**Monograph Synopsis**

**‘A Promise of Perfection: Refractions of Utopia in Contemporary Iran’**

**Abstract:**

In 1988, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini oversaw the signing of a document that he referred to as a ‘poisoned chalice’, a peace treaty marking the end of the eight-year war with Iraq and returning the two sides to the *status quo ante bellum*. Since then, it has been common in work on Iran to suggest that this tumultuous event marked the end of revolutionary utopianism and the beginning of a kind of political pragmatism as the country’s guiding ideology (see e.g. Sadeghi-Boroujerdi 2019). I take issue with this assumption that we can chart the course of Iran from Revolution to the present as a simple arc away from utopia. What I found during my research in Mashhad was what I have come to think of as the ‘promise of perfection’ - a legacy of utopianism that remained a pervasive concern, sometimes potent, at other moments subtle, but one that nonetheless meaningfully shaped the lives of my interlocutors and what they expected from life.

Drawing on fourteen months of ethnographic fieldwork from 2016 to 2018, I trace this utopianism as it is ‘refracted’ in a range of practices. By this, I suggest that we may think about refraction as looking at the ways that perfection exists as a current, a “tendency” (Khan 2012, 9), in the social, influencing ideas, informing thinking, shaping behaviors in subtle ways, ‘refracting’ in unexpected fashions. An anthropology of utopian refractions seeks to understand how the lives of my interlocutors inform and are informed by a commitment to, concern for, and belief in, the possibility of perfection, as something that is tangible, rather than impossible or a mere abstraction. Each chapter in this book is then a meditation on how some element of this promise of perfection came to be realised in different contexts of the lives of my middle-class Mashhadi interlocutors.

**Introduction: Promising perfection**

This chapter outlines the theoretical and regional influences that have shaped this book. Beginning with a vignette from my fieldwork, I follow by exploring literature related to the anthropology of Islam, of ethics, morality, and of utopianism, and how it establishes the theoretical foundations of my research. I provide an outline of the methodological approach taken during the research. My method is influenced by what Marcus (1995) refers to as an approach that “follows the thing”, although in this context, I am not so much following a tangible object, as an ideological project as it spun out in different directions.

**Chapter One: Perfect Riches**

In this chapter I look at Iran’s experiment with post-revolutionary economic liberalisation, particularly the phenomenon of what are glossed as ‘get-rich-quick schemes’. With a micro-analytical lens, I focus on the experiences of Zhaleh, a young, university-educated mother, who found herself out of formal employment following the birth of her son, and who used what little spare time she had to participate in a multi-level marketing program. I argue that Zhaleh’s justifications for taking part in get-rich-quick schemes demonstrate a shifting ethical framework that switched from a focus on the rapid acquisition of wealth to more philosophical goals like individual moral perfection. These stories of participation in fast-money schemes are then not so much fixed narratives, but rather complex, time-contingent assemblages that are pressed into the employ of competing ideologies at different moments.

**Chapter Two: Perfect English**

This chapter looks at the explosion of English language learning institutes across Mashhad as sites for the enactment of particular modalities of perfection, and critically, places in which perfection was experienced not so much as a desire, but also as an all-encompassing obligatory sense, an ‘ought’. Education, and especially English-language learning, is one of those, a site of and method for achieving “a better way of being” (Levitas, 1990, p.8), a form brought into the orbit of the discourse of utopia and ‘completion’. I draw on experiences at an anonymous English language institute in which, as part of my fieldwork, I both taught English and observed the teaching of others.

**Chapter Three: Perfect Sounds**

This chapter draws on ethnographic material that analyses the *salavāt* prayer*,* a blessing said for the wellbeing of the Prophet and the Prophetic family. I argue that by evoking a unified moment of solemnized, egalitarian effect, the *salavāt* provides a sonic mechanism through which a public that was understood to be ‘perfect’ was achieved. It managed this by a) transcending the barriers of rank and hierarchy that normatively characterize life in Mashhad, b) heightening emotion and solemnizing time and space, and above all by c) re-focusing attention in a unified moment – a “single buzzing bloc of unified affect” (Mazzarella 2010, 717)  in praise of the Fourteen Infallibles. This created, however briefly and for however few, an ideal, *perfect* public.

**Chapter Four: Perfect Morals**

In this final ethnographic chapter, I turn specifically to the question of morality and ethics, and what we might refer to as the ‘dilemma’ that the promise of ethical perfection delivered, especially for those among my interlocutors who were critical of the political status quo in Iran. I argue that for them, one of the outcomes of the promise of perfection has been a hypersensitivity to moral matters, with inconsistences of virtue, however small, coming to be read not as part of the ethical static that is understood by some (e.g. Schielke 2009; Laidlaw 2014) as part of everyday life, but as gross indecencies and major evils.

**Conclusion**

The conclusion to this book ties together the themes that have been at the heart of my writing, while meditating on more broadly what this ‘promise of perfection’ might mean for other contexts beyond the Iranian example.

**Additional research interests:**

In addition to my PhD topic, I maintain a broader interest in Jewish and Muslim communities and their relations with the state. I am particularly interested in how Shi’ite sonic rituals are used by these minority-Muslim communities to make a claim of belonging in the public sphere in Western societies.