Iranian/Canadians: Homeland, Diaspora and Belonging

Panel Discussion

Diaspora is a creative space for bringing out complexities of the extension of national cultures and their emerging trends, for enhancing intercultural relations, and for extending the horizons of difference (e.g. via and beyond multiculturalism). In this panel, focusing on Iran, its diverse culture and education, and on Iranians in Canada, a group of Iranian scholars and educators inquire into the phenomenon of the Iranian diaspora. Exploring themes of diasporic life, exile and multicultural education, the panelists provide a grounding for opening up discussion around the perceptions, representations and transformations of culture and identities in the context of Iran and the Iranian diaspora. Encompassing several aspects of Iranian culture and life, the presenters cover a wide spectrum of subjects: from multicultural curriculum design in Iran to international Iranian students in Canada, from Iranian political culture to literary and visual arts representation of the Iranian diaspora.
ABSTRACTS

Multicultural Education in Iran: Requirement, Challenges, and Solutions
ALIREZA SADEGHI - Assistant Professor at Allameh Tabatabayi University and visiting scholar at the Centre for Culture, Identity & Education and Department of Educational Studies.

The purpose of this presentation is an exploration in the features of multicultural education in Iran along with highlighting requirements, and challenges. This is followed by some suggestions for solutions. Now, people from, at least, thirteen (Iranian) ethnicities live together in Iran. The languages and dialects spoken within the borders of contemporary Iran includes; Farsi (Persian), Turkish, Arabic, Turkmen, Kurdish, Lori, Bloch, and Armenian. Such diversity implies the requirement of conversations that address multiculturalism in Iran's educational system. However, due to existent of the political and ideological conditions, multicultural education is poorly discussed and face challenges. In this article, through a descriptive – Analytic method, I will review the current situation of multicultural education in Iran. This will be followed by discussing the needs and challenges in the way of developing multicultural education within the highly political context of education in Iran. Finally, some solutions for this situation will be proposed.

“I want to make Canada my home:” Iranian Students in the Tornado of Diaspora
SHADI MEHRABI - PhD Candidate, University of Alberta

Iranian diaspora has been represented by different communities with different backgrounds. Iranian immigrants and refugees have been among the most noticeable Iranian communities in diaspora whose lives have been investigated by scholars and educators (Mobasher, 2006; Ghazinour, 2004). This is while, despite the challenges and difficulties faced in diaspora, Iranian international students' stories have been unheard and overlooked. In order to address this issue and to show the complexities of everyday life of international students in diaspora, in this presentation I will draw on various theoretical perspectives and a qualitative case studies of living and studying experiences of four Iranian international students in Canada. The study is designed to inform policies related to Iranian students’ settlement in the new society. Using the concepts of “place” and “everyday life” proposed in Eyles (1989) and Ellis (2005), I will ask how place is at work in my participants’ experience of being international students in Canada. Moreover, since place is a source of security, meaning, belonging, and identity (Tuan, 1977), my intention is to see how Canada as a place is at work in the ongoing dynamic of Iranian international students’ constructions of identity in diaspora.

Hijab and visibility: An Exploration of the Meanings Generated Through Encountering the Image of Hijab in Contemporary Iranian Artworks
NASIM PEIKAZADI - PhD student, Department of Educational Studies, University of British Columbia

This presentation investigates the meanings and relations generated through the visual depiction of hijab in the works of selected contemporary Iranian women artists who have exhibited these works, independent of one another, in international and mostly Western art venues. The study contributes toward the development of approaches to inquiry into the politics of representation in a transnational context; a context which is already replete with various influences, that feed in controversial assumptions about communities such as Muslims, whose identities are often easily generalized. Through generalization and stereotypification, Muslim women are usually characterized as oppressed and marginalized subjects within communities dominated by patriarchal and religious values. Although this is the case in many traditional communities, these imagined characteristics are hardly universally valid and they feed into and comply with discourses that degrade and alienate Muslims as Others. By incorporating ideas of Susan Sontag (1966) regarding art criticism and interpretation that emphasize the “sensuous immediacy” of an art piece rather than “meaning”, in this paper I aim to generate a discussion about the ways in which Iranian women’s identity is negotiated and presented through art in international, and mostly Western, contexts since the Islamic revolution of 1979. Considering the revolution as a huge sociocultural and political shift in many aspects of the Iranian citizens’ lives, inside and outside of the country, this discussion will touch upon the shifts that occurred in the representation of Iranian culture within the international context. Sontag’s framework contributes to looking at these artworks not to find their hidden meanings, but rather to find the connections they can create with socio-political discourses of representation.
Iranian Poetic Voices in Multicultural Canada

DR. NILOFAR SHIDMehr- Instructor, Liberal Arts Program, Continuing Studies, Simon Fraser University

