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WHO WE ARE: The Perplexity of Iranian-American Identity

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This article conveys the Iranian experience in the United States by analyzing the formation of an Iranian identity in the United States. The author characterizes this dual identity and interprets the Iranian-American culture. The essay also focuses on the relationship between American civil society and its immigrants.

From its inception, the United States has been an immigrant society. However, there exists within both academia and the U.S. government a debate over how immigrants should be received and treated and what obligations the state has to each new arrival. In turn, how immigrants view and incorporate themselves into mainstream American society—including the government—and interact with other ethnic groups are also concerns for both the immigrant and the state. With each wave of immigration, new ethnicities and cultures either penetrate or absorb the American identity. This negotiation between traditional values and recently acquired practices causes an identity crisis for many immigrant ethnic groups. But does it occur for all?

In the case of Iranians living in the United States, a melding has ensued between “Iranianness” and “Americanness.” A divergence from straightforward American or Iranian identification has occurred through the combination of cultural characteristics, or perceived cultural characteristics, from both ethnicities. Cultural characteristics consist of ideas, values, symbols, and meanings existing through time (i.e., they are historically derived).¹ Culture can be defined as a set of characteristics formulating a collective identity through experiences, relationships, and social institutions. “Identity is both a psychological and a sociological term” (Guibernau and Rex 1997, p. 4) for it is the basis of all other social constructions such as race, ethnicity, and nationality. However, many scholars emphasize that identity cannot be “formed” independently of outside influence. “Identity is established in relation to a series of differences that have become socially recognized” (Connolly 1991, p. 64). Thus, the “other” represents anyone separate from one’s self. “The existence of others is crucial in defining what is ‘normal’ and in locating one’s own place in the world” (Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin 2000, p. 35). Therefore, this essay focuses on the relationship between American civil society as an expression of the “normal” and its immigrants as the “other.”

In this pursuit, it is important to outline how Iranian culture in Iran has impacted

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immigrant identity and experiences abroad, what identity immigrants have constructed, and how American civil society has treated these immigrants. Like many immigrants before them, Iranians in the United States construct a dual identity. This dualism combines a unique mixture that can only be termed Iranian-American, a mixture that is perpetually blended and brewed. Through the process of their diasporic immigration, Iranians absorb, reject, and assimilate specific elements from both Iranian and American cultures into their identity. This essay primarily utilizes the diaspora paradigm espoused by William Safran (1999) as the framework in describing Iranian immigration immediately prior to and after the Islamic Revolution (1978–1979). Diaspora refers to the mass migration of peoples to various locations around the world. Throughout this migration, immigrants maintain a longing for their homeland and a desire to either return or preserve their nostalgia as a form of identification.

Also essential in characterizing the creation of Iranian identity abroad, Safran's six-point explanation of the diasporic experience guides the analysis of Iranian sentimentalities toward themselves, their homeland, and the United States. Iranians view American identity as representative of a "civic" identity or nationalism. Similar to the concept of citizenship, civic nationalism is a "nationality, in principle, open and voluntaristic" (Guibernau and Rex 1997, p. 5), that may tolerate the existence of an alternative identity based on cultural ties. As Michael Walzer (1997, p. 79) argues, American civil society or Americanism forms a "civil religion" that "facilitates the toleration of partial differences—or it encourages us to think of differences as only partial. We are Americans but also something else; and safe as something else insofar as we are Americans." Iranians are one example of an immigrant group in the United States who simultaneously identify with their ethnic characteristics and American civic nationalism based on American notions of liberalism, democracy, and laws—proving the possibility of their coexistence. Defining Americanness in this light, as a culture of civic nationalism, shows how Iranians interpret American identity as being political without a strong or specific culture (Walzer 1997, p. 33).

This essay describes Iranian-American identity as a combination of (1) American notions of freedom and liberty and (2) Iranian cultural traditions and concepts of the family. Although the process of constructing an identity in and of itself may be taxing, this dualism itself is not adverse. In other words, Western—especially American—culture, political rhetoric, and lifestyles have been a part of the Iranian psyche since World War II. Additionally, the emergence of a Westernized, middle- to upper-middle professional class bred on American political theory, Parisian fashion, Italian cinema, and German friendship during the Pahlavi regime demonstrates the historical link between Iran and the West. For example, according to Ron Kelly (Kelly and Friedlander 1993, p. 260), large-scale Westernization of Iranian culture goes back to the late nineteenth century, especially through education: "Perhaps the most obvious example of European influence in Persian society is that the French word *merci* is used colloquially for 'thank you.' Used first by those who aspired to status and civility, this token of French chic was incorporated over time into speech throughout metropolitan Tehran." Regardless of the familiarity with Western standards, this essay shows how Iranian-Americans have been extremely successful in maintaining their constructed Iranian identity within the private domain of the home and among trusted family and friends while publicly embracing the perceived American civic culture.

For Iranian-Americans with a more Westernized background, an identity crisis is not necessarily a problem as much as it is an identity confusion. The question appears to be “Who are we?” and not “What are we?” Iranians do not ask where they come from, for they maintain close cultural ties to Iran either through frequent visits, nostalgia, or memories. Iranian immigrants have strong connections either to the Iran of the present or, in most cases, the Iran of the past. Getting the balance right between what they perceive as the two sets of cultural characteristics is, especially for 1.5-² and second-generation immigrants, the issue. They are Iranian. But they are also American. A main thrust of this work, therefore, concentrates on this duality through the examination of case studies (generated from Southern California Iranians living in Los Angeles, Irvine, and San Diego) and personal accounts in other works that present firsthand narratives by Iranian-Americans.

Southern California Iranians are used as the main source of data because they represent the middle- to upper-middle-class professionals who aspired to become more Westernized in Iran and who succeeded in importing their wealth, education, and experience to the United States. These immigrants are, for the most part, products of the Pahlavi era, in that they were economically prosperous, inclined to Western influence, and belonged to Iran’s newly formed, predominately secular middle class. (Kelly and Friedlander 1993, p. 5) They were the majority class in Iran who not only immigrated with the principles of Westernization, secularization, urbanization, and modernization but also with traditional “Persian” and anti-Islamic, therefore anti-Muslim, ideals. They immigrated to Southern California prior to or soon after the Islamic Revolution. They came to the United States as professional or entrepreneurial immigrants living in exile while creating an identity in diaspora based on these notions. Although the status of Iranian immigrants varies from students to refugees and asylum seekers, this work focuses on the professional and entrepreneurial Iranian immigrants.

By creating a mainstream Iranian identity through the use of television media, Southern California Iranians are an important resource for research because they have become the main source of Iranian identity formation in the United States. The Iranian sociologist, Hamid Naficy, provides a comprehensive study of the mechanisms and effectiveness of Iranian television. In this work, television and radio are noted as the main tool of spreading Iranian culture, which has been imposed on and/or rejected by other Iranian groups living throughout the United States. Therefore, this study presents and analyzes how these Iranians view themselves, how and with what methods they have created an identity, how this identity then becomes a culture in diaspora, and whether or not these forces have been successful in creating a community within the American civil society context.

This article asks whether the many different Iranian groups living in the United States share in the overarching identity created by the “majoritarian” Iranian immigrant and whether they can collectively be constituted as a community. Iranian immigrants in the United States are not homogeneous—they come from a variety of religious, linguistic, and ethnic backgrounds. The first section below focuses on the diaspora of the majority-status immigrants in Iran who came to the United States with either professional skills and/or money and analyzes how these specific immigrants construct an Iranian identity. This section also asks whether this identity has permeated into a shared cultural experience by all other Iranian immigrants such as the Kurds, Armenians, and Assyrians. In other words, has the Iranian-American identity created by the dominant group become

accessible for Iranian subgroups and, consequently, has a community emerged from this identity?

