

Talking to America:

How Iranian Immigrants' Public Events in Los Angeles Respond to American Political and Media Discourses

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Abstract

My paper investigates the ways Iranian immigrants of Los Angeles (LA) respond to the American media and political discourses about Iranians through their public events. From August 2017 to May 2018, I conducted a fieldwork project in LA to study the largest Iranian community outside Iran. I observed that despite being stigmatized, Iranians maintained a tangible public presence through organizing a range of religious, heritage and political public events. This observation led to the formation of my research question asking how, if at all, Iranians implicitly or explicitly respond to or challenge the American political and media perceptions through their public events, such as Islamic processions or Iranian New Year celebrations that are practiced on the streets of LA.

To answer this question, I gathered data by employing the qualitative method of participant observation which included participating in over one-hundred community events, conducting forty formal and informal interviews with first and second-generation Iranians, and documenting the events through taking fieldnotes, photography and audio/video recordings. I produced about two hundred pages of fieldnote data, two thousand photos and fifty hours of footage, based on which I am writing my dissertation.

I analyze this data based on theories from fields of anthropology, folk studies, event studies and migration studies, arguing Iranians respond to the American media and political discourses through numerous trivialized behaviors incorporated in their public events. For instance, during practicing Shia Islamic rituals in streets of LA, Iranians distribute roses to every random bystander—an unprecedented practice which according to the participants aims to counter the discourse of Iranian Muslims as violent popularized by the U.S. media.

Although the event studies scholarship has been growing in Europe since early 2010s, my research is one of the first papers in the field of event studies in the US that provides an analytical method to study how public events converse with media and political discourses. Besides, my research provides nuanced data about an ethnically, religiously and politically complex immigrant community that is under-represented in academic study of cultures in the US despite being under public spotlight particularly in the current political climate.

Problem

My research investigates the ways in which the largest Iranian immigrant community in the world living in LA (Graham and Khosravi 2002: 223) uses their public events to respond to the unfavorable political and media discourses pertaining to Iranians.

Although many Iranians immigrated to the US as their beliefs, political affiliations, or lifestyles were not tolerated by the Islamic Republic established after 1979 Iranian Revolution, they did not receive a cordial welcome from the American political and media institutions. The state of suspicion towards Iranians that began with the 1979 hostage crisis, during which many Iranians lived in fear of deportation, has continued to the current Trump administration and its implementation of the travel ban policy which directly implicates Iranians.

One of the platforms that the 45th president of the US ran on and won the 2016 presidential election was the Muslim Ban policy which called for "a total and complete shutdown of Muslims entering the United States until our country's representatives can figure out what the hell is going on (npr: 2015)." After coming to office, the 45th president of the US implemented this policy through an executive order which was temporarily blocked by federal courts. However, White House modified the policy into a travel ban which was concerned with the US national security and halted the travel of citizens of Iran, Libya, Somalia, Syria, Yemen, North Korea, and Venezuela Iran to the US. Although this list covers two non-Muslim majority countries, it disproportionately hits Muslim countries and especially Iranians.

In an article titled *Call Trump's Travel Ban What It Is: An Iran Ban*, Jason Rezaian—a Washington Post journalist who was indicted by the Islamic Republic of Iran on four charges, including espionage and spent 544 Days in an Iranian Prison—wrote;

Of the total of those likely to be affected [by the travel ban], Iranians make up the majority. Last year, there were 17,000 students from the list of banned countries studying in American colleges and universities. More than 12,000 them were Iranian. 35,000 Iranians visited the United States on non-immigrant visas in 2015. Mind you, those numbers are a fraction of what they once were. During the 1960s, Iranians sent more students to the United States than any other country in the world. [...]

Rezaian who has been born in San Francisco from an Iranian immigrant father and American mother stipulates that the policy is a confirmation that American public should be bereft of Iranians:

[Iranian-immigrants] have worked hard for decades to become one of the most well-integrated and successful immigrant communities in this country, both in terms of education and income. The travel ban is merely the latest confirmation of a grim realization: [w]e aren't wanted here. How could we be, if our relatives are viewed solely as security risks?

