

BOOK REVIEW/ COMPTE RENDU

Maghbouleh, Neda. *The Limits of Whiteness: Iranian Americans and the Everyday Politics of Race*, Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2017, pp. 248, \$24.95, (9781503603370).

For many Iranian Americans, the census – or any sort of survey where one must select their racial category – can evoke hesitation. Knowing the American government classifies and counts Iranians as ‘white’, this category doesn’t always comfortably fit for those who “work, love and live through a core social paradox: Their everyday experiences of racialization coexist with their legal, and in some cases, internal “whitewashing”” (3-4). Dr. Neda Maghbouleh, sociologist at the University of Toronto, presents an incredibly timely and profound articulation of the complex and often contradictory racial identity of Iranian Americans, in *Limits of Whiteness: Iranian Americans and the Everyday Politics of Race*.

The Limits of Whiteness melds years of ethnographic fieldwork, including interviews with over 80 young second-generation Iranian Americans, together with analysis of historical archives and legal evidence to present an unprecedented examination of Iranians within America’s racial landscape. Maghbouleh offers two new concepts – racial hinges and racial loopholes – to aid in understating how Iranian Americans can and do complicate understandings of whiteness. This book challenges the frameworks that assume race to be stagnant. The first, articulates how “legal and extralegal actors” utilize Iranians as a “symbolic hinge that opens and closes the door to whiteness as necessary” (5). For example, in legal proceedings early in the 20th century, Armenians demonstrated their whiteness, hinged on an articulation of their dissimilarity to the “fire worshipping” non-white Iranians [Persians] (19). Religion is a pivotal intersection that can serve to whiten a group in the eyes of the law, contrasting Islam and Zoroastrianism, with Christianity. This line of analysis demonstrates how racialization can occur without the physical presence of a body to racialize – as Iranians had yet to migrate to America.

As a group, Iranians often migrate with an internalized Aryan ideology – a self-understanding as white; or even the original white

people – and move through America under a harmonious legal category of whiteness. However, Maghbouleh utilizes racial loopholes to articulate the “everyday contradictions and conflicts” that arise when “a group’s legal racial categorization is inconsistent with its on-the-ground experience of racialization or deracialization” (5). The lived realities of Maghbouleh’s young participants urges an understanding that takes us beyond what has been previously chalked up to “ethnic bigotry, religious intolerance, or anti-immigrant nativism,” (170) and necessitates a race-based examination. Maghbouleh brings forth the voices of young Iranians grappling with liminal identities, creating a compelling analysis of the issues they deal with.

Moving through both time and place, Maghbouleh demonstrates the complexity of racial categorization and the precarious nature of whiteness for Iranian Americans. Taking us to the homes, schools, summer camps, and visits back to Iran, the lived experiences of dozens of second generation Iranian Americans illuminate the shifts in their white/non-white statuses. Integral to an understanding of the contradictory nature of Iranian racial identity is the pervasive Aryan racial ideology that many first generation Iranians carry with them to their diasporic homes. However, these ideologies remain unsatisfactory for many second-generation youth who encounter “race-based bullying” in majority white spaces, such as schools (11). The rhetoric of The War on Terror (such as references to bombs, Al Qaeda, etc.) plays heavily into the bullying that white peers, and sometimes teachers, weaponize to construct Iranians as outside the limits of whiteness. It becomes evident that many assimilationist frameworks of immigration are unsuitable in fully articulating the experiences of Iranians; who seem to check the right boxes of acceptability (highly educated, middle class, white-collar employment) in white America, and yet remain racially othered.

One of the most unique and revealing chapters is Maghbouleh’s articulation of *Camp Ayandeh [Future]*, in Massachusetts. A camp created by and for Iranian American youth, it offered for many a place of refuge – one that did not call into question their Iranian-ness or their whiteness, per se – instead it offered youth a safe space to simply, be. This chapter highlights how racial ideologies can be questioned, challenged, and reimagined, given a sense of belonging, by those who embody a paradoxical identity.

In a footnote, Maghbouleh notes that “antiblack discourse and symbols in Iranian culture and history” (196) is one narrative that this book does not explore. However, one participant’s story centered

on the way her half black, half Iranian cousins were racially othered, in Iran, countering romanticized ideas about the homeland. But, it seems that an important aspect of this experience is the antiblackness in Iran and Iranian communities, and this does not receive full exploration. This serves an extremely interesting point for future research, especially if we are to continue to disrupt the investment made by racialized peoples, such as Iranians, in whiteness. This direction seems all the more fruitful given how many Iranian youth ally themselves with other racialized young people.

Maghbouleh's own experiences are reflexively sprinkled into the *Limits of Whiteness*, allowing the reader to gain a sense of the researcher/participant dynamics – which are further explored in the appendix. The timely nature of this book cannot go unstated. This year has continued to place Iranians at the forefront of much media attention, including the Executive Order banning travel and immigration from Iran into American, and the renewed attention to the Iran Deal on its nuclear programming. Additionally, as Maghbouleh notes, Iranians are on the verge of being reclassified into a racial category separate from 'white'. Given the current context, and America's perpetual demonization of Iran and Iranians, Maghbouleh's book attends to the people who must navigate this racialized rhetoric. Further research should also begin to investigate the racial politics and terrain of other contexts, such as Canada. Although one could expect similarities, there remains much to investigate and disentangle.

Tremendously important for historians, sociologists, legal scholars and anthropologists, *The Limits of Whiteness* is required reading for those with interests in race, immigration, processes of othering, and diasporas. Maghbouleh's work continues to push these areas forward, complicating the black/white binary academics often operate from, and expanding understandings of race in America. This book also serves as a sort of refuge for Iranians in the diaspora who often move through the world navigating a complex racial terrain. This book puts words to the thoughts and angst many Iranians have as they continue to negotiate and renegotiate their position at the limits of whiteness.

Mitra Mokhtari is a Masters student at the University of Alberta in Sociology. She is conducting community-based research with members of Somali communities in Edmonton, with a particular focus on examining experiences within Edmonton's public school system.