Posing this question leads to understanding Iranian cohesiveness, or lack thereof, and the future possibilities of recognition as a community by the U.S. government—whether or not Iranian-Americans are an ethnic minority deserving of political recognition. Thus, the essay works through the assumption that minority rights and ethnic identities are important to American democracy and policy. The second section further analyzes Iranian identity by highlighting the mechanisms used in construction of the diasporic identity. This essay does not critique American democracy. Instead, it illustrates Iranian perceptions of American civic nationalism and how they accept democratic ideals. Therefore, the third section defines how immigrants are racialized as either black or white and how some immigrants, such as Iranians, absorb the role of “model minority” through assimilation. Through the examination of the various multicultural theories and policies, the third section analyzes how the United States manages, absorbs, or ignores immigrant and ethnic groups and whether Iranians themselves have created a community in the United States. It is important to understand the views of mainstream American society because without the acceptance from this society—especially in a civic nationalism where freedom and rights necessitate a political voice—the “other,” immigrant, groups like Iranians will not obtain recognition or political representation.

Thus, the participation of middle- to upper-middle-class Southern California Iranians in answering a twenty-five-question survey guides this analysis of Iranian-American identity formation. The participants were contacted through the network of family, friends, and acquaintances as formal associations were difficult to find and cold calling Iranian names from a phone book was ineffective. The survey asked questions concerning how immigrants perceive Iranian and American culture, how they have adapted in the United States by separating their private domain of “Iranianness” from the public American one, and how they have assimilated into that public sphere. For the purpose of this article, the actors constituting the public sphere are defined as “Americans” (the majority mainstream) and “Iranians” (the minority substream)—not to be confused with the divisions between Iranian mainstream and its subgroups. The public sphere consists of the U.S. government, its institutions, and laws, the media in all its forms, and mainstream society.

It is not surprising that out of a hundred questionnaires sent, only twenty-three individuals responded. As this article argues, the preservation of the private domain outweighed the opportunity to have a voice in the public domain. Also, due to the political climate at the time of the actual study, shortly after September 11, 2001, many Iranians were not inclined to answer questions that they must have deemed too personal and risky. Therefore, to provide a more comprehensive study of Iranian-American identity, this essay uses data accumulated by other scholars such as Ron Kelly, Jonathan Friedlander, Dale F. Eickelman, Hamid Naficy, Asghar Fathi, Roger Waldinger, and Mehdi Bozorgmehr. The work of Zohreh Sullivan, Tara Bahrapour, Persis M. Karim, and Mohammad Mehdi Khorrami has provided further personal accounts from Iranian-Americans. Moreover, the analyses and definitions of Iranian-American identity and culture in diaspora combine anthropological and sociological frameworks of theory, specifically constructivism to prove that Iranian-American identity constitutes a continuum of shared, lived, remembered experiences. The analysis of governmental policies toward

immigrants and minority groups utilizes concepts derived from the multicultural paradigm to highlight espoused, but not necessarily applied, democratic idealism.

THE IRANIAN DIASPORA: IMMIGRATION AND IDENTITY FORMATION

Sometimes I try to imagine how I would have been different if there had been no revolution.

—Tara Bahrapour, *To See and See Again*

The history of Iranian diaspora starts with the Islamic Revolution of 1978–1979. Various reasons incited the rebellion: political oppression, income inequality, religious subjugation, and an inopportune relationship with the West, especially the United States. Not only do discrepancies exist over what occurred to insight the revolution but also in the estimates of the number of Iranians in the United States. According to an Iranian Internet news source, the total current population is between 800,000 and 1,100,000, but these numbers may be excessive <http://www.persianoutpost.com>. Widely circulated press estimates, from the *Los Angeles Times* to *Forbes* to *Time*, give a figure between 200,000 and 800,000 Iranians in Southern California alone. The sociologists Mehdi Bozorgmehr and Georges Sabagh estimate the number of Iranians in the whole of the United States, and in Los Angeles, not to exceed 341,000 and 74,000 (Naficy 1993, p. 25). The 1990 U.S. Census data on Iranian immigrants counted 216,963 who were born in Iran and 235,521 who claimed Iranian ancestry (Naficy 1993, p. 25)—totaling 452,484. This discrepancy in the population numbers points to the difficulty in getting Iranians to participate in surveys and public research.

Iranian immigrants range from all sectors, ages, and walks of society. They came from radical political backgrounds, working-class traditional families, and Westernized bourgeoisie and elite classes. They came as persecuted intellectuals, oppressed minorities, rich professionals, and educated workers. There are religious and ethnolinguistic differences among the Muslim, Jewish, Baha'i, Zoroastrian, Christian, Turkish, Armenian, Azerbaijani, Kurdish, and Assyrian groups. They came as refugees, asylum-seekers, expatriates, immigrants, students, families, and individuals. In simple terms, these immigrants are a heterogeneous group who lived very different lives in Iran and endured extremely distinct experiences during the revolution. How then has this group of religiously, ethnically, and linguistically diverse people with different pasts constructed an Iranian identity in diaspora? Why is Iranian immigration even termed a diaspora?

Understanding Iranian diaspora lies on defining the term, and the various interpretations of what this phenomena means. Most scholars suggest that “diaspora” refers to ethnic minority groups who immigrate to various locations but still maintain ties to their country of origin. How strong these ties remain throughout time and how cohesive ethnic groups stay have become points of contention for scholars. The various definitions of diaspora indicate the academic attention scholars of anthropology, sociology, political science, and history pay to the processes of immigration and its interpretation into policy or theory. It can be surmised, then, that a diaspora consists of a group of people (a nation, an ethnic minority, a transnational community, or a displaced peoples) who have been forced into mass migration. Leaving their homeland for any number of years, maybe even the rest of their lives, these immigrants construct a new identity abroad through the use of imagination, nostalgia, and memories.

Of utmost importance to this work is the compositional definition of diaspora postulated by William Safran (1999, p. 365) for it proves the most applicable. He defines diaspora as expatriate minority communities who:

- 1) have been dispersed from a specific original "center" to two or more "peripheral," or foreign, regions; 2) they retain a memory, vision, or myth about their original homeland—its physical location, history, and achievements; 3) they believe that they are not—and perhaps cannot be—fully accepted by their host country and therefore feel partly alienated and insulated from it; 4) they regard their ancestral home as their true, ideal home and as the place to which they or their descendants would (or should) eventually return—when conditions are appropriate; 5) they believe that they should, collectively, be committed to the maintenance or restoration of their original homeland and to its safety and prosperity; and 6) they continue to relate, personally or vicariously, to that homeland in one way or another, and their ethno-communal consciousness and solidarity are importantly defined by the existence of such a relationship.

Safran's six-point definition furnishes the paradigm from which this essay constitutes the interpretation of Iranian diaspora. For example, in regard to the first three points, after the revolution Iranians mainly immigrated to the United States, Canada, and Europe. The crux of their identity abroad lies in the "collective memory, vision, or myth" of their homeland. In most cases, Iranians living in the United States feel unsettled, "partly alienated and insulated from it." However, Iranians have been very successful in assimilating into the mainstream culture of their host society—that which is projected from pop culture—an argument explored further in this essay.

