



Zia Khoshsirat (PhDc), Department of Anthropology, UCLA,
375 Portola Plaza, Los Angeles, CA 90095, ziaoddin@ucla.edu, 859-333-9197

Elahé Omidyar Mir-Djalali Institute of Iranian Studies
4 Bancroft Ave 2nd floor, Toronto, ON M5S 1C1, Canada

Dear Members of the Search Committee,

On a humid summer evening in a Los Angeles bookstore, a former Iranian revolutionary and a secular Jewish musician find common ground through the rhythmic recitation of 14th-century Hafez poetry. This moment from my fieldwork encapsulates my central argument: Persian mystical assemblies (*erfān* assemblies) have become critical infrastructures where diasporic Iranians renegotiate their belonging through precarious solidarity, simultaneously asserting their cultural identity while resisting state-sponsored definitions from both their homeland and hostland. I am applying for the University of Toronto's Elahé Omidyar Mir-Djalali Postdoctoral Fellowship in Iranian Studies to advance this research into its next phase, leveraging the university's strengths in global migration studies and critical interdisciplinary scholarship.

My dissertation, *Language Ideologies and Affect: An Ethnography of Persian Mystical Poetry Classes in Los Angeles*, extends Appadurai's concept of ethnoscape by demonstrating how mystical practice creates alternative geographies of belonging. Through five years of immersive ethnographic research (2019-2024), requiring 3,400 hours of participant observation to capture seasonal ritual cycles and intergenerational knowledge transmission, I trace how Iranian (first-generation) immigrants from Muslim, Jewish, Baha'i, and Zoroastrian backgrounds reinterpret medieval Persian poetry as living ideological archives. Building on Keane's work on semiotic ideologies, I demonstrate how participants naturalize relationships between poetic form and spiritual truth, while my concept of "co-memorative identity" reveals how collective remembrance reshapes belonging through *erfān's* inclusive ethos. This work contributes to three key anthropological conversations: the materiality of religious practice, diaspora as a site of knowledge production, and the performativity of identity.

The research makes two significant interventions. First, it critiques "spiritual supremacy"—the ways mystical ideals of unity obscure persistent material hierarchies, particularly in Los Angeles' spiritual marketplace, where Iranian cultural capital commands premium value. Second, it reveals how poetic ambiguity enables precarious belonging, allowing participants to maintain Iranian identity while avoiding alignment with either the Islamic Republic or assimilationist narratives. These findings emerged through a reflexive methodology that acknowledges how my own positionality shaped access across religious subgroups—a necessary approach for studying communities where political trauma necessitates careful trust-building.

During the fellowship, I will revise my dissertation to transform it into a book manuscript, titled "Who Holds the Key to Rumi? Textual Mastery and Hierarchies in Iranian Mystic Assemblies in Los Angeles," which analyzes how *erfān* is commodified while maintaining its spiritual potency. It demonstrates how these assemblies operate differently from Islamic counterpublics by employing poetic polyvalence to foster pluralistic participation.

This research offers translatable frameworks for multicultural education, demonstrating how arts-based pedagogies—particularly the study of mystical poetry as a shared cultural practice—can foster intergroup dialogue in pluralistic societies. The findings provide actionable insights for curriculum designers seeking to bridge cultural divides through humanities education, urban school districts (e.g., Los Angeles, Toronto, Berlin) addressing identity-based tensions in diverse classrooms, and community organizations developing arts programs that honor heritage while cultivating inclusive civic spaces. By documenting how Persian mystical traditions create common ground across Muslim, Jewish, and other diasporic youth in L.A., this work models how aesthetic practices can transform cultural difference from a source of conflict into a resource for collective meaning-making.

