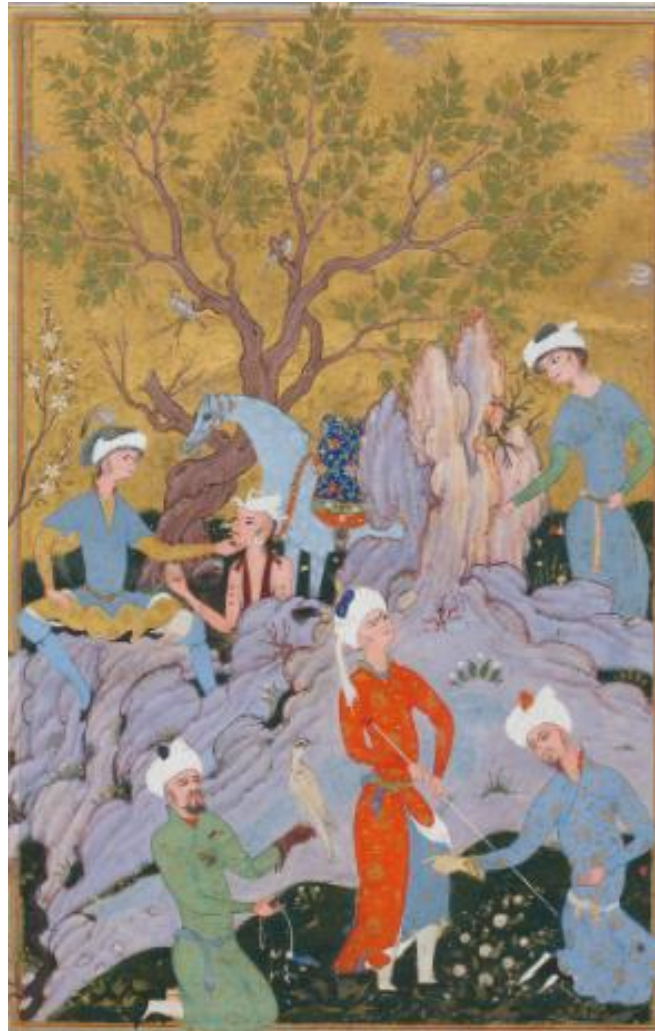International Conference

Limits, Boundaries, and Transgression in Literatures and Languages of the Persianate World

Utrecht University
Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies
Thursday 5 and Friday 6 September 2024
Academy Building
Belle van Zuylen Hall
Domplein 29

Limits, Boundaries, and Transgression in Literatures and Languages of the Persianate World

In this conference we aim to explore extreme and transgressive ideas and practices within the context of Iranian literary, intellectual and religious history. Drawing inspiration from a wide range of theoretical frameworks, we seek to understand how different transgressive practices destabilise, destroy, or negotiate with scriptural, architectural, and ethnic boundaries. We believe that the extremities of Iran's cultural and intellectual heritage remain an underexplored area of research, which is especially urgent to tackle in the ongoing social, ecological and political crises in Iran. From early Islam to modern times, Iranian literati, from the free-thinkers such as Abū Bakr Muḥammad b. Zakariyyāʾ Rāzī (Latin Rhazes, d. either about 925 or 935), to the brilliant mystic ʿAyn al-Qużāt al-Hamadānī in the 12th century to the modernist Sādiq Hidāyat in the 20th century, have continuously challenged accepted norms and values of their times. Similarly, many poets, architects, and artists expressed their extreme views against the established orthodoxy and Islamic piety, many of whom were persecuted and the trend continues to this day. Their works have fearlessly explored the inadmissible and the unsayable, crossing the boundaries between belief and unbelief. This conference aims to open a platform to initiate a collective scholarly approach to this understudied field.

Programme Thursday 5 September 2024

09.00   Welcome and opening by Asghar Seyed-Gohrab & Arash Ghajarjazi

09.15   **Keynote: Dominic Parviz Brookshaw (University of Oxford)**
"I Am That Woman": gendered transgression in the feminine mufākhara from Padishah Khatun, through Tahira Qurrat al-ʿAyn, to Simin Bihbahani

Session One: Chair Arash Ghajarjazi
Sufi Literature and Mysticism I

10.15   **Abolfazl Moshiri (University of Toronto)**
Context and Function of the Narratives of Transgression in the Mevlevi Hagiographies

10.45   *Break*

11.15   **Farinaz Kavianifar (École Pratique des Hautes Études)**
Between Faith and Infidelity: Ḥāfiẓ's Ghazalīyāt

11.45   **Matthew B. Lynch (Oregon State University)**
Verbal Abuse as a Means to the Batin Amongst the 'Knowers of God':
The Function of Cursing in the Manaqeb al-Arifin of Shams al-din Aflaki

12.15   *Lunch break*

Session Two: Alexandra Nieweg
Sufi Literature and Mysticism II

13.30   **Anwesha Sengupta (Colombia University)**
Translating transgressions: Kṛṣṇa in the 16th century Avadhi Sufi world

14.00   **Ahmad Bostani (Kharazmi University of Tehran)**
Invisible Religion and Paradoxes of Monotheism:
Henry Corbin on "Iranian Islam vs. Legalism"

14.30   *Break*

Session Three: Leila Rahimi Bahmany
Political and Revolutionary Themes

15.00   **Rebecca Ciattini (Ca' Foscari University of Venice and University of Heidelberg)**
Crafting a Religion of the Worker: Lāhuti's Marxist Verse Between Persian Canon and Shiite Islam

15.30 **Yusuf Ünal (Utrecht University)**
A Sinner or God? Reevaluating Shah Ismail I's (r.1501-24) Religious Views

16.00 *Break*

<u>Chair: Arash Ghajarjazi (Utrecht University)</u>

16.15 **Keynote: Claudia Yaghoobi (University of North Carolina)**
From Tehran to Los Angeles: Armenian Women's Journey Through Love, Family, and Cultural Expectations

18.00 **Dinner for speakers**

Programme Friday 6 September 2024

<u>Session Four: Chair Zhinia Noorian</u>
Literary History

9.30 **Keynote: Paul Losensky (Indiana University)**
"The Valley of Whoring and Frivolity": Taqi Kāshi and the Wayward
Lives of Poets in Sixteenth-Century Iran