Concerning the last three points, although all Iranians do not have a "desire" to return to Iran, most still "continue to relate to that homeland in one way or another, and their ethno-communal consciousness and solidarity are importantly defined by the existence of such a relationship" (Safran 1991, p. 365). Until recently, due to the strict socio-political situation, the thought of return was unimaginable, even for a visit. However, after more than twenty years of immigration, most Iranians who do want to go back either want to go for a visit or an extended stay. Most Iranians—especially those of my ethnographic study of Southern California Iranians—feel that conditions in Iran are not appropriate for their return. Many of the first-generation immigrants have also established "roots" in the United States and are not willing to leave their children or grandchildren behind. It appears that 1.5- or second-generation immigrants, who have been raised in the United States, have a desire to visit their ancestral home but have become too "Americanized" for relocation.

The various responses to the question of return in the questionnaire interestingly reflect age. For example, a second-generation male teenager born and raised in San Diego stated, "I would visit when I'm sure I wouldn't be held there permanently." When asked about moving, he answered, "No. I feel I'm too accustomed to the United States, and don't know how to speak Farsi [Persian]." A 1.5-generation Iranian, a twenty-eight year-old male born in Tehran and raised in San Diego, stated, "I would certainly go back to visit. I would love to reconnect with my past and to discover the many wonders of Iran, our culture, our art, our cities, our nature, my old school, my old street." That same person, when asked if he would ever go back to live stated:

I would not go back to live in Iran. Even if the political situation was to drastically improve, I have spent/invested too much of my heart, my mind, and my life to leave here permanently. How many homes can one person lose in one lifetime? I've had enough personally. California is my home now.

A thirty-four year-old male also born in Tehran but raised in Los Angeles answered,

Yes, it would mean so much to visit the land that I came from, the land of my ancestors, the land of my beginning, the land that I know a great deal about, and yet know very little. To visit the people who share my roots, language, and to visit the land always mired in political upheaval, but whose geography and soil hinders great beauty and enormous diversity.

And when asked about returning permanently, he wrote, "No, I have found the place where I can speak and think and do without fear of persecution. I have also found the land where I can thrive intellectually. It would be very difficult to leave such a place."

Finally, a sixty-four year-old woman working as a physician in both Iran and the United States stated that she does not "have a strong desire to go for a visit. Maybe someday to see the changes and do some shopping." When asked about living there, she wrote, "No. Never. I am established here and my children live here." These examples not only show the various range of desires for return but also the immigrant's regard of their ancestral home as the "ideal home." These cases also reveal the connection, commitment, and continuous relation of these immigrants to Iran. Regardless of the sentiments toward actually returning, Iranians strongly feel the desire to be near their people—who look like them, talk like them, and remember like them. This wanting, or needing, to fit in becomes one of the foundations of identity construction in the United States.

Although the Iranian immigrants in the United States are heterogeneous, they have been able to connect to one another through this collective remembrance and nostalgia. And this collective diasporic consciousness has been generated by Iranians in Southern California. Through the use of exile media—television, music, cinema, print, and radio—Iranians living in Los Angeles and Southern California have broadcasted an "Iranianness" rooted in the Iran of old, living in memories. Naficy (1993) argues that Iranian television programs and music videos produced in Los Angeles both reflect and shape the exile experience of the Iranian diasporic consciousness and identity. According to Naficy, there are more than eighty-six Persian-language periodicals published in Los Angeles, eighteen radio programs, twenty-seven feature fiction films made by Iranians in exile, and fifty-six regularly scheduled Iranian television programs including news broadcasts, music videos, and talk shows aired on three different channels—KSCI, Cablecast, and KRCA. All these media outlets promote the celebration of holidays and practice of mannerisms of the culture under the Pahlavi regime, which these immigrants lived, transposed, and conveyed to their offspring in diaspora. Along with shared traditions, other characteristics such as language, history, the role of the family, status, occupation, and interpretation of the American culture contribute to the formation of the Iranian diasporic identity.

According to the questionnaire, the main components of Iranian identity are family, education, hospitality, and artistic traditions. For example, a thirty-four year-old female wrote:

To me, many characteristics represent Iranian culture, both positive and negative characteristics. Some of the most prominent positive aspects of Iranian culture are

hospitality, warmth of heart, strength in family ties, depth of emotions, and pride. Some negative characteristics I have observed often in Iranians are being judgmental, caring inordinately about social images, lack of organization and punctuality, lack of respect for or industry toward collective objectives, lack of an ability to balance individuality with familial and social obligations, and lack of honest introspection.

On the other hand, a thirty-four year-old male made an interesting distinction between Iranian and Persian identity:

Certain currents and themes are ingrained in the culture: some are based on tradition, others are learned behaviors passed on through generations and altogether, they represent Iranian/Persian culture. The Iranian/Persian spirit of family cohesion is one aspect of the culture that is inculcated into Iranians at a very young age. In addition, the importance of the family unit is also celebrated and deeply rooted in Persian poetry, music, and literature dating back to the time of the Persians thousands of years ago. Then there are certain traits that are associated with Iranian culture that has less of a connection to the traditions of the past: narcissism, highly competitive spirit, self aggrandizement, intense emotional reactions. . . . There are learned behaviors with less direct ties to ancient Persian culture but which has been instrumental in the successes and failures of the Persian people in life circumstances.

This distinction and its effect on collective Iranian identity highlights the level of influence that the Pahlavi regime's modernization campaign still has on Iranian immigrants. "Persian" means beautiful and has a positive connotation, while "Iranian" qualities are construed, no doubt by virtue of Islamic influence, as ugly with negative implications.

With respect to the interviews conducted by Zohreh Sullivan (2001, p. 17), the Iranian diasporic consciousness constitutes an identity based on a "historical consciousness" where some valorize cultural traits and cultural cohesion through poetry, history, and geography. The history of Iran based on the Pahlavi model of pre-Islamic Persian dynastic history, its art, literature, and language transcends ethnoreligious differences among Iranians in diaspora. According to the scholar Shahrokh Meskoob (1992, p. 10), retention of cultural individuality for Iranians as a separate people started during the Arab invasions in the seventh century where the most important source of their pre-Islamic history was "remembered, imagined, and reconstructed, for the most part, in the mytho-historical narratives, such as Ferdowsi's *Shahnameh* (Book of Kings)." Although Meskoob applies his argument to Iranians maintaining a nationalistic identity in the face of Arab invasion, one can argue that Iranian immigrants abroad have also maintained a nationalistic identity—a diasporic nationalism—for the purpose of maintaining their cultural heritage.

However, the nationalistic sentiments of Iranian citizens in Iran and of Iranian immigrants abroad are differently interpreted and expressed. Through the experiences of the Iranian diaspora came a new "remembered, imagined, and reconstructed mytho-historical narrative" of the past and meaning of culture. The trauma of the Islamic revolution and subsequent immigration has left Iranian immigrants nostalgic for a homeland that no longer exists, for a constant regeneration of "the way things were," and for a construction of an identity that not only incorporates their past lives and histories but also represents the experiences of their new lives.

Iranianness, as a diasporic creation, has not maintained nationalistic characteristics in

the sense that it does not correlate with the contemporary nationalism expressed in Iran. In diaspora, the flag, national anthem, and political consciousness are all drastically different than those in Iran. Iranian immigrants have not only become U.S. citizens, but they are also outside the realms of Iranian nation-state authority. Thus, Iranianness can be understood as a collective identity that is devoid of a physical location (like a nation) but that incorporates the memories of a homeland along with its geography and history, as well as the process of immigration and experiences in a new country. Diasporic consciousness as a transnational identity “invents homes and homelands in the absence of territorial, national bases through. . . memories of, and claims on, places that they can or will no longer corporeally inhabit” (Malkki 1992, p. 434).

