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Zar, Cinema and Iran's Forgotten History of Blackness

DISSERTATION

Submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

In Comparative Literature

by

Parisa Vaziri

Dissertation Committee:
Professor Rei Terada, Chair
Professor Nahum Dimitri Chandler
Professor Adriana Johnson
Professor Nasrin Rahimieh
Professor Tiffany Willoughby-Herard

2018

DEDICATION

For Ariana and Faramarz

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CURRICULUM VITAE

Parisa Vaziri

- 2007 B.A. in Comparative Literature, French Minor, New York University
- 2012 M.A. in Comparative Literature, University of California, Irvine
- 2018 Ph.D. in Comparative Literature, University of California, Irvine

FIELD OF STUDY

Iranian Cinema, African Diaspora, Black Studies, Indian Ocean Slavery, Critical Theory

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Zar, Cinema and Iran's Forgotten History of Blackness

by

Parisa Vaziri

Doctor of Philosophy

In Comparative Literature

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Professor Rei Terada, Chair

This dissertation engages the history of Indian Ocean world slavery in Iran and the Persian Gulf through cinematic artifacts. Blackness in Iranian films describes a demand for historical reckoning that repositions Iranian cinema as a site of transmission and relation to the submerged past, complicating traditional narratives of transition to Iranian modernity. Through mediating ancient performance traditions and rituals, the films I read in this dissertation articulate a temporal complexity that is heightened by the qualities of film medium. From scenes of *sīyāh bāzī* in Farukh Ghafārī's feature films, to Nasir Taqvāī's experimental documentation of African spirit healing rituals such as zar, and black influences on Shi'a ritual, cinematic blackness grapples with a kind of history that must take into account the difficult transcription of experience into shared knowledge, and the ethical problems posed by abstraction in the process of this transcription.

INTRODUCTION

Cinematic Blackness: Performance Legacies of Indian Ocean World Slavery

Geographical entities, like all concepts with apparently palpable referents, enable imaginative work, of the past as much as of the present and future. An exaggerated poetry, cinema unleashes a creative force that carries dimension beyond the geographical, beyond the terrestrial. In furnishing means for abstraction to distend in such a way, cinema is duplicitous—illuminating and perilous. For, necessarily distortive, abstraction fuels inquiry, improvises vision, as much as it, like time itself, stimulates dissolutions. In this dissertation, cinema and history evince parallel interacting fields where cosmological and historical violence leave behind waned traces of a slavery past that blackness holds at various levels of proximity and distance. Staking claim to the crucible of human civilization—the Near East—this history is necessarily mired in myth and ruminative detail, undermining the claims of historiographical certainty in favor of modest inquiry and observation. On the other hand, by plumbing such hyperbolically unfathomable temporal depths—the four millennia history of slavery in the Indian Ocean world¹—cinematic blackness powers a re-orientation of the meaning of history.

This dissertation explores Iranian cinema as a media archive for slavery's pasts in the Indian Ocean world. Like all claims to being-world, the Indian Ocean is a virtuality, neither a universally recognized and agreed upon scale, nor a fact of consciously extant or iterated community. Historians of slavery in the region like to recall this by pointing out what they perceive as the “unconscious” or latent nature of the slave descendent diaspora in the Indian

¹ Paul E. Lovejoy, *Transformations in Slavery: A History of Slavery in Africa*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge UP, 2000), 2.

Ocean.² In continuing to reuse the term anyway, they strengthen its hold, imbuing it with new meanings. On the more optimistic side of the spectrum, Indian Ocean world scholars not only embrace such a world's existence but pronounce its cosmopolitanism: "Where Gilroy recovers the most wretched of subaltern histories," Moorthy and Jamal write, referring to Paul Gilroy's intervention in the triumphalist narrative of Euro-American exchange across the Atlantic, "Indian Ocean studies reveals what John Hawley describes as 'subaltern cosmopolitanism'...It's more wretched travelers assimilated, to leave trace communities such as the Sidis in India and the Bombay Africans of Mombasa."³

While not altogether inappropriate, for in fact a robust trade network between East Africa, the Indian subcontinent and the Persian Gulf connected these regions since antiquity, the apt immission of "cosmopolitanism" creates the unintended effect of smoothing out possible trails of violence, just as "more wretched travelers" euphemizes "slaves."⁴ "Subaltern cosmopolitanism" serves, finally, to diffuse this euphemization by drawing attention to the marginalized status of Indian Ocean history in historical consciousness, as well as the suppression of its vibrant communal life by the European (Portuguese) great invasion of the 15th century.

I pause with elaboration at this otherwise unremarkable passage in Moorthy and Jamal's *Indian Ocean Studies* to point out the complexity of the ideological positionings that condition extant studies of the Indian Ocean world. Despite its plurivocity, one characteristic that unites the

² Gwyn Campell, "The African-Asian Diaspora: Myth or Reality?" *African and Asian Studies* 5, 3-4 (2006).

³ Shanti Moorthy and Ashraf Jamal, eds. *Indian Ocean Studies: Cultural, Social, and Political Perspectives* (Routledge, 2010), 2.

⁴ With unflinching candor, Simpson and Kresse characterize the term as "lazy" (*Struggling with History*, 2).

various and sometimes contradictory studies that focus on slavery pasts in the broad geographical and imaginative space of the Indian Ocean world, is a sometimes tacit, sometimes explicit expression of the archive's paucity. "What constitutes a legitimate source of historical truth?," writes Fahad Ahmad Bishara about the Persian Gulf, in light of the "paucity of local historical documents."⁵ In search of his family genealogy, the Afro-Turk Mustafa Olpak could only lament the absence of any slave narratives in the Ottoman archives, augmenting his disappointment by contrasting it with the thousands of slave narratives incubated in the Library Congress of America.⁶ The "fragmented administrative superstructure" belies any underlying unity of the Indian Ocean world system, "making archival research a formidable task to any serious scholar"⁷ writes Vink.

Overemphasizing the lack of information that exists about Indian Ocean world slavery is necessary and dangerous. It is necessary because it throws into relief the shallowness of generalizations that have thus far been made about it. Amongst the better known of such generalizations are the "good-treatment thesis";⁸ Indian Ocean slavery's "benign" nature,⁹ and

⁵ *The Persian Gulf in Modern Times: People, Ports, and History*. Ed. Lawrence G. Porter (Palgrave, 2014), 8.

⁶ Olpak, Mustafa, and Mehmet Konuk. *Biographie D'une Famille D'esclaves: Kenya, Crete, Istanbul*. Paris: Librairie Özgül, 2006

⁷ Markus Vink, "The World's Oldest Trade': Dutch Slavery and Slave Trade in the Indian Ocean in the Seventeenth Century." *Journal of World History*, Vol. 14, No. 2 (2003), pp. 131-177.

⁸ *Eve M. Troutt Powell*, "Slaves or Siblings? Abdallah al-Nadim's Dialogues about the Family," in Walz, *Race and Slavery*, 221.

⁹ Suzanne Miers, "A question of definition," in Campbell, *The Structure of Slavery*. Amongst the more prevalent reasons for assuming its benign nature is the unverifiable assumption that Qu'ranic verses, which generally request humane master-slave relations, reflected and were reproduced in historical practices.

other forms of romanticization that cast as shadow effect a general disinterest in knowing more;¹⁰ gentle, “relatively seamless”¹¹ histories are unfashionable.

On the other hand, such stress on historical dearth is unwarranted, because to accentuate paucity is in part to undermine the extent to which all historiography is impoverished by historiography’s very conditions of possibility: selectivity and contingency. Like archaeological finds, historical narrative depends on chance.¹² Terms that supply a sense of destitution belong to a presumption about history’s predetermined totality, a presumption shaped by terms of comparison. Thus Olpak’s reference to the thousands of slave narratives in the Library Congress of America conjures pathos to illustrate his plaint, replicating a charged and inevitable tradition of juxtaposition between the Atlantic and the Indian Oceans. More often than not, this tradition is overdetermined by the rupture of capitalist modernity which renders self-evident the ultimate significance of the former; this self-evidence is repeated and perpetuated by the comparative wealth of material produced about the Atlantic world. Thus writes John Hunwick:

for every gallon of ink that has been spilt on the trans-Atlantic slave trade and its consequences, only one very small drop has been spilt on the study of the forced migration of black Africans into the Mediterranean world of Islam and the broader question of slavery within Muslim societies.¹³

Rightly, the historian’s response is to forge a plan of recovery. Worthy and necessary endeavors, supplementation and restoration, whether latently fueled by the drive toward a fantasy

¹⁰ Speaking to Muslim populations’ relation to slavery history in Islamic countries, Bernard Freamon emphasizes the way religious history tends to subrogate one reality for another. (“Straight, no Chaser” in Harms, Freamon, and Blight, 62.)

¹¹ Moorthy and Jamal, 2.

¹² In commenting on methodological approaches to ancient stores of documents, Maria Brosius points out the obvious: “we rely on the area which has been excavated and the extent to which excavation can be carried out” (*Ancient Archives and Archival Traditions*, 6).

¹³ “The Same but Different: Africans in Slavery in the Mediterranean Muslim World,” in Hunwick and Powell, ix.

of historical repletion or not, can help to mitigate past trauma, as much as they are also liable to activate it; can form the foundations for future occasions of redistributive justice, as much as they are likely to uncover voids in the place of agents capable of accountability.¹⁴ Most relevant to the argument at hand, historiography's drive to supplementation tends to dissimulate the "untranscribeability" of history—the reason why its substratum and "essence" is in fact *not* fact, but myth and non-presence, the failures that result when experience attempts to conjure representations in its own image.¹⁵

In their mercurial evocations of slavery history in the Persian Gulf, Iranian films simulate this recoil from cognitive grasp practiced by the immaterial archive of the Indian Ocean world. Mediated by blackness, these evocations incline toward failed reception, discomfort, and precarious discovery. And yet, recurring and appearing with dissension, they insist on historical inscription— an opening onto the past that sometimes brushes against, and sometimes painfully pressures upon what is unspoken in the present, picking at a phantom wound.

Though irreducible to a singular event, blackness codes the signs to a past of slavery heretofore repressed in the historical imagination of Southwest Asia, without itself fully dissolving in the violence of its denotative capacities and demands. The slave routes from the East African coast to the Persian Gulf, though numerous, were among many originating in other geographical spaces: most importantly, the Caucasus. Why, then, does blackness bear the power to make itself legible as a sign of a disavowed history in a way that "Caucasianness" is not able to do? Without fully disengaging from the laden dialogue that focalizes as its inquiry the

¹⁴ Thus, the 2003 *Declaration of the Conference on Arab-Led Slavery of Africans* has so far resulted in no actions on the part of the U.N. or Arab countries interpolated.

¹⁵ Peter Munz, *Shapes of Time: A New Look at the Philosophy of History*. Wesleyan UP, 1977, 127.

historical question of whether blackness ever did, or does today, connote slave status in the Middle East, I suggest instead that such connotation, violent and exacting, flashes, rather than perdures as an unwavering quality; moreover, that it *is* a power as much as a painful transgression and —one accrued not through a single history, but through the global history of African slavery and its aftermath throughout the world. Blackness demands a deliberation which transcends geographical exclusion, individual desire and interest. There can be no future, Iranian cultural production insinuates, without a reckoning with black history in Southwest Asia’s ancestral past, without a reckoning with blackness *as* the collective past, as the conditions of our global present.

Zar

Iranian films describe how this transcendence manifests itself in performance traditions that position history as an experience that overflows epistemology. Zar, the “African” healing ritual complex that appears in chapter two as the site or conditions of emergence of Iranian literary and filmic modernity, is one such tradition. Distributed in various iterations across the Persian Gulf and Arab world, in Southeast Asia and throughout the African continent, zar bespeaks a relation to the past that is latent and boding, enduring though unformalized, injurious but transformative, impossible but lived. Though the scare quotes will disappear after this initial caveat, it is important to its comprehension that the unverifiable and doubled origins of zar appear as the aporia that zar carries within itself. For, like the infinite recursivity of East African coastal cities’ origins stories (which posit an Iranian, specifically Shirazi origin) zar bears a “double origin” in Persia and Africa.¹⁶ In his etymological argument for the Persian origins of

¹⁶ "All along the East African coast, from the Benadir coast of Somalia in the north to other northern tip of Madagascar in the south, there are populations or families which claim origin from the Persian

zar, Taghi Modarassi pointed out the word's ancient and modern usage in Persian, meaning, in its nominal form, mourning and crying.¹⁷ Leo Frobenius believed zar and bori (a similar belief complex prevalent in African countries) were manifestations of a Persian system of beliefs that spread throughout the grassland belt from the Abyssinian highlands through Kordofan to Hausaland.¹⁸

The duplicity of the Shirazi hypothesis I explore in chapter four, and the doubleness of zar described by early etymological endeavors complicate—mythologically, symbolically—the self-evidence of the proximity between Persianness and blackness; the irreducibility of blackness to slavery history, and zar as its expression. This irreducibility persists as an imperative of duration, for it is most clearly due to the depth and distance of duration posited between a possible origin and contemporary historical consciousness that insurges against the movement toward fact. By abstracting even as it represents, condenses and holds temporality, film foregrounds this irreducibility, arterializing it.

Writing of a different but not unconnected context—the French Caribbean—the poet philosopher Edouard Glissant expresses suspicion toward historical "methodologies passively assimilated" in order to comprehend the Caribbean's past, proposing that, in addition to the

province of Shiraz," writes Abdul Sheriff ("The Historicity of the Shirazi Tradition along the East African Coast," in *Papers*, 21). These stories, like all story of origins are more mythological than factual; though, this distinction is inevitably confounded by the material traces of Persian wares on the East African coast (Adria LaViollette, "Swahili Cosmopolitanism in Africa and the Indian Ocean World, A.D. 600–1500," 33.)

¹⁷ Taghi Modarassi, "The Zar Cult in South Iran," in Prince, 151.

¹⁸ Pamela Constantinides, "'The History of *Zar* in the Sudan: Theories of Origin, Recorded Observation and Oral Tradition," in I.M. Lewis, Ahmed Al-Safi and Sayyid Hurreiz, 84; Richard Natvig, "Oromos, Slaves, And the Zar Spirits: A Contribution to the History of the Zar Cult," *The International Journal of African Historical Studies*, Vol. 20, No. 4 (1987), 673.

problem of duration evoked above, the specificity of a history of slavery demands nontraditional tools for analysis:

Our historical consciousness could not be deposited gradually and continuously like sediment, as it were, as happened with those peoples who have frequently produced a totalitarian philosophy of history, for instance European peoples, but came together in the context of shock, contraction, painful negation, and explosive forces. This dislocation of the continuum, and the inability of the collective consciousness to absorb it all, characterize what I call a nonhistory.¹⁹

A history of slavery produces peoples, as well as schemes of shifty subject marking incurred by such production; a history of slavery cannot constellate an objective historical narrative, perhaps it thereby exemplifies the impossibility of historical objectivity. For its actors, perspectival insights, the ebbs, flows, and jolts of action are characterized by violence and antagonism that no pretension to historical positivism can mitigate or neuter. Glissant's words suggest a resistance even to the less controversial acceptance of chronology that is built up by the repeated dislocations intrinsic to the experience of slavery. Untranslatable, untranscribable, experience enters history with less fidelity through fact than through a kind of poesis that is necessarily distortive; for, whether reductive or magnetic, poesis threatens to dissolve violence. The specter of this dissolution radiates an anxiety which poetry absorbs and reluctantly communicates—measures of its success.

In zar, this contorted poetry flows through kinetic energy, hypnotic rhythms and incensed vocal interruptions. A communal form of healing diffused through zones freighted with deeply unresolved pasts and blurry annals, zar names the complex of belief in spirited winds that burrow inside the human body and through instilling physical or psychic suffering, demand action

¹⁹ Glissant, "The Quarrel with History" in *Caribbean Discourse*, 62.

toward relief. The resulting ceremonial response enables momentary reversals and evacuations of social positions, an achievable but painfully inadequate and brief transcendence. Zar's persistence in Southwest Asia, despite its banning under changes in religious regimes, reflects the past's persistence, and the past's insistence on its own inscrutability. As the Iranian modernist writer Ghulām Husayn Sā'idī documented, the zar- or wind-afflicted individual responds to her healer in foreign languages, reflecting the extent to which zar's insistence on the past's inscrutability, bespeaks as well the foreignness and dividedness of experience itself. The wind-afflicted responds as if through another's language, another's voice, though it is merely her own, moved to another register.²⁰

Historians are well aware, the line between past and present is impossible;²¹ it is so because this line resembles the ambulatory striae in the intimacy of experience. Film remembers and reimposes these mobile and multiplying grooves in its own consistent recombination of elements—an impure art, as André Bazin claimed, which activates the sensorium's multiplicity and thereby thematizes, if it does not induce, experience and reflection upon itself. History is the expression of a desire that experience succeed at representing itself; as an expression of this expression, film reproduces this desire for the self-sufficiency, self-sameness and self-evidence of experience. But by reflecting and not merely reproducing, film thereby illuminates the desire as a desire, rather than a fact. Film opens history—as it opens experience—to the internal

²⁰ “He asked [Asha], 'What is your name? Where do you come from?' No answer. He made her dance again, and finally she did produce some noises, which were interpreted by one of the women.” (Virginia Luling, “Some Possession Cults in Southern Somalia,” in Lewis, al-Safi, Hurreiz, 171). See also Soheir A. Morsy's description of a zar ceremony in “Spirit Possession in Egyptian Ethnomedicine: Origins, Comparison and Historical Specificity,” in *ibid.*

²¹ Constantin Fasolt, *The Limits of History* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2004), especially the introduction.

circulation of its own disavowals, holding it accountable to its dissimulations and abuses, and what the epistemological plane of the human present must withhold from commonsense.²²

Chapter Summary

Chapter One: *Sīyāh* as Figure: Farukh Ghafārī's *Night of the Hunchback* and Indian Ocean World Slavery as Frame Story

In chapter one, black *trivia* disguises such dislocations; blackness exposes itself to plain view, even as its insignificance diverts itself as a shield deflects penetration. This equivocal transaction between exposure and diversion expresses itself through an age-old circulation of amusement between black figures and sexualized female bodies. In this chapter I argue that the presence of black figures in Iranian films from the 1960s describes the paradigmatic status of blackness in Southwest Asia— trivial, anecdotal; yet, cosmetic, salvific. Adorning like jewelry, blackness articulates gender positionality through an arcane and intricate embroidery that cannot be subtracted. Two examples illustrate this in “*Sīyāh* as Figure: Farukh Ghafārī’s *Night of the Hunchback* and Indian Ocean World Slavery as Frame Story.” *Sīyāh bāzī*, the centuries-old theatrical practice resembling blackface minstrelsy, appears in the predominant film genre of the 1950s, 60s, and 70s, a genre the critic Amīrhūshang Kāvūsī famously and disparagingly called *filmfārsī*. Little known outside of Iran, and generally disregarded as a genre unworthy of serious film analysis amongst older generations of and contemporary Iranian critics alike,²³ *filmfārsī* contains striking artifacts for viewing blackness as gender’s supplement. In these films and the

²² Glissant opposes the “tale” to “history,” suggesting the former supplants the “paralyzing force of a yearning for history, to save us from the belief that History is the first and most basic dimension of human experience, a belief inherited from the West or imposed by it” (*Caribbean Discourse* 84). From its inception, postcolonial scholarship, absorbing poststructuralist trends of thought, combats the self-evidence of Western historiography.

²³ Jāhid, 67.

long theater tradition they evoke, blackface appears opaquely and unsystematically—as an accoutrement to celebratory events or as the ubiquitous female raqās (dancer)’s accomplice, performing on café stages.

Just as they articulate and eroticize gender positionality black figures’ interactions with their surroundings and profilmic scenery in the works I read (Ghafārī’s *Night of the Hunchback* and *Rivalry in the City*; Samuel Khachākān’s *Midnight Terror*) convey a depth to the nonsensical detail that is dissimulated by its resistance to the scrutiny of attention. Belying their inconclusive insignificance, black figures signify and operate on their surroundings while seeming to blend passively, bereft of meaning into their mise-en-scène. As a practice that dates back at least to the sixteenth century, and present possibly as early as the pre-Islamic period, sīyāh bāzī in Ghafārī’s oeuvre and its prostheses (black memorabilia in the noir-esque *Midnight Terror*) tugs these constellations back through time, accruing significations that resist easy periodization or a straightforward relegation to the modern period that would be expected of film narratives produced in the mid-twentieth century. Likewise, this denial of legible temporal taxonomy ensues from Iranian films’ collusion with an antiquated literary past. Ghafārī’s *Night of the Hunchback*, which derives inspiration from the haphazardly bound Near Eastern textual compilation *Alf Layla wa Layla (One Thousand and One Nights)*, illustrates a cavernous genealogy that blackness bears out, sexually interjected as it is in this ancient text, between Southwest Asian maleness and femaleness.

In recent years, Afsaneh Najmabadi’s studies of sexuality in Iran historicize gender terminology, seeking to denaturalize the self-evidence of gender dimorphism and lucid distinction between hetero- and homo-sexuality in Iranian history. In turning to the way filmfārsī interjects sīyāh bāzī in its romantic melodrama and comedy subgenres, I argue that the

embeddedness of blackness in the Iranian cinematic imagination demands a confrontation with slavery in Iran and the larger Southwest Asian world that would engage gender in relation to histories of slavery and blackness. Such challenges have yet to be taken on by scholars of gender and sexuality in Southwest Asia despite the longevity of circulation between blackness, gender, and sexuality that is documented by the nearly twelve-hundred year old *Alf Layla wa Layla*, which begins with a dramatic transgression on sex between Southwest Asian women and their black slaves.²⁴

Chapter Two: Pneumatics of Blackness: Nāṣir Taqvā’ī’s *Bād-i Jin* and Modernity’s Anthropological Drive

Blackness acts, in the long *durée* and through expansive geographical and psychic scales, on the consolidation of form. In chapter two, I argue that blackness coheres Iranian literary and filmic modernity through creating desultory spatiotemporal disjunctions that activate subject formations legible as modern. Excavating the import of amateur anthropology and experimental ethnography to the formation of the *Mūj-i Nū*, or the Iranian New Wave, I show how Iranian writers and filmmakers’ exposure to populations of African slave descendants in the Southern provinces of Iran, in particular, their exposures to these populations’ involvement with zar, helped to institute one of Iranian modernity’s prized mid-century aesthetic genres: the New Wave film.

In the famous modernist writer Ghulām Husayn Sā’idī’s ethnography of Bandar Lingih, *Ahl-i Havā* (*People of the Wind* 1966) and in the fictional works that ensue, such as his short

²⁴ Ali Asghar Hikmat, a high functionary under the regime of Riza Shah, remarked in a speech on the text in 1929 that the stories in *Alf Layla wa Layla*, or *Hizar u Yak Shab*, were two millennia old, thus transmitting instructive moral lessons from the ancient Near East to contemporary Iranians (Rastegar 269).

story anthologies *Vāhamah'hā'i bī nām va Nishān* (*Unnameable and Invisible Fears* 1967) and *Tars u Larz* (*Fear and Trembling* 1968), one detects a transmutation of atmospheric elements from ethnographic experience to creative writing that articulates what I see as one of historiography's greatest conundrums: the relationship between facticity and abstraction. Shaping a parallel and cognate itinerary, filmmaker Naṣir Taqvā'ī's *Bād-i Jin* (*Wind of Jinn* 1969) and his narrative feature length films released in subsequent years (*Tranquility in the Presence of Others* 1970; *Nifrin* 1973; *Captain Khurshid* 1986) release a slow and evolving abstraction of African slavery history via breathtaking romanticization and dilution of zar into the poetry of experimental film. Sā'idī and Taqvā'ī traveled to Bandar Lingih together. The adaptations and associations cross-articulated by the arcs of their oeuvres conveys an ethical problem that pushes the critique of Western historiography to a new ledge. For, artifacts such as Sā'idī's prized short stories and Taqvā'ī's panoramic *Bad-i Jin* both activate inquiry into the history of African slavery in the Persian Gulf, even as they abstract it through expressions that prefer phantasmagoria over concern for veracity. On the other hand, as Glissant's remonstrance about historical representation artfully shows, facticity's expression overflows fact; what overflows is no less factic than fact; nonhistory is no less historical than history. Thus, any historical representation is necessarily aporetic because bound by the constraints of expression; its ethical evaluation stymied by its own conditions of possibility. Such is the nature of the problem inadequately expressed by and responded to thus far by milestone postcolonial critiques of Western historiography.

Chapter Three: *Arba'in* and Bakhshū's *Nūhah*: Violence and Ambivalence in the Persian Gulf

History arises through traditions of bodily practice in a way that is necessarily distinct from the way it materializes through writing and media of certitude. Chapter three focalizes the

African influences on the Shi'a elegiac ritual commemorating the fortieth day of Ash'ūra—the 7th century murder of Imam Husayn at the Battle of Karbala. In South Iranian provinces like Būshihir Arba'in expresses a distinctly black African character. Ethnographies of the ceremony stress a qualitative difference in affect characterizing regional specificity; in Southern provinces like Bushihr, animation, speed and drumming virtuosity impassion the sobriety expected of such occasions, resonating more obviously with funeral practices from the African continent. Iranian filmmaker Naser Taqvāi's experimental ethnographic documentary *Arba'in* (1970) chronicles the peculiarities of this ritual and its black specificity in Bushihr, reflecting in both its form and content fragile testament to a haphazardly recorded history of African slavery more or less absorbed into oblivion.

Drawing upon historiographical, musicological and ethnographic sources in Persian, and taking into account the various instances of violence encoded in the physiological dimension of Arb'ain as an elegiac form, "Arb'ain and Bakhshū's Nuh" takes Taqvāi's documentary as an occasion to demonstrate the way so-called syncretized religious forms reveal historical information about slavery in nontransparent ways. *Arba'in* realizes a performance that crypts violence, monstrated by the interaction between instrument and physical gesture: sinj-u-damām, a drumming and cymbal set unique to the South of Iran, centralizes rhythm. In combination with the more spatially ubiquitous *sīnah-zani*, or chest-striking, I argue Bushihri Arba'in offers rhythmic self-infliction as relation to history. Taking up this relation as a problem for and of documentation and repurposed expression, *Arba'in* draws attention to the opacity of historical relation when such relation inclines toward the experiential revelation.

The second part of the chapter untangles the thick intelligibility of this activity through a critique of syncretism. The assumption that the majority of Afro-Iranians are East African

descended generates a perplexing loop. An enigmatic story of origins promulgated by East Africans fabricates Persian ancestry for Swahili peoples in coastal Tanzania (Kilwa), modern day Kenya (Mombasa) and Somalia (Mogadishu). Despite a missing confirmation of its historicity, this origins story demonstrates the inadequacy of hyphenation for representing the relation between Africanness and Persianness—a derelict convergence. Blackness poses a challenge to the practice of ethnonym-izing that resituates temporal abstraction as its inevitable but impossible starting point. A running theme of this dissertation, documentary film superimposes temporal and poetic abstraction over one another; chapter four delves into the more “cosmic dimensions” of historical translation and the inscription of experience that such superimposition evinces.

Chapter Four: Simulating the Archive: Incantatory Blackness in Bahrām Bayzāī’s *Bāshū*

The sparseness of the archival record of slavery in the Indian Ocean renders its apprehension ephemeral, in ways iterated by performance traditions whose heightened mediation by film I describe in chapters one, two and three: *sīyah bazi*, which coarticulates gender in *filmfārsī*; *zar*, whose filmic capture probes experimentalism’s ethics; *sīnah-zanī* and *sinj u damām* in *Arb’ān* whose embodiment generates repetition as historical “liveness.” In chapter four I return to *zar* once more, discussing the reorientation of historical perception through *zar*’s very brief evocation in Bahrām Bayzāī’s *Bāshū*, *Gharībih-yi Kūchak* (*Bashu, the Little Stranger* 1986). About a young orphaned boy from the Southern Iranian province of Khūzistān who finds himself lost in the verdant fields of Northern Gilān after Iraqi bombs demolish his village, *Bāshū* has typically been read by critics as an allegory of national fragmentation and reunification. Na’i (Susann Taslimi) discovers swarthy, Arab speaking *Bashū* under shrubs and, while initially abjuring him for his physical and linguistic difference, eventually assimilates him into her

family. In *Bāshū* an abridged display of zar serves to corroborate Bashu's distinctly Southern origins, thus evoking African ancestry and the history of slavery by covert and unspoken extension. But zar plays the double role of a vaporous contagion, uttering a need for healing whose pathogenic source remains obscure because of its multiplied and chaotic contraction.