Not only are Iranians perceived as "security risks," but their nationality is also framed as stigmatic, disgraceful and a cause for embarrassment. A few months after the approving the travel ban by the supreme court, during an appearance on *Fox & Friends*—a FoxNews show—senator Lindsey Graham of South Carolina who was discussing taking a DNA test by Sen. Elizabeth Warren commented on his possible DNA ancestry by saying "I'll probably be Iranian. That would be like terrible (HuffPost: 2018)." A few days later, he clarified that his comment was a joke meant for "the Ayatollah," not the Iranian people. But a few years earlier Lindsey Graham has stated similar insulting remarks about Iranians. In a pre-taped address to the Southern Republican Leadership Conference, Sen. Graham had said: "My family owned a restaurant, a pool room, and a liquor store. And everything I know about the Iranians I learned in the pool room. I ran the pool room when I was a kid, and I met a lot of liars, and I know the Iranians are lying (TheState: 2015)."

Beyond the political discourse, the Iranian nationality has been repeatedly impugned in the public discourse through films and other media products. In the Oscar academy winner film, *Argo*, Iranians are mainly introduced as nameless and zombie-like mobs who are deranged as they see an American man in the streets of Tehran. Despite these screaming Iranian mobs, a CIA hero manages to rescue Americans who lived in hiding after the 1979 November attack on the US embassy in Tehran. *Argo* does not shy away from any historical inaccuracy to dramatize the

story and pitting Iranians against an American hero. Similarly, in another Hollywood production—*300*—Iranians are portrayed as freakish disfigured swarms that are slaughtered, by sculptured white male bodies.

Together, *Argo* and *300* represent Iranians as a historically consistent other to "the west." Such coordination between these films seems perhaps unmanageable, but they show how the US-Iran relation is formulated and presented by the American media institutions. Such oppositional relation makes sense to American masses as both films were well received in the US.

Iranian public events stand at odds with these dominant political and media discourse as they explicitly or implicitly celebrate Iranian-ness. Many public events of Iranian immigrants of LA celebrate Iranian heritage: Nowruz (Iranian New Year), Yalda Night (winter solstice night), and Festive Wednesday are celebratory. However, even non-celebratory events such as Quranic sessions, Bible studies of Iranian converts, or political meetings of leftists implicitly celebrate Iranian-ness as Iranian languages, Iranian food, Iranian politics and other traits of Iranian-ness are spoken, tasted, discussed and performed in the context of these events. In other words, the Iranian public events create a public which opens up spaces within which behaviors that construct the sense of Iranian-ness can be performed and legitimately displayed. However, such a display of Iranian-ness contradicts the dominant political and media discourse that wants Iranians out of the American public and demonize them.

Throughout my interviews and informal talks, organizers of and participants in the Iranian public events repeatedly reminded me of the political and media discourses pertaining to Iranians. Not only do they show a clear awareness of this hostile political and media environment, they implicitly respond to the political and media discourses on Iranians. Iranian immigrants' events such Shia processions embody practices such as distributing roses to audiences that reveal

Iranians are cognizant of political and media discourses on them and respond to them. As I mentioned before, while performing Shiite morning rituals in the streets of LA, congregants and organizers of mosque al-Zahar—one of the most conservative Iranian mosques in LA—give roses to every random passerby, a new and unprecedented practice which responds and counters the discourses of Muslims as dangerous and Islam as a religion of violence popularized by the American politicians and mainstream media.

Recurrent and explicit statements of my participants and their implicit practices through which they displayed awareness about the political and media discourses on Iranians and their responses to these discourses contributed to the formation of my research question, asking how Iranian immigrant public events respond to the potent political and media discourses that stigmatize Iranian-ness.

Iranian immigrants have a visible public presence in the LA area through holding Iran-related events in Shia mosques, Zoroastrian centers, cultural societies, charity foundations, everyday meeting places (such as restaurants), and on the streets of LA in political rallies, heritage parades, or religious processions. My research aims to understand how, if at all, Iranian immigrants of LA explicitly or implicitly respond to political and media stigmatization of Iranian-ness through their public events.

Method

To collect data, I employed the qualitative method of participant observation which included participating in over one-hundred community events, conducting forty formal and informal interviews with first and second-generation Iranians who participated in them, and documenting the events through taking fieldnotes, photography, and audio/video recording.

Most events in which I participated such as Quranic sessions and political meetings were held on a weekly basis. Over nine months of research, I participated in these events, volunteered in four Iranian organizations and developed a deep relationship with the community. None of my interviewees were random participants in the events, but individuals whom I got to know over the span of nine months and established mutual trust with. Consequently, my interviews were not survey questions but in-depth interviews with personalized questions that revealed why individuals participated in the events and how they responded to the American political and media discourses.

