Action, Criticism, and Theory for Music Education
August 2026. Vol 25 (4): 6–32. doi:10.22176/act25.4.6

An Autoethnography of Immigration Policy and Doctoral Study in Music Education in the United States

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Abstract

In this autoethnography, I examine how U.S. immigration policy and political discourse shaped the doctoral experiences of an international student in music education. Drawing on analytic vignettes from a PhD program undertaken during a period of heightened immigration restriction, I document how visa regimes, employment regulations, and public rhetoric influenced academic mobility, professional development, scholarly authorship, and pedagogical practice. Using frameworks of precarity and forced immobility, I situate personal experience within broader geopolitical structures that condition who can participate fully in academic life. I highlight misalignments between disciplinary expectations in music education and the regulatory environments governing international students, with implications for faculty pipelines, scholarly voice, and international doctoral education.

Keywords

Critical autoethnography, forced immobility, immigration policy, international students, music education, Iran

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The doctoral experience is often framed as a period of scholarly growth, professional socialization, and increasing intellectual independence (Walker et al. 2008). Yet for many international students, particularly those from countries targeted by restrictive immigration policies, doctoral study might unfold within a psychological landscape shaped by geopolitical forces as well as by academic expectations (Todoran and Peterson 2019). I examine my trajectory as an Iranian national pursuing a PhD in music teacher education in the United States during a period marked by visa bans, immigration halts, escalating political rhetoric, military conflict, and the erosion of stable pathways to legal residence (Habibpour and Grewal 2026; Iran International 2026; White House 2025c, 2025d; Wikipedia contributors 2026).[1]

The decision to write this autoethnography emerged not from a desire to foreground personal hardship but from the recognition that my experiences might be typical of a broader set of conditions affecting international students whose nationalities place them at the center of United States immigration enforcement (Todoran and Peterson 2019). Autoethnography—an approach that situates experience within larger political and cultural structures (Ellis, Adams, and Bochner 2010)—allowed me to examine how government policy became embedded in the daily labor of my graduate study. Immigration restrictions influenced my academic decisions, narrowed my professional possibilities, and affected my capacity to teach and conduct research. These effects are neither peripheral nor episodic; they became integral to the texture of my doctoral life.

Although the realities described herein are political in nature, I do not seek to take part in partisan debates. The political valence of my experience is unavoidable because federal policies vastly determine whether I may legally remain in the United States, continue my studies, or even maintain basic personal safety (Congressional Research Service 2025). I therefore ask readers not to interpret this narrative as endorsing or opposing any political party or stance, nor to appropriate these experiences to advance partisan arguments. As a noncitizen, I hold no agency in shaping the political decisions that govern my presence in the United States (Kapelner 2025). I encounter these decisions primarily as an individual to be affected without agency to affect. Whether and to what extent US citizens experience similar constraints is a question beyond the scope of this work.

Niknampour, Hamidreza. 2026. An autoethnography of immigration policy and doctoral study in music education in the United States. *Action, Criticism, and Theory for Music Education* 25 (4): 6–32. https://doi.org/10.22176/act25.4.6

Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

A central framework I employ in this study is the concept of precarity, defined in migration scholarship as a condition in which one's legal, social, and professional stability is contingent on forces outside one's control (Paret and Gleeson 2016). Precarity is not merely temporary uncertainty; it is a sustained condition that affects how individuals plan, work, relate, and imagine their futures (Jørgensen and Schierup 2016). For international students from countries subject to heightened political scrutiny, precarity can shape how they perform academic labor (i.e., teaching, research, administration, and service performed by faculty and graduate students; Kahn and Pason 2021) and construct educational aspirations (Fu 2025).

I also draw on literature concerning *forced immobility*, a term used to describe individuals who cannot safely return to their home countries yet lack viable pathways to remain in their host countries (Lubkemann 2008; Tsapenko 2021). Forced immobility reframes migration not as movement but as the inability to move. In my case, political conditions in Iran made return unsafe (Boroumand 2025; Habibpour and Grewal 2026), while escalating immigration restrictions in the United States diminished long-term residency options (White House 2025c, 2025d). This dual constraint created an academic environment in which doctoral study was carried out under persistent mental strain and worry about my future and lack of a place to consider home. Precarity and forced immobility provided the main analytic lenses for this study while additional frameworks were used to supplement the analysis.

