

Placeholders in Exile: Memory, Resistance, and the Social Lives of Iranian Photographs as *Amanat*

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In its aged black-and-white form—marked by scratches, creases, and worn edges—the photograph bears the visible traces of memory, touch, and time. Learning about its journey from its making in 1950s Iran to the moment an Iranian carpet trader in Frankfurt entrusted it to the artist—herself the daughter of the young man pictured at the centre of a demonstration—reveals the image’s layered and complex history. This history does not end with its handover; rather, it continues to unfold through the people, politics, and media that shape its circulation across time and place. Remarkably, the photograph registers the twists and turns of history, accumulating new traces and generating solidarity as well as tension in Iran, Europe, and the spaces in between. Like a stone cast into water, it creates ripples of emotion and affect, continually reaching new publics. In this sense, the photograph functions as a placeholder for shared grounds—a scaffold for diverse publics, solidarities, and collective imaginaries.

As part of a performative act of giving and receiving, the photograph as *amanat* (Persian: امانت)—a cultural practice of entrustment—exemplifies a larger category of images in Iran that survived censorship, destruction, and confiscation after the Islamic Revolution of Iran in 1979. Such images embody collective agency of resistance, solidarity, and care. In the aftermath of the revolution, amidst migration, forced displacement, and exile, family albums, vernacular photographs, and political or press images turned into vulnerable objects of memory and shared histories. They were handed over as *amanat* to safeguard their stories, people, and political commitments. Carried in suitcases, sent in letters or emails, or hidden in archives and private collections, these photographs constitute an important yet fragile part of Iranian history.

In dialogue with the conference theme of photographs as “placeholders,” this paper examines an exile archive of Iranian photographs belonging to artist and activist Parastou Forouhar, who lives in Germany since the early 1990s. After the politically motivated murder of her parents, Dariush and Parvaneh Forouhar, in their Tehran home in 1998, the artist began to create an archive of documents and photographs of her parents as well as art works as part of her activism and protest against the repressive regime of the Iranian state and for keeping alive the memory of the political assassination of her parents and as well as of many others in the late 1990s (and afterwards). With the growing role of “mobile media technologies and the central role they play in everyday exile” (cf. “Mobile Belonging in Digital Exile”, Bublatzky 2022) and in reaction to ongoing crisis, political upheaval and social movements in Iran—such as

the *woman-life-freedom* in 2022—Parastou Forouhar also developed multimedia strategies to share photographs and other documents from her archive.

In this context of memory work and resistance, the mentioned photograph as *amanat* functions as a stand-in—both conceptually and practically—for a culturally specific form of exchange (giving, receiving, and giving back) that resonates with Marcel Mauss’s theorization of gift and reciprocity (1925) and sustains social relations of resistance and the labour of remembering.

Beginning thus with a single photograph, I trace an economy of Iranian images in migratory settings that contribute to an infrastructure of place—places from which people have been displaced yet to which they continue to belong. While new technologies have transformed the communication, sharing, and circulation of photographs as “uncertain images” (Edwards 2017), they also challenge practices of knowledge-making and belonging in times of ongoing crisis. My article therefore moves in two directions: toward the Iranian past, in which the photograph was produced and circulated as *amanat*; and toward possible futures in which the lives and political heritage of those represented—and of their descendants—continue to unfold.

Methodologically, my approach is twofold: first, a tracing of the photograph and its itineraries as it moved through migratory contexts and eventually entered the exile archive; and second, an engagement with the subjects who ensured its mobility, in face-to-face encounters as well as in social media spaces.

Coming from anthropology, I present research material grounded in a long-term collaboration with the artist that begun several years ago. Together, we approached the archive as a powerful space that, as Rose (2000) argues, aligns the visual and spatial resources of photographs with research practice. Using an expanded form of photo elicitation, storytelling, and archival work, our analysis emerged through haptic and sensory encounters with the image (cf. Listening to Images, Camp 2017) and by reading the archive “against the grain” (Zeitlyn 2012).

Following a more recent article by David Zeitlyn and his discussion on ‘redemption’ (2020), I will further develop my own argumentation on photographs as *amanat* and on the artist’s collective and archival process that can be considered in parts potentially redemptive, as it involves practices of de-materializing images through scanning, and then re-materializing them through sharing and returning them on different (social) media platforms to resource communities (cf Zeitlyn 2020) in Iran and its diaspora and exile communities as a means for providing access to an otherwise restricted, silenced and contested Iranian political heritage.