University of Toronto provides the ideal environment for this work through its Elahé Omidyar Mir-Djalali Iranian Studies Institute and faculty like Dr. Tavakoli-Taraghi and Dr. Karen Ruffle. I would be honored to join a cohort of fellows committed to rigorous interdisciplinary dialogue. My work offers new frameworks for understanding how cultural practices can sustain solidarity amid displacement—an urgent question as global migration reshapes cities like Los Angeles and Toronto. Thank you for considering my application; I look forward to discussing how I might contribute to the University of Toronto's intellectual community.

Sincerely,

Zia Khoshsirat
Department of Anthropology, UCLA

Education

UCLA , <i>Ph.D. Linguistic Anthropology (Los Angeles, CA)</i>	2018-present
University of Kentucky , <i>M.A. Linguistics (Lexington, KY)</i>	2016-2018
University of Kentucky , <i>LSA Summer School (Lexington, KY)</i>	2017
University of Allameh Tabataba'i , <i>M.A. Old Iranian Languages (Tehran, Iran)</i>	2011-2014
University of Lorestan , <i>B.A. English Literature (Lorestan, Iran)</i>	2007-2011

Awards & Honors

2024	Research Award, Department of Anthropology
2024	Society for Linguistic Anthropology John Gumperz Graduate Student Essay Prize, RUNNER-UP
2023	The Laura Bassi Scholarship
2023	Ebrahimi Family Foundation Pre-Doctoral Fellowship
2023	Dissertation Year Fellowship
2023	Research Award, Department of Anthropology
2022	Wenner-Gren Dissertation Fieldwork Grant
2022	Middle East Studies Association/MESANA Conference Travel Awards
2022	Ebrahimi Family Foundation Pre-Doctoral Fellowship
2022	Roshan Cultural Heritage Institute—Elahé Omidyar Mir-Djalali Fellowship for Excellence in Persian Studies
2021	Dr. Harris/Hariri Family Funds—Mosafer Centennial Fund for Near Eastern Scholars
2021	Roshan Cultural Heritage Institute—Elahé Omidyar Mir-Djalali Fellowship for Excellence in Persian Studies
2020	Graduate Dean's Scholar Award, UCLA
2020	Roshan Cultural Heritage Institute—Elahé Omidyar Mir-Djalali Fellowship for Excellence in Persian Studies
2020	Graduate Summer Research Mentorship, UCLA
2019	Graduate Dean's Scholar Award, UCLA
2019	Roshan Cultural Heritage Institute Conference Travel Awards, North American Conference Iranian Languages, Arizona
2019	Department of Anthropology Conference Grants, UCLA
2018	University of Kentucky Conference Grants
2011	Top 1% in Iranian National University Entrance Exam

RESEARCH

BOOK

<i>in-press</i>	EDITOR —Essays in Language, Culture, and Society: A Move Toward Linguistic Anthropology of Iran, Springer Handbooks in Languages and Linguistics.
<i>in-press</i>	EDITOR (with Alireza Korangy)—Essays in Caspian Languages and Linguistics, Handbooks in Languages and Linguistics, Springer Handbooks in Languages and Linguistics.

JOURNAL ARTICLES

2023	(with Andrew M. Byrd) The Indo-Iranian Labial-Enlarged Causative Suffix: Proto-Caspian *-āwēn-, Eastern Iranian *-(ā)uaja-, and Indic *-(ā)pāya-. IEUL, Brill
<i>accepted</i>	Who Holds the Keys to Rumi? Textual Mastery and Hierarchies in Iranian Mystic Assemblies in Los Angeles., Journal of Linguistic Anthropology

