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MOVING FROM THE MARGIN TOWARD THE CENTER:
SOME THOUGHTS ON THE EMERGING FIELD OF IRANIAN
DIASPORA STUDIES



Twenty-five years ago, when I was learning Persian and working toward a master's degree in Middle East studies at the University of Texas, I wondered how I would ever get to Iran to do any kind of research or field study. Even while Iraqi president Saddam Hussein was becoming the new enemy and Iran seemed to be fading into the background, the ongoing chilly relations which began with the Iranian Revolution in 1979 and the 444-day hostage crisis made traveling to Iran for anyone like me—an American woman born of an Iranian father—a challenge, to say the least. In order to go there, I would have to engage in the arduous process of getting an Iranian birth certificate, then an Iranian passport, and all that would take convincing my father, who left Iran after the Second World War, the most difficult task of all. But as I continued onto a PhD program in comparative literature and studied major works of literature from Iran's contemporary, pre- and post-revolutionary period, I began to see the importance of another narrative that was not yet documented or understood: the Iranian diaspora.

When I began my dissertation toward the end of the 1990s, I understood how intensely I was seeking my own story in the literature of Iran, in the literature of the United States, and the stories of more recent exiles and immigrants who had arrived in significant numbers in the period between 1980 and 1990 when Iran was in a protracted war with Iraq and when many were fleeing the new realities of a country that had been both isolated and challenged because of its new regime. I did not find that story of immigration or diaspora, but the experience of writing about contemporary Iranian literature gave me an important idea that has shaped my academic and personal path in ways I am only beginning to fathom. After meeting many Iranian immigrants and first-generation Iranian Americans during my graduate education, I

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realized that they, too, had a story that needed to be told and shared. My role in editing the first collection of writing (fiction, nonfiction, and poetry) with Dr. Mehdi Khorrami (NYU) during my final year of graduate school taught me an important lesson about the value of human stories in the narration and documentation of larger national histories. When we undertook to collect the material for this first literary anthology, *A World Between: Poems, Short Stories, and Essays by Iranian-Americans* (George Braziller, 1999), I could not have imagined it would be the beginning of an important and emerging field that has, until recently, been relegated to the margins of Iranian studies and the larger field of Middle Eastern studies.

In the past decade alone, I have seen the vocabulary, discourse, and scope of research on the Iranian diaspora grow exponentially. The number of young scholars working on research projects that involve Iranian diaspora topics from literature, to film, to racialization of Iranians in Europe and the United States, as well as sociological and ethnographic studies of communities of Iranians in Western Europe, North America, Australia, and other countries of the Middle East such as Turkey and Dubai, have also expanded. At each Iranian studies or Middle East studies conference I have attended in the past five years, there are many more papers and panels that address the Iranian diaspora. The most recent Association of Iranian Studies conference at the University of California, Irvine, in August 2018, for example, featured ten individual papers on Iranian diaspora topics, and a panel called "Reconceptualizing Race in the Iranian Diaspora." Among the most recent groundbreaking studies to be published is Neda Maghbooleh's *The Limits of Whiteness: Iranian Americans and the Everyday Politics of Race* (Stanford University Press, 2017). Other forthcoming publications include Mohsen Mobasher's edited volume *The Iranian Diaspora: Challenges, Negotiations, and Transformations* (University of Texas Press, 2018) and Manijeh Moradian's *Neither Washington, Nor Tehran: Iranian Internationalism in the United States* (Duke University Press, 2019). A number of studies of literature and art of the Iranian diaspora based on recent PhD research have also been published.¹

While we have few definitive figures of the actual number of Iranian Americans (those who immigrated after the 1979 Revolution) and their American-born children in the United States, we do know that Iranian Americans living in California compose the largest population outside the boundaries of Iran (estimates range between 500,000 and 1 million). Some estimates of the actual number of Iranians

living in Europe and the United States vary from 5 to 8 million, but no comprehensive counts have been conducted due to the politics of self-identifying at a time when Iran and the United States have been in a continuous state of conflict.² Despite the fact that we have no exact numbers of Iranians in places like California, we do know that this is the largest diaspora of Iranians in history. As such, it is both a worthy and an overdue research topic. Perhaps because of how this large diaspora occurred—first as a major exodus from Iran as a result of the political and historical ruptures that ensued from the 1979 Revolution, subsequently because of the devastating physical and economic consequences of the protracted Iran-Iraq War and finally due to political events such as the 2009 disputed presidential elections, we know that Iranians live in significant numbers in many metropolitan centers around the globe. We are only now learning, and seeking to learn, more about the manifestations of those diaspora experiences in fields such as history, sociology, literature, film, and the newer fields of cultural studies, race studies, American studies, and diaspora studies.

