

Racial Profiling of Iranian Armenians in the United States: Omid Fallahazad’s “Citizen Vartgez”

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Throughout history, Armenians have endured several resettlements and migrations, one of which dates back to the seventeenth century when the Safavid monarch Shah Abbas (r. 1588–1629) forcibly moved Armenians to Isfahan, Iran. However, Armenians’ most major migration came after the 1915 genocide. Some settled in the Middle East, yet others resided in Europe and North America. A number of those who resettled in Iran post-1915 moved to the United States, especially after the Islamic Revolution of 1979 and during the Iran–Iraq War (1980–88). In this paper, focusing on Omid Fallahazad’s “Citizen Vartgez,” I will examine the (hi)story of Vartgez, Fallahazad’s protagonist, as an Iranian Armenian in the diaspora in the United States. First, I will briefly chart the various waves of Armenian migration to

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the United States regardless of the migrants' origin state. In this section, I will also point out the ways that Armenians have been exposed to discrimination in the United States. Next, I will delineate the ways that Iranian Armenians, along with other Middle Easterners, have been subjected to racism and Islamophobia in the United States post-9/11. In the following section, examining Fallahazad's "Vartgez," I will map out the ways that Iranian Armenians attempt to hold onto their heritage in the United States while simultaneously maintaining their ties with both Armenian and Iranian cultures. I will also discuss the fact that regardless of whether they live in Iran or in the United States, Armenians have had to negotiate their minoritized status within a codified legal hierarchy—in Iran, with an ethno-religious hierarchy and in the United States, with a racial one. Because Armenians are Christians in a Muslim-majority Iran, their identity is defined via its ethno-religious minoritized status in official Iranian narratives. However, after their migration to the United States, Iranian Armenians enter a national context defined by race, ironically enough; now, they are considered a white ethnic minoritized group, but are lumped together with Muslim Middle Easterners and subjected to America's racism and Islamophobia. In the next section, I will address questions of racial profiling against Iranian Armenians along with other Middle Easterners in the United States. I will conclude this paper with a discussion of Iranian Armenians' transnationalism as a result of their precarious minoritized position within the United States.

Armenian Migration to the United States

Since much of Vartgez's story is set in the United States, it is beneficial to look at a few of the major Armenian migration waves to America. Armenians arrived in the United States as early as the seventeenth century, when a few were brought to America to help grow silkworms. The earliest record of an Armenian pioneer to America belongs to "Malcolm the Armenian," who arrived in Jamestown in 1618–19. The most considerable Armenian migration to the United States began when American missionaries visited Turkey in the early nineteenth century, prompting some Armenians to enter the United

States in pursuit of a theological education, while others arrived to develop the Oriental rug industry. It has been estimated that approximately 60 businessmen educated by New England Protestant missionaries came to the United States from Asia Minor before 1870, yet that number rose to 1,500 by the late 1880s. Most of these immigrants were artisans and laborers seeking economic opportunities.¹ Between 1869 and 1890, 1,400 Armenians arrived in the United States, with another 5,000 emigrating in the following years. While the first major wave of migrants entered the United States after the 1894–96 Ottoman massacres, the trend of Armenian immigration to the United States continued well into the twentieth century. After the 1909 massacres of Cilicia, this number increased to 5,500 in 1910, for instance. Interestingly, as the number of immigrants rose, the boat fare from Constantinople to New York decreased from \$34 to \$24 in 1913.² In the last decades of the nineteenth century, Ottoman policies and violence motivated Armenians to take refuge in the United States in the first fourteen years of the twentieth century; immigration rates rose dramatically; and by World War I, there were approximately 60,000 Armenians in the United States. Before World War I, the majority of the Armenian immigrants arriving in New York hailed from Asia Minor. A small number of Russian Armenians (about 2,500) also arrived between 1898 and 1914, first moving to Canada and later to Southern California in 1908. This migratory trend continued after World War I, when many of the 1915 genocide survivors continued to migrate to America until the 1924 quota system took hold in the United States.³

The post-1915 immigrants settled in the eastern states of the United States within industrial centers before moving to California and engaging in farming there. Today, multitudes of Armenian churches and schools are found in and around Los Angeles.⁴ As

¹Anny Bakalian, *Armenian Americans: From Being to Feeling Armenian* (London: Routledge, 1993), 10.

²Donald E. Miller and Lorna Touryan Miller, *Survivors: An Oral History of the Armenian Genocide* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 141–42.

³Bakalian, *Armenian Americans*, 10–11.

