.S.⁶¹ Between 1978–95, almost 82,465 Iranians became naturalized U.S. citizens.⁶²

Reduced in number, the third wave of immigrants, starting in the late 1990s to the present, are made up of political dissidents such as Iranian ethnic, religious, sexual minorities, and refugees. The third wave of immigrants are likely from a lower socioeconomic means in comparison to the second wave immigrants.⁶³

This brief history outlining the three waves of migration, is an attempt to conceptualize how age and sociopolitical context shape the ways in which Iranian-Americans perceive their racial identity. I have classified my participants into three categories, according to their respective generation, or alternatively, the timing of their immigration to the United States. The three categories are first-generation Iranians (immigrated as late teens or adults), 1.5-generation Iranians (immigrated in their childhood) and second-generation Iranians (were born and raised in the U.S.).⁶⁴

⁶⁰ “Iranian Immigration to the United States: 2006-2016,” 4–6.

⁶¹ Bozorgmehr, “From Iranian Studies to Studies of Iranians in the United States,” 1.

⁶² “Iranian Immigration to the United States: 2006-2016,” 3.

⁶³ Bozorgmehr, “From Iranian Studies to Studies of Iranians in the United States,” 6.

⁶⁴ I borrow this framework as proposed by Bozorgmehr. See Bozorgmehr, “From Iranian Studies to Studies of Iranians in the United States,” 10.

VIII. Methodologies

I collected my research data through conducting in-depth interviews, paired with a short-written questionnaire that collected basic demographic information from each participant. Conducting in-depth interviews is important for my research, as it provides a comprehensive and detailed understanding of my participants' stories that have formed their racial identities. Itzigsohn stated that "the ways of being of people--that is, their everyday relationships and practices--always transcend their ways of belonging---that is, the boundaries of the identities that they adopt."⁶⁵ These interviews revealed how my participants self-categorize themselves, based on the meanings they have attached to their personal experiences and social encounters here in the U.S. and in Iran. My interview questions focused on topics such as my participant's own or their parents' immigrant story, messages they received about their racial identity from their family, friends and media growing up, their experiences with racial discrimination, how they relate to different racial categories on surveys, and how they relate to people of different races and ethnicities. I interviewed twenty-one first, 1.5, and second-generation Iranian-Americans, all of whom were older than 18. My participants varied in socio-economic status, age, religion, and place of residence in the U.S. The majority of my participants are from Southern California. My interviews lasted about an hour to an hour and a half, each. With the exception of three interviews that took place in person, the rest were conducted over the phone. I assigned each of my participants a pseudonym. These pseudonyms will be used to replace the names of individuals as well as institutions that they are associated with. I recruited my participants using snowball sampling.⁶⁶

⁶⁵ Itzigsohn, *Encountering American Faultlines*, 118.

⁶⁶ A method of gathering research subjects through an initial contact who refers you to another contact, and eventually the web of contacts expand. I had three points of entry. First, I asked my parents who are well connected in the Iranian American community in San Diego and other areas of the U.S. to put

Out of the twenty-one interviewees, six are *first-generation* Iranian-Americans, three of whom are between the ages of 45 and 55, and permanently relocated to the U.S. due to social and political instability caused by the 1979 Iranian Revolution. These participants completed their high school education in Iran, and received their university education either in Europe or the U.S. There are three outliers in this group, whose move to the U.S. was not associated with the 1979 Revolution. Golnaz, a 70-year old woman, immigrated to the U.S. in 1956 at the age of 14, years before the Islamic Revolution. Golnaz' family had always wanted her to be exposed to and learn the American culture and receive an American education. She lived with an American host family during her high school years in the U.S. Upon graduating from an American university, Golnaz returned to Iran where she lived for nearly ten years. She moved back to the U.S., this time with her 7-year old daughter, at the onset of the Revolution.

Acquiring Western education, particularly from an American college, is widespread amongst and quite characteristic of first-generation Iranian-Americans between ages 40 and 70. This was a result of the amicable U.S.-Iran relations and Iran's quest for modernization during the mid-1950s and 1960s.⁶⁷ It is important to note that the three participants constituting this group are from middle-to-upper class Iranian backgrounds which, in turn, provided them with the financial means to study abroad, escape, relocate, or travel back to Iran in order to bring some of their assets to the U.S. In

me in contact with a few of their first-generation friends. Second, in order to have religiously diverse participants, I asked my family members to connect me with their friends who are heavily involved in the Bahá'í Iranian community as well as the Jewish Iranian community. These two groups constitute the two main religious minorities among Iranians. Third, I reached out to my own connections of second-generation Iranian Americans from Persian dance class at the Persian Cultural Center in San Diego, as well as a group of Iranian American students whom I met in college. The following paragraphs provides descriptions of my interviewees, the wave of immigrants to which they belong, and what patterns they hold based on the age and sociopolitical time period they immigrated.

⁶⁷ Benjamin, *Inside Iran*, 77.

addition, they were able to sustain themselves financially for a period of time before they found employment in the U.S.

Another outlier from the first-generation bracket is Omid, a 35-year old Jewish-Iranian man who was born in Iran five years after the Revolution. He emigrated to the U.S. with his family at the age of 17, amidst the height of the Iran-Iraq war, in pursuit of better opportunities. He is an outlier, because he doesn't fit the classic story of first-generation Iranians moving to the U.S. as a result of the political turmoil caused by the revolution. He emigrated to the U.S. in 2012, well after the 1979 Iranian Revolution. The third outlier is Pirooz, a 26-year old, Bahá'í man who moved to the United States in 2014, seeking refuge as a religious minority. Like Omid and Golnaz, he too, is an anomaly in my first-generation category, albeit for different reasons. Pirooz is the only participant who fits into the third wave of immigration. In contrast to the other two outliers, who both come from similar upper-middle class backgrounds, Pirooz arrived in the U.S. with far fewer financial resources. In fact, today, solely on the basis of his annual income, he belongs to the lower economic class.

Each of the six first-generation Iranian-Americans interviewees had very distinct narratives regarding their immigration to the U.S., or their families' immigration. Some of my participants were able to catch flights out before the airports in the country shut down, arriving to the U.S. on student or temporary visitor visas. Others endured traumatic journeys of being smuggled across the border to Turkey or Pakistan on a trek to Europe, and eventually to the U.S. Each obtained their entry visas and citizenship status in different ways. Some obtained their entry permits through refugee status, the lottery system, tourist or student visas.

The second category in which I have classified my participants is what I have called the “1.5-generation.” I identified five persons (three men and two women) belonging to the category, each of whom immigrated from Iran to the U.S. either during their childhood or adolescence—specifically between the ages of one to ten years old. This group is significant to my research, as they present an experience floating between the first and second-generation. Although they were born in Iran, most of their education and experiences shaping their cultural growth, development, and identity took place in the U.S.

The final category in my study is that of the *second-generation*, which is comprised of eleven Iranian-Americans who were born in the U.S. to parents that, according to my framework, would be considered first-generation. The parents of the second-generation participants relocated to the U.S. from Iran at tumultuous moments in the years following the Revolution, whether during the Hostage Crisis or amidst the Iran–Iraq war. Of the three categories, those forming the second-generation group are the most diverse in terms of age, socio-economic status, sexual orientation, and racial self-identifications. I interviewed college-aged students in their early 20s, as well as a few post-graduate students and adults ranging in age from 30 to 39. Furthermore, second-generation participants encompass the greatest variation in their exposure and connection to both the country *and* culture of Iran. This ranges from matters such as whether they have visited Iran themselves or still have family members living there to their proficiency levels (if at all) of the Persian language or of the vast literary tradition of Persian societies, for instance.

CHAPTER 2: IRANIAN-AMERICAN RACIAL AMBIGUITY—WHO IS DOING THE LABELING?

To be questioned, to be questionable, sometimes can feel like a residence: a question becomes something you reside in. To reside in a question can feel like not being where you are at. Not from here, not? Or maybe to become not is to be wrapped up by an assertion. To be asked “Where are you from?” is a way of being told you are not from here. The questioning, the interrogation, can stop only when you have explained yourself.

—Sara Ahmed⁶⁸

“What are you?” is a question many of my participants are quite used to answering. ‘What are you’ is a subtle way of asking, “Why do you look the way you do?” or “I can’t figure out where you are from, just by looking at you. What is your ethnic or racial background?” Many of my participants could list all the different ethnicities people have asked or assumed they are, such as Mexican, Russian, Italian, Hawaiian, Black, or Spanish, and the list goes on. Not only are many people uncertain about what racial features constitute a person from the Middle East, but also Middle Eastern is not an official legal racial category. These two factors cause confusion for both the outsiders who view Iranians, and for the insiders of the Iranian-American community. Arman, a 49-year-old man, moved to the U.S. when he was 9, and is of the 1.5 generation. He came from an upper middle-class background and personally labels himself as white because he has fair complexion and blue eyes. However, many people in his life have labeled him otherwise. One of many examples, that has stuck deeply in his mind was when 17-year old Arman and his family went to the INS (Immigration and Naturalization Services)—the pre-9/11 version of Homeland Security—to obtain citizenship. The clerk behind the

⁶⁸ Sara Ahmed, *Living a Feminist Life* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017), 116–117.

window questioned and “corrected” his family’s choice in checking “white” on the racial section of the questionnaire. Arman stated:

We went up to the window and they had ethnicity checkboxes and the choices were narrower at that time and the clerk was an older white Irish gentleman who looked at that and said: ‘you are not white’ and said you are ‘medium’ and checked ‘other.’ The interesting thing is that I don’t remember anything else about that day, not our swearing in or the ceremony but what he said to us. That is what stuck out and what does it mean to be ‘medium?’

On the basis of his remarks, I assume that the INS clerk was inferring that Arman and his family could not be white, yet were also not black, and thus were somewhere in-between the two. In other words, the INS clerk might as well have said, “you all are not white, and there is no other racial category that will work for you, so you must fit in the category of ‘other.’” Not only does this instance attest to the often confusing and insubstantial choices provided on racial surveys, but moreover to the general ambiguity that exists towards Iranian racial identity. This ambiguity or uncertainty has created a dissonance between how some Iranian-Americans racially identify, as opposed to how they are perceived by outsiders.

Arman is comfortable identifying as white due to his appearance, which affords him a certain level of white privilege, unlike those of darker complexion in his inner circle. Reflecting on his first years in the U.S., Arman said he felt like a foreigner and cited instances in which, to name a few, people would scream “give us back our hostages” at him in the aftermath of the Hostage Crisis. In another instance, strangers have asked him, or ask him “How’s cab driving going”? in arbitrary environments like the DMV. For Arman, these experiences seemed rather trivial in comparison to the encounters with racism and prejudice other Iranian and non-Iranian friends experience on a daily basis. Although Arman identifies as white, he acknowledges that his racial identity is ambiguous, especially for outsiders. For example, one of his close friends who

(is a Black woman) told him she does not consider him to be white—racially—because he is not a “WASP,” a slang term denoting white Anglo Saxon Protestants. Clearly, in the case of Arman’s friend, her notion of whiteness is predicated not only on color, but additionally on ideological assumptions pertaining to one’s personhood (Anglo Saxon Protestant).

As mentioned in chapter one, Jose Itzigsohn defines identity as a process in which “people identify with certain labels that they then use for self-definition and self-description. These labels function as cognitive schema through which people understand themselves and those who surround them.”⁶⁹ This chapter investigates how, on the bases of their lived experiences, my participants conceptualize their racial identities. Over the course of interviewing twenty-one Iranian-American participants, I was exposed to many perspectives on the various labels and categorizations Iranian-Americans use to define themselves. In many cases, a participant’s own racial identification of themselves did not align with how outsiders might define them, which yet again reveals the ambiguous nature of Iranian-American racial identity.