As Salman Rushdie (1991, p. 125) writes, “Migrants must, out of necessity, make a new imaginative relationship with the world, because of the loss of familiar habits.” He argues that “they refuse to become totally assimilated into the host society, but they do not return to their homelands. . . . In the meantime, they construct an imaginary nation both of the homeland and of their own presence in exile.” Therefore, Iranian diaspora immigrants live in an awkward position. They pine over a home they can never become a part of because the Iran of their memories no longer exists, and they reside within a state they must adapt to for survival. In the words of Rushdie (1999, p. 15), “We are now partly of the West. Our identity is at once plural and partial. Sometimes we feel that we straddle two cultures; at other times, that we fall between two stools.”

According to James Clifford, diasporic consciousness is defined as making the best out of a bad situation. Clifford (1994, p. 312) states that experiences of loss and further marginality in the host country breed “skills of survival: strength in adaptive distinction, discrepant cosmopolitanism, and stubborn visions of renewal. Diaspora consciousness lives loss and hope as a defining tension.” It could be argued that diasporic consciousness binds internal ethnolinguistic differences among Iranians because the sense of loss experienced in diaspora outweighs all other differences in the struggle of adapting and surviving in the new environment. According to Naficy (1993, p. 2), “it is a relationship that is not so much based on shared originary facts (birth, nationality, color, race, gender) than on an adherence to a common imaginary construction. Discourse thus replaces biology.” Therefore, it would seem that the manufacturing of a diasporic identity would thus create a community among Iranians living in the United States. But, that has not been the case.

In diaspora, Iranian Muslims, Jews, Christians, Turks, Armenians, and Assyrians can construct and collectively adhere to an identity composed of neutral cultural experiences and characteristics such as *No Ruz* (New Year), *Chahr-shambeh-yi soori* (the last Wednesday of the year), *Seezdeh beh dar* (thirteenth day of spring),³ *ta'arof* and *roodarvasi* (forms of etiquette),⁴ and *dowreh* (gathering).⁵ Yet, the incorporation of these non-religious holidays, nonspecific cultural mannerisms, and ethnically neutral traditions into a collective Iranian diasporic identity has been created by affluent Muslims in Southern California (who are not necessarily practicing Islam and were the majority in Iran). So although other Iranians can relate to these traditions as Iranian cultural universals, they may not be enough of a stimulus for all Iranians to create a community.

There exists a popular negative interpretation among Iranians in Iran of Southern California Iranians as a “typical Iranian in a Mercedes Benz, shopping on trendy and expensive Rodeo Drive” (Waldinger and Bozorgmehr 1996, pp. 351, 367). This image may be exaggerated, but it has nonetheless become stereotypical of L.A. and Southern

California Iranians. Although the harbingers of diasporic identity formation, Southern California Iranians have been stigmatized by other Iranians in the United States as being arrogant and superficial. They are also blamed indirectly for the revolution because of their admiration and support of the West and directly for the demise of Iran because of their hasty immigration and removal of their wealth from the country. Thus, the creation of a community among all the Iranian groups in the United States has been a difficult task. As mentioned previously, Iranian immigrants are not a homogeneous group, their experiences of immigration vary drastically, and their political attitudes toward the revolution itself and its causes create great rifts even among family members.

Proposing that there exists an overarching diasporic identity might seem contradictory after emphasizing Iranian immigrant diversity. However, although this essay argues that an Iranian "community" does not exist, the collective identity based on the diasporic experience of living in the United States and having to adapt to the new society does. Mixing traditional Iranian (pre-Islamic) customs with new American political ideologies has created an Iranian-American identity that has nothing to do with the creation of a community—or lack thereof. In this sense, community refers to any group "provided that they have a certain internal organization and, what is more important, the ability to make representations to the authorities" (Touraine 2000, p. 163). A community consists of a "group identity orchestrated and produced in part through political institutional processes" (Bickford 1999, p. 86).

According to Max Weber ([1922] 1997, p. 15), belief in group affinity can have important consequences for the formation of a political community. He defined the basis of "ethnic" group identity as a "subjective belief in common descent because of similarities of physical type or customs or both, or because of memories of migration." Weber argued that this belief must be important for the propagation of group formation but does not "constitute a group; it only facilitates group formation of any kind, particularly on the political sphere." ([1922] 1997, p. 15), Iranian-Americans do "entertain a subjective belief" in their diasporic identity. Memories and nostalgia of the past and the reconstruction of its customs in the United States have propagated a group formation and ethnic membership. There exists a "presumed identity," but by using Weber's argument that this identity does not necessarily lead to the creation of a group, this essay argues that group formation does not necessarily lead to community formation. William Connolly (1991, p. 90) states that the ideal of community itself presses its adherents to treat harmonious membership and consensus not as contestable ends to be interrogated by the most creative means at their disposal but as vehicles of elevation drawing the community closer to the harmony of being.

Thus, Iranians in America have not created a "harmonious end that binds them together." In fact, "it is a normal mode of behavior for an Iranian to escape from other Iranians, or to ignore him wherever he meets one" (Ansari 1988, p. 26). According to Abdolmaboud Ansari (1988, p. 80), Iranians "suffer from mutual distrust and lack of social commitment. The immigrants state of mind is one of skepticism and distrust." The lack of alumni and other associational activities among Iranians shows this lack of cohesiveness, which is necessary to the creation of a community.

In conclusion, although Iranian-Americans "consist of distinctive ethno-religious subgroups, whose history, background, characteristics, and post-migration experiences in American society vary" (Bozorgmehr and Min 2000, p. 722), the possibility of constructing a future communal identity is not impossible. The Iranian diasporic identity

created and the subsequent culture practiced in the United States can provide the basis for the Weberian model of an ethnic membership that can constitute a community through the subjective interpretation of common symbols or characteristics (Guibernau and Rex 1997, p. 3) for the purpose of political mobilization. Symbols of Iranian culture such as food, pre-Islamic holidays and traditions, history, domestic values and kinship ties, and etiquette can serve as reminders of their origin while helping “to establish who we are and who are they” (Gonzalez and McCommon 1989, p. 4). According to Nancie Gonzalez and Carolyn McCommon (1989, p. 4), “it matters little whether the migrants have all shared these symbols earlier in their lives, for they now serve to bind them together, perhaps in new ways, and to shield them from an often hostile receiving society.” Although there is a real sense of ethnic membership, a community has yet to be established.

IRANIAN-AMERICAN IDENTITY: IRANIAN DIASPORA EXPRESSED IN THE UNITED STATES

In a crowd, in a mall, in a mob, I pass. . . . “Zara. What a pretty name. Where’s it from?” The far side of the moon, I pass.

—Zara Houshmand, “I Pass,” *A World Between*

I came with hate but now I love you America.