⁴Aghop Der-Karabetian, *Armenian Ethnic Identity in Context: Empirical and Psychosocial*

Levon Boyajian expresses, for the children of Armenian immigrants, “survivors of the 1915 genocide, growing up in Washington Heights, that particular corner of the New York which was our home, was an experience of very special quality [. . .] Our little corner, in a sense, was what was left of the Armenian homeland for those who ended up in Upper Manhattan clustered around the Holy Cross Church on 187th street.”⁵ The same was true for Armenians in New England (where Vartgez lives), who had created “little Armenian homelands” in their neighborhoods. While each neighborhood was different in its composition and architecture, they were each distinct and different from the mainstream neighborhoods. Isabel Kaprielian-Churchill writes: “Yet each Armenian neighborhood had many similar physical characteristics [. . .] More importantly, each neighborhood was dominated by the same overarching sense of Armenianness [. . .] Armenian neighborhoods have played a critical role in molding and strengthening Armenian identity in the American diaspora.”⁶

Between 1920 and 1924, a total of 20,559 Armenians arrived in the United States. As opposed to prewar immigrants, over half of the postwar immigrants were women, many of whom were widows, and one-fifth were orphaned children scarred by the atrocities of the war and the genocide. A few of these refugees had been rescued from Turkish homes, but the majority arrived from refugee camps run by Armenian charitable associations or European and American missionaries in Syria, Greece, and Egypt. Between 1924 and 1965, when the quota system was in effect, Armenians were able to circumvent restrictive barriers to immigration. The American National Committee for Homeless Armenians (ANCHA) was established in 1947, and relocated 4,500 Armenians who had been in settlement camps in Germany and Italy after World War II, using the Displaced Persons

Perspective (Beirut: Haigazian University Press, 2018), 46.

⁵Levon Z. Boyajian, *Hayots Badeevuh: Reminiscences of Armenian Life in New York City* (London: Taderon Press, 2004), v.

⁶Isabel Kaprielian-Churchill, “Changing Patterns of Armenian Neighborhoods in New England,” in *The Armenians of New England*, ed. Marc C. Mamigonian (Belmont, MA: Armenian Heritage Press, 2004), 16–23. Quotation on p. 17.

Act, which effectively exempted them from the quota. Later, ANCHA also helped Armenians from Palestine, those fleeing communist regimes in Romania and Bulgaria, and those escaping the socialist Arab governments of Egypt, Syria, and Iraq. ANCHA helped about 25,000 Armenians immigrate to America as refugees between 1947 and 1965. After the 1965 liberalization of the quota law, Armenian immigration to the United States again increased. This coincided with political turbulence in the Middle East, including the start of the Lebanese Civil War in 1975 and the Iranian Islamic Revolution in 1979. The 1980 US census showed only 8 percent immigration from Iran before 1959, about 25 percent between 1960 and 1974, and 65 percent between 1975 and 1980. Three-quarters of Armenian immigrants from Iran settled in Glendale, Los Angeles.⁷

Hence, Armenian immigration to the United States can be divided into three waves: the earliest wave, beginning as early as 1618 to World War I; the post-World War I wave, which included the survivors of the 1915 genocide; and the third one in the post-quota era beginning in 1965, which included the Armenians who had escaped the political turmoil in the Middle East. While Vartgez's story centers on Iranian Armenians, it is important to briefly explore the various waves of Armenian immigration from different countries to the United States.

It is also important to highlight the way Armenians were treated upon their arrival in the United States. Vered Talai describes Armenian presences in American cities as “relative anonymity,” meaning that they decided to remain ethnically vague.⁸ While their dispersion across the United States contributed to less exposure to discrimination, it did not rescue them from stereotyping. Along with Jewish, Greek, Syrian, and Japanese Americans, they were stereotyped as “too ambitious and with a crafty kind of self-interested intelligence.”⁹ The congrega-

⁷Bakalian, *Armenian Americans*, 11.

⁸Vered Talai, “Mobilization and Diffuse Ethnic Organization: The London Armenian Community,” *Urban Anthropology* 13 (1984): 197–218. Quotation on p. 203.