BOOK CHAPTERS

<i>in-press</i>	Discursive and Practical Consciousness in Spiritual Persian Poetry Classes in Los Angeles. In Z. Ghane (Ed.) Handbook of Persian Discourse Analysis, Springer Handbooks in Languages and Linguistics
<i>in-press</i>	The Unexpected Passive Suffix in Gilaki Foomanati. In R. Falahati (Ed.) Handbook of Iranian Language Phonology, Springer Handbooks in Languages and Linguistics
<i>in-press</i>	(with Alireza Korangy) Introduction: Reconfiguring Caspian Linguistics—A Speaker-Centered Approach to Language, Identity, and Space. In A. Korangy & Z. Khoshsirat (Ed.) Handbook of Caspian Languages and Linguistics, Handbooks in Languages and Linguistics, Springer Handbooks in Languages and Linguistics
<i>in-press</i>	Introduction: Toward a Linguistic Anthropology of Iran. In Z. Khoshsirat (Ed.) Essays in Language, Culture, and Society: A Move Toward Linguistic Anthropology of Iran, Springer Handbooks in Languages and Linguistics.
<i>in-prep</i>	My Accent Has a Skin: Embodied Language Ideologies

PH.D. DISSERTATION

“Language Ideologies and Affect: An Ethnography of Mystic Persian Poetry Assemblies of Iranian Immigrants in Los Angeles”

Committee: Drs. Norma Mendoza-Denton (chair), Paul Kroskrity (co-chair), Purnima Mankekar, Domenico Ingenito

M.A. THESIS

2018 “Origin of Gilaki Causative *-be(:)-*”

Committee: Andrew Byrd (chair), Gregory Stump (co-chair), Mark Lauersdorf

2014 “Inchoative Aspect in Gilaki”

Committee: Mojtaba Monshizadeh (chair), Mohammad Dabir-Moghaddam (co-chair)

PRESENTATIONS

CONFERENCES

- 2025e “We Do Not Believe This”: Indexical Shadows and the Ghostly Labor of Secular Reading in Persian Mystical Pedagogy, Panel: Ghostly Grounds: Semiotic Erasures and Haunted Meanings, American Anthropological Association, New Orleans, LA (UPCOMING, NOVEMBER)
- 2025d Contested Signs: Reconfiguring National Symbols, Ownership and the Struggle for Meaning in Iranian Digital Spaces (2020–2025), MESA, Washington, DC (UPCOMING, NOVEMBER)
- 2025c Dynamic Interactions of National, Mythical, and Historical Signs in Iranian Social Medias, Tehran, Iran, May
- 2025b Old Caspian Texts: A Missing Link in West Iranian Language Classification, NACIL4, University of Toronto, May
- 2025a Who Holds the Keys to Rumi? Textual Mastery and Hierarchies in Iranian Mystic Assemblies in Los Angeles, Society for Linguistic Anthropology Conference, University of Chicago, May
- 2024c Negotiating Ethnoreligious Perceptions in Everyday Lives of The Iranians in Los Angeles, MESA, Washington, DC, (Panel: Iran in the Diasporic Activism and Imagination, Chair)
- 2024b Connoisseur and Sommelier: Social Authenticity and Societal Alterity Among Iranians in Los Angeles. CLIC GSA Conference, Los Angeles (CANCELED)
- 2024a Enregisterment and Indexicality: Identity Within Mystic Persian Poetry Classes in Los Angeles, LSA Annual Meeting, New York
- 2022 Pride and Profit: An Ethnography of Spiritual Persian Poetry Assemblies in Los Angeles, MESANA, Denver, Colorado.
- 2019b **Khoshsirāt, Z** & G. Stump. The Morphotactics of the Gilaki Negative Affix. NACIL2, Arizona
- 2019a *-ax-* the Unexpected Passive Suffix in Gilaki Foomanati. NACIL2, Arizona
- 2018c **Khoshsirāt, Z** & A. Byrd. The Gilaki Causative Suffix *-be(:)-*: Its Function and Origins. Presentation at the 30th Annual UCLA Indo-European Conference
- 2018b Gili, Dailami, Tabari: A New Classification of Gilaki Language, ConCALL-3, Indiana University
- 2018a Ethnolinguistic Evidence in Five Inchoative Verbs of Gilaki About Rice Development, ConCALL-3, Indiana University
- 2017b Grammaticalization of Inchoative Aspect in Gilaki, Central Kentucky Linguistics, Conference, February 2017
- 2017a Diachronic Study of Two Inchoative Verbs in Gilaki, LSA Summer Institute Poster Session