I identified all explicit or implicit references to American politics and media discourses that happened in the context of events. Afterwards, during interviews, I asked the participants about those references, trying to understand whether they were in conversation with American political and media discourses. For instance, I noticed that during traditional Shia Islamic processions in the streets of LA, participants gave roses to bystanders—a new and unprecedented practice in Shia processions. My assumption was that the practice is a means to challenge the American perceptions on Islam. When I inquired about the practice during interviews, participants confirmed that the distribution of roses aimed to counter the discourse of Islam as the religion of violence popularized by the US media. At the end of my fieldwork, I produced about two hundred pages of fieldnote data, two thousand photos and sixty hours of video footage that include my interviews and other ethnographic data. I am currently writing my dissertation based on these collected data.

Results

For analytical purposes and based on my data, I classify the events into three categories of religious, heritage, and political events, and analyze each category in one chapter. My analysis

identifies at least two types of responses in these events. In some events, Iranians counter the American political and media discourses. For example, I repeatedly observed that Quranic sessions held in mosques placed emphasis on the notion of Islam as a religion of peace, based on which they concluded Muslims could live in harmony with other religions. Relying on these observations and interviews with participants in the Quranic sessions, I argue that highlighting the notion of Islam as a religion of peace aims to counter the political and media discourses of Islam as a violent religion.

Another type of response is countering political and media imaginations of Iranians by conforming to the broader American ideological and racial relations. Unlike the first type, these discursive responses do not embrace Islam as a marker of Iranian identity. For instances, many Iranian heritage events that celebrate “the ancient Iranian traditions” in streets of LA counter the American imagination of Iranians as conservative Muslims. Incorporating dance and music, these events replace the American perception of Iranians as “fundamentalist Muslims, hostage-takers, and terrorists” (Malek 2015: 21) with the image of women dancing to Iranian music in colorful costumes. Beyond attempts to portray Iranians a secular community, some organizers of heritage events use racial and nationalistic tropes to promote a narrative according to which Iranians have Aryan roots. These events mobilize the potent discourse of Iranian “banal nationalism” (Billig 1995: 175) which links Iranians to the Aryan Myth and “claim” a white identity (Maghbouleh 2017: 21).

Thus, many of heritage events challenge the American political and media discourses on Iranians through conforming to the broader American ideological and racial discourses that frame Islam as a negative and whiteness as a positive marker of identity.

Significance

Although in Europe the interdisciplinary field of event studies is gaining traction, this field is yet to be fully introduced to American humanities scholarship. My paper is one of the first scholarly works in the US to employ the framework of event studies and contribute to the field from the perspective of American anthropological and folk studies scholarship. I draw on the notion of “traditionalization” (Hymes 1975:354) in folk studies, which expounds how individuals de-contextualize behaviors from the past and re-contextualize them in present contexts (Bauman and Briggs 1990:76-77), to show that creating Iranian public events primarily relies on re-contextualizing Iranian traditional behaviors in the context of LA. I also employ the anthropological concept of “discursive tradition” (Asad 1986: 15-21) to explain these recontextualizations are discursive and respond to the broader political and media discourses in the US. Based on this scholarship, I coin the term “discursive traditionalization”—a theoretical contribution to the field of event studies that outlines how events involving trivial practices such as dancing and wearing “traditional” clothes converse with the broader political and media discourses, sometimes opposing and other times conforming to them.

Besides, my research portrays the heterogeneity and layeredness of the under-represented Iranian community in ways that American audiences, including many academics, are not familiar with. For instance, my research includes descriptions of rallies of Iranian monarchists who carry pictures of Trump and pass themselves off as American patriots who want regime change in Iran, Iranian fundamentalist Christians who have converted to Christianity because they believe Islamic jurisprudence is not strict enough to make them pious, and female mosque congregates who pray or lead prayers without hijab, an unorthodox practice in Iranian Shia mosques in order to modify Shia traditions and reconcile Islam with the American social context.

To document the intricacies of the Iranian community in LA, I video-taped my interviews and events in which I participated and co-made a documentary about the ways Iranians maintain their traditions. This film—*The Taste of Samanu*—was screened in the 2018 American Folklore Society conference and 2018 OSU Ethnographic Film Series and has been nominated for “Aftab Prize” by the Iranian Diaspora Studies based in San Francisco State University.

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