In addition, I engage with scholarship on discursive violence, which examines how political rhetoric shapes the social meaning of particular populations (McMillian 2024). Public statements that portray certain nationalities as dangerous, unwanted, or inferior do more than express opinion; they construct categories of people as less deserving of safety, mobility, or dignity (Fisher, Dugan, and Chenoweth 2019). Such discourses can amplify precarity by producing an ambient sense of vulnerability that extends into classrooms, research sites, and daily interactions (Fu 2025). For international students, the symbolic dimension of this rhetoric can become intertwined with the material consequences of policy (Yin 2025). I use discursive violence not as a separate analytic framework but primarily to discuss how

the conditions considered in this article were intensified by such discourse. Political rhetoric, in addition to shaping external perceptions through surrounding the policies described in the vignettes, impacted how these policies were experienced.

I also situate this autoethnography within critical international student studies, a field that interrogates the systemic conditions shaping the academic labor of noncitizen students (Yin 2025). While international students are often imagined as apolitical contributors to university diversity, scholars have increasingly recognized that their experiences are conditioned by global power relations, racialization, and state surveillance (Buckner et al. 2021). Music education researchers have rarely addressed these dynamics, despite the field's emphasis on equity and access (Silverman 2023). I draw on this literature to complicate the more familiar accounts of international student experiences by foregrounding dimensions of academic life that are not always captured through frameworks of cultural adjustment or institutional diversity. I seek to broaden discussions about inclusion in music education by highlighting how immigration policy and disciplinary identity intersect (Gerrard, Adorno, and Song 2025), while keeping the analysis grounded in lived experience and maintaining a critical orientation toward the political forces that produced it.

While these frameworks offer important lenses for understanding migration, vulnerability, and state power, I did not treat them as explanatory endpoints. Rather, the vignettes that follow examined how the experience of an Iranian doctoral student in the United States might complicate and extend these concepts. Specifically, I suggest that precarity in this context is not only economic but geopolitical and epistemic; that mobility may coexist with forms of structural immobility; and that international conflict can reshape not only migration trajectories but also the conditions of scholarly production itself.

Methodology and Positionality

Autoethnography blends personal narrative with critical social analysis (Wall 2008). It positions experience as a site through which broader elements of power can be examined (Ellis, Adams, and Bochner 2010). Autoethnography is particularly useful for illuminating phenomena that are difficult to access through conventional forms of data collection, especially when the researcher's experience is itself the site where certain dynamics become materially and emotionally legible

(Ellis, Adams, and Bochner 2010). The method allows for the systematic analysis of personal narrative in relation to broader institutional, cultural, and political contexts. Rather than positioning the self as an object of confession, analytic autoethnography situates the self as a lens through which larger patterns can be understood (Anderson 2006). In this article, autoethnography functioned not as introspective storytelling but as a method for understanding how US immigration policy and political discourse shaped the academic trajectories of an international doctoral student.

The primary data for this study consisted of vignettes (Huber 2022) drawn from the past three years of my doctoral program. These vignettes include interactions with university administrative offices, the unfolding of immigration policy announcements, shifts in my dissertation design, conversations with peers and mentors, and changes in my pedagogical and scholarly capacities as political pressure intensified. I reconstructed all vignettes from multiple sources of data, including contemporaneous journal entries, email correspondence, immigration notifications, and memories anchored to clear temporal events (such as the June 2025 visa ban and the November 2025 immigration halt; White House 2025c, 2025d). They were selected not for their emotional intensity but for their analytic relevance: that is, for the ways they revealed the entanglement of policy, academic labor, and embodied experience (Huber 2022).

The selection process involved deliberate restraint. Some materials that informed the analysis, including verbatim journal entries, were not included in the final manuscript because their inclusion risked shifting the emphasis from the policy conditions under examination to the affective force of the individual account. Parsimony was also central to the selection process. I sought to include the smallest set of accounts that, when read together, offered the most comprehensive understanding of how and to what extent the examined policies shaped my doctoral experience.

Throughout the writing process, I engaged in iterative cycles of reflection and analysis. Each vignette was considered not as an isolated narrative but as an example of conditions shaping the academic life of an international student. I wrote, then stepped back to identify the institutional and political forces operating within each experience. The frameworks guided the interpretation of the vignettes after reconstruction. This movement between personal narrative and critical interpretation is central to analytic autoethnography and is the mechanism through which

individual experiences become theoretically meaningful (Anderson 2006). In this process, personal experience functioned as an analytic site rather than as evidence of exceptionality.