In the interviews I conducted, each participant was asked which racial category they selected on the U.S. Census Bureau’s form or any survey that had a race category. I then asked them to explain the extent to which their choices reflect how they racially identify themselves. My rationale in doing so was to discern the discrepancies or inconsistencies that may exist between their personal racial self-identification despite the category they choose. Amongst my interviewees, many had experiences of outsiders labeling their racial identity in order to place them in one of the racial categories.

⁶⁹ Itzigsohn, *Encountering American Faultlines*, 118.

Given the inherently ambiguous nature of Middle Eastern racial identity, both in the U.S. and elsewhere, I was not surprised that my interviewees retained a number of stances and approaches concerning how they racially classify themselves on standardized forms. Supported by my research and evidence, second-generation Iranian-Americans formulate their racial identities dependent on variables such as: firsthand experiences or proximity to discrimination prompted by their phenotype, their interactions with and definitions of diversity and race growing up, as well as the extent to which they identify with the customs and traditions of Iranian culture.

I. Race Through the Limits of Racial Surveys

In an attempt to address the limiting parameters that govern our collective understanding of race and whiteness, Neda Maghbouleh coined the term “racial loopholes.” Assessing this issue through the purview of Iranian-Americans, she defines the term as “the everyday contradictions and conflicts that emerge when a group’s legal racial categorization is inconsistent with its on-the-ground experience of racialization or deracialization” (Maghbouleh, 5).⁷⁰ Many of my participants face these “contradictions and conflicts” concerning their racial identities in their daily interactions. One such example is answering rudimentary surveys or questionnaires where information regarding race is requested. Due to the fact that “Middle Eastern” is not considered a racial category, Iranian-Americans, are habitually faced with inconsistent and contradicting labels used to determine their racial categorization. For example, for the sake of fitting into a category, a few of my participants expressed their hesitancy to check “Asian” on racial surveys. Although they were aware that Iran is technically a part of the Asian

⁷⁰ Maghbouleh, *The Limits of Whiteness*, 5.

continent, they believe that the racial category of “Asian,” as conceptualized in the U.S., does not apply to Middle Eastern-Americans.

Bahar, a 36-year-old second-generation woman of lower economic status, self identifies as a woman of color. She is of Middle Eastern descent even though growing up in San Diego most people assumed she was Mexican because of her darker complexion (compared to other Iranians) and straight, thick hair. Throughout her life, Bahar has had multiple experiences with people of Asian descent explaining to her that she should indeed identify as “Asian.” When she was once filing a police report, she was forced to declare her race on a survey that did not offer “Middle Eastern” or “Other” as options. The police officer, who himself was of Asian descent, stated “You should put Asian because you belong to our continent.” She emphasized “*our* continent,” insinuating that the police officer and other people (usually in positions of power) who have expressed similar sentiments, retained some sort of ownership over the continent, and thus over her. Bahar shared a story where her ambiguous racial identity got her in trouble. She described an event that took place in her acting class during which students were playing an improvisation game called “Good, Bad.” She remarked:

The premise is to fill in the blank: the good part about being whatever you are is ____ The bad part is ____ So we are going around and I say the good part about being Middle Eastern is *koobeedeh* (beef kabob) and the bad part about being Middle Eastern is that I am hairier than my boyfriend. After that, the director who is Asian pulled me aside and he said, ‘Say Asian’ so I am biting my tongue and I say ‘okay, I will try that.’ Very literally there is an Asian girl in the crew who uses the line, ‘The good thing about being Asian is that I am not hairier than any of my boyfriends and the bad thing.’ Strategically I said ‘the bad thing about being Asian is being hairier and the good thing is *koobeedeh*,’ which makes no sense at all: like what?! So I went to him and I said, ‘I am sorry there is no association with *koobeedeh* and Asianness, this doesn’t work for me. There is the opposite association with body hair and being Asian. I don’t identify with it.’ He said ‘Okay, you are not going to be in this part of the show,’ and I was like, ‘Okay!’

In this scenario, Bahar had no choice but to take direction from her director, given his position of power within the theater. When she voiced her discomfort, she was deprived of a performance opportunity, which she perceived as “being punished.” Bahar interpreted these experiences as comical, because they testified to the inadequacy of the racial categories available for someone who is Middle Eastern, or of Middle Eastern descent, and does not identify with the experiences of many white people.

Bahar’s sister, Soraya, a 36-year-old second-generation middle-class woman expressed the sense of confusion she encounters when completing racial surveys. Bahar and Soraya, have both experienced racial discrimination from those outside their own ethnicity within their everyday lives, while simultaneously they have experienced exclusion, from within their own community comprised of Iranians and Iranian-Americans. Explaining her refutation to select “white” as her race on such surveys, Soraya rationalizes that she has never been treated as a white person, whether in school or in society at large, and as such should not choose “white.” As a result, when she receives paperwork that asks for her racial classification, she stated: “I have returned the form to my employer and have had them fill it out, which is always a struggle. So, for different jobs, I have been listed as different races. For the city, I was Latina, but when I worked for National University [a private higher education institute in San Diego], I was Hawaiian. What is important is what *they* think I am, not what I think I am” [italics my own]. In her explanation, Soraya is suggesting that racial classifications are concerned with the way that people navigate spaces according to the perceptions of outsiders, and thus categorizations are strictly based upon one’s phenotype.

Soraya is assertive that outsiders see her as “Brown.” She feels that the majority of her encounters with discrimination were not based on the fact that she is seen as

Middle Eastern, but rather due to the fact that she is perceived as an intimidating woman of color. When I asked her why she identified as Brown she said, “I had no choice.” Her stories experiences are reminiscent of Du Bois’s theory of “double consciousness”, as outlined in *The Souls of Black Folk*.⁷¹ Double consciousness is a theory that describes how Black people in America have a distorted view of themselves through the lenses of white people. Soraya identified as Brown, because her experiences constantly reminded her that outsiders saw her as Brown. Soraya racially identifies as Brown and Middle Eastern, however in cases where those labels are not supplied—like the U.S. Census Bureau for instance— she opts to be labeled by an outsider, so long that she is not categorized as white.

Parvin, a 21-year old student attending college in New York is originally from Los Angeles and similar to Soraya confidently does not identify as white. Unlike Soraya, Parvin came to this realization later in life. She spent most of her childhood “ashamed” of her Iranian identity. This is primarily rooted in her upbringing in a household where her mother’s Iranian identity was, and continues to be, shaped by trauma with the residual effects of erasure and shame. While Parvin’s appearance adheres to the Middle Eastern “phenotype” (brown skin, large brown eyes, and thick dark eyebrows), growing up, she racially identified as white. Although she attended public schools in Los Angeles County, in which the student population was primarily comprised of blacks and Hispanics, a majority of Parvin’s friends were in fact white. She explains that she had become accustomed to compartmentalizing her life whereby she kept her culturally Persian family social life separate from that of her “white” school persona. It was only when she arrived to college and came across other Iranians, that she was able to relate to, such as

⁷¹ W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, Reprint, Dover Thrift Editions (New York: Dover, 1994), 2.

those who took pride in their non-white heritage, or those outside the domain of the stereotypically wealthy and superficial Los Angeles Persians, that she began to claim her Iranian identity and heritage.

Although for most of her life she struggled with her relationship to her racial identity, Parvin had a decisive moment of clarity during an instance in college. Her resident advisor told Parvin, so matter-of-factly, that she was white according to the census, to which Parvin defensively responded, “I am not white.” After reflecting critically on her own racial identity, Parvin was adamant that it would be inappropriate, or rather inaccurate, to adopt the white label considering that she and her family have never been treated as such when navigating through society. She told me that “my dad openly says that he will probably never get promoted to what he could be because of his accent...like that’s not white privilege, you know”? In the experience involving her resident advisor, who due to his elevated position within their shared educational institution retained a certain level of authority over her, Parvin, only a freshman at the time, nevertheless corrected him. Though fraught with both apprehension and anxiety on her part, this encounter served as a catalyst for Parvin to, for perhaps the first time, contemplate her racial identity.

This was, in a sense, Parvin’s point of epiphany about her racial category as perceived by others. All four of these examples have a common denominator: someone in a position of power over my participants is asserting and even imposing their own perception and/or understanding about how the participant should racially identify. These examples suggest that different variables such as which continent Iran belongs to, the official racial categories available on the census, and phenotype, impact different people’s conception of race.

II. Checking White, Feeling Brown

Soraya, the 36-year-old Iranian-American from a middle-class background stated: “I refuse to check that I am white... If I was Iranian and I was treated like a white person, I would’ve checked white. But I really don’t feel like that is how I am treated.” Growing up and attending school in a predominantly white neighborhood, Soraya never had the opportunity to question her whiteness, although she notes that her parents would project onto her their beliefs that she (and in fact her whole family) is white. Yet simultaneously, her ‘otherness’ was reinforced by teachers and peers at school on a daily basis. An incident she recalled, which occurred in her kindergarten classroom, provides an insight into how internalization of her ‘otherness’ can be traced back to her early childhood. In an attempt to identify colors that best represented students’ skin tones, her teacher held a number of different colored crayons up to Soraya’s face, “as if she was a makeup artist.” Soraya remembered feeling “mortified” in that moment, unlike the rest of her peers, who were given peach crayons that corresponded with their white complexions, she was singled out. She also has recollections of being referred to as “the brown one” by one of her teachers, who was describing to the principal who had stolen her attendance sheet. At the start of every academic year, Soraya was placed into the classroom designated for primarily Spanish speaking students, because teachers assumed, she spoke Spanish (San Diego has a large Mexican population). Similarly, despite her competency and skill set, she would be put into lower level math classes, where in order to be removed and placed in the correct classrooms she had to perpetually advocate for herself. Throughout her adult life, particularly in relation to her professional life, Soraya has continuously been cast as, and even reported for, being too “angry,” “aggressive,” “loud,” “intimidating,” and “hostile.” These terms, as we have come to know, are racialized tropes that situate

women of color in opposition to characteristics typically attributed to white women, such as respectable, docile, polite, and pleasant.⁷² These represent just a couple of scenarios in which Soraya has encountered both overt and covert racism that have plainly conveyed to her the message, either actively or passively, that she is not treated as a white person, and is thus not “white.” The experiences that have established Soraya’s racial identity are unique, as they were not predicated on her being perceived as Middle Eastern, but rather on the fact she is seen as a brown woman.

Many of my participants who were confident in their racial identities shared different narratives of feeling othered and discriminated against. Cyrus—similar to Soraya—from a very early age was cognizant of the fact that he was different from his white counterparts. Cyrus, a 35-year old second-generation Iranian man who is a high school teacher in San Diego, (in contrast to Soraya), checks white on the census. Unfamiliar with protocol for these types of surveys, he resorted to the instructions provided by his teacher. Nevertheless, he now acknowledges that his social experiences often remind him he is not regarded as white; especially amongst white people. At home, on the other hand, it was instilled in Cyrus that we are all part of a “human family,” and that race and ethnicity were merely constructs created to divide people from one another. In elementary school, Cyrus retained a diverse group of close friends consisting of a Mexican, an Arab, an Indian, and an Iranian. Cyrus’ dad, being immensely proud of his son having a multiracial group of friends, would jokingly—but still with a sense of pride—call them the “League of Nations.” His father’s beliefs and value system are rooted in his intimate connection to the Bahá’í faith, which advocates for the elimination of prejudice of all kinds, as well as for the universal unity of humankind. Despite such

⁷² Combahee River Collective, *The Combahee River Collective Statement: Black Feminist Organizing in the Seventies and Eighties*, 1986, 211.

beliefs, Cyrus shared a memory from when he was six years old, recalling the first time he encountered the meaning of race:

At recess there were a bunch of white kids playing on the baseball diamond. They were taking chunks of the clay and throwing it at each other. I went and asked what they are playing and if I can play. They said sure you play, but we are playing Gulf War and you have to play as the Iraqi army, and you have to lose on purpose because you are brown like them. They are 6 years old. I distinctly remember being more upset about having to lose as opposed to the brown comment. There is no losing. I remember telling my brother, why do I have to lose on purpose. My brother who was 11 at the time said to me ‘don’t ever forget they see you as different they will never see you as the same.’ That stuck with me.