⁹George Eaton Simpson and J. Milton Yinger, *Racial and Cultural Minorities: An Analysis of Prejudice and Discrimination*, 5th ed. (New York: Plenum Press, 1985), 101.

tion of Armenians in different states and cities in the United States depended on various factors. From the beginning, however, their choices of settlement were limited; and while they were not exposed to explicit discrimination in many places, their settlement relied on the permission of the natives of those cities or states.¹⁰ In Fresno, California, things were different, however, as Armenians were subjected to overt discrimination there.¹¹ In 1909, Armenians were placed in the category of “Asiatic” aliens, thus prohibiting them from purchasing land in California. This continued until the case of *re Halladjian* was brought to the United States Circuit Court of Appeals in December of 1909, and the court ruled that Armenians are “Caucasian,” based on Franz Boas’s testimony.¹² However, even this rule did not support property ownership for Fresno’s Armenians, as the areas accessible to them did not include better neighborhoods. In addition to redlining, Armenians were forbidden from other aspects of US life, including being excluded from Protestant churches (a reminder that harkens back to Iran’s exclusion of Armenians from mosques); they also could not create social and professional associations, and were ill-treated by clerks, salespersons, and other townspeople; and Armenian schoolchildren were openly abused by teachers and classmates. According to Richard LaPierre’s 1920s research, descriptions of Armenians were similar to the negative portrayals of other communities of color, labeling Armenians as dishonest, deceitful, parasitic, heavily reliant upon community welfare, morally inferior, and inherently criminal.¹³ In Fresno, anti-Armenian discrimination’s roots can be found in economic and social factors. The influx of Armenians who purchased land and attained professional positions incited fear and anxiety among Fresno’s non-Armenian population. In addition to their independent attitude, and despite their

¹⁰Kaprelian-Churchill, “Changing Patterns,” 18.

¹¹Robert Mirak, *Torn between Two Lands: Armenians in America, 1890 to World War I* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1983), 144–47.

¹²Anahid Victoria Ordjanian, “Children of Ararat: Political Economy and Ideology at an Armenian Ethnic School in the United States” (PhD diss., Temple University, 1991), 60–61. See also *In re Halladjian*, 174 F. 834 (1909), cite.case.law/f/174/834/.

¹³Richard LaPierre, “The Armenian Colony in Fresno County, California: A Study in Social Psychology” (PhD diss., Stanford University, 1930), 390–415.

legal classification as Caucasian, Armenians exhibit a diverse set of traits including darker complexions, a unique language, and ancestral costumes. While they were exposed to discrimination, Armenians avoided any direct confrontation. This is the predicament of a minoritized population living among a dominant group that exhibits anti-ethnic discrimination. Since Armenians were not as widely known in other parts of California, Fresno natives did not succeed in mobilizing opposition to pass discriminatory laws, as they had done against the Chinese.¹⁴ This invisibility soon ended with the advent of the Americanization process in the 1910s to 1930s, and later post-9/11.

Iranian Armenians in the United States Post-9/11

Due to their affiliation with Iran, Iranian Armenians have faced an additional layer of discrimination in the United States, particularly after the Iranian hostage crisis in the 1980s and post-9/11. Iranian Armenians have been subjected to further racial profiling along with other Middle Easterners and Arab Americans after 9/11. Much of the scholarship on American racism is centered on the white–Black binary. Focusing on Puerto Ricans and referring to them as “sandwiched minorities,” Elizabeth M. Aranda and Guillermo Rebollo-Gil problematize this dichotomous rhetoric and argue that while the rhetoric is true, “the nature of the binary racial discourse reifies the subordinate position of other Americans in the same studies that attempt to unravel how race operates in the daily lives of those most affected by it. In this manner, the duality of race and the implications for White racial subjects undermines their structurally subordinate position, shaped by centuries of institutional racism.”¹⁵ Whereas skin color and phenotype are the typical tools for racial profiling, “the inclusion of ancestry and nativism provides an axis of racialization that differentiates citizens from noncitizens and/or Americans from non-Americans.”¹⁶

¹⁴Mirak, *Torn between Two Lands*, 146.

¹⁵Elizabeth M. Aranda and Guillermo Rebollo-Gil, “Ethnocracy and the ‘Sandwiched’ Minorities,” *American Behavioral Scientist* 47 (2004): 910–27. Quotation on pp. 912–13.

¹⁶Bradley J. Zopf, “A Different Kind of Brown: Arabs and Middle Easterners as Anti-American Muslims,” *Sociology of Race and Ethnicity* 4 (2018): 178–91. Quotation on p. 179.

In the West, Iranian Armenians are frequently placed in the category of Middle Eastern “brown” bodies. In this context, Kumarini Silva writes: “In the eight years since 9/11, both the local and global arena has changed as governments and citizens respond to the growing crisis of ‘terror’, or what this issue identifies as ‘deviance’ – bodies that are identified and subsequently disciplined as out of control because they challenge the status quo.”¹⁷ This type of “browning” is based on color, ethnicity, language, nationality, and those religions associated with a racial “Other” often viewed as a foreigner, an illegal immigrant, or un-American. Like many minoritized bodies, this brown body poses threats to the US racial and ethnic hegemony; hence, it is deemed deviant or dangerous. Therefore, the racialization of brown bodies does not require one to be a member of a specific ethno-racial group. According to Silva, “While the processes of racializing and categorizing people based on somatic identities and perceived differences are deeply historical in the United States, it is perhaps not until 9/11 that identification—of specifically targeted communities and peoples as threats to national security—has so effortlessly become incorporated into everyday life.”¹⁸