In 2017, I was fortunate to begin a new position as the inaugural director of the Center for Iranian Diaspora Studies (CIDS) at San Francisco State University, a research and service organization within the College of Liberal and Creative Arts endowed in 2016 by San Francisco State University alumna Neda Nobari, an Iranian immigrant herself who came to this country more than forty years ago. This new center, the first and only such center of its kind in the world, has as its focus, not the more traditional Iranian or Persian Studies, but instead the Iranian diaspora. CIDS, inspired by the vision of the donor, seeks to emphasize new research, scholarship, and community engagement that focuses on the global Iranian diaspora. As a center in a state and a region that has a long history of Iranian immigration, we are fortunate to support collaborations and initiatives that begin to document and narrate the story of Iranian Americans on this continent. In our first year, the center has sought to build relationships both within and outside the university, to collaborate on programs and projects that highlight and feature scholars, artists, and initiatives about the Iranian diaspora. In the fall of 2017, I began collaborating with the Doc Film Institute to codirect a new film, *We Are Here: A History of Iranian Immigration to the San Francisco Bay Area*. While the film is still in production, we have had the pleasure of interviewing five Iranian Americans from four different generations that have set down roots in the Bay Area. One particularly colorful character is Parviz Shokat, who

came to the United States in 1959, attended Oakland Technical High School, and went on to university. Shokat is one example of an individual of the Iranian diaspora who preceded the large exodus from Iran, and whose story is contextualized by larger events like his departure from Iran after the 1953 US-instigated coup in Iran that overthrew Prime Minister Mohammad Mossadegh, and his arrival in the United States at the beginning of radical student movements of the 1960s.

The personal and collective histories revealed by these interviews say much about the silenced history of Iranians in this country. That silencing, both as a measure of trauma and deliberate attempts to forget the painful past of Iranians who left Iran in the early days of the revolution and the war has left a tremendous void in the public history of Iranian immigration and Iranian Americans in North America. Those histories have also been obscured by the constant stream of negative headlines that have vilified Iran and Iranians on a national scale, and have equated all Iranians in this country with the government in Tehran. As a result, several new initiatives are underway that we hope will fill this tremendous void in scholarship and in public history.³

Taking examples from other diaspora communities and fields of study, CIDS is embarking on building a more public record of Iranian Americans and their history in this country. The abovementioned film *We Are Here* is one such example of research and documentation that can be shared more widely, and can give a more humane and nuanced narrative to a very complex and often oversimplified history. Other initiatives that the center is embarking on include a digital archive of stories of Iranian immigration. In April 2018, when I attended the Khayrallah Center for Lebanese Diaspora Studies Conference “From ‘*Mjaddarah*’ to ‘*Fatti de Luxe*’: Food and Middle Eastern Diasporas,” co-hosted by the Center for Regional Food Studies, I had the good fortune to meet with Claire Kempa (the Khayrallah Center’s archivist) and Marjorie Stevens (the center’s senior researcher) to discuss ways to build public awareness of our own center and to develop initiatives and projects that engage the Iranian diaspora community locally.

Inspired by the Khayrallah Center, the Center for Iranian Diaspora Studies will embark on building a digital archive of Iranian American immigrant stories in 2019. While some of the challenges of building archives are universal—a reluctance to share material due to a culture of censorship, self-censorship, and a fear of authorities, the

case of Iranian Americans is particularly difficult due to a long history of mistrust. Given the current political situation in the United States in the aftermath of Trump's Travel Ban,⁴ his abandonment of the Iran nuclear deal, and escalating anti-Iranian rhetoric, it is a challenge to persuade Iranian Americans to self-identify and publicly share their painful histories. The archive project, moreover, is more urgent and essential than ever because it is an important vehicle for documenting the history of Iranians who left Iran, whose stories have been or will be erased by the political realities of that country, and also face the possibility of losing the ability to document and share their story and history with future generations because older generations of Iranian immigrants are dying with those stories untold. This archive project is also timely as it suggests an important narrative about the contributions and experiences of one of the largest populations of Iranians outside of Iran.

In addition to building the digital archive, the Center for Iranian Diaspora Studies has been collaborating with the Paul J. Leonard Library and the Bay Area Television Archives to digitize and make available the Iranian Diaspora Newsfilm Collection online. This collection is sourced from original 16mm newsfilm elements from the Channel 4 KRON-TV and Channel 5 KPIX-TV collections, preserved at the Bay Area Television Archive at San Francisco State. The KPIX film material was rescued in the 1980s through the intervention of local TV broadcasters Belva Davis and Bill Hillman, when they discovered that KPIX were liquidating their older assets. The KRON film material, on the other hand, was donated to San Francisco State by former programming director Pat Patton in 2015, when Channel 4 moved from their old Van Ness site to the current Front Street location in San Francisco. This unique material is now being made publicly accessible online as a free cultural resource for scholars, artists, and researchers.⁵

Another recent activity of the center is to create an Instagram page titled "This Iranian American Life" which highlights the experiences, everyday challenges, and life moments of Iranian Americans. While this image-based activity is a small effort to humanize and share the stories of Iranian Americans and Iranian immigrants in the United States, it creates an occasion for self-representation.⁶ These numerous activities and initiatives in the first year of the center are part of a larger vision to make the center a clearinghouse and repository for new material and research about the Iranian diaspora. Our long-term goal is to move the study of the Iranian diaspora from its historically marginal position to one that recognizes

the important historical experience of Iranian immigration and the role of Iranian Americans in this country and, in particular, in the California region for more than sixty years.

