



August 6, 2022

Dear colleagues:

I write in very strong support of Elmirasadat Alihosseini for the Elahé Omidyar Mir-Djalali Dissertation Completion Fellowship.

Elmira is a truly outstanding doctoral student in the Department of Anthropology. She has completed drafts of her four main chapters and will use the fellowship to write the introduction and conclusion. I am fully confident that she will be able to wrap up the writing in the fall and defend the dissertation during this academic year, likely early in 2023.

Elmira transferred to our doctoral program from Johns Hopkins in fall 2018 because she could not travel to Iran from the US to continue conducting her fieldwork. Since joining us she has accomplished a great deal. She redeveloped her research proposal, completed some coursework, returned to Iran for a good deal more fieldwork, and has made major strides in writing her doctoral thesis. During the past 18 months she has also been a faithful and valuable participant in a reading group I have run over Zoom.

Elmira has taken on a difficult but extremely important subject of study and she approaches it with courage, originality, critical insight, and empathy. The thesis concerns Hazara Afghan refugees in Iran, especially in the city of Mashad, and focuses on questions of sanctuary, uncertain migration, borders and subjectivity. The borders in question are both national and internal with respect to places inside or outside of sanctuary. Many Hazara have been in Iran for over a generation now but their lives remain extremely difficult as they are unable to gain citizenship. However, they are not entirely immobile since some, especially men, manage either to get to Europe or are used by the Iranian government as soldiers in Syria and elsewhere. As a result, many Hazara women experience uncertainty or abandonment, especially with the death rate among the soldiers.

The first chapter of her thesis is an extremely interesting account of the nature of shrines as places of refuge in Iran and in the Shi'ia world more generally. Here she draws on historical, archival, and ethnographic work. She shows convincingly how the shrines serve as places of sanctuary, the contractual arrangements that pilgrims, the poor, and refugees make with shrine authorities, and the kinds of dependencies formed. She addresses this by means of theories of sovereignty and spaces of exception. As she argues, the older model of the shrine as place of refuge has influenced how refugees are treated by the Iranian state both within and outside the shrines themselves, such that the presence of the Hazara is enabled while most rights are denied them.



She has also written several very moving and theoretically nuanced chapters and article drafts that attend more closely to questions of subjectivity. One chapter addresses the experience of suffering, violence, and madness among women in Mashad, and their responses by means of poetry to the great distress and uncertainty in their lives. Another chapter focuses on what she calls “lives of chronic displacement,” that traces families moving between Iran and Afghanistan according to changing political and economic circumstances and the contingencies that enable or undermine their plans, using the metaphor of the game of snakes and ladders. Throughout, she attends insightfully to aspects of ordinary life and kinship, such as naming and the way birthdays are celebrated in the midst of uncertainty.

Elmira presents her work with passionate but careful scholarship. Her dissertation will be a powerful and compelling contribution to understanding of changing conceptions of boundaries, borders and the reception of strangers in Afghanistan and Iran, especially in the context of Shi’ite tradition, and their impact on the lives and fortunes of Hazara and other refugees and migrants in the region. Her work unflinchingly shows great suffering but also the optimistic, creative, and agentive ways in which people respond to uncertainty and violence and address their condition. The result is both empirically extremely rich and theoretically sophisticated.

Elmira is a very independent young scholar with a clear sense of what is important to her, including service to others. She is one of the least demanding students I have ever had. She is poised, articulate, serious, and very, very smart.

Elmira works hard and I have every expectation she will complete an excellent dissertation this year with the support of your scholarship. In sum, I consider her an outstanding candidate for the Elahé Omidyar Mir-Djalali Dissertation Completion Fellowship

Please let me know should you have any further questions. I can be reached most easily at michael.lambek@utoronto.ca.

Sincerely,

Michael Lambek, FRSC
Professor and Canada Research Chair emeritus
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