Throughout his life, Cyrus explained that he has experienced discrimination primarily in the form of Islamophobia. Although he was born and raised a Bahá’í, outsiders racialized Cyrus as a Muslim man who comes from a backward, violent, and removed country. Simultaneously, he is generally “hyper-aware” of the manner in which his racial identity is intertwined with negative perceptions of the Middle East, specifically as a region inhabited exclusively by violent people professing dangerous ideologies. For example, after Trump was elected president in 2016, Cyrus came across a note hanging from his office door that said, “It’s time to go home!” However, Cyrus was quick to note that much of the discrimination he encounters is much more covert than that particular example.

A few of my second-generation interviewees shared similar journeys towards embracing their Iranian identities’ as they grew older. 39-year old Setareh, a second-generation, community manager for the Oakland Unified School District, spent her formative years in Walnut Creek, a predominantly white suburb of San Francisco. Although her encounters with discrimination may not have been as intense as those of Soraya or Cyrus, Setareh was certain that “socially”, she has never inhabited spaces as a white person. She explicates that growing up, she consistently felt “othered...as if I did

not belong amongst the majority of my white peers.” During her early years in Walnut Creek, Setareh “desperately” strived to be “normal” and fit in with her peers. In the context of her school, normality was synonymous with whiteness. Setareh recalled one such occasion of attempting to “fit in:” asked by her fourth-grade teacher if she could call her “Sally,” Setareh readily replied, “Yes, of course.” Rather than learning to pronounce her “difficult” name, Setareh’s teacher not only Anglicized her name, but indeed whitewashed her existence. Due to the fact that Setareh longed to assimilate with her cohort, and thus despised standing out, she remembered feeling “a sense of relief” when her teacher posed this proposition. From her viewpoint, this was not a matter of removing traces of her identity, but rather of alleviating (at least to some extent) her alienating otherness. When I asked Setareh what sentiments her friends expressed concerning her racial identity, she stated, “From friends, in regards to racial identity, comments were all the stereotypical type things—terrorism to questions about the *roosary*” (Persian, lit. ‘head scarf’).

Setareh identified three socio-political moments that significantly impacted her experiences during elementary and secondary school: 1) the release of Brian Gilbert’s 1991 movie, *Not Without My Daughter*, adapted from Betty Mahmoodi’s book of the same name, 2) George Bush’s 2002 State of the Union address, otherwise known as his “Axis of Evil” speech, and 3) the whirlwind of propaganda that circulated throughout the U.S. when it was announced that the Iranian and American soccer teams would go head to head with one another at the 1998 FIFA World Cup held in France. In each of these instances, Iran was unilaterally cast as an uncivilized nation inhabited by oppressed women and barbaric men, and particularly in the latter two, as an extremely threatening country covertly scheming to bomb the U.S. with its concealed nuclear weapons of mass

destruction. Setareh recalled feeling the ramifications of such rhetoric at school on a daily basis, as people were aware that her family was from Iran. As was the case with Cyrus, Setareh's experiences of feeling "other" are directly correlated with her Middle Eastern, specifically Iranian, heritage. However, in contrast to Cyrus, on the U.S. census she selects her race as "other" owing to both her alienation the predominantly white environment she was exposed to, in addition to the divergence between their and her experiences navigating public spaces.

As has been revealed in the various narratives of participants I interviewed, experiences of racial discrimination and exclusion have significantly shaped the manner in which they configure their racial identity. One variable, which can be unanimously singled out within each participant's encounter with discrimination, is that of his or her phenotype. Second-generation Iranians who possess darker skin tones, or a distinctly Middle Eastern aesthetic, are more outspoken in their hesitancy to accept the white label on the basis that as they do not look white, they are not perceived as white, and thus do not experience whiteness.

III. Looking White, Feeling Brown: Refusing White as a Label

Many second-generation participants who have *not* experienced racial discrimination state they do not feel comfortable or secure checking white on a racial survey. Surprisingly, phenotype is *not* a factor determining their racial identities. Although many Iranians do in fact possess fairly pale complexions, or are ethnically ambiguous enough to hold some form of white privilege when navigating spaces, the majority of my second-generation participants *do not* identify as white. All interviewees who retain lighter skin and eye colors were assuredly mindful of the fact that they have "passed" as white on several occasions, and accordingly have not been subject to the

same levels of discrimination as their friends and/or family members who have darker complexions and look more “Middle Eastern.” A few of these light-skinned participants have suggested that the discrimination faced by darker skinned Middle Easterners indirectly impacts the way in which many people from the region with lighter skin relate to their Middle Eastern identity.

Bitá, for example, a 21-year-old college student from an upper-class family who studies and practices Islam more so than most Iranian-Americans of Muslim backgrounds, stated that she does not racially identify as “white” as Middle Eastern people’s “history and presentation, physically, is just different.” Attending upper-class educational institutions throughout her life, Bitá has primarily existed in close proximity to white people of European descent. She shared that on account of her lighter olive skin and blonde highlights, she is often times treated differently (or viewed as less of a threat) in public spaces in comparison to her sister, who has darker and more patently Middle Eastern features.

Although she does not claim to experience overt discrimination, Bitá moves throughout her predominantly white, private college campus “very aware” of her racial identity. To illustrate her statement, Bitá cites the discomfort she senses from her peers—as though they are put off—whenever she mentions Iran in her (Middle Eastern Studies) classes. “I am more conscious of what we (she and her sister) are doing or what we are saying or how our language is coming across... just because we live in a very racially or religiously charged geopolitical climate and I think you can’t escape that. It’s this constant awareness of being looked at by the western gaze,” she stated. After 9/11, Bitá encountered an incident on the plane, were a passenger on their flight, requested from the flight attendant to be moved away from her father. The reason he gave to the flight

attendant was that Bitá's father "was going to blow up the plane." While she has never outwardly faced Islamophobia or racial profiling in an airport setting like her dad, she is still "very conscious" of how people view her within public spaces, like the airport. Bitá's reluctance in selecting "white" as her race on surveys stems from a number of factors: the overt discrimination faced by her family and friends of Middle Eastern descent, feeling alienated in the white environments she grew up in, and attending school in a post 9/11 world that only exacerbated the already hostile relations between the U.S. and Iran. Her racial identity is—atypically—infrequently questioned by strangers, as customarily people of Middle Eastern origin appear ethnically ambiguous to outsiders. This fact signifies that she is more easily able to pass as white in comparison to other Middle Easterners possessing darker complexions. Bitá embodies the sentiments expressed by several of my second-generation participants: although externally "white," this is not reflected internally. Her race is not white, but rather Middle Eastern.

26-year-old Arash, moved from his native Iran to Turkey in 2012, and eventually to San Diego in 2014, as a religious refugee. Arash moved to San Diego for its reputation as a family friendly town with an active Bahá'í community, as well as the opportunities available to him in pursuit of a film career. Although Arash is, technically speaking, a first-generation, he is rather young and his perspectives closely mirror those of my second-generation participants. Having access to media and news during his formative years, Arash was conscious of the manner in which Middle East is depicted in the West, yet his impression of race was augmented upon moving to the U.S. In this country, where a multitude of races exist alongside one another, he began to learn and conceptualize race, like never before. Like Bitá, Arash too, has a light complexion. Yet unlike Bitá, his racial identity is often called into question. Perceptions of Arash's racial identity have

varied according to his environment: “when I was in Iran, they thought I was from Turkey; in Turkey, people thought I was Italian and here [the U.S.] they think I am Mexican.” Again, similar to Bitá, he claimed that “in terms of history” he is not white. However, in contrast to her, Arash stated, “in terms of skin color, I am white.” As was demonstrated in a number of my interviews, I noticed Arash attempting to designate his position on the color line while speaking to me. His identity has been heavily influenced by refugee experiences and the number of obstacles he was forced to reckon with as an older immigrant in the U.S.: bridging the gap between his education and the level expected of him by educational institutions in this country, learning and becoming proficient in the English language, as well as the myriad circumstances grounded in psychological and cultural adjustments faced by immigrants. Both Arash and Bitá expound on historic moments and events to corroborate their non-white racial identities, the majority of which are predicated upon the equation of whiteness with European descent. Historically, Iran has been “othered” as a country in opposition with and far removed from the West, and thus is precisely why Bitá and Arash view Middle Eastern and white as mutually exclusive heritages.

Another reason some of my participants refused to label themselves white is because, culturally speaking, they were unable to relate with their white American friends. Maryam, a second-generation 21-year-old college student from an upper-class background, has uncharacteristic physical features for an Iranian: blond hair and blue eyes, which are traits shared by her identical twin sister. While their Iranian identity, or “Iranianness,” is often questioned by both outsiders and Iranians alike, their mannerisms typically provide telling hints. She describes being Iranian as upholding certain cultural values, such as hospitality, politeness, respect for your elders, and being family-oriented.

Both she and her twin sister speak Farsi fluently, and interestingly, speak English with traces of a Persian accent. They cite this as a by-product of their intimate relationship with their grandmother with whom they have always lived in the same house. Although Maryam's racial phenotype is white, she does not identify as white and finds it difficult to relate to white people. In fact, her friend group consists of people of Middle Eastern and Asian descent.

Maryam upholds Iranian culture, customs, and values. She does so by taking Farsi lessons, cooking Iranian food, and maintaining close relationships to her parents and extended family. She acknowledges that, although people see her as white, it is difficult for her to identify as white. For Maryam, whiteness not only signifies a racial phenotype, but also being somewhat ordinary and devoid of culture. Ultimately, accepting white as her race would dismiss, and even erase, her integral Iranian cultural identity that she so proudly claims.

IV. Checking White: Feeling Iranian and White

Readily willing to check "white" on racial surveys, Yasmin, a 50-year-old, first-generation Iranian woman from a middle-upper class background, was baffled when, in college, a peer telephoned her to ask if she would be interested in joining a group for women of color. In a tone of genuine confusion, she had replied "are you sure you are calling the right person"? The caller then responded, "I don't know, where are you from"? She responded that she is Iranian and the caller indicated to her that she is not sure if that means she is a woman of color. Yasmin also shared that part of her confusion was in fact derived from a sense of guilt, "thinking do I call myself a person of color when I am not, like am I experiencing what a person of color does?" This interaction between Yasmin and the caller bring attention to three central points, pertaining to the

racial nature of Iranian-Americans. First, the mutual confusion shared by both Yasmin and the caller in determining whether or not an Iranian woman is in fact woman of color directly attests to the ambiguous nature of Iranian racial identity, mentioned in the previous chapter. Second, Yasmin's sincere bewilderment is indicative that she is a first-generation immigrant, who grew up in Iran, where her race was not a significant marker of her identity and labels like "woman of color" did not exist. Third, her conception of what it means to be a person of color is entirely based on phenotype and encounters with overt discrimination. Unlike many second-generation Iranian-Americans who understand the meaning of "person of color" to denote someone of non-European descent, who does not encompass all the privileges of a white person but also not all the disadvantages of a black person, Yasmin defines "person of color" as someone who has darker skin than most Iranians and experiences systemic racism. In her daily life, Yasmin does not have an awareness of her racial identity, and as such is comfortable identifying as white. As was the case for the majority of first-generation people I interviewed, Yasmin identifies as white, and simultaneously claims her Iranian heritage with much pride.