WORKSHOPS

- 2024 (INVITED) “*Semiotic Processes from Linguistic Anthropological Perspectives*” (10 sessions), Iranian Linguistic Anthropology Committee, Iranian Anthropology Association
- 2023 Mendoza-Denton, **Z. Khoshsirāt**, Natalia Casio-Lara, Cate Dark, Jester Mediano, XiaoXuan Wang. An Experiment in Mixed Reality, Co-Operative Action Lab, UCLA, Los Angeles.
- 2023 **Khoshsirāt, Z**, Y. Goto, G. Romero & N. Ramos. UX Professionalization, Digital Humanities, UCLA, Los Angeles.
- 2022 **Khoshsirāt, Z**, S. Castro & T. Slobe. Grants, Fellowships and Funds in Anthropology. Discourse Lab, Department of Anthropology, UCLA, Los Angeles.
- 2018 Geographic Information System (GIS) for ethnographic projects. Discourse Lab, Department of Anthropology, UCLA, Los Angeles.

INVITED TALKS

- 2023 LECS: Reconstructing Proto-Caspian Causative Suffix, Department of Linguistics, Allameh Tabataba'i University, Iran
- 2023 Talk Series at the University of Gilan
- Semiotic Processes: The Sociality of Signs, Department of Persian Language and Literature, University of Gilan, Iran
 - Semiotic Works and Ideological Positioning: How Narratives Shaped Stereotypes of Gilaks in Iran. Department of Persian Language and Literature, University of Gilan, Iran
 - Indexicality and Intersubjective Realities: How Tehranis See Northern People, Department of Persian Language and Literature, University of Gilan, Iran
 - Reiteration of Indexical Model: From Edward Said's Orientalism to Mendoza-Denton's Hemispheric Localism, Department of Persian Language and Literature, University of Gilan, Iran.
 - Linguistic Anthropology: The Most Unattended Subfield of Anthropology in Iran, Department of Persian Language and Literature, University of Gilan, Iran
 - Some Theoretical and Methodological Approaches in Linguistic Anthropology, Department of Persian Language and Literature, University of Gilan, Iran
 - Language Ideologies and Ideological Positioning in Sociocultural Studies, Department of Persian Language and Literature, University of Gilan, Iran
 - Ethnography, Fieldwork, Interview in Linguistic Anthropology: A Case Study, Department of Persian Language and Literature, University of Gilan, Iran
 - Linguistic Anthropology and Gilaki, Department of Persian Language and Literature, University of Gilan, Iran
 - Regimenting Signs, Rendering People Invisible, Department of Persian Language and Literature, University of Gilan, Iran
 - Linguistic Anthropology and Policy Making: Department of Persian Language and Literature, University of Gilan, Iran
 - Language Identity: Experts Demarcation and People's Fluid Movement: Department of Persian Language and Literature, University of Gilan, Iran
- 2019 Patterns of Negative Affix in Gilaki. Linguistics Colloquium, Department of Linguistics, California State University, Fresno (<https://cah.fresnostate.edu/mesp/news-events/index.html>).
- 2017 Human and Animal Language/Communication. Department of Linguistics, University of Kentucky, Lexington (guest lecture)

SERVICE TO PROFESSION

EDITORIAL BOARD

- International Journal of Persian Literature
- Iranian and Persian Studies
- Springer Handbooks in Languages and Linguistics
- Comitatus, Journal of Medieval and Renaissance Studies (2023-2024)

ASSOCIATE-EDITOR

- Iranian and Persian Studies
- Springer Handbooks on Languages and Linguistics

PEER-REVIEWER

- Springer Handbooks on Languages and Linguistics
- Mouton Companions to Iranian Languages and Linguistics
- International Journal of Persian Literature
- Folia Linguistica (2024, 2025)
- Italian Institute of Oriental Studies at Sapienza, Asian and African Civilisation (2024)