10.30 **Shafag Dadashova (ADA University of Baku)**
Voices of Rebellion and Resilience: Autobiographical Narratives in Iranian Literature

11.00 *Break*

11.30 **Mehdi Sham Roshan (University of Lausanne)**
Veiled verses: Unraveling the poetry of Persian Nuqṭawī poets

12.00 *Lunch*

<u>Session Five: Chair Maarten Holtzapffel</u>
Literature, Aesthetics, and Intellectual History

13.00 **Nadir Boudjellal (Inalco, Paris)**
The Notion of Blame in Islam: From a Poetic Motif to the Spiritual Elite of the
Malamatis

13.30 **Kasper Tromp (independent scholar)**
Suffer the Pain: Iranian Aesthetic Practices as Quietist Transgressions of the
Revolutionary State

14.00 **Arash Ghajarjazi (Utrecht University)**
Television Heresies: Towards a Cultural History of Televisuality in the Persianate
World

14.30 *Break*

<u>Chair: Asghar Seyed-Gohrab (Utrecht University)</u>

15.00 **Keynote: Michiel Leezenberg (University of Amsterdam)**
Sexuality and Alchemy in the Nizamian Poetic Tradition: An Anti-Humanist
Perspective

16.00 **Asghar Seyed-Gohrab (Utrecht University)**
Wrapping up and drinks

"I Am That Woman": gendered transgression in the feminine mufākhara from Padishah Khatun, through Tahira Qurrat al-'Ayn, to Simin Bihbahani.
(Dominic Parviz Brookshaw)

This paper examines a chain of self-praise poems (sing. *mufākhara*) penned by female poets writing in Persian that stretches from the late thirteenth century to the early twenty-first century. The *mufākhara*, a lyric genre normally reserved for vaunting about one's literary prowess, is used by both amateur and professional Persian women poets not only to boast about their exemplary eloquence that rivals (or even surpasses) that of their male peers, but also as a platform to express their resolve to transgress the limitations imposed upon them by men. At the hands of women of political power (e.g., Padishah Khatun; strangled, 1295) and/or those of elite social status (e.g., Tahira Qurrat al-'Ayn; martyred, 1852), the gynocentric self-praise lyric serves as space for the assertion of feminine authority. With Simin Bihbahani (1927-2014), the leading woman poet of late twentieth-century Iran, the *mufākhara* morphs into a defiant call for women's voices to be heard over the din of state-sponsored censorship and age-old institutional misogyny that would see them silenced.

Dominic Parviz Brookshaw is Professor of Persian Literature and Iranian Culture in the Faculty of Asian and Middle Eastern Studies at the University of Oxford where he has taught for the past decade. Dominic simultaneously holds the position of Senior Research Fellow in Persian at Wadham College, Oxford. From 2011-2013 he was Assistant Professor of Persian and Comparative Literature at Stanford University and, before that, he held Persian Studies teaching positions at the University of Manchester (2007-2011) and McGill University (2005-2007). At Oxford, Dominic has served as both Director of Undergraduate Studies and Director of Undergraduate Admissions for the Faculty of Asian and Middle Eastern Studies.

Dominic works across a wide range of Persian literary genres, and his research focuses on three primary areas: i) premodern Persian poetry and prose (with specific reference to patronage, performance, conviviality, sexuality, intertextuality and the relationship between Persian and Arabic poetic imagery and form); ii) Qajar poetry (with a focus on gender, canonicity, and indigenous literary history); and iii) women poets of twentieth-century Iran and their dialogue with (and disruption of) the male-dominated literary tradition. In addition to these three periods of Persian literary history, Dominic has also published on Iran's non-Muslim religious minorities. His articles on medieval, early modern, and modern Persian poetry have appeared

in peer-reviewed journals such as *Iranian Studies*, *Middle Eastern Literatures*, and *IRAN: Journal of the British Institute of Persian Studies*.

In 2020, Dominic's monograph, *Hafiz and His Contemporaries: Poetry, Performance, and Patronage in Fourteenth-century Iran* (Bloomsbury, 2019) won the Saidi-Sirjani Book Award. His next monograph will be published in 2025 by University of Michigan Press under the title *Center, Periphery, and Gender: Poetic Resurgence in Early Qajar Iran*. In addition to these monographs, Dominic has edited or co-edited three collections of scholarly essays: *Forugh Farrokhzad, Poet of Modern Iran: Iconic Woman and Feminine Pioneer of New Persian Poetry* (with Nasrin Rahimieh, I B Tauris, 2010; expanded second edition, 2023); *Ruse and Wit: The Humorous in Arabic, Persian, and Turkish Narrative* (ILEX/Harvard University Press, 2012); and *The Baha'is of Iran: Socio-historical Studies* (with Seena B. Fazel, Routledge, 2008). Dominic's publications in the field of Persian language learning include *Media Persian: An Essential Vocabulary* (Edinburgh University Press, 2011) and two volumes co-authored with Pouneh Shabani-Jadidi, *The Routledge Introductory Persian Course: Farsi Shirin Ast* (Routledge, 2010; revised second edition, 2020) and *The Routledge Intermediate Persian Course: Farsi Shirin Ast Book 2* (Routledge, 2012; revised second edition, 2023).

From 2004-2014, Dominic served as Assistant Editor for *Iranian Studies*, and he is currently a member of both the Editorial Board of *Iranian Studies* and the International Advisory Board of *Middle Eastern Literatures*. In 2023, Dominic established a new book series with Bloomsbury entitled, *I B Tauris Studies in Medieval and Early Modern Persian Literature*. Dominic has previously served on the Governing Council of the British Institute of Persian Studies as well as on the Association for Iranian Studies Council. From November 2024, he will serve as the next President of the Association for Iranian Studies.

