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"You were born in a shit hole; I was born in imperial Iran": Ethnic Reality TV and Inventing Persianness in *Shahs of Sunset*

Lior Sternfeld and Babak Rahimi

This chapter attends to the question of diasporic identity in *Shahs of Sunset*, an American reality TV show aired on Bravo between 2012 and 2021.[1] *Shahs of Sunset* signals a specific example in the subgenre of reality TV programming that makes visible characters *as* performers with the potential not only for celebrity status but also identity construction. Our focus on five of the six Iranian-American cast members, portraying a diasporic life of luxury in "Tehrangeles," is meant to analyze the significance of the dramatization of personality interaction and hence complex practices of identity, which the American reality TV depicts.[2] *Shahs of Sunset* invites us to experience being "Persian" in a Southern Californian context wherein reality and performance run parallel and overlap in complexities of class, ethnicity, gender, class, sexuality, race, and status.

Since space precludes us from examining all the characters in nine seasons, we will concentrate on the five cast members in season three, which aired from November 5, 2013, to February 25, 2014, although references to other seasons will also be made. With its sixteen episodes, including "Reunion," when all reality television characters meet for a face-off, season three is unique in how its episodic narrative brings the diasporic identity of the Iranian-Americans into conversation. Five key cast members, – "Asa" (Asa Soltani Rahmati), "GG" (Golnesa Gharachedaghi), "Reza" (Reza Farahan), and "Mike" (Mike Shouhed), and "MJ" (Mercedes Javid) – participate in an apparent unscripted reality television program that stages confessional selves, comprised of interview segments that offer gossip-like insights to their inter-personal stories as immigrants to the United States.[3] However, crucial to the identity of cast members' immigrant story is the ostensible glamorization of status and wealth that

1. Bravo is a division of NBC Universal, a leading US media and entertainment company with a global audience.
2. For a study of the cultural life of "Tehrangeles" Iranians, see Hemmasi 2020.
3. We leave out several characters from our discussion, though we will turn to Lilly Ghalichi, who played a more visible role in season three, toward the end of the present paper.

remains conflicted in the experience of immigration. What ultimately defines the identity of *Shahs of Sunset* is a narrative divided between the two homelands, Iran and America, where claims to Persianness play an ambiguous role in dramatizing self and reality.

What is Persianness? We argue that the diasporic identity of Los Angeles-based Iranian Americans, as depicted in *Shahs of Sunset*, revolves around a conception of "Persianness" as citational performances of ethnicity that reify the cast members as frivolous and superficial on the screen. However, such reification is intimately tied to the 1979 revolution as a temporal marker—an event of rupture and discontinuity that shattered and reshaped the exilic lives of Iranians. Importantly, this discontinuity provides the opportunity for subjective opening to self-reconstruct in American consumerist culture. *Shahs of Sunset* expresses such culture through its key cast members in two crucial ways.

First, despite individualized personalities, a common theme among the characters of *Shahs of Sunset* under study is the self-branding practice through which "Persian" becomes an exotic ethnicity of superficial character for (reality) television consumption. Second, *Shahs of Sunset*'s personas depict a yearning in a felt distance for a lost homeland imagined as something crossed over without the possibility of a return. Yet such distance is marketized in branding terms of a new identity to underscore the narrative of progress made in the experience of immigration from Iran to America, where the new homeland, in contrast to the static old one, promises a dynamic identity for self-expression.

In many ways, the presentation of "Persianness" in *Shahs of Sunset* traverses consumerist themes such as celebrity fame, fashion, lifestyle, luxury, gossip culture, drama, intimate confessional diary, and tabloid, all of which have been a staple of American reality television shows since the 1990s. But, in this particular program, the theme of dislocation appears at center stage. *Shahs of Sunset* emphasizes a distinct exilic habitus where physical or imagined encounters with transnational belonging offer the promise of self-development in the experience of immigration – to America. While dislocation is about longing for a departed homeland, in *Shahs of Sunset*, it becomes an opening for re-invention. The opportunity to reconstruct becomes closely connected with the narrative of an encounter with the past left behind (Iran) and the present now (America) for re-invention. Such re-invention becomes possible in the American media industry, where "Persianness" takes the signified forms of fluffy cats, comfortable carpets, professional laborers such as attorneys, entrepreneurs, medical doctors, real estate agents, and, in the case of *Shahs of Sunset*, new celebrities. All in all, what *Shahs of Sunset* characters reveal is a kind of celebrity culture, in which

"Persian" signifies a distinct branding of ethnic identity as glamorous, rich but equally part of the broader multicultural life of Southern California.