After 9/11 and with the rise of Islamophobia, Iranian Armenians have been lumped together with other Muslim Middle Easterners and subjected to American prejudice against non-white Muslim bodies. Despite being legally classified as white, Middle Easterners—including Armenians—are neither seen nor treated as white by the US legal system or society. When it comes to Islamophobia, however, Muslim Middle Easterners are considered anti-American because of their allegiance to Islam. Interestingly enough, religion as a motivating factor within Islamophobia is misplaced when it comes to the racialization of Armenians who identify as Christian. In the post-9/11 United States,

¹⁷Kumarini Silva, “Brown: From Identity to Identification,” *Cultural Studies* 24 (2010): 167–82. Quotation on p. 168. See also Neda Maghbouleh, *The Limits of Whiteness: Iranian Americans and the Everyday Politics of Race* (Redwood City, CA: Stanford University Press, 2017).

¹⁸Kumarini Silva, “What Is Brown? Theorizing Race in Everyday Life,” in *Brown Threat: Identification in the Security State* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2016), 25–51. Quotation on pp. 26–27.

Armenian religious affiliation is irrelevant as religious, ethnic, national, and other boundaries are blurred. Hence, post-9/11, Iranian Armenians grapple with what Neda Maghbouleh calls “racial loopholes”—the paradoxes between their legal status in American society and their everyday lived experience.¹⁹ As Trinh T. Minh-ha points out, “At a time when the rhetoric of blurred boundaries and of boundless access is at its most impressive flourish, the most regressive walls of separation and racial discrimination [. . .] continue to be erected around the world to divide and conquer, exacerbating existing conflicts as one world, one nation, one community, [. . .] continue to be dramatically raised against another.”²⁰ In such a world, every immigrant or potential traveler is viewed as a terrorist. In this sense, airports and official governmental institutions become fraught with moments of racial profiling where individuals are randomly selected for background checks only because their name might sound Muslim or they were born in the Middle East.

Maintaining Heritage vs. Assimilating

Fallahazad’s story “Citizen Vartgez” begins with Vartgez, the protagonist, having a nightmare the night before his citizenship oath ceremony. Part of his nightmare includes the neighborhood grocer, Masis, who appears as a bearded and chubby king.²¹ Vartgez wakes up from his nightmare and notices a police car’s light entering his apartment from a window. The confluence of anxieties about citizenship, a bearded king, and a police car right in the first paragraph of the story sets the scene for the reader to expect issues of nationality, citizenship, and power dynamics. The anxiety induced from seeing the police car makes Vartgez fetch his citizenship pamphlet, which has the red stripes, blue stars, and image of the Statue of Liberty on it—markers of superiority or integration forces. Yet Vartgez feels that he cannot tolerate the pamphlet or its symbols anymore.

¹⁹Maghbouleh, *Limits of Whiteness*, 5.

²⁰Trinh T. Minh-ha, “Foreignness and the New Color of Fear,” in *Elsewhere, within Here: Immigration, Refugeeism and the Boundary Event* (New York: Routledge, 2010), 1–10. Quotation on p. 5.

²¹Omid Fallahazad, “Citizen Vartgez,” in *Vartgez: The Trilogy of Watertown* (London: Mehri Publication, 2019), 5–28. Reference on p. 5.

With this initial scene, Fallahazad presents the reader with a character who is struggling with his immigrant status and anxieties regarding the American integrative strategies. The integrative ideology of the United States and the Americanization League in the 1910s to 1930s challenged all diasporic communities, including Armenians. This ideology provided the Armenian diaspora with greater opportunity of abandoning their heritage. Armenians were caught in between their desire to assimilate and their efforts to pass on their heritage to the next generation. Regardless of all the hardships, the Armenian political parties and the elite managed to create a core of committed Armenians with a nationalist vision. This is not to say that Armenians did not assimilate, however. For nation building in diaspora regardless of location, schooling and education became a cornerstone. Even today, Armenian diaspora schools try to instill and create a new image of what a “true” Armenian looks like. This new Armenian is conscious of their culture, heritage, history, and language, and is nationalistic. This type of nationalistic education and identity formation played an important role for the diasporic Armenians notwithstanding all the difficulties and troubles they faced.²²