Yasmin is the executive director of a well-recognized national non-profit organization intended to advocate for Iranian-Americans, while celebrating the Iranian culture and advancing their interests in the U.S. It seems as though she is extremely comfortable claiming her Iranian identity to be her ethnicity and not her race. Racial discrimination has not informed her personal racial identity, yet she heads an organization that politically organizes against discrimination faced by the Iranian-American community such as Islamophobia, police brutality, and the recent Muslim Travel Ban.⁷³

⁷³ See Mohsin Hassan Khan et al., "Muslims' Representation in Donald Trump's Anti-Muslim-Islam Statement: A Critical Discourse Analysis," *Religions* 10, no. 2 (2019).

CHAPTER 3: EXPANDING ON WHITENESS

Golnaz, a first-generation Iranian stated that she has never questioned her racial identity. She reported that she is comfortable and confident checking "white" on a racial survey. She was even surprised when asked which racial category she checks on a survey: "Why would I want to identify with something other than white? Just because I have olive skin? I mean, with white people there is no olive skin?" Golnaz is a 76-year old woman from an upper-class background, who has lived in the U.S. on and off for almost 60 years. Her immigration story is unique for a first-generation Iranian-American; she moved to the U.S. when she was 15 to live with a host family, whom she adored. She lived with her "American family" in Michigan while she finished high school, and later attended university. After college, Golnaz returned to Iran and worked in education. She permanently immigrated back to the United States, with her 6-year old daughter during the 1979 Islamic Revolution. During the interview, she repeatedly emphasized that she has lived in the United States for nearly 60 years, has traveled to almost every state in the country, and has never felt "out of place" or experienced overt racial discrimination. She unequivocally identifies as white. Various reasons may explain her self-identification. She had positive experiences while studying in the U.S. during the 1960s, when U.S.-Iran relations were amicable and she lived with an open-minded hospitable host family who welcomed her into their lives. Both underlying reasons could have explained Golnaz' perception, however, another key factor for her self-identification as white is that Golnaz is part of a generation who lived in Iran before the 1979 revolution. This generation was

heavily influenced by nationalist ideologies rooted in whiteness that were spearheaded under the Pahlavi regime (1925–1979).

This chapter examines different Iranian-American narratives that reflect the notion that Iranians are legally classified as white, yet often socially identify as brown. While Iranian-Americans can be radicalized as “oriental others,” the following narratives expose how most first and 1.5 generation Iranian-Americans label themselves as white. Iranian-Americans exist on the spectrum or on the color line in between whiteness and blackness. In order to further analyze why some Iranian-Americans are comfortable identifying as white, I will theorize how my participants relate to whiteness as “a political tool to maintain the social order of white as one belonging to the superior race.”⁷⁴

I. The Aryan Myth: Iranians as the “Original White People”

Golnaz later strengthened her stance of identifying as white by saying: “I had been to Khorasan, I have been to Qeshm Island and they all identify as being Iranian. I can never remember that skin color was ever a question of who you are.” Khorasan and Qeshm Island are two regions in Southern Iran predominantly inhabited by Afro-Indians, who have dark skin. Disregarding the fact that colorism exists in Iran, as well as within the Iranian diaspora in the U.S., Golnaz's conceptualization of race is inextricably linked to nationality. Continuing our conversation regarding racial categories, she asked, “How do you tell people that you are not white but you are the Aryan race?” Similar to many other first-generations, Golnaz identifies as white because she believes that Iranians are descendants of the Aryan race. Her belief is a throwback to growing up in Iran during the Pahlavi regime (1925–1979), an epoch in which the Aryan race was promoted as part and parcel of the Iranian national identity.

⁷⁴ Ashley W. Doane, “Rethinking Whiteness Studies,” in *White Out: The Continuing Significance of Racism*, ed. Eduardo Bonilla-Silva and Ashley W. Doane (New York: Routledge, 2003), 7.

During that era, the common narrative throughout the country was that Iranians are of the Aryan race and therefore “the original white people.”⁷⁵ Aryanism was a concept that Reza Shah (the first Pahlavi monarch) appropriated from colonial scholarship in Europe and Turkey and linked language to ethnicity. This ideology stated that the Persian language was historically connected to European languages, as the Aryans migrated through India and Persia to get to Europe. Developed by the German philosopher, Friedrich Schlegel, this Orientalist ideology spread throughout the world by Darwinian anthropologists during the nineteenth century.⁷⁶ Edward Said further explains that Aryanism states that “language and race seemed inextricably tied, and the ‘good’ Orient was invariably a classical period somewhere in a long-gone India, whereas the ‘bad’ Orient lingered in present-day Asia, parts of North Africa, and Islam everywhere.”⁷⁷ The Pahlavis used Aryanism to distinguish Iran as a “good Orient,” separate from Islamic Arab countries in the neighboring region. To solidify this, Reza Shah banned all non-Indo-European languages in Iran and made “Farsi,” also known as Persian, the official language of the country, in order to form a powerful and unified national identity.⁷⁸

In addition to the cultural secularization, Iran underwent rapid westernization during the Pahlavi era. Both monarchs intended to make Iran an independent superpower and separate the nation from British and American economic and geopolitical influences. Said explains how “the whole question of imperialism, as it was debated in the late

⁷⁵ Maghbouleh, *The Limits of Whiteness*, 51.

⁷⁶ Michael F. Robinson, *The Lost White Tribe: Explorers, Scientists, and the Theory That Changed a Continent* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2016).

⁷⁷ Said, *Orientalism*, 99.

⁷⁸ Alex Shams, “A ‘Persian’ Iran?: Challenging the Aryan Myth and Persian Ethnocentrism,” *Ajam Media Collective*, May 18, 2018, <https://ajamc.com/2012/05/18/a-persian-iran-challenging-the-aryan-myth-and-persian-ethnocentrism/>.

nineteenth century by pro-imperialists and anti-imperialists alike, carried forward the binary typology of advanced and backward (or subject) races, cultures, and societies.”⁷⁹ In order to create a sovereign state and monopolize Iran’s natural resources, the Pahlavis were determined to prove that Iran was “advanced,” and not a “backward” country in need of imperialist intervention. Repurposing orientalist ideology away from themselves, both monarchs strategically focused on creating a national identity that would unite all the various minorities in the country such as the Kurds, Turks, Armenians, Baluchis, and distinctly separate Iran from the Islamic Arab world. In order to prove that Iran is a powerful country, they had to prove that Iranians are a powerful race of people, and that powerful race is white.⁸⁰

This narrative of Iranians as descendants of the Aryan whites is most common and a strongly held belief amongst first-generation Iranian-Americans who lived in the Iran during the reign of Mohammad Reza Pahlavi (1941-79) and/or Reza Shah (1925-1941). As Maghbouleh notes in *Limits of Whiteness*, “...terms associated with whiteness, such as ‘Persian,’ ‘Aryan,’ ‘Caucasian,’ and ‘Indo-European,’ are regularly passed down from Iranian immigrant parents to children as answers or explanations for the question of what racial category they fit in.”⁸¹ However, Bijan, a twenty-two-year old Iranian-Jewish male and recent college graduate living in Los Angeles is second-generation, who also believes he is Aryan. Bijan is an outlier compared to the other second-generation Iranian interviewees. Unlike the others, he claimed he is confident and clear about checking white on the census. Bijan’s first-generation parents taught him that Iran is a part of the Caucasus mountain region and therefore all Iranians are by definition Caucasian. This

⁷⁹ Said, *Orientalism*, 207.

⁸⁰ Hamid Dabashi, *Iran: A People Interrupted* (New York: The New Press, 2008), 119–127.

⁸¹ Maghbouleh, *The Limits of Whiteness*, 53.

geographic argument--rooted in Iran being in the Caucasus Mountainous region has been used to prove that Iranians are of the Aryan race. By being from the Caucasus region, the argument contends that Iranians are racially Caucasian, i.e. another term used to signify whiteness.

Scholars have termed this ideology the Aryan “myth,” because it is more of a “racial fiction,” born in the last century of Iranian history.⁸² As Maghbouleh notes, “Alongside the Eurocentric, Islamophobic, anti-Arab, and white supremacist beliefs that form its basis, the Aryan myth relies on the illusion that Iranians have remained ethnically pure and racially white across two millennia of cultural exchange and variable borders by side stepping out-marriage and other reproductive encounters with non-Iranian populations.”⁸³ In short, the Pahlavi regime pushed an ideology based on white supremacy onto Iranian citizens to generate political superiority and national independence.

Many Iranians like Golnaz and Bijan, accept this racist ideology as truth, when it comes to their Iranian racial identity. Golnaz’s statement that she “can never remember that skin color was ever a question of who you are” aligns with the myth that all Iranians from all the various ethnicities come from the Aryan, European, or white race. She believes that all Iranians, (regardless of their ethnicity or skin color), come from the Aryan race. This belief overlooks that Iranians, are actually of all different phenotypes and skin colors, representing a mixture of different nationalities and ethnicities that would not be considered “pure.” The Aryan myth as a national narrative during the

⁸² Reza Zia-Ebrahimi, “Iranian Identity, the ‘Aryan Race,’ and Jake Gyllenhaal,” News site, PBS FRONTLINE—Tehran Bureau, August 6, 2010, <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/tehranbureau/2010/08/post-2.html>.

⁸³ Maghbouleh, *The Limits of Whiteness*, 55.

Pahlavi era, not only rejected the existing multiculturalism of Iran, but also equated “Iranianness” to being Aryan and therefore from European descendants.

European art, culture, and science trace back to the Persian Empire; the modern notion of human rights was first established in the 550 BC rule of Cyrus the Great; today’s Europeans are actually centuries-old migrants out of Iran; and the existence of recessive human traits like fair skin, blue eyes, and light hair within the population is a glimpse into what Iranians *used* to look like.⁸⁴

This passage notes that Europe is a region and culture that symbolizes whiteness and imperialist power over countries such as Iran. However, European culture and society grew out of Iran, or what was once the Persian Empire. The Pahlavis encouraged a sense of nostalgia and pride for the Persian Empire’s 2500-year old lineage of powerful rulers, civilization, and cultural production. This narrative was designed to enhance Iran’s ability to compete with colonial powers such as Europe.

Supporting the Aryan myth, “Persian Exceptionalism” is a related theory implying that Iranians are superior to other races because they come from the ancient Persian Empire. The narrative highlights the glory of the 2500-year old Persian Empire, which at its time was “the most influential domain of global cultural and intellectual production and exchange” before it was conquered by Alexander the Great in 330 BC.⁸⁵ The idea of “Persian Exceptionalism” is exemplified by many Iranians’ (mostly first-generation) immense sense of pride in their Persian heritage, one that is often passed anecdotally to their offspring, especially outside of Iran. Rami, a second-generation, middle class, 28-year old man, shared that the narratives he heard about Iran from his parents and grandparents, vastly differed from the narratives he heard about Iran from the various news broadcasts, while growing up. From different news and media outlets, Rami learned that people associated Iran with “terrorists, and village people;” however, from

⁸⁴ Maghbouleh.

⁸⁵ Dabashi, *Iran: A People Interrupted*, 24.

his family he heard about the glory of Persia described as “the center of civilization.” Most second-generation Iranians grew up learning from their first-generation parents or relatives that math was discovered by al-Khwarizmi, a Persian mathematician, medicine was discovered by Ibn Sina, a Persian philosopher, and of course the eponymous ruler Cyrus created the first declaration of human rights the Great.⁸⁶ In a sense, the second-generation Iranian-Americans grew up trying to reconcile the duality of the negative messages outside of their homes with the positive hype inside their homes.

The idea of superiority has been reinforced in the U.S., by the fact that a majority of the Iranian immigrants and their offspring are successful professionals. First-generation Iranian-Americans reflect a disproportionate number of doctors, engineers, lawyers, and entrepreneurs. They are highly educated, economically successful, and as such, contribute to and enhance the American society. Furthermore, second-generation Iranian-Americans are reminded about how rich and enlightened, ancient Iranian history is, hence separating Iranians from other Middle Eastern groups. Further, the American-born second-generation have grown up learning about how exceptionally successful the members of the Iranian diaspora are, compared to other immigrants in the U.S.