To mark the fortieth anniversary of the Iranian revolution and the emergence of this new field, CIDS will host the first-ever International Conference on Iranian Diaspora Studies, March 28–30, 2019 at SF State. We will also host two exhibits of Iranian diaspora art in the city of San Francisco before, during and after the conference. For more information about the Center, follow us on our website or join our mailing list. We'd love to be in conversation with other diaspora projects, centers, and initiatives across the US, the Middle East, and the world.⁷

NOTES

¹ Several other recent studies in a variety of disciplines include Mohsen Mobasher's *Iranians in Texas: Migration, Politics, and Ethnic Identity* (Austin: University of Texas, 2013); Nima Naghibi's *Women Write Iran: Nostalgia and Human Rights from the Diaspora* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2016); and Sanaz Fotuhi's *Literature of the Iranian Diaspora: Meaning and Identity since the Islamic Revolution* (London: I.B.Tauris, 2015). "A Fragmented Diaspora: Iranians in Sweden," by Shahram Khosravi of Stockholm University, identifies some of the unique "diasporic practices" of Swedish Iranians (*Nordic Journal of Migration Research*, June 2018).

² PAAIA, the Public Affairs Alliance of Iranian Americans, was part of a coalition of Iranian community organizations that campaigned prior to the 2010 census to encourage Iranian immigrants and Iranian Americans to make sure they were counted (and self-identified on the 2010 census), but the results were mixed. "According to the US Census Bureau's 2011 American Community Survey, 470,341 (+/- 21,201) individuals reported their first or second generation ancestry as Iranian. However, it is widely believed that this figure is an undercount of the Iranian American community. This can be attributed to a lack of participation in the census surveys, as well as the methods used by the Census Bureau to obtain such information. Estimates of the size of the Iranian American community range from 500,000 to one million Iranian Americans 'well-assimilated' into American culture." "Demographics," PAAIA, 2018, www.paaia.org/educate/demographics.

³ Literature of the Iranian diaspora has perhaps been the most able to grapple with this silencing. A number of novels and memoirs are at the forefront of naming and chronicling Iran's traumatic history. They delve into the lives of individuals who hold the memory of war, revolution, and in many cases, torture and imprisonment, by those who have been arrested and detained by

both the regime of Mohammad Reza Shah and those after the revolution under the Islamic Republic of Iran. Shahla Talebi's *Ghosts of Revolution: Rekindled Memories of Imprisonment in Iran* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2011) is one endeavor to uncover those silenced traumatic histories. Novelist Shahriar MANDANIPOUR also attempts to deal with the silenced history of Iran in his English-language novels (he currently does not publish inside of Iran). His novel *Censoring an Iranian Love Story* (New York: Vintage, 2010) deals with the history and impact of censorship in Iran, and his most recent novel, *Moon Brow* (Brooklyn, NY: Restless Books, 2018), deals with the trauma of the Iran-Iraq War. The three anthologies which I edited all contain poems, nonfiction, and fiction writing that depict some of the traumas of the revolution, the Iran-Iraq War, and the experience of exile and migration: *A World Between: Poems, Short Stories, and Essays by Iranian-Americans* (New York: George Braziller, 1999); *Let Me Tell You Where I've Been: New Writing by Women of the Iranian Diaspora* (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 2006); and *Tremors: New Fiction by Iranian American Writers* (co-edited with Anita Amirrezvani, Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 2013).

⁴ Persis Karim's *PostEverything Perspective on the Trump Travel Ban* identifies some of the unique challenges that this executive order poses for individual Iranian immigrants and Iranian Americans. See "Iranians Have Always Lived in Limbo in the United States. Now It's Chaos," 29 August 2018, https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/2018/08/29/iranians-have-always-lived-limbo-united-states-now-its-chaos/?utm_term=.9811f2298fc5.

⁵ "Iranian Diaspora Collection," Bay Area Television Archive, <https://diva.sfsu.edu/collections/sfbatv/12278>.

⁶ This Iranian American Life, "thisiranianamericanlife," Instagram.

⁷ Center director Persis Karim can be reached directly at persiskarim@sfsu.edu, and more about the center's activities and projects is available at Center for Iranian Diaspora Studies, San Francisco State University, <https://ids.sfsu.edu/>. You can also follow the center on Instagram, Twitter, and Facebook.