Conscious of his cultural heritage and trying to maintain his Armenian language but at the same time endeavoring to assimilate into mainstream American culture, Vartgez undertakes his journey through this citizenship process. Vartgez remembers that he had bought the citizenship pamphlet two months ago with an album of Vigen’s songs, but read only a few pages of it.²³ Building and maintaining collective identity based on shared consciousness, memory, and knowledge is a major source of identity for a minoritized diasporic community. The fact that Vartgez purchases the US nationalization books and pamphlets alongside a music album by an Iranian Armenian singer, Vigen, hints at his hybridity and the ways that he maintains his Armenian heritage but also has a tendency to assimilate. Vigen Derderian, an Iranian Armenian pop

²²Razmik Panossian, *The Armenians: From Kings and Priests to Merchants and Commissars* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), 296–99.

²³Fallahazad, “Vartgez,” 6.

singer, was labeled “the sultan of Iranian pop music.” Before the 1950s, the Iranian music landscape was dominated by traditional singers with limited knowledge of Western pop music. In that sense, Vigen ushered in a revolution in the music industry. Even thematically, his songs were different from those of his predecessors. Traditional songs revolved around the candle and the moth, the rose and the nightingale, and an imaginary beloved and the pain of separation from this beloved. However, Vigen departed from these gloomy descriptions with mirthful content which he derived from common people and their colloquial language while also drawing from Persian rhythms. Vigen’s works became the prologue for a new type of music taking root in Iran. After the Islamic Revolution, Vigen left Iran and resided in California, where he continued to perform. When he died in 2003, his last wish was to go home (to Iran) and perform for that vast audience there, and one of his last songs, “Awazeh-Khan-e Mardom” (“People’s Entertainer/Singer”), expressed that desire. Interjecting Vigen’s name within his story, Fallahzad accomplishes two things: an intertextual dialogue between Vigen and Vartgez and a reference to Iranian Armenian collective consciousness.

Fallahzad is using intertextuality to place Vartgez’s status in the diaspora in conversation with Vigen’s diasporic story through a mosaic of allusions and intertextual references. Intertextuality, as propounded by Julia Kristeva in her essay “Word, Dialogue, and Novel,” refers to the ways in which a single work engages in dialogue with other texts, or intertexts, creating complex, layered meanings. Intertextuality manifests itself through symbolism, metaphors, allusions, and other rhetorical figures. According to Kristeva, “Any text is constructed as a mosaic of quotations; any text is the absorption and transformation of another.”²⁴ Using this intertextual reference, Fallahzad transcends the limitations of history and culture and creates compounded, nuanced meanings. Intertextuality helps evoke the liminality diasporic communities

²⁴Julia Kristeva, “Word, Dialogue, and Novel,” in *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art*, ed. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980), 64–91. Quotation on p. 66.

experience living between cultures, languages, and literary traditions. Techniques of intertextuality help convey the layered, nuanced complexity of diasporic multivocal aspects.

By choosing Vigen's music, Vartgez reveals the way he views himself as a part of the Iranian Armenian consciousness—a consciousness shared by an entire community. Per Emile Durkheim's ideas, societies are constantly influenced by people who are no longer alive but have left their mark on the consciousness of the community.²⁵ In this sense, not only does Fallahazad's inclusion of Vigen in the story hint at the group identity and consciousness of Armenians, but also as the sultan of Iranian pop music, Vigen is integral to the collective national consciousness of all Iranians regardless of their ethno-religious orientation.

Cultural identity encompasses shared culture, a sort of collective self, hiding inside the many other, more superficial and artificially imposed identities which people with a shared history and ancestry hold in common. This means that Armenian cultural identity reflects the common Armenian historical experiences and shared cultural codes, which provide Armenians as one people with stable, unchanging, and continuous frames of reference and meaning, beneath the shifting divisions and vicissitudes of the actual history.²⁶

Finally, on the night before his citizenship interview, when Vartgez is confused as to which questions to read and what parts of the citizenship pamphlet to learn, his brother, Mato, gives him a ten-page photocopied pamphlet. There are no stars or stripes on this pamphlet, which contains twenty-five questions in three languages: English, Spanish, and Armenian. The Armenian part is handwritten.²⁷ Using the significance of language, Fallahazad draws on the idea that language is a tool for demarcating an ethnic group from other groups in

²⁵Emile Durkheim, *Rules for the Sociological Method and Selected Texts on Sociology and Its Method*, ed. Steven Lukes, trans. W. D. Halls (New York: Free Press, 1982).

²⁶Stuart Hall, "Cultural Identity and Diaspora," in *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference*, ed. Jonathan Ruthengord (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1990), 222–37. Reference on p. 223.