—Ali Zarrin, “Made you Mine, America,” *A World Between*

As a group, Iranian immigrants have assimilated into their perception of American life, defined as civic nationalism and economic participation. At the same time, they have maintained an Iranian identity formed by a diasporic consciousness of Iranian traditions or Iranianness. As presented in the previous section, through the diasporic experience of mass migration and perpetual longing to return home, Iranian diasporic consciousness consists of and maintains the Persian language, closeness of family, traditional nonreligious holidays, and a pre-Islamic history. Like many other immigrant groups, Iranians have forged an identity incorporating elements from both their ethnic traditions and the new U.S. mainstream civic society, which they keep separated into the private and the public spheres. Iranians try to blend into mainstream America by using their relative “whiteness,” to both benefit from American liberal society and hide from the prejudices that may follow them due to the political hostilities between the United States and Iran.

The Iranian hostage crisis of 1979 and the following decade consisted of either direct or indirect bigotry, prejudice, and hatred toward Iranian immigrants in the United States. According to Ali Behdad (quoted in Sullivan 2002, p. 249), “To be an Iranian was marked for people of my generation in this country by the hostage crisis, the way we were ashamed of our Iranianness.” Based on the ethnographic questionnaire compiled for this study, it seems that 1.5- and second-generation Iranian immigrants feel prejudice more than the older, first-generation. Out of the seven 1.5- or second-generation immigrants questioned—ranging from teenagers to mid-thirties—four answered that they have been victims of some kind of prejudice such as name calling, hostility, or discrimination. Most of the incidences occurred at school or among young people. A twenty-eight year-old male answered, “In the school yard I would always get hassled with slogans like ‘Iran man,’ ‘Bomb, bomb Iran,’ and ‘Ayatollah.’” A thirty-four year-old female

replied that she felt prejudice only once: "When I was looking for my lost dog and followed a lead by calling a telephone number I had been given. The person who answered the phone told me: 'Go back to where you came from, you damned Iranian.'" And a teenage male answered:

I have never been outright treated with hatred, but I have been poked fun at for being one [an Iranian]. This kidding around occurs largely because of the thought of the people who do it as not being offensive. I was called a terrorist by my friend, who knows Iran's lack of responsibility for September 11th, but still thought the joke would be funny. I had to put him in his place.

In *To See and See Again*, Tara Bahrapour (1999, p. 132) presents a moving story of her experiences growing up in the United States during the hostage crisis:

I wonder if the kids in my class even know I'm from Iran. There are no other Iranians. . . . I hate the people on TV who wear yellow ribbons and shout for Iranians to get on their camels and go back to the desert. . . . I hate the band that sings the Beach Boys' "Barbara Ann" with the lyrics changed to "Bomb Iran". . . . You shouldn't tell people [that you're Iranian]. They'll beat you up.

Out of the first-generation participants in the study over the age of fifty—sixteen in all—only two claimed experience of prejudice or hatred, both of whom are male. One replied, "I have never been in a confrontational situation, only generalities." And the other wrote:

A sick-minded policeman once falsely arrested me in an Iranian party two doors from my residence. I was not under the influence of any substance nor had I drunk more than two glasses. In any case, I was not even going to drive home. I choose not to consider the man a typical officer but rather a person in need of psychiatric care. Obviously, I did not feel good about the circumstances especially since the average age of the partygoers was about higher thirties, my mother was present, and the average education was a graduate degree with all the guests being successful professionals and business people.

Thus, although Iranian-Americans are not exempt from prejudice—of course, now being part of the "axis of evil" does not help their situation—they seem to fair better than most other immigrant groups in the United States. In this instance, "better" means that many Iranians have managed to succeed economically. They have been able to use the U.S. economic system of free markets, competition and capitalism to their advantage. They have also been able to transfer their education, knowledge, and Iranian funds to the United States. Therefore, a large proportion of Iranian immigrants—with a slight initial decline in status upon immigration—were able to pursue the same occupations in the United States as they had in Iran (e.g., physicians, engineers, dentists, and self-employed businessmen). Thus, "a combination of affluent and skilled exiles and former college students account for the unusually high socio-economic status of Iranians in the United States" (Kelly and Friedlander 1993, p. 69). They are the immigrants who moved to Southern California and maintained the same (if not better) standard of living in the United States while creating an Iranian diasporic identity.

In the 1990 U.S. Census, Iranian-Americans living in the Los Angeles area numbered 76,000 or 29 percent of the total Iranians living in the United States (Waldinger and Bozorgmehr 1996, p. 352).⁶ They have emerged as a major immigrant group in the city since the early 1980s (Bozorgmehr and Min 2000, p. 708). Further statistics highlight their education and occupations: “64.9 percent of Iranian men attended four years of college or more, 84.0 percent of those are employed, 51.3 percent are employed in higher white collar work (managers and professionals) while 29.1 percent are employed in higher blue collar work (sales and clerical), 19.6 percent are in blue collar work (all other occupations), and 33.3 percent are self-employed” (Waldinger and Bozorgmehr 1996, p. 356). For women the figures are “33.7 percent have four years of college or more, 47.6 percent are employed, 41.7 percent work in higher white collar jobs while 41.4 percent work in higher blue collar jobs, 16.9 percent work in blue collar jobs, and 14.4 percent are self-employed” (ibid.).

Waldinger and Bozorgmehr (1996, p. 356) also included other Middle Easterners (Arabs, Armenians, and Israelis) in their analysis and concluded that, “although all four groups are highly entrepreneurial, Iranians and Israelis are more likely to be professionals than Armenians and Arabs.” Furthermore, “among Middle Eastern males, Iranians have a much higher level of education than any other group, while females have only a slightly higher level” (ibid.). A *CNN World News* article estimates “600 Iranian-American dentists and 1,000 physicians in Los Angeles” <http://cnn.com/WORLD/9705/23/iranian.americans/>. In *Ethnic Entrepreneurs in America's Largest Metropolitan Areas* (1998, p. 340), Eran Razin and Ivan Light present a graph of the percentage of the labor force in the sixteen largest metropolitan regions in the United States in which Iranians were “the fourth minority group to have a significant labor force with 27.2 percent in Cleveland, 23.0 percent in Los Angeles, 23.6 percent in New York, and 19.6 percent in San Diego.” Although the labor force may seem more significant in Cleveland and New York, the combination of San Diego and Los Angeles statistics places Southern California as the biggest locale of Iranian labor (at 42.6 percent) and the main center of Iranian cultural identity production in the United States.

Iranian immigrants have also been relatively successful entrepreneurs, investing in real estate, construction, and retail businesses. “The Iranian impact upon business, residential, and other real estate in Los Angeles area is significant” (Kelly and Friedlander 1993, p. 251). Iranians were among the first immigrants to settle in traditionally wealthy, white neighborhoods of Los Angeles County, especially in Beverly Hills. Indeed, Beverly Hills High School provides a significant gauge for the presence of Iranians in Los Angeles. Although official school policy forbids cooperation with outside research of their institution, “it is common knowledge within the community that 20 percent of the school’s student body is Iranian” (Kelly and Friedlander 1993, p. 264). They have settled in affluent areas of the westside, for example, in Bel Air, Brentwood, Malibu, and Pacific Palisades.

What mechanisms have Iranians imagined and used to move up the U.S. economic ladder? Regardless of what may be considered factual or essential to the inauguration into mainstream America, Iranians perceive an alteration of the body into a “whitened” form as necessary for successful participation. According to *Immigrant America: A Portrait*, the Iranian ability to move up the socioeconomic ladder is credited to their ability of “acting white” (Portes and Rumbaut 1996, pp. 248–249). This article argues that both the interpretation and definition of space and the body have enabled Iranian immigrants to successfully assimilate into U.S. civic society, regardless of experiences of prejudice or

discrimination. Thus, an analysis of space will be discussed after understanding the use of the body as one informs and influences the other.

