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DEPARTMENT OF ANTHROPOLOGY
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Dear colleagues,

It is a pleasure to support Zia Khoshsirat's application for an Iahé Omidyar Mir-Djalali Postdoctoral Fellowship in Iranian Studies at the University of Toronto. I have known Zia since he first took a seminar with me on virtual anthropology; shortly thereafter he did a directed reading with me on theories of affect. Subsequently, he invited me to join his exam and dissertation committees. Through all this time, I have been very impressed by Zia's intelligence, scholarly acumen, and discipline as a researcher.

As his committee member, I have witnessed this wonderful young scholar grow from strength to strength: from a working-class Iranian student who had to struggle with English to a scholar who is not just at home but fluent in Iranian and Iranian diaspora studies, Middle East Studies, critical theory, linguistic anthropology, and theories of affect. Zia is one of the most brilliant, tenacious and disciplined students I have come across. His passion for ideas is infectious. He first encountered theories of affect in my graduate seminar and was so excited that he proceeded to do a directed reading with me during which he read theorists ranging from Kant, Merleau-Ponty to Eve Sedgwick, Brian Massumi, and Patricia Clough – he had clearly come a long way from a shy student who struggled with Anglophone social theory.

Zia's book manuscript is based on five years of intensive fieldwork among Erfan communities in the greater Los Angeles area. As we all know, this is a region that has become home to the largest Persian/Iranian diaspora in the world and the many cohorts of immigrants and exiles that have moved here have resulted in an extremely complex diaspora that is striated by differences along religious, linguistic, class, and ethnic lines. Ethnoreligious differences are the primary axes of identity across these very heterogeneous communities. Class is another major source of fissure, if not contention, as are polarizing relationships with the Pahlavi regime. In this highly differentiated landscape, Erfan assemblies have emerged as unique loci of reconfiguring identity in terms of spiritual authority, textual and literary engagement, and modes of what Zia terms co-memoration. Mixing memory, desire, belonging, and aspiration, these assemblies are powerful settings for reconfigurations of identity that push back against predictable lines of ethnoreligiousity, class, and political affiliation without side-stepping or attempting to transcend them.

1

Since I am not a linguistic anthropologist, I cannot comment on the interventions offered by Zia's research in that specific field. But, as someone who has studied affect, I am deeply excited by how Erfan assemblies generate, evoke, and circulate forms of affect that complicate our understanding of the relationship between everyday piety and cultural identity. These forms of affect are foundational to the formation of participants' subjectivities. I am also very intrigued by the intermixing of spiritual authority, which is consolidated or invoked in the interpretive practices of Irfan assemblies, which is imbricated with the generation and circulation of these very regimes of affect. What is most striking to me is how spiritual journeys, and the affective regimes that cohere around them, emerge in Erfan settings that bring together participants who are committed to secularism as well as others who identify as Jewish, Muslim, and Christian. Much of the "canon" in theories of affect are profoundly secularist. But Zia's research enables us to rethink secular(ist) notions of affect that are deemed somehow disconnected with faith and the sacred with particular reference to the multi-religious communities of the Middle East and North Africa which have, stereotypically, been represented as culturally monolithic.

Zia's project is exemplary in how it demonstrates the "real world" contributions of regional studies and liberal arts scholarship. On the one hand, it illustrates their centrality to frameworks that can enable us to revisit our understanding of the relationship between aesthetics, performative traditions, and inter-ethnic relations *within* diasporic Iranian communities. At the same time, this research also has far-reaching implications for public policy. In a political context marred by international tensions, his research highlights a rich tapestry of diverse ethnic, religious, and cultural identities that pushes back against xenophobic and Islamophobic caricatures of Iranian culture. As such, it provides significant insights into how diasporic and exile communities draw on spiritual and cultural resources to not simply survive but thrive. In societies where race-blind discourses of multiculturalism have produced xenophobia rather than a celebration of cultural and ethnic difference, Erfan assemblies offer us valuable lessons on how heterogeneous communities with distinct ethnoreligious identities may find common ground. Given worldwide epidemic of hostility against immigrants, exile communities, and asylum-seekers, these insights also have significant policy implications.

I support Zia's application with great enthusiasm. In addition to being a terrific scholar, he also has a real commitment to creating an intellectual community: his presence will, therefore, add a great deal to your community of faculty and students. He is a talented teacher and a generous interlocutor that your students and colleagues will greatly enjoy having in your midst.

With thanks and best wishes,
Sincerely,

Purnima Mankekar
Professor
Departments of Anthropology,
Asian American Studies, Gender Studies, and Film, Television and Digital Media