My positionality is central to this study. I write as an Iranian national on an F-1 student visa studying in the United States during a period of rapidly shifting immigration policy (White House 2025a). My national origin placed me in a category explicitly targeted by federal restrictions (US Department of State 2026; White House 2025c, 2025d), and my inability to safely return to Iran created a condition of forced immobility. At the same time, I write as a music education researcher, a graduate instructor, and an emerging scholar whose work has been shaped by disciplinary commitments to care, access, equity, and mental health (Niknampour 2025a, 2025b, 2026a, 2026b, in press; Niknampour and Hooman 2026). Before and during my doctoral study, my perspective had also been shaped by years of teaching music across different ages, settings, and two different countries. My decision to pursue doctoral study was motivated largely by an interest in further training in conducting research and scholarly inquiry. These multiple identities interacted throughout my doctoral program, at times in tension. Immigration policy operated in the background of most academic decisions I made, including the research I pursued, the conferences I could attend, and the futures I could imagine.

Ethically, writing this autoethnography required careful consideration of vulnerability, safety, and professional integrity (Xue, Kooten, and Desmet 2025). I am aware that international students often hesitate to document their struggles, fearing misunderstanding, accusations of political manipulation, or perceived fragility (Corney et al. 2024; Shek, Chan, Stubbs, and Lee 2024; Zheng et al. 2023). I navigated these concerns throughout the writing process. My aim was not to elicit sympathy or portray my hardship as exceptional, but to examine how political forces might shape academic lives in ways that remain relatively unaddressed within music education scholarship. These boundaries shaped both what was included and what was withheld. I chose to include only the personal details necessary for understanding the analytic position of the study and the conditions through which the analysis was developed. I also recognize that the political environment surrounding immigration in the United States is deeply polarized (Hout and Maggio 2021). As stated in the introduction, my analysis focuses on the consequences of policy and rhetoric, not their partisan origins.

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I do not attempt to represent the experiences of all Iranian students, all international students, or all individuals affected by immigration restrictions. I offer instead one account that can reveal how one doctoral student encountered and responded to the intersections of political hostility, institutional norms, and disciplinary expectations. Through this specificity, my aim was to illuminate broader questions:

- How might immigration regimes shape who is able to pursue advanced study in the arts and education?
- How might political forces seep into research design, teaching practice, and scholarly identity?
- What might it mean for fields like music education to acknowledge the forms of precarity faced by some of the very scholars who aspire to participate in the discipline?

Vignettes

Vignette 1: Mobility and the Politics of Permission

International academic mobility is widely understood as a cornerstone of scholarly growth (Shen, Xu, and Wang 2022). Conference travel, cross-cultural exchange, and the cultivation of international networks are routine expectations in fields such as music education, where disciplinary knowledge is often shared and developed through global dialogue (Kallio et al. 2021). Yet the mobility presumed by these expectations depends on conditions that are unevenly distributed among students of different nationalities (Carlson et al. 2025).

During my third year of doctoral study, my advisor encouraged me to submit a proposal to a conference in Ireland. He envisioned the trip as both a valuable professional opportunity and a chance for us to deepen our working relationship through shared travel. Although I held valid F-1 status, I could not leave the United States. My visa had been issued for only two years, despite my legal documents reflecting a program length of up to five years. This discrepancy is common among Iranian students, many of whom receive visas with shortened validity periods or single-entry restrictions (Niknafs 2017). Had I traveled to Ireland, I would not have been permitted to re-enter the United States to complete my degree.

I was aware of the additional immigration scrutiny faced by Iranian students due to the adversarial political situation between the United States and the Islamic

regime but I did not fully understand the significance of this restriction until some of my peers from other countries mentioned holding five-year visas with multiple entries (Taridashti et al. 2025). The comparison revealed the extent to which mobility was shaped not by academic merit or program structure, but by nationality. For students from countries under heightened scrutiny, the standard forms of academic participation can become fundamentally inaccessible (Carlson et al. 2025). Professional development, therefore, may not always be determined by scholarly readiness but also by geopolitical classification.

Such immobility had practical consequences for me as a music education scholar. I lost the opportunity for mentorship-building travel with my advisor, exposure to international research communities, and the professional visibility that often emerges from presenting at global conferences (Shen, Xu, and Wang 2022). In addition, my university also lost potential representation at that conference. These losses were not the result of personal choice or academic limitation; they were produced by an immigration framework that defined permissible movement according to national origin (Taridashti et al. 2025). In a discipline that values collaboration, exchange, and the circulation of ideas, such restrictions can narrow the scope of who can fully participate.