One of the most famous Iranian films which thematizes racism at a politically laden moment (the Iran-Iraq war), *Bashū* substitutes blackness as a marker of ethnic difference, the age-old antagonistic distinction between Persianness and Arabness, describing the extent to which blackness might be read as an anachronizing medium that absorbs other iterations of historically informed difference. Chapter four examines the way a feature film's cinematic techniques whisper historical meanings of blackness into fictional plot, supplementing the filmmaker's own naïve handling and intentions for representing it with supercinematic effects. Like the invisible zar spirits which appear and abscond from the senses, these effects manifest like faint ancestral call.

Each chapter in this dissertation thus reflects in a cinematically mediated performance the way in which blackness coheres narrative and meaning. But because they are mediations of ancient traditions that lack knowable origins, these films reverberate far beyond their period of production and distribution, like plasmic artifacts whose sedimentation floats rather than settles, irradiating and diffusing into occult dimensions unbound by perceptible form. Cinematic blackness produces virtual relations to the deep past nurtured by Iranian cinema's latent temporal richness. As a mechanism for abstracting temporality, film always already explores and liquifies the boundaries between real, virtual and imaginary. Yet, embedded within and infusing it, blackness intervenes in this dissolution's process, yielding consequence: it reinterprets historicity.

CHAPTER ONE

Sīyāh as Figure: Ghafārī's *Night of the Hunchback* and Indian Ocean World Slavery as Frame Story

A fanged zoomorphic puppet hangs from an invisible ceiling beam in the initial moments of Farukh Ghafārī's *Shab-i Qūzī*, or *Night of the Hunchback*. Various perspectives of the puppet's hunched body alternate with images of a lit paper moon sign, Tamāshu Khānah-i Ghamarī, The Moon Theater.²⁵ A low angle shot of the puppet allows the viewer to gaze into his glassy eyes, which blink repetitively, devilishly at the camera as the figure spins slightly on its axis. He wears a horned helmet and holds a stick capped with the head of horned animal. A leftward pan of the camera reveals the title of the play displayed in Persian, “‘The Demon’s Revenge,’ with the participation of the well-known actor, Asghar Qūzī.” The camera cuts again to the puppet, who blinks twice, before his entire body is revealed: animal torso, hooved feet. A force winds the helmet from Qūzī’s laughing head.

“The Demon’s Revenge,” the play within a film (or, a very brief sequence from a play adapted from a mysterious compilation of textual fragments) inaugurates *Shab-i Qūzī*. The sequence derives from the famous Indo-Perso-Arabic receuil of mythology and folktale, *Alf Laylah wa Laylah*, Arabic for *One Thousand and One Nights*. The detail germinates a promise about *Shab-i Qūzī*’s type of exemplarity for Near Eastern cultural production generally.²⁶ A hysterical woman with rope-bound feet hits her head in refusal to marry the demon. She enjoins

²⁵ A literal translation from contemporary Persian usage would be “Watching House.” But as Bahrām Bayzā’ī points out in *Namāyish Dar Īrān*, an older meaning connotated circumambulation. *Tamāshu* encompassed the entire array of street performances experienced in daily life (*Namāyish* 166).

²⁶ I sometimes use the term Near East (the older referent for what is today more commonly called the Middle East, or the anti-imperialism motivated term, Southwest Asia) to evoke the long durée, and sometimes pre-history, of the region.

Qūzī's threatening laughter with her own demonic wails. The miniscule scene concludes, curtains fall, and Qūzī and the nameless female actress return to the makeup room, where the third and fourth members of their troupe, or *dastah*,²⁷ prepare themselves for a second performance that evening, this time at a house party. One of the actors blackens his face with grease as Qūzī kneels with a thick marker in front of the fourth actor's stomach and begins drawing eyes below the nipples. A close medium shot focalizes this transposition—of stomach to face, a displacement of another scene of crossing, from bare- to black-face. The film credits roll as traditional santouri music plays, and darkness surrounds the belly-painted-face.

In the next shot, the stomach-face wears a dress and large curly black wig and begins dancing to the music. Belly rolls and hips gyrate a crooked mouth; the dysmorphic face moves, its motions cosmetic. A curious metastasis ensues: a traditionally female form of seductive dance—bellydancing—is here performed by a male body, as the locus of recognition disintegrates from stomach to face, human becoming ambiguously animate flesh. This is doubly iterated by the cosmo-psychological symbolism of the belly's perspectival vanishing point, the navel,²⁸ as well as a subtle drift in setting. Moody light engulfs the dancing belly and shadowy domestic details emerge: a vase of flowers, an ewer, a cloth hanging over a mantel, the outline of a jeweled turban. With the brightening light the site of action thus transforms from playhouse to living room. This spatial shift from the public to the domestic carries the navel's symbolism of

²⁷ Groups of ceremonial *mutrib*, or musicians and actors. (*Namayish* 46.) Though the term *mutrib* once referred to all types of musicians, today it is generally a derogatory term applied only to musicians who perform at weddings, parties, and other festive events (Breyley, G.J. and Sasan Fatemi, *Iranian Music and Popular Entertainment from Motrebi to Losanjelesi and Beyond*, Routledge, 2016, 2).

²⁸ Elizabeth Bronfen analogizes the Freudian “navel of the dream” to the vanishing point in perspective—a limit to vision beyond which lines meet in recess. See Bronfen, “Death, The Navel of the Image.” *The Point of Theory: Practices in Visual Culture*. Edited by Mieke Bal and Inge Boer, Bloomsbury, 2002; and Maaïke Bleeker, *Visuality in the Theatre: The Locus of Looking*, Palgrave, 2008, 91.

the *impenetrability of the trivial* and will echo through the subsequent unfolding of actions in relation to the film as a whole, its ancestral source, generic classification, and unveiling a curious relationship between blackness and Southwest Asian sexuality, the archive and gender, between cinema and historicity. In this chapter I take the example of the 1960s Iranian melodrama (filmfārsī) to argue that analyses of Southwest Asian gender and sexuality cannot faithfully be treated without attunement to the imagination of blackness in this region's cultural production; that, as the phrasing insists, this imagination exceeds the assumptions and expectations associated with empiricist and positivist history, demanding a rethinking of how archives appear, to whom they appear, and, as important, resist appearance.

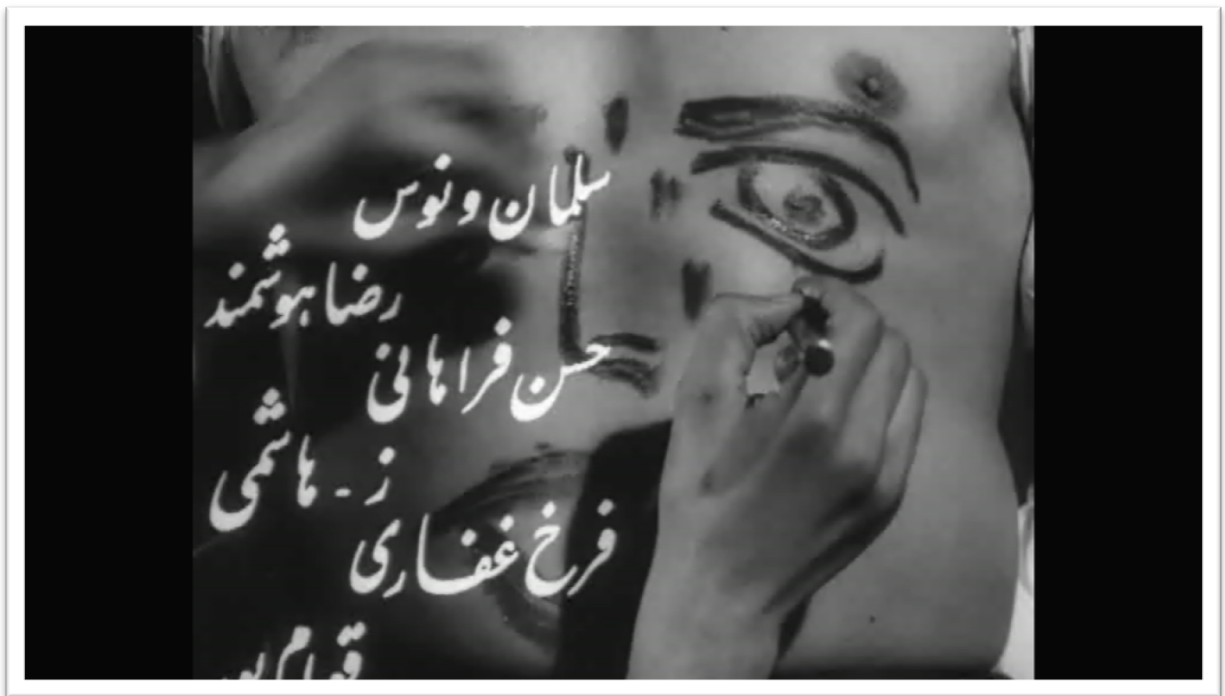


Figure 1. Still from opening credits in Farukh Ghafārī's *Night of the Hunchback* (1964).

“Black Play”

Based loosely on “The Hunchback” cycle in *One Thousand and One Nights*, Ghafārī’s film was released in early February 1964 to critical acclaim and absolute commercial failure.²⁹ As in the *One Thousand and One Nights* version, the film chronicles a night in the drama surrounding a hunchback’s corpse, who is comically killed in the first ten minutes of the film. During their meal in the woods following the *siyah bazi* scene, the female dancer playfully stuffs Qūzī’s mouth with a piece of bread and chicken. (Qūzī’s name means “hunchback” in Persian.) Panicked about being blamed for Quzi’s death, the female dancer and the man who plays the *sīyāh* furtively drop the corpse off in the home of a neighbor hairstylist, played by Ghafari, who happens to be in the midst of his own suspicious activities (we later learn he and his supervisor smuggle illegal substances in and out of the country). Meanwhile, the hostess who had invited the *dastah* to perform for the party learns of Qūzī’s death. After the troupe’s performance, she had slipped Qūzī a piece of paper, called euphemistically in the movie “the list,” and ordered him to deliver it to a mysterious receptor. The ensuing plot details the neighbors’ attempts to rid themselves of Qūzī’s corpse, as—following the course of the *One Thousand and One Nights* version—it is shuffled off from one neighbor to another. The corpse shuffling, Ghafari’s main interest in the story, which he thought poignantly reflected his country’s sociopolitical atmosphere and impressively eluded censors, remained central in his film version.³⁰ The major additions to the film version narrative includes the hostess’s oddly persistent attempts to recover

²⁹ More specifically on the third of the Iranian month Esfand—one of the worst times of year for film releases (Jamāl Umīd. *Tārīkh-i Sīnamā-yi Īrān: 1279–1357*. Intishārāt-i Rawzanah, 1998, pp. 370).

³⁰ Ghafari, Farukh. Interview with Akbar Etemad, Oral History Project, Foundation for Iranian Studies, Paris, 25 November 1983 and 4 July 1984.

the mysterious piece of paper from the corpse's body, and a number of personality substitutions from the original cycle.

In a film so bedazzled by animated ludicrous action, the *sīyāh bāzī* withdraws from plot significance, adding merely comic frivol to the overall narrative—a trifle best captured by what Ebrāhīm Gulistān dismissively calls the nonsense of a dancing belly-face.³¹ If it has any legible fidelity to the original at all, the *sīyāh bāzī* is a perverse and incongruous permutation of the original “Hunchback” cycle, which descends into a narrative spiral of embedded recitations pivoting around the character of a dangerously garrulous Ethiopian barber, whose “soul” in *Alf Laylah* is described as “blacker and yet more horrible than his face” (262). Upon the conclusion of the belly's performance, brightened light shows that the jeweled turban sits atop the head of an *arbāb* (Persian: master), who, reposed on the carpet with a pipe hanging from the corner of his mouth watches the dancing human doll. As the music dies down and clapping subsides a new scene commences. The actor in blackface launches himself awkwardly into the spotlight, throwing his velvet cap in the air. With a barely scrutable accent and screeching voice he asks whether his *arbāb* has enjoyed the music. “No, I didn't like it,” says the master in low pitch. “Then please allow this houseborn slave [*ghulām-i khānahzād*] to entertain you. Musicians, play!” he exaggerates, as the master, still reposed sips his hookah. The “houseborn slave” in blackface pours liquid from the ewer on the mantel into a cup small enough to be a shot glass and places it on his forehead as he shimmies, bending backward low enough so that the master can grab it. Downing the glass, the sultan hits the *sīyāh*'s back with the tip of his hookah. As the *sīyāh* walks away, he throws his shoe at the *sīyāh*'s back, who shrieks.

³¹ In *Nivishtan ba Dūrbān*, filmmaker Ebrahim Golestan calls the scene nonsense.

A dramatic practice with an ambiguous and temporally vast, if mysterious history,³² *sīyāh bāzī*, literally “black play,” figured in a number of Iranian films from the 1950s, 60s, and 70s. While traditionally performed by circumambulating acting troupes throughout both the Iranian countryside and urban centers since at least the sixteenth century, if not since pre-Islamic times, *sīyāh bāzī*, appears to predate the Anglo-American phenomena of blackface minstrelsy, raising surprising questions about the latter’s genealogy and unexamined interpretations of temporal and geographical dissymmetries—for example, the assumption that racial tropes inevitably move from West to East or North to South, or that such movement even operates upon a cognizable plane.³³ In Iran *sīyāh bāzī* was performed as well in aristocratic and public spaces, for weddings and circumcisions, on raised platforms in backyard gardens (*rūhawzī*), and in Tehran theaters and cinemas in the 20th century, encompassing an entire genealogy of “black play” rooted in Persian (but also, Turkish, Arab, possibly Indian and Italian) traditions that overlap religious ritual with *shādī āvar*, or “joy making.” Some sources claim its origins in the Italian tradition of *Commedia dell’Arte*. But *Commedia dell’Arte*’s origins are also, unsurprisingly, unknown. The Italian connection in *commedia dell’arte* is nevertheless telling; it renders inevitable the thought of a complicated relationship between American blackface minstrelsy and *sīyāh bāzī*, particularly since scholars of American blackface *also* assume *Commedia dell’Arte* as a possible starting point for their histories. On the other hand, there is no reason to assume that *Commedia dell’Arte* did not itself derive from Near Eastern traditions. Situating the *Commedia dell’Arte* tradition within its larger Mediterranean context, for example, Jaffe-Berg “challenges the tendency to see

³² William O. Beeman, “Why do they laugh? An Interactional Approach to Humor in Traditional Iranian Improvisatory Theater: Performance and its Effects,” *Journal of American Folklore*, vol. 94, no.374, 1981, pp. 511. (note 9)

³³ Though Bahram Bayzā’ī dates popular theater to the mid-Safavid period, William Floor believes *tamāshu* (comedy) and *taqlīd* (mime) started much earlier in the pre-Islamic era (*History of Theater*, 41).

[it] as a distinctive Italian art form rather than considering the ways in which commedia was itself possibly influenced by performance traditions coming from Asia and the Middle East."³⁴ A starting point without a point then, a non-origin which lies in indecipherable translation, or, as a scholar of Commedia Dell'Arte would have it, in the "sacred origin of *risus* (laughter)."³⁵

Featuring a male character, face blackened with soot or vegetable fat, *sīyāh bāzī* revolves around largely improvised scenarios whose self-deprecating and vulgar humor coalesces insolence toward his *arbāb*, or another person in a superior social position, such as a sultan or court official, even grocer. Veiled by the absurdity of context—which can take the form of imitation (*navār uvurdan*), or pestering (*pakarī*),³⁶ commentators overwhelmingly suggest that the *sīyāh*'s rebellious prowess overshadows his subservience, thus denying or suppressing the deprecatory image of black people that *sīyāh bāzī* inevitably creates.³⁷ The genuineness of such recuperative interpretations about *sīyāh bāzī*'s subversiveness is irrefutable and worthy of consideration. However, such consideration shrinks under the boding impression that through *sīyāh bāzī*, the historical reality of African people's stolen labor is abstracted into comedic relief for the benefit of Iranian audiences, who themselves, while undeniably compatriot victims of

³⁴ *Commedia dell'Arte and the Mediterranean*, 14. See also Kathy Foley, "Commedia Counterparts: Middle Eastern and Asian Connections" in *The Routledge Companion to Commedia dell'Arte*.

³⁵ Antonio Fava, *The Comic Mask in the Comedia Dell'Arte: Actor Training, Improvisation, and the Poetics of Survival*. Northwestern UP, 2007, pp. 5. Cyril W. Beaumont, *History of the Harlequin*: "The pedigree of the Harlequin resembles an ancient tree with long, straggling roots and many branches intertwined" (25).

³⁶ Davūd Fathalī Bīgī, "Barkhī Istlāhāt Takht Howzī." *Dar bārah- 'i ta 'zīyah va ti 'ātr dar Īrān*, Edited by Lālah Taqiyān, Nashr-i Markaz, 1995.

³⁷ Thus, replies documentary filmmaker Maryam Khakipour about her documentary of *sīyāh bāzī* in Iran to an interview question "it's very difficult to explain for the American society, because in Iran, it's the opposite, "The *sīyāh* is the most lovable character in the group...a delegate of truth...one who can speak when others have no voice. So there is no relationship between this theater and the racial prejudice we know in the West" (*The Joy-Makers*, 2014).

various kinds of stolen labor and arbitrary violence, do not suffer identical consequences, but rather, participate in a schematism of marking that “produces” blackness in the region.

The consistent desire to exceptionalize *sīyāh bāzī* as something other than blackface is facilitated by effective recourse to the proposition that race does not exist, or, amounting to the same, does not exist organically in Iranian society. Such defense is inevitably buttressed by the self-proclaimed rigor of scholarship that defends and polices the modernity and geographical specificity of race, eliding the porousness of concepts, their reliance on metaphor and literary language, and thus, deep involutions in history and in the conflicted and opaque senses of what the facility of the term “history” conceals. Such recourse moreover depends upon the more prosaic presumptions about the history of blackface practices in the Western world. As U.S. scholarship in the 1980s and 90s corroborates, American histories of blackface minstrelsy were similarly originally bound up with ambiguous and contrary forces whose pleasure-seeking dynamics promoted the transgression of social power structures, rather than monosemously designed and destined as derogatory acts against black peoples.³⁸ This ambiguity did not nevertheless prevent the degeneration of blackface minstrelsy into one of the most pernicious weapons of antiblack symbolism, especially upon its entry cinematic form, as Cedric Robinson has argued.³⁹

In writings on Persian theater, *sīyāh bāzī*'s insecure historicization reflects the difficulty of cleanly linearizing its development. No commentator claims to know *sīyāh bāzī*'s origins with certainty. Ghafārī wrote on *sīyāh bāzī* in the journal *Iranian Studies* the 1980s, generalizing its

³⁸ For example, Eric Lott, *Love & Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy & The American Working Class*. Oxford UP, 1993.

³⁹ In *Forgeries of Memory and Meaning*, Robinson argues that blackface gained its most "robust" incarnation in early cinema (131).

roots in the courtly performances of jesters in pre-Islamic times, but admitting the same kind of doubt about the truth of its origins characteristic of more traditionally “scholarly” forays into the question: the *sīyāh*’s “date of appearance is unknown.”⁴⁰ Commentators on the practice of *sīyāh bāzī* can only agree upon the unlikelihood of delineating its precise origins, clashing more or less consistently on the question of *sīyāh bāzī*’s relationship to slavery. As an artifact surrounded by a turgid discourse, *sīyāh bāzī* reflects the perils to recognition posed by the unstable archival medium of film, heightened in Iranian filmic production. Like most pre-1979 films, the versions of Ghafārī’s films that remain for viewing today bear the degradations of time and revolution. Celluloid, the film’s material substrate and thus conditions of possibility for archivability, is also its required impermanence, the chemical erosion of its fantasized futurity. Highly susceptible to gradual deterioration— particularly without proper storage techniques—the acetate cellulose base upon which film images were captured for most of cinema history lead to a process of decay commonly known as vinegar syndrome. It is why most of the mid-century Iranian films one is likely to retrieve for viewing today appear washed by a purplish cast. Insouciance and misinformation about the significance of and proper techniques of preservation and storage, as well as the inclement consequences of iron-handed censorship and sabotage, many films from the time period are barely legible. As if to compound the constitutive ambiguity borne from *sīyāh bāzī*’s unverifiable origins, the illegibility introduced by film decomposition poses difficulty for recognizing blackface practices, especially when they are not merely contained as dramatic stage

⁴⁰ Ghafārī, Farukh. “Evolution of Rituals and Theater in Iran.” *Iranian Studies*, vol. 17, no.4, 1984, pp. 372. Despite variations, *sīyāh bāzī* is still most commonly assumed to develop out of *ruhowzi*, which in turn borrowed from *taqlid*—“dialogued buffoonery” (literally, imitations). Ru-howz (over the pool) refers to the wooden platform placed over private backyard pools.

sequences. Facial features recoil from high definition, and from the viewer's gaze, veiled by a thin grainy film of temporal remove.

“So you didn't like it?” the *sīyāh* asks, as he returns the shoe to the master. “Kiss it,” says the master, alluding to his foot. And the *sīyāh* complies. Unscathed, the *sīyāh* gets up: “I'm going to call in a dancer who will make you die of happiness.” The music recommences. The female actress, familiar as the enslaved wife of the demon from “The Demon's Revenge” prances onto the living room floor in traditional attire. Clapping, the *arbāb* expresses his satisfaction and joins the actors in dancing.

In this genre of Iranian film from the mid-twentieth century, the *sīyāh* and female dancer sometimes share a stage. I examine the stakes and modality of such sharing further in turning to Ghafārī's controversial and highly redacted film, *Rivalry in the City* (1964) and drawing references from a film released during the same period, Samuel Khachikian's popular *Faryād Nīm-i Shab* (*The Midnight Terror*, 1961). Because *sīyāh bāzī* is a folk dramatic practice, one considered appropriate to the “uncultivated” tastes of the working-class strata of Iranian society, in its traditional form *sīyāh bāzī* appears in films less frequently than the ubiquitous dancing female body—which is present in all socioeconomically variegated genres of *kāfah* (café) setting. (Although, as Gay Breyley points out, stylized enactments of *sīyāh bāzī* were broadcast often on Iranian television, especially in the 1970s.)⁴¹ Spreading the range of the socioeconomically marked public spaces from the traditional dingy *qahvih-khānah* (“coffee house”) setting in the South of Tehran, to the more sophisticated, Europeanized *kabarah*

⁴¹ Gay Breyley, “Hope, Fear and Dance Dance Dance: Popular Music in 1960s Iran.” *Musicology Australia*, Vol. 32, No. 2, December 2010, pp. 207.

(cabarets) of North Tehran,⁴² the dancer's presence binds a space of male socialization that appears universal and generalizable—much as gender “transcends” race in global social histories because of its effortless naturalness. But as *Night of the Hunchback* and its ancestral source *One Thousand and One Nights*, as well as *Rivalry in the City*, and, I will argue, *Midnight Terror*, all attest, the *sīyah*'s chameleonic presence prompts questions about how to interpret the unnameable form of socialization and gender distinction that blackness coheres, even while it itself remains incoherent.

In *Night of the Hunchback*, the *sīyāh* and dancer share the theatrical stage's substitute in domestic space: the stage of a living room floor. The *sīyāh*, failing to sufficiently regale his master with his shimmies, twirls, and backbends inducts the female dancer—formerly, from the audience perspective, slave—to administer amusement. Proximate, but not quite fungible, this sibylline intimacy between blackness, slavery, and gender aggregates, impelling but overwhelming decryption; or, positing a mire from which none of these familiar terms would be able to emerge individuated. The film's incessant tendency toward absurdism and anachronism (most obviously uttered through the sound track, with santouri music drifting through tracks by Ray Charles) compounds the cinematic medium's peculiar capacities for eliciting synesthesiac effect. As a result, the living room *sīyāh bāzī* scene seems to crystallize the history of a cognitive blending that is indistinguishable from a story of origins; at the same time that it appears to describe them, proximity and mediation in fact verge on absolutely collapsing the conceptual

⁴² Masūd Kīmīār's famous action-packed *Kandū* (1975) thematizes the socioeconomic marking of Iranian coffeehouses. Meftahi dates the bifurcation of *café* spaces along class lines to the 1950s (*Gender and Dance*, 71). For a history of coffeehouse culture in Iran, see Bulūkbāshī, 'Alī. *Qahvahkhānah'hā-yi Īrān*. Tīhrān: Daftar-i Pizhūhishhā-yi Farhangī, 1996.

boundaries of femaleness and blackness—much as sensory pathways lose their clear distinctions in synesthesiac experience.

The image of the masked dancing navel that mediates the relationship between comedic blackface and sexualized but innocent female performance condenses the significance of narrative insignificance. Never formally central to a *sīyāh bāzī* narrative, the *sīyāh* is peripheral and yet strangely pivotal—Bayzā’ī calls him the *mihvar* (axis, pivot), the wellspring of audience entertainment. A *mutrib* or troupe’s status *depends* on its *sīyāh* figure, whose acting reputation determines that of his group’s.⁴³ Yet, rarely cited even within the narrative scripts which feature him,⁴⁴ the *sīyāh*’s discursive invisibility clarifies his performance as one of an echo that resounds comedic relief through his own character insignificance. Indeed his character is unlikely to express self-consciousness about the burden of producing of humor. It operates almost seamlessly through amusing malapropisms derived from the *sīyāh*’s defective Persian, which betrays an alloyed, servile but clear foreignness. Beeman, whose perspective is more critical than commentators calculates that the *sīyāh*’s humor “works” only because the *sīyāh* is socially positioned “lower than any member of the audience witnessing the performance.”⁴⁵

The timeless sartorial minutiae of the brief *sīyāh bāzī* scene in *Night of the Hunchback* arrest the desire for historical reconstitution. The jeweled turban atop the head of the reposed sultan and the female dancer’s traditional costume evoke an aoristic temporality, a past without tense that could equally belong to the 19th century as it could the 16th or 3rd. (In a film from Parviz Sayyad’s famous *Samad* film series, Samad imagines himself in a dream where a

⁴³ Breyley and Fatemi, pp. 11.

⁴⁴ William O. Beeman, “Ruhawzi,” *Encyclopædia Iranica*, online edition, 2017, available at <http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/ruhawzi>.

⁴⁵ “Why Do They Laugh?,” p. 524.

beautiful Persian woman commands her two black slaves, conflating his late 20th century present with a fantasy of Qajar Iran.) Chronological confusion intensifies when the performance ends and the partygoers step forward to applaud the actors. A white veil draped over the female dancer's headdress falls down to her shoulders, over which her two long braids of black hair dangle down to her hips. She wears loose striped pants under her dress, skirt and a long vest. In contrast, the female partygoers wear their hair in puffed up buns, and sleeveless dresses, fashion trends evocative of European and North American sensibilities. The clean-shaven men wear suits. (Facial hair articulates a symbolism of Iranian gender and social history that historian Afsaneh Najmabadi has chronicled with heartening nuance.⁴⁶ I comment on her readings of the history of sexuality in Iran below.) A group of partygoers at a different residence later in the film dance the twist to Les Fantomes and dine to Claude Bolling. *The Hunchback's* display of the middle-class modern's "pop-ness," expressed through fashion and music, betrays an impure temporality that complements the archaic qualities of the *sīyāh bāzī* scene: sultans, gleeful black servants, harem dancers, and *nutribi* musicians that the *sīyāh bāzī* scene orchestrates. That *sīyāh bāzī* easily moves from the formal frame of a theatrical setting—a lower class café stage, to the intimacy of middle-class domestic space shows its appeal transcends socioeconomic class. *Sīyāh bāzī* operates, therefore, on an order of reality which is not purely locateable, dateable or readable, and which exceeds internalized orientalism.