Context and Function of the Narratives of Transgression in the Mevlevi Hagiographies
(Abolfazl Moshiri)

The Mevlevi Hagiographies contain numerous references and anecdotes about the deviant and transgressive deeds attributed to various Sufi shaykhs. These hagiographies include seminal works such as those authored by Sultan Valad (d. 712/1312), along with early Mevlevi hagiographies like the *Risāla dar manāqib-i khudāvandigār* of Firaydūn Sipahsālār (d. ca. 710/1310) and the *Manāqib al-ʿārifīn* of Shams al-Dīn Aḥmad Aflākī (d. 761/1360). The

subsequent centuries witnessed the emergence of abridged or revised editions of these foundational texts in Persian and Ottoman Turkish.

This paper endeavors to explore the contextual significance of narratives portraying transgressive acts in Mevlevi hagiographies, focusing particularly on two multigenerational Mevlevi Sufis: Rūmī's intimate spiritual companion Shams-i Tabrīzī (d. ca 647/1249), and Rūmī's grandsons, Ulū ʿĀrif Chalabī (d. 719/1320). By examining the historical and confessional milieu in which these hagiographical works were composed, this study aims to elucidate the pivotal role played by such narratives in legitimizing the lineage of Rūmī's descendants as the leaders of the Mevlevi Sufi order. This paper also hopes to examine how such narratives served specific functions within the broader framework of Mevlevi Sufi literature, shedding light on their purpose, impact, and dynastic significance within the tradition.

Abolfazl Moshiri is a Postdoctoral Research Fellow at the Department of Near and Middle Eastern Civilizations, University of Toronto where he also serves as the senior research associate and coordinator for Women Poet Iranica Project at the Elahé Omidyar Mir-Djalali Institute of Iranian Studies. His broad areas of research include Persian mystical literature, antinomian and heterodox Sufism, and the intellectual history of the Persianate world from the 10th to the 16th century. At the University of Toronto, he has also taught undergraduate courses on classical Persian literature and culture. His publications appeared in the journals such as *Iranian Studies* (2014), *Iran Namag* (2021), and the series *Christian-Muslim Relations: Primary Sources 600-1914* (2023).

Between Faith and Infidelity: Ḥāfiẓ's Ghazalīyāt
(Farinaz Kavianifar)

In this article, we will be examining the transgressive role of love and its relationship to faith (*īmān*) and infidelity (*kufr*) , as seen in the poetry of Khwājah Ḥāfiẓ-i-Shīrāzī (d. 792/ 1390). The theme of love has played a key role in Persian sufi poetry, most notably its categorization into the divine and profane, in which a fine line is drawn between those who are deemed upon as believers (*mumin*) and disbelievers (*kāfir*), the latter being idol-worshippers and the former as monotheists. As the gnostic distances from the traditional and orthodox creed, his views on

the supreme beloved is deemed as blasphemous. In seeking and finding a personified and material God, the sufi manifests divinity in the form of his lover's tresses and lips. Thus, one can argue that for the seasoned sufi, infidelity and idolatry is in a sense superior to that of orthodox belief.

Through an intertextual approach, we will attempt in answering the following questions: Can mystical love be a promoter of infidelity? What is the relationship between love, idolatry, and faith? Are idolatry and polytheism viewed as loftier than monotheism in the mystical path? By a close reading of Ḥāfiẓ's poetry we will provide an illustration of the blasphemous nature of love, yet one that is perhaps superior than the common faith as promoted in the Islamic orthodox tradition.

Farinaz Kavianifar is a PhD candidate at the École Pratique des Hautes Études, specializing in oriental civilizations and religion, with a particular focus on the literary and philosophical tradition of islamic mysticism. She is affiliated with the Laboratoire d'études sur les monothéismes (UMR 8584), Paris. Previous to her doctoral studies in France, she obtained an M.A Degree in Middle Eastern Studies from the University of Chicago, writing a thesis on Nizāmī Ganjavī's *Makhzan al-Asrār* and the concept of social rebellion and justice. Her doctoral dissertation focuses on the poetry of the 9th /15th century mystic, ʿ Abd al-Raḥmān Jāmī and the concept of felicity. She has translated a section of Gholamreza Ebrahimi Dinani's book, *Eastern Mysticism*, into English for *Nur Sokhan Publishers* and has a recent publication entitled, "Unveiling Dream: Ibn al-Arabi's Imagination and the Sufi Path", and a publication under review on Iranian cinema and the mystical tradition. Her most recent conference presentations include ECIS 10, entitled, "Jāmī 's Golden Chain: Grades of Love and its Path to Human Perfection", and the Association for Iranian Studies 2023 Symposium, " Jāmī's Golden Chain: The Role of Timurid Kingship in Human Felicity."

Verbal Abuse as a Means to the Batin Amongst the 'Knowers of God':
The Function of Cursing in the Manaqeb al-Arifin of Shams al-din Aflaki
(Matthew B. Lynch)

While transgression takes many shapes and varies by context, certain speech acts stand out clearly as transgressive due to their departure from the norms of speech and the expectations

of the people performing them. It is well documented that the 13th century Anatolian mystic, Jalal al-din Rumi, was no prude. He peppers his *Masnavi-e Ma'navi* with ribald jokes and colorful language, such that one translator rendered such lines into Latin—lest he offend his readers' sensibilities. In my paper, I push further into Rumi's transgressive speech by examining the hagiographical work, the *Manaqeb al-Arifin* by Shams al-din Aflaki.

Within this text, Rumi and Shams al-din Tabrizi are not portrayed as sanitized mystics: each has angry outbursts in which they curse out members of their family. If any transgression is universally recognizable, it is abusive language coming from a relative. Yet Aflaki's inclusion of these narratives invites us to reflect on these 'transgressions' as revelatory of a deeper meaning: Shams and Rumi deploy transgressive speech acts as a means of demonstrating their authority over their interlocutors and in revealing a deeper truth.

For example, Rumi curses out his son, Sultan Valad (calling him the "son of a whore") over a comment Sultan Valad made diminishing the Rumi's *Masnavi* in comparison to the Qur'an. The curse is thus concurrent with an audacious statement by Rumi on the importance of his master work. Likewise, when Shams likens his own father to a flightless bird, Shams asserts his status as greater than his own father. In both instances, the speech act is the outward form (*zahir*) of a deeper, more transgressive inner reality (*batin*) revealed by it. In this way, transgressive speech can be seen to function along the same lines as the *zahir/batin* 'dichotomy' found within Mevlevi and Sufi mystical teaching.