ABSTRACT REVIEWER FOR CONFERENCES

- Linguistic Society of America Annual Meeting 2025
- Linguistic Society of America Annual Meeting 2024
- The Iranian Diaspora in Global Perspective Conference, UCLA, Los Angeles, 2023
- ACM Creativity and Cognition 2022 (external reviewer), San Servolo, Venice, Italy

RESEARCH CONSULTATION/ASSISTANT

- In Richard Larson and Vida Samiian chapter (2020)
- In Neda Bolourchi's book (*in progress*), Historical Analysis of the Notions of Sacrifice and Martyrdom in Iran from 1950-1989, Battle for the Sacred Nation-State 1941-1983.
 - edits to book manuscript in progress to include translations of Bakhtar-e Emruz archives
 - three-month part-time translation assistant

ADMISSION COMMITTEE, STUDENT REPRESENTATIVE (DEPARTMENT OF ANTHROPOLOGY)

- Co-led Department of Anthropology admission committee in reviewing ~50 doctoral applicants addressing diversity and equity (2018/2019)

HIRED AS ANTHROPOLOGIST/EXPERIENCE RESEARCHER

- Experience Researcher and Strategist, Health and Vitality Center, Los Angeles (since Dec 2021)
- Data Analyst in: The Effects of VR and Mixed Reality Environment on Language, Los Angeles (since April 2023)
 - Supervisor: Dr. Norma Mendoza-Denton
- Researcher, Data Analyst in: LASPEAK, linguistic anthropological perceptions of neighborhoods in Los Angeles (2018/2019/2020)
 - Supervisor: Dr. Norma Mendoza-Denton

TEACHING EXPERIENCE

University of California, Los Angeles

- Language, Power, and Identity Within Muslim Communities (2025)
- Raciolinguistics: Culture and Communication (2020, 2022, 2023, 2024)
- Language in Society (Winter 2024)
- Constructing Race (Spring 2023)
- Social Systems (Winter 2023)
- Introduction to Linguistics (2021–2022, 2024, 2025)
- Language and Culture in Sub-Saharan Africa (Spring 2021)
- Language Development and Socialization (Spring 2020, Winter 2021)
- Human Biology, Genetics, and Society (Winter 2020)
- Culture and Communication (Fall 2019)

University of Kentucky

- History of the English Language (2016–2018)
- Introduction to the Study of Language (Fall 2017)

COMMUNITY OUTREACH

Spring 2024	Discussant , Travelling Through Borders, Becoming Others, Los Angeles
Winter 2024	Discussant , Diaspora Question of Trusting “Others,” Los Angeles
Fall 2023	Discussant , What Does Bring Us Together in Diaspora, Los Angeles
Summer 2023	Discussant , Freedom of Speech in Diaspora, Los Angeles
Spring 2023	Moderator , Iranians in Los Angeles: Compartmentalized Society, Los Angeles
Winter 2023	Discussant , Ethnoreligious Markedness: From Iran to Diaspora, Los Angeles
Fall 2022	Discussant , Amidst Social Upheavals in Diaspora: How Do We Treat Others, Los Angeles
Summer 2022	Moderator , Ethnoreligious Tolerance for Iranians in Los Angeles, Los Angeles
Winter 2022	Instructor , Attar Neyshabouri's The Conference of the Birds, Los Angeles
Fall 2021	Instructor , Attar Neyshabouri's <i>Ghazaliat</i> , Los Angeles

PROFESSIONAL MEMBERSHIP

- Association of Iranian Studies, U.S.
- Middle Eastern Studies Association, U.S.
- American Anthropological Association, U.S.
- American Anthropological Association, Linguistic Anthropology, U.S.