The mobility presumed by the academic profession is therefore not a universal condition but an entitlement afforded selectively (Shen, Xu, and Wang 2022). As a doctoral student whose training depended on publication, presentation, and network-building, I experienced how immigration policy rearranged the landscape of opportunity long before a scholar entered the formal job market. The expectation of global engagement remained a central feature of my field, yet my passport, rather than academic readiness, constrained my ability to fulfill that expectation.

This vignette can also extend the concept of forced immobility (Lubkemann 2008) beyond literal confinement or inability to depart. In this case, immobility operated through the conditionality of reentry. I could leave the United States in principle, but not without jeopardizing my ability to return and complete my degree. Mobility therefore existed formally but not substantively. What appears, within academic culture, as a routine expectation of professional participation was, for me, reorganized by immigration policy into a site of calculated risk.

Vignette 2: Immigration Restrictions and the U.S. Music Education Job Market

In United States music education, a familiar set of expectations often shape the transition from doctoral study to faculty employment. Search committees routinely seek candidates who combine strong research potential with several years of public school teaching experience in the United States (Sims, Jeffs, and Barrow 2010). This preference reflects an assumption within the field: university-based music teacher educators should possess firsthand knowledge of the K–12 contexts for which they are preparing future teachers. This expectation has disciplinary logic. Yet it sits uneasily within the conditions under which international doctoral students navigate the U.S. labor system. My awareness of this expectation first developed in a doctoral course, part of which addressed preparation for the transition to the academic job market in the United States. The requirement became more concrete as I later began exploring faculty job postings in music education.

As an international student on an F-1 visa, my employment options were defined by immigration regulation, as off-campus work requires federal authorization (USCIS 2025). Even with authorization, the Employment Authorization Document (EAD) necessary for such work became inaccessible to Iranian nationals after the 2025 halt on immigration benefits (USCIS 2026). Proposed federal restrictions on Optional Practical Training (OPT), which has historically offered a window for professional employment after graduation, introduced further uncertainty (USCIS 2025). These constraints made it essentially impossible for me to obtain the multiyear, full-time public school teaching record frequently expected of competitive job applicants in music teacher education.

This misalignment between disciplinary expectations and immigration regulation is rarely discussed in scholarship examining faculty demographics or pipeline development. Researchers have noted the homogeneity of higher education music faculty in the United States and have acknowledged the impacts of such homogeneity (Brewer and Rickels 2012), yet few have addressed the mechanisms that restrict whether nationals of foreign countries can realistically enter the field. I do not intend to frame the absence of such discussions as an oversight; these dynamics operate largely outside the awareness and control of those not directly subject to them. However, for international doctoral students, these mechanisms quietly shape the contours of possible career trajectories (Gerrard 2025; Niknafs 2017).

My purpose in documenting these conditions was not advocacy for policy change, nor critique of disciplinary hiring standards. These constraints influenced

how I envisioned my own future in the field. As I worked to build a record of publications, presentations, and teaching experience within the limits of permissible on-campus employment, the gap between disciplinary norms and immigration realities became increasingly apparent. The requirements of the academic job market and the restrictions of federal immigration policy formed two parallel systems that rarely aligned. The consequence is a narrowing of who can viably enter the professoriate in music education in the United States.

This misalignment reveals a different form of vulnerability not reducible to job insecurity alone. My position was precarious (Standing 2011) not simply because of uncertain employment, but because of the unstable, nationality-dependent legal conditions governing whether I could pursue that employment. Precarity here was juridical and geopolitical. Labor market competition did not produce this alone; immigration rules also quietly determined whether the expected pathway into the field remained available to me.

As such, the demographic patterns observed in music education faculty do not only result from personal choice, cultural preference, or uneven access to educational opportunities. They are also shaped by the immigration policies that determine which scholars can remain in the United States long enough to pursue academic careers. From my vantage point within these constraints, documenting their impact became a matter of scholarly clarity rather than political argument.

Vignette 3: Precarity, Academic Relationships, and Pedagogical Constraints

The effects of immigration policy surfaced not only in bureaucratic interactions but also in the relationships and pedagogical environments in which my doctoral training unfolded. Precarity does not operate solely at the level of the individual; it extends outward, influencing advisors, colleagues, and students in ways that are often unacknowledged within institutional settings (Omotilewa and Johnson 2025).

This became evident during a required immigration appointment at a United States Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) office in Washington, D.C., scheduled at a time when reports of immigration enforcement actions and detainments were circulating widely (Gonzalez, Attanasio, and Tareen 2025). Although I approached the meeting with the documentation and legal status required, the broader atmosphere surrounding enforcement shaped how those around me un-

derstood the event. My advisor, aware of recent reports of legally present individuals being detained during routine appointments (Acevedo 2025), expressed significant concern in the days leading up to the meeting.