Matthew B. Lynch is a scholar of religion, history, and literature. His research interests include medieval Muslim mysticism, dynamics of power in Islamic polities, the relationship between cultural production and identity formation, critical Islamic studies, and Islamic(ate) digital humanities research. He has published articles on Rumi, pedagogy, and Sufism.
In his current position at Oregon State University, he teaches courses in Islamic civilization, world history and philosophy, as well as theories and methods in religious studies. His Ph.D. is from the University of North Carolina's Department of Religious Studies. His dissertation, "A Persian Quran? The *Masnavi-e Ma'navi* as Scripture", examined the production and reception of Rumi's master epic in 13th century Anatolia. He holds an M.A. from the University of Chicago's Middle Eastern Studies Program. His MA thesis investigated discourses of authority in Farid ad-din Attar's *Ilahi-Name*. He currently resides in Portland, Oregon, USA.

Translating transgressions: Kṛṣṇa in the 16th century Avadhi Sufi world
(Anwesha Sengupta)

My paper examines the concept of "Sufi-Kṛṣṇa" in 16th century Sufi literary texts composed primarily in Avadhi in India. I close-read select texts which although by Sufi composers engage with the figure of Kṛṣṇa (which is pivotal to Hindu devotional practices). Though these texts were produced and performed in the Sufi circuits of North India – they embody a structure and sensibility that is legible to the transregional Persianate society. By thinking through the lens of translation, my analysis tries to reposition what appears to be a transgression in both Hinduism and Islam into a site of interaction of religion, language, script, textual genre, emotions and aesthetics. This multifaceted intersection can be best understood through the framework of circulation of culture and multilingualism.

At the center of my project is the text *Kanhāvat* (1540 CE) which claims to narrate the story of Kṛṣṇa as primarily found in the *Bhāgavat Purāṇa*. It is attributed to the Sufi poet, Malik Muḥammad Jāyasī who is most well-known for his Avadhi romance narrative, *Padmāvat.* Through this text, I examine the translation practices prevalent in the 16th century and I attempt to understand how tropes, motifs and ideas that have crystallized religious identities at present, circulated in the pre-modern period. I shall read this text in conjunction with selected portions of other related texts. For example, Bilgrami's *Haqā'iq-i Hindī* (1566 CE) was also composed in the Avadh region; and it talks about possibility of Sufi hermeneutic engagement with the Kṛṣṇa universe. Other connected textual corpora include Avadhi Sufi romances and their translations. My paper aims to take the "literary and cultural analysis" track and engage with "transgression" both by the choice of subject which is Kṛṣṇa in this case as well as linguistic choices (expressing Sufi ideas through often "Hindu" vocabulary) within the texts.

Anwesha Sengupta is a doctoral candidate at the Middle eastern South Asian and African Studies (MESAAS) program in Columbia University in New York City. She is currently also a visiting researcher at Leiden Institute of Area Studies (LIAS) at Leiden University in the Netherlands. Her doctoral research broadly studies themes and motifs of Hindu-Muslim intersection in a corpus of 16th-17th century Avadhi Sufi texts. Her research interests include translation studies, digital methods and transregional circulation of early modern texts. Prior to pursuing her doctoral education at Columbia University, she completed an MPhil in Modern South Asian Studies at the University of Oxford in the United Kingdom after securing the Felix Scholarship and an MA in History at Jadavpur University in Kolkata during which she won the

Invisible Religion and Paradoxes of Monotheism:
Henry Corbin on "Iranian Islam vs. Legalism"
(Ahmad Bostani)

Henry Corbin, a prominent figure in Iranian and Islamic studies, developed a philosophical interpretation of Islam that emphasized the persistence of Iranian elements in the religion. Corbin's "gnostic" perspective and rejection of Christian orthodoxy enabled him to understand the heterodox nature of Persian intellectual history and its key figures. He differentiated between two concepts of Islam: the esoteric and the legalist. The former represented the religion's spiritual, inward, and gnostic dimensions, while the latter represented its formal, rigid, and materialistic aspects. Corbin's work on the paradox of monotheism in the Abrahamic tradition sought to reconcile the transcendence of God with His intervention in the material world. He argued that Iranian Muslim philosophers' spiritual and gnostic concepts could solve this paradox satisfactorily. According to Corbin, the tension between Iranian "theosophers" and Muslim theologians was because the gnostic view could better resolve theological issues and "save the spiritual phenomena." However, Muslim theologians condemned these beliefs as heretical.

The paper examines the theoretical framework established by Henry Corbin to address the persistence of the Persianate imaginary, which can also be referred to as the Iranian "invisible religion." This invisible religion has deep roots and has consistently influenced and constrained the visible religion (*fiqh*, *kalam*, and rituals) through a hierarchical structure of the cosmos, angelology, imaginal world, and subtle bodies. This paper will first discuss the tension between Iranian Sufis and philosophers and legal and dialectic theologians, as portrayed by Corbin.

Then, it will concentrate on the theological paradoxes of monotheism, according to Corbin. Finally, it will explore how Iranian sages, especially after Suhrawardi, attempted to offer unorthodox answers to the complicated questions raised by Abrahamic religions, especially Islam.

Ahmad Bostani is an assistant professor of political theory and Islamic intellectual history at Kharazmi University, Tehran. His area of research includes Iranian, Islamic, and comparative political theology. He earned a Ph.D. in political philosophy with a dissertation on Suhrawardi's notion of the imaginal world and its implications in the Iranian world. He is also working on a project on Henry Corbin's philosophy. Among his recent publications: Ahmad Bostani, "Cosmic Hermeneutics: A Critical Appraisal of Corbin's Hermeneutical Approach" in *Philosophical Hermeneutics and Islamic Though*t, Edited by Sylvain Camilleri & Selami Varlik, Springer, 2022; Ahmad Bostani, "Henry Corbin's Oriental Philosophy and Iranian Nativist Ideologies, *Religions* (MDPI), 997 (11), 2021; Ahmad Bostani, "Rethinking Political Theology in the Islamic Context: The Case of Iran" in *Islamic Political Theology*, Edited by Masimo Campanini, Lanham, Lexington Books, 2020.