Dancing female figures, particularly framed by cabaret-like café settings, featured in even early 20th century Iranian films, such as Abdulhosein Sepanta and Ardeshir Irani's *Dukhtar-i Lur*, *The Lor Girl* (1932) the first Iranian sound film, in which Golnar (Ruhangiz Saminezhad),

⁴⁶ Najmabadi, Afsaneh. *Women with Mustaches and Men Without Beards: Gender and Sexual Anxieties of Iranian Modernity*. University of California Press, 2005.

the narrative's love interest, worked as a dancer and singer at a café way-station for caravans after being kidnapped by a group of bandits. Though present early, the cabaret trope gathered striking force in the 1950s, coextending the international popularity of American Jazz.⁴⁷ Dance segments intended for intradiegetic spectators appeared in films of this period, sometimes inflected by Hollywood interpretations of, and thus orientalist renditions of Eastern dance, while the café setting formed a cathected site of dissolution and debauchery, important motifs in filmfarsi. Harkening back to cinema's roots in vaudeville, burlesque and minstrelsy, the omnipresent cabaret trope bore Iranian cinema's ongoing relation to the camera's infancy as a stationary machine awaiting "interesting movement."⁴⁸ The juxtaposition of racialized gesticulation in *sīyāh bāzī* and sexualized female dance in *Shab-i Qūzī*'s living room scene sounds a resonance that echoes beyond the short sequence, even beyond the film as a whole. When thought together with the domesticity of the *mise-en-scène* and the intimate understanding of the *sīyāh* figure Iranian culture claims, this four-minute sequence from a tepidly appreciated film rearticulates an understanding of the archive that scours its originary sense. By highlighting the opacity of violence that characterizes its domestic primal scene, *sīyāh bāzī* in Iranian film acts as a conduit for the reimagination of the archive—one built upon phantasms and perverse forms of stimulation and relief whose ambiguous relation to the history of slavery in the Indian Ocean has yet to be thought.

⁴⁷ For an iteration of Iranian society's relationship to American jazz in the 20th century, see G.J. Breyley, "From the 'Sultan' to the *Persian Side*: Jazz in Iran and Iranian Jazz since the 1920s." *Jazz and Totalitarianism*, Edited by Bruce Johnson. Routledge, 2017.

⁴⁸ Alice Maurice, "The Essence of Motion: Figure, Frame, and the Racial Body in Early Silent Cinema." *The Moving Image: The Journal of the Association of Moving Image Archivists*, vol. 1, no. 2 (2001), pp. 131.

In its originary meaning, the archive presents a peculiarity: bound to the scene of the domestic, as well as to patriarchy and elitism. In *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*, Jacques Derrida points out that the contemporary meaning of “archive” derives from the Greek *arkheion*, “initially a house, a domicile, an address, the residence of the superior magistrates, the *archons*, those who commanded.”⁴⁹ Extending this line of thought, writes Domietta Torlasco, “the archive is a patriarchive.”⁵⁰ In the ancient Persian empire as in the contemporaneous Greek world Derrida references, administrative records were originally housed in palatial dwellings.⁵¹ In the early 20th century when archeologists first uncovered in the ruins of Persepolis Palace the clay tablets documenting treasury records of the Pars region, they were confounded by the “absurd” presence of tableware and furniture in the same room as administrative documents.⁵² In relation to the rest of the Near East, the quantity of archival remains of the Persian Empire is minute in part due to the Persians’ choice of substrate. Subject to perish, the papyri and leather which were the preferred materials for Persian record-keeping exemplify a tendency toward decomposition and disappearance that is paradigmatic of the archive itself.

This connection between the concept of the archive and the domestic exceeds mere schematism, introducing a fissure in the scene of domesticity that is, while not exclusively gendered, irreducibly bound to a history of gender. For if the ancient history of the archive

⁴⁹ Derrida, pp.2

⁵⁰ Domietta Torlasco, *The Heretical Archive: Digital Memory at the End of Film*. U of Minnesota P, 2013, pp. 2.

⁵¹ Maria Brosius explains that in the Greek world the term archives usually referred to “public buildings controlled by the state” (9). Yet she argues that the distinction between public and private records was equally unclear in the Near East as it was in the Greek context. Brosius, “Ancient Archives and Concepts of Record-Keeping,” in Brosius; also, in the same anthology, Alan Millard, “Assyrian and Achaemenid Documents in Aramaic,” pp. 236.

⁵² Eric Posner, “Persia, Alexander the Great, and the Seleucid Empire.” *Archives of the Ancient World*. Harvard UP, 1972, pp. 122.

impresses upon us a world of patriarchal states recording and meticulously organizing edicts, legal treatises, contracts, and financial receipts, all of which remained interpretable by an elite minority, and which today make available to the uniquely qualified and highly specialized historian or archaeologist the prospect of reconstituting a five millenia old Near Eastern human civilization, it is also the case that the history of the archive is also a history of what has long faded from the substrate, the substrate's decomposition, its non-durability, as well as, less obviously but no less relevant, what cannot be represented or appear in the document; further, that which is recorded or impressed otherwise than on the registers of sensibility. If not sensible, on what order of temporality might such impressions live or survive? Inside which period can they be said to be contained? Film, mimicking the mythological temporality of dreams, which are outside of time, seems to simulate a kind of response.

In Ghafārī's *Rivalry in the City* (1964), the natural decomposition of acetate which colors the majority of Iranian films before the revolution is compounded by a censorship-motivated sense of chaos and incoherence. On the fifth day of its initial release in early November 1958, the original version of the film, *South of the City* was suspended and Ghafārī warned by the Prime Minister not to sleep in his bed.⁵³ The government had taken offense to Ghafārī's meticulously researched portrayals of poverty in the dilapidated South End—the first filmfārsī physically filmed in the streets there.⁵⁴ Having learned of recent Soviet attempts to stimulate pro-Communist sentiment through funding of political projects, they feared the film's participation in the arousal of class consciousness. When the negatives of the film were returned to Ghafārī three

⁵³ Naficy mentions that the film was already censored upon order after Ghafārī presented it to the Ministry of Arts and Culture for an exhibition permit, in addition to its banning a few days later (Naficy, 188).

⁵⁴ Ghafari, Oral History Project, Tape 2.

years later, many of the scenes had been mutilated, torn apart and then pasted together randomly.⁵⁵ The release of re-edited and renamed version in 1964 included new scenes filmed by Amir Qasim Shahr, dancing and singing, and a positively-inflected ending, traits which prompted Ghafārī to refuse designation as the film’s director.⁵⁶ Unlike *South of the City*, audiences shunned *Rivalry in the City*, having witnessed its revolutionary ethos degenerate.

Even before its 1964 failed re-release however, prominent critics like Kāvūsī had disparaged the original version of the film, accusing Ghafari of narrative inconsistency and of lacking a cinematic eye: “the film is an expression of a number of fragmentary scenes and it is normal that only the special glue of the cinematic binds them together. It is not a cinematic vision,” wrote Kavusi in the film journal, *Firdūsi* in 1958, after which he was anonymously attacked in the publication *Omid Iran*, Kavusi believed, by Ghafārī himself.⁵⁷ No doubt the insertion of cabaret scenes heightened the already incoherent nature of filmfarsi narrative, rooted in its artisanal mode of production.

Though a much debated feature of film, the cinematic cut has rarely been thought through and with the figure of the archive. Patently sensible by definition, the archive consists of the content of inscription and its substrate, while the cut exemplifies a kind of crack or fissure. The cut poses a question about the limits of the sensible as it regards the nature of memory and the nature of reality. It is in this sense which the repeated cuts of the navel in Ghafārī’s film allude to the possibility of a form of perceiving or registration that cannot be confined by the notions of perception, nor of inscription. The navel is a scene of natality, the invasion of the stranger, a site

⁵⁵Gulistān, Shāhrukh. *Fānūs-i Khīyāl: Sarguzasht-i Sīnimā-Yi Īrān Az Āghāz Tā Pīrūzī-I Inqilāb-I Islāmī, Bih Ravāyat-i Bī. Bī. Sī*. Tīhrān: Intishārāt-i Kavīr, 1995, pp. 107.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*; Umīd, 310.

⁵⁷ Umīd, 308.

of danger and unease, but also of renewal, radical transformation and the unforeseen—the openness of history.

Original Slave, Woman

Qūzī enslaves Sheherzade on a theater stage, before the actress playing her appears as a private dancer in a parlor. The contiguity to the sīyāh bāzī moment conveys an almost mythological relationship between slavery and the female body that is sharpened by the scene’s connection to *One Thousand and One Nights*. The extended predication unfolds upon a phantasmic plane whose (non)spatiality the film medium and its editing capacities etherealize and diffuse. The consistent shift between frame and stage that contiguity and citation prolong ruptures any absolute determinacy between the representable and the unrepresentable, while preserving its promise. Such ongoing shift injects doubt into the separation of realms of meaning.

In the way that its thematics foot its form, *Shab i Quzi* reflects the entropic texture of its fraught ur-text, that "monument of untidiness."⁵⁸ *One Thousand and One Nights*’ intractable history continues to haunt scholars with its elusoriness. Famously, its unknown origins begin in translation—probably from Persian to Arabic sometime in the ninth century, before being reanimated by the French antiquarian Antoine Galland. Galland first translated the text in the early 17th century after his chance encounter with a three-volume manuscript dated from the mid-15th century. In 1959, Nabia Abbott discovered a papyrus folio that appeared to be the title page of *One Thousand and One Nights*, dated from the ninth century, thus making it the earliest known fragment of the text.⁵⁹ Nor do scholars hold consensus about the borders of the text,

⁵⁸ Gerhardt, p. 46.

⁵⁹ Nabia Abbott, "A Ninth-Century Fragment of the "Thousand Nights" New Light on the Early History of the Arabian Nights." *Journal of Near Eastern Studies*, Vol. 8, No. 3, 1949, pp. 129-164.

competing editions based on manuscripts discovered after Galland's alleging the forgery of stories included in rival publications. Ongoing debate impedes accord over original authorship.⁶⁰ Galland, who literalized in his mind a title that some scholars insist was figurative in nature, endeavored to complete his compilation by speaking to native Arab informants whom he hoped would help fill in the many holes in his incomplete manuscript. Paula Horta, who analyzes the biography of some of these informants, suggests the fabrication of many of these oral relays on a counterintuitive basis and reversal: if some scholars have assumed that translation from Arabic to European languages enabled orientalist inflections and projections, Horta argues some of *One Thousand and Ones* in fact reflects Arab experiences of the exoticism of Europe.⁶¹

“The Hunchback,” in particular, is one of *Arabian Nights*' more labyrinthine stories, receiving attention from narrative theorists for its formal sophistication.⁶² *Shab-i Qūzī* echoes many of the details plotted in the story from *Arabian Nights*, while displacing the figure of the slave. In the textual version, a tailor and his wife invite a hunchback over for dinner; the tailor's wife accidentally kills him when she stuffs a piece of fish in the hunchback's mouth. In Ghafārī's film, the female dancer accidentally chokes Qūzī when she playfully stuffs his mouth with a bite from the food they've received from the host. As in the story, the two actors panic and wrap the corpse in a blanket, pretending it is their sick child, and drop it off at a neighbor's home. In the story version, a black female slave opens the door for them; in the film, a barber replaces the slave, recalling another series of stories embedded within the same story cycle: “The Barber”

⁶⁰ See for example Muhsin Mahdi, *The Thousand and One Nights*, Brill, 1995.

⁶¹ Horta points out that although scholars have assumed the elaborate descriptions of the palace in 'Aladdin' reflected Galland's Orientalist projection of his experiences in Istanbul, the actual textual descriptions more closely resembles the Versailles palace, which Hanna Diyab, Galland's Syrian informant writes about with similar marvel in his memoir (Horta, 51.)

⁶² For example, Gérard Genette, *Narrative Discourse*, Cornell UP, 1980; Tzvetan Todorov, *The Poetics of Prose*, Cornell UP, 1977.

subcycle. In the film, the barber is played by Ghafārī himself. (Incidentally, Ghafārī used to write anonymous film critiques for a Tudeh communist newspaper, signing with the alias M. Mubarak, and later, Ghulam Siah—"Black Slave".)

One Thousand and One Nights' near pulp status weakens the text's call to produce new readings, even though an immense body of scholarship continues to engulf it. So absolutely voluminous and brimming with contestation is the compilation's content, it is easy to forget that at its core, *One Thousand and One Nights'* is founded upon a taboo on "interracial"⁶³ sex. The text's frame story—"one of the most powerful narratives in world literature"⁶⁴ and its one unchanging feature as well as the basis upon which it is popularly recognized—involves the unforgivable transgression of female adultery translated from Persian into Arabic in the eighth century: Southwest Asian women making love with their black male slaves.⁶⁵

The aspect of the frame story most often recalled is Shahrazad's inexhaustible storytelling ability. Lost from this abridged popular memory is the narrative context surrounding her marital entrapment in King Shahriyar's grip. Prior their marriage, Shahriyar, the King of India and China, and his brother had respectively witnessed their wives sleeping with their black slaves and thereafter lost all faith in female fidelity and goodness. After having watched his wife from over a fence making love to Mas'ud, her black slave, in a garden orgy with twenty other male and female slaves, Shahriyar had vowed to kill every virgin in his kingdom. When the

⁶³ It is difficult, despite its obvious hazards, to find an adjective other than this one to describe the intercourse between Persian/Arabic women and black men. The slash reflects that the women in the story are both fictional and representative of both Arab and Persian cultures.

⁶⁴ Malti-Douglas, Fedwa. *Woman's Body, Woman's Word: Gender and Discourse in Arabo-Islamic Writing*. Princeton UP, 1991, pp. 11.

⁶⁵ Pier Paolo Pasolini's 1974 version, *Il fiore delle mille e una notte*, vividly captures the erotic nature of the tales.

vizier in charge of presenting Shahriyar with his victims had run out of virgins, he consented, by her own request, to allow his daughter Shahrazad to marry Shahriyar.

Here the inscription of proximity between blackness and the female body is unambiguously sexual; and yet, another layer of relation threatens to transform this proximity into identity—a threat already announced in the positioning of blackness so close to the socially-maligned figure of the Middle Eastern female dancer, held, according to Rudi Matthee and others in ill-repute since at least the advent of Islam.⁶⁶ Michael Lundell points out, in the earliest versions of the *Nights*, the Arabic term with which Shahrazad is referred to is *jārīyā*, one of whose meanings is "singing slave girl."⁶⁷ The figure of the *jārīyā*, or *qīyan*—a more specific stratum of courtesan slaves proper to Abbasid society—captures two significant points about the social and historical milieu within which *1001 Nights* began to unfurl that again echo beyond historical context. First, that slavery flourished during the eighth century Abbasid Caliphate when *One Thousand and One Nights* was translated from Persian to Arabic,⁶⁸ an often underestimated detail; second, the figures of the *jārīyā* and *qīyan* portrays a particular “gendering” of slavery that is intricately bound up with the dubious temporality of slavery’s

⁶⁶ Matthee, "Prostitutes, Courtesans, and Dancing Girls" in Matthee and Baron, p. 139. In Iran dancers and musicians were always considered to occupy the bottom rungs of society, according to Floor (*Theater in Iran* 38); Chehabi makes a similar argument about the low esteem of female singers throughout Iranian history ("Voices Unveiled: Women Singers in Iran," in Matthee and Baron, pp. 153-5). On the marginalization of female dancers in Egyptian society, see Karin van Nieuwkerk, *A Trade Like Any Other: Female Singers and Dancers in Egypt*. U of Texas P, 1995; Kathleen W. Fraser, *Before They Were Belly Dancers: European Accounts of Female Entertainers in Egypt, 1760-1870*. McFarland, 2015.

⁶⁷ Michael James Lundell, *Bound Infinities: Scheherazade's Moral Matrix of The 1001 Nights*. Dissertation, University of California, San Diego, 2012. In his *Muruj al-dhahab* (Meadows of Gold) the 10th century historian ‘Masudi noted that among the Greek, Persian and Indian translations made in Baghdad, there was one in particular (Translations of *1001 Nights* into English and French have for the most part elided this connotation, translating *jārīyā* as "girl" or "maiden," for example in the Haddaway and Macdonalt translations (though Dodge and Meynard translate *jārīyā* as "concubine" and "esclave," retaining its initial meaning. (Lundell, pp. 34-5.)

⁶⁸ For a work on slavery in *One Thousand and One Nights* see Bin, Ḥasan -M. *Al-‘abīd Wa-Al-Jawārī Fī Hikāyāt Alf Laylah Wa-Laylah*. Tūnis: Sirās lil-Nashr, 1994.

“blackening,” a relation that filmfarsi reawakens with its enigmatic presentations of physical proximity between sīyah bāzi and female hypersexualization.

Departing from the Engels-inspired historical argument that bourgeois patrimonial ideology fueled the domestication of female bodies, in *The Creation of Patriarchy*, historian Gerda Lerner famously moves back further in time, arguing that the longheld, and still indissociable equation between female honor and chastity developed millenia ago in ancient Near Eastern civilization from the practice of sexual exploitation that was intrinsic to slavery—“the first institutionalized form of hierarchical dominance in human history,”⁶⁹ which, argues Lerner, affected female bodies first. Archeological evidence shows that early human civilization unambiguously preferred female to male slaves, which Lerner interprets as reflective of female vulnerability to the psychological attachments that would ensue from rape—a violence more easily wielded against women than men, who, in any case, would never bear the binding emotional consequences of pregnancy with the captor’s young.⁷⁰

Historians of sexuality in Islamicate worlds note the impact of slavery, in particular the institution of concubinage, on the psycho-symbolic status of Muslim women, sometimes with astonishing conclusions. It is likely, for some scholars, that mandatory veiling may have grown out of the increasing prevalence of slave women during the Abbasid period, who themselves were forbidden to veil.⁷¹ Abdelwahab Bouhdiba takes this line of thinking to an extreme, naming the concubine the “anti-wife” who introduces a fissure in the male image of Muslim woman, usurping the domain of sexuality and frivolity, and dooming the Muslim wife to seriousness and

⁶⁹ Lerner, 76.

⁷⁰ Lerner: “For women, sexual exploitation marked the very definition of enslavement, as it did *not* for men” (*Invention of Patriarchy* 89).

⁷¹ Fuad Matthew Caswell, *The Slave Girls of Baghdad: The Qiyān in the Early Abbasid Era*. I.B. Tauris, 2011, pp.7.

prudishness.⁷² Pernilla Myrne rightly finds the texture of such feminist discourses disconcerting, connecting it to an old theme in Arabic literature that disparages the qayna.⁷³ This disparagement is in turn connected to a wider discourse emerging during the Arabic Renaissance regarding the uncomfortable nature of sexuality in the premodern Arab world, especially as it was treated in Orientalist scholarship,⁷⁴ as it is connected, on the other hand, to the pervasive “wiles of women” trope in Arabic and Persian literature.⁷⁵

Unsurprisingly, discourses dictating treatment of slaves and women were organically connected in medieval Muslim texts, thus complicating, in the Islamicate context, the criticism of recourse to tropes of slavery in women’s liberation discourses.⁷⁶ It is difficult to define, especially with limited, and simultaneously brimful historiographical information, the contours of the analogy.⁷⁷ The distinction between sexual availability and inaccessibility articulated by the ancient originary enslavement of women mapped onto a social topology of debasement and honor whose legacy continues to define the social value of the female. Is there, then, a deeply sedimented connection between the theater scene where the female dancer is enslaved by Qūzī,

⁷² Abdelwahab Bouhdiba, *Sexuality in Islam*. Saqi, 2004. Translated by Alan Sheridan, pp. 104-8.

⁷³ Qayna is plural for qiyān. Pernilla Myrne, “A Jariya’s Prospects in Abbasid Baghdad.” *Concubines and Courtesans: Women and Slavery in Islamic History*, edited by Mathew S. Gordon and Kathryn A. Hain. Oxford UP, 2016.

⁷⁴ Joseph A. Massad, *Desiring Arabs*. U of Chicago P, 2007.

⁷⁵ In *Woman’s Body* Malti-Douglas painstakingly documents the centrality of *kayd al-nisa’* (women’s trickery) to the conceptualization of female sexuality from its presence in the Qu’ran through the entire scriptural body of Arab medieval literature. Is this a timeless misogyny of the great monotheisms, and if so, why does blackness seem so central to it? (A question Malti-Douglas does not pursue.) As bell hooks notes, the brutal treatment of black women under chattel slavery was a direct consequence of fundamentalist Christian teachings that portrayed women as evil sexual temptresses. The rape of black female slaves condensed hatred of women with hatred of blackness. bell hooks, “Sexism and the Black Female Slave Experience,” pp. 29

⁷⁶ Sabine Broeck, “Re-reading de Beauvoir After Race: Woman-as-Slave Revisited,” *International Journal of Francophone Studies*, vol. 14, no. 2.

⁷⁷ Though even as late as the Sasanian period, like acquisitions of slaves, any gifts earned by women or children would belong to the “master” of the house (Azād, 98).

and the same actress's dancing in a living room subsequently? Does her femaleness, so provocatively articulated through her gyrating limbs, index a kind of being-slave approximate to her companion, ghulam khanah-zad? Are her femaleness and his blackness analogically pronounced by what intervenes between them?

The navel, erogenous, connected to human origins and reproduction— and thus, the transhistorical control of female bodies— articulates an archaic connection between female enslavement and female debasement through the filmic technique of the cut. A seemingly unideal figure for historical sedimentation, the cut conjures lapse, rather than a presence, but a lapse that nevertheless carries the burden of not being able to show something expected in its place; a disappointed chronology. The rearrangement of symbols that the cut and its corollary, montage, make possible heightens the potency of conflict that exists always already within a filmic shot, between an object and its spatial and temporal nature.⁷⁸

⁷⁸ Botz-Bornstein understands Sergei Eisenstein's formalism to insist upon this particular formulation of conflict internal to the shot. Thorsten Botz-Bornstein. *Films and Dreams: Tarkovsky, Bergman, Sokurov, Kubrick, and Wong Kar-wai*. Lexington, 2007, pp. 2.



Figure 2. The dancing belly in Farukh Ghāfārī’s *Night of the Hunchback* (1964) intervenes between Shahrazad’s enslavement and ghulām-i khanahzād’s performance as the sīyāh.

Through the status of a most socially degraded labor, the dancing figure—comically overrepresentative of women in filmfārsī—seems to broach, apocryphally, the historical relationship between woman and slavery.⁷⁹ Qūzī enslaves Shahrazad on a theater stage, before the actress playing her appears as a private dancer in a parlor, introduced and accompanied by the sīyāh, or ghulām-i khānahzād, the “houseborn slave.” The cinematic cut draws the analogy (woman and slavery) with blackness, that is, with the presence of a blackened servile body, the figure of the sīyāh. This cinematic thought pattern depends upon a series of absorptions: the absorption of hierarchical distinctions specific to the institutions of Indian Ocean world slavery by the concept of “slavery”; and then, the *absorption of this absorption* by a hyperbolically

blackened body. The iconic image above all promotes a certain stereotype, and this is the irrefutable and overarching function of the *sīyāh* figure.

In *Shab i Qūzī* the female actress dances a style reminiscent of *raqs- i sharqī*, or Eastern dance, which featured in historical films of the 1950s;⁸⁰ her performance, embedded as it is in a *sīyāh bāzī* sequence, is not quite representative of the cabaret genre of female representation so ubiquitous in films of the era. In an interview, Ghafārī claims there is “absolutely” no dancing and singing in the film, which signifies that the female dancer’s movements unfold upon an order that diverges from the ostentatiousness of the *filmfarsi* genre.⁸¹ A more typical example of the dancing female figure features in *Rivalry in the City*, Farukh Ghafārī’s re-release of his more successful film from 1959 (*Jūnūb-i Shahr*, or, *South of the City*), a film that displays a differently vexing kind of proximity between *sīyāh bāzī* and female degeneracy. Mimicking a schematism of declivous female biography popular in *filmfarsi* narratives, in *Rivalry the City*, a young widower (Fakhrī Khurvash) takes the lowly position of a café waitress in the economically trodden area of South Tehran after her husband dies. She catches the eye of two men who frequent the café: Asghar, a thuggish mafia head, and Farhad, an aspiring *lūtī*. The film passes in large part in café setting, which Ghafārī and his co-writer Jalāl Muqadam had developed intimate quasi-anthropological knowledge of after spending three months immersed in the cultural milieu of South Tehran, to the point of befriending local gang leaders who would guard their filmcrew during shootings (and would later turn out to be threats once the film was released; they were

⁸⁰Meftahi, 102.

⁸¹ Ghafari, Farukh. Interview with Akbar Etemad, Oral History Project, Foundation for Iranian Studies, Paris, 25 November 1983 and 4 July 1984.

unhappy with their “soft” representations, implying a misplacement in Ghafārī’s attempt at an avante-gardeist revision of the lumpenproletariat stereotype).⁸²

Shifting gazes between male rivals huddled and drinking at round tables and camera focalizations of the stage performer’s body parts as she dances in various styles set the stage for the *sīyāh bāzī* scene, which, while narratively sealed off from the female performances that precede and follow the spectacle, occupies the same physical space. In the moments just before the *sīyāh bāzī* begins, the café manager tells a displeased Efat that Asghar would like to meet her outside the café later that night. Efat’s anxious frown cuts to a plump cartoon figure on the wall, marking the transition to the stage, where two noblemen sit at a table with their guard, the mutrib playing behind them. One man leans over to the other and says, “Sir, this is the slave I was telling you about, recently arrived from Basra.”⁸³ The *sīyāh* wears a knee-length white robe over clashing garments: his shirt an array of circular animal-like prints and loose pants blocked patchwork of irregular cloth sizes, evoking the dress of the *zanni* or harlequin, or its mythical prototype, an African slave.⁸⁴ When asked his name, the *sīyāh* causes an uproar with his reply: “My name is Leila.” One of the noblemen complains, “Leila is not a man’s name.” “Well, sir,

⁸² Ibid. For an iteration of what this subgenre of film often tries to accomplish see Nicole Brenez, *Traitement du Lumpenproletariat Par le Cinéma D’Avant-Garde*. Séguier, 2007.

⁸³ Like Bushihr a southwest Iranian province, Basra in modern day Iraq was one of the most important gateways for the slave route from East Africa through the Persian Gulf to Iran’s interior. It was a major commercial hub, especially in the 16th and 17th centuries. Rudi Matthee, “Boom and Bust: The Port of Basra in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries,” in Potter, 105.

⁸⁴ In *Commedia dell’Arte*, the *zanni* wears gaudy tricolored clothing, which, the French writer Jean Pierre Florian attributed to story of an African orphan who was clothed by the three sons of a cloth merchant. (Henry Louis Gates Jr., *Figures in Black*, pp. 51). Gates, using such 18th century sources that model the harlequin’s origin on the African slave figure, recognizes the inconclusive import of the connection: “These are all, of course, myths of origins. Nevertheless, the visual evidence does suggest at least the myth of an African connection with the origins of Harlequin’s mask, in terms of both its features and its color.” (51).

I'm not a man. They named me Leila," he replies lightheartedly, with the same piercing effeminate voice typical of the *sīyāh* character. "What is your father's name?" "My father's name is Zahra," the *sīyāh* replies. "Zahra? But Zahra is a woman's name." The *sīyāh* circumvents the confusion by suggesting a dance. He twirls languidly, then more briskly, lifting up his long coat to reveal his hyperbolically swollen bottom.

