Opening Remarks for October 25th 2016 MIAOHP Event

Camron Michael Amin

Thank you all so much for coming. My name is Camron Michael Amin. I serve as the coordinator for the Middle East Studies Certificate program at the University of Michigan-Dearborn. I also serve as the principal investigator for the Michigan Iranian American Oral History Project.

Before I introduce our panelists, let me tell you about how I drove to Iran last Thursday. It wasn’t as hard as you might think. I mean, traffic was bad and it was raining and I was a little bit late. But I just had to drive North on Telegraph. At the corner of Telegraph and Lone Pine Road, in the basement of a library, I found that Iran had been created for a night. The people there were talking in Persian about it the poet Roya’i – what was his place among Iran’s modern poets? Could he be connected to older traditions of mystical poetry or was he too influenced by some obscure idea from French culture?

They recited the poetry of Simin Behbehani and others. They briefly discussed whether composing poetry was like composing songs or was it fundamentally different? They shared their divergent opinions with good humor and obvious joy. In many ways, the Iran I found in Bloomfield Hills was like the Iran I might have grown up in or visited if history had played out differently for my family and me. But, the Iran I visited on Thursday was not some imaginary world. The people there also talked about recent visits to
geographical Iran – about to going to bookstores like Iran's version of Barnes and Noble, “Book City” or Shahr-e Ketab. They talked about the literary circles in Iran that how those were alike and different from what they were doing here in Michigan. With Iran Night, Iran is both here and there and as real as anything.

Iran's culture is becoming global not only because of the academic study of its literature and history, or, its UNESCO World Heritage sites. It is also a global culture because Iranians in the Diaspora create "Iran Nights" and participate in that culture -- in a variety of ways -- locally while they are still able to connect to Iran itself (physically and digitally). Yes, that culture is changing and diversifying (as all cultures do), but it is also living and growing on a wider geographical scale than ever before.

It is very exciting to think of the place of Michigan Iranian-Americans in that process. It also underscores, for me, the value of recording the stories of Iranian-Americans in Michigan so that their place in the history of Iran, the Iranian Diaspora, and America can be known through their own words.

This year, thanks to a Michigan Humanities Council Heritage Grant, we have an opportunity to record oral histories of Michigan Iranian-Americans. The grant also funds this lecture series that brings specialists in the fields of Iranian-American Studies and Iranian Diaspora Studies here to interact with the community and show us the potential for the story of Iranian-Americans in Michigan to contribute to these fields. Last month, Persis Karim showed us how the study of literature enriches the field of Iranian American Studies, and
today we will have the perspectives of a sociologist, an anthropologist, and Arab and Muslim-American Studies specialist.

Our sociologist is Professor Mehdi Bozorgmehr from the City University of New York. I remember the first article of his that I read was in a special issue of the journal *Iranian Studies* focusing on Iranians in America in 1998 entitled, “From Iranian Studies to Studies of Iranians in the United States.” When he published that article, he had already been developing that part of his research agenda for over a decade.

Our anthropologist is Professor Mohsen Mobasher from the University of Houston-Downtown who has written *the* book on Iranians in Texas, published by the University of Texas Press in 2012, and built on research he had been conducting since 1993. These two pioneers have joined forces on a forthcoming edited volume on the Iranian Diaspora and we are so fortunate to have them both here so we can learn from the directly.

I’m also delighted that my colleague and director of the Center for Arab American Studies, Dr. Sally Howell, is also joining our panel tonight as a discussant and moderator of our Q & A. She is the author of wonderful book on Muslims in Detroit (published by Oxford University Press in 2015). One reason that I wanted her to join us tonight is that I know that when she teaches *History 3634: The History of Islam in America*, as she will next term, Dr. Bozorgmehr and Dr. Mobashers’ works are required reading.
This underscores the fact that the field of Iranian-American Studies and, by extension, your oral histories, connects not only to Iranian Studies and Iranian Diaspora Studies, but also the study of religion and ethnicity within American Studies more broadly.

Here is how our program will proceed:

Professors Bozorgmehr and Mobasher will provide their initial remarks. I will serve as your timekeeper, gentlemen. Professor Howell will then offer a short reaction then moderate the discussion as we take questions from the floor. Let me remind you that as our event comes to an end, please take the time to fill out and return the audience survey to Tina Nelson, our intrepid project intern. These surveys are an important part of our reporting to the Michigan Humanities Council, and give us a chance to learn more from you.

And, now, please join me in welcoming our panel.