This show allows us to examine the social, sociological, and generational composition of the Iranian community in Los Angeles. While most participants came to the United States soon after the 1979 revolution and most were born in Iran, some of the characters that joined later are of different backgrounds, which helps to emphasized the unique dynamic of the Los Angeles community, or as they proudly call it: "Tehrangeles."[4] Additionally, while in Iran Iranian Jewish community accounts, and historically accounted for less than half of a percent of the population, it is estimated that in Los Angeles they make up at least ten percent of the Iranian diaspora.[5] In a way, this show gives space to that too (perhaps unintentionally). Mike is Jewish, Sammy who was core member in the first season and made cameos appearances in later seasons is Jewish too. Reza is half-Jewish on his father's side, which becomes an important theme in season one when Reza reunites with his estranged father.

This chapter divides into three sections. The first offers an account of reality TV as a distinct programming genre, while typologizing *Shahs of Sunset* as a distinct form of ethnic reality TV show. The second section offers a brief interpretation of five personas in the *Shahs of Sunset*, all of which are identified in sharing the common practice of self-branding that projects success and wealth as Persian identity. The third section looks at two cast members, Asa Soltan Rahmati and Reza Farahan, who travel to the Iranian-Turkish border in nostalgia for a lost homeland. The invisible border they encounter is discussed to reflect a subjective void in the ambiguity of belonging, but ultimately helping them recognize their Persian identity in diaspora as an expression of an imagined multicultural America.

Ethnic Reality TV

If we follow Raymond Williams' diagnoses of television as a development of earlier media forms, in particular, advertisement and theater, with an emphasis on dramatized visualization, then reality TV is a genre of dramatic form of a documentary program in which in a controlled environment characters display their personal lives in a distinct public stage.[6] This public stage is inherently about the audience who participate in watching a genre of narrative that docu-

4. The sole exception is "GG," who was born in Los Angeles in 1981.

5. See more regarding the ethnic and religious composition of the Iranian diaspora in the United States: Bozorgmehr 2002, 1169.

6. Williams 2003, 39–76.

ments individual realities who undergo subjective change through encounters, trials, and conflict. For the most part, conflicts in reality TV are about individuals who express themselves and their relations in terms of class, gender, race, and sexuality and work through ostensibly unscripted plots that remain contingent on the unfolding storyline on the screen. Often the drama's protagonists reinforce conflict in their daily lives through overlapping but conflict-ridden relations in the form of enmity, family, friendship, and marriage. Yet characters in reality TV are mainly archetypes, representing a range of villains and heroes who embody complex emotions with ethical implications. Meanwhile, dramatic stories of reality TV are based on characters who perform their selves in relation to others in experiences of love, hate, vengeance, redemption, loss, and death.

The coming of reality TV programs in the 1990s, facilitated by the growing global media industry, changed the genre of TV drama into documentary-like life dramas (day-in-the-life), in which everyday events in a person's life, entangled with familial and friendship relations, come under surveillance with the potential for dramatic outbreak.[7] Following William, we can speak here of a structure of feeling in the emergence of reality TV, reproducing a representation of a reality upon which individual stories are framed as the central theme on the screen. Yet televised identities are primarily mediated through the space of choreographed television, where "reality" is staged into a self-performing platform. For more than three decades, reality TV has evolved into multiple subgenres, particularly as its distinct programming has increasingly overlapped with online fandom and consumption practices. The digitized dimension has not only expanded the audience size, but also changed the experience of viewing television, when first the mass technology became popularized in the 1960s, with the online component incorporated into the show's produced TV content.

The oldest subgenre of reality TV includes game shows that take place in a choreographic environment, a set designed for clash between individuals as contenders competing in isolation for a prize. While shows such as *The Bachelor* (2002–) and *Top Chef* (2006–) revolve around competition over skills or romance, the subgenre of reality TV games are fundamentally about the cast members as contestants who display themselves through stages of trial through which the gaming nature of the show is naturalized into individual or group contestation based on values of personal skill, talent, perseverance or wealth. Connected with gaming shows, makeover programs such as *Queer Eye* (2018–) and *Extreme Makeover: Home Edition* (2014–) emphasize self-improvement through an internal competition as an individual is self-challenged with the help of an expert, usually a celebrity professional, to undergo self-transformation. Shows such as *America's Next Top Model* combine gaming and the makeover subgenre in staging the cast members into both competitors and persons who undergo self-transformation. In both subgenres the individual experiences a hyperbolic version of themselves in the performance of gaming or self-improvement.

7. Sender 2011, 4.

Gaming and makeover shows, however, identify a visual counterpoint to popular celebrity reality TV programs. In celebrity TV, best exemplified by *Keeping Up with the Kardashians* (2007–2021), it is the famed *persona*, embodying wealth, fame, racial identity, gender, lifestyle, and conspicuous consumption, that takes center stage. The spectacle of celebrity reality TV is a reminder that fame and wealth maintain representational value because of their association with products which the celebrity persona embodies as (symbolic) capital. Unlike gaming shows, celebrity personas do not engage in competition with others but remain, as Sean Redmond observes, self-reflexive of their performing bodies made famous under the camera's gaze.[8] Unlike the themes of self-improvement, celebrity reality TV rejects self-identity as self- upgrading since the celebrity life is already an upgrade for others to aspire to. However, conflict still remains a dominant theme in celebrity reality TV's ideal of "famous for being famous," since celebrities' desires and needs, at times malicious in nature, are thwarted, endangered by others' desires, longings, betrayals, or jealousies. The source of tension in celebrity reality TV lies in preserving fame, weaving between self-absorption and endangerment of notability.