Scholars of blackface note the sexually subversive role that the imagination and caricature of blackness plays—a break from the prosaic boredom of the heterosexual romantic drama. Black masculinity is a riven configuration—marked by phallic “intensification and diminishment”; “hypersexuality and emasculation.”⁸⁵ This is perhaps particularly so due to the largely domestic function of slavery in the Indian Ocean World throughout history, a facet which, I argue throughout this dissertation, has rendered this history of slavery more or less imperceptible in theories of race that interact with histories of African slavery. The eunichic figure of the *sīyāh*, whose name is Leila, whose father's name is Zahra, and who is, as he himself proclaims, neither man nor woman, surfaces this lost history through the confusion and unintelligibility his opaquely gendered presence and name. “They named me Leila,” he says, evoking the violence of interrupted ipseity general to slave status, but insisting on the gendered quality of that interruption.⁸⁶

Afsaneh Najmabadi's groundbreaking readings of the history of sexuality in Iran point out that difference figures along the actional, resisting gender dimorphism.⁸⁷ Leila's liminality is

⁸⁵ Susan Gubar, “Psychopathologies of Black Envy: Queer Colors.” *Racechanges: White Skin, Black Face in American Culture*. Oxford, 2000, pp. 170.

⁸⁶ Writing in the Atlantic context, Hortense J. Spillers famously puts forth a compelling argument for the undoing of gender in the transition from African body to black slave symbolized by the Middle Passage.

⁸⁷ Afsaneh Najmabadi, *Women With Mustaches, Men Without Beards*.

difficult to locate from the mire of ambiguous sexualities that Najmabadi liberates from the stranglehold of binarism. Her otherwise astute observations generally diminish the complexity of the entire institution of slavery that plays a profound historical role in marriage and sex in the Islamic world, as Leila Ahmed and Kecia Ali, among more overtly ideological scholars like Bouhdiba and Fatima Mernissi, have documented.⁸⁸ Thus, in an article on the ambiguity of sexual classification in Iran Najmabadi introduces her investigation with the famous anecdote about a slave girl who was shown to the 9th century caliph, al-Mutawakkil. Upon seeing her he asked, “So are you a virgin, or what?” To which the slave girl replied, “Or what, O Emir of the believers.” Najmabadi takes the quip “or what” as an entry point into a discussion about the indeterminate status of sexuality in the Iranian world with respect to the overdetermining tendency to describe sexual acts through naturalized gender terminology, but ignores the question of the girl’s slave status.⁸⁹

Leila is recognizable to his interlocuters and his audience as a male, which is why his name provokes laughter. Thus, more so than the female slave, the *jārīyā* or *qīyān* that his companion the cabaret dancer evokes, it is perhaps the historico-mythological figure of the eunuch that approximates his role. Dwelling literally in the architectural domain between female and male space, between the private and public, eunuchs consolidated gender binarism and hierarchy by embodying its traumatic remainder, a “third”⁹⁰ or impossible gender marked by

⁸⁸ See for example, Kecia Ali. *Sexual Ethics and Islam: Feminist Reflections on Qur'an, Hadith, and Jurisprudence*. Oneworld, 2013; Ahmed, *Women and Gender in Islam*, pp. 67, 79–101

⁸⁹ Afsaneh Najmabadi, "Types, Acts, or What? Regulation of Sexuality in Nineteenth Century Iran." *Islamicate Sexualities: Translations Across Temporal Geographies of Desire*. Edited by Kathryn Babayan and Afsaneh Najmabadi. Harvard UP, 2008. In her discussion of the black servant figure Mehrangiz in Simin Daneshvar’s “Shahri Chon Behesht,” Amy Motlagh picks up on Najmabadi’s oversight as well, p. 151.

⁹⁰ Kathryn M. Ringrose, *The Perfect Servant: Eunuchs and the Social Construction of Gender in Byzantium*, U of Chicago P,

cultural vestibularity throughout Islamic history.⁹¹ They derived their roots in a sacred past whose source is therefore impossible to uncover because bound to secret archaic rituals.⁹² Excluded from the tellural domain of human maturation and procreation, and therefore, outside of time and history, this strange category of person which the *sīyāh* Leila evokes, incarnates gender difference while being alienated from it, modeled on the angel but historically maligned. On the one hand, one of the eunuch's historical purposes was to ensure female chastity by acting as the harem guard, therefore strengthening the oppressive equivalency between female chastity and female value of which he was forced to be a part. On the other hand, castrated so that he might develop no kin investments and therefore remain loyal to his master, the eunuch figured the converse historical relation between woman and enslavement. If woman is theoretically enslaveable because her body is capable of reproduction, thus attachment, the eunuch is enslaveable because his body is incapable of reproduction, thus non-attachment. The figure of the eunuch entifies the feminization of the slave that is colored by the archaic association between women, reproduction and slavery. Uprooted from his lifeworld, genitally mutilated and unable to build new kinship ties, the eunuch was the ideal servant—one reason eunuchs were largely employed in positions close to power in the Byzantine empire,⁹³ and in a later period, sacralized and chosen to guard the Prophet's tomb in mid-twelfth century Medina.⁹⁴

⁹¹ Shaun Marmon, *Eunuchs and Sacred Boundaries in Islamic Society*, Oxford UP, 1995, pp. 6, 8. "Vestibularity" is a term Spillers invokes as well. Marmon points out that eunuchs literally inhabited and were associated with vestibular spaces in a variety of Islamic architectural settings.

⁹² Piotr O. Scholz, *Eunuchs and Castrati: A Cultural History*, Markus Wiener, 2001, pp. ix.

⁹³ William D Phillips, Jr., *Slavery from Roman Times to the Early Transatlantic Trade*. Manchester UP, 1985.]

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 86.

The sīyāh, who appears male, professes a female name and incites pandemonium. As in *Night of the Hunchback*, the sīyāh bāzī scene's brevity reflects its apparent irrelevance to the narrative; a ludic breath between two tired love plots. Instead, the overarching narrative pivots around Efat's honor—her chastity. In a climactic scene Efat deserts Farhad after she sees that Asghar has beaten him, rejecting his love in order to protect him from further violence. She returns to the café in the middle of the night, where she dances drunkenly and catches the stares of both men and women, who find her enchanting. When he awakens to find her gone Farhad tracks her back to the café and finds her swaying with a tambourine on the stage. In her refusal to return back home with him, Efat announces, "I'm not your woman. I belong to everybody," gesturing toward the audience. Farhad slaps her across the face, as if to waken her from her descent.⁹⁵

Rivalry in the City and *Night of the Hunchback* ricochet two repeating elements off of each other: sīyāh bāzī, and the patriarchal institution of female possession. While the overarching narrative force in *Rivalry in the City*, in *Night of the Hunchback*, the latter theme recurs episodically, reappearing and disappearing from attention. The possession of women is a theme so prevalent in *filmfarsi*, but also, Middle Eastern cultural production, and it is necessary to add, cultural production generally, that it can hardly be contained by terminology, let alone recognized as a connecting thread to the film's parent text, *One Thousand and One Nights*. In one of the subplots in *Night of the Hunchback*, a neighbor is in the midst of marrying his

⁹⁵ Filmfarsi championed archetypal binarism, representations of women straying no further than the extremist norms of tramp and angel. Narratives often push oscillations between these poles as their primary intrigues. (Arguably the most famous example of the genre, famous enough to elevate it from the disparaging filmfarsi title, Masud Kimiai's *Gheisar* revolves around a brother's revenge of his sister's rape. Early in the film, she commits suicide for bringing her family dishonor.)

daughter off when the hunchback's corpse is deposited into his backyard. His daughter is so distraught by the prospect of the marriage, she poisons herself.

In *One Thousand and One Nights*, the maintenance of social and moral order mandates the control of women's bodies, whose voracious sexuality exemplifies the chaos that would ensue from their independence from marital and family bondage:

by apprehending a large-scale female rebellion that could overturn an entire sociopolitical system, the tales advance a male homosocial order, a network of bonds among men that, in the context of the *Nights*, stresses collaboration, solidarity, and the exchange of knowledge about women.⁹⁶

This chaos achieves its dangerous legibility through the union of Persian and Arab women with black slaves. The repetition serves to mark a distinction between virtuous and wily women. While feminist readers of this genre consistently omit blackness as a problem for thought, filmfārsī curiously hyperbolizes it.⁹⁷ Again in *Rivalry the City*, as in *Night of the Hunchback*, androgyny and gender ambiguity symbolized by a bellybutton forges this relation. The wall stick figure shot that follows the conversation between the café manager and Efat and which introduces the sīyāh bāzī scene advances a new iteration. Devoid of sexual attributes, the crayoned outline holds a purse. Neither male nor female, figurative and parodic of femaleness, it subtly hearkens back to the image of the performing belly that mediated the scenes of female enslavement and sīyāh bāzī in *Shab i Qūzī*.

⁹⁶ Shamma, 241.

⁹⁷ Like Malti-Douglas, Najmabadi explores the misogyny of *makr-i zanān*, the Persian version of the Arabic *kayd al-nisa'*, but an exploration of blackness is lost from her line of questioning, which focuses instead on the requisite expulsion of the female from male homosociality and/or homosexuality. Najmabadi, "Reading 'Wiles of Women' Stories a Fictions of Masculinity." *Imagined Masculinities: Male Identity and Culture in the Modern Middle East*. Edited by Mai Ghousoub and Emma Sinclair-Webb. Saqi, 2000.



Figure 3. Still from Farukh Ghāfārī’s *Rivalry in the City* (1958/64). A stick figure in the wall precedes the staged *sīyāh bāzī*.

The scar of a lost relationship,⁹⁸ the navel scrawled on the wall invokes *Shab i Quzi*’s mother text, *One Thousand and One Nights*, by dint of narrative dexterity inherited retroactively, and a “*chemically encoded process of entropy*”⁹⁹ that is its material substrate. Mimicking the winding intricacy and abounding repetition effects of this text, *sīyāh bāzī* recurs in Ghafārī’s oeuvre (even his life—wherein he once adopted the pseudonym Black Slave).

⁹⁸ Bleeker, pp.82.

⁹⁹ D.N. Rodowick, *The Virtual Life of Film*. Harvard UP, 2007, pp. 20.

Ghafari's bizarre adoption of the name Ghulām Sīyāh, as well as the fact that in *Shab i Ghūzī*, he plays a character whose role is exchanged for a female black slave in *Alf Laylah*, reflects an unavoidable fact about Indian Ocean world slavery that I have begun to recount in historical descriptions of eunuchs and qiyān: proliferation of distinctions internal to the slavery confuse and complicate positions, destabilizing attempts to draw social theory out of historical facts, blatantly anecdotal as such facts are in their partiality. Moreover, in the Islamicate societies of the Indian Ocean World wherein submission, rather than autonomy constituted a human ideal, enslavement inscribed a hierophantic threshold between literal and figurative modes of being in the world. Walter Andrews argues that the extent to which free Muslims referring to and thinking of themselves as slaves is inadequately reflected in secondary sources;¹⁰⁰ slavery apologists maneuver the malleability of distinction to render specious attempts to adjudicate the distinctions that matter and which do not.

And yet, as the example of sīyah bāzī shows, the power to maneuver symbols and manipulate meanings and values on a large scale defines a certain barrier in the real beyond which historical objectivity loses its immediate influence. Thus, as Cedric Robinson points out, “racial regimes” by their very nature conceal their historical foundations and operate according to another logic—one that might be loosely termed symbolic, but not therefore any less ideologically powerful.¹⁰¹ The absence of a racial regime, in the sense of a coherently organized ideology undergirding Iranian cultural production renders even more cryptic the insistent ephemera of blackness; seemingly purposeless and spare, such signs vex clear theorization, even as they prompt it.

¹⁰⁰ Walter Andrews. *Poetry's Voice, Society's Song: Ottoman Lyric Poetry*. U of Washington P, 1985.

¹⁰¹ Cedric Robinson, *Forgeries of Memory and Meaning: Blacks and the Regimes of Race in American Theater and Film before WWII*. U of North Carolina P, 2007.

In scholarship on gender, the wellspring of racialized symbolism connected to reproductive labor in the Western world has been amply documented and long mobilized by feminists of color as a stratifying force that demands a reevaluation of the category of woman.¹⁰² Historians of gender in Islam who tend to foreground religious identification in their analyses of Southwest Asian societies—while part of this mobilization to rethink the global contours of “woman”—often end up overlooking the divisive force of labor as a source of social distinction, because this force does not seem to operate according to what is assumed to be a univocal logic of racialization, nor even of class.¹⁰³ And yet, as *sīyah bāzī* proposes, social divisions based upon faded historical connections to slavery can be adequately embodied by skin color (blackness) precisely because blackness exceeds historical grounding and objectivity, having crossed the threshold of the real.

Indexed by cinematic cuts, histrionics and obscure imagery the apophenic relationship between the female body, blackness and slavery strains against the polarity of metaphor and proper sense, magnetizing— but only weakly and reluctantly—a lost context. Though present in the Umayyad period (661-750 CE) and available to perception in pre-Islamic poetry, the *qiyān* slave women prevailed during the Abbasid period when *One Thousand and One Nights* was first translated into Arabic—many argue, as a result of the fusion of Arab and Persian cultures.¹⁰⁴ Physical charm, (which documentary evidence suggests meant in part light skin color),

¹⁰² Mignon Duffy, “Doing the Dirty Work: Gender, Race, and Reproductive Labor in Historical Perspective,” *Gender & Society*, vol. 21 (2007), pp. 313. Patricia Collins, “Work, Family, and Black Women’s Oppression.” *Black Feminist Thought*, pp. 45. Without implying their mutual exclusivity, Patricia Collins points out that theoretical and historical emphases tend to tend to classify Black feminist analyses of labor into two strands.

¹⁰³ For example, despite the undeniable social pervasiveness and longevity of the practice of servitude in Iran (as distinct from slavery) as Amy Motlagh points out, there is no scholarly study documenting its history.

¹⁰⁴ Lisa Nielson, “Visibility and Performance: Courtesans in the Early Islamicate Courts (661-950 CE).” Gordon and Hein, pp. 775.

distinguished them from other enslaved women—qualities that were determined by qualified trainers.¹⁰⁵ Harlots who were also chattel, Arab men solicited the qiyān for various entertainments: poetry, singing, dancing, lofty banter, sex—the anti-wives some Arab feminists blames for the decline in Arab women's social and legal status during this period.¹⁰⁶ Shahrazad's character and narrative voice prototypes such a figure—given to hypnotic recitations of suspenseful lore; and Shahriyār's absorption in her suspense recreates the Abbasid male desire for the qiyān's seduction.¹⁰⁷

Caswell points out that the pre-Islamic meaning for “qayn” was blacksmith or craftsman—used pejoratively, and suggesting a stretching continuity in the debasement of manual labor. But etymology, like analogy, can provoke, elucidate as deftly as it can mystify. For the qiyān's type of labor in fact distinguished her from female slaves who did not conform to the beauty ideals of Arab men, such as the “Zangi.” Literacy, elite affiliation and hopes of hypogamy rendered social mobility prospective for light-skinned slaves perceived as beautiful, while mobility remained unlikely for others. Deemed unappealing for the belletristic and sexual domains of the qiyān black African and dark Indian slaves¹⁰⁸ handled menial tasks instead. Ehad

¹⁰⁵ Close physical examination of enslaved female bodies determined which would be chosen to be trained as qiyān (Gordon, 35.) In *Actes de Vente D'esclaves et D'animaux D'Égypte Médiéval* Yūsuf Ragīb translates a number of Arabic sales receipts from ninth- and tenth- century Egypt. Some of these comment on individual enslaved women and their physical qualities. Al-Jahiz's Epistle on the Singing Girls....

¹⁰⁶ Like Bouhdiba, Ahmed argues “access to slave concubines during the Abbasid era was a contributing factor to gender discrimination in the emerging legal system, which has had a significant effect ever since” (Myrne, 59). See Ahmed, 83-87.

¹⁰⁷ Although scholars generally treat the jawari and qiyān as an exclusively male affair with devastating effects for women,” Myrne points out that Nabia Abbott has shown how the Abbasid slave trade was part of an extensive luxury market that catered to ‘the tastes and vanities of both men and women.’ (Myrne, 59)

¹⁰⁸ Caswell, pp. 14. Ibn-Butlan's taxonomic assessment of slave girls based on ethnicity shows favor for almost all origins (Indians, Medina, Mecca, Ta'if, Berbers, Yemenis, Turkic) except for the Zanj who have “many faults; the blacker the uglier; the sharper the teeth, and the less desirable” (17)

Toledano's observation about special slave designations suggests that categories such as *qiyan* (which, in the Ottoman period could map loosely onto the *kul*), is one reason why slavery in Islamic societies occupies minimal space in studies of comparative slavery.¹⁰⁹ The evidence for slaves who managed to wield some political power and social mobility more generally—characteristics of deeply stratified societies—emits clouds of contradiction, challenging this history's assimilation into neat abstractions and theories of slavery that submit to the simple dichotomies of free and enslaved.

The distinctions in domestic slavery divided more or less along corporal lines passes more often as anecdote than of point of departure; far from fundamental, even remarkable, the problem of blackness is, in Near Eastern cultural production and history, anecdotal. (So, in their *Encyclopedia of Arabian Nights*, Ulrich Marzolph and Richard van Leeuwen will only mention in passing, "In the stories of the *Arabian Nights*, black people almost without exception serve as negative stereotypes. The most recurrent of these stereotypes is the black slave who commits adultery with a white woman."¹¹⁰)

Nell Irvin Painter's writing on the bizarre transformation of the Circassian and Georgian slave to the Caucasian beauty ideal in the Euro-American imagination places these otherwise anecdotal and irrelevant corporal distinctions on a crucial plane of inquiry, one that merges with the history of the concept of race.¹¹¹ In their travels to India and Persia Jean-Baptiste Chardin and Francois Bernier documented what they perceived as the eugenical beauty of the white

¹⁰⁹ Toledano, "Representing the Slave's Body in Ottoman Society, *Slavery & Abolition*, vol. 23, no. 2, pp. 57. Toledano points out that some Ottoman historians (I.M. Kunt, S. Faroqui, H. Inalcik) even argue that the *kul*/harem system ought to be distinguished from slavery.

¹¹⁰ Marzolph, Ulrich, and Richard van Leeuwen. *The Arabian Nights Encyclopedia*. Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 2004, pp. 500.

¹¹¹ Nell Irvin Painter. *A History of White People*. Norton, 2010.

female slave. In Bernier's 1684 anonymous essay "Nouvelle Division De La Terre, par les differentes Especies ou Races d'hommes qui l'habitent"¹¹² used the word "race" to refer to human categorizations for the first time, devoting over half of the essay to descriptions of beautiful women around the world, the figure of the Circassian slave would overwhelm European art over the subsequent fifty years as the "odalisque" (from the Turkish *odalk*, or "harem room.")¹¹³ In studies that focus on Orientalist representations of the Muslim harem in the history of European art and literature, the image of the Circassian harem slave dominates constructions of sexuality and femininity, while blackness occupies a menial or ornamental position.¹¹⁴ In the fetishization of the Caucasian female slave that marks one origin of the history of whiteness, woman, through beauty, is liberated; blackness elaborates this liberation, appearing residually, absorbing that which is left behind.

A medium frontal shot shows Efat absorbed by the blackface act on stage, before Farhad startles her. A cut in the film obstructs the sequence's cohesion, so as the film is currently preserved, the spectator does not know what links the *sīyāh bāzī* scene in the café to the sequence that proceeds immediately in Efat's home. In the flat she has taken over after her friend has been jailed for prostitution, Efat applies lipstick in front of a mirror, as Farhad waits for her. He notices a photograph of Eshrat, the friend. "Is she pretty?" he asks. "Very." "You are prettier,"

¹¹² "Nouvelle Division De La Terre, par les differentes Especies ou Races d'hommes qui l'habitent, envoyee par un fameux voyageur a M. l'Abbe de la **** a peu pres en ces termes."

¹¹³ Ironically, Bonnett notes a "tendency among contemporary Russians to revile the peoples of the Caucasus as 'Blacks'" (1045).

¹¹⁴ Linda Nochlin, *The Politics of Vision: Essays on Nineteenth-Century Art and Society* (New York: Harper & Row, 1989) Reina Lewis, *Gendering Orientalism: race, femininity, and representation* (London: Routledge, 1996); Lewis, *Rethinking orientalism: women, travel, and the Ottoman harem*. Rutgers UP, 2004); Jocelyn Hackforth-Jones and Mary Roberts, eds. *Edges of Empire: Orientalism and Visual Culture* (Malden: Blackwell, 2005); Rana Kabbani, *Imperial Fictions: Europe's myths of the Orient* (London: Saqi, 2008).

Farhad replies as he grabs Efat's arm and hugs her toward him. From this scene forward Farhad's interest in Efat develops from curiosity to a marriage proposal. Subsequent scenes show him taking Efat and her son to an ice cream parlor; later, he tells her they are taking a trip to Shiraz to get married. The celerity of sequencing, from Leila's *sīyāh bāzī*, to Farhad's assertion of Efat's beauty, "You are prettier," thus launches Efat's liberation from café worker and prostitute to a respectable wife—a transformation that is captured by the beginning and final scene of the film, both of which frame Efat as a middle-class wife in North Tehran. (An addition to the script not included in the earlier, *South of the City* version.)¹¹⁵

In Iranian films, blackness is displaced onto a theatrics of representation that refuses to be itself read as on the register of historical sobriety. Like the veil, blackface masks an unreadable historical trauma, just as it masks by inversions and temporal recoilings distinctions in social positionality that would otherwise be perceived as antagonistic.¹¹⁶ The houseborn slave in *Shab-i Quzi* evokes a sprawling history that dissimulates its spread into the film's present. After the *sīyāh bāzī* sequence, the troupe gathers in the kitchen to divide their money. Foregrounded left, the blackface character de-wigs the dancing belly. As he peels the shaggy black prop off the inverted pot on which it is fitted, a tuxedoed black servant in profile emerges from behind the performer and walks left to right across the background. He looks briefly toward the performer and camera and smiles as he drifts out of the frame. In the *Alf Laylah wa Laylah* version of "The Hunchback," the tailor and his wife feed the hunchback the dinner on which he chokes. In *Shab-i Quzi*, the host family's cook and black servant fills the troupe's pot with bread and meat. The servant and cook preparing the food express a reverence similar to the houseborn slave in his

¹¹⁵ Umīd, 308.

¹¹⁶ In the case of the veil, for example, this would relate to who was worth protecting from the public gaze (free women), and who was forbidden from such protection (female slaves).

sīyāh bāzī face. “Hurry up,” the servant tells the cook, “the madam said dinner should be served in half an hour. Give them whatever they want, food and drink.”

Bahram Bayzā’ī, whose films I discuss in the fourth chapter, wrote a still foundational text on the history of theater in Iran whose cover is graced by the sīyāh figure.¹¹⁷ Bypassing slavery altogether, Bayzā’ī mentions the ancient trade roots between Africa and Iran; he mentions as well that beginning in the 10th century, the Portuguese, accompanied with slaves from Zanzibar and Abyssinia attempted to build forts along the Iranian coasts. He calls these slaves, and their descendants who stayed behind, “zari,” attributing possible origins of sīyāh bāzī to these inhabitants.¹¹⁸ However, Bayzā’ī finds it much more likely that the practice began with the spread of Indian gypsies “kowlī” throughout the Iranian countryside, a notion that coheres with the common Persian association between gypsies and the lowly entertainment trades.¹¹⁹ Despite his rejection of the sīyāh figure’s relationship to the African slave, Bayzā’ī goes on to relate that his master’s “permanent vision of him as a slave, motivated the sīyāh’s myriad forms of comical sabotage and irreverence.”¹²⁰

A scene from a different kind of sīyāh bāzī in Samuel Khachikian’s *The Midnight Terror*, sharpens the strange vitality of black presence that sīyāh bāzī’s long, if opaque genealogy broaches. After murdering his previous assistant in the back of a taxi cab for showing romantic interest in his wife, Zhila, Afshar, a money counterfeiter, lures another man to take the position. He spots Amir (Fardīn) at a bar and invites him to his house the following night after Amir helps

¹¹⁷ Bahram Bayzā’ī, *Namāyish dar Īrān*.

¹¹⁸ See chapters two and four.

¹¹⁹ Mathee points out that in Persian literature gypsies are presented as professional musicians and their women as entertainers, and that Firdusi’s *Shahnameh* claims that gypsies were first brought to Iran by the Sasanian King Bahram Gur, who asked the Indian King Shungal for dancers and singers and received 4,000 gypsies in response (“Prostitutes” 124).

¹²⁰ *Namāyish*, 182.

Afshar out of a fist fight. When Amir shows up to Afshar's mansion the following night, he is awed by the intricacy of the décor, which Afshar informs him Zhila herself arranged. They casually exchange banter while Afshar lights Amir's cigarette. "Come this way," Afshar gestures, as the camera pans right with their footsteps, continues to absorb the elaborate intricacy of the house décor. The frame travels with Afshar until he locates his wine bottle on the counter, which he uncorks: "So you say you're unemployed." The density of objects overwhelms the medium shot of Afshar. In front of him on the countertop sit what appears to be a jug set of elaborate porcelain design; behind him, a sconce; a plug connecting into a wall socket, whose source is unidentified; and to the right, a doll-sized figurine resembling a smiling black servant with his or her hand out.

Pamela Karimi documents the breakdown of gendered spatial distinctions (andarūn and birūn—the traditionally partitioned areas of the household) during the post-Qajar period, showing how this breakdown led to an increased female investment in interior design as a form of self-expression.¹²¹ In *Midnight Terror*, Afshar's comment attributes a form of responsibility for the morbid presence of blackness in the house, one reminiscent of the black memorabilia and collectibles that thrived in the U.S. during and after the Reconstruction era, and that Cedric Robinson locates on the same cultural plane as blackface minstrelsy.¹²² But if the figurines familiar to Western audiences promoted racial stereotypes that operated primarily through vivid deformation, the doll in Afshar and Zhila's home is more subtly disfigured.¹²³ Its head cocks

¹²¹ Pamela Karimi. *Domesticity and Consumer Culture in Iran: Interior Revolutions of the Modern Era*. Garland, 2017, pp.12.

¹²² *Forgeries*, 136. Kenneth Goings estimates tens of thousands of such objects were produced and disseminated between the 1880s and late 1950s. Goings, Kenneth W. *Mammy and Uncle Mose: Black Collectibles and American Stereotyping*. Indiana UP, 1994, pp. xiii.

¹²³ Diawara highlights the significance of deformation in stereotypes in his companion essay to David Levinthal's *Blackface*, a compilation of gruesome close-up photographs of such figurines. Writes

back and forth from side to side incessantly, rhythmically, accompanying the perpetual smile on its face. The black figurine sits cross-legged, wears a white fez, white clothes and a vest, and earrings that (given the poor quality of the film it is impossible to say with certainty) look like bells.

The figurine remains intermittently visible through the interaction between Afshar and Amir that ensues. It is very inconspicuously present at the moment Afshar announces to Amir that he will be employing him as his personal assistant and bodyguard. “I have lived an entire life of honesty. Now I want to make an honest youth like you fortunate,” Afshar says to Amir standing behind a couch. Visible in the corner bar area, the black figurine sits and cocks its head back and forth.

It is not inconsequential that Afshar attributes the household décor to Zhila. She, like the figurine, embodies a certain staticness manifested in her constant presence inside the household. Zhila is the femme fatale, or prototypically wily woman—a staple of the Muslim unconscious¹²⁴—seducing Amir from the very instant she meets him, and consistently urging him to kiss her, touch her, or sleep with her. In a scene toward the end of the film after she has sung him an elaborate love song and thrown him on the couch, Amir says “Love? [Ishgh?] Do

Diawara, for example, "Characteristically, the Mammy--used commonly in the design of cookie jars, kitchen decorations, or other housewares--is a rotund black woman dressed in a long robe, an apron, and a head kerchief, with a big smile on her face"(10).

¹²⁴ Malti-Douglas painstakingly documents the centrality of *kayd al-nisa'* (women's trickery) to the conceptualization of female sexuality from its presence in the Qu'ran, to the entire scriptural body of Arab medieval literature, especially in chapter two of *Woman's Body*. Is this a timeless misogyny of the great monotheisms? As bell hooks notes, the brutal treatment of black women under chattel slavery was a direct consequence of fundamentalist Christian teachings that portrayed women as evil sexual temptresses. The rape of black female slaves condensed hatred of women with hatred of blackness. bell hooks, "Sexism and the Black Female Slave Experience," pp. 29.

you even know the meaning of this word?...You name those dirty and naughty urges of yours love. Isn't it a waste of this sacred word that you use to name your dirty habits?"