Crafting a Religion of the Worker:
Lāhuti's Marxist Verse Between Persian Canon and Shiite Islam
(Rebecca Ciattini)

This paper explores how Marxist poet Abu'l-Qasem Lāhuti (1887-1957) expresses modern ideas by interpreting the conventions of Persian literary canon, alongside the imagery of Shiite Islam. Lāhuti was born in Qajar Kermānšāh, and experienced his first encounter with Persian poetry within the literary circle of his father, poet Elhāmi Kermānšāhi (1834/48-1907), renowned in the intellectual milieu of Kermānšah for his religious epics devoted to the martyrs of Karbalā. Thus, at the beginning of his literary activity, Lāhuti himself was deeply influenced by both Persian literary tradition and Shiite religious poetry, and his early works adhered to classical forms and conveyed mystical themes.

Since the beginning of the twentieth century and more intensely after his escape to USSR in 1923, Abu'l-Qasem Lāhuti moves to political poetry, focusing specifically on the figure of the worker. However, even though he experiments with new forms of poetry, he never completely leaves the genres and the themes of the classical canon. Thus, this paper examines how Lāhuti's

later compositions convey revolutionary and Marxist themes through the classical verse. In particular, this study focuses on how Lāhuti adapts the vocabulary of Shiite Islam to the proletariats. In his literary production, such as in the poem *Kreml* (1923), the famous *qaṣida* devoted to the Kremlin, the worker is portraited as a *šahid* ('martyr'), and his condition of oppressed (*maẓlum*) is described with the motifs related to the martyrdom in Shiite Islam. Through an analysis of Lāhuti's poems centred on workers (*ranjbar*), this paper sheds a light on how the poet employs his religious and literary background to shape a 'religion of the workers'.

Rebecca Ciattini has completed her BA and MA in Languages and Civilizations of Asia and Mediterranean Africa (Curriculum Near and Middle East) at Ca' Foscari University of Venice. She is currently enrolled in the PhD program in Asian and African Studies at Ca' Foscari University of Venice in Double Degree with the University of Heidelberg. Her main research interest is the relationship between Persian literature and social and political issues in Iran as well as in the wider Persianate world. Her ongoing research project focuses on the role of urban contexts in the production of non-courtly literary texts in nineteenth century Iran.

A Sinner or God?: Reevaluating Shah Ismail I's (r.1501-24) Religious Views
(Yusuf Ünal)

Modern accounts of the Safavid dynasty often depict Shah Ismail I, who self-declared as "Khaṭā'ī" (the Sinner), as an antinomian and heterodox figure who claimed divine status. This narrative portrays him as an object of worship, someone who disregarded religious law and strictures. This "absolute Godhead" or "antinomian anarchist" interpretation has become a prominent foundation of early Safavid historical research. Many scholars have built their analyses on this premise, investigating facets of Safavid religious history like messianic expectations, political ideology, and the immigration of Shi'i Arab clerics. It also underpins the common belief of multiple Safavid conversions: first from Sunni Islam to an "antinomian and messianic" Shi'ism, and later to a more orthodox Shi'ism under the influence of émigré Shi'i scholars. However, I argue this dominant hypothesis stems from: i) literal interpretations of Khaṭā'ī's love poetry and ii) uncritical acceptance of hostile Sunni polemics and unreliable European travel accounts. This paper critically reexamines these sources alongside previously unexplored materials to challenge the long-held antinomian thesis. It proposes an alternative

reading of early Safavid history, prompting us to reevaluate the ingrained assumptions that have shaped modern scholarly perspectives.

Yusuf Ünal (Ph.D., Emory University) is a historian of early modern Safavid Iran and Ottoman Empire. His research pivots on the transformative impact of the Safavid Revolution on the religiopolitical landscape in Iran and across the central Islamic lands. As a postdoctoral researcher at the Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies at Utrecht University, Yusuf is contributing to a research project titled *Rosewater, Nightingale, and Gunpowder: A Sensory History of the Islamic World, c. 1500-1900* and co-editing the *Handbook of Islamic Sensory History*, Vol. III, focusing on the Ottomans, Safavids, and Mughals (c. 1500-1900). His scholarly contributions have been published by the Indiana and Edinburgh University presses and translated into languages such as Russian, Turkish, and Arabic. Additionally, his work has been featured in reports from institutions like the American Foreign Policy Council, Hudson Institute, and Brookings Institution. Before joining his current position, Yusuf served as an associate research scholar at the Abdallah S. Kamel Center for the Study of Islamic Law and Civilization at Yale Law School.

From Tehran to Los Angeles: Armenian Women's Journey Through
Love, Family, and Cultural Expectations
(Claudia Yaghoobi)

This keynote lecture delves into the complex experiences of dating and inter-religious/racial relationships from the viewpoint of Iranian Armenian women in Iran and the United States. Employing oral history and auto-ethnography, I will recount and analyze my journey alongside the stories of other Armenian women navigating identity, culture, and love in both Iran and the U.S. This exploration will uncover the cultural nuances and challenges faced by Iranian Armenian women, as well as the ways they contest traditional norms and or conform to these limitations. I will demonstrate how socioeconomic status, cultural influences, and gender roles converge to shape romantic decisions and interactions. By addressing familial and communal expectations, the conflict between personal desires and family obligations, and the fortitude required to navigate these intricacies, this lecture highlights common themes and obstacles encountered by women in ethnic and religious minority communities. It examines the balance between tradition and modernity and its influence on the dating experiences of Armenian minorities in Iran and Iranian Armenian immigrants in Los Angeles.

Claudia Yaghoobi is a Roshan Distinguished Professor of Persian Studies and the Director of the Center for the Middle East and Islamic Studies at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill. Yaghoobi is a scholar of Iranian cultural studies, and gender and sexuality studies with a focus on the members of sexual, ethnic, and religious minoritized populations. She is the author of *Transnational Culture in the Iranian Armenian Diaspora* (Edinburgh UP 2023), *Temporary Marriage in Iran:* Gender and *Body Politics in Modern Persian Literature and Film* (Cambridge UP 2020), and *Subjectivity in 'Attar, Persian Sufism, and European Mysticism* (Purdue UP 2017). She is also the editor of the volume, *The #MeToo Movement in Iran: Reporting Sexual Violence and Harassment* (Bloomsbury/IB Tauris 2023). She received her Ph.D. in Comparative Literature from the University of California at Santa Barbara in 2013.