Soraya, a second-generation woman from a middle-class background has an acute awareness of this phenomenon. Having a wide variety of other Middle-Eastern friends, she states there is a distinct privilege in being Iranian within the Middle Eastern community. As such, when she meets other non-Iranian Middle Easterners, she often feels the necessity to assure them that she is not “one of those” Persians who conceives herself to be an “exceptional” immigrant who looks down upon non-Iranians, for example, Arabs or Afghans.

⁸⁶ Maghbouleh, *The Limits of Whiteness*, 67.

II. Proximity to Whiteness

46-year-old Keyvon, moved to the U.S. when he was ten years old. He is what some would call a 1.5-generation Iranian-American, and grew up in an upper-class background. I asked Keyvon if he relates to Middle Eastern people of non-Iranian descent. He nonchalantly replied, “I relate to people who are of lighter skin...like if you are Pakistani and you are lighter, I relate to you, but not if they are darker.” Although Keyvon has olive (tan) skin and facial hair—two markers of the “Middle Eastern” phenotype—he believes in the ideology that light skin represents superiority, while dark skin represents inferiority. This view is linked with the racial and social hierarchy (vis-à-vis other Middle Eastern immigrants) proclaimed by the Aryan myth that was likely engrained in Keyvon by his parents who grew up in Iran during the Pahlavi regime. However, Keyvon’s behaviors also exemplify someone whose journey of achieving great success and becoming “American” has made him inherit a racial ideology that reflects white privilege and capitalist power.

When I asked Keyvon what being American means to him, he answered, “Being American means power.” For him, economic success and power go hand in hand: he views “power” as having autonomy over his business and the decisions he can make because of his position. An example of “power” which he provided was being able to hire a Stanford MBA graduate (Keyvon dropped out of undergraduate college) to work for him as a subordinate at the e-commerce company he has built. Equating power with achieving “Americanness” reflects W.E.B. Du Bois’ definition of whiteness, asserted in his 1920 novel *Dark Water: Voices from within the Veil*. Du Bois defines whiteness as “the ownership of earth forever and ever.”⁸⁷ Disoriented after World War I, DuBois

⁸⁷ William E. B. Du Bois, *Darkwater: Voices from within the Veil*, Radical Thinkers 13 (London New York: Verso, 2016), 18.

viewed Europe in a different light compared to when he wrote the text *Souls of Black Folks*, twenty years before. Instead of whiteness representing European cultural values that signified monetary and intellectual wealth and prestige, his understanding had become more nuanced: whiteness was a symbol of power and entitlement over the earth. He writes about how the notions of difference and race were used in the nineteenth century to justify European colonization. Although Keyvan is not using his power to acquire land in another country, his acquired economic power in the business world gives him entitlement to manage not land, but capital. Because of the interlocking nature of capitalism and white supremacy, I suggest Keyvan has acquired a sense of entitlement, power, and whiteness through achieving wealth in America. Through identifying as a capitalist, achieving power in a capitalist system that “historically rests on red land and black labor,” Keyvan represents someone who has achieved whiteness.⁸⁸

Unlike Golnaz, Keyvan does not identify as Aryan or white. He self identifies as Middle Eastern, and has had—culturally speaking—an Iranian upbringing. Yet, his conception of his own Iranian identity is proximal to behaviors attributed to second-generation European immigrants whose ethnicity became a matter of choice. While Keyvan is proud of his Iranian heritage, his ethnicity “became a form of symbolic identification expressed occasionally in a number of public events, a marker that can be worn on special occasions and left aside in most daily interactions.”⁸⁹ Keyvan conceives his racial identity as having nothing to do with his race or ethnicity and more to do with being new and “foreign” in American society. He never perceived his experiences of “not fitting in” relating to his ethnicity or Iranianness, but rather to his own initial lack of

⁸⁸ Charles W. Mills, “White Supremacy as Sociopolitical System: A Philosophical Perspective,” in *White Out: The Continuing Significance of Racism*, ed. Eduardo Bonilla-Silva and Ashley W. Doane (New York: Routledge, 2003), 43.

⁸⁹ Itzigsohn, *Encountering American Faultlines*, 43.

Americanness. If he did not “fit in,” it was only because he, himself “just did not feel American.” Therefore, according to him, his Iranian identity was “left aside in most daily interactions,” once he felt he had become American.

Keyvon exemplifies someone who sociologists Milton Gordon and Stewart Cole define as an “Anglo-conformist.” Anglo-conformity is an assimilation pattern in which immigrants forget about their culture in order to adapt the Anglo-Saxon culture.⁹⁰ Gordon states those who are Anglo-conformists believe that Anglo-Saxon languages and institutions are the most valuable compared to other cultures and institutions around the world. Keyvon’s beliefs and behavior fit into the pattern of an Anglo-conformist; he has assimilated or learned to “fit” in the American culture by adopting the English language as well as values and social norms, and in his case, acquiring upward socioeconomic mobility. When Keyvon moved to the U.S. at the age of ten, he neither spoke English nor did he have an Iranian community to which he could belong. Twenty years after he made America his home, he sold his business to a large company and acquired tremendous wealth, virtually overnight. He took some time off and in a matter of two years, started another business, which has become immensely successful and is growing at a rapid pace. The sense of general superiority Keyvon feels towards people of a different class and race also symbolizes whiteness in an ideological sense.⁹¹

Moving to the U.S., in the early stages of his adolescence, without command of the English language (he was fluent in Farsi and Spanish), Keyvon struggled to make friends in school. He experienced bullying, had to take ESL classes, was made fun of, and was held back in the sixth grade, because he was having trouble academically.

⁹⁰ Sebahattin Ziyanak, “Critically Assessing Classic Assimilation Theory and Alternative Perspectives for Immigrants and the Second Generation in the United States,” *Race, Gender & Class* 22, no. 1–2 (2015): 148.

⁹¹ Doane, “Rethinking Whiteness Studies”, 11.

Recalling his experiences in school, he shared that the reason he did not have any friends in middle school was because he was “weird,” not because he was Iranian. In the same breath, he explained how high school was a much more “positive” experience, precisely because he became friends with an Iranian group of students who formed his community. He believes that his foreignness was shed after spending more time in the U.S., acclimating to the culture, and most importantly achieving economic success.

Keyvon’s trajectory as an immigrant shows us that Americanness often mimics or reflects whiteness or white culture. Sociologists Omi and Winant write that one of the consequences of racial dictatorship is that American identity has been defined as white and also “the negation of racialized ‘otherness’—at first largely African and indigenous, later Latin American and Asian as well.”⁹²

Having fulfilled the “American Dream” as a successful entrepreneur, he stated that he views Middle Eastern Uber drivers, as “other” or of “a different class” than him. He actually refers to this group of newer immigrants—in a condescending tone—as “F.O.B.s” (fresh off the boat), a group with which he does not have an affinity or feel any kind of solidarity. Conversely, Bitia, a twenty-one-year-old second-generation woman and college student feels a shared sense of racial and cultural affinity with other Middle Easterners. Even though she grew up in an upper-class family in a predominantly white suburb, and has enjoyed a lavish lifestyle all of her life (similar to Keyvon’s adult life) she has a different perspective concerning other Middle Easterners.

Bitia shared that Middle Eastern Uber drivers, always ask her where she is from because of her Iranian name. However, she recounts her experiences with Middle Eastern Uber drivers with excitement, because she enjoyed sharing her heritage and feeling

⁹² Michael Omi and Howard Winant, *Racial Formation in the United States: From the 1960s to the 1990s*, 2nd ed (New York: Routledge, 1994), 66.

somehow connected to these “strangers” who have somewhat of a similar ethnic background. She too has grown up with immigrant parents who have indirectly taught her the social/racial hierarchy of the Persians and have instilled in her the Aryan myth. However, unlike Keyvan who is about 20 years older than Bitá, she feels a sense of affinity towards anyone of Middle Eastern descent. Keyvan—who is arguably “more Iranian” than Bitá because he was born in Iran—feels no such connection and in fact distances himself from that group. This dichotomy reveals the different mindsets that are somewhat typical of first/1.5 and second-generation Iranian-Americans: while the first/1.5-generation mindset is focused on becoming American, the second-generation is working to be more Iranian.⁹³

Growing up in an upper-class family in Iran, Keyvon’s standard of living was privileged. He stated that growing up in the Iranian upper class instilled in him a feeling that he can “achieve things.” This feeling has always stayed with him, despite all the hardships and instability he experienced in his immigration story: fleeing with his family from Iran during the Iran-Iraq war, his family losing a lot of their wealth, being imprisoned in Turkey, facing an unknown future, and settling in Spain before he reached the final destination, among other things. He believes that his privileged background is one of the factors that have pushed him to work hard as an entrepreneur and achieve economic success.

Keyvon possesses most of the characteristics of an “Honorary White:” he produces a high income, comes from wealth, perceives other racial and ethnic groups as less than, and has lighter skin tone compared to most Middle Easterners. Sociologist Eduardo Bonilla Silva developed the term “Honorary White” to label non-European

⁹³ Mehdi Bozorgmehr and Daniel Douglas, “Success(Ion): Second-Generation Iranian Americans,” *Iranian Studies* 44, no. 1 (2011): 3–24.

immigrants who have white privilege and have achieved upward assimilation. Silva categorized different ethnicities into different labels based on a group's "education, wealth, income, occupation, self-identification, perceptions of other racial groups, and skin tone."⁹⁴

In her book, *Limits of Whiteness*, Neda Maghbouleh pushes against the idea that Iranian immigrants have a straightforward path to achieving whiteness. Her findings challenge the idea that Iranians fit into an "Honorary White" category by arguing that Iranians "have been pitched across a white/non-white American color line for over a century."⁹⁵ She also states that "Knowledge about a group's socio-economic status, intermarriage rates, or official legal classification, which are foundational pieces of the assimilation puzzle, offer only partial insights into its members' day-to-day *racial* experiences."⁹⁶ Yet, in Keyvon's case, it was hard for me to understand his "day-to-day racial experiences," outside of the ones previously listed, because he exemplifies what sociologist Doane has termed "color blind."

Ashley "Woody" Doane defines color-blind racial ideology as a way of ignoring social and racial structural issues and believing that inequality results from individual failings. Doane is a researcher on whiteness, and states that "whites tend not to see themselves in racial terms and society, this promotes a worldview that emphasizes *individualistic* explanations for social and economic achievement, as if the individualism of white privilege was a universal attribute."⁹⁷ Keyvon expressly articulated this ideology in his interview: he works closely with people in the tech industry and believes there is a movement in the tech world that involves women and people of color

⁹⁴ Bonilla-Silva, *Racism without Racists*, 193.

⁹⁵ Maghbouleh, *The Limits of Whiteness*, 8.

⁹⁶ Maghbouleh.

⁹⁷ Doane, "Rethinking Whiteness Studies", 14.

“victimizing” themselves. He laments about this notion and believes that people of marginalized identities need to stop “playing the victim card.” Applying the “color blind” ideology, albeit unknowingly, he firmly believes that ethnic minorities and women “just need to work harder” than other people, just like he did and continues to do.

Keyvon’s adherence to the color-blind racial ideology, even if it is accidental, is further explained as he narrates his childhood and journey immigrating to America. He perceives the disadvantages he experienced as a result of his immigrant, not racial, identity. Keyvon’s family was able to immigrate to the United States as a matter of luck, out of the thousands of others who applied as political refugees. They moved to the U.S. as American citizens and immediately received an influx of welfare benefits, such as food stamps and medical care, until they found jobs. It is noteworthy that someone who received food stamps and other welfare benefits, (without which his family would not have survived), holds anti-immigrant and ultra-conservative political beliefs. Keyvon does not believe that women or people of color should receive extra support in the tech world, yet he and his family received institutional benefits and financial support that sustained them and eventually led to his economic success. His proximity to whiteness, coupled with his strong belief that hard work will bring success, has disconnected him from immigrants seeking refuge, much like he was in the past. In *The Souls of Black Folks*, DuBois related to himself as someone who was self-made. However, after twenty years of reflection, he related to himself as someone who got lucky as expressed in *Dark Water: Voices from Within the Veil*. Keyvon, on the other hand, attributes his successes only to hard work and determination, not privilege or luck.