Through the process of assimilation, Iranians utilize their bodies so as to uphold an image of a white model minority in the eyes of the majority. The importance of blending into the perceived norms of mainstream society for the facilitation of a more comfortable life without the harassment felt during the hostage crisis manifests through plastic surgery, fake contact lenses, extraordinary diets to the point of anorexia, dyed hair, plucked eyebrows, and the removal of body hair. There exists no tangible statistics for the number of Iranians utilizing such measures to “whiten” their bodies. Due to patient privacy codes, no doctor would submit their records for investigation. However, proof of such modifications as nose jobs, breast implants, liposuction, collagen injections, and face lifts are not difficult to observe when walking down the streets of Beverly Hills and Westwood in Los Angeles, Newport Beach in Irvine, and La Jolla in San Diego.

For immigrants the body performs an important role in the construction of identity as it is interpreted by the self and the other. According to William James (1890, p. 322), the body is the primary site of self-formation, preservation, and interest. The body is “just as much the entire vehicle of the self-feeling” as it is “the vehicle of the self-seeking.” For Iranian-Americans, the “whiter” the body, the more attractive the appearance, and the greater the ability for assimilation of the public face, which translates to success. Of the twenty-three southern California Iranian-Americans responding to the questionnaire, when asked what ethnicity/race they mark in filling out census data (the choices were white, caucasian, or other), ten responded that they consider themselves “white,” seven viewed themselves as “caucasian,”⁷ and four responded “other”—either Iranian/Persian or Middle Eastern. This relatively modest compilation of data exhibits that the majority of Iranian-Americans consider “white” an appropriate categorization of their ethnicity/race. Thus, through transformations, Iranian-Americans reconstruct their public persona or outer identity to facilitate the process of assimilation.

This image of “whiteness” has its roots in the racialization of many other immigrant ethnic groups. Throughout the history of immigration to the United States, it can be argued that “racialization” has been standard procedure in policies toward various immigrant groups. According to several scholars, such as Robert Miles and Stephen Small, racialization “refers to the ways in which diverse ethnic groups from Europe and Africa came to be defined as the white ‘race’ and the black ‘race’ in the colonization and conquest of the Americas” (Small, p. 49). The term also refers to the creation of race as a “human construct, an ideology with regulatory power within society” (Solomos and Back 1999, p. 68). Michael Omi and Howard Winant (1994, p. 55) also argue that the racialization project has been institutionalized through social interaction in which “race, or the concept of race, continues to play a fundamental role in structuring and representing the social world.”

Thus, racialization is an institutionalized process that all ethnic groups face upon immigration to and settlement in the United States. It permeates through many social institutions such as the government and the economy. For example, African, Irish, Italian, Mexican, and Cambodian (just to name a few) immigrants have been traditionally racialized as “black” minority groups. The Irish and the Italians have been able to escape *negative* identifications of laziness, backwardness, and ineffectualness through the process of assimilation. Other immigrants, beside Europeans, have also been *positively* racialized as “white,” such as the Chinese, Japanese, Israelis, and Iranians and thus

have been able to reap the benefits of a liberal society. In this process, color and race are prime signifiers of ethnicity and identification as exemplified in the population census. In the next section, examination of U.S. policies toward minority groups will be examined to consider whether or not the “American way” truly promotes liberal ideology.

As individuals, we are “marked by our birth, by the shape of the nose or the color of the skin” (Gorra 1995, p. 436). Yet, how these characteristics are marked or valued is the issue. Originating from racist colonial structures, racialization assigns negative identification to dark skin, a big nose, and kinky dark hair, whereas white skin, bright eyes, and fine features are marked with positive identification as being pure and perfect. To this day, many immigrants or ethnic groups observe their own bodies through this image of white purity, regard it as “negatively” marked, and face difficult circumstances; “Should they identify with this ideal and deny the particularities of their own bodies, or refuse this ideal and suffer delegitimation by the state?” (Takacs 1999, p. 596). As Franz Fanon (1967, p. 110) stated, “In the white world the man of color encounters difficulties in the development of his bodily schema.” Racialization, therefore, creates a subjugation of the dark body, which then creates a negative consciousness of that body.

The Iranian immigrants of this study solve this dilemma by interpreting and transforming their bodies into the whitened form and separating their identity into two spaces, the public and private spheres. They have maintained a uniquely Iranian compartmentalization of Western values, incorporating U.S. civic society and individualism in the public sphere while perpetuating Iranian diasporic identity in the private sphere. The separation of the collective diasporic identity into public and private spheres reflects the plurality of being Iranian-American and the contextualization of particular types of behavior. The anthropologist Dale Eickelman (2002, p. 222) states that the distinction between these two spaces has roots in the Iranian language, writing, and interpretation of space:

The “architecture” of Iranian verbal interaction indicates a pervasive distinction between the “external” (*zاهر*), public aspects of social action and speech and an “inner” (*باطن*) core of integrity and piety revealed only to one’s family and trusted intimates. In the “external” social world, characterized by insecurity and uncertainty, the cultural ideal is the clever dissimulator (*زهرنگی*), the shrewd and cynical manipulator capable of maintaining a “proper public face” and holding “true” feelings in check to trusted family and intimates.

Eickelman argues that Iranian social interaction originates from this linguistically cultural paradigm. Hence, Iranian verbal and social interactions include a highly structured contextualization of the self that exhibits itself in “domestic architecture and in the use of domestic space, where a separate room. . . is set aside for public receptions and visiting, while another part of the house is reserved for family intimacy” (ibid.). Thus, Iranian-Americans interpret and write space according to their perceptions of themselves and others, as a form of identification.

The analysis of space and its functions provides an important model for interpreting all types of identity. However, for people in diaspora this analytical framework of writing and interpreting space, as espoused by Andreas Glaeser in his examination of German identity after unification, furnishes a more suitable interpretation of identity formation. Surely, for those uprooted not only from their homeland but also from all

previously comfortable and functioning (however questionable) categories of race, ethnicity, sexual preference, gender, class, and nation (Glaeser 2000, p. 9), the writing and reading of both public and private space becomes a more significant and telling demonstration of identity. According to Glaeser, the "writing of space" entails not only institutional uses (such as street signs and public announcements) but also a "beautification" of that space through decoration and individual arrangement of objects. Reading of space thus involves situating oneself in that space literally and rhetorically by identifying with that space through emotional ties (Glaeser 2002, pp. 42–66). For Iranian-Americans, the writing of space transpires into a private (*baten*) and public (*zاهر*) realm where different social interactions are codified and take place. Not only is this writing and interpretation of space manifested in the home through the tangible arrangement and use of living quarters but also in public through the maintenance of a "proper public face." It is found in the construction of a diasporic identity through the definition of the collective self as a dual/hyphenated/split identity that is Iranian-American.

As Stuart Hall (1996, p. 345) argues, identity "is always a structure that is split. It is something that happens over time, that is never absolutely stable, that is subject to the play of history over time and the play of difference." Arjun Appadurai (1996, p. 170) also expresses the construction of a split or dual identity for immigrants:

There is the seductiveness of a plural belonging, of becoming Americans while staying somehow diasporic, of an expansive attachment to an unbounded fantasy space. But while we make our identities, we cannot do so exactly as we please. As many of us find ourselves racialized, biologized, minoritized, somehow reduced than enabled by our bodies and our histories.