- American Anthropological Association, Middle Eastern Section, U.S.
- Linguistic Society of America
- Linguistic Anthropology Committee, Iran

MEDIA

- | | |
|------|--|
| 2025 | <i>A Seed Burnt to Ash in Its Maternal Lectunis (Part II)</i> [https://v6rg.com/?p=13027] |
| 2021 | <i>Notes on the Gilaki Writing System Released by Gilan Studies Institute</i> (in Farsi - http://v6rg.com/?author=731997) |
| 2019 | On the Silk Road with CelCAR, podcast, <i>talking about Gilaki</i> (https://podcasts.apple.com/no/podcast/episode-21-gilaki/id1451343372?i=1000505160103) |
| 2019 | <i>My new finding in Iranian language studies</i> (in Farsi - https://baxsad.bigblog.ir/post94119.html) |

LANGUAGES

Gilaki (Caspian - native); Farsi/Persian (native); Lori, Laki, Kurdish (Western Iranian - basic); Arabic (basic); Old Persian, Avestan, Middle Persian (Old Iranian - philological knowledge)
Python (basic and intermediate level for nonprogrammers)

Who Holds the Key to Rumi?
Textual Mastery and Hierarchies in Iranian Mystic Assemblies in Los Angeles

This ethnography traces how Persian mystical assemblies (*erfān*) become contested sites of belonging and belief as they take root in Los Angeles' Iranian diaspora. Across five years of fieldwork with Muslim, Jewish, Baha'i, and Zoroastrian participants, I examine the paradoxical life of tradition, where medieval poetry can simultaneously anchor communal identity and fuel spiritual commerce, where ritual gestures meant to transcend difference often silently reinscribe it. The work explores three core tensions: The Sacred in Secular Skin, where *erfān*'s personal practices—such as touching, collective sighing, and improvisational weeping—turn into performances within boutique wellness and interfaith dialogue settings; The Politics of Participation, questioning who gets to define what constitutes "authentic" practice, as claims of stewardship come from class-based reciters, exiled clerics, and entrepreneurs, all of whom assert ownership of the same tradition; and The Archive of the Unwritten, referring to embodied knowledge, like a quaver or a pause in speech, that resists transcription but holds the true weight of history, and is thus the first aspect to be lost in translation.

At its heart, this is a study of how communities negotiate the price of preservation.

1. **The Paradox of Sacred Authenticity:** In gatherings across Los Angeles focused on *erfān*, I notice how participants collaboratively interpret poetic meanings, where the same Hafez verse, recited by Muslim, Jewish, and Baha'i attendees, becomes a shared act of semiotic alignment rather than just a fixed text. These exchanges demonstrate strategic multivocality; a single couplet about 'the tavern' can simultaneously symbolize different ideas—representing divine intoxication for the Muslim teacher, Sabbath wine rituals for the Jewish doctor, and a lament for homeland gatherings among secular students. This is more than polysemy; it is socially distributed meaning-making, where poetic ambiguity helps negotiate shared space while preserving diverse theological views. The 'paradox' arises not from commodification but from the interpersonal effort involved in rhythmic breathing, call-and-response recitation, and tactile manuscript passing, transforming individual interpretations into a collective experience. Authenticity, therefore, resides not in textual purity but in interactional textuality—the real-time, embodied co-creation of sacred meaning.
2. **The Moral Economy of Recitation:** In Los Angeles' *erfān* assemblies, the same sonic practices that bridge religious divides also reveal stark class divisions. The daf's heartbeat-like rhythms and collective poetic sighs create visceral solidarity among Muslim, Jewish, and Baha'i participants—yet these sounds become class-marked when circulating through the city's cultural economy. Working-class Iranian and other Persian-speaking immigrants, many bearing the physical toll of factory or ride-share work, derisively call upper-class gatherings rosewater Sufism, critiquing how: Embodied Knowledge vs. Cultural Capital—The precise recitation styles perfected in South Tehran cultural centers are repackaged as "sound healing" in \$200/month workshops; Sacred Temporality vs. Leisure Time—All-night *samā'* ceremonies, where fatigue induces trance states, are shortened into 90-minute "Rumi experiences" for professionals; and Communal Ownership vs. Curated Access—Heirloom manuscripts once circulated freely among neighbors now require "donor tier" memberships at cultural centers.
3. The tension between spiritual egalitarianism and class exclusion became clear when members of a working-class *erfān* collective—whose practice originated in traditional Sufi circles where manual laborers and scholars sat side-by-side—found their participation limited in more affluent Los Angeles gatherings. Despite their deep knowledge of mystical poetry and ritual, these participants reported being spatially marginalized, directed to the back rows during recitations; aesthetically corrected; and ritually contained, with their more expressive practices, such as ecstatic movement and spontaneous weeping, described as "disruptive." Yet their absence was notably replaced by their cultural capital. Following scholarship work on enregisterment, we see how sonic practices are re-signified across class contexts: the same daf rhythm that signals *ḥāl* (spiritual state) in working-class South LA becomes "acoustic decor" in Pacific Palisades living rooms.