The unabashed misogyny of *Midnight Terror*, so typical of filmfarsi communicates a secret with the monument of *One Thousand and One Nights*: Like the black figurine timelessly cocking its head back and forth, a mirror of the grandfather clock ticking on the wall across the room, immobile and constant, its palm extended, women's voracious capacity for guile is timeless, as al-Thalabi writes, and as nationalists will remind Iranian audiences in the 20th century. (For, far from extinct, the wiles of women genre, as *Midnight Terror* demonstrates, formed an integral aspect of contemporary popular Iranian culture. Earlier in the century, the chief architect of Reza Shah's modernized education system would champion the tales in *Hizar va yek Shab*—the Persian translation of *One Thousand and One Nights*—claiming they contained important millennia-old moral lessons from the ancient East with continued relevance.¹²⁵)

The black figurine blackens Zhīlā, as the sīyāh bāzī scene blackens Efat in complementing their female corruptness and perversion. As the subject of a transitive verb, what blackens is never itself shown to transcend its own action except through a disavowal, or a burial into historical opacity, a passive nomadism in time. It is important that, in *Midnight Terror*, blackness appears as a *figurine*, rather than a human figure. This clarifies the object-status of the face that paints itself black in sīyāh bāzī; a detachment of blackness from black persons that raises questions about analytical terms of social analysis, or, the relationship between ideas and bodies, concepts and life, ideality and eventuality, and how such relationships materialize and

¹²⁵ Kamran Rastegar, "The Changing Value of "Alf Laylah wa Laylah" for Nineteenth-Century Arabic, Persian, and English Readerships." *Journal of Arabic Literature*, Vol. 36, No. 3, 2005, pp. 283.

circulate. In *Night of the Hunchback* and *Rivalry in the City*, the navel falsely centralizes a site of convergence that disappears terms, returning them to an invisible source, and thereby dissolving them in an iconicity that historicization cannot recuperate. The navel is the impossibility, the aporia of intersection that draws attention to itself, only to withdraw from significance and insist on the innocent neutrality of the trivial.

CHAPTER TWO

Pneumatics of Blackness: Nāṣir Taqvā'ī's *Bād-i Jin* and Modernity's Anthropological

Drive

Thrashing waves disrupt a calm sea in the first few seconds of Nāṣir Taqvā'ī's *Bād-i Jin* (*Wind of Jinn* 1969/1348 sh),¹²⁶ an enigmatic twenty minute black-and-white ethnographic documentary shot on 16 mm that chronicles a zar spirit ritual in the harbour of Bandar Lingih.¹²⁷ The sound of the swells continues to rise and fall: "Man's tolerance is due to the amount of pain he bears. But when pain becomes unbearable, Southern blacks perform zar," utters modern Iranian poet Ahmad Shāmlū (1925-2000/1304-1379 sh) in a Persian voiceover whose lyricism this English translation fails to achieve. Taqvā'ī's initial choice of medium shot and slightly high angle intensifies the disorienting pull of tall waves spraying the camera lens, even though the shot remains constant, anchored to the deep tenor of Shāmlū's somber voice.

The tropological traction of the sea, as filmmaker John Akomfrah notes,¹²⁸ bears a particular heaviness in the black filmic imagination, intimating African peoples' violent forced migrations throughout the world since antiquity. Caused by winds blowing over the water's surface, the initial waves in *Bād-i Jin* thus embed layers of the film's theme in its very first shot: the "infidel winds" that menace the *ahl-i havā*¹²⁹ and spoil the Iranian landscape; their connection to the history of African slavery in Iran; and the relationship between a burgeoning anthropology

¹²⁶ Nāṣir Taqvā'ī is a well-known Iranian filmmaker and screen writer born in 1941.

¹²⁷ Bandar Lingih is a harbour city in the Iranian province Hormuzgan in the Persian Gulf.

¹²⁸ John Akomfrah, "Stuart Hall documentary" (talk presented at Yale University, 24 September 2014).

¹²⁹ The Persian term for "wind-afflicted" refers to all the individuals that belong to a zar cult and have established life-long relationships with the winds. The ambiguity caused by the lack of a differentiation between the singular and plural terms of *ahle-havā* will be clarified by context.

and modernist form. The superimposition of Shāmlū’s poetic verse onto the ethnographic images imbues these tropes—the afflicting winds, their victims, and the terrestrial and psychic trauma of slavery allegorized in the image of waves—with a softly historical connection incommensurable with historiographic testimony or closure, just as it complicates the traditional ethnographic procedure, appearing to fulfill instead the fantasy of an experimental ethnography that is also an alternative, if warped and benighted historiography.¹³⁰ Dilating Taqvā’ī’s film in context thus reveals a complex of divergent, dizzying levels of meanings and tensions. Through a reading of the film that magnetizes contiguous artifacts and trends, I explore *Bād-i Jin*’s aesthetic procedures for pursuing and producing what has been canonized as a modernist form—the Iranian New Wave film—through a distinctly ethnographic gaze that refracts and abstracts historical information. In doing so, I position the film as an exemplary moment within a larger movement undergirding the co-constitution of Iranian literary and filmic modernity¹³¹ and the development of Iranian anthropology.¹³² This exemplarity pivots around a question about the aesthetic dimension of

¹³⁰ For example, one not premised on bureaucratic documents and statist foundations, the traditional paradigm of modern historiography nurtured in the European 19th century and developed and debated in Iran in the 20th. Michael Fischer has this particularly optimistic view of Iranian film as alternative historiography. Michael Fischer, *Mute Dreams, Blind Owls, and Dispersed Knowledges: Persian Poesis in the Transnational Circuitry* (Durham: Duke UP, 2004), 12.

¹³¹ In this paper, I treat the term “filmic modernity” as an extension of “literary modernity” due to the deep collusion between Iranian filmmakers, screenwriters, short story writers, novelists and poets throughout the history of Iranian cinema, and in particular, from the 1960s forward. Parvīz Jāhid sees the connection between cinema and literature exemplified by Ibrahim Gulistan’s *Khesht va Ayeneh*, “which is most likely a reflection of his unique narrative style and storytelling (*Directory*, 85). It is well known that many Iranian writers and filmmakers collaborated during the period where Iranian film was first beginning to achieve renown; for exempla, see note 28. Today, it is sometimes argued that Iranian film has subsumed Iranian prose fiction as a modern artform, a thesis that draws its energy from the infinitely greater popularity of Iranian film internationally. While the differences between Iranian film and literature are obviously many and warrant a study of their own, here I am less concerned with elaborating a theory of their difference than of articulating the meaning of the relationship of both to Iranian anthropology.

¹³² By “Iranian anthropology” I mean not simply anthropology’s institutional development in Iran, but a widening, and increasingly politicized interest in the problem of otherness.

historicity: namely, its ethical implications. Focus on the anthropology of African slave descendants in Taqvā'ī's documentary, finally and crucially, underlines a doubt about the concept of the modern as an adequate heuristic for comprehending the meaning of historical forms.

Although its inspiration from Italian Neorealismo and the French Nouvelle Vague receive ample emphasis in film studies of the Iranian *Mūj-i nū*, it is no exaggeration to state that the New Wave movement developed out of and concomitantly with an ethnographic impulse that was particular to the Iranian intellectual environment of the early to mid-twentieth century. While highly informative scholars of Iranian film certainly intuit the magnitude of such impulses, the various but often stringently formalist, encyclopedic, or ideological approaches to the study of Iranian film have so far prevented a deeper understanding of the possible meanings of this anthropological impulse to come to fruition. Moreover, the unexplored bond between ethnographic film and ethnographic literature in the early to mid-20th century leaves dormant an entire genealogy of literary-filmic connections that would clarify an understanding of Iranian literary modernity as deeply ethnographic.¹³³ Ethnography, as we know, is perennially troubled by its history of

¹³³ Allusions to this ethnographic connection often miss the mark, particularly when compelled to ascribe value-judgement to the phenomenon. For example, in a minor article from the early 1980s, Michael Hillman notes the discrepancy between the modern Iranian literati's putative audience (*mellat*) and the literati's actual cognitive distance from the latter, positioning this discrepancy as part of the failure of modern (particularly committed) Iranian literature to effect social change. But despite impressive readings from an array of modern prose works and poetry describing an urgent political desire to portray the destitution of the masses, Hillman neglects the history of ethnography that in fact produced an actual (if artificial) proximity between the literati and their subjects, and further, does not analyze the meaning, nature, or effects of such proximity. Michael Hillman, "The Modernist Trend in Persian Literature and Its Social Impact," *Iranian Studies* 15 (1982): 7-29. Other notations of the relationship between the aesthetic and the anthropological in modern Iranian cultural forms are generally rooted in field surveys of Iranian anthropology, the upshot being a somewhat condescending assessment of Iranian anthropology as remaining unscientifically bound to its roots in the literary and in amateur fieldwork. See for example, Nasser Fakouhi, "Making and Remaking an Academic Tradition: Towards an Indigenous Anthropology in Iran," in *Conceptualizing Iranian Anthropology: Past and Present Perspectives*, ed. Nadjmabadi, Shahnaz R. (New York: Berghahn, 2009). See also the chapter on Iranian anthropology's genetic convergence with literary studies in Nematollah Fazeli's *Politics of Culture in Iran: Anthropology, Politics and Society in the Twentieth Century* (London: Routledge, 2006).

obscuring a position dissymmetry that is its conditions of possibility.¹³⁴ It is also beholden to certain naturalized assumptions about the meaning of the human whose connection to hierarchized difference informs the entire history of the concept of race. It is within, through and to these interred and uncomfortable connections that any iteration of modernity—including its aesthetic dimensions—finds itself responsive.

Mid-twentieth century ethnographic filmmaking in Iran by Iranian filmmakers grows out of a tension-riddled history colored by the Cold War.¹³⁵ Although British, Russian and American embassies all vied between 1945-50 to distribute political propaganda through mobile cinema units situated in Iranian cities and towns, only the United States developed direct involvement in locally producing films and training Iranians in film production, leaving in its wake a “nucleus” of Iranian directors whose work would later flourish under patronage of the newly developed Ministry of Culture and Arts and National Iranian Radio and Television under Muhamad Rizā Shāh Pahlavī’s regime.¹³⁶ Such varicose, politically ambiguous connections attest to the fraught relation between the institutional support for “salvage ethnography” (a form of cultural preservation for indigenous forms of life deemed to be decaying in the throes of modernization), anti-Communist sentiment,

¹³⁴ A milestone reading of anthropology’s recourse to asymmetrical spatio-temporal functions informs Johann Fabian’s famous thesis in *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes Its Object* (New York: Columbia UP, 2002).

¹³⁵ There is of course an earlier tradition of ethnography in Iran that was heralded by foreign anthropologists who popularized the study of nomadic tribes in Iran. The American filmmakers Merian Cooper, Ernst Schoedsack, and Marguerite Harrison filmed the nomadic Bakhtiari tribe in the 1920s in their film *Grass*—one of the first ethnographic films made in Iran, and often cited by anthropologists as an archetype of the ethnographic film genre.

¹³⁶ Ali Issari, *Cinema in Iran: 1900-1979* (Metuchen: Scarecrow Press, 1989):164-193. Close relatives of both the Shah, and his wife Farah, headed both the MCA and NIRT, ensuring tight political surveillance. Hamid Naficy, *A Social History of Iranian Cinema: Vol. 2: The Industrializing Years, 1941-1978* (Durham: Duke UP, 2011): 69.

and the ongoing project of constructing an Iranian nationalism that would buttress the country's international image to stimulate foreign investment and tourism, while curtaining dire internal structural inequalities and mitigating through myriad distractions the unextraordinary durability of royal corruption.¹³⁷ For example, various measures taken by Iranian governmental powers during the twentieth century to bolster institutional anthropology forcefully belied ongoing efforts to homogenize all ethnic tribes and instances of socio-geographical fragmentation and antagonism into a unified Persian identity that would surrender to administrative hold.¹³⁸

Beyond its formidable aesthetic achievements, Furūgh Faruḵzād's abysmally melancholic *Khānah Siyāh Ast* (*The House is Black* 1962/1341sh) often cited as precursor of the Iranian New Wave was in essence an ethnographic documentary of a small leper colony in northern Iran.¹³⁹ Its ethnographic undercurrent is not only reconcilable with its experimentalism but constitutive of it, for avant-gardeism and documentary, surrealism and ethnography have historically shared common roots,¹⁴⁰ the fact that the very earliest films were ethnographic works lends further

¹³⁷ As George Stocking notes, historically ethnography and anthropology have been used in non-European contexts in the service of nationalism. See Stocking, "Afterword, a view from the center," *Ethnos* (1982): 172-86.

¹³⁸ Stephanie Cronin. *Tribal Politics in Iran: Rural conflict and the new state, 1921-1941* (New York: Routledge, 2007).

¹³⁹ Farroḵzād (1935-67) is commemorated as one of Iran's preeminent poets of the 20th century. This film is almost always read with an emphasis on its breathtaking poeticism. I would insist that attention to the work's ethnographic component does not detract from its allure, but rather, complicates and nuances what is almost uniformly celebrated about it.

¹⁴⁰ For film, see Scott Macdonald, *Avant-Doc: Intersections of Documentary and Avant-Garde Cinema* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2014). In literature, the relationship between the development of anthropology and the ascendancy of modernism (particularly with regard to surrealism) has also been explored. See for example, James Clifford, "On Ethnographic Surrealism," in *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth Century Ethnography, Literature, and Art* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1988). Contemporary studies on this moment reflect upon the very boundedness of present genre distinctions, asking how the once less rigidly defined fields of literature and anthropology informed each other in the late 19th and early 20th century. See Paul Peppis, *Sciences of Modernism: Ethnography, Sexology, and Psychology* (New York: Cambridge UP, 2014). Many film scholars and visual anthropologists go so far as to claim that the cinema was invented for

support to this claim.¹⁴¹ The figure of the primitive Other incarnates modern human alienation, because the category of the primitive denotes childhood, a premodern intimacy with nature, innocence from mass industrialized culture, and an altered relation to pain.¹⁴² In practice, the alienation of a less figural, more literal other lent material substance to this fantasy.¹⁴³ In Taqvā'ī's work this figure is the black slave described by a poetics of abstraction.

Chronicler of Iranian ethnography Humāyūn Imāmī qualifies this period to emphasize that most of these mid-century pieces did not quite adhere to the strictures of ethnographic documentary;¹⁴⁴ Hamid Naficy similarly coins the term "ethnographic-lite" to signal the fact that although many of the films of the period communicated with ethnographic themes, none of the filmmakers attached to the moniker were seriously affiliated with a coherent and institutionalized anthropology. Poetic realism, a favoured term among critics for describing works such as Faruḡzād's, captures this detachment from scientificity which Iranian ethnographic films never

anthropological purposes, that is, to observe the physical behavior of men. David MacDougall, "Beyond Observational Cinema," in *Principles of Visual Anthropology*, ed. Paul Stockings (Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter, 2003).

¹⁴¹Lumière's earliest short films, for example, featured Ashanti women and children engaging in daily activities, dancing and participating in tribal parades, while Edison's earliest studies pictured Native Americans, African American dancers, Kanakan divers, and Hopi snake dancers. See Assenka Oksiloff, *Picturing the Primitive: Visual Culture, Ethnography, and Early German Cinema* (New York: Palgrave, 2001).

¹⁴² Catherine Russel explains that "fascination with possession is bound up with the fundamental ambivalence of primitivism in the modernist imagination" productive of the fantasy in which modernity overcomes its alienation in rejoining its primitive past. Catherine Russel, *Experimental Ethnography: The Work of Film in the Age of Video* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999), 194.

¹⁴³ David Marriott, "Response to Race and the Poetic Avant-Garde," in *Boston Review*, 10 March, 2015, <http://bostonreview.net/poetry/david-marriott-response-race-and-poetic-avant-garde>.

¹⁴⁴Humayūn Imāmī, *Sīnimā-yi Mardum Shinakhtī-i Īran* (Tihiran: Nashr-i Afkār, 2006).

claimed with any earnestness in the first place.¹⁴⁵ Such detachment could not, however, fully filter out the dubious effects of even scientificity's aesthetically-charged emulation. Though Taqvā'ī's film appears, at a superficial level, to take on some of the architectonic postures of the kinds of ethnographic film outlined by scholars of the field,¹⁴⁶ specifically one long sequence shot from a hold in the wall of the zar ceremony room,¹⁴⁷ upon closer scrutiny, strict filmic continuity never materializes, suggesting a reluctant disbelief in neutral archiving and expressing a position closer to what Simon Gikandi and others see as the defining feature of geographically disparate modernisms: a desire to "merge with the other."¹⁴⁸ This impulse finds expression in Taqvā'ī's own remarks about his strange experiences in Lingih and release of conviction in transmission of verisimilitude while filming there: "In *Bād-i Jin* I let go of absolute objectivity and allowed my presence as a filmmaker to be felt."¹⁴⁹ The film, as critic Javād Mujābī noted at the time (albeit

¹⁴⁵ See Dominic Parviz Brookshaw, Nasrin Rahimieh, eds. *Forugh Farrokhzad, Poet of Modern Iran: Iconic Woman and Feminine Pioneer of New Persian Poetry* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2010) and, for a more ideologically-oriented critique, Hamid Dabashi, *Masters & Masterpieces of Iranian Cinema* (Washington D.C.: Mage, 2007).

¹⁴⁶ Crawford and Durton in *Film as Ethnography* describe one of the core practices of filmmaker ethnographers as preserving sequences in their entirety.

¹⁴⁷ Naficy, *Film-i Mustanad, vol. 2, Tarīkh-i Sīnema-yi Mustanad* (Tih-rān: Intishārat-i Dānīshgah-i Āzād-i Iran), 325.

¹⁴⁸ Simon Gikandi, "Africa and the Epiphany of Modernism," in *Geomodernisms: Race, Modernism, Modernity*, eds. Laura Doyle and Laura Winkiel (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 2005). Gikandi's analysis resonates with testimonies of avant-garde ethnographic filmmakers like Jean Rouch. In "On the Vicissitudes of the Self: The Possessed Dancer, the Magician, the Sorcerer, the Filmmaker, and the Ethnographer," Rouch shows how his role as a filmmaker almost mirrored that of the possession dancers through his participation and transformation: "For the Songhay-Zama, who are now quite accustomed to film, my 'self' is altered in front of their eyes in the same way as is the 'self' of the possession dancers: it is the 'film-trance' (ciné-transe) of the one filming the 'real trance' of the other" (100). Rouch fortifies the link between modernism and ethnography when he notes that, at the time of his writing, French theater schools had already been using ethnographic information about possession to extract methods for training actors for the past twenty years.

¹⁴⁹ Ghulām Haydarī, editor. *Mu'arriḡī va Shinākht-i Nāsir Taqvā'ī* (Tih-rān: Nashr-i Qatraḡ, 2002), 204.

with the exigency of attributing a value judgment) elicits attention to its own strange relation, or irreverence for traditional narrative temporality, the hallmark of derealization so central to modernist style.¹⁵⁰



Figure 4. Still from Taqvāī's *Bād-i Jin* (1969)

If the visual description of zar ceremonial culture occupies the focal point of *Bād-i Jin*, the audiovisual compilation of nebulous messages that precede this second, more stationary half of the film disquiet expectations for ethnographic precision. This is true especially because of the degraded quality of the film's preservation, which deprives images of sharpness and shape. The grainy shot of ships docked ashore builds the theme of maritimity incited by the initial scene of waves, and the various connections to esotericism, the inhuman, and violence it conjures: "the curses of the departed kaffir jin winds in the south are many," Shāmlū narrates as the camera

¹⁵⁰ "Successful but Short," in Haydarī, *Mu'arrifī*, 145.

draws in focus on three dhows, while waves slap a stone dock; the whistle of wind and waves infiltrate a break in the voiceover. A moribund spectrality haunts the film from start to finish; music punctuates its points of intensification. The melancholic drawl of a folk acapella accompanies a two-minute montage following a woman kneeling before a tombstone. The camera chooses arbitrary objects on which to rest: a ceramic pot, the open windows of an abandoned mosque, a minaret, a close-up of a crack on the wall.

Bād-i Jin's piecemeal transition to the zar ritual occurs through a simple drum beat, as film shots remain oriented toward exteriors: following a veiled figure through a sandy landscape the camera rests on a disfigured tree, bent, as if due to the wind, at an extreme angle: "This tree at the corner of the night is a jin hive; and in the South there are many jin-stricken. Behind this desert-town is another," recites Shāmlū, as the camera cuts to a brick fortress in the distance and the drum's rhythm fades into whistling wind. "And behind that desert town there's a holy house," he continues, the camera settling on an extreme long shot of a dome structure. Panning right toward a shadow, the frame concludes its movement with a close-up of a wall. Shāmlū ends his prelude, "The ahl-i havā in the room behind this wall rejects the jin from his body." The camera's subtle actions phantasmatically suggest traversal of time and space, translating exteriors into interiors and recapitulating the prototext's findings: that the ahl-i havā imagine winds to occupy the most interior corridors of the human body. The drumming picks up again as the camera cuts to two tambūr hanging from the wall of a room, and then to an obscure painting on another wall, slowly tilting down to reveal the heads of a group of seated women veiled in black and clapping in time to the rhythm. The camera stabilizes at a downward tilt, contributing to the slightly voyeuristic, disorienting quality of the scene.

Though Naṣir Taqvā'ī made at least thirteen documentaries throughout his early career, including a second, more realist ethnographic documentary about zar, *Mūsiqī- 'i Jūnūb: Zar* (*Music of the South: Zar* 1970/1349 sh) discussed below, *Bād-i Jin* is worth singling out as exemplary. First, it foregrounds the anthropological unconscious¹⁵¹ sustaining the robust connection between ethnographic filmmaking and the Iranian New Wave,¹⁵² a connection whose implications I draw out further below when I turn to his first feature film, *Ārāmish dar Huzūr-i Dīgarān* (*Tranquility in the Presence of Others* 1970/1349 sh). Second, *Bād-i Jin* was itself foundational to the surge in Iranian ethnographic film, inspiring a slew of religion and spirituality-themed ethnographic filmmaking that would come to follow it, such as Abulqāsim Rizā'ī's film on the hajj to Mecca, *Khānah- 'i Khūdā* (*The House of God* 1968/ 1347 sh); Manūchihr Tayyāb's *Iran: Sarzamīn-i Adīān* (*Iran: The Land of Religions* 1970/ 1349 sh); Manūchihr Tabarī's *Lahazātī Chand bā Darāvish-i Qādirī* (*A Few Moments with Qadiri Dervishes* 1973/1352 sh); Parvīz Kīmīāvī's *Yā Zamin-i Ahū* (*O' Deer Savior* 1971/1350 sh), and Āshghar Āshgharīān's *Shabīh-i Shahādat* (*The Taziyeh of Martyrdom* 1976/1355 sh). Ghulām Husayn Tāhirīdūst's *Azar Surkh* (*Red Fire* 1971/1350 sh), also about the spirit healing ritual zar, and directly inspired by Taqvā'ī's work, would be deemed the “Iranian *Les Maîtres Fous*” by his mentor, Jean Rouch.¹⁵³ Third, *Bād-i Jin* attests to the potent relation between the history of modern Iranian film and literature, as is reflected in the close resemblance between Ghulām-

¹⁵¹ Naficy, *A Social History*, 101.

¹⁵² Naficy, who is regarded as the authoritative commentator on the subject periodizes the Iranian New Wave from 1969 through, roughly, 1979. These films, like much of the literature of the time period, were critical of the social conditions promulgated by the Pahlavi regime's domestic modernization policies, even as they were informed stylistically by modernist forms of cinema abroad.

¹⁵³ Haydarī writes that Ghulām-Husayn Taheridoust's *Azar Sorkh* (1971) was explicitly inspired by *Āhl-i Havā* and *Bād-i Jin* (31).

Husayn Sā'idī's 1966/1345 sh ethnographic monograph *Ahl-i Havā* and Taqvā'ī's filmic rendition, and then in Taqvā'ī's subsequent adaptation of another of Sā'idī's works for his first feature film.¹⁵⁴ Fourth, it romanticizes a founding anthropological object (spirit possession and trance), quintessentializing a crucial aspect of anthropology's connection to modernity's racialized philosophical preoccupations regarding the figures of subjectivity and interiority. And finally, *Bād-i Jin* participates in a long history of using blackness as an allegory for universal suffering while ultimately naturalizing the history of African slavery, suppressing its role in modernity's material, epistemological and aesthetic formations.¹⁵⁵ In this sense the film maintains the kind of "idealized knowledge" of slavery characteristic of Middle Eastern societies,¹⁵⁶ and reflected in the paucity of historiographical sources for Iran's long history of

¹⁵⁴ The list of collaborations between New Wave directors and modernist authors is endless. For instance, Davūd Mulāpūr's *Ahu's Husband* (1966) was based on a story by the same name written by the novelist 'Alī Muhamad Afghānī; the New Wave film script for Dāriyūsh Mihrjūi's *Cow* (1969) was based off of a short story from Ghulām Husayn Sā'idī's *Mourners of Bayal*; Bahman Farmānārā's *Prince Ehtejab* (1974) and his *The Tall Shadows of the Wind* (1978) were both based on stories by the modern novelist Hūshang Golshīrī; Mas'ūd Kīmiyā'ī's *Dash Akol* (1974) was based on a short story by the same name by Sādiq Hidāyat; Kīmiyā'ī's *Earth* (1973) was based on a story by contemporary author Mahmūd Dawlat'ābādī; Amīr Nādīrī's *Tangsir* (1973) was written by modern author Sādiq Chūbak; etc. A comprehensive account of the meaning of such collaborations and adaptations in relation to a theory of literary modernity has, to my knowledge, yet to be written.

¹⁵⁵ Numerous theorists have insisted upon the way the history of African slavery disrupts the universal narrative of history upon which any concept of modernity is sustained. See Lindon Barrett, *Racial Blackness and the Discontinuity of Western Modernity* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2014). Slavery's material centrality to the development of modern economic infrastructure is compounded by the way in which its history is entangled with the construction of the universal values (freedom; autonomous subjectivity; private property) undergirding modernity's epistemological ground. See also Orlando Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1982); Saidiya V. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997); Domenico Losurdo, *Liberalism: a counter-history* (New York: Verso, 2014). Area studies' generally myopic historical frameworks have meant oblivion or indifference to these important developments in modernity studies or misrecognition of their conclusions as parochial. However, because African slavery reached the same magnitude in the Indian Ocean world as in the Atlantic (albeit over a much longer time-span) black studies' interventions have implications for global theories of modernity.

¹⁵⁶ Bernard Freamon, "Straight, No Chaser: Slavery, Abolition, and Modern Islamic Thought," in *Indian Ocean Slavery in the Age of Abolition*, ed. Robert Harms, Bernard K. Freamon, David W. Blight (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013), 62.

it.¹⁵⁷ And yet, if this idealization bears roots in a paucity of historiography, I am interested in the ways in which the evolution of Taqvā'ī's oeuvre demonstrates that idealization exceeds mere absence of information. As I will show in my reading of Taqvā'ī's more realist *Mūsīqī-i Jūnūb: Zar (Music of the South: Zar)*, which chronicles an identical phenomenon but prefers limpid, rather than tenebrous articulation of fact, abstraction and artistic mediation perform enigmatic processual functions for historical transmission that are both necessary and aporetic. Necessary because "pure fact" is always already abstract, conditioned by the possibility of its communication, and thus, dependent upon language in its broadest sense. But because the boundary between abstraction and erasure cannot in advance be adjudicated, its ethical implications generate boundless turmoil.