Aspiration is an important theme since narratives of reality TV celebrities revolve around the display of self-presentation of consumption practices that viewers desire to attain. Seen in this way, it is not merely the celebrities who display fame that are participants in the programming plots but also those around them and, of course, the audience who aspire to a life of fame revered or mocked but still watched for its viewership appeal. The "democratizing" effect of aspiration has become part of a broader cultural yearning for fame and visibility, which has led to a distinct modality of celebrity reality TV programming, which can be described as "ordinary" celebrity. The term "ordinary" is meant to underscore the growth of reality TV shows with relatively unknown cast members, whose very appearance in the programs make thme famous for, well, wanting to become famous. But it is important to note that the distinction between celebrity and "ordinary celebrity" is hard to define in the age of reality TV programming, as figures such as Kim Kardashian became famous for performing famousness.

For our discussion, the notion of "ordinary" mainly implies a distinct por-

8. Redmond 2008, 149–61.

trayal of middle-class life that reinforces stereotypes of heteronormative practices of gender, family, and race. The franchise of *Real Housewives*, launched in 2006 across Australia, Canada, the United Kingdom and the United States, best depicts this appeal to the "ordinary." The franchise portrays women of influence, mainly of an entrepreneurial type, based on their appeal to sexual powers, youth, vitality, and at times a cut-throat competitive nature for success. Though mostly unknown prior to the filming, with the show the cast members gain fame in performing themselves, producing a unique form of celebrity that is self-performed. In this sense, self-performance serves as a self-branding practice in a show that frames the cast members as self-promoters who actively participate in a series of advertisement environments that include restaurants at which they have dined and hotels in which they have stayed, where often personal conflicts of gendered and racialized nature unfold. In an example of the centrality of race, the famed MTV show, *Laguna Beach: The Real Orange County* (2004–2006), portrays friends in an upper-middle class community in Orange County where whiteness, friendship, and success are in tension with jealousy, competition, and betrayal. All in all, in celebrity reality TV, gender and race play the most important roles in character-narrative structure.

Within the subgenre of ordinary reality TV grew the dramatization of friendships or families based on ethnic identity. In the North American context, ethnicity is perceived in a racialized categorization of a group of people understood to share an essentialized cultural trait linked through a distinct racial makeup. The racial features can be implicit in the narrative but they appear intimately connected with expressions of ethnic culture segmented into a geographical community mainly in a (sub) urban context. *Jersey Shore* (2009–2012) is a good example of ethnic reality TV as it depicts reified notions of Italian-American identity as aggressive, mischievous, and uncouth. Racialized cast members reveal their character in highly staged personal conflicts that bolster stereotypes while simultaneously enhancing the visibility of the characters as either aspiring to up-and-coming careers, or successful artists, entrepreneurs or professionals.

Shahs of Sunset is modeled after *Jersey Shore*, fusing dramas of persona conflict with the ethnic/racial culture of the cast members portrayed on screen. In many ways, the personas in ethnic reality TV are encouraged to express their ethnicity, often referencing their heritage in art, fashion, marriage, or daily conversations, as they participate in multicultural expressions of diversity and appearing as postracial chic, beyond cultural material stereotypes. But the element of being foreign is reinforced by depicting the cast members as people who are different, racially unique, though still familiar in their Americanized entertainment value for a largely white audience.

In *Shahs of Sunset*, the ethnicity of the cast members as "Persians" configures as racialized identity, appearing between foreignness and whiteness.[9] *Shahs of Sunset* follows the celebrity-like persona of the cast members but does so by emphasizing distinct racial markers expressed in cultural behaviors perceived as distinctively "Persian." From branding of the show as "Shahs" to depictions of physical smoothness, dandiness, boastfulness, crassness, violence, and, most importantly, deceptiveness, perpetuates tropes of Persianness commonly found in Western literary and visual traditions since the early modern travel accounts. The diasporic aspect also stresses the element of foreignness, which the show zooms on its characters who are balancing their American lives in Beverly Hills and Iranian traditions that involve expectations of sexual or gender identity and material or marital success. However, there is a key difference between *Shahs of Sunset* and diaspora reality TV programs such as UK-based Manoto's *befarmayid sham* ("Dinner Is Served"), which is funded and managed by Iranians in diaspora. *Shahs of Sunset,* in contrast, is produced by the Bravo network and the American Entertainment production company, Ryan Seacrest Production, which has overseen the production of numerous reality TV programs since the mid-2000s. The production aspect of *Shahs of Sunset* reflects a broader cultural industry of reality TV shows that continue to produce programs of diverse themes for a targeted audience demographic, focusing on the personal lives of cast members perceived to display distinct racial identities.