Color-blind racial ideology is another way in which whiteness has infiltrated itself into the way race is perceived in American society today. Doane states that “color blind

racial ideology has combined with the transparency of white identity and white privilege to create a new set of racial understandings for white Americans.”⁹⁸ Even though Keyvon does not identify as white, he benefits from white privilege and holds an ideology that according to Doane is one of the reasons why a white hegemony and power structure is maintained. Keyvon’s adamant belief that people of other races need to work harder in order to achieve success ignores the marginalization and lack of opportunities by groups that are subordinated and not included in a society rooted in white supremacy. It also ignores the historic and systemic exclusion of women and people of color in different social structures such as the tech industry.⁹⁹

Growing up, fitting into to American culture and gaining respect through economic achievement were the top priorities for Keyvon. This is a notion that some—albeit by default—might equate Americanness to whiteness.¹⁰⁰ Achieving economic upward mobility is a way of attaining whiteness, because it is a mode of gaining power and socioeconomic superiority.¹⁰¹ Keyvon expressed that he did not experience much overt racial discrimination while growing up. He also emphasized that if he experienced such incidents, he did not identify any of the discrimination or bullying as racial encounters, per se.

Keyvon represents immigrants who believe in the myth of achieving the “American dream” through hard work and sheer determination, the “pull yourself up from your bootstraps” mentality.¹⁰² This myth fits into the color-blind ideology, because

⁹⁸ Doane, 13.

⁹⁹ Doane, 13–14

¹⁰⁰ Omi and Winant, *Racial Formation in the United States*, 66.

¹⁰¹ Jack Niemonen, “Public Sociology or Partisan Sociology? The Curious Case of Whiteness Studies,” *The American Sociologist* 41, no. 1 (2010): 48–81,

¹⁰² K. Sue Jewell, *Survival of the African American Family: The Institutional Impact of U.S. Social Policy* (Westport, Conn: Praeger, 2003), 165–171.

it is a belief that ignores our society's existing systematic racism which prevents many people of color who do not have access to the same kind of opportunities and education from building wealth and maintaining social, emotional, and economic stability.

Keyvon's privilege coupled with "luck" paved the way for him to achieve the American dream. Not negating Keyvon's hard work and determination, his privilege coupled with "luck" paved the way for him to achieve the American dream. However, despite him possessing white privilege, to a degree, he still does not identify his racial identity as white.

Racial theorists such as Frantz Fanon write about whiteness and blackness as dependent forces that exist in relation to each other. In *Black Skin, White Mask*, French West Indian psychologist, philosopher, and Pan-Africanist, Frantz Fanon conducts a physiological analysis on the effects racism has on the human psyche. Fanon writes that "For the black man there is only one destiny. And it is white."¹⁰³ In other words, "the white mask" is a symbol of gaining status by imitating the culture of the colonizer. Augmenting this theory to relate to Iranians in relation to whiteness, the production and execution of the Aryan Myth was a way of gaining power through emulating the culture of the powerful West. By embracing the White dominant culture and thus acquiring a sense of racial and social superiority, Keyvon also exemplifies Fanon's theory.

¹⁰³ Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Charles Lam Markmann, Revised ed, Get Political (London: Pluto-Press, 2008), 10.

CHAPTER 4: ANTI-BLACK RACISM TOWARDS IRANIANS/ANTI-BLACK RACISM BY IRANIANS

Amrita is a half-Iranian, half-Indian, 24-year old second-generation woman. Amrita is confident that she is not white, and that she has never been perceived as such. Unlike many of my interviewees, Amrita does not pass as white, because of her half-Indian roots and darker skin complexion. Throughout her life, she has endured different forms of prejudice from Iranian people because of her half-Indian racial identity. Amrita was primarily raised by her Iranian mother, who divorced her Indian father, when she was only nine years old. Having grown up with her mother, she has always “felt more Iranian than Indian.” She loves the culture, always listens to Persian music, is fluent in Farsi, cooks Persian food, and takes Iranian familial obligations, customs, and values seriously. Despite internally identifying as more Iranian than Indian, Amrita does not consider her Iranian acquaintances, friends, or communities as her “real friends.” However, Amrita has never felt welcome in the Iranian groups, whom in her opinion have been “judgmental.” In fact, she purposefully separates herself from Iranian communities due to repeated incidents of being disrespected and excluded, mainly based on her half-Indian identity. When I asked her to elaborate on that point, she gave the example of being called *Hendizadeh*, which literally translates to “born to an Indian.” This is a derogatory expression in the Persian language and culture that refers to people of Indian descent.

The fact that such an expression even exists suggests the prevalence of racial hierarchy and “Persian Exceptionalism,” all stemming from the Aryan myth, even outside of Iran. I suggest that in addition, the prejudices toward Amrita stem from the fact that

her half-Indian identity resembles proximity to blackness. It is also possible that Amrita's negative experiences within the Iranian community (regarding her half-Indian identity), are in essence, rooted in anti-Black racist ideologies. In order to reinforce Iranian proximity to whiteness, many Iranians growing up in Iran or the U.S. were taught that people with darker skin were racially inferior.

In her the article, "Unaccounted Foundations: Black Girls, Anti-Black Racism, and Punishment in Schools," Connie Wun notes that Jared Sexton, along with several other scholars of critical race theory, argue that it is vital to position anti-Black racism at the center of all discourse concerned with racism or racial formation in the U.S., as well as the entire world.¹⁰⁴ This argument is based on a critique of Omi and Winant's racial formation theory, defined as the "sociohistorical process by which racial categories are created, inhabited, transformed, and destroyed."¹⁰⁵ A number of these racial theorists, such as Smith, Kandaswamy, and Feagin contend that this theory ignores systems of power, such as colonization and white supremacy. Wun goes to quote Sexton's statement that "black existence does not represent the total reality of the racial formation—it is not the beginning and end of the story—but it does relate to the totality; it indicates the (repressed) truth of the political and economic system."¹⁰⁶ Societal systems and structures in the U.S. were created on the backs of "chattel slavery and cheap labor."¹⁰⁷ In other words, Sexton is asserting that it is not only whites who can and have historically participated in anti-Black racism, but also those who are considered "non-whites" and "non-blacks."

¹⁰⁴ Connie Wun, "Unaccounted Foundations: Black Girls, Anti-Black Racism, and Punishment in Schools," *Critical Sociology* 42, no. 4–5 (July 2016): 739.

¹⁰⁵ Omi and Winant, *Racial Formation in the United States*, 55.

¹⁰⁶ Wun, "Unaccounted Foundations," 740. See also Jared Sexton, "People-of-Color-Blindness: Notes on the Afterlife of Slavery," *Social Text* 28, no. 2 (103) (June 1, 2010): 48.

¹⁰⁷ Wun.

Interpreting Sexton’s analysis, Wun asserts that “race scholarship particularly about non-Black non-whites (or non-Black people of color) that takes seriously the project of analyzing the U.S. racial state or system must contend with their constitutive relationship to anti-Black racism and Black suffering.”¹⁰⁸ For the purposes of my research, it is necessary to confront “anti-Black racism and Black suffering,” while analyzing Iranian-American racial identity in the U.S. Based on Wun’s synthesis of anti-Black racism, Iranian-Americans are non-white and also non-Black, and therefore need to look at their identity as it relates to both whiteness and blackness. While the previous chapter explored Iranian-American identity in relation to whiteness and this chapter examines Iranian-American identity in relation to Blackness.

I. Anti Blackness—Slavery in Iran

In order to contextualize the anti-blackness that exists inside the Iranian community, I refer to Beeta Baghoolizadeh pioneering research on Black slavery in Iran. Her dissertation, titled *Seeing Race and Erasing Slavery: Media and the Construction of Blackness in Iran 1830–1960*, reveals a commonly untold reality that slavery did indeed exist in Iran. Baghoolizadeh argues that through different media depictions of Africans as slaves, Blackness was associated with enslavement, even after the emancipation of slaves in 1929. Outlining the history of slavery from 1830–1960 in Iran, Baghoolizadeh notes: “for centuries, major Persian poets, among them Firdawsi, Hafiz, Rumi, and Nizami Ganjavi, associated blackness with different groups, including the *hindū* (South Asian), *habashī* (Abyssinian) and *zangī* (Zanzibari).”¹⁰⁹ Indians, “once referred to as the Black slaves of the Safavid court” were slowly washed out and East Africans were the last

¹⁰⁸ Wun.

¹⁰⁹ Beeta Baghoolizadeh, “Seeing Race And Erasing Slavery: Media And The Construction Of Blackness In Iran, 1830-1960” (Dissertation, University of Pennsylvania, 2018), 21.

group to remain enslaved in the nineteenth century.¹¹⁰ Like most countries in the world, an anti-Black racial hierarchy exists in Iran. Indians in Iran existed on the lower end of the racial hierarchy because they were once enslaved. This supports the idea that Amrita's half-Indian identity is viewed as proximal to Blackness. As such, she is more susceptible to discrimination and bullying from those within her own Iranian community.

Researching the systemic erasure of slavery in Iran, Baghoolizadeh illuminates the fact that Iran's participation in the transnational slave trade was never included in history textbooks during the Pahlavi era. She also states that instead of slaves receiving reparations, "they received citizenship, which was sometimes marred by the permanent naming of racial slurs."¹¹¹ Therefore "racial slurs" such as *hendizadeh* were used as words to replace terms that described "slaves." Iran's historical legacy of slavery is vastly different compared to the U.S.'. However, they are characteristically similar in that neither country has ever reconciled with the roots and lasting effects of slavery. The 1929 law granting slaves freedom in Iran did not engender in one fell swoop racial equality or eliminate racial hierarchies. Racial slurs have, and continue to, serve as tools used to establish and reinforce racial order and hierarchy. *Hendizadeh* is not then simply a term designating Indians, but an expression that—in Iranian nomenclature—denotes someone who is racially inferior. In linking blackness to enslavement, we can see that *hendizadeh* is an anti-Black racial slur, and thus Amrita experienced anti-Black racism from her own Iranian community. Other anti-Black racial slurs availed amongst Iranians include *siyah sukhtih* (Persian, lit. 'burnt black') and *suskeh siyah* (Persian, lit. 'black roach'), both derogatory terms invoked to refer to people with darker skin or those of African descent. Baghoolizadeh vehemently breaks the silence that exists around slavery in Iran. She

¹¹⁰ Baghoolizadeh, 20.

¹¹¹ Baghoolizadeh, 207.

argues that it is necessary to analyze the understandings of blackness and racial hierarchies throughout Iranian history in order to study “these lasting racial legacies.”¹¹² She also discusses the impact that the Aryan myth has had on Iranian immigrants assimilating into American culture:

My dissertation traces the opposing process: as Iranians viewed themselves more and more as white, they viewed Africans more and more as black. The dissertation traces a shift in racial hierarchies. While Iranians had once viewed themselves in between “white” Caucasians and “black” Africans in the nineteenth century, the diminished presence of Caucasians led to the creation of a clear category of enslaved blackness framed by an Iranian whiteness.¹¹³

II. Anti-Black Racism and Racial Etiquette

Baghoolizadeh’s research reveals a history of Black slavery, racism, and colorism in Iranian history and culture. As such, anti-Black narratives continue to exist in the racial attitudes of Iranians in the diaspora today. Sisters Bahar (30 year-old, lower class, second-generation) and Soraya (36 year-old, middle class, second-generation) had similar negative experiences of being excluded from their own Iranian community. Their experiences were rooted in anti-blackness and colorism, similar to Amrita’s. Soraya shared several memories of her interactions with the parents of her Iranian friends at the Persian Cultural Center she attended where her mom was the dance teacher for the school. She remembers being warned to stay out of the sun because “you will become chocolate.” Soraya’s skin tone is darker than “most Iranians” and she understood, at an early age, that darker skin tone was perceived as unattractive and inferior to lighter skin tone within her Iranian community.