Appearing just three years after Ghulām Ḥusayn Sā'idī's ethnographic monograph *Ahl-i Havā* and Taqī Modarressi's¹⁵⁸ essay "The Zar Cult in Southern Iran," Taqvā'ī's documentary on zar forms part of a mid-20th century surrealist and anthropological infatuation with trance and possession that both transcends and is yet highly specific to the Iranian frame.¹⁵⁹ In fact, Taqvā'ī

¹⁵⁷ Absence of established and authoritative written records, the abyssal duration of millennia-long trade involving slaves, and the fact that there were rarely specialized slave cargos in the Indian Ocean World region render quantification difficult to assess. And yet, quality, and not quantity, is at stake in the present analysis. While the historiography of African slavery in Iran remains sparse, a few recent studies attend to this gap, although, these studies remain mired in the limits of social science. See for example, Behnaz A. Mirzai's recently published *History of Slavery and Emancipation in Iran, 1800-1929* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2017) ; Mirzai, "African Presence in Iran: Identity and its Reconstruction," *Outre-Mers: Revue d'histoire* 336 (2002): 229-246; Thomas Ricks, "Slaves and Slave Trading in Shi'i Iran AD 1500-1900" *Journal of Asian and African Studies* 36 (2001): 407-18; Ronald Segal, "The 'Heretic' State: Iran," in *Islam's Black Slaves: The Other Black Diaspora* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2001), 119-127.

¹⁵⁸ Modarressi (1931-1997) was a Persian novelist and psychiatrist.

¹⁵⁹ "The Period of Trances" in Maurice Nadeau, *History of Surrealism*, trans. Richard Howard (New York : Collier Books, 1967). Though it is often assumed that surrealism was cultivated primarily in Europe, Nadeau emphasizes that no artistic movement previous to surrealism shared its international scope, and that it was in fact surrealism's burgeoning life in Asia and Africa that sustained its life as one of the most

accompanied Sā‘idī for portions of his fieldwork, acting as a kind of conduit for southern culture, with which he was familiar because of his own upbringing in the capital of Iran’s southwestern province of Khūzistān—Abādān. Zar names¹⁶⁰ the belief in rambunctious and malignant spirits that circulate in the intestines of humans and penetrate the skeletal frame, as well as the associated rituals “meant to shake the spirits from the skeleton.”¹⁶¹ Because variations on zar are found throughout Africa¹⁶² and primarily amongst African slave descendants in the Middle East, this ritual is thought to constitute a trace of Sub-Saharan and Indian Ocean World slavery, for which concrete archival material is not only chaotically dispersed and often absent, but for some, chronically undesirable.¹⁶³

significant movements of the 20th century. See also the oeuvre of French filmmaker-ethnographer Jean Rouch, a pioneer of visual anthropology.

¹⁶⁰ Taghi Modarressi takes up a quirky etymological argument for the Persian origins of the term zar. Though his thesis is usually considered invalid by contemporary zar scholarship, Modarressi claims that the introduction of zar into Iran dates back to the 16th century Portuguese invasion of the islands of Kisham, Hingum and Hurmuz, where the African crew of the Portuguese viceroy Alphonso d'Albuquerque stayed behind once King Abbas and the English burned the Portuguese vessels and forced them out of the islands. These African sailors remained more or less endogenous, practicing and transmitting the tradition of zar to future generations in relative isolation. As this theory of “African sailors” telescopes, the relationship between zar and slavery is obscure in traditional Iranian scholarship, much more so than it is for other Middle Eastern countries, which generally openly avow the relationship. Taghi Modarressi, “The Zar Cult in Southern Iran,” in *Trance and Possession States*, ed. Raymond Prince (Montreal: R. M. Bucke Memorial Society, 1968). This obscurity is inevitably compounded by theories of black presence in Iran that emphasize the existence of blacks in Iran since antiquity, such as Iraj Afshār’s *Khūzistān va Tamaddun-i Dīrīnah-yi Ān*, vol. 1 (Tihārān: Sazmān-i Chāp va Intishārāt-i Vizārat-i Farhang va Irshād-i Islāmī, 1373/1994), 462.

¹⁶¹ Sā‘idī 5. Sā‘idī notes that the only studies of zar in Iran prior to his had focused on the dance aspect of the ritual, but not penetrated the meaning of the illnesses and ceremonial remedies.

¹⁶² In Africa, the term *zar-bori* is often used, bori constituting a separate cult that is prevalent in West Africa and related to a similar form of spirit possession. Historically zar-bori is the largest and most widely distributed indigenous spirit healing cult in Africa. I.M. Lewis, Ahmed Al-Safi and Sayyid Hurreiz, eds. *Women's Medicine: The Zar-Bori Cult in Africa and Beyond* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1991), 2.

¹⁶³ Ehud Toledano notes that in general, work on the slave trade in the Middle East has proceeded slowly not due to the lack of its history or longevity, but because of “attitude hurdles.” For the case of the Ottoman Empire, for example, Toledano writes “the study of slavery...has suffered from the lack of an interested,

Despite the many interpretations of zar throughout the Middle East and even within the south of Iran itself,¹⁶⁴ what is common to the tradition is the ubiquitous presence of a large drum called *duhul*.¹⁶⁵ As Sā‘idī details in his ethnography, this particular drum awakens the wind spirits from the body of the afflicted,¹⁶⁶ and is also evidence of the celebratory, community-oriented character of zar. The introduction to the rhythmic drumming of *duhul* in Taqvā’ī’s film accompanies Shāmlū’s first insinuation of the zar ritual as a form of covert community: “one ‘hava’ girl, bamboo in hand, wanders around Lingih, searching for jinn-stricken to gather.” Among the features the zar cult in Iran shares with other Middle Eastern countries is its emphasis on exclusivity and secrecy, which contrasts with the public accessibility of zar ceremonies practiced in African regions.¹⁶⁷ The distinction strengthens G.P. Makris’s thesis that the exclusivity unique to zar in the Middle East is related to the feeling of subordination those who engage in these practices feel in general society, tying its presence to the experience of slavery, dishonor and exclusion from mainstream society that slave legacy brings with it. Though Africans have not been

engaged constituency, namely...there are no self-conscious descendent communities." Ehud R. Toledano, *As if Silent and Absent: Bonds of Enslavement in the Islamic Middle East* (New Haven: Yale UP, 2007), 9.

¹⁶⁴ Zar rituals have been observed in Southern Iran, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Oman, Bahrain, Sudan, Somalia, and Ethiopia (all areas touched by slavery). Richard Natvig, “Oromos, Slaves, And the Zar Spirits: A Contribution to the History of the Zar Cult,” *The International Journal of African Historical Studies* 20, no. (1987): 669-89.

¹⁶⁵ The protagonist instruments vary widely from region to region. In *stambeli*, a spirit possession ceremony similar to zar but practiced by Sub-Saharan slave descendants in Tunisia, a three-stringed lute called *gumbri* “speaks” to the spirits. See Richard C. Jankowsky, “Black Spirits, White Saints: Music, Spirit Possession, and Sub-Saharans in Tunisia” *Ethnomusicology* 50. 3 (2006): 373-410. Jankowsky argues that the music’s “ontology is predicated on ... exclusion” (386).

¹⁶⁶“the remedy for winds are not drugs and shots,” but drums (*duhul*) and tambourines (*tambire*), Baba Ayud—a zar expert—informs Sā‘idī in his ethnography (*Ahl-i Havā*, 32).

¹⁶⁷ Raymond Prince, ed. *Trance and Possession States* ((Montreal: R. M. Bucke Memorial Society, 1968), 36; Jean Rouch, *Cine-Ethnography*, trans. Steven Field (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 88.

the only enslaved people in Iran, their discernible difference from the majority of Iranians bears the most palpable mark of this slave legacy.¹⁶⁸ More significantly, the *global* history of African slavery throughout time and space, its integrality to the emergence of modernity on a planetary scale, encrypts, or hieroglyphs a relation between blackness and slavery that undermines the purported privilege and self-evidence of statistical logic.

The techniques Taqvā'ī employs to illustrate zar for the viewer suggest why it might be the consistent object of anthropological fascination: possession here visually indexes the perennial modern philosophical problem of the meaning of interiority and exteriority (how to define the self or individual in relation to the body and to the surrounding world; how to formulate a theory of subjectivity and objectivity). Evoking the absence of a distinction, the absence of a will, and, “by extension, the figure of the slave,”¹⁶⁹ Taqvā'ī's film operates the thematic of slavery to elaborate modern concerns about human alienation in an increasingly industrialized and nascently modernizing Iran. In the meantime, the sociohistorical experience of slavery, and all that is encompassed in the cultural distribution of zar with relation to the experience of slavery in Southwest Asia, is itself muffled or discarded as a problem for or of Iranian modernity. In its place, the abstraction of the slave's suffering (interchangeable in the film with “man”'s suffering) is exalted into form, abstraction passing through the evacuation of subjectivity, or, the visualization

¹⁶⁸ The white slave source from the Caucasuses was more or less permanently cut off after the 1828 Treaty of Turkmenchai, after which African slavery experienced a large-scale revival. The historically lower monetary cost of black slaves and confined capacity for social mobility compared to white slaves exemplifies the distinction in their social value, and the compounded abjection of African slaves compared to their nonblack counterparts post-manumission. Bernard Lewis, "The African Diaspora and the Civilization of Islam" in *The African Diaspora: Interpretive Essays*, ed. Martin L. Kilson, Robert I. Rotberg (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1976.)

¹⁶⁹ Paul Christopher Johnson, ed. *Spirited Things: The Work of 'Possession' in Afro-Atlantic Religions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014), 5.

of an interiority free for claim. This exaltation, I detail below, continues to accrue remoter levels of abstraction through Taqvā'ī subsequent work.

In the first few minutes after the drumming achieves uniform pace and conjoins the participants' vocal chanting, the camera draws close to the ahl-i havā—the afflicted man in white turban, slumped in the corner of the room, his eyes closed and head tilted forward as if asleep. As the camera draws in even closer, the man swerves his head from side to side in collusion with the rhythm. Cryptically responding, both the music and camera suddenly cut away from the scene to an image of a broken ceramic window, revealing darkness between the shattered pattern of its intricate grill, and evoking nighttime with the sound of crickets. When the camera cuts back to the drooping man in the corner, the diegetic music of *duhul* and singing recommence; a second cut away with the same strange crickets effect this time reveals a similar radius top window pane, but bare and grill-less—opening onto black empty space, suggesting absence in the place of where character depth, or interiority, might otherwise be elaborated (as in the traditional shot-reverse-shot which simulates dialogue between characters or effects an imagistic monologue through flashback or free association). As the camera cuts back to the man and the zar ceremony again, the ahl-i havā awakes, strokes his face, and opens his eyes with slight surprise, indicating the arousal of zar in his body. When rhythm and music suddenly die and Shāmlū's voice returns, the ahl-i havā halts his erratic dancing, and the participants quiet down. Everyone remains seated, as if attending to Shāmlū's ethereal voice:

The winds have been attributed to the blacks from Africa. Prior to the arrival of the blacks for the cost of dates [the Persian reads literally, *bīsh az an kih siyāh bih bahā-'i khurmah biyāyad,*] the winds were there on the border of the coast; but, like the vital force sustaining a sick body, oil under the seafloor, and intelligence in the mind of a savage, it remained unrecognized. The black tradition, with its experience of hunger, detected the resemblance and brought healing.

Gratuitous African labor peaked in the Persian Gulf in the late 19th century due to the growing demand for commodities like dates and pearls for global markets,¹⁷⁰ but African slaves manned the fields of the Iranian South long before that. References to black slaves cultivating sugar cane in Khūzistān, or Sūsa, date back to the Sasanian period.¹⁷¹ The awkward “bahā-‘i khurmah” refers to this deep historical sedimentation; its untranslatableability reflects Shamlū’s poeticization of a buried truth. The placement of this narrative fragment toward the end of the film imbues this moment with climactic sense, as if emphasizing the ambivalence of such poetics. When the music ends a final time, it is unclear why; the participants communicate in a cacophony of Gulf dialect, which would have been inscrutable to the majority of Iranian audiences. One of the afflicted appears cured, as he stands up to embrace his fellow ahl-i havā. The other one remains covered, his hands bracing his head, and begins screaming while the camera cuts back to the initial ocean waves of the film. Though this would seem like a plausible ending, imbuing the film with a satisfying circular structure, the camera returns once more to the ahl-i havā, but this time, with the acapella music first heard during an early montage sequence. It is not clear if the music emanates from within the ceremony room, or is meant to evoke another invisible space from the past.

¹⁷⁰ Mathew S. Hopper, "Slaves of One Master: Globalization and the African Diaspora in Arabia in the Age of Empire," in *Indian Ocean Slavery in the Age of Abolition*, eds. Robert Harms, Bernard K. Freamon, David W. Blight (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013), 225; Hopper, "African Presence in Eastern Arabia," in *The Persian Gulf in Modern Times: People, Ports, and History*, ed. Lawrence G. Porter (New York: Palgrave, 2014).

¹⁷¹ Barbara L. Solow, "Capitalism and Slavery in the Exceedingly Long Run," *The Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 17, No. 4 (1987): 712; Maurice Lombard, *The Golden Age of Islam* (Princeton: Markus Wiener, 2004):167. William D. Phillips Jr., "Sugar in Iberia," in *Tropical Babylons: Sugar and the Making of the Atlantic World, 1450-1680* (Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 2004): 299.

The abrupt and inscrutable ending, as if “cut with scissors,” Mujabī wrote in his review, draws a thin yet palpable line between viewers and filmed subjects.¹⁷² The arguably erratic linguistic, mental and physical behavior the film displays allows the Persian-speaking spectator to disidentify, drawing a limit to and for the modern Iranian national identity undergirding the very project of salvage ethnography, and the ethnographiable referents—patois-speaking (and therefore originally non-Iranian) port inhabitants the film chronicles.

Fīlmfārsī and Mūj-i Nū

The theme of madness that sustains Taqvā’ī’s focus on the psychic contagion and terrestrial destruction of African-transmitted zar penetrates his contemporaneous and subsequent work, even as Africa dissolves in the repetitious movement of this abstraction. Madness reinvigorates Iranian cinema, minting a new stage of filmmaking which would later become recognizable under the too capacious term, the Iranian New Wave, *Mūj-i Nū*. Criticism of the New Wave generally clashes over the precise definition of the movement, whether the movement existed in fact or in a fantasy fulfilled retroactively by critics: “Reviewing the works on the New Wave, either before or after the Revolution, in English or Farsi, we find a sort of confused, disordered, and ambiguous perception,” writes Jāhid.¹⁷³ In comments, Ibrāhīm Gulistān, whose *Khisht va Āyinah* (1965/1344 sh) many critics consider part of the movement’s inception, sometimes eschews the concept of a New Wave altogether. The lack of theoretical precision in its criticism and in its practice reflects the spontaneity, contingency and ephemerality of the *Mūj-i Nū*, whose underlying unifying feature, if such existed, was above all resistance to the

¹⁷² Mujabī, *Mu‘arrifi*, 145.

¹⁷³ Jāhid, *Directory*, 85.

complacency and political impotence of mainstream film culture, a culture generally encompassed by the derogatory neologism *filmfārsi*.¹⁷⁴ Taqvā'ī's first feature film, produced and released almost simultaneously with *Bād-i Jin, Ārāmish dar Hūzur-i Digarān* (*Tranquility in the Presence of Others* 1970/1949 sh), breaks with the status quo of the revered happy Hollywood ending by delving into the existential depths of human degeneration. like Ghulām-Husayn Sā'idī's more famous screenplay, adapted by Dāriyūsh Mihrjui in *Gav* (*Cow* 1969/1348 sh) *Tranquility* explores mental disintegration and the funereal darkness of modernity's alienating forces. If *filmfārsi*'s affinity for hybridized melodrama trafficked in cabaret scenes, gratuitous sexual imagery and stilted narratives, Mihrjūī and Taqvā'ī's work were remarkably novel for the period, and, importantly, bridged by the literary figure of Sā'idī.

¹⁷⁴ *Fīlmfārsī*, literally Persian language films, refers to a genre of so-called “B-grade” commercial melodramas, comedies and musicals prevalent in Iran between approximately 1950-1980. Hūshang Kāvūsī coined the term in the 1950s in the Iranian film journal, *Firdūsī* (Mu'azzizī'niyā, *Fīlmfārsī Chīst?*, 8), and the neologism is generally attributed to him. However, as Pedram Partovi points out, its usage probably dates earlier in the promotion of foreign features dubbed in Persian (*Popular Iranian Cinema*, 4).



Figure 5. Still from *Tranquility in the Presence of Others* (1970)

About a retired, recently remarried, mentally disturbed colonel who comes to visit his two daughters in the city, *Tranquility* derives from a short story of the same name by Sā'idī' collected in his 1967 anthology, *Vāhamah'hā'i bī nām va Nishān (Unnameable and Invisible Fears)*. Like his films to come, Taqvā'ī's feature *Tranquility in the Presence of Others* responds to the theme of madness in recognizably modernist ways: through figures of urban disquietude marked by a predominance of closed-form aesthetics: dark interiors, hospital corridors, and nighttime, counterbalanced by foreboding outdoor scenes, such as the memorable sequence of Akbar Mishkīn (the colonel) marching along a barbed-wire fence in the midday sun, hallucinating the rhythmic music of a military salute. Two long outdoor tracking sequences outside the hospital overwhelmed by the clamor of cawing crows establishes a certain fidelity to the original text and exemplifies the extent to which, as in *Bād-i Jin*, extension and interior disquiet translate one another. Simultaneously playing into and recoiling from the period's

demand for sexually exploitative films, the colonel's daughters Malīhih (Parto Nouri) and Mahlaqā (Leila Baharan) live alone, command their own household, and date and sleep around.¹⁷⁵ In Taqvā'ī's version, the film opens with a nihilistic conversation between Mahlaqā and her boyfriend about the futility of monogamy, followed by a vivid scene of their love-making. The daughters exemplify the dangers of women's liberation in the degenerate but resolute edifice of Iranian patriarchy. His aging alienates the colonel from this edifice, to which he longs to remain relevant. "Everyone would freeze in their places when the Colonel would walk in," he tells his young wife, Manījih (Surayā Ghāsimī). "Now, even the servant doesn't listen to me." Patriarchy's degeneration and the daughters' involvement in it is dramatized in the film adaptation when Malīhih commits suicide as a result of her devolution into depression after a hollow romance ends in betrayal (a somewhat radical interpretation of Sā'idī's less sensational ending, which is marked by a journey to an unnamed abroad). The film's depiction of the infiltration of Western pop culture, the corruption and decrepitude of modern medicine practices, and the trite intellectual clashes characterizing the contemporary middle class are all carried out with a uniform white cast of Persian speaking actors clad in European fashion and coifs.

When asked why he chose Sā'idī's short story for his first feature length film, Taqvā'ī admits he was attracted to the mystery inside the story, "The feeling one gets throughout the story...something like the ineffable."¹⁷⁶ That sense of the transcendent present in *Ārāmish* and *Bād-i Jin* delineates an undeniable, if unlikely, relation between them. As Taqvā'ī mentions in a 1986 interview in the Iranian film journal *Sitārih Sīnamā*, *Bād-i Jin* was one of his "dearest"

¹⁷⁵ Atwood, Blake. "When the sun goes down: Sex, desire and cinema in 1970s Tehran," *Asian Cinema* 27, no. 2 (2016): 127–50.

¹⁷⁶ Haydarī, *Mu'arrifi*, 207.

films, specifically because of the novelty of its subject and the "strangeness of its theme."¹⁷⁷ At a private viewing of *Tranquility* in 1971/1350 sh Taqvā'ī discussed his intense experience of the desolation and ruination of the "jin-ridden" city of Lingih, hinting at a transmutation of atmospheric elements between the two films, and affirming Taqvā'ī's esteem of atmosphere and spatiality as the ground of art and of history: "Without atmosphere, art is meaningless... Without geography there is no history... The South for me is a very far-reaching geography."¹⁷⁸ The close temporal proximity in both films' productions and identity of the author of both proto-texts more obviously strengthens the bizarre affinity between them.

Though released in 1970/1349 sh, *Ārāmish* was immediately banned upon its exhibition, and a third of its footage censored;¹⁷⁹ it thus lacked the opportunity to achieve a level of fame analogous to *Cow*, generally prized as the "first" New Wave film.¹⁸⁰ If, as Jāhid observes, "the sad fate of the villager" in *Cow* is transposed to the family and entire society in *Tranquility*, the shift in setting from rural to urban sharpens a vexed disjunction between *Tranquility* and Taqvā'ī's earlier work, between the New Wave film and its ethnographic supplement.¹⁸¹ The difference between the quality and kind of madness conjured by *Bād-i Jin*'s thematization of the archaic and ritualistic and *Tranquility*'s avail of anxiety impresses a difference in levels or depths of subjectivity. This difference in levels stands in for a spatio-temporal rupture that dissimulates the conceptual function of the modern. In both its aesthetic decisions and sobriety, *Tranquility* marks a distinct moment in Taqvā'ī's oeuvre. And yet, its gravity and circumscribed social

¹⁷⁷ Ibid., 203

¹⁷⁸ Ibid., 37.

¹⁷⁹ Issari, *Cinema in Iran*, 216.

¹⁸⁰ Explains Naficy, "Temporally, the new wave lasted for about a decade. Specifically, the movement began with Mehrjui's *The Cow* in 1969" (*A Social History*, 349).

¹⁸¹ Jāhid, *Directory*, 103.

awareness, which distinguishes it from the *filmfārsī* formula of other films of the period infects Taqvā'ī's other feature films from this decade, such as *Sadiq the Kurd* (*Sādiq Kurdiḥ* 1972/1351 sh) and *The Curse* (*Nifrīn* 1973/1352 sh). Both *Sādiq Kurdiḥ* and *Nifrīn* take place in southern provinces, Khūzistān and Hurmuzgān respectively, bearing subtle and conspicuous traces of *Bād-i Jin*'s subject: zar. In *Sādiq Kurdiḥ*, for example, a woman sings a lullaby identical to the one performed during the montage scene in *Bād-i Jin* described above. Sādiq (Saīd Rād)'s wife has just been raped and murdered by a truck driver, launching the protagonist into a murder rampage in seek of vengeance for his wife's true killer. Apart from literalizing it in its title, *Nifrīn* elevates the theme of wind-affliction to its narrative core. In the film, a construction worker (Bihrūz Vūsūqī) moves to a small village in Bandar Abbas to help a woman (Fakhrī Khurvash) repair and repaint her home. During his visit, the worker observes the dysfunctional relationship between the woman and her husband (Jamshīd Mashayikhī), who he later learns is the son of the village's deceased sheikh. (Bizarrely, none of the film characters receive fictional names, so I refer to the characters through the names of their corresponding actors.) An alcoholic and opium addict, Mashayikhī, the village landowner, has squandered his family wealth, leaving his wife to manage the estate. Vūsūqī also learns that the villagers believe the landowner is "jin-zadih," or ahl-i havā. An old man (Muhamad Taqī Kahnimūī) that lives with Mashayikhī and Khurvash, remains one of the last of the village land workers. He attributes the desertion of the village by the farmers, and the destruction of the village's date palms to the malignant force of Mashayikhī's wind-affliction. Hamoun, of whom all we ever learn is his name, has ascertained it, Kahnimūī promises. "Well it was Hamoun. He would know," the old man tells an incredulous Vūsūqī. "He would just know... from the air [havā]. From the way the wind swishes through the leaves at night." Vūsūqī laughs.



Figure 6. The camera pauses on two black children crouched behind crates of fruit which intervene in the tracking shot of Behrouz Vusughi and the old man.

The causal relationship between winds and destruction is thus borrowed and repeated from *Bād-i Jin*, but the winds' African origins are displaced onto a negligible detail, a fleeting, meaningless moment in the film. Africanness, its historical relationship to the zar complex as it is framed by *Bād-i Jin* and its counterpart (*Mūsīqī-i Jūnūb*, discussed below) is absorbed by other articulations of blackness that are no less evocative and ambiguous. Throughout *Nifrīn*, the sheikh's son Mashayikhī repeatedly disappoints his wife, Khurvash; his separate bedroom, where he sleeps alone, displays walls papered with images of naked women (evoking a detail from Taqvā'ī's collection of eight short stories, *Tābistān-i Hamān Sāl*); he steals money from Vūsūqī's bag to purchase alcohol from a group of youths playing on a dock—strangely shot, the sequence ends in a clothed orgy. The sheikh's son commits his greatest sin when he steals the

household income from his wife and disappears to smoke opium with a group of addicts. Livid upon hearing the news, Kahnimūī vows to kill him and storms off, accompanied by Vūsūqī. From various long shots, the camera tracks the two men marching through a path lined with palm trees as stormy music dramatizes their mission. At a point along their journey the distance between the camera and the men is cut off by the length of a thatched hut. The camera's momentum continues, then stops on two small black boys crouched behind crates of fruit.

A private and codeless color symbolism thus permeates the film. Vūsūqī paints the walls of the home white, which causes Khurvash increasing bouts of dizziness; Vūsūqī's charisma infects her. The night he paints her bedroom he warns her not to sleep in it because of the smell of the fumes. As Khurvash gazes out over the light speckled night harbour from her makeshift outdoor bed, she gets up, trance-like, and walks toward Vūsūqī's room. It is the first night they sleep together. In the final scene, Khurvash and Vūsūqī make love on the beach and are overcome by a wave, which covers them in mud. "Mūj!" ("Wave!") yells Khurvash as they laugh, two blackened figures running away from the shore. Vūsūqī is suddenly shot and falls to the ground. Khurvash spots her husband sitting with a gun under a tree. She stands over him, her body and face still covered in mud, takes his rifle and strikes him in the head. After placing a coiled cloth under Vūsūqī's head as a cushion, she walks back over the pebbly shore to her husband's corpse. The mud on her skin now dry; it appears white instead of black. She cradles her husband's head and screams "Khudah!" (God!), ending the film.

Although definite outliers, *Tranquility in the Presence of Others*, *Sādiq Kurdi*, and *Nifrīn* are all haunted by and borne out of the expectations of the predominant genre of the time period. Their distinction is often marked by an ethnographic tendency. For instance, if the

cabaret trope of filmfārsī gathered striking force in the 1950s, 60s and 70s, *Sādiq Kurdi* transforms the sexualized dancing female body through an ethnographic translation. A dance sequence toward the middle of the film shows a tribal woman dancing amidst a circle of mostly male onlookers by a fire. Unlike the typical “sweeps” of the dancer’s gyrating body which Kavūsī decried, the camera’s gaze assimilates an ethnographic curiosity in the detail:¹⁸² a montage of close shots showing hands drumming neutralizes the focus on the dancing body, which is fully clothed in the anomaly of a long shimmery dress. The drunk man who loudly goads on the dancer is abruptly killed by Sādiq when he leaves the circle to get more alcohol from his truck, an avenged misogyny.

Taqvā’ī’s more famous and critically-acclaimed *Captain Sun* (*Nākhudā Khurshīd* 1987/1368 sh) takes place in the same port as *Bād-i Jin* (Bandar Lingih), adapts tropes such as belief in jin as the source of Lingih’s destruction, thematizes creolized Persian identity in the South, pearling, and the smuggling of human beings on dhows, thus resonating much more obviously with *Bād-i Jin* in content, if less so in style. As Malūl leads Farhan (Alī Nasīrīān) through the town to his hostel, Farhan looks out over a deserted building foundation: “What calamity has befallen this city? An earthquake?” Malūl replies, “Can earthquakes cause such destruction?” The city has become a jin-hive, he whispers.