Therefore, identity formation for immigrants not only involves internal influences guided by memories of the homeland, experiences of immigration, and from members of the ethnic group itself but also by outside influences—from the members, laws, and circumstances of the host culture. "An identity is established in relation to a series of differences that have become socially recognized" (Connolly 1991, p. 64). Without the other, recognition of collective identity, differences, or individuality is meaningless. Perhaps these definitions best suit Iranian-American identity formation for they illustrate the struggle between ethnic and civic identity in which the public sphere of mainstream society controls the processes of recognition, such as laws and the procedures of naturalization and citizenship.

Furthermore, the public sphere is also the site where many immigrant groups may be "othered" into a position of inferiority. The theory of "othering," asserted by both Jean-Paul Sartre and Franz Fanon, argues that, originating from racist colonial institutions and structures, the black body has become inferior and wretched by the white man who is not only the other but also the master (Fanon 1967, p. 138). In light of this definition, Homi Bhabha's (1994, p. 67) interpretation of the other as "an object of desire and derision, an articulation of difference contained within the fantasy of origin and identity," reveals the importance of the relationships among the other, the interpretation of the body, and the existence of a public identity. Below, I will further analyze how the other mainstream society interacts and influences the collective immigrant identity, by discussing multicultural policies and Iranian assimilation into the U.S. public sphere.

Immigrants may maintain a "proper public face" or act *zerang*, in order to use a

“public identity” or “persona” to disguise a private self that may be considered by mainstream society as “freakish.” According to Marcel Mauss (1985, pp. 12–14), that persona becomes a “mask, a role played by the individual” that hides a different part of the self. With the case of Iranian-Americans, masking their Iranian self in the private sphere is an important part of survival in the United States—a way of further whitening themselves. Thus, the “deliberate use of the hyphen in Iranian-American is meant to represent this synthesis of two distinct cultures” (Karim and Khorrami 1999, p. 24). The hyphenated form illustrates the struggle of coming to terms with “their identity as Iranian-Americans, influenced not only by U.S. attitudes toward Iran but also by Iranian immigrants anxious to preserve their culture and language within a nation often hostile to them and their homeland” (Karim and Khorrami 1999, p. 25). Although the authors of *A World Between* argue that there has been a shift between diaspora and assimilation among “Iranian-Americans” stemming from a tiredness of “being caught in the never-ending spiral of old images that tie them to the homeland” and a “new syncretic, evolving, and dualistic experience” (Karim and Khorrami 1999, p. 27), the present article advocates the notion of a compartmentalization of these identifications. In other words, Iranian-Americans maintain a dual identity between their public and private selves in which the interpretation and use of space and the construction of the “whitified” body help assimilate the public identity into mainstream American culture while sustaining the Iranian diasporic identity in the private domain.

THE IMMIGRANT STATE: LIFE BETWEEN IRANIANS AND AMERICANS

Culture in America is likely to be spelled out these days with a hyphen.

—*Time*, Special Issue Fall, 1993

The meaning of “the American way of life” or “Americanness” is important to analyze from both mainstream and immigrant perspectives. The observation of this relationship between the mainstream and substreams of a society not only shows how members of that society interact with and perceive each other but also how social institutions historically standardize and codify this relationship, as seen through the previous discussion of racialization. For example, the use of a census creates a “normal” body—or recognized identities—in which all people of that society are contrasted against, or othered. According to Benedict Anderson (1996, p. 246), the innovation of the census was both its success in construction of ethnic-racial classifications and their systematic quantification. In other words, the census has become the measuring stick of ethnic identities, providing political power through recognition. Some identities—specifically the hyphenated identity—are formed outside this public sphere/space and lack recognition with choices of identifications that are not suitable, such as “caucasian.” How does this lack of recognition impact ethnic minority groups such as Iranian-Americans? And how do policy-oriented theories such as multiculturalism affect public space and the actors involved within it?

Traditionally, mainstream American society has been termed WASPish—meaning white Anglo-Saxon Protestants. WASPs have historically been marked as the suitable and desirable national body. From very early in its history, the United States has espoused an assimilationist ideology toward immigrants. Under the policy of Americanization, assimilation promoted the WASPish form as the ideal national body. According to

David Bennett (1998, p. 15), Americanization presupposed that the state twinned with the nation and that the state claimed legitimacy "by gaining the consent of an ethnically diverse citizenry to live by the enlightened, universal principles." Therefore, the nation and the state became one body in which the WASPish body was the ideal.

The notion of the "melting pot" stemmed from Americanization and theories of assimilation where all ethnicities or races could become "American" regardless of their color or culture by accepting civic nationalism though WASP was still considered the ideal national body. The melting pot became "essential for American national identity: it is a metaphor for the construction of a unified people out of a wide variety of ethnic and racial groups" (Bennett 1998, p. 144). Iranian-Americans have become assimilated. As presented throughout this work, Iranians have traditionally been familiar with Western and specifically U.S. society. Under the modernization policies implemented by the Pahlavi regime, Westernization originated in Iran prior to the revolution and consequent immigration. Along with this familiarity, Iranians have also been able to melt into the pot by creating a public persona, separating their private Iranian identity from the public sphere as discussed above. Thus, one could argue that the assimilation is partial, part of the hyphenated identity.

However, with more and more diverse ethnicities (i.e., non-European) immigrating to the United States, the "twinning" of the state with a homogeneous national body has become increasingly difficult, and in some cases, unappealing to both the white mainstream and ethnic immigrants. The great wave of immigrants, mainly from Europe, in 1901–1910 has been matched and exceeded by immigrants from the rest of the world. According to (*Time*, December 2, 1993, p. 3) immigrants are arriving at the rate of more than one million per year, mostly from Asia and the vast Hispanic world.

Thus, beginning in the 1960s with a new set of liberal immigration policies, multiculturalism and pluralism started usurping the assimilationist melting pot notion with a presumably more liberal and democratic theory regarding society and social relations. Although some scholars criticize the theory, policies, and discourse that constitutes multiculturalism—claiming that "although a nation of ethnics, our established ethnic is WASPishness," which keeps "America white" (Reed 1997, p. xvi)—other scholars argue that "multiculturalism describes the reality of minority and ethnic diversity" in the United States (Glazer 1997, p. 10). By rejecting assimilation and the melting pot image, some scholars, such as Nathan Glazer, claim that multiculturalism "becomes a new image of a better America, without prejudice and discrimination, in which no cultural theme linked to any racial or ethnic group has priority, and in which American culture is seen as the product of a complex intermingling of themes from every minority ethnic and racial group" (1997, p. 11). Instead of the melting pot, such a multicultural society is metaphorically described as a "salad bowl" or the "glorious mosaic."

Glazer qualifies his analysis of multicultural theory by analyzing the various "directions" it can take. This means that multicultural theory has yet to be finalized. There are numerous explanations and definitions for multiculturalism. Clearly, the discourse circulating around this liberal ideology is extremely charged, opinionated, and voluminous, making multicultural policy—such as affirmative action and educational reform—highly debated and controversial. Therefore, an analysis of this debate would be too complex and beyond the scope of this article.

Instead, this essay shows how, as a liberal theory, multiculturalism espouses an extension of the democratic principles that are the founding ideals of American society.