"The Valley of Whoring and Frivolity":
Taqi Kāshi and the Wayward Lives of Poets in Sixteenth-Century Iran
(Paul Losensky)

In early modern Iran, the writing of poetry moved beyond the court and the *khānqāh* to spread throughout all levels of society, from the fashionable homes of the nobility to the streets and shops of craftsmen and merchants. The concluding section of Taqi-al-Din Kāshi's biographical compendium *Kholāsat al-ash'ār va zobdat al-afkār* (completed 1016/1607) provides an engaging guide to these changes in the social praxis of poetry. These biographies are based on Taqi Kāshi's first-hand knowledge of the literary scene, and he makes little pretense of neutral objectivity. His strong narrative voice constantly judges, praises, and criticizes both the poetry and the lifestyles of his subjects. While acknowledging that poetry is an essential sign of learning and culture, he bemoans the dissolute, ethically dubious lifestyle of many poets, a lifestyle marked by drug use, sexual license, and religious deviance. This lecture will explore the features of this transgressive subculture and Taqi-al-Din's struggles to resolve the contradictions of an art form that both enunciates the highest values of the community and panders to its worst vices.

Paul Losensky (Ph.D. University of Chicago, 1993) is Professor Emeritus in the Department of Central Eurasian Studies and the Department of Comparative Literature at Indiana University, Bloomington, where he taught Persian language and literature, translation theory and practice, and comparative studies of Western and Middle Eastern literatures. His research

focuses on literary historiography, biographical writing, and Persian poetry of the early modern period. His publications include *Welcoming Fighāni: Imitation and Poetic Individuality in the Safavid-Mughal Ghazal* (1998), *Farid ad-Din 'Attār's Memorial of God's Friends: Lives and Sayings of Sufis* (2009), and *In the Bazaar of Love: Selected Poems of Amir Khusrau* (2013, with Sunil Sharma). He has authored numerous articles on Persian literature for journals such as *Iranian Studies* and is a contributor to *Encyclopedia of Islam* and *Encyclopaedia Iranica*. Professor Losensky is currently working on a book the work of the master-poet of the seventeenth century, Sā'eb Tabrizi, and a new edition and translation of *Nal o Daman* by the poet-laureate of the Mughal court, Abu'l-Feyz Feyzi. He has served as chair of the Department of Comparative Literature and is a former fellow at the National Humanities Institute and the Bodleian Library.

Voices of Rebellion and Resilience: Autobiographical Narratives in Iranian Literature
(Shafag Dadashova)

This presentation explores the theme of transgression within Iranian literary history, with a sharp focus on autobiographical works, notably "Persepolis" by Marjane Satrapi and "Funny in Farsi" by Firoozeh Dumas. The aim is to unravel how these autobiographies uniquely challenge societal norms, defy religious boundaries, and transcend cultural expectations, providing nuanced insights into the Iranian experience. In the specific context of "Persepolis," Marjane Satrapi navigates the tumultuous landscape of the Islamic Revolution in Iran, offering a firsthand account of her personal rebellion against oppressive regimes and cultural restrictions. Satrapi's autobiography boldly portrays her resilience in the face of political upheavals, providing readers with an intimate understanding of the individual's struggle within the larger socio-political context. Similarly, "Funny in Farsi" by Firoozeh Dumas delves into the immigrant experience, unraveling the complexities of cultural identity and the challenges of assimilation. Through humor and wit, Dumas transgresses cultural boundaries, challenging stereotypes and offering a resilient perspective on her Iranian-American identity. The autobiographical lens in Dumas's work serves as a medium to navigate and transcend the societal norms imposed on her as an immigrant, emphasizing resilience in the face of cultural clashes. The exploration extends to theories of transgression, delving into conceptualizations in Iranian languages and philosophical lineages. Moreover, it touches upon the contexts of transgression, scrutinizing motivations, consequences, and cultural implications embedded in these autobiographical acts in Iranian society. Contributing to the discourse on transgression in

Iranian literature, this presentation aims to offer a distinct lens into the autobiographical narratives, showing how these works fearlessly explore the inadmissible and the unsayable. In doing so, it contributes to a deeper understanding of the interplay between individual expression and societal constraints in Iranian literary traditions.

Shafag Dadashova is an Associate Professor at ADA University in Baku, Azerbaijan, teaching Literature of Azerbaijan. Holding a diverse academic background, she has served as a research fellow in the Centre for International Gender Studies at LMH, University of Oxford. Her scholarly pursuits also led her to a fellowship in Oriental Studies at the University of Oxford. Shafag Dadashova has published articles about gendered and cultural identity in autobiographies.

Veiled verses: Unraveling the poetry of Persian Nuqṭawī poets
(Mehdi Sham Roshan)

In the face of persecution from the Safavid monarchs (1501-1736) in Iran, the Persian Nuqṭawīs, including some acclaimed poets, dismissed as "heretics", sought refuge in Mughal India (1526-1857). There, in the courts of Akbar (r. 1556–1605) and his son Jahāngīr (r. 1605-1627), they found not only refuge but also acceptance and recognition for their talents and beliefs. A number of notable studies addressed the Nuqṭawīs' philosophy and socio-political significance. Yet, their literary significance is still understudied and neglected. Existing literature, veiled by the reluctance to propagate Nuqṭawī beliefs, offers only glimpses into their poetic legacy through fragmented accounts in medieval Indo-Persian tazkiras and historiography. This study aims to address the Nuqṭawīs in terms of their literary significance in Indo-Persian literature. This study aims to address the following question: what thematic and stylistic advances did the Nuqṭawī poets bring to the Indo-Persian literary heritage, and how did they traverse the complexity of their religious convictions in the socio-political setting of Mughal India? By exploring the interplay between religious ideology, artistic expression, and cultural adaptation, this research seeks to unravel the nuanced layers of the Nuqṭawī poets' literary contributions and their enduring impact on the Indo-Persian literary landscape.