This work ultimately reveals how Persian mystical assemblies (*erfān*) function as contested soundscapes—where the same recitation can signal divine intoxication, cultural resistance, or commodified wellness depending on who listens, and how. Through three interlocking arguments—(1) the paradox of sacred authenticity in interfaith meaning-making, (2) the class-coded moral economy of ritual participation, and (3) the embodied archives of working-class spiritual labor—the book demonstrates that diasporic resilience requires not cultural purity but strategic self-fragmentation.

Khoshsirat-Synopsis

What emerges is an ethnography of ethical acoustics: a call to hear both the harmony and dissonance in how communities preserve tradition while paying its hidden costs.

Research Program: Mysticism and Diasporic Identity Formation

Core Intervention

My research investigates how Persian mystical traditions (*erfān*) serve as dynamic platforms for renegotiating ethnoreligious belonging among Iranian diasporic communities in Los Angeles. Through five years of ethnographic fieldwork (2019–2024) engaging Muslim, Jewish, Baha'i, and Zoroastrian participants, this project challenges conventional notions of diaspora as primarily preservative, demonstrating instead how communities creatively adapt spiritual practices to navigate intersecting pressures of geopolitical conflict, cultural commodification, and interfaith dialogue. The resulting monograph, *Who Holds the Key to Rumi? Textual Mastery and Hierarchies in Iranian Mystic Assemblies in Los Angeles*, advances the concept of *erfān* assemblies as "acoustic infrastructures"—social and sensory spaces where poetic recitation, ritual performance, and affective labor collectively transform conceptions of Iranian identity in diaspora.

Theoretical Framework

Building on linguistic anthropological theories of indexicality (Silverstein 2003) and affective regimes (Reddy 2001), this work develops two key original concepts. First, *indexical inoculation* captures how participants strategically employ mystical poetry's inherent multivocality to resist political polarization, allowing the same verse to signify differently across religious contexts. Second, *co-memorative identity* describes how collective rituals—such as annual Rumi commemorations—weave together fragmented diasporic histories through shared embodied practices like synchronized breathwork. This theoretical framework bridges three interdisciplinary conversations: material religion studies, through its examination of how sacred objects like *daf* drums and manuscript reproductions circulate as both devotional tools and commodities; diaspora studies, in its analysis of how geopolitical conflicts redraw community boundaries; and semiotic anthropology, through its decoding of how poetic ambiguity facilitates pluralistic interpretation across faith traditions.