Ethnic-Diasporic Personas

The gleaming, flashy and, of course, fashionable traits of *Shahs of Sunset,* best depicted in the show's title sequence, serve visual markers that accentuate the glamorous and celebrity-like status of the cast members. The lyrics of the upbeat opening song, "Cut a lot of girls, cut a lot of checks, that's the life here on sunset, rich and famous, I am success," matches the celebrity rhythm of affluence and glamor that characterizes the show. Central in the emphasis on superficiality and materialistic lifestyle are the personas who are the driving force of the show. It is in "Asa," "GG," "Reza," "Mike," and "MJ" that *Shahs of Sunset* displays the complicated relationship between wealth and Persianness in the show's narrative trajectory. When it comes to self-presentation, celebrity culture that the cast members depict conflate Iranianness with "Persian," which the show portrays in terms of a racial marker beyond Iran's diverse ethnic and linguistic makeup.

There is also the appeal to the ancient tradition of monarchy. The title,

9. The reference to this whiteness ambiguity is best explained by Maghbouleh when she shows how Iranians in America are perceived not as white enough to avoid racial discrimination. See especially, Maghbouleh 2017, 14–48.

Shahs of Sunset, embodies the persona-driven charactesr of the reality show, especially Reza, who claim Iranian identity in reference to an imagined imperial past defined by the monarchy, the feudal political institution overthrown by the 1979 revolution. It is ironic that the plural title of "Shahs," meaning kings, representing a failed political institution, takes center stage for a show that displays a glitzy life of Iranian success in Southern California. For the most part, though, in the diasporic imagination of many Southern-Californian Iranians who left after the revolution and their children, the shah stands as a tale of triumphant nationalism. For the diaspora, Farzaneh Hemmasi explains, Iran under the Pahlavi "represents the last version of Iran they truly knew or, in the case of the second generation (who often have had limited exposure to pre-postrevolutionary Iran), the only Iran they understand in positive terms.[10]

Yet in the irony lies a hint of tragedy. In the personas who claim success, there is a struggle to come to terms with a revolution that forced the cast members to migrate to America, and also a reckoning with a monarchy that upon its collapse the characters claim identity. But the form of identity the "shahs" adopt is a branding tactic to promote the show for an audience seeking to watch (pseudo) royalty fused with personality drama marked by ethnic stereotypes.[11] The branding of *Shahs of Sunset* concerns itself with the depicted personas who self-promote in the idiom and symbolics of celebrity fame and status. In many ways, the major cast members of the show are performing celebrity branding in fetishizing their immigrant stories into a reified Persian identity.

The following short descriptions of the five cast members are meant to draw out differences in each of the show's personalities while stressing similarities of celebrity branding practices.

Reza

Reza is the larger-than-life character in the show. He is what is culturally and colloquially called half Jewish. His father is Jewish, and his mother is Muslim, so he is not Halakhically Jewish. The Jewish identity, however, is something that he wears proudly, and it grows with the progression of the show. In the first episodes, before the viewers get to learn of his family background, one can see subtle Jewish décor in his office. But what we see is something that is as Iranian

10. Hemmasi 2020, 129.

11. This study does not discuss the reality TV show's audience. However, based on research on the size of the audience for the first season, which was 1.5 million, the primary demographic for *Shahs of Sunset* is aged between 18 and 49. http://www.thefutoncritic.com/ratings/2012/03/27/bravo-medias-shahs-of-sunset-earned-series-highs-among-all-key-demos-with-15-million-total-viewers-up-56-percent-among-adults-18–49–709010/20120327bravo01/. Last accessed March 23, 2023.

and Middle Eastern as much as it is Jewish. We see *Hamsa* (or in the non-Jewish culture: *Fatimah's hand*) with the blessing of the business [Birkat Ha'esek] inscribed.

When Reza takes the crew to meet his Jewish family in Great Neck, NY (including his father and grandmother, with whom he had lost touch) his connection to his Jewish identity becoming increasingly dominant. As they were driving around, he said: "Great Neck is a mini version of Beverly Hills, except there's zero Muslims." Then, he goes on to tell MJ that "they're all Jewish, and when I say Jewish, they're, like, super Jewish." The Great Neck community, comprised of Mashhadi Jews and those who came after the revolution, are considered to be more religious than the Los Angeles community, and perhaps even more socially tight than them. "I feel more Jewish than I do Muslim," Reza told MJ. "I've been to a thousand Bar Mitzvahs and Bat Mitzvahs, like, I've worn more yarmulkes than I have turbans." When they arrive at Reza's Jewish family, Asa presents the family with *Esther's Children*, which is a diasporic celebration of Iranian Jewish culture edited by Houman Sarshar and featuring images and essays on a wide plethora of themes.

