

The Limits of Whiteness: Iranian Americans and the Everyday Politics of Race by Neda Maghbouleh (review)

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NEDA MAGHBOULEH, *The Limits of Whiteness: Iranian Americans and the Everyday Politics of Race* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2017). Pp. 248. $85.00 cloth, $24.95 paper. ISBN 9780804792585.

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In *The Limits of Whiteness: Iranian Americans and the Everyday Politics of Race*, sociologist Neda Maghbouleh explores how Iranian Americans, both as an ethno-racial category defined from without, and relatively recent, non-Western immigrant group defined from within, confound US racial classificatory systems and accepted scholarly narratives about immigrants, race, and whiteness. Assembling a diverse corpus of research materials—from early twentieth-century racial prerequisite cases and contemporary anti-Iranian hate crimes and discrimination complaints to interviews with more than fifty 1.5 and second-generation Iranian Americans—Maghbouleh traces how Iranians have been seen and see themselves as both white and non-white in America. Her book responds to the question of how "a highly educated, high-income population of legally white immigrants who arrive already believing in their own racial whiteness" becomes brown, and the discordant experience of feeling brown when legally classified as white (8).

Through her textured analysis, she demonstrates the insufficiency of frames like "Islamophobia" and "assimilation" for explaining Iranian Americans' lived experiences of (un)belonging in the United States, particularly among those coming of age in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Teasing apart the *de facto* and *de jure* experiences of Iranian Americans, her analytic innovation is centralizing race, not religion or culture, to render the contours of their betwixt-and-between group identity visible. She identifies home, school, the homeland, and summer camp as four key sites of ethno-racial socialization and identification, organizing her ethnographic

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chapters accordingly, and traces how Iranian American youth navigate the limits of whiteness across these spaces.

To do this she develops a pair of concepts that together explain both the flexibility of whiteness as a category and Iranian Americans' experiences of it: *racial hinges* and *racial loopholes*. With *racial hinges*, Maghbouleh describes how the "specter of a racially liminal group, like Iranians, can be marshaled by a variety of legal and extralegal actors into a symbolic hinge that opens or closes the door to whiteness as necessary" (5). In chapter 2, she details this hinge-work, showing how even before Iranians immigrated to the United States, their purported racial identities as both white and non-white were used to define the whiteness of Syrian, Armenian, Indian, and Parsi/Parsee applicants in racial prerequisite cases through both negation and affinity. These early invocations drew on geographic, linguistic, and religious evidence, based in part on nineteenth- and early twentieth-century racial science, which was also deployed by Iranian elites for nation-building purposes, and passed down intergenerationally in diasporic homes. Drawing on interviews with Iranian American youth in chapters 3 and 4, she finds that these "powerful notions of Aryan cultural heritage, Caucasian geographic origin, Indo-European language, and concomitant white racial identity" often are diametrically opposed to their experiences of race in the United States (64). She teases out how parents' and grandparents' exclusionary maneuvers of "Persian exceptionalism," meant to soothe children's experiences of racism and anti-Iranian discrimination, shore up the pervasive "Aryan myth" in ways that are not only dissatisfying, but also distressing.

This disjuncture relates to her second concept, *racial loopholes*, which she uses to analyze the "everyday contradictions and conflicts that emerge when a group's legal racial categorization is inconsistent with its on-the-ground experience of racialization and deracialization" (5). Racial loopholes surface when Iranian Americans are victimized or discriminated against because of their group identity, but have no legal recourse to challenge it. While documenting the double bind of the racial loophole, Maghbouleh's ethnography also shows its generative potential. She analyzes both failed legal challenges (chapter 2) and successful activist campaigns that have transformed how institutions "see" Iranian Americans and other Southwest Asian and North African students (chapter 4). This tension is woven throughout the book and provides examples of racialization from the top down and bottom up, and at multiple scales.

The Limits of Whiteness has several strengths. Maghbouleh's multi-sited fieldwork, seeking out youth not just in densely populated ethnic enclaves or a single city, but across the country and as they move through different spaces, accurately captures the experiences of Iranian Americans who often grow up as one of only a handful of others in their town or city and form their identities in response to shifting contexts. As a second-generation, mixed-race Iranian American who grew up in a southern city with about thirty-five other Iranian families, reading these young people's stories and Maghbouleh's analysis of them was bittersweet. So many incidents and encounters that had seemed idiosyncratic to my family or simply confusing when I was growing up were, in fact, common and shared. The inability to articulate them fully, without a transformative space like Camp Ayandeh described in chapter 6, was intrinsic to the experience.

For that reason, while the ethnographic chapters provide much-needed empirical data about Iranian Americans' everyday experiences of racial discrimination that is sorely missing from the literature, chapters 1–3 stood out to me as the strongest. There, Maghbouleh places the contradictions of Iranian American identity into historical and transnational perspective. She identifies the structure of conjuncture that positions Iranian American parents and their children as racially liminal subjects and contributes to their hinge-work, browning, and transformative potential. Though her focus is the experiences of young Iranian Americans, Maghbouleh provides a longer history and context for why Iranian American parents see things so differently from their children, and how Iranian American youth's identity is shaped not only in the United States but also in transit.

Moreover, by using Iranian Americans as a case study for exploring the boundaries of whiteness, she shows how racial formations are never formed in one place and time alone, but across boundaries and projections, both in the presence and absence of actual Iranians and Iranian Americans. Her work considers the figurative Iranian alongside so many literal Iranian American youth. Her transnational framework allows us to understand the construction of whiteness as a broader (geo)political project, interpenetrated by imperial nation formation and socialization across national borders and in multiple spaces and registers.

This book joins others, like Moustafa Bayoumi's *How Does It Feel to Be a Problem? Being Young and Arab in America*, , in capturing young people's experiences of race and belonging in the diaspora.[1] In clear and compelling prose, Maghbouleh has written a richly detailed

chronicle of young people's shifting experiences of race and racism that takes their voices and actions seriously. It succeeds in highlighting moments of cross-racial and cross-ethnic solidarity, like the University of California SWANA (Southwest Asian/North African) campaign and Camp Ayandeh, which are especially instructive in the current political climate. Like Bayoumi's, Maghbouleh's text is imminently readable, but with a more robust sociological architecture. While there is much for a scholar or advanced graduate student of race, migration, or Middle East studies to glean from the text, the book would be a welcome addition to introductory courses in American studies, ethnic studies, anthropology, and sociology, and as shared family reading in Iranian American households. The book is a conversation starter and an insightful, timely analysis of what race means and feels like for brown youth at the limits of whiteness.

NOTES

[1] Moustafa Bayoumi, *How Does It Feel to Be a Problem? Being Young and Arab in America* (New York: Penguin, 2008).