One could thus single out and closely read any of Taqvā’ī’s feature films as fictionalized extensions and abstractions of *Bād-i Jin*. If I insist on *Tranquility*’s privilege, it is due to its uncanny proximity to the production of *Bād-i Jin*; because it marks another film adaption of a text written by Sā’idī; because it was chosen by the Ministry of Culture and Art for the “Week of Iranian Movies” in Paris as a representative of the modern Iranian filmic imagination—thus

¹⁸² Kavūsī calls this kind of action sweeping (jārū kardan) the dancer’s body. Jamāl Umīd, *Tārīkh-i Sīnamā-yi Īrān: 1279–1357* (Tehran: Intishārāt-i Rawzanah, 1998), 308.

expressing a conscious articulation of what Iranian (filmic) modernity might look like to the world; and is retroactively recognized by critics as a crucial milestone in the New Wave movement. Despite the handicap of its notorious banning, it was one of the first films commissioned for national television and formed part of the resistance movement to *filmfārsī*. (Jāhid suggests that Taqvā'ī was “forced” to make *Sādiq Kurdiḥ* and *Nifrīn* in the wake of *Tranquility*'s banning: Taghvai "could probably be called the most important victim of the New Wave; a director that made the most important New Wave film...yet failed to continue on the path..."¹⁸³)

It is tempting to attribute *Tranquility*'s distinction to Sā'idī's authorly presence. For, although the striking variation in approaches to character “depth” in Taqvā'ī's two films can be explained away through recourse to genre distinction—one an experimental documentary and the other a feature-length narrative film—the discrepancy is curiously mirrored in Sā'idī's two collections of short stories, *Fear and Trembling (Tars va Larz)* and *Unnameable and Invisible Fears (Vāhamah'hā-yī bī nām va nishān)*. Both collections were published just subsequent to Sā'idī's period of field travel and exposure to village life throughout the Iranian South and countryside. As in his other works, dialogue largely dominates the stories of *Fear and Trembling*—however, dialogue that is muted, flat, and utilitarian, delivered for the relay of information about events and actions, rather than revelatory of thoughts and feelings. The sentence construction of his prose is predominantly short, matter-of-fact, and functional. Though anxiety thematically overwhelms both series of stories, in *Fear and Trembling*, anxiety emanates from a naturalized fear of preternatural forces radiating out of from physical elements like the sea and air. “Tranquility” and

¹⁸³ Jāhid, *Directory*, 105.

the larger collection of which it is a part, psychologizes anxiety; it surfaces from human stress about the perceived dissolution and loss of traditional social hierarchies and structures. Thus, for example, the colonel's development of post-traumatic stress disorder results not from any empirical war but ensues from his dwindling sense of self-significance. In an early scene in Taqvā'ī's film, the colonel stares out through the living room window pane into the darkness: "now it's time for strange thoughts."

In the textual form of *Tranquility in the Presence of Others*, the reader gleans details about each character's interior life through free-indirect discourse and long, winding sentences overflowing with copulas and testifying to the anxiety inherent in a thinking, speaking consciousness: "All the characters in the story could conceivably be the patients of their creator, a psychiatrist as well as a creative writer," writes Rivanne Sandler of the text, indicating a roundedness to *Tranquility's* characters, who are constituted by multiple layers of psychic substance.¹⁸⁴ In Taqvā'ī's adaptation, the interior life of Sae'di's characters plays out through extensive and nuanced dialogue, complex facial expressions, and lingering close-ups. Released just one year earlier, *Bād-i Jin's* subjects are spectral characters. Broken window panes perform the work of depth; they communicate just once in a language unintelligible to the mainstream Iranian public, and live in a dying, miasmatic past; one whose African origins bestow the ultimate profundity to the modernness of the film's form.¹⁸⁵ Modernness thus emerges as an effect of displacement, extracted from the figures who are necessarily denied the characterizations and

¹⁸⁴ Rivanne Sandler, "Literary Developments in Iran in the 1960s and the 1970s Prior to the 1978 Revolution" *World Literature Today*, 60. 2, (1986), 248.

¹⁸⁵ Achille Mbembe argues that discourses and narratives about Africa contain an "appealing depth," one which marks Africa as the epitome of the archaic philosophical and psychological problem of otherness. Mbembe, *On the Postcolony* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 1.

forms of coherence they produce. Superstitious and dreaming, *Bād-i Jin*'s subjects lack the sophistication to suffer the “unnameable” metaphysical anxieties symptomatic of modern subjectivities. Their suffering is primordial. The content of sexual difference never emerges in such sleep, and subjectivity feels too ripe a term to describe what the viewer learns of the windridden. As suggested, ruined interiority frequently pours out into the landscape, and an archaic form of godly monovocalism endowed with the responsibility of explaining events through poetic prose. For, though Taqvā'ī's choice of a famous poet to narrate the film imbues the ethnographic content of the film with reflexivity, in another sense, it is completely aligned with the state-ordained mandates of the period that ethnographic films appoint for voiceover narration a “‘person with a recognizable high-class or good Persian accent,’ not a person with a minority accent.”¹⁸⁶

To clarify, absence of depth does not correspond in any degree to writerly sophistication. The notion of depth, like “character development” is somewhat of an antiquated literary device which reveals less than it obscures. The absence of depth can sometimes point toward the elusiveness of the subject, or the difficulty of defining the features of a self, and in this sense, bears the potential to say much more, much more convincingly about interiority than the piling up of psychological details, as the genre of modernism in its canonized Anglo-European sense shows. The foremost figure connected to the formalization of Persian literary forms, Muḥammad-Taqī Bahār, championed simplicity over intricacy (though racializing his recommendations by associating clarity with ancient Persian poetics and decadence with the corruption of Arab literary influence), suggesting a registration of concision's potency.¹⁸⁷ But nondimensionality

¹⁸⁶ Naficy, *A Social History*, 73.

¹⁸⁷ Muḥammad Taqī Bahār. *Sabk'shināsī, yā, Tārīkh-i taṭavvur she'r- Fārsī: baraye tadrīs-i karshenasi-e arshad, reshteh-e zaban va adabiyyat-e Farsi* (Tehran: Tūs, 2001).

accrues particular meaning when flat characters reference former slaves; it gains a further meaning when situated next to a work that fills in and activates the interiority of urban Iranian subjects with psychology, sexual agency, and consciousness of historical and social change. Iranian culture production dilutes the complex history and variegated origins of enslaved African populations into a homogenized stereotypes like the *sīyah* of blackface theater (*rūhuzī* and *sīyah bazi*).¹⁸⁸ or the peripheral servant in modernist fiction,¹⁸⁹ and has done so for centuries. In Taqvā'ī's film, the black stereotype is characterized by an occult, at times evil, at times fetishized healing experience which has ruined Bander Lingih. In this case, the peculiar difference sustained between the absence and presence of psychologized consciousness and historical awareness in *Bād-i Jin* and *Ārāmish*, *Tars va Larz* and *Vāhamah'hā*, built from similar ethnographic experiences, is itself suggestive of a preconceptual space of possibility that allows the modern to cohere as a concept structured by the telic fantasy of a full, feeling subject. When the modern is elaborated through forms that correspond to differences in degrees of subjectivity (as it has been at least since Hegel, the author of modernity's epochalism) it is a racialized concept.¹⁹⁰ This is particularly so when such differences perpetuate the naturalization of uneven

¹⁸⁸ New Wave filmmaker Farukh Ghafāry is one of the few commentators on the history of theater in Iran that avows the relation between the figure of the Siah and African slavery in Iran. Farrokh Ghafāry, "Evolution of Rituals and Theater in Iran" *Iranian Studies* 17, no. 4 (1984): 361-389.

¹⁸⁹ In her study on the relationship between the legal discourse on marriage in Iran and the trope of companionate marriage in modern Iranian literature, Amy Motlagh attends to the role of the slave-servant in a few modernist works, arguing that the figure of the female servant (usually rural, uneducated, of African ancestry, antimodern, sexually or racially impure) threatened "the achievement of a modern state founded on companionate marriage" of which the Iranian, Persian-speaking woman was to become the prototypical agent. The demonization of the African slave or rural servant in fiction and in constitutional discourse normalized monogamous heterosexual marriage relations thought to be integral to Iranian modernity. Amy Motlagh, "Ain't I a Woman: Domesticity's Other," in *Burying the Beloved: Marriage, Realism, and Reform in Modern Iran* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2012).

¹⁹⁰ Barnor Hesse, "Racialized modernity: An analytics of white mythologies," *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 30 (2007), 643-63. See also Rei Terada, "Hegel and the Prehistory of the Postracial" *European Romantic Review* 26, no. 3 (2015), 289-99.

power relations, a naturalization both Taqvā'ī and Sā'idī, like the majority of Iranian intellectuals of the time period, opposed in theory and in intent.

The funding impetus for Taqvā'ī's films, prompted by the Iranian government's investment in New Wave filmmakers' ability to draw international acclaim in awards circuits describes the complicity of his films in the manufacture of a desired "modern" Iranian identity—despite Taqvā'ī's own and other filmmakers' reluctance, and sometimes outright hostility to such underlying motivations.¹⁹¹ It is possible that Taqvā'ī's *Bād-i Jin* and certain that *Tranquility in the Presence of Others* never received enough exposure to be privileged with the notoriety of actually succeeding in fulfilling these aspirations. Though *Bād-i Jin* was screened in the capital and a few other cities, the NIRT, who had funded it, ultimately maintained control of its rights and distribution. *Tranquility* was banned for six years and finally released domestically for just eleven nights, when Taqvā'ī agreed to enter the film at the behest of the Ministry of Culture and Art for the "Week of Iranian Movies" in Paris as a work tellingly parading Iran's modern filmic imagination. The film subsequently received permanent ban status.¹⁹² Hamid Reza Sadr estimates that this was due to Taqvā'ī's daring depiction of "men's alienation and women's sexual freedom [which] had no precedent in Iranian cinema."¹⁹³ But the historical paucity of domestic distribution and audience reception do not suffice as criteria for assessing the conditions of possibility for the imagination and coming to fruition of a film's initial premise in the first place. Neither Taqvā'ī's ethnographic film, nor his feature were mere anomalies, but reflections of both contemporary

¹⁹¹ Hamid Naficy, "Cinema as a Political Instrument" in *Politics of Modern Iran*, Vol. 3, ed. Ali Ansari (London: Routledge, 2011), 202.

¹⁹² Naficy, *A Social History*, 371.

¹⁹³ Hamid Reza Sadr, *Iranian Cinema: A Political History* (New York: I.B. Taurus, 2006): 153.

national and global trends of filmmaking, as Fatimah Tobing-Rony has shown.¹⁹⁴ And despite express intentions, at the very least because of the institutional matrix of state-funded cinema in which Taqvā'ī found himself suspended, his films cannot simply or fully be detached from the connection to the desires of necessarily racializing state nationalism they seem to escape when unmoored from context.¹⁹⁵

Mūsīqī-i Jūnūb

Part of his locally-specific body of cultural influences, zar absorbed Taqvā'ī. After filming *Bād-i Jin*, he returned to the South to produce another ethnographic documentary about it, this time in the island of Qishm. Unlike *Bād-i Jin*, *Music of the South: Zar* relinquishes ellipticism for a scientific candidness disavowed in his previous documentary. The film mimics universal ethnographic styles of the period. Taqvā'ī's voice narrates the prosaic geographical and spatial features of the island. We learn for example, that it is the largest island in the Persian Gulf; that the primary forms of livelihood include sailing between Persian Gulf ports, net weaving, rope braiding, fishing and shrimp baiting. Still harmonizing with the esoteric subject matter, poetic embellishments mystify more straightforward lines of narration. Framing the sea, then revolving to reveal a leftward pan of the distant port structures' desolate angularity, Taqvā'ī's voice relates: "The jetty is the beating heart of Bandar Qishm. If the jetty is empty, the town is quiet and serene and until another day, until the coming of another dhow, there is no sound but the sound of the breathing sea. Only at night sometimes the sound of the ahl-i havā 's *duhul* cuts through the sea's breath." Silence neutralizes the droning wind, replacing the pathos-

¹⁹⁴ Fatimah Tobing Rony, *The Third Eye: Race, Cinema, and Ethnographic Spectacle* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996).

¹⁹⁵ For the ineluctable connection between racialization and nationalism see Etienne Balibar, "Racism and Nationalism," in *Race, Nation, Class, Race, Nation, Class: Ambiguous Identities* (London: Verso, 1991).

saturated acapella lullaby that accompanied the oneiric montages of *Bad-i Jin* (and that travels into the nursing scene from *Sādiq Kurdih*). A lengthy continuous shot of a zar ceremony tightens the homology between *Bād-i Jin* and *Mūsīqī-i Jūnūb*, both of which ultimately concern the phenomenon of zar. However, contrasting with his orchestrated non-interference in *Bād-i Jin*, Taghvai's narration guides the viewer through the zar ceremony in *Mūsīqī-i Jūnūb*. In *Bād-i Jin* a confrontation with confusion ensues when the drumming first stops; in *Mūsīqī-i Jūnūb*, the audience takes reprieve in Taqvā'ī's explanation: the zar will not leave the woman's body, the narration informs. "The zar speaks with Baba Darvish." Baba Darvish shows the woman a ring: "this ring must pay for the ceremony so that the wind will leave the body."

In comparison to *Bād-i Jin*'s audiovisual thaumaturgy, *Mūsīqī-i Jūnūb* delivers an understated but aboveboard narrative about zar. At times, certain lines appear lifted straight from Sā'idī's monograph. Thus, we learn that "The zar winds have mostly come from Africa and most of its sufferers are blacks whose long-ago ancestors came to be slaves" ("Bih ghulāmī va kanīzī omadand"), a description which conforms to the black subjects of *Mūsīqī-i Jūnūb*. This statement's facticity clearly contrasts with the more poetically embroidered "they came for the price of dates," or, "they came for dates," that Shāmlū recites at the climax of *Bād-i Jin*.

Whether *Music of the South*'s prosaic forthrightness cost it its success, or whether there were additional causes for its doom to oblivion, the film falls among Taqvā'ī's unmemorable works. Unlike *Bād-i Jin*, *Tranquility in the Presence of Others*, and *Arb'a'ān*, all of which were selected as Iranian entries to the 1972 Venice film festival, *Music of the South: Zar* left no lasting imprint, evidenced in the near impossibility of its retrieval today and the unfamiliarity of its title. The success of abstraction within the ethnographic film genre (as opposed to its position within anthropology, where facts still bear a measure of hegemony) is worth remarking and has not, one

might argue, yet received its full exploration in either film studies, nor in the anthropology-based scholarship on experimental ethnography. Does the valorization of abstraction express a desire for remove from facts or simply inflate facticity's least-understood condition of possibility? Facts, that is, are never purely unmediated, passing through, or more accurately, absorbing some form of language and space of possibility for intersubjectivity. Where and how this absorption becomes aestheticization—an eternal problem for the history of art, its self-definition and self-criticism—the resultant artifact seems to exceed the possibilities for ethical evaluation. If *Bād-i Jin*, and not *Mūsīqī-i Jūnūb*, its more factic counterpart, influenced later filmmaking and made a palpable mark upon the cinematic history of Iran, its loss of facticity in comparison to *Mūsīqī-i Jūnūb* seems partially responsible. One might hazard such a conclusion based on the evidence: prior to his “comeback” with the television series *Dear Uncle Napoleon* (1976/1355 sh), all of Taqvā'ī's subsequent works abstracted and fictionalized dimensions of the subject of zar; wind possession would return again in 1986. “Malūl, azizam, jūnam, dast var dar az in jin va pari,” (“Malūl, my dear, let go of this jin and fairy nonsense,” one of the characters in *Captain Khurshid* pleads.) If the transmission of fact in general depends upon some form of abstraction, and if this abstraction's ethical boundaries remain an open problem, this irresolution bears recursively on the facticity of fact. The increasingly complex layers of fictionalization begins simply with a redacting translation: “The zar winds have mostly come from Africa and most of its sufferers are blacks whose long-ago ancestors came to be slaves,” to “They came for dates.” Redaction in this context embodies a poetics that cannot simply be described as erasure; but nor can it be so easily celebrated, for it bodes a tendentious repression that characterizes Iran's relationship to its own history of slavery.

Taqvā'ī and the artistic cohort to which he belonged regarded film as a means to both connect with and reflect the societal issues of the Iranian people. Ethnographic documentary appeared to Taqvā'ī a form of democratic history-writing or archiving: in an interview he reveals not only his preference for documentary to feature film form, because the former could most accurately represent his life experiences, but that his experiences—presumably of life in the South of Iran—were indeed worthy of inscription. It would be “a shame if they weren't recorded.”¹⁹⁶ That Taqvā'ī and filmmakers like him were eager in the first place to collude with a political regime that they opposed ideologically testifies to certain hopes and investments in national television's potency as a medium for mass communication. In the same interview Taqvā'ī expresses resentment about the fact that the NIRT refused to televise his works, despite having ordered some of them to be made and offering him funding to make them in the first place: “The films I made about the traditional livelihoods of the people were in order to produce knowledge and familiarity with this wonderful society.” If the Censorship Bureau foreclosed distribution of his films in Iran, he lamented, why wouldn't they at least allow the films to flourish outside the country?¹⁹⁷

Just as it has developed sophisticated critiques of the historiographical method and its latent biases and ideologies, a postcolonial or anticolonial impulse implicitly inspires studies which seek to displace the European locus of that structure of periodization called modernism. While the “globalist turn” to modernism studies developed largely subsequently to the postcolonial moment in the Western academy, pushing for research on transnational exchanges and alternative models of analysis, the debate about the formation of Persian modernism predates

¹⁹⁶ Haydarī, 202.

¹⁹⁷ Ibid., 200.

this more general academic trend, occurring coterminously and thus constituting modernist discourse itself. A major aspect of the debate about Iranian literary modernity traditionally revolved around the question of influence—the commonplace idea that, like so many other non-Western literary movements, Persian modernism developed directly from its influence by European modernism.¹⁹⁸ Detractors of the influence theory underscore the turn to Iranian folk themes and pre-Islamic mythology in the works of such seminal modernist writers as Sādiq Hidāyat to emphasize the indigeneity of modern Persian prose.¹⁹⁹ This revival of folklorist themes and pre-modern clarity is impossible to extract from a larger movement of anthropological impetus institutionally braced, pro-modernist, and alternatively anti-imperialist energies, even where its agenda departs from these. To exemplify this contradiction, the Persian anticipation of Edward Said's *Orientalism*—Jalāl al-i Ahmad's *Westtoxification (Qarbzadigī* 1962/1341 sh)—took inspiration from many from his ethnographic writings, *Awrazān* and *Jazīri*

¹⁹⁸ On the relevance of influence on Persian modernism by European literary movements see for example, Michael Beard, *Hedayat's Blind Owl as a Western Novel* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1990); for views which emphasize the indigeneity of modern Persian prose, see Christophe Balay, Michel Cuypers, *Aux Sources de la Nouvelle Persane* (Paris: Editions Recherche sur les civilisations, 1983) and Mohammad Mehdi Khorrami, *Modern Reflections of Classical Traditions in Persian Fiction* (Lewiston: Edwin Mellon P, 2003).

¹⁹⁹ In his seminal text periodizing Persian literary forms, Taqī-Bahar argued for the pre-modern modernism of Iranian poetry in works such as Sa'di's *Gulistān* from the 13th century, celebrating its simplicity of prose.

'i *Kharg*.²⁰⁰ As Menahem Merhavi points out, these ethnographic works also influenced al-i Ahmad's fiction.²⁰¹

The Iranophilia characteristic of modern Iranian literati of the early 20th century was largely motivated by efforts to rehabilitate the early history of Iranian culture, preserved, it was imagined, in the oral traditions of rural Iranians. Muhammad Alī Jamālzādah's position on the potential for anthropological strategies to serve the project of democratizing Persian literature by reviving authentic Iranian themes testifies to this initial modernist desire, as did Hidāyat's pioneering initiatives to embrace Persian folklore.²⁰² The first Iranian to collect, systematically analyze, and compose methodological guidelines for the study of folk material, encouraging young writers to follow suit, Hidāyat's endeavors were unambiguously charged with racially taxonomic impulse. (His *Nayrangistān* divided folklore between the practices of early Indo-Iranian races and non-Iranian ones, for instance.)²⁰³ These approaches to indigenizing modernism bordered on a desire for purification present in much 19th century reform discourse.²⁰⁴

²⁰⁰ These ethnographic works earned al-i Ahmad a reputation as an ethnographer. He was invited to supervise the publications of the Social Research Institute of the Faculty of Letters at the University of Tehran and to attend the Seventh International Conference of Anthropology in Moscow as a representative of Iranian anthropology (Fazeli, *Politics of Culture*, 114).

²⁰¹ Menahem Merhavi. "True Muslims must always be tidy and clean: Exoticism of the countryside in late Pahlavi Iran," in *Constructing Nationalism in Iran: From the Qajars to the Islamic Republic*, ed. Meir Litvak. (London: Routledge, 2017): 164.

²⁰² Fazeli, *Politics of Culture*, 67.

²⁰³ Mohamad Tavakoli-Targhi, "Narrative Identity in the Works of Hedayat and His Contemporaries," in *Sadeq Hedayat: His Work and his Wondrous World*, ed. Homayun Katouzian (New York: Routledge, 2008).

²⁰⁴ For Kamran Talatoff, for example, Parsigera'i, or "Persianism" most aptly characterizes the emergence of Persian modernism: "...its advocates had several immediate objectives: to denounce the use of Arabic terminology; to work toward the purification of the Persian language through poetry; to promote a

Riven with contradiction, and like other authors and artists from the global south, the authors of Iranian literary and filmic modernity shared doubled ambitions to exhibit political grievances through their creations, however varied and diverse their political agendas. (Geeta Kapur documents the political and ideological strategies of canonical Indian New Wave filmmakers through a compelling argument about the force of contradiction in self-proclaimed modernist works that resonates with the present analysis.)²⁰⁵ Taqvā'ī and Sā'idī were among the group of authors who understood themselves as committed to sociopolitical change and journalistic revelation, and doubtlessly their forays into rural Iran formed part of an intent to chronicle the injustices spawned by Pahlavi era dysfunction and oppression. Taqvā'ī's earlier involvement with a collective of writers of Southern origin who endeavored to articulate Gulf impoverishment in the publication *Gāhnāmah Hunar va Adabīyāt-i Jūnūb* affirms such intent: Haydarī insists that Taqvā'ī's *Tābistān-i Hamān Sāl* (*The Summer of That Year 1968/1347 sh*) informed the nascent trend in modern Iranian literature oriented toward working class life.²⁰⁶ Taqvā'ī seems to heighten the impetus toward literary democratization that characterized the modernity of Iranian 20th century literature. If Jamālzadeh could lament the Iranian literati's disregard for mass audiences in favor of a sequestered elitism symbolized by baroque language,²⁰⁷ Taqvā'ī moves this complaint further, relinquishing prose altogether in favor of filmmaking: "There were things in the lives of the people from my birthplace that I saw that I

fictional language closer to common parlance instead of the conventional style; to link ancient Iran to the present time and expunge centuries of Islamic dominance from the memory; and, finally, to promote modernity by creating new literary forms"(25).

²⁰⁵ Geeta Kapur. *When Was Modernism: Essays on Contemporary Cultural Practice in India* (New Delhi: Tulika, 2000). Thanks to Anirban Gupta-Nigam for drawing this connection.

²⁰⁶ Haydarī, *Mu'arrifi va naqd*, 5.

²⁰⁷ Nasrin Rahimieh, "Four Iterations of Persian Literary Nationalism," in Litvak, 44.

wanted to communicate to others. Story writing wasn't appropriate for these experiences, and this is why I chose cinema."²⁰⁸

Generically positioned to do so, *Ahl-i Havā* airs political ambition even more explicitly than Taqvai's collection of stories. After providing detailed descriptions of various aspects of zar belief in the south, Sā'idī declares that zar deserves more research, thought and attention and should not be homogenized or collapsed into the myriad other forms of dealing with spirits; in this region zar "may have an economic and sociological dimension."²⁰⁹ Sā'idī's descriptions of the black communities in the south detail desolation, poverty and segregation, summoning up the reader's moral indignation at reading such anecdotal information as the following. Narrates Sā'idī of the village of Kalāt "a man with a white beard said to an old black man who was sitting near us, 'he's from the jungle, like an animal'. The black man replied 'Yes, I'm from the jungle, like an animal,' and laughed." And "during a circumcision gathering, a few black fishermen were standing nearby watching, and a peddler pointed to them and said, 'They are cows.' And the blacks nodded."²¹⁰

Whatever possible motivations one might attribute to Sā'idī's inclusion of these blatantly antiblack incidents in his monograph, the sparks of indignation and small bids of sympathy collection present in his text get lost in the transformation of his experiences into his fictional short story writing based upon these very encounters. Sā'idī's fictionalized depiction of blackness is one of terrorizing and radical otherness. The first story of *Fear and Trembling* opens with the main character, Salam Ahmad, who hears his name called out from the sea prior to

²⁰⁸ Haydarī, *Mu'arrifi va naqd*, 46.

²⁰⁹ Sā'idī, *Ahl-i Havā*, 10.

²¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 6-7.

glimpsing a “strange black man sitting next to a fire with his wooden leg stretched out in a parlor.” Upon perceiving the figure of the black man—whose name we never learn— Salam Ahmad immediately believes himself to be possessed by an evil wind and runs to his neighbor for help. The villagers, exemplifying the irrationality and superstition of the characters in *Fear*, stone the black man to death in response to Salam Ahmad’s accusation. Salam Ahmad finally heals from his curse in the concluding scene of the story when the villagers thrust him near the dead black man’s pyre of ashes. The black man whose life is sacrificed in exchange for Salam Ahmad’s salvation remains the flattest character of all in this opening story. The author describes only his bizarre literal and figural voraciousness:

‘Even if we kill him, he’ll turn up somewhere else,’ said Zahed. ‘His kind won’t stop until the end of time.’
‘He keeps coming closer. Look at him!’ said Zakariya.’ The black man was very close. His face was quite flat, as if his nose and lips had been gnawed away...
‘I’m hungry, I’m hungry,’ the black man pleaded. The men each picked up a rock and hurled it at the black man.²¹¹

Latent and obscurely articulated anxiety about color and otherness problematizes modernist authors’ purity of political intent in announcing the predicament of the Iranian poor and destitute. In Sā‘idī’s fiction black characters are impoverished, but they are also devious and dangerous, unwarranting of the reader’s sympathy, and stimulating fears surrounding sorcery and remnants of traditional Iranian society that modernizers and their advocates were eager to either eradicate or taxonomize and distance for contemplation, appreciation, or exhibition. In Taqvā’ī’s *Bād-i Jin*, an occult, at times evil, and in any case fetishized healing experience characterizes blackness and its relation to Bandar Lingih’s deterioration. Taqvā’ī remarks that though “winds

²¹¹ Ghulām Husayn Sā‘idī, *Fear and Trembling*. Translated by Minoos Southgate (Washington D.C.: Three Continents, 1984) 12.

wound through the streets of Bandar Lingih since time immemorial, they were not the zar kinds”—“the blacks” brought these latter with them from the “deep jungle interior.”²¹² The subtle and inadvertent displacement of the burden of blame for Lingih’s destruction on the black population, most of which constituted coerced migration and labor, is remarkable. It echoes the strange hierarchization of winds modeled in Sā’idī’s *Ahl-i Havā*: the winds come from far off shores; “the Indian and Persian winds, though frightening, do not compare to the enormous and very black winds that come from the coast of Africa.”²¹³ According to Sā’idī, non-Muslim winds are far more dangerous and unpredictable. How does one understand taxonomy of the metaphysical or cosmological in relation to taxonomy of the body—the bedrock of the history of race?

Ethnography inspired and constituted Iranian literary and filmic modernity. Rendering longstanding indigenous cultural practices objects worthy of visual taxonomy and radically poetic aesthetic innovation, Iranian ethnography participates in and produces the very dichotomy and desired return to the archaic to which it seems to appear as response. *Bād-i Jin* shows how the fetishization of the “pre”—the primitive, the pre-subjective, pre-linguistic—that colors the modern with its charm also occludes the problematic material realities that constituted such poignantly arcane, premodern or nonmodern ways of life ethnographic film believed itself merely to be preserving. Rather than a subject for analysis, or the articulation of social grievance, as was the putative goal of much of the committed modern art of the era, historical suffering quietly sinks into a subtheme of *Bād-i Jin*, a subject for abstraction and experiential intuition (as in the initial shot of the waves; the cut from the close up of ships to the “destruction” of Bandar Lingih carried

²¹² Haydarī, *Mu’arrifi va naqd*, 29.