Then, we witness the reunion of Reza and his estranged father, Manoochehr. We get a glimpse into a story of over four decades starting in Tehran and continuing in Los Angeles and New York. Reza confronts his father about his leaving the family and moving to NY and not showing any interest in their lives. Manoochehr then tells Reza that his mother, Reza's grandmother, never approved of Manoochehr's marriage with Reza's mom, because of her Muslim religion, and she always strove to create a chasm between Manoochehr and his family. "They are *goyim*," Reza's grandmother would tell his father about his own family. It appeared that towards the end of the season, Reza's relations with his father, but also grandmother, ipmroved significantly, which allowed him to connect even more to his Jewish identity.

Reza's Muslimness is revealed in connection with his (non-practicing) Muslim mother, whose marriage to his Jewish father caused considerable controversy since he had converted to Islam. Since Reza's mother is not accepted in his father's Jewish family, as half Muslim, Reza suffers from a deep sense of rejection. It is perhaps because of this inner conflict, with his mother as the source of stigma, that Reza not only downplays but at times even violently denies his background as a Muslim, however secular it may be. But we can also frame it as a diasporic reaction of the generation of 1979 to the revolution. The rationale of this articulation can be summarized as follows: if the revolution is Islamic, and we wish to distance ourselves from it – let's say we're not Muslim, if the revolution is Iranian – then we will call ourselves Persian.

Reza adheres to an expression of his Persian identity that glorifies an ancient imperial past. As a monarchist, Reza wears his Persianness with gold watches, flashy chains with pre-Islamic symbols of Faravahar (while Reza also espouses, anti-Islamic sentiments throughout the show, the symbols themselves convey a wide array of sentiments. Consider, for example, GG's wearing them alongside very Muslim symbols, like *Allah*), and a large commemorative gold mold with the bust of Pahlavi kings pinned on his designer clothes. As a staunch monarchist, Reza's style of self-branding combines his public expression of sexuality with elegance and conspicuous wealth. There is connection between fashion and wealth, as Reza expresses his class through venture entrepreneurship, self-promoting his various businesses from home, intending to own a line of luxury haircare products.

Asa

As the least bombastic character in the show, Asa Soltan Rahmati is an artist from Venice, California, whose artistic works have appeared in public. Educated and smart, Asa, who appeared in six seasons of the show, is a more recent immigrant, a "political refugee" since the age of eight, and hence more of an outsider in a group of cast members. Born in the southern-city of Ahwaz, Asa's provincial background distinguishes her Iranian identity from the other characters, whose families originate from Tehran. Equally important is Asa's place of familial residence, as she calls it the "ghetto" of Beverly Hills, which implies a marginal identification as a racial enclave of urban geography.

Asa is also a businesswoman, actively marketing herself in what Kira Ganga Kieffer calls "spiritual entrepreneurship," an extensive set of business practices that revolve around spiritual themes and values coded as "feminine."[12] "Welcome to the World of Diamond Water." Asa welcomes her parents to the facility where her new branded water, "Diamond Water," is bottled. "The priestess is working all the time," observes her mom, visibly disapproving her career choices like a typical migrant parent. Asa articulates her spiritual entrepreneurship when promoting her brand of spiritual merchandise, a luxury high-pH alkaline water to rejuvenate body, mind, and soul. The name "Diamond Water" foregrounds a spirituality primarily tied to wealth, marketed as organic and nourishing, while "priestess" evokes images of healing and guidance: as a businesswoman, Asa represents a gendered capitalism that involves self-branding in product advertisement. Meanwhile, as she seeks support for self-promotion from diasporic women leaders such as Jewish-Iranian media personality Homa Sarshar, Asa's

12. Kieffer 2020, 80–104.

character bolsters a modern image of entrepreneurial success while maintaining a traditional notion of spiritual femininity.

As she promotes herself and her product in season two, we see Asa speak strategically about her ethnicity and cultural background, even if a hyped form of new age spiritualism, to enhance her brand as organic and marketable to a health-minded white audience. In a symbolic way, identity embodies Diamond Water. There is a moment, as Asa gives a tour of the water facility to her parents, when her mother suggests shipping a bottle of Diamond Water to Iran. "It is a big deal," she explains, "if they can drink Diamond Water in Iran, too." Asa's response is a sigh of enthusiasm: "Oh, I wish. Inshallah, one day." While fulfilment can be described as an unconscious desire manifested in past and present dreams, Asa's wish is one of conscious futurity, her "one day" aspiration for her branded alkaline water to be consumed by her fellow Iranians. What also gets to be consumed is the modernity of a luxury cultur,e which Asa now embodies as her personalized brand. Asa's diasporic identity, spiritual and material, fuses American entrepreneurship with a displaced yearning for home. Diamond water provides an allegorized self-portrait of a future in glamorous commodity.