²⁷Fallahazad, "Vartgez," 6.

the diaspora. The relationship between ethnicity and language also influences the links between language and national identity. Language and religion are typically considered markers of ethno-national identity. According to Steven Gryosby, language and religion are considered integral parts of primordialism, into which individuals are born.²⁸ Depending on time and place, the relationship between the two varies; however, they are associated with and feed upon one another.²⁹ With modernity and secularization, ethno-identities have increasingly been created based on socioeconomic status and political-territorial context; however, for ethno-national communities outside the homeland, a common language and/or religion are the major markers of collective identity, as in the case of diasporic Armenians, Chinese, Greeks, Indians, Jews, Sikhs, and Tibetans.³⁰

By choosing to include a multilingual citizenship pamphlet in the story, Fallahzad offers the reader a moment of character hybridity, where instead of reading the naturalization questions in English, Vartgez is provided with a shorter, multilingual version specifically prepared for immigrants. Most importantly, the questions have been translated into Armenian; however, they are handwritten, indicating that another Armenian member has translated them for the community and that Armenians have to find ways to negotiate the exclusionary policies of the host nation by asserting themselves.

It is also important to note that after the 1915 genocide, Armenian language mastery became a cultural marker for Armenian identity. Since the genocide had the most impact on Armenians of Istanbul, their language (Western Armenian) became the hegemonic Armenian language of the diaspora, with the exception of Iran. Other dialects of Armenian language were confined to private spheres, and the use of Turkish was condemned. Western Armenian unified the polyglot

²⁸Steven Gryosby, "The Verdict of History: The Inexpungeable Tie of Primordiality – A Response to Eller and Coughlan," *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 17 (1994): 164–71. Reference on p. 168.

²⁹William Safran, "Language, Ethnicity and Religion: A Complex and Persistent Linkage," *Nations and Nationalism* 14 (2008): 171–90. Reference on pp. 171–74.

³⁰Safran, "Language, Ethnicity and Religion," 184.

diaspora Armenians into a community. Languages of the host nations were considered second languages. Of course, in the United States this was more challenging. The fluidity of borders, pressures for acculturation from the host nation, and the lack of Armenian schools contributed to the rapid integration of Armenians into mainstream American society and culture. For this community, language could not serve as a cultural identity marker which divided the diaspora Armenians in the United States. Out of necessity, this community replaced language with religion and the Apostolic Church controlled by Armenian political parties.³¹

After the citizenship interview, Vartgez promises himself that he will learn the questions from the English version before his oath ceremony: “The day when his nationality will officially become American.” He feels that reading the questions from the Armenian pamphlet is a form of cheating right before this “so-called new life, or [. . .] this rebirth.”³² Rightfully so, Vartgez feels that this American naturalization and citizenship means the death of his roots and heritage and a rebirth into a new life. Hence, as he tries to integrate into the host nation in the United States, he first needs to disintegrate from the memories and languages of the homeland: Iran and Armenia. This is a common process of disintegration and reintegration that diasporic communities undergo. Vartgez must first empty his soul so that the new culture can penetrate and settle in. However, this strategy proves unsuccessful as the past continues to haunt him. Therefore, he has to reinvent himself, bringing the past, present, and future together rather than disintegrating from one and integrating into the other. The cultures are not mutually exclusive; he has to combine all three into a form of transnationalism and multiple consciousnesses.

Anxiety-Induced Racial Profiling

However, Vartgez’s collective consciousness is not limited to the shared memories of Armenians but also includes those of Iranians: twice a stranger, he has two homelands in his consciousness. After twenty

³¹Panossian, *The Armenians*, 299–300.

³²Fallahazad, “Vartgez,” 7. All translations are mine.

years of living in the United States, Vartgez has given in and accepted, or more accurately, been forced, to become an American citizen. Mato and Mato's friend Avizhan fill out the forms for him and pay for his interview without his knowledge. After they tell him the truth, when he finally tries to explain to them that "[he] may one day want to go back [to Iran], because you cannot bury twenty years of memories," Mato interrupts him: "What memories? You grew up in Abadan, but with the first signs of the war [Iran–Iraq War], you left and moved here. Don't talk about memories in front of me. I have memories, not you, of fighting during the war in Basra, Iraq. Four years, yes it was imposed, but still, my body is torn, haven't you seen?"³³ The conversation leads to a discussion about how, during wars, everything becomes binary. You are either a supporter of one group or the other; there is no middle way.