This incident illustrated how immigration precarity can diffuse into academic relationships. My advisor's reaction was not a response to my personal circumstances alone but to a national climate in which the boundaries of enforcement had become unpredictable. The anxieties generated by this unpredictability were absorbed not only by those directly affected but by those who cared about them as well. In this sense, immigration policy shaped mentorship dynamics. These dynamics extended into the classroom, as well. As a graduate instructor responsible for teaching undergraduate music education students, I became increasingly attentive to how political topics surfaced, or failed to surface, in pedagogical contexts. I grounded my caution not in partisan politics but in a more fundamental calculation: the recognition that discussions involving inclusion, belonging, state authority, or cultural responsiveness could carry different stakes for someone with a conditional right to remain in the country (Mackey 2025). This resulted in a subtle narrowing of pedagogical possibilities. Certain topics that might have enriched discussions about diversity, educational equity, or the social contexts of schooling remained underspoken, not out of disinterest but out of perceived vulnerability.

These interpersonal and pedagogical consequences rarely appear in institutional accounts of international student experiences, which often emphasize cultural adjustment or academic integration (Buchanan 2019; Sarkodie-Mensah 1998). Yet the reactions my immigration appointment elicited illustrate that precarity (Paret and Gleeson 2016) can become relational, shaping how my advisor performed care or interpreted the responsibilities of mentorship and how I navigated classroom discourse. For me, whose legal status positioned him between political scrutiny and academic expectation, the classroom became a space where professional identity and vulnerability converged. The need to maintain composure, authority, and pedagogical openness existed alongside the constraints imposed by external political forces. Recognizing this tension was essential for understanding how immigration policy shaped the everyday practices through which teaching and mentorship occurred.

Vignette 4: Forced Immobility and the Geopolitical Double Bind

While U.S. immigration policy restricted my ability to remain, work, or build a future in the United States, the political situation in Iran rendered return unsafe (Boroumand 2025; Habibpour and Grewal 2026). The pressures exerted by these two regimes were distinct in origin yet converged to foreclose mobility in both directions.

My inability to return to Iran was not a matter of preference. The Islamic Republic regime's repressive response to at least two major, nationwide protests and uprisings (i.e., in 2022 and 2025–2026) since my arrival in the United States, its patterns of extremely violent crackdown and retaliation against perceived dissidents and their families (e.g., the perpetrated widespread massacres of tens of thousands of civilians by the Islamic Republic in late 2025 and early 2026; Habibpour and Grewal 2026; Iran International 2026; Serjoie, Saberi, and Jamalpour 2026), and its escalating military confrontations—which ultimately resulted in a regional war in February 2026—created conditions in which return carried credible risk (Iran International 2026; Wikipedia contributors 2026). My partner's work in a Washington-based opposition organization to the Islamic Republic regime heightened this risk further (Center for Human Rights in Iran 2025). During this period, U.S. government agencies issued advisories warning against visiting Iran, citing concerns about facing detention, kidnapping, or even hostage taking on arrival (Iran International 2025; U.S. Department of State 2025).

At the same time, the 2025 halt on immigration benefits for nationals of nineteen countries, including Iran, eliminated the possibility of pursuing employment authorization, permanent residency, or the extraordinary-ability employment-based visa (EB) categories (White House 2025c). These restrictions directly and rather swiftly removed the legal avenues through which I might have secured the stability necessary to continue working as a music education researcher after graduation. The result was a paradoxical situation in which political rhetoric and policy from two different governments operated in tension yet produced similar outcomes for me: a profound conditionality surrounding where I could live and how I could plan my future. Return to Iran was unsafe because of political conditions I consistently and emphatically opposed. In the United States, permanence became unattainable because of political conditions over which I had no influence. The two systems, often presented as geopolitical adversaries, converged in shaping the limits of my mobility.

This double bind carried implications for my academic work. The uncertainty surrounding my long-term security influenced how I chose dissertation topics, how I balanced long-term and short-term research commitments, and how I envisioned my place within the field. Decisions that might otherwise have been purely scholarly became entangled with considerations of risk, legality, and the narrowing of future options. Forced immobility (Lubkemann 2008), in this context, was not merely a legal status but an intellectual condition. It shaped the temporal horizons of my scholarship, compressing the sense of an academic future into a series of short-term calculations. It affected how I understood institutional belonging, transforming the university from a site of long-term professional formation into a space of provisional residence. And it underscored the extent to which political forces operating far beyond the boundaries of international students' scholarly fields might shape their academic lives.