Meanwhile, the expression "inshallah" (God willing), a trans-cultural practice also shared by Jewish-Iranians, may signify Asa's Muslimness without stating it explicitly. While her character has its subversive moments, especially when she shows awareness of her recent immigration to the United States or class position, Asa exemplifies a form of self-branding Persian that combines art, luxury, business spirituality, and politics. Asa advertises her politics like an advertisement for a product. Among the cast members, Asa is also the most expressive of her Iranian identity as a source of spirituality. But her spirituality is of a new-age kind with a mixture of priestess magic and Muslim mysticism, including observing the fasting month of Ramadan. Her defense of wearing a veil (*hijab*) based on a person's free choice while arguing with Reza over public display of Islam during their trip to Turkey reflects a deeper multi-cultural attitude towards Islam, a kind of cultural secularism that GG also echoes somewhat.

Mike

Mike is the Iranian Jewish member of the crew. He epitomizes being Jewish and Iranian in the Southern California culture. The Iranian Jewish community is very much an active part of creating the diasporic identity in Los Angeles. Hamid Naficy argues that

> Self-employment [that is, independent contracting and employment by other Iranians] allows Iranians to create not only an exilic and

> ethnic economy but also what might be called an interethnic or sub-ethnic one. The repercussions of this situation for T.V. become clear when we consider that with two exceptions all Iranian exile television programs are commercially driven and must rely for their livelihood on Iranian businesses. The high percentage of self-employment among Jews and Armenians that means they have a disproportionate role in sustaining exile television and an extraordinary power to influence Iranian exile discourses. In addition, if we take into account the high representation of Jews, Armenians, and Baha'is in the production and distribution of music and entertainment recordings, the extent of their influence becomes more evident.[13]

This also contributed to their distinct identity internally among Iranian Jews and vis-à-vis non-Jewish Iranians, and also non-Iranian Jews. All these dynamics translated into a very protective behavior of the community and guidelines that aim at self-preservation.

In one of the earlier episodes, when Mike's dating habits were being discussed, Mike and the crew made it clear that Mike may date women of many backgrounds, but he would marry only an Iranian Jewish woman. "Being a Persian Jew, it's been embedded in our minds from childhood, we stick within our race, we stick within our religion." When he started dating Jessica, an Italian Christian, he said: "so this is, like, a [beep] double whammy. My poor grandfather's gonna turn over in his grave.[...] She's not Persian, and she's not Jewish." Jessica later went on to convert to Judaism and picked up some Persian, and Persian cooking, to please Mike's parents.

In a very emotional encounter Mike tells his parents about Julia. Mike's father is saddened that his soon-to-be daughter-in-law would not speak Persian. He said that he always hoped that his daughter-in-law would be like a daughter to him, but his inability to communicate in Persian and his limited abilities in English will pose a challenge. Throughout the seasons, we see how the family got closer together with an equal place for Persianness and Jewish identity.

GG or Golnesa Gharachedaghi

Golnesa is the hot-tempered character among the shahs. She also personifies a kind of superficiality that combines wealth and good looks. When describing herself in season one, Golnesa states, "Two things I don't like: I don't like ants and I don't like ugly people."[14] While she possesses some of the stereotypical

13. Naficy 1993, 27.
14. Season one, episode one.

attributes that are often associated with the Iranian community of Los Angeles, she does not perform anything that is inherently Persian. She speaks Persian, of course, and is part of the crew, her role in the show is to disrupt. She does not hide her Muslim identity; she has tattoos and jewelry that express that much. However, nothing new is revealed to us about the community or the diaspora culture through her. Passively, she was accused by Reza of making hateful comments about his half Jewish-half Muslim background, when he said that "the girl calls me the piece of you-know-what that comes out when a Muslim and a Jew have a kid."

Throughout the seasons she moves between attempts to do right by her friends, and fierce confrontations, which sometimes suggest that she was on the side that was right. While she has many personal and family problems, her ethnicity shows up only when she discusses some social ostracizing she experienced as a brown kid in white Los Angeles. We are led to believe that her behavior as an adult somehow compensate for the social hardships she had had before.

As for self-branding, Golnesa too actively engages in reality TV entrepreneurship. In the second season (episode six), Golnesa introducers her business venture. While having lunch with her wealthy architect father, Mahmoud Gharachedaghi, Golnesa describes the new company, which she launched with her sister. "It's called 'GG's Extensions.' So I decided that I'm taking complete control of the launch party. And I'm gonna do it all on my own. I don't need anyone else's help." At this crucial point in her self-development as a reality TV star, GG's Extensions reinvents Golnesa based on the myth of the entrepreneurial subject: individualistic, self-reliant, and ready for venture toward prosperity. Throughout the nine seasons of the show, Golnesa goes back-and-forth between a self-assured business venturer and an unruly, privileged woman, followed by motherhood in season nine.