Whether or not these principles have been fully realized or impartially implemented does not concern this work. The assumption states that ideals such as freedom, liberty, justice, and equality constitute a main thrust of what characterizes American culture or civic nationalism. According to Aihwa Ong (1993, p. 739), “neoliberalism, with its celebration of freedom, progress, and individualism, has become a pervasive ideology that influences many domains of social life. It has become synonymous with being American.” Based on these assumptions, multicultural theory espouses that American culture can and should accommodate diversity because it is “the American way.” Not only do multicultural advocates claim that American society is composed of immigrants with a liberal democratic tradition, but they also argue that the next phase of U.S. politics and society (i.e., the public sphere) should usher in a politics of equal recognition (Taylor 1994, p. 27). According to Charles Taylor (1994, p. 27), “democracy has taken various forms over the years, and has now returned in the form of demands for the equal status of culture.”

Hence, the ideal form of multiculturalism attempts to promote a “changing understanding of our nation, its values,” along with its faults in order to influence policies regarding immigration (Glazer 1997, p. 79) and ethnic groups. It seeks to promote the objective of a liberal democratic culture that according to Steven Rockefeller (1994, p. 89), is “to respect ethnic identities and to encourage different cultural traditions to develop fully their potential for expression of the democratic ideals of freedom and equality.” As argued by Bennett (1998, p. 15), “Jefferson’s Declaration of Independence founded the American nation on an Enlightenment doctrine of universal ethical and political principles. . . principles which transcended ethnic and racial differences.”

Therefore, American culture conforms to liberal political and ideological beliefs that have been codified into laws as universal ideals. Franklin D. Roosevelt “expressed this clearly when he stated in 1943 that ‘Americanism is a matter of the mind and the heart; Americanism is not, and never was, a matter of race and ancestry. A good American is one who is loyal to this country and to our creed of liberty and democracy’” (Bennett 1998, p. 144). Thus, Americanism or Americanness identifies with liberalism and democracy not only as theories but also as cultural characteristics. According to Richard Falk (2000, p. 128), “the United States has been generally successful in combining the psychopolitical and juristic sense of nationality in the face of ethnic diversity, by giving substance and meaning to an overarching, nonethnic reality of citizenship.” Falk argues that civic nationalism is less of an ethnic identity and more a feature of a political association ensuing from rights, privileges, and the aura of American citizenship.

In its purest form, civic nationalism is devoid of race, ethnicity, gender, and class—all traditional categories of identification—so as to incorporate diversity while neutralizing differences. It espouses equality for every citizen and neutrality for the public sphere. There may very well exist a gap between the theory of American civic nationalism as defined above and its implementation and practice throughout American history. However, some immigrant groups give credence to this rhetoric and truly believe that to be an American means to be a citizen with rights. Iranian-Americans in this study are an example of this sentimentality toward and acceptance of American civic nationalism. According to Jürgen Habermas, there are various levels of immigrant incorporation into the public sphere. Habermas (1994, p. 138) argues that, as a result of U.S. immigration policy, liberal interpretations of assimilation include an institutionalization of the autonomy of

the citizens in the recipient society and the practice of the "public use of reason" through agreement with the principles of the U.S. Constitution.

Therefore, under this definition, "all that is expected of immigrants is the willingness to enter into the political culture of their new homeland, without having to give up the cultural form of life of their origins by doing so" (Habermas 1994, p. 139). Then, the United States is a society that has a number of ethnic groups as loosely aggregated subcultures within the larger English-speaking society (Kymlicka 1995, p. 15) or the mainstream. In this society, Iranians have been able to benefit from these liberal ideals as a "loosely aggregate subculture." They not only accept American civic nationalism, but they also willingly assimilate into the public sphere. For example, when asked what it means to be an American, Iranian participants stated unanimously: freedom, rights, and citizenship. Eighty-one percent of the participants stated that they are Iranian-Americans. A fifty-three year-old woman wrote that being an "American is having cultural, religious, and political freedom. To be able to do what I want without having to be afraid of a secret police. To be able to work hard and make a good living. To have political power and be able to influence what happens in my society." However, interestingly enough, this same woman, who perceives Americanness as having "political power" and influence over society, does not feel represented by the U.S. government. When asked, she wrote, "No! I would love to see Iranians run for public offices and influence the policies of the U.S. government."

An eighty-six year-old woman wrote that American characteristics are "freedom, legal process, acceptance of foreigners and nonjudgmental." A forty-nine year-old man wrote that a person who has become an American by choice rather than by birth "is more of an American than otherwise." And a thirty-four year-old man:

To be an American means many different things to me, all of which embody the reasons why different ethnic populations are attracted to the United States. First and foremost is the belief that "anything is possible". . . . one's craft can lead to great achievements not just measured monetarily but through an appreciation (societal) and recognition that is received for an elite few in other countries. I embrace the spirit of freedom (in the true sense of the word). America is the final destination where I have found my wants and my desires, and America has allowed me to believe in myself and given hope to the realization of my dreams. America is also a melting pot, a cornucopia of different traditions who have found a common theme in their land.

Thus, as well as restructuring the body and splitting the identity into two spheres, it can be argued that Iranian-American's acceptance of American ideological norms leads to their adaptation and relative prosperity as an immigrant group. By absorbing U.S. civicism and assimilating into the public sphere through the alteration of their bodies, Iranian-Americans "live the American dream."

CONCLUSION

The study of American immigrants is important in understanding U.S. civilization, as it is one of the greatest immigrant states in all of history. As each new wave of immigration hits the United States, Americans (mainstream and substreams) are faced with new questions of identity and recognition. In order to inform and direct appropriate policies, new explanations need to arise to answer such questions as, "Who are we?" Thus, in the hopes of further developing a theory that may be applied universally, it is important to

study all immigrant groups in the United States. Furthermore, such a study hopes to add to the understanding of what it means to be an American with the many hyphenated identities attached. For the beauty of being an American is the opportunity of also being an African, an Irish, a Mexican, and an Iranian.

NOTES

1. Culture can refer to the distinct customs, perspectives, or ethos of a group (Despres 1968; Kymlicka 1995, p. 18).

2. 1.5-generation refers to young immigrants, born in a foreign country, but brought up in the host country. Second-generation immigrants are born and raised in the host country. 1.5-generation more than second- or first-generation immigrants feel the full force of their duality.

3. All these holidays celebrate nature and involve "Iranian" manifestations of the culture with little regard to religious or ethnic differences.

4. *Ta'arof* refers to the unwritten laws of elaborate civility in which words and behavior relate metaphorically to meaning. It is used when one greets friends and strangers. It refers to the kind of courtesy in which no guests, no matter how unwelcome, can feel anything but welcome in your house (Sullivan 2001, p. 15). *Roodarvasi* is a consequence of *ta'arof* in which people participating in the etiquette banter over the object being offered, shy away from accepting the offering at first insistence, and never make a definitive affirmation of desire over the object.

5. *Dowreh* are networks of interlocking personal coteries. The word literally means "circle" and is an informal group of individuals who meet periodically, usually rotating the place of meeting among its member's homes. These circles may be formed around any number of ties: professional, familial, religious, intellectual, political, or economic. This form of consociation has deep historical roots. Sufi mystics and darvishes, for instance, formed *dawra-s* with their disciples, and many of the groups regularly met in coffeehouses (Eickelman 2002, p. 224).

6. According to a 1997 CNN World News estimate, "Southern California has the largest Iranian immigration population in the United States-about 300,000 people-making it the biggest such concentration outside Iran itself" (<http://www.cnn.com/WORLD/9705/23/iranian.americans/>).

7. If taken literally, "caucasian" refers to the region of the Caucas Mountains on the borders of Eastern Europe, Turkey, and Russia. Otherwise, "caucasian" may propose an identification as "nonwhite" but not "black" either.

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