Methodological Innovations

The research employs a triangulated methodological approach designed to capture both the embodied and archival dimensions of diasporic mystical practice. Embodied ethnography forms the project's foundation, with over 3,400 hours of participant observation conducted across diverse settings—from intimate home *erfān* circles to commercial Rumi workshops and interfaith symposiums. This immersive fieldwork is complemented by multi-modal archiving strategies, including the digitization of participants' personal notebooks as alternate repositories of diasporic memory and GIS mapping of recitation events across Los Angeles' Iranian enclaves to trace patterns of spiritual sociability. Recognizing the sensitive nature of interfaith research, the project incorporates conflict-aware protocols, such as conducting preliminary separate focus groups with Muslim and Jewish participants before joint sessions, and engaging community co-researchers to address potential positionality gaps in data interpretation.

Postdoctoral Revisions

During my fellowship, I will significantly enhance the manuscript by leveraging the University of Toronto's distinctive scholarly resources. My theoretical deepening will engage three key faculty strengths: First, through collaboration with Dr. Ruffle's expertise in Shi'i material culture, I will conduct comparative analysis between Persian mystical objects in my study and South Asian devotional lithographs, revealing transnational patterns in how sacred materials circulate. Second, working with Dr. Sidnell's semiotic approaches, I will refine my analysis of how *erfān* rituals creatively resignify "Iranianness" in diaspora contexts, particularly examining the transformation of domestic spaces through ritual practice.

Working with Dr. Clark's public-centered ethnography framework, I will enhance my manuscript's methodology by incorporating haptic analysis of how rituals function as embodied memory practice; applying her interlocutor equity principle to amplify marginalized voices in my participant pool; and adding reflexive analysis of my research's role in

Iranian cultural politics. This approach transforms my sensory ethnography into both an analytical tool and an ethical practice for studying the sacred texts' journey between private devotion and public contestation.

These strategic engagements will collectively strengthen the manuscript's theoretical framework while maintaining its grounded ethnographic perspective.

Empirical Expansion and Dissemination

The fellowship will enable crucial expansions to my research corpus, including new fieldwork documenting Muslim-Jewish *erfān* collaborations in post-October 2023 Los Angeles, where geopolitical tensions have intensified both interfaith dialogue and conflict. These empirical enhancements will inform two major dissemination outputs: my article "Mysticism as Resistance" (targeting *American Ethnologist*), which demonstrates how poetic ambiguity facilitates both boundary-crossing and boundary-maintenance; and policy-oriented presentations, translating academic findings into tools for interfaith mediators.

Project Significance

Theoretically, this work makes three transformative interventions: First, it reorients diaspora studies from its traditional focus on identity preservation to examine cultural improvisation, particularly how communities weaponize poetic multivocality to navigate conflict. Second, it advances sensory anthropology by theorizing *acoustic infrastructures*—the sonic spaces where recitation practices shape political subjectivity. Third, it reframes commodification as a dialectic process, showing how market forces simultaneously erode and amplify sacred meaning, as seen in the dual use of Rumi verses for both interfaith healing and boutique wellness marketing.

12-Month Book Revision Plan

In the first 4 months, I will reframe the dissertation's structure around core interventions ("ethical acoustics") and expand theoretical engagement with material religion. Months 5-8 focus on new content: two chapters on "unwritten archives" (embodied knowledge) and "spiritual extraction" (commodification case studies), plus 15-20 new ethnographic vignettes. The final four months prioritize peer review, public-facing materials (such as discussion guides), and press submissions. This phased approach transforms ethnographic research into a cohesive monograph while developing supplemental tools for interdisciplinary audiences.

Future Trajectory

This project seeds a decade-long research program with two intertwined branches. The scholarly arm includes *Hemispheric Mysticism*, a comparative study of Iranian devotional practices in Toronto and Los Angeles, and a planned SSHRC grant examining Sufi musical adaptation in other Canadian communities. The public humanities initiative encompasses the *Rumi Resonances* StoryMap, which tracks poetic transmission globally, as well as policy briefs for Canada's Office of Religious Freedom, analyzing the role of mysticism in countering radicalization. Together, these efforts exemplify how rigorous anthropology can illuminate the tensions between sacred tradition and secular survival, work perfectly situated within UofT's interdisciplinary ecosystem /927