MJ or Mercedes Javid

MJ represents a Persian of superficial wealth and the least expressive of her diasporic Iranian identity among the cast members. A realtor of self-promotional and, at times, mean spirit, MJ is also a villain in the storyline. While she struggles with her weight and alcohol, MJ typifies a back-stabbing persona whose role in the story is mainly in-between Asa, GG, Reza, and Mike, initiating rumors or promoting conflict for her advantage. Calculated in her intentions, including her marriage to Tommy Feight, MJ personifies a deceiving figure, but one who still receives sympathy for her challenges as a woman balancing her success with her Iranian tradition.

In season three, during her trip to Turkey, MJ experiences the stress of an expected heterosexual marriage. While Asa visits her family in Istanbul, MJ confronts her deepest anxiety: becoming a mother as her mother, Vida, keeps a critical eye on her troubled love life. But without the prospect of a marriage, MJ is emotionally troubled because of an uncertain future, as the "biological tick" threatens her fertility and hence her status as a potential maternal figure in the community. The branding of MJ's Persianness appears as a mixture of deceiver, debauchee, and established entrepreneur. She is both crass and business-smart, portraying a kind of Persian who is unruly and still fashionably wealthy.

MJ's remote relations with her identity, culture, heritage, and tradition, and her visiting a Muslim country like Turkey, also enable the closer examination of the experience of a young Iranian Muslim professional in Southern California.

> When you're a Muslim kid in America and you look like this, you hide it. When I'm asked if I'm Muslim, I respond, "yes, but ..." I always said, "yes, but I'm not practicing"; yes, because I'm afraid that I'm gonna be labeled as a terrorist, and for the first time in my life there was no shame attached to being Muslim."

Being in Turkey allowed her to shed the identity conflict between being an American businesswoman, Iranian-American, and Muslim.

"Spiritual Pilgrimage" to the Homeland

In two episodes (12 and 13), titled "Return to the Homeland," season three shows Asa, GG, Mike, MJ, and Reza embark on a vacation trip to Turkey. While Asa's aim for the trip is to partake in a family reunion, the other cast members explore Istanbul. Each experiences a foreign country in a unique way. But Turkey also offers racial familiarity, as, before their departure, Asa says to Reza, "Do you realize we're gonna be in a place where we're gonna look like everybody else? Everyone's gonna look like us." Except, she continues, "we're gonna be better-looking, of course." Meanwhile, Reza sees the journey as a way of self-discovery of his Persian "heritage." Turkey, he explains, is "the closest thing that I have to Iran." MJ describes her intentions for traveling as bringing the crew "closer to our culture." While Islam is referenced several times throughout the trip, all the characters focus on Iran, where they claim a cultural heritage.

But tensions over identity simmer on the trip. While Reza wrestles with his gay identity in a Muslim nation, MJ, GG, and Asa emotionally respond to hearing the call for prayer outside of the Blue Mosque. It is as though they have arrived home through the call for prayer without visiting Iran itself.

Mike, however, has a different emotional realization or reaction upon hearing the *azaan* (call for prayer). He confessed that ,

> no disrespect to Muslims, but it scared the hell out of me. People are just rushing into the mosque. I got this overwhelming feeling inside of me that I just couldn't help. I felt like a little kid that had lost his mom and dad, and I was looking for them. It was really weird. My poor mom was pregnant with me and they'd be on the loudspeakers like this. My mom was afraid she's like "[beep], what's gonna happen?" [...] all I could think of is "oh my god, this is what my parents were submerged in when they were fleeing for our lives. It's a pro-Muslim, very fanatical, very crazy country that kicked us out, that said, "You cannot be a part of this country anymore, you must hand over what you have, and if you don't like it, we're gonna throw you in jail."

Mike's interpretation of the situation and his feelings calls for an analysis of the community memory that became, inevitably, very personal. Mike's family had been in Iran, presumably, for generations. Iran has been Muslim since the seventh century. We can conclude that many generations of the Shouhed family heard the *azaan* as part of their daily routine. And more often than not, it did not signal a sense of emergency as Mike felt that day outside the Blue Mosque in Istanbul. The circumstances under which the family left can cause trauma, but it may also unify the narrative of exile among the community members.

Mike concluded that day outside the mosque saying, "It was scary to be a Jewish man surrounded by thousands and thousands of Muslims at this very given moment I'm feeling more Jewish than I am feeling Iranian. Because of my religion, I could have left Iran and went to Israel if I chose to because they would take me in. My country didn't want me, but my religion does." Again, we see a narrative that perhaps came out of the collective memory that was created in the context of the Iranian Jewish community in Los Angeles, that accumulated experience of Jews in Iran over two-and-a-half millennia. It is interesting to compare it to the personal account of the scholar Leah Mirakhor, who wrote about diasporic identity, in which she recounts that:

> When my family moved to Flushing, Queens, from Tehran, I knew without ever having to be told that we were *both* Iranian and Jewish. At six years old, that wasn't a confusing phenomenon, aberration, or strange set of affinities. It just was. I couldn't be Iranian without being Jewish or Jewish without being Iranian.[15]