Mehdi Sham Roshan is currently a PhD student in the Faculty of Letters, Section of Slavic and South Asian Languages and Civilizations, at the University of Lausanne. The director of his thesis is Dr. Prof. Blain Auer. His ongoing research examines Amīr Khusraw's *Rasāʾil al-Iʿjāz* and other prose

works as a significant Indo-Persian literary source for reconstructing the socio-cultural history of the medieval Islamicate India (13th to 14th Centuries). His primary academic interests include Persian language, literature, and historiographical works. He also works on Persian and Arabic primary sources in Persianate and Islamicate contexts. He has been working on a body of Persian medieval letters of victory (*fatḥnāma*), victory poetry (shir-i fatḫ), and manuscripts of inshā in different Islamicate contexts since 2020.

The Notion of Blame in Islam: From a Poetic Motif to the Spiritual Elite of the Malamatis
(Nadir Boudjellal)

The notion of blame (in Arabic *lawm* or *ḏamm*) is a recurring motif in pre-Islamic poetry that would be transmitted throughout the cultural space of the new religion until the contemporary era. This notion is widely developed through its multiple usages in the Quran as well as over the course of the *ġazāl*'s love poetry developments. Blame then takes on a more introspective dimension that finds its apogee with the appearance of the esoteric trend of the *ahl al-malāma*, "the people of blame", originating in Khurasan and distinct from the Sufism of Baghdad or al-Baṣra. The path of blame enshrines self-blame as the guiding principle of soul purification and the guarantor of the sincerity of any initiatory endeavor. Fighting their concupiscent souls at every turn, the Malamatis initially cultivate a principle of anonymity, preventing them from writing down their methods. But in front of this, the path of blame would also give rise very early on to provocative characters such as Abū Saʿīd Ibn Abī al-Ḫayr (d. 440/1049) who didn't hesitate to draw his contemporaries' blame on himself, no doubt to exploit the methodological interest of this process to better fight his own ego. The Malamati approach would eventually would be considered by Sufi masters as the most elitist spiritual path and its influence would be the strongest in the Indo-Persian culture, like on the poet Hafez (d. 792/1390) or on the phenomenon of qalandars.

This paper proposes to trace the evolution of the notion of blame from pre-Islamic poetry, via the Quran, to the emergence of love and mystical poetry in the Arab-Persian literary sphere, in order to shed new light on the development of the Malamati trend. It will benefit from the results of my Master's thesis on the notion of blame in Islam.

Nadir Boudjellal is a Phd student at the « Institut national des langues et civilisations orientales » (Inalco) in Paris. His doctoral thesis entitled "The disconnected letters of the Quran

and their exegesis: a crossroads of knowledge" is directed by Jean-Jacques Thibon and Francesco Chiabotti. His research topics are the Quran, Sufism in the classical period, Islamic occult sciences and the science of letters. He currently holds a scholarship from the Erbil (Iraq) branch of the Institut français du Proche-Orient, where he has been living and conducting research for the past year. He holds a Master's degree in Islamology from Inalco and a Bachelor's degree in Arabic from the same institution. He was awarded a "Campus France" excellence scholarship in 2019, which enabled him to live in Tunis for a year, and he also spent several months in Cairo at the start of his thesis to build up his bibliography. His first article appeared in 2023 in "Carnets de l'Ifpo" and is entitled "*The moon and the hidden face of the Arabic alphabet.*"

Suffer the Pain:
Iranian Aesthetic Practices as Quietist Transgressions of the Revolutionary State
(Kasper Tromp)

In recent years we have seen many instances of civil disobedience enacted by Iranian protesters, highly publicised examples of transgressions against Iran's public order. However, seen from the vantage point of critical aesthetics, such acts were transgressive of the law but usually offered no more than a negation of the ruling hegemony. The literary scholar Krzysztof Ziarek suggests that an aesthetic intervention can only be truly transgressive if, beyond a mere affirmation or negation of power, it imagines a space beyond the operations of power. These may include aesthetics that engage the same (literary) imaginary as the hegemonic order, yet manage to, in Ziarek's words, evacuate power from it and maintain themselves as power-free. In the tumultuous era between the Green Movement (2009) until the present day, various Iranian artists have, in their creative practices, responded to moments of uprising and their unfulfilled and violent ends. They did so, not by documenting the state oppression of its people, nor by subverting state power in any counter-hegemonic intervention. Rather, they explored collective literary imaginaries, particularly mystical love poetry, to strengthen the moral resolve of their viewers and inspire perseverance in the suspension of civic movements. I will argue that these artworks are transgressive of the "revolutionary" order of the Islamic Republic, modeled on the oft-cited "Karbala narrative". The artworks withdraw from power, i.e. from Imam Husayn as the archetypal revolutionary for world change, to adopt the world-accepting yet critical disposition of his sister Zaynab, who led the community after her brother's death. The artworks' transgression lies in evoking the same literary and moral universe as the ruling

order, yet shifting into a postrevolutionary "quietist" mode that delegitimizes the latter while instilling spiritual perseverance in its viewers.

Kasper Tromp is an art historian educated at Leiden University. In 2018 he completed his Master's in the specialization of Art of the Contemporary World / World Art Studies. He has conducted fieldwork in Tehran as part of his research internship at the Aaran Gallery, and in Istanbul as a participant in the Forces of Art project. Kasper has published articles about contemporary art in Iran, Türkiye and Saudi Arabia. In his work on cultural production in the MENA region, he shows a particular interest in the ways artists engage Islamic literary traditions in order to construct modern subjectivities and navigate intercultural encounters. He lives and works in the Netherlands.

