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Postdoctoral Fellowship Synopsis
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Project Overview

This proposed postdoctoral project, titled *Hope Across Borders: Migration, Faith, and the Journey to Belong*, builds on my PhD dissertation, which explores the lived experiences of educated Muslim Iranian migrants in North America. It examines the complexity of Iranian migration amid global structural constraints, including its internal diversity. Through ethnography and personal narratives, it challenges rigid categories in dominant migration discourse. Rather than reducing migrants' experiences to global policy frameworks or framing their hopes as a uniform pursuit of upward social mobility, the project explores a broader landscape of hope.

My interlocutors navigate challenges including visa precarity, the need to re-establish professional credentials, and social pressures—from both outsiders and intra-diasporic tensions over religion. I argue that their interactions with others and with the evolving world around them, mediated through cultural and Islamic practices, open new possibilities for them to live more fulfilling lives within pluralistic North American societies.

Highlighting lived religion beyond doctrine and outside institutionalized forms, this project engages with key debates in the anthropology of religion, migration studies, and the theoretical study of hope. By centering the experiences of Iranian migrants, it expands the geographic and thematic scope of Iranian Studies and brings their voices into broader academic and public conversations.

Context of Research

This project unfolds amid intensifying migration flows and socio-political volatility in North America, making it urgent to understand the vulnerabilities and complexities of migrant life. Focusing on similar Iranian communities in two distinct locales, it explores how migrants live under uncertain conditions.

During the U.S. phase (2018–2020), which coincided with the implementation of the “Muslim Ban,” I conducted research among participants at Omid Islamic Center in Boston, a community founded by educated Iranians. I examined whether their religious orientations fostered cultural continuity, solidarity, or alternative forms of hope. Their programs enabled visibility and self-expression; notably, democratized gatherings encouraged lay participants to reflect on Quranic verses in relation to everyday life. In Vancouver (2021–2023), I studied

Iranian migrants involved in the Khāneh-hā-ye Nūr (KN) group. Their religious gatherings in public parks were a creative response to pandemic-era isolation, which led to unexpected life shifts. One woman, for instance, began baking for income with community support while struggling to find work—an effort that soon grew into a personal vocation. The downing of Ukraine International Airlines Flight 752 (January 2020) deeply affected the Iranian diaspora in Vancouver. In its aftermath, secular Iranians, whose resentment toward the regime had grown, increasingly associated visible religiosity with the state. KN’s public programs unfolded amid heightened visibility, surveillance, and intra-diasporic mistrust, revealing the complex terrain migrants navigate between marginality and hope.

Theory and Methodology

To examine migrants’ lives, I adopt an existential-phenomenological framework that understands human life as a dynamic interplay between uncontrollable external conditions and the capacity to inhabit them in diverse ways (Jackson 2005). My approach to hope draws on Spinoza’s concept of the “struggle for being,” as developed by Jackson (2011; 2013), Hage (2002), and Massumi (2002). For Spinoza, being and nothingness are not opposites but degrees of vitality; all life strives to persist and grow. Building on this, I approach hope not merely as a future-oriented expectation shared among all migrants, but as *existential mobility*: an ongoing search for meaning and vitality amid uncertainty.

While my interlocutors pursue stability, my research attends to the more nuanced negotiations that shape their lives. The sense of purpose and individualized ways of living fostered in their religious and cultural spaces are often overlooked in research centered on legal status and economic mobility. This broader lens on hope moves beyond viewing migratory trajectories as uniform to uncover new forms of being and belonging amid shifting and precarious social landscapes.

To explore this complexity, I combine participant observation, narrative collection, visual elicitation, and interviews—conducted both in person and online. Drawing on long-term relationships with migrants, I also focus on symbolic material culture and emic perspectives that deepen understanding of how migrants navigate their lives.

Structure and Timeline of the Proposed Book

The manuscript will consist of six chapters grounded in my completed ethnographic fieldwork:

- ❖ **Introduction: From Stigma to Strength: Faith and Culture among Iranian Migrants in North America**

Outlines the project’s core questions, methodology, and theoretical framework within interdisciplinary scholarship on Iranian migration, religion, and hope.

- ❖ **Chapter One: Between Departures and Arrivals: The Geography of Uncertainty**
Traces the personal histories of three Iranian migrants, exploring how their religious orientations shaped aspirations and vulnerabilities before and after migration, and how they navigate the complexities of belonging.
- ❖ **Chapter Two: Names as Seeds of Hope**
Using narratives and semi-structured interviews, this chapter explores naming as an individualized yet relational practice—shaped by faith, language, and context—through which young Iranian migrants imagine and orient themselves toward possible futures.
- ❖ **Chapter Three: Food Rituals – Marginality and Hospitality**
Focuses on communal food rituals through participant observation and photo-elicited interviews, showing how shared acts of cooking and eating foster belonging, creativity, and care—particularly among Iranian women and members of the wider society.
- ❖ **Chapter Four: Religion and the Space of Presence**
This chapter, to be developed during the fellowship, will examine how Iranian migrants in Vancouver repurpose public parks for religious and communal gatherings that foster dialogue, challenge dominant norms of visibility, and enact pluralistic modes of presence.
- ❖ **Conclusion: Migrants’ Ongoing Struggle to Sustain Life**
Reflects on lived religion amid uncertainty and proposes new directions for studying migration and plural modes of life. Drawing on Schielke and Debevek (2012), it emphasizes religion as a framework for meaningful action, not merely a coping strategy.

Timeline

I will draft the new chapter in months 1–3, revise the core chapters from months 4–8, and finalize revisions and citations in months 9–12.

Contribution to the Host Institution

This fellowship would offer the focused time and institutional support needed to complete my book project. It would also provide an exceptional opportunity to contribute original perspectives on the Iranian diaspora, thereby advancing the field of Iranian Studies. As a postdoctoral fellow, I would be excited to collaborate with the scholarly community at the Elahé Omidyar Institute at the University of Toronto—through joint initiatives, conferences, and public talks. With teaching experience in Persian language and literature as well as anthropology at Boston University and the University of British Columbia, I am well-positioned to design and offer a course aligned with the program’s goals and to contribute actively to its intellectual life.