For my presentation, I will look at two books of poetry by Iranian-Canadians and compare these poets' experiences of exile, dislocation, and life in diaspora. One of the books is my own Between Lives (Oolichan Books, 2014) and the other is Banoo Zan's Songs of Exile (Guernica Editions, 2016). I will examine different forms of exile, geographical, political, and spiritual, and the different relation to Iran each poet expresses in her work. I will also investigate the relation of the two Iranian poets to Canada and its people through the ways in which they coin their new identities, locate themselves in Canadian society, and create their civil and literary agencies. Showing how these immigrant poets connect to different cultures across the world through diverse mythologies and personal stories, I illustrate how their poetry paints Canadian multiculturalism more colorfully. Through the discussions of metaphor, language, and imagery, this presentation aims at discovering concerns related to stereotypical portraits of the Middle Eastern people and their cultures in Canada (Iranians and Iranian culture) and explore the potential of poetry as true voice of cultures to change stigmas, reshape public opinion, and enhance Canadian politics of recognition.

Nationalism and Racio-Cultural Imagination: Recent Experiences in Iranian Civic Life

TAHA A. VOSTA- PhD student, Department of Educational Studies, University of British Columbia

Inspired by specific works in critical studies of race and colonialism, in this paper, I examine Iranian political culture through phenomenological and psychoanalytic approaches (Fanon, 2008; Ahmed, 2007; Dalal, 2002; Baldacchino, 2011). I specifically inquire into Iranian nationalism(s) as the major politico-cultural identity which is shaping Iranian people's collective imagination(s). I discuss how the collective national imagination is enacted, experienced and reproduced in ordinary lives of Iranians and in everyday cultural tensions and debates; and how it shapes Iranians' cultural and racial identifications and imaginations inside and outside of Iran in significantly different ways. Analyzing the role of nationalism(s) at the level of cultural psyche helps to describe entanglements as well as potentials in various ways Iranian politico-cultural identity is perceived and practiced. The study will be grounded on excerpts from interviews in my previous research (Vosta, 2012), my personal experiences of living in Iran and in the Iranian diaspora, and, finally, analysis of recent forms in which Iranian nationalism is enacted specifically in social media. The latter is important as new waves of presenting and reacting to nationalism are emergent in the Iranian civic life through social media. Drawing on this analysis, I will discuss implications for civic education (in a broad sense of the word, in schools, campaigns, media and so on), both in Iran and within multi-cultural contexts. I will propose how reframing the ways we represent ‘Iranian culture’ and rearticulating our relation to other subnational, national and transnational collectives as well as the global North-South hierarchies would enhance cultural openness among Iranian people.

Discussant: Dr. MARYAM NABAVID, Research Associate, Social Research and Demonstration Corporation.
BIOGRAPHIES OF THE PRESENTERS

ALIREZA SADEGHI is an Assistant Professor, Head of Curriculum Studies, and Director of the Cultural Studies Institute at Allameh Tabatabayi University, Tehran, Iran. Dr. Sadeghi holds a Ph.D. in Curriculum and Instruction. He is passionate about teaching and research on issues of culture, multicultural education and curriculum. He has published three books and 14 journal articles to date. In terms of his service to the profession, he is a founding member of the “Culture and Curriculum” Special Interest Group (SIG) in Iran and currently serves as Vice Editor for the Qualitative Research in Curriculum Quarterly journal. Alireza is currently a visiting scholar at the Centre for Culture, Identity & Education and the Department of Educational Studies at UBC.

SHADI MEHRABI is a PhD candidate in the Department of Educational Policy Studies at the University of Alberta. As an Iranian student in Canada, her research mainly centers on academic/social life of racialized immigrants and international students in Canada. Focusing on the Middle Eastern Diaspora in Canada, she has tackled different areas in education including educational policy, citizenship education, social justice, and identity.

NASIM PEIKAZADI is a doctoral student in the Department of Educational Studies at the University of British Columbia. She works as an educator and a researcher. Her current research is on refugee integration services in Canada with a focus on the role of civil society in the implementation and development of integration services. Her research is deeply informed by a commitment to a holistic conception of social justice in human development contexts.

NILOFAR SHIDMHER, PhD, MFA, is an arts-informed scholar and a British Columbia-Book-Prize-nominated author with four books of poetry in English and Farsi. She is also the Farsi translator of Toni Morrison’s The Bluest Eyes. Dr. Shidmehr was the 2015-2016 Writer in Residence at Regina Public Library. She is currently an instructor in the Liberal Arts Program at Simon Fraser University.

Taha Vosta – Coming from an engineering and sociology background, Taha Vosta is in his second year of PhD in the department of Educational Studies at the University of British Columbia. His work concerns cultural and civic education, transforming experiences of cultural hierarchies, and issues of nationalism, religion, and political culture in Iran as well as in Western multicultural contexts.

MARYAM NABAVI completed her PhD in Educational Studies at UBC in 2011. Her research interests centre on the politics of identity as it bears on institutional inclusions and exclusions. She is currently a Research Associate at the Social Research and Demonstration Corporation, a national non-profit research organization that identifies policies and programs to improve the well-being of Canadians to whom social structures offer least.