Additionally, throughout her childhood, many Iranians told Soraya that she looked Mexican as a way to insult her. When Soraya was about seven years old, one of

¹¹² Baghoolizadeh, 13.

¹¹³ Baghoolizadeh.

her friend's mothers (who was Iranian) told her she looked like a Mexican. Soraya, who describes herself as "critical and inquisitive," asked her what that meant, and she said "Mexicans are like the Afghans of Iran." Usually Afghans who lived in Iran had darker skin and were poor laborers belonging to the working class. The majority were refugees who had escaped their country during the Russian invasion of Afghanistan in the late 1970s. Baghoolizadeh notes that in the 19th century, people from Afghanistan, along with other South Asian countries were considered "black slaves" in Iran.¹¹⁴ Soraya is from San Diego, a city whose land used to belong to indigenous Mexicans, prior to invasion and colonization. Today, it is a city that borders Mexico and is heavily populated by people of Mexican descent who, similar to the Afghans in Iran, are predominantly poor laborers. Inheriting racist ideologies that exist in Iran and the U.S., the mother who called Soraya "Mexican" was implying that she looked like she was from an inferior social and racial class.

Growing up, Bahar felt that she did not belong in any "group" at school, yet she was always welcome in the Black community. Although she has had many experiences with racial discrimination, she understands that she cannot compare them to "the Black experience." She is highly aware of her positionality and privilege. While both Bahar and her sister felt welcomed by the Black communities they became a part of, they felt a strong sense of alienation from the Iranian community. In fact, their affiliation with the Black community stigmatized them and was an added reason for their alienation and exclusion from their own community. They felt that they were "kicked out" of the Iranian community, because "of our association with the Black community." Bahar and Soraya's proximity to blackness distanced themselves from whiteness and therefore Iranianness. In

¹¹⁴ Baghoolizadeh, 35.

their experience, we can see how Iranianness can become equated with whiteness in America. Soraya shared with much sadness, that one of her friend's moms had asked her daughter to sever friendship ties with Soraya because she was socializing closely with Blacks in her school. She stated that many Iranian mothers were concerned that their daughters would date someone outside of the community, and even worse, someone with darker or Black skin. Soraya and Bahar were seen as outsiders because they did not fit into the perception of the first-generation's ethnic or racial identity, by their skin color (phenotype) or the social groups they surrounded themselves with. Sociologists Jennifer Lee and Frank D. Bean explain how different ethnic groups are marked and defined by stating that:

Loewen (1971), for example, documents how Chinese Americans in the Mississippi Delta made conscious efforts to change their lowly racial status by achieving economic mobility, emulating the cultural practices of whites, intentionally distancing themselves from blacks, and rejecting fellow ethnics who married blacks, as well as their Chinese-black multiracial children. Spickard (1989) notes a similar process of change among Japanese Americans who were once at the bottom of the ethnic ladder along with blacks at the beginning of the twentieth century, but whose status improved dramatically just three-quarters of a century later.¹¹⁵

Soraya and Bahar were certain that if they were associating with or dating someone who was white, they would not be negatively judged or stigmatized by the older first-generation Iranian parents whose children attended the same Persian Cultural Center. Similar to Loewen's example of Chinese-Americans, Soraya and Bahar experienced "rejection" from many of the Iranian-Americans they interacted with.

¹¹⁵ Jennifer Lee and Frank D. Bean, "AMERICA'S CHANGING COLOR LINES: Immigration, Race/Ethnicity, and Multiracial Identification," *Annual Review of Sociology* 30 (August 2004): 225. In this excerpt the authors refer to the works of sociologist, James Loewen, and historian, Paul Spickard. See James W. Loewen, *The Mississippi Chinese: Between Black and White*, 2nd ed (Long Grove, Ill: Waveland Press, 1988) and Paul R. Spickard, *Mixed Blood: Intermarriage and Ethnic Identity in Twentieth-Century America*, 2. print, Ethnic Studies History (Madison, Wis: Univ. of Wisconsin Press, 1989).

Soraya's experiences growing up made her question and eventually reject a lot of what she believes to be "racist and elitist values within the Iranian community." She shared that on some occasions a few first-generation Iranians have called her—both behind her back and to her face—*gheda*. *Gheda* is a derogatory term that literally translates to 'beggar' in Farsi. She then explained how many Iranians assume she is not Iranian. In a skeptical tone she stated, "I think I look very Iranian actually." Soraya believes "there is a specific look that has to do with what you are wearing and how you carry yourself that outwardly marks your Iranianness." In high school Soraya was excluded and bullied by a group of Iranians who apparently "looked Iranian." She described them as people, who got nose jobs, drove fancy cars, highlighted their hair, and wore designer clothes. Bahar, and their group of Iranian friends who also felt rejected from the Iranian community pushed against Iranian norms, or what Omi and Winant call "racial etiquette." Linda Martín Alcoff, author of "The Phenomenology of Racial Embodiment," posits Omi and Winant's definition of racial etiquette as "a set of interpretive codes and racial meanings which operate in the interactions of daily life. Rules shaped by our perception of race in a comprehensively racial society determine the presentation of self, distinction of status, and appropriate modes of conduct."¹¹⁶ Racial etiquette is a term that describes how race can be performed as well as seen, through unspoken gestures and interactions. Soraya did not perform her racial identity in a way that matched the racial etiquette that belongs to most Iranians. This affirms that there is an Iranian racial and social code, and when it is not upheld people can be exiled or excluded from the Iranian community.

¹¹⁶ Linda Martín Alcoff, "Towards a Phenomenology of Racial Embodiment," *Radical Philosophy*, 1, no. 95 (June 1999): 17.

When I asked Soraya how her friend group was formed and why they were all “rejects,” she explained that “we all have very similar skin tone, body type, we are all analytical and critical, the type that flock against norms, most of us were all middle class, not super wealthy, and we banded together.” Soraya’s explanation suggests that there is an Iranian “norm” that she and her friends did not conform to. She explained that the “norm” parallels “Western and white beauty standards of being thin, light in skin color, wealthy, docile and content.” Soraya’s explanation suggests that there is an Iranian “norm” that presents “a distinction of status.” Expanding on racial formation theory, Sociologist Wun writes, “James (1996) argues that Black bodies are the standard against which normality is measured. Blacks are structurally positioned in opposition to normality and all of its signifiers including demonstrations of civility, respectability, and obedience” (Wun 740).¹¹⁷ According to the Iranian “norm” Soraya, Bahar and their group of Iranian friends did not demonstrate “civility, respectability and obedience” (Wun 740) and were therefore treated as outsiders. This “outsider” treatment, I assert, is in relationship to their proximity to blackness; or their closeness with the Black community, instead of the Iranian community.

Amrita, Soraya, and Bahar all confidently identify as non-white women, because they are never seen or treated as white, mostly based on their skin color. Although they have experienced prejudice based on their Iranian identities from outside of their community, they have also experienced prejudice and exclusion from people within their Iranian communities. This is again, based on their skin color and in the case of the two sisters, also relates to their breaking of social norms as well as their close association to Blacks. All three exemplify the fact that Iranianness does not only mean maintaining

¹¹⁷ Wun, “Unaccounted Foundations,” 740.

specific cultural values and traditions, but it also means presenting a certain proximity to whiteness.

III. Notions of Brownness

In *Darkwater: Voices from Within The Veil*, DuBois states, “Everything great, good, efficient, fair, and honorable is ‘white’; everything mean, bad, blundering, cheating, and dishonorable is ‘yellow;’ a bad taste is ‘brown’; and the devil is ‘black.’”¹¹⁸

This section will expand on ‘brown’ as the bad taste, in comparison to whiteness as “everything great” and blackness as “the devil.”

Kian (21, middle class, second-generation) recounted a crucial incident when he went to court for a traffic ticket and the clerk read his first and (long) last name out loud, mispronouncing practically every syllable. He remembers how everyone in the courtroom started laughing and he was complicit because he didn’t want to stand up for himself and risk being perceived as “aggressive, or even a threat.” Being a Brown man, with a Muslim-sounding last name, Kian is often “viewed as potential terrorists and a threat to homeland security.”¹¹⁹ Another instance he recounted with the police was when he and his friends were arrested for possession of Marijuana. The reason that the police searched their bags was because a neighbor had called the police when they saw Kian’s friend (who was Black) walking around an all-white neighborhood. Kian stated “the whole reason why we got arrested was prejudice in the first place. We were in a white neighborhood and my Black friend whose backpack was searched had left the house (of their other friend) to get something out of my car... and when he was walking back to the house the white neighbor saw him going into a house and immediately called the cops.”

¹¹⁸ Du Bois, *Darkwater*, 24.

¹¹⁹ Saher Selod and David G. Embrick, “Racialization and Muslims: Situating the Muslim Experience in Race Scholarship,” *Sociology Compass* 7, no. 8 (August 2013): 650.

The neighbor, who had suspected they were breaking in the house, called the police who arrested Kian, his Black friend, and his White friend for possession of Marijuana.

Kian states, “I feel that if all of my friends had been white, we would not have been arrested...it was two weeks after I had turned 18 and I think there was an ease with criminalizing people of color because that just does not happen to white folk.” The police officers referred to Kian as Kumar, a character from the film *Harold & Kumar Go to White Castle*, a comedy about two friends who go through a series of comedic events trying to get take-out food after smoking marijuana. Although Kumar was of Indian descent, the cops calling Kian Kumar suggests that they see Kian through a racialized lens, attaching him to a character that smoked weed and was Brown. Because of his Brown skin, the police assumed he was Indian and made fun of his racial identity by calling him Kumar. Kian’s Black friend’s presence in an all-white neighborhood was the reason that the cops were called: he did not belong in that neighborhood and was considered a “threat,” according to Kian. This incident exemplifies how “the devil is ‘black’” because it was his friend’s blackness that was the real crime. The police officer’s use of racial slurs to describe Kian, their decision to search the three young men, and eventually arrest them, indicate that “a bad taste is ‘brown.’”

As an adult, Parvin (22-year-old, middle class, second-generation woman) has experienced overt prejudice and verbal abuse. At the New York Police Department and the Transportation Security Agency at John F. Kennedy Airport, she believes she was targeted on the grounds due to her Middle Eastern identity, and more specifically her Muslim sounding last name. She recounted a story where she was racially profiled by a police officer in New York City. One morning on her way to work, an MTA police officer stopped her to ask if she had a ticket. The MTA had newly enacted a new bus

system that checked people's receipts. She was on her way to work when an MTA officer asked "can I see your ticket?" and she responded:

yeah, just give me one moment, I promise it's in my bag' and then he was like 'show me your fucking ticket' and I was like 'okay' and then he was like 'show me your fucking ID' and then I showed him and then he was like '*Shahbazi*' is that a Muslim last name'? And then I was really thrown off and thought he was joking, so then I kinda started to laugh, but like out of shock, and then he was like 'answer my fucking question...are you a fucking Muslim'? And then I was like 'ummm'...and then he was like I'm writing you a ticket for not answering my fucking question' and it was 9 in the morning and I was really caught off guard so I dumped my bag out onto the sidewalk and found my receipt and gave it to him and he just gave me my ticket and laughed and walked away.