Television Heresies: Towards a Cultural History of Televisuality in the Persianate World
(Arash Ghajarjazi)

This paper examines the tension between belief and unbelief in mid-20th-century Iran in the context of the religious reception of early television. With the increasing popularity of broadcast media in Iran, notions of belief and unbelief were given renewed attention and urgency. Iranian airwaves thus became in the 1950s and 1960s zones of competition between religious and secular forces. This paper builds on and explores further the findings of my upcoming book *Remembering Khayyām: Episodes of Unbelief in the Reception Histories of Persian Quatrains*, in which I detail multiple historical paths along which notions of belief and unbelief evolved from medieval Persia to modern times. Examining excerpts from Persian religious periodicals about television, I highlight the anxiety television provoked in Iranian Muslim society, particularly among Shi'a clerics. I show how this anxiety stemmed from both television's transgressive technology and its "offensive" or "immoral" visual content. For example, some clerics believed that television would not work in Qom because its sanctity protected it against the signals. Others were troubled by the presence of women on the screen and felt uncomfortable hearing female voices and seeing female bodies on television. Some were concerned with Bahāʾīs taking control of television networks. This paper suggests possible directions for writing a cultural history of television in Iran and its impact on reshaping the boundaries between modern secularity and religion in Iran. Employing a media archaeological approach, I draw attention to how televisuality is imagined in Persian literature

and how this literary imaginary medium emotionally informs the reception of television networks in Iran.

I identify in this religious unease the resurfacing of a Persianate imaginary televisual device, namely, the World-Revealing Mirror or World-Revealing Cup (*jām-i jahān-namā*). This device appears as an imaginary medium or metaphor for total knowledge in Persian lyrical poetry and Sufi literature. Examples of lyrical references to the Cup are Firdawsī's *Shāhnāma*, Niẓāmī's *Iskandarnāma*, and Jāmī's *Salāmān u Absāl*. Examples of Sufi metaphorical allusion are Auḥadī's *Jām-i Jam* and the recurrence of the term in Ḥāfiẓ's ghazals. As an imaginary device, *jām-i jahān-namā* is imagined in terms of the desire to transcend space and absence. As a metaphor, it is imagined in terms of a desire to transcend the limit of human knowledge. In both cases, *jām-i jahān-namā* is predicated on a tension between belief and unbelief. In *Shāhnāma*, Kay Khosrow uses it to see distant events but only by God's command (*bi farmān-i yazdān*). In *Iskandarnāma*, Alexander deploys it to access details about faraway territories, which further helps him reach Mecca and officially become a Muslim. According to Hamadāni's *Jāme' al-tawārikh*, the device enabled King Jamshid to see "the state of anyone and any place he wanted, no matter how far they were," to the blasphemous limit that he claims to be God. In *Salāmān u Absāl*, the king uses the device to see his son's incestuous relationship with his wet nurse. I show how this secular-religious tension with the televisual image is re-articulated in the age of television, where the word *jām-i jahān-namā* frequently featured in advertisements for television consoles and was wittingly used in the Persian periodical press in talking about television.

Arash Ghajarjazi is a postdoc member of the ERC Advance Grant project *Beyond Sharia: The Role of Sufism in Shaping Islam*. He works across Persian Studies, Media History, Memory Studies, and Religious Studies, using methodological tools from cultural analysis, media theory, and philology. His research examines the interaction between Muslim mystical and clerical textual practices, media technologies, and media imaginaries, focusing on secular-religious dynamics in Iran. His archival research targets lost, neglected, or silent records, such as premodern manuscripts, digitised newspapers and periodicals, and radio and television repositories. He is particularly interested in developing theoretical knowledge grounded in the rich but under-explored Persian and Arabic milieus – from fiction, poetry, and Sufi literature to photography, periodicals, radio broadcasts, and religious performances. He is the author of *Irrationalities in Islam and Media in Nineteenth-Century Iran* (Leiden: LUP 2022) and

Remembering Khayyām: Episodes of Unbelief in the Reception Histories of Persian Quatrains (Berlin: De Gruyter 2025).

Sexuality and Alchemy in the Nizamian Poetic Tradition: An Anti-Humanist Perspective
(Michiel Leezenberg)

The Classical Persian, and Persianate, poetic tradition has been labeled 'humanist' by authors like Johann-Christoph Bürgel and Hamid Dabashi, for presumably preaching a form of non-violence and for presumably steering clear of religion and religious learning. Neither position, I will argue, is entirely tenable. In this talk, I will explore Nizami's work and the tradition of love poetry it has inspired from what one may call an 'anti-humanist' perspective, which explicates and questions humanist assumptions in readings of classical literature. I will take my starting point from Michel Foucault's work on the history of sexuality. Already in a famous earlier essay, 'Preface to Transgression,' Foucault had argued that in the modern (and presumably secularized) world, sex is the sole remaining profanation in a world that no longer sees a positive role for the sacred; but also in desecularized and premodern settings, sexuality is the ultimately transgressive experience, reaching – and crossing – the limits of the law, consciousness, and language.

In this paper, I will argue in what ways sexuality is a transgressive experience in the mathnawî romance poems of Nizami and later authors like Jami, Fuzuli, and Xanî. These later authors, it turns out, characterize love and sexuality in rather more explicit philosophical terms, and tell their stories in rather more explicit mystical vocabulary. Yet, they are not simply antinomian: significantly, Jami and his followers were members of the Naqshbandiyya tariqa, a Sufi order known for its emphasis on a strict adherence to the sharî'a. At the same time, early Naqshbandîs like Jami were staunch defenders of Ibn 'Arabî's *wahdat al-wujûd*, and enthusiastic practitioners of, and believers in, alchemy. Alchemical processes are at times described in overtly gendered and sexualized terms; conversely, sexual encounters may be characterized in alchemical language of amalgamation and transmutation. Not only sexuality, however, but also sexual abstinence or virginity (which, it should be kept in mind, is not a traditional Islamic ideal) is characterized in the alchemical language of self-transformation and transmutation. Thus, in this poetic tradition, we may see both sexuality and virginity as transgressive experiences in so far as they involve a transformation of the self and a transgression of the boundaries of what it is to be human.

Michiel Leezenberg teaches in the departments of Philosophy and Classics of the University of Amsterdam. His current research interests focus on the intellectual history of the early modern and modern Islamic world, the history and philosophy of the humanities, and the Kurdish question. He has held visiting positions at INALCO-Sorbonne (Paris), Jagiellonian University (Cracow) and the University of Ghent. In 2001, he published Islamic Philosophy: A History (in Dutch), which won the Socrates cup for the best Dutch-language philosophy book of the year. Among his other publications are Sex and Politics in Islam (in Dutch, 2017) and (with Gerard de Vries) History and Philosophy of the Humanities: An Introduction (2018).