This example of political exclusion in one country and legal exclusion in another forms a critical, yet understudied, dimension of international graduate education. For certain nationalities, doctoral study in the United States may unfold not only within the expectations of academic labor but within overlapping regimes of risk, surveillance, and geopolitical constraint. Understanding this double bind is essential for grasping the circumstances under which some international scholars attempt to build their academic futures.

This case, similar to the first vignette, can extend the concept of forced immobility (Lubkemann 2008) by showing that immobility may arise not only from the impossibility of leaving one place, but also from the impossibility of safely remaining in one place while having no viable route back to another. The constraint therefore operated doubly; one regime rendered return dangerous, while the other rendered permanence unattainable. Forced immobility, in this sense, was not merely spatial. It was geopolitical, temporal and entangled with the possibility of imagining an academic future.

Vignette 5: Scholarly Voice and Intellectual Risk

During my studies, I conducted a research project examining higher education music students' perceptions of federal diversity, equity, and inclusion policy changes following a presidential executive order issued in January 2025 (White House 2025b). The study was methodologically sound and aligned with ongoing debates

in music education research. After reviewing the manuscript, my advisor recommended submission to a flagship journal in the field. Unlike other projects I had prepared for publication, this manuscript prompted discussions unrelated to methodological rigor or theoretical contribution. Given the political climate surrounding immigration enforcement and my status as an F-1 student from a country subject to heightened scrutiny, we considered whether submitting the paper under my own name posed unnecessary risk. At various points, we discussed the possibility of using a pseudonym. These conversations were driven by uncertainty about how visibility, topic selection, and authorship might clash with immigration vulnerability.

We weighed language with unusual care, not to dilute the findings but to avoid any potential misinterpretation within a polarized political environment. This heightened self-monitoring was not a standard feature of my scholarly writing; it emerged specifically in relation to the topic and my legal status. I ultimately submitted the manuscript under my own name, and it was published in the *Journal of Research in Music Education* (Niknampour 2025b). The conditions under which I made the decision were more significant the publication itself. This experience touches on how immigration vulnerability can shape not only access to academic spaces, but the terms under which scholarly speech occurs (Mackey 2025). The freedom to research and publish on politically adjacent topics was, in this case, accompanied by calculations of risk that operated outside the formal reservations of academic evaluation.

This vignette also points to a dimension of precarity that is epistemic (Papoulias and Callard 2022). The process did not involve formal censorship, but rather the need to assess whether authorship or topic selection might produce consequences beyond academic evaluation. In that sense, immigration precarity entered the production and circulation of knowledge itself, impacting the framing and attribution of the research before it reached peer review. Scholarly voice, in this context, can be affected. The freedom to contribute to disciplinary conversation remained present in principle, yet it was mediated by calculations of legal and political exposure that other scholars may not have to make.

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Vignette 6: Revising in Wartime

Between the submission of this manuscript and the drafting of its first revision in response to the editor's desk review, before the peer-review process began, the political context surrounding the article shifted dramatically. I revised what had initially been written as an autoethnographic account of how immigration policy and political rhetoric shaped my doctoral life as an Iranian student in the United States during the outbreak of an active war between the United States and the Islamic Republic regime in Iran (Wikipedia contributors 2026). The manuscript's central concerns did not change, but the conditions surrounding its revision and finalization for publication did.

This development affected the paper in more than a personal sense. The war intensified the uncertainty already described throughout these vignettes. At the same time, it also altered the scholarly context of the manuscript itself. A paper concerning the experiences of an Iranian student in the United States, revised during a moment of open war between the two states most directly structuring that experience, could not proceed as though this development were external to its argument. The war therefore entered the paper not because I designed this article as a commentary on military conflict, but because the conflict had become part of the very context that made the analysis legible.

This also created a tension in writing. The scale and consequences of the war exceed what I can adequately address within a vignette such as this, and I do not attempt to analyze the conflict itself. Yet to omit any acknowledgment of the war would risk presenting the manuscript as though it existed outside the geopolitical conditions it seeks to examine. In this sense, the war did not simply interrupt my scholarly work; it altered the frame within which that work now had to be read, revised, and presented.

Discussion

The analytic value of these vignettes may lie less in showing that immigration policy affected one doctoral student's life, which would not in itself be surprising, than in showing how such policy can enter domains of doctoral formation often treated as primarily academic or professional. The vignettes suggest that precarity, forced immobility, doctoral socialization, and scholarly voice might take somewhat different forms when doctoral study unfolds under nationality-based restriction,

shifting legal regimes, and geopolitical conflict. The point is therefore not that existing frameworks fail, but that this case could indicate where they may require greater nuance in order to account for how immigration policy becomes embedded in academic life.