Avizhan tells Vartgez that it is important to become a US citizen because his nationality is currently stamped "Iranian." Mato continues: "It doesn't matter if you are Armenian or non-Armenian, your passport says Iranian; it will become a headache here in these conditions. It's happened to us once when we were kids. You and dad were in Abadan. Mom and I in Basra. I'm still suffering from that."³⁴ Mato's comment about the irrelevance of Vartgez's Armenian nationality or religion hints at the ways that people of Middle Eastern descent are racialized in the United States. It also indicates the increasing visibility of non-white and non-Black ethno-racial minoritized groups in the United States. Eduardo Bonilla-Silva calls this visibility the "intermediate racial categories" and conceives of "racial groups in the Americas as inhabiting 'spaces' – that is, as sharing a location without necessarily crystalizing into a social collectivity."³⁵ This intermediary group occupies a "different location[s] in the racial order, and [is] racialized through ethnicity, national origin, and/or religion, rather than strictly phenotype."³⁶ Legally in the

³³Fallahazad, "Vartgez," 12.

³⁴Fallahazad, "Vartgez," 13.

³⁵Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, "More Than Prejudice: Restatement, Reflections, and New Directions in Critical Race Theory," *Sociology of Race and Ethnicity* 1 (2015): 73–87. Quotation on pp. 79–80.

³⁶Zopf, "Different Kind of Brown," 178.

category of Caucasian but racialized as non-white, Iranian Armenians (like other Middle Easterners) are located in an ambiguous space as neither white nor non-white—a group that Gualtieri calls the most “invisible of invisibles” but at the same time hyper-visible, as seen in Vartgez’s case.³⁷

The racialization of Iranian Armenians has less to do with race, ethnicity, and religion, and more to do with the US foreign policy that has fluctuated throughout history.³⁸ As citizens of Iran, Iranian Armenians have been increasingly viewed as threats to US national security with the increasing Islamophobia that has targeted Muslims, specifically after 9/11. When Vartgez gets to his oath ceremony, breaking news appears on TV: the image of a fugitive terrorist whose facial components are ironically similar to those of Vartgez, from his tuft of tongue-shaped hair on his balding head, to his sunken eyes on his wide face, and worst of all his full mustache. Seeing the image of this “terrorist,” Vartgez begins sweating, and taken over by his anxiety, he feels that everyone is staring at him. When the woman in charge of his file calls him, all he thinks about is “to immediately make her understand that while his nationality is Iranian, he is actually a Christian Armenian.”³⁹ That day, things end up well, but he avoids the news for the next two days. Since Mato is a fan of the news, he notices a change in Vartgez, and finally realizes that ever since his oath ceremony, Vartgez has been wearing a beard so he will not look like the “terrorist.”⁴⁰ This scene in the story clearly dramatizes the fact that while race has been understood as a biological entity, it is in fact a social construction. What is significant in this episode, however, is that this socially constructed understanding

³⁷Sarah A. Gualtieri, “Strange Fruit? Syrian Immigrants, Extralegal Violence, and Racial Formation in the United States,” in *Race and Arab Americans before and after 9/11: From Visible Citizens to Visible Subjects*, ed. A. Jamal and N. Naber (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2008), 147–69. Quotation on p. 149.

³⁸Louise Cainkar, “Thinking outside the Box: Arab Americans and U.S. Racial Formations,” in *Race and Arab Americans before and after 9/11: From Visible Citizens to Visible Subjects*, ed. A. Jamal and N. Naber (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2008), 46–80.

³⁹Fallahazad, “Vartgez,” 9.

⁴⁰Fallahazad, “Vartgez,” 10.

of race has global implications where nationality, language, religion, and history come into play.⁴¹ Race sociologists have called this process “brown racialization,” which encompasses a confluence of skin color with ethnic, religious, linguistic, or national factors.⁴²

Interestingly enough, racialization of brown bodies requires only being viewed as a foreigner or a terrorist, not any racial or ethnic specificity. This homogenization leads to racialization of all brown bodies in the same way. During the oath ceremony, the young man next to him asks Vartgez, “so we should congratulate you for two things? [. . .] one for your citizenship, and one for getting rid of your dictator leader?” A woman sitting next to them corrects the young man, saying “like everyone else, he confuses Iran with Iraq. It’s on your paper. But he means Saddam.” The young man asks Vartgez if he is Iranian or Iraqi. Vartgez responds: “I am Iranian. Honestly, I was born in Iraq. My parents were Armenian. Then my father took me to Iran and was forced to get an Iranian birth certificate for me, but in reality, I’m Armenian.”⁴³ As they are singing the American anthem, Vartgez thinks, “what would happen to him? Would he be taken to court? For what? Betrayer? Rioter? Terrorist? American? Iraqi? Iranian? Or Armenian?”⁴⁴

What happens to Vartgez in this scene crystalizes that for brown bodies, American citizenship is legally obtainable; however, American cultural identity remains elusively unattainable. In the context of blackness, Devon Carbado labels this as testimony to the policies of “inclusive exclusion: inclusion in American citizenship and exclusion from American identity.”⁴⁵ This is also true about brown bodies that are positioned both inside and outside of America’s national imagination. According to Louise Cainkar, “As a result of exclusion and denigration in American society, the normative

⁴¹Aranda and Rebollo-Gil, “Ethnoracism,” 913.