Sociologists Selod and Embrick situate Muslim identity within racial scholarship. They echo the work of various thinkers who examine how the Muslim body has historically been constructed as "other" to justify imperialism, and in a post 9/11 society, a "war on terror."¹²⁰ Furthermore, the authors draw attention to anthropologist Rana Junaid's work that underlines the historical trend whereby Muslims and Jews were differentiated from Christians as a separate entity. In her 2011 book, *Terrifying Muslims: Race and Labor in the South Asian Diaspora*, Junaid writes, "religious identity had a biological component to it and was not simply based on cultural differences."¹²¹ The imagining of the Muslim identity as inherently dangerous indicates that Muslim people not only experience Islamophobia, but also anti-Muslim racism.¹²² They state "in a post-9/11 society, Muslim civil liberties are not protected when their experiences with discrimination either by the state or their fellow citizens are viewed as necessary or acceptable in order to promote national security."¹²³ Parvin received a ticket based solely on her "fucking Muslim last name" and her racial identity. Wun states, "according to Sexton, blacks are the

¹²⁰ Selod and Embrick, "Racialization and Muslims," 647.

¹²¹ Selod and Embrick. See also Junaid Akram Rana, *Terrifying Muslims: Race and Labor in the South Asian Diaspora* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011).

¹²² Selod and Embrick, 649.

¹²³ Wun, 741.

prototypical targets of the state and its foundation. Even if non-black non-whites (and whites) may be subject to state policing practices or racial oppression, blacks are the paradigmatic objects of racialized state repression.”¹²⁴ In other words, with Blacks being the epitomized targets of brutality and physical oppression, Parvin’s experience of discrimination based on her Muslim identity is inherently rooted in anti-Black racism. In this way, being Muslim is being “non-white” and being “non-white” can be dangerous.

IV. A State of (In)Between

Similar to the other interviewees, Kian (twenty-year-old, second-generation, middle class background) was heavily influenced by the different environments in which he grew up. For example, in Kindergarten he quickly understood that he was racially and culturally “not white,” compared to his almost all-white classroom at a private catholic school. Comparatively, Kian also quickly understood that he was “not black” compared to his almost all-Black classroom at his public high school. In conjunction with school environments and social groups, influencing Kian’s racial identity, Kian explained how growing up in Baltimore, “a city divided by race and power,” also influenced the way he sees himself. He stated that there is a polarized division between “Black folk and white cops, white politicians, and white corrupt officials.” He further explained that the division between Blacks and Whites in Baltimore shapes how people view race so much so that “anything not black is very much viewed as white.” And here is where we see the spectrum.

Race, as a concept, exists upon the all-pervasive backdrop of whiteness and blackness. In many ways, race is a spectrum or a scale. Black and white are the two contrasting dualities. This exists in the physical and literal reality of skin color, but it also

¹²⁴ Wun, 740.

exists in both American history and World history. White versus Black, Light skin versus Dark Skin, or Colonizer vs Colonized has been the primary narrative in human history. The Iranian-American diaspora in the United States, is in many ways, dealing with this spectrum or in-betweenness. Iranian-Americans, are on one hand, oppressed immigrants, and on the other, a primarily wealthy and privileged racial group in the United States. In this way, Iranian-Americans are too Black to be white, and too white to be Black.

This mentality was demonstrated when Kian was in high school, which in his words, “awakened his political identity in many ways.” He recalled an experience where he went on a field trip with his debate team to a Nation of Islam Mosque. Along with three other teammates who were not Black, Kian was not given permission to enter the Mosque. He expressed how “conflicted” he felt by this experience, because while he understands that he is not Black, he is also not white, either. He also added: “I am from Iran, a country highly influenced by Islamic religion and culture.” In that moment, his Muslim identity was not considered a significant aspect of his racial identity. For Kian, this was a moment of epiphany at which he realized he needed to address the reality of his in-betweenness: “I am not black and I am not treated as black and I am not white but sometimes I am treated as white.” Theories concerning racialization suggest that experiences of race and racism shift depending on the socio-historical environment in which they occur.¹²⁵ Kian realized that, sometimes his in-betweenness allows him the privilege of being viewed as white, depending on the context and his environment. This state of in-betweenness is not only a racial identity that holds privilege compared to Black people, but it is also a racial identity that necessitates a more expansive conceptualization of race.

¹²⁵ Selod and Embrick, “Racialization and Muslims,” 647.

Cyrus (35-year old second-generation, Bahá'í, middle class, teacher) grew up playing both basketball and volleyball. He spent time with his basketball teammates who were mostly Black, as well as his volleyball teammates who were mostly white and Mormon. He expressed that he “definitely felt more included with his Black friends.” However, while his Black teammates were welcoming and inclusive treating him as if he was not white, he still felt that there was “a mutual understanding that he was still a bit of an outsider.” He retold a memory of traveling with his basketball team at which his teammates blasted out the loudspeakers, playing a song by a famous rap group called “Purple Ribbon Allstar.” His whole team, who loved this song, were dancing to create hype for the game. Unfamiliar with the song and their dance moves, Cyrus did not share their enthusiasm, yet his teammates pressured him to dance in the middle of the walkway. They were screaming “you are one of us now.” His teammates were affectionately joking that Cyrus was now a part of them, the Black community, and they were inviting him to dance and listen to their music. He shared this moment, because it described his experience of being included by his teammates who did not view him as white. However, both he and his teammates also knew that he is not Black. While feeling comfortable and having a sense of camaraderie and affinity with them, he still walked the line between being an insider and outsider, in his mind.

After 9/11 Cyrus was who a part of a traveling basketball team was constantly subjected to “random” airport checks after 9/11. He felt conscious about this and the delays he caused for the entire team. On one of these airport security checks, one of his teammates commented: “Man you are like the nigger of the airport!” Cyrus’s friend, who was Black conceptualized Cyrus’s experience as relative to his own Black identity. In the airport, people who look like Cyrus are the ones surveilled and targeted by the security

officers. Whereas, in the United States, in public, in private, on the streets, Black people are the ones that get targeted by the police. This is not to say that Iranians only face racism in the airport. Rather, this story suggests that Iranian-Americans have a complicated relationship bouncing back and forth between the two poles of whiteness and blackness. Their relationships to these poles change depending on external, situational and temporal factors.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

“Do people often ask you, “Where are you from?” I asked Rami, a 28-year old, second generation homosexual man. He responded: “Sometimes. It’s always out of like...flirtation.” He continued to explain that he feels people ask him this question out of sexual curiosity, rather than fear. He shared that his sexual orientation, combined with his Middle Eastern identity, often leaves him feeling exoticized at people’s questions or assertions about his race. Iranian American identity is not only ambiguous and mysterious, but it also can be sexualized and exoticized.

Kian, the same young man who spoke about his arrest for marijuana, also shared experiences of being exoticized while attending a liberal arts college. He believes that the culture of small liberal arts colleges makes it “cool” to be different and stand out. As in, his “otherness” as a Middle Eastern man makes him special or appealing to social groups at college. Aware of this, Kian was sensitive to and cognizant of how his ethnic identity influenced the friendships he built in college. Mostly surrounded by white liberals who loved to dress unique and different, he often wondered, “... why are you friends with me, is it because my racial identity matches the culture you are excited about? Is it because you think I seem cool?” He also described a couple of “suspicious” or uncomfortable hookup experiences with white women. He shared: “I was always interested in why white women are attracted to me and there was one person who told me ‘I like hairy Brown guys.’” Kian’s experiences with forming such relationships only validated his suspicions as to why friends or romantic partners are attracted to him. He questions if people are interested in him as a person or because of his “exotic racial and ethnic identity.” These

experiences reflect the isolation and stigmatization that Iranian Americans can often feel because of their Middle Eastern, or “different,” identity.

Exoticism is most often discussed within the context of European art, music, and design. In his article titled “Europe and the Orient: An Ideologically Charged Exhibition,” Oleg Grabar defines exoticism as “the use of foreign objects and motifs or the representation of alien scenes in order to satisfy needs of one's own.”¹²⁶ European collectors wanted to obtain extravagant art from the East to fulfill their need for luxury, cultural capital and expansion. During the age of imperialism, Grabar states that there was a “theme of sensual sexuality associated with the Muslim world” during the 19th century.¹²⁷ This theme was an ideology used by the West to cover up the exploitative nature of obtaining beautiful, precious and cultural materials. Kian questioning the reasons why people choose to be friends with him shows that he is acutely aware that his identity is sometimes viewed as a “foreign object” to be *used* by his white friends to gain cultural capital.

Yekta, a 1.5 generation 20-year-old woman from a middle-class family in Atlanta, Georgia was always bullied in school for being “hairy.” Unlike Kian, her exotic “hairy and brown” features were deemed as unattractive to her peers. Most of my women interviewees shared the same experiences of being teased or made fun of for having hairy arms, unibrows or facial hair. They recalled how painful these encounters were and how it made them conscious of their differences. Social constructions around the gender binary have deemed hairiness to represent masculinity. A few of the Iranian women participants who are feminine-presenting, have been called a “gorilla” or “sasquatch” in

¹²⁶ Oleg Grabar, “Europe and the Orient: An Ideologically Charged Exhibition,” *Muqarnas* 7 (1990): 5.

¹²⁷ Oleg Grabar, “Europe and the Orient,” 5.

different environments such as school. Both Kian and Yekta show that hair is a racial marker for Iranian Americans. Expanding on typical conceptions of race, hair was used as a way to mark them both as exotic and other.

Historically the Middle East and Middle Eastern people have been exploited under colonial interests and powers. Just as Blackness and whiteness are two poles that exist in relation to one another, the East and West also exist in relation as opposites. Frantz Fanon, an extraordinary postcolonial scholar who theorizes about Blackness, heavily influenced renowned Orientalist scholar Edward Said. The fact that Said builds on Fanon's scholarship reveals that both of their theories are rooted in colonial thought. In *Edward Said: A Legacy of Emancipation and Representation*, a volume that explores and illuminates the profound impact on the prolific thinker's life and work, intellectual historian Joseph Massad writes on this relationship in his essay "Affiliation with Edward Said":

as Frantz Fanon argued, 'Europe is literally the creation of the Third World', Said elaborated on that brilliant summation. Thus, for him, Orientalism was never about the Orient and its identity and culture but about the production of the West and *its* identity and culture--in short, 'a kind of Western projection'; the West could not exist if the East were not invented as its antithesis, its opposite, its other.¹²⁸

The production of the West is based on the "othering" of the East. Fanon would affirm that the production of whiteness is based on the "othering" and conquering of Blackness. Racism towards Black people and Middle Eastern people is rooted in the same system of white supremacy.

Elsewhere in the volume, literary scholar Jahan Ramazani writes that for Said, "cross-cultural affiliations and identifications are central to the poetry of

¹²⁸ Joseph Massad, "Affiliating with Edward Said," in *Edward Said: A Legacy of Emancipation and Representation*, ed. Adel Iskandar and Hakem Rustom, 1st ed. (University of California Press, 2010), 25.

decolonization.”¹²⁹ I interpret this quote to mean that decolonization requires different races and ethnicities to find similarities and connections with one another. I suggest it is important for Iranians to be aware of their racial positioning in society, not to fit into a category but to show solidarity towards other racial groups. Various ideologies such as the Aryan myth and ‘Persian Exceptionalism’ deny the fact that Iranian identity is sometimes seen as “other” like other subordinated racial groups in the U.S. These ideologies also ignore the ways in which Iranians have historically been “othered” and exploited by Western countries. It is vital to think about Iranian-American racial identity as complex, fluid and subjective. My participants shared their racial identities through personal narrative. These narratives could not be simplified to fit into a racial category. Therefore, in order to conceptualize Iranian American racial identity, I pose we focus on larger social forces, like whiteness and blackness that reveal how power organizes society.

¹²⁹ Jahan Ramazani, “Edward Said and the Poetry of Decolonization,” in *Edward Said: A Legacy of Emancipation and Representation*, ed. Adel Iskandar and Hakem Rustom, 1st ed. (University of California Press, 2010), 164.

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