One possible implication concerns precarity. In scholarship on higher education and migration, precarity is often associated with unstable labor, uncertain belonging, or generalized insecurity (Hastings et al. 2023; Mulvey et al. 2024; Webb et al. 2021). The present case suggests that, in international doctoral education, precarity can also be juridical, geopolitical, relational, and possibly epistemic. It is juridical insofar as legal permissions shape access to work, travel, and long-term planning and may narrow or withdraw that access. It is geopolitical insofar as relations between governments may distribute those permissions unevenly across nationalities rather than according to academic readiness alone. It is relational insofar as immigration vulnerability can shape the practices of care and responsibility through which advisors and students respond to one another. It may also be epistemic insofar as instability can extend beyond mobility or employment and enter authorship, topic selection, self-presentation, and judgments about what can be said safely in scholarly settings. Under such conditions, precarity might not simply surround academic work as an external pressure. It could become one of the conditions through which academic work is timed, imagined, and voiced.

The vignettes may also complicate doctoral socialization conversations. Much of that literature understandably emphasizes how students acquire disciplinary norms, professional identities, and pathways into a field (Sweitzer 2009). These accounts often assume that, once admitted to a doctoral program, students can move along the path into the profession. The experiences discussed here suggest that for some international doctoral students, the more basic issue might be whether they are legally and politically able to remain on that path. Conference travel, school-based experience, professional networking, and gradual transition into employment often appear to function as indicators of readiness (Walker et al. 2008). This case suggests that they may not serve as neutral indicators in practice when the legal ability to pursue them is distributed unevenly. In addition to considering how they socialize doctoral students into a discipline, doctoral mentors might acknowledge how disciplines may rely, often implicitly, on legal conditions that make some forms of professional preparation easier to accumulate than others.

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Relatedly, the vignettes can help refine how forced immobility is understood in academic life. Existing work has shown that mobility and immobility are not opposites so much as intertwined conditions shaped by state power (Cranston and Duplan 2023; Tzanakou and Henderson 2021). The present case possibly adds to that insight by showing that immobility may arise not only from the inability to depart, but from the conditionality of return. In vignette one, travel to a conference was technically possible. What made it effectively impossible was the risk that leaving the United States could interrupt the degree itself. Under such circumstances, movement does not disappear; rather, movement can become professionally irrational. This may suggest that blocked reentry deserves greater attention alongside blocked exit in discussions of forced immobility. For international doctoral students, the inability to return might be as consequential as the inability to leave.

Vignette four extends this point. The problem there was not simply confinement within one political space, but the absence of durable futurity across two of them. One national context had become unsafe to return to, while the other appeared increasingly uncertain as a site of long-term permanence. The language of either mobility or immobility alone does not fully capture the resultant condition. It might be better understood as a geopolitical double bind in which academic, legal, and personal continuity become difficult to plan because no stable route through either space appears secure. Framed this way, forced immobility may involve not only blocked movement, but the erosion of reliable pathways through which one can imagine and sustain a life in scholarship.

A more tentative implication concerns scholarly voice. The fifth vignette does not demonstrate censorship in any formal sense, nor does it establish that the author was in fact denied credibility. I ultimately submitted and published the manuscript under my own name. Still, the vignette may point to a condition in which anticipatory calculations that some scholars might not have to make would shape scholarly speech. The question was not whether the work met disciplinary standards, but whether visibility, authorship, and topic selection could carry extra-academic risk under conditions of immigration vulnerability and reports of similar risks and consequences sustained by other academics (Mackey 2025). As such, the vignette suggests a possible anticipatory form of epistemic precarity: one in which a scholar moderates language, weighs public visibility more carefully, or considers withholding aspects of authorship not because of peer review itself, but because of

uncertainty about how political identity and legal status might shape reception beyond ordinary academic judgment.