⁴²Silva, “Brown.”

⁴³Fallahazad, “Vartgez,” 21.

⁴⁴Fallahazad, “Vartgez,” 25.

⁴⁵Devon W. Carbado, “Racial Naturalization,” *American Quarterly* 57 (2005): 633–58. Quotation on p. 638.

pattern among Arab immigrants arriving in the last 40 years and their American-born children was to develop a range of transnational identities [. . .] Shun[ing] a hyphenated identity [. . .] wait[ing] for a society more willing to incorporate them as full members.”⁴⁶

Iranian Armenian Transnationalism

As Vartgez’s story shows, diasporic subjects inherently navigate a dual challenge—namely, the everyday implications of a kaleidoscopic identity in a new environment, and the task of puzzling together an identity rooted in a fragmented home and host nation. In their attempts to resolve both challenges, the subjects’ cultural identity simultaneously takes root. Stuart Hall defines *cultural identity* as a focus on a shared culture and the mixture of vectors that cultural identities occupy, taking up multiple cultures.⁴⁷ Because diasporic subjects experience multiple consciousnesses, establishing a cultural identity is often full of challenges, including the suffering arising from fragmented memories, the weight of solitude, and constant roaming between borders of two or more worlds. The new and old environments exist together, placing life in diaspora “outside of habitual order. It is nomadic, decentered, contrapuntal.”⁴⁸ This decentered lifestyle necessitates physical representation as a single point of consistency in a life of constant movement. Focusing on the idea of dignity inherent in the concept of “multiplicities” rather than in the attempts to belong, as Franz Fanon puts it, diasporic multiplicities often contradict one another as a “way of being.” To become their true self is a never-ending journey for diasporic subjects⁴⁹; they cannot seek approval in either the majority or the minoritized group and must create an amalgam of all identity factors, firmly establishing diasporic multiplicity in all aspects of life.⁵⁰

⁴⁶Louise Cainkar, “No Longer Invisible: Arab and Muslim Exclusion after September 11,” *Middle East Report* 224 (2002): 22–29. Quotation on p. 25.

⁴⁷Stuart Hall, “Cultural Identity and Diaspora,” in *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory: A Reader*, ed. Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman (London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1994), 222–37. Reference on p. 226.

⁴⁸Edward Said, “Reflections on Exile,” in *Reflections on Exile and Other Essays* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001), 137–49. Quotation on p. 149.

⁴⁹Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1952), 14.

⁵⁰Homi Bhabha, foreword to *Black Skin, White Masks* by Frantz Fanon (Paris: Editions du Seuil,

For Iranian Armenians in the United States, this is achieved by diasporic transnationalism as they are culturally anchored in the host nation yet simultaneously maintain symbolic and spiritual ties with their homeland(s). The hybrid, diasporic transnational identity of Iranian Armenians indicates that they recognize one another's differences, fractured identities, and fragmented memories, yet they also connect with others cross-culturally. Diasporic transnationalism softens the boundaries of "us" versus "them" via exchanges and mutual connections. While not always harmonious, these exchanges allow Iranian Armenians to negotiate their social differences and positions. This, of course, is the result of centuries of similar exchanges and negotiations that the preceding generations have undergone to make the boundaries porous today. The transnational, in-between, hybrid position of Iranian Armenians today is the reason for their cultural permeability, which is essential in a world where individuals live together in their differences. This diasporic transnationalism also challenges former understandings of diaspora, immigration, and assimilation; Iranian Armenians subvert hegemonic identity formations by insinuating the marginalized Other into the fabric of the dominant. This re-articulation decolonizes hegemonic notions of one unified national identity and destabilizes the power relations between "the ethnic" and the native. The transnational boundary-blurring casts doubt on the hierarchical dualism of the center and the periphery. In Michael Smith's words, diasporic subjects become not only transnational but also translocal—that is, "situated yet mobile subjectivities," both here and there.⁵¹

1952), vii.

⁵¹Michael Peter Smith, "Translocality: A Critical Reflection," in *Translocal Geographies. Spaces, Places, Connections*, ed. Katherine Brickell and Ayona Datta (Farnham, UK: Ashgate, 2011), 181–98. Quotation on p. 181.