15. Mirakhor 2016, 52–76.

The climactic scene of this episode is when Asa and Reza travel to the Iran-Turkey border. While wearing a black veil, Asa takes the lead in what she describes as a "spiritual pilgrimage" to the homeland which lies beyond an invisible border, generating emotions of longing for an Iran left behind. "We are going to a spot where everything our eye sees is Iran," Asa tells her mother, Zinat, who also accompanies them. Asa then elatedly describes her emotions as she walks toward the spot where she could see Iran: "I feel different," she says. "I feel almost euphoric. Suddenly, it is all coming together. There it is. All of this is Iran." Uplifting music plays over the scene where Iran appears as green rolling hills shadowed by moving clouds. "This is so magical to me," Asa describes. "It is lit up by the sun. It's like a painting. And I was born there." Following Asa, Reza exclaims: "Wow. There is Iran. That is the place I was born. My parents were born, and their parents were born. And it's also the country that drove us away." In tears, Zinat talks about her longing for a lost Iran, her deceased parents and their graves, which she cannot visit. The following scene shows Zinat shouting to the distance, "I'm happy with the memories. I'm happy with the memories!" Home is the dwelling of memory.

Intense emotions unfold in relation to a displaced ancestral space. With the prospect of never being able to visit Iran, the scene shows how Asa and Reza emotionally meld with the landscape. Yet there is something almost biblical in this scene; to see their connection to the land, the soil, the place that shaped so much of their personalities, yet their inability to touch it, feel it, and breath its air. Distance lies in an affective geography that expands into a horizon. The Iran of Asa, her mother, and Reza lies in their memories projected into a distant land, the place of their birth, where dreams and hopes for home evoke an uncanny sense of "looking back" while, ironically, gazing toward the horizon.

Conclusion

This study has presented an analysis of the relationship between identity and reality TV programming in the diaspora Iranian community of Southern California. The above discussion explored the way *Shahs of Sunset* presents and popularizes ideas regarding the Iranian community, and shared bits of relevant history on the making of this community. "Image," MJ boasts, "is everything," and it is so because it is believed to be real. "To outsiders, it probably looks like we live a very glamorous life. And, in fact, we do," MJ boasts about her friends.[16] To be an image is to perform being an image.

But beyond the image lies the life of diasporic subjects, those who have

16. Season one, episode one.

left their country of origin for a better life. "We talk shit about each other, we fight with one another, but at the end of the day what really matters is they have my back and I have theirs," Reza explains. "Hello, we're Persians," he humorously utters. Yet such Persianness takes place outside of Iran in aesthetically marketized spaces of diaspora sociability; reconstructed in art galleries, musical performances, and businesses Persian identity becomes imbricated by exotic wealth. The experience of exile remains integral to identity. As depicted in the trip to Turkey in season three, longing for the homeland haunts the characters, though in different ways.

Beyond these five characters, we get to meet others that help us develop a well-rounded understanding of this community as a phenomenon, and compared to other Iranian communities. For example, One of the characters in season two is Lilly Ghalichi. She joined the crew from Texas, where the Iranian community is sociologically different.[17] She seems to share similar habits and standards regarding wealth, beauty, aesthetics, and visibility. Still, despite her best efforts (and some of the others'), she remains an outsider. In one conversation with Reza, she says, "If this is how the Persian community in L.A. behaves and acts, I don't want to have any part of it." In the interview segment later, she adds: "Persians in Houston are very different from Persians in L.A., because Persians in Houston definitely do not party as hard as Persians in L.A." Then, referring to an incident earlier where she had been mistreated by some of the shahs, she added: "if any of my own friend were behaving that way the rest of us would ask them to leave." We can read here an observation and critique of the group dynamic that is stereotypical of the Iranian community in Los Angeles.

There is also a good amount of exceptionalism in the Tehrangeles self-perception. Adam, who was Reza's boyfriend in that season (later they got married) was originally from Oklahoma. Reza commented, "I don't know what Oklahoma is like. We don't like to get all up in the bowels of the United States. We tend to stay on, you know, L.A., New York, Miami. Like you know, the pretty parts." Ironically, Oklahoma was one of the earlier places Iranians settled in upon arrival to the United States.[18]

Another example attests to the generational differences. The title of this chapter is taken from a conversation Reza had with Sasha, a younger gay Iranian man who wanted to hang out with the crew. He had recently arrived to the United States, having been harassed by the Islamic Republic for his sexual orientation. Sasha suggested that the differences between them should not be so big. In response, Reza said: "Me and you were born in the same geographical

17. Mobasher 2012.
18. Honey 1978, 21–23.

spot," to which Sasha replied, "Then you're Iranian for the rest of your life." Reza's answer to that was pretty revealing for the entire identity of the Iranian community in Los Angeles: "No, you were born in a shit hole. I was born in the Imperial Kingdom of Iran. The country that I was born in stopped existing in 1979."

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