For similar reasons, the concept of *testimonial injustice* may be useful here only if applied cautiously. Fricker (2007) describes testimonial injustice as a credibility deficit imposed on a speaker because of identity prejudice, occurring when prejudice causes a hearer to assign deflated credibility to a speaker's word, thereby wronging that person specifically in their capacity as a knower. The fifth vignette does not provide evidence that credibility was denied on the basis of identity prejudice. What shows, however, that the possibility of unequal credibility can become salient before any overt act of dismissal occurs. A scholar may begin to anticipate that nationality, visibility, or legal status could shape how their work is heard, and that anticipation could in turn reorganize what feels prudent to say, how directly to say it, and under whose name it should appear. If so, the harm would extend beyond moments discounting speech after the fact. It could also emerge prospectively, in the internal regulation of scholarly conduct under conditions where equal uptake cannot be assumed. The connection to testimonial injustice here would be provisional and suggestive rather than definitive.

The concept of *hermeneutical injustice* may also be relevant in a restrained sense. Fricker (2007) describes hermeneutical injustice as one's inability to understand or communicate their own experiences due to a lack of shared, collective, or conceptual resources, often caused by structural prejudice, which can render marginalized experiences invisible or unintelligible. One reason experiences such as those described in these vignettes can remain individualized or misread as private struggles may be that the field has only limited language for naming the condition of being academically included yet legally contingent, professionally prepared yet structurally constrained, institutionally welcomed yet geopolitically suspect. If that is the case, the contribution of this paper may then be less to resolve that gap than to make it more visible.

These vignettes may also bear on how music educators might understand internationalization and inclusion. The legal and geopolitical conditions of international students' participation have been left relatively undertheorized in music education discourse. This does not suggest that such discourse is insincere, nor that inclusion is symbolic, or that even symbolic inclusion is meaningless. It does suggest, however, that presence alone may serve as a weak indicator of inclusion when

access to travel, employment, public speech, and long-term belonging remains uneven. Internationalization in music education might therefore need to be understood not only in terms of who is present in the field, but also in terms of the conditions under which participation is made possible, limited, or rendered provisional.

This can have implications for how music education defines preparedness and fit, as well. In many contexts, substantial U.S.-based school teaching experience serves as one of the most important markers of preparedness. For many international students the inability to accumulate such experience may be misread as a lack of fit for the field. Disciplinary definitions of preparedness therefore may unintentionally aggravate exclusion if they fail to account for the legal conditions that restrict access to valued forms of preparation. Areas most directly affected include faculty mentoring, doctoral preparation, and hiring. Faculty mentors advising for international doctoral students may need to account for the ways immigration status shapes research planning and postgraduation employment possibilities. Similarly, doctoral programs and search committees might consider whether a limited record of U.S.-based teaching experience reflects lack of preparation, or whether it reflects legal and geopolitical constraints that made those forms of preparation difficult or impossible to pursue. The practical question is not whether music education should abandon its standards, but whether the field can interpret professional records without mistaking immigration constraint for lack of merit or fit.

More broadly, these vignettes may indicate that disciplinary norms are less self-contained than they appear. Collegiate faculty and institutions usually treat expectations concerning conference mobility, precollegiate teaching experience, hiring readiness, and scholarly openness as internal standards of the profession. Yet in some cases, external legal arrangements scaffold these expectations by determining who can realistically meet them. From this perspective, patterns of participation in the music education professoriate may not be shaped only by individual preference or merit. Immigration law and geopolitical hierarchy may also coproduce those patterns indirectly but consequentially. A discipline might endure or even sustain exclusion through standards that appear neutral precisely because the legal subject they presuppose has gone somewhat unmarked.

This study remains limited. It offers one autoethnographic account. The argument is therefore best understood as interpretive rather than generalizable in any strong empirical sense. What this case can possibly offer is a grounded illustration

of how immigration policy, political rhetoric, and geopolitical conflict may become entangled with doctoral life in ways that are not always visible within prevailing disciplinary narratives. Future research could examine whether similar dynamics appear across other national groups, disciplines, institutional types, and stages of academic career development.

About the Author

Hamidreza Niknampour is a Ph.D. candidate in Music Teacher Education at the Hartt School at the University of Hartford. His research explores the psychology of music, student engagement, and the intersections of care and mental health within music education. His work has been published or accepted in peer-reviewed journals including the Journal of Research in Music Education, Psychology of Music, Philosophy of Music Education Review, Early Education Journal, College Music Symposium, Contributions to Music Education, and Music Educators Journal. Niknampour holds an M.A. in Classical Guitar Performance from the Iran University of Art and a B.S. in Applied Chemistry from the Isfahan University of Technology. With nearly a decade of teaching experience across age groups, from young learners to undergraduates, he remains active as a solo and ensemble guitarist.

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Note

[1] The author used ChatGPT for the purposes of copyediting, proofreading, and streamlining the text to improve clarity and flow. After using this tool, the author reviewed and edited the content again as needed.