²¹³ Sā’idī, *Ahl-i Havā*, 22.

over in Shāmlū's narration), than of critical reflection. Barely forming a coherent horizon for an exploration of social redress, the film relegates it, like the actors in the film itself, to an ancient unknowable past: they came "for the price of dates," goes the euphemistic Persian.

The lost history of African slavery in the Persian Gulf—as captured by the modern form of Iranian ethnographic experiment—exemplifies the way in which the modern both enables and impoverishes historical recovery as it silently imprints a racializing telic vision of the subject upon the constellation of objects that enable its own recognition. Studies that attempt to shatter the category of modernism into localizable fragments, or to rearticulate the category with attention to its geographically dispersed iterations tend to do so without adequate explanation for the problem of race at modernity's core, and its relation to histories of African slavery that resist full dissolution. I have tried to show that modernity's grounding in the problem of race, and more specifically, blackness, transcends the geographical and temporal terms by which it has traditionally been framed. Mired in the ambiguity of fascination with the past, the modern compensates its strategies of burial with new lines of creation. But navigating the tolls and boons of such forms, and the relations that constitute, subsume and project them, remains as precarious as drawing clear distinctions between them. The crescendo of abstraction tracked through Naşir Taqvā'ī's oeuvre describes the pneumatics of blackness as a modern poetics, a repository of the past whose conditions of reception is also a participatory forgetting.

CHAPTER THREE

Arba'in and Bakhshū's *Nūhah*: Violence and Ambivalence in Gulf Slavery History

“Every day is ‘Āshūrā, every land is Karbālā’.”

-Shi'i saying

Pink light scattered on water reflects the diminished red of a sun melting into the Gulf's horizon. The placement of this moment feels abrupt, at once violent and grounding, absorbing and projecting the memory of blood condensed through the film's restless narrative. Slaves on dhows traveling from Africa's Eastern coast once landed ashore Persian Gulf sunsets such as the one the camera frames. If colors conjure memory, the landscape's crimson doubtless recalls those bobbing lateens no less than it does Husayn's perennial slaughter at Karbala. The disappearance of the light signals the onset of slow, drawn, rhythmic clapping; the movement of time kept by the measured pounds of palms on chests is not, however, orienting, nor does it signal temporal passage or versability. Nasir Taqvā'ī's experimental documentaries abound with such strangely placed but meaningful images. *Arba'in* (1970) in particular dispenses memory and knowledge whose facticity both transcends and fails the hubris of historical fact, confronting instead the dense impurity at the heart of historicity.

Arabic for “forty” *Arba'in* names a component of the resilient Shi'a elegiac ritual commemorating the murder of Imam Husayn at the infamous 7th century Battle of Karbala, and solidifying a story of origins for the minority twelver sect of Islam.²¹⁴ Spectacular and

²¹⁴ The Muharram celebrations, of which *Arba'in* forms an important if underrepresented part in scholarship, mark the scission between Sunni and Shi'a Muslims. This scission is epitomized by the events symbolized by the month of Muharram in 680 AD. Sunnis espoused succession of the caliphate by

controversial in that Arba'in and the Muharram rituals to which it belongs can involve, beyond a vital component called *sinah-zanī* (chest-striking), self-flagellation, chain-swinging, and knife-, razor-, or sword- driven blood-letting of foreheads, variations of Arba'in prevail throughout modern-day Iran, home to a majority of Shi'a Muslims. In southern provinces like Būshīhr, Arba'in acquires a distinctly black character on account of the scattered African diaspora dispersed along the Gulf for hundreds (in some cases thousands) of years. Descriptive accounts of the ritual stress a qualitative difference in affect and style characterizing regional specificity; in the Iranian South, animation and speed impassion the sobriety familiar to the majority of mourning occasions in the Islamic Middle East, resonating more emphatically with funerary practices in the African world and offering testament to a haphazardly recorded history of movement more or less absorbed in the oblivions of denial, shame, acceptance, indifference, and time.²¹⁵

election, while the Shi'a championed succession of the caliphate through blood-relation to the Prophet Muhammad (Shi'at Ali, or partisans of Ali—Muhammad's cousin). The murder of Muhammad's grandson, Husayn, marks a foundational event, or story of origins, for Shi'a self-conception—one rooted in notions of sacrifice, redemption, and tragedy. The authenticity of this story of origins, is however, inlaid with historical homologies. For example, there are parallels between the narrative of the martyrdom of Husayn and Siyavush in pre-Islamic Iranian legend, and the Muharram celebrations find parallel in the ancient Mesopotamian ritual of Adonis-Tamuz (Chelkowski 3). I will elaborate upon the relevance of such parallelisms further below.

²¹⁵ Nketia, *Funeral Dirigs of the Akan People*. In dirges of the Twi (Asante, Akyem, Kwawu, Akuapem) Nketia studies, funerals demand "not the solemnity of a quiet atmosphere, but rather the turbulence of a festival shorn of its glaring gaiety. Noises of drums and other musical instruments, the sound of guns and human voices singing, wailing or speaking intermingle" (1). It is generally well known that drum and dance formations are components integral to various African funereal cultures. See for example, Nketia, "The Role of the Drummer in African Society," *African Music*, vol. 1, no. 1, 1954, pp. 35; Willie Anku, "Drumming Among the Akan and Anlo Ewe of Ghana: An Introduction" *African Music*, vol. 8, no. 3, 2009, pp. 38-64. On the bounteousness of creative forms expressed through Asante funereal culture see Marleen de Witte, "Money and Death: Funeral Business in Asante, Ghana," *Africa: Journal of the International African Institute* vol. 73., no. 4, 2003, pp. 531-559. See also, Peter Geschiere, "Funerals and Belonging: Different Patterns in South Cameroon," *African Studies Review*, vol. 48, no. 2, 2005, pp. 49. In contrast, Shi'ism traditionally encourages "the replacement of joy with pain," during the Muharram

This exorbitance exhibits itself primarily through musical energy in Taqvā'ī's film. A rather remarkable example from his more or less forgotten oeuvre of amateur ethnographic documentaries, Taqvā'ī's *Arba'in* contains visual and auditory information about South Iranian iterations of the enigmatic mourning ritual which clarifies the singularity of their regional distinction—a distinction which conjures a palpating history bereft of sharp testimony and solicitude for factuality. If the theatrical Ta'ziyeh receives ample attention in academic scholarship on Muharram, Taqvā'ī's choice to focalize its underthought Arb'ain already hints at a kind of subtle recursivity that thematically dominates his treatment of it, further devitalizing this solicitude for fact.²¹⁶ The film visually describes with Taqvā'ī's characteristically coy temporal musings, first, the unique rhythmic *sinj va damām* musical call a group of primarily black male musicians perform in an alleyway—a call to town dwellers to gather in a shared experience of conflated feeling. Then, shifting to a void, the Muharram narrative finds visual expression through flashes of stained glass against a pitched black, metonymizing the Dehdashti mosque where the film takes place: images illustrate floating decapitated arms shedding drops of blood, a faceless Husayn alights on his white horseback, a dizzying swish pan conflating light and color against black space actualizes a question about spatio-temporal coordinates. Following

period, and in literature dating back to the recommendations of the imams, weeping in particular is considered morally valuable (Nakash 165).

²¹⁶ Perhaps due to its resonances with the Christian Passion play, Western scholars found in Ta'ziyeh an object of dramatic scholarly curiosity, abandoning other culturally significant aspects of the Muharram rituals, and inflating Ta'ziyeh's significance for Muslims. In his study of the historical evolution of the rituals, Ali J. Hussain recovers a curious chronology of the rituals' development, where Arb'ain, the 40-day post-mortem celebration in fact forms the ground for what are thought to be more central elements of the Muharram rituals, like the Ta'ziyeh. Early Islamic sources document a detour back to Karbala forty days after Husayn's murder, where the freed members of Husayn's camp were surprised to find a group already gathered in his memory. Husayn's sister Zaynab delivered a eulogy, marking the prehistory of the *majalis* (gatherings in Husayn's memory). Ali J. Hussain, "The Mourning of History and the History of Mourning: The Evolution of Ritual Commemoration of the Battle of Karbala," *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 25.1 (2005), 80.

this transition, or interruption, the film shows day preparations for the Muharram ritual: men carry construction instruments and hang banners. The actual Arb'ain procession proceeds, the exclusively male gathering for the enactment of *nūhah-khūnī* (dirge-singing) and *sīnah-zanī* (chest striking) in the dimmed mosque where an enclosed black singer, the famed Jahānbakhsh Kurdīzādah, more popularly recognized by the nickname Bakhshū, receives gifts of colored sashes strewn upon his chest as he trills tragedy into the microphone, his audience motioning responses to his bellows with powerful body thumps while stepping the circle left.²¹⁷ Like a distracted onlooker, the camera cuts away from this neat chronology to seemingly irrelevant elsewhere. This distraction from the collectivity of the religious fervor magnifies through an interest in lostness expressed as intercut scenes of a veiled black figure ambling down dark corridors of the desolate port city. Spatial devastation and ghost-like vacuity mirror temporal confusion and recurs in Taqvā'ī's work, and in artifacts of Indian Ocean world port cities more generally.²¹⁸

Known in Iran for popularizing the Būshihri variant of Arb'ain throughout the country, Taqvā'ī's experimental documentary provides more to its viewer than mere visual and auditory description about this enigmatic component of the Muharram rituals.²¹⁹ Apart from the plausible haptic benefits afforded by a screen witnessing, Taqvā'ī's documentation of Arba'in merits focus for the way in which its form and content crystallizes historical inquiry about the blackness of

²¹⁷ It is believed that after the Battle of Karbala, Husayn's family was robbed of their belongings; thus, observers throughout Iran also donate cloth to the *Shaddeh*, the uppermost pole extending from a large wooden lattice called *Nakhl*. On the tenth of Ashura at noon carriers ambulate the *Nakhl* as a reminder of ongoing tyranny and oppression (Korom, 48).

²¹⁸ *The Red Sea: In Search of Lost Space*, 45; John Meloy, *Imperial Power and Maritime Trade: Mecca and Cairo in the Middle Ages*.

²¹⁹ Sharīfīyān, 179. According to Sharīfīyān's account the screening of Taqvai's Arb'ain was pivotal for the history of nohe-khuni; for Sharīfīyān, Bakhshu was himself largely responsible for attracting Iranians' attention.

Arba'in's elegiac form as practiced and performed around the borders of the Persian Gulf. In my characterization of a pivotal sunset scene in the introduction, I tried to portray the nebulosity of such inquiry and the precarity in recognizing the transitive character of its satisfaction. In what follows, I suggest that a fuller, replete historiographical account may not necessary remedy whatever shortcomings one tends to associate with historical opacity and paucity, but that such opacity is itself constitutive of the philosophical problem of historicity; moreover, that the conceptual problem that global blackness poses and offers exemplifies that opacity— a resilient absence that sustains knowledge and coheres common sense. If in the previous chapter I was interested in exploring Iranian ethnography's relation to modernism and race, here I engage the cosmic dimensions of translation and transmission of historical fact. A filmic representation of Arb'ain shows how this putatively Shi'a ritual can bear the history of African slavery in the Persian Gulf only recursively: through a kind of peeling away, tearing and tarrying, rather than a simple gathering or accumulation of layers of fact.



Figure 7. Sunset Still from Taqvai's *Arba'in*.

The film offers a model of historical desire whose nonnormativity and ethicality takes place on at least three imbricated scales: on the question of delimiting the conceptual, and not merely the geographical boundaries of Africanness and blackness; engaging with the temporalization of such delimitations, which shift along an uneven and infinitely sliding scale that is expressed on the border between the physiological and the ideational—thus magnifying the ambiguity of their distinction; and finally endeavoring to lift the notion of crossover (transmutation, fusion, melting, syncretism, etc.) out from under a stifling oppositional presumption of purity (order, authenticity, originality, etc.). In the last part of the chapter I reexamine the quality of these scales' imbrications by showing how the Muharram rituals' narratological parallels with Persian antiquity, when touched by the irrecoverable origins of the black inhabitants of Iran in Taqvā'ī's passive representation of fusion, demonstrates the privation and infinite withdrawal at the core of historicity, and the futile but inescapable labor of recourse to it.

Senses of Syncretism

Drawing attention to its subliminal interest, the film's opening high shot condenses the problem of origin first at a material level—one that beckons with discreetly ethnomusicological strategies for tracking diffusion.²²⁰ As if filming from the top of a wall, the camera shows a gathered group of men in an alleyway immersed in a steady beat of *sinj* (cymbals), *damām* (drums), and *būq* (horns). The camera zooms in on one of the *damām*, drawing attention to its intricate features: tanned goat hide stretched across two ends of its *pīp*, or body, suspended by braided bands. Mounted with straps over an old black man's shoulders, the camera zooms in

²²⁰ Ethnomusicology has long relied upon features of musical instruments as criterion for resemblance in the understanding of cultural diffusion. Allan P. Merriam, *The Anthropology of Music*, Northwestern UP, 1964.

steadily upon his face bobbing to and fro adjacent to the drum, while the music steadily accelerates. For a moment the frame holds this adjacency between the musician's face and his drum; in addition to corroborating both historical information about the participation of black musicians in south Iranian ceremonial culture, and more recent ethnographic data shoring up its continuity, this holding evokes the instrument's affirmation of the ambiguously syncretic connection pursued by Iranian ethnomusicologists. The close up of the damām gestures toward Būshihri's recognition of the foreign origins of this membranophonic instrument assuming center stage during Arba'in and other Shi'a ceremonies in the South, and the specific style of rhythm bellowing forth from its body—heavily marked by isochronous pulsing and polyrhythms evocative of African musical cultures, and the myriad realms of expression the “metonymic fallacy” African carries.²²¹

Unlike the *sinj* and *būq*, long staples of traditional Iranian music finding inscriptions in the earliest Persian texts of antiquity, the *damām* asserts a singular significance within the context of the documentary's unfolding: the question of its “foreignness,” its Africanness (thus relation to the long history of the African slave trade), but also, its tremulous universalism and primitivity which destabilizes the first two of these evocations.²²² “Richly catachrestic,” the drum cannot help but recall the very emergence of music,²²³ if not the emergence of language,²²⁴ the

²²¹ Muhsin Sharīfīyān believes these instruments were brought to Būshihri mainly by African slaves, eventually acquiring a sanctified character (100).

²²² In-depth descriptions of *sinj* and *damām*, important elements of *sinj va damām* discussed below, can be found in Rūhangīz Rāhgānī, *Tārīkh-i Mūsīqī Īrān*, Pishraw, 1998.

²²³ Mowitt, 6.

²²⁴ Roland Barthes: “Without rhythm, no language is possible: the sign is based on an oscillation” (“Listening” 249).

human being, and of the pulsation that is the border between violence and repetition undergirding the concept of life more generally.

While the African background of the inhabitants of the southern provinces of Iran has only recently come to the fairly sustained critical scrutiny of scholars, the festive distinctness of southern Iranian music has long been remarked by ethnomusicologists and the general Iranian public, opening onto the microcosm of musical historiography that the black poet and theorist Amiri Baraka and a 20th century anthropological tradition invested in theories of diffusion once identified as the privileged medium for reading African transmutations into blackness.²²⁵ Drumming virtuosity, specifically, distinguishes Būshihīrī and other forms of *jūnūbī* (southern) music and infuses the celebratory aura of South Iranian Arbaʿin in a peculiar form of the more broadspread practice of *nūhah-khūni*—seeping into the deepest strata of the (often politicized) cultures of mourning so integral to Islamic, and specifically Shiʿa ethic and being.²²⁶ Taqvāʾīʾs film engages Būshihīrī musical virtuosity by inviting the rhythm of *sinj va damām*, to guide both the soundtrack and narrative of his film. The film contains no direct information—no language or subtitles— other than that of this rhythm (first of *sinj va damām*; then of *Bakhshū* reliving the tragedy of Karbala for the participants in his Gulf-accented Persian, and the participants self-hitting in response).

²²⁵ For recent scholarship on the African origins of the inhabitants of South Iran which recapitulates older understandings of this “demographic,” see Behnaz Mirzai, “African presence in Iran: identity and its reconstruction.” *Outre-mers*, vol. 89, no. 336-337, 2002, p. 229-46. In general, previous generations of Iranian historians make note of the African character of Southern inhabitants in passing when defining other geographical and anthropological characters of south Iranian provinces like Khūzistān and Būshihīr.

²²⁶ David Pinault, “Lamentation Rituals: Shiite Justifications for Matam (Acts of Mourning and Self-mortification).” *The Shiites : ritual and popular piety in a Muslim community*, St. Martin’s P, 1993); Ruffle, Karen G. *Gender, Sainthood, & Everyday Practice in South Asian Shi’ism*, UNC P, 2011.

Iterations of Arb'ain and the Muharram rituals more broadly obtain significantly divergent molds shaped by time and regional thresholds.²²⁷ Muhsin Sharīfīyān, who extensively studies south Iranian culture, writes that more than any other tradition Būshihri Arba'in has influenced the collective mourning culture of Iran; near identical rituals prevail in two other southern provinces: Khūzistān and Hurmuzgān.²²⁸ More specifically, the percussive tradition of *sinj va damām* distinguishes Būshihri mourning culture, collecting excitement, significance, meaning and perennially attracting the largest number of participants and spectators in Būshihri.²²⁹ For this reason, and like other aspects of the Muharram rituals like self-flagellation which have become the center of controversy amongst the religious elite, the ritual has been as equally demonized and condemned as it is traditionally revered.²³⁰ The excitement elicited by the subtle rhythmic accelerandos and hallucinatory states its entranced and entrancing performers display contradicts the staidness and gravity expected of Islamic lamentation traditions.

Taqvā'ī's film harps upon the perversity of sobriety's contamination with rhythm, exalting animation through editing strategies: quick cuts, unwarranted camera movements, and seemingly senseless images. If holding resilient among the many useful, if ideologically conflicting theories of montage in film theory strains a certain intuition of montage's capacity to

²²⁷ Common to most Muharram cultures in regions with a palpable Shi'a presence (Iran, Iraq, Lebanon) are the following: memorial services, the visitation of Husayn's tomb in Karbala particularly on the tenth day of 'Ashura and the fortieth day after the battle, the public mourning processions, the theatrical representation of the battle, and various forms of flagellation. Yitzhak Nakash, "An Attempt to Trace the Origin of the Rituals of 'Āshūrā'" *Die Welt des Islams*, New Series, vol. 33, no. 2, 1993, pp. 163.

²²⁸ Sharīfīyān, 14.

²²⁹ *Ibid.*, 123. Korom notes the magnetism of drumming in drawing religiously diverse participants in the Hosay processions in Trinidad (101)

²³⁰ On the interesting history of the condemnation of Ashura blood-letting in Lebanon, where the Shi'i population comprise a minority, see Lara Deeb, "Living Ashura in Lebanon: Mourning Transformed to Sacrifice." On speculations on the development of Muharram self-flagellation more generally see Hussain, 86; Nakash, 163.

break into the invisibility of social relations,²³¹ one might recognize in Taqvā'ī's seeming irrelevant juxtapositions a nascent ideation of Būshihri society that refracts historical information. Editing prowess evokes the legacy of African slavery in the Persian Gulf in a way which also lets resound its global horizon: the folding back upon itself which the term “African” requires on any anthropological register—that is, one attempting to define a syncretism—experiences a kind of reactive paralysis at every juncture.

Studies meticulously detail syncretized black spiritual and musical forms abounding throughout the Americas. From blues and jazz, to Santería or regla ocha and Condomblé, black musicology, theology, and theory more broadly form distinct but connected, internally differentiated fields. Less material, even at the level of bare information—thus generally excluded from these rich interconnections—circulates about Eastern instantiations of black articulations surviving in the areas covered by what was once a part of the sprawling 4,000 year old Indian Ocean trade networks. The sheer paucity of data about such vestiges; linguistic barriers compounded by uneven distribution of scholarly resources and labor; the precarity of perceiving, and further, singling out and specifying as black—and, for that matter, African—such articulations render this state understandably so. As an anthropological, and often times problematically ahistorical, term, the contested term syncretization bears flaws that are uniquely magnified in its application to any form of black cultural forms or speculations about them, as the critical work of such thinkers as Paulin Hountondji, Valentin Mudimbe, and students of their work, suggests.²³² As heuristic, syncretism, in its more felicitous denotations, allows at the very

²³¹ *Transcultural Montage*. Edited by Christian Suhr and Rane Willerslev, Berghahn, 2013, pp. 2.

²³² See Stephen Palmié, “Against Syncretism,” in *Counterworks: Managing the Diversity of Knowledge*. Edited by Richard Fardon, Routledge, 1995; and Palmié, *The Cooking of History: How Not to Study Afro-Cuban Religion*. U of Chicago P, 2013.

least for the appearance of otherwise opaque and submerged ways of being and inhabitation. These latter can bear no doubt historical and anthropological value, but also theoretical value, so long as the anthropological strategies at play risk energization by imaginative query and philosophical concern, while remaining responsive and reflective of methodological criticisms, even and especially where these result in impasse or near destruction of inquiry.

Like the content he documents, Taqvā'ī's modernist vision affirms the suitability of moving sound-images to the ambiguity of historical knowing about African diasporic history and its ensuing syncretisms. Amongst the plethora of densely placed cuts intervening and complementing the serialization of musical rituals a shot of two bloated and listless silver fish washed ashore interposes the Dehdashti bur, or tradition of sīnah-zanī encircling.²³³ The syncopated booms of chest pounding overlaying this image of death fertilizes the metonymic powers of water and maritimity for the black tradition. If the sea bears a particular resonance in the black filmic imagination, one strongly associated with the history of forced migration of African peoples through the Atlantic world, Taqvā'ī's catatonic fish distills lesser known histories of such migrations, as it simultaneously reorients the nation-based ideology of historiography and contemporary Gulf nationalist emphases on Bedouin and desert heritage, in favor of a more conflicted perception of boundary that remains paradoxically more faithful to the Gulf past's configuration in the Indian Ocean.²³⁴

²³³ The concentric circles enclosing the nūhah khūn recalls the ubiquitous African diasporic tradition of encircling Sterling Stuckey writes of in *Slave Culture: Nationalist Theory and Foundations of Black America*. Stuckey argues for the ancestral meaning of the circle as it is variously encoded throughout the African diaspora: ceremonial ring shuffling is a kind of ancestral honoring (11).

²³⁴ Nation-driven historiography's denigration of the hydrographic received substantive clarification in French historian Ferdinand Braudel's watershed *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II*, an illumination of the sea's place in world history which inspired the first generation of significant Indian Ocean World studies, like K.N. Chaudhuri's significant *Asia Before Europe: Economy and Civilisation of the Indian Ocean from the Rise of Islam to 1750*. But while the work of this Braudel-inspired coterie paid homage primarily to economic history (often covering such technical minutiae as



Figure 8. Still of bur from *Arb'ain*

Considered by some to be one of the most physically and emotionally painful of occupations,²³⁵ pearling typifies, especially in the modern period, the image African slave labor in the Gulf, which heightened with the peak in industry in the mid-19th century.²³⁶ (By the mid-

boat construction, sailing techniques and climatological details regarding monsoon winds), slavery, and more specifically African servitude figured rarely into their analyses of labor. Chaudhuri's two volumes cover primarily four major moments in the history of the Indian Ocean World: first, the rise of Islam in the seventh century to rise of European colonialism in 18th; second, the massive presence of Chinese civilization; third, periodic migration of people from central Asia; and fourth the growth of European maritime power. In a more recent contribution to Indian Ocean World studies, Shanti Moorthy and Ashraf Jamal note Chaudhuri's "scandalous disregard" for any mention of Southern and Eastern Africa in the role of exchange. Shanti Moorthy and Ashraf Jamal, eds. *Indian Ocean Studies: Cultural, Social, and Political Perspectives*, Routledge, 2010, pp. 16. Ralph Callebert similarly notices this elision: Callebert, "African Mobility and Labor in Global History," *History Compass*, vol.14, no. 3, 2016, pp. 117.

²³⁵ Harban, Jasim. *L'Fjeri: Silsilat al-fann al-sha'bi fi al-Bahrayn*. al-Mu'assasah al-'Arabiyah, 1996.

²³⁶ Hopper, "Slaves of One Master: Globalization and the African Diaspora in Arabia in the Age of Empire" in Robert Harms, Bernard K. Freamon, David W. Blight, eds. *Indian Ocean Slavery in the Age of Abolition*, Yale UP, 2013, pp. 226. With Bahrain at its center of industry, pearling in the Gulf peaked

19th century, African divers in the Gulf numbered around 30,000, or approximately one-third of divers.)²³⁷ Prior to the discovery of oil and its metonymization of the Persian Gulf, the majority of Gulf inhabitants professed subsistence through some form of connection to the sea, laboring as fishermen, pearl-divers, sailors, and shipbuilders. Pearl fishing in particular shines amongst the marine activities fabricating the Persian Gulf's archetype, featuring in regional descriptions over the past 6,000 years and thought to constitute the substrate of early civilization in the region.²³⁸ Taqvā'ī's fish thus coalesces this iconicity, recalling the infamous "parcel of fish eyes" from Dilmun (modern-day Bahrain).²³⁹

While the collapse of the pearl industry in the Gulf since the Japanese discovery of its artificial reproduction²⁴⁰ have all but obliterated the memory of this once thriving industry, the connection between enslavement and sea labor remains "recorded" in the Gulf's richest folk music traditions: fjeri in Bahrain, and the lesser known yazlah in the south of Iran.²⁴¹ Sharing roots with sinj va damām, the central and sanctified musical component of Būshihrī Arba'in,

in the early 20th century, producing nearly half of the world's pearl supply (Hopper, "Slavery, Family Life, And the African Diaspora in the Arabian Gulf, 1880-1940").

²³⁷ Abdul Sheriff, *Slaves, Spices & Ivory in Zanzibar: Integration of an East African Commercial Empire into the World Economy, 1770-1873*, Ohio UP, 1987, pp. 37.

²³⁸ Richard LeBaron Bowen Jr., "Pearl Fisheries of the Persian Gulf" *Middle East Journal* 1951 vol. 5 no. 2, pp. 161. Andrew Lawler, "The Pearl Trade." *Archaeology*, vol. 65, no. 2, 2012, pp. 46.

In *Arab Seafaring in the Indian Ocean in Ancient and Early Medieval Times*, Hourani traces diving and seafaring activities in the Persian Gulf back to the third millennium B.C.

²³⁹ Scholars of Arabian and Mesopotamian antiquity interpret references to "fish eyes" in ancient artifacts to mean pearls. The "parcel of fish eyes" refers to the cuneiform tablet discovered at Ur of the Chaldees and dated to 2,000 B.C. Robert Bowen Jr., "The Pearl Fisheries of the Persian Gulf." *Middle East Journal*, vol. 5, no. 2, 1951, pp. 161.

²⁴⁰ Mathew S. Hopper, "Slaves of One Master: Globalization and the African Diaspora in Arabia in the Age of Empire." *Indian Ocean Slavery in the Age of Abolition*, edited by Robert Harms, Bernard K. Freamon, David W. Blight, Yale UP, 2013, pp. 227.

²⁴¹ Played to energize and also to synchronize boat workers during physically grueling tasks, Būshihrī attribute yazlah to African slaves. According to Andrew Lawler pearls fueled one of the world's most enduring economies—that of the Arabian Gulf since prehistoric times. According to the British Persian Gulf resident John Lorrimer, most slaves had been absorbed into the pearl fisheries by the early 20th century.

yazlah names the musical energy traditionally associated with strenuous boat labor in the Gulf.²⁴² That modern-day ship workers sailing from Zanzibar and Malabar to Būshihīr continue to play *sinj va damām*, supplementing the instrumentals with singing while unloading cargo, further triangulates the connection between *yazlah*, *sinj va damām*, and slave labor,²⁴³ letting to resound the history of African slavery inside the Iranian Muharram tradition *Arb'ain* without any assurance of this resonance's credibility or grounding. This is because Būshihīrīs' own contradictory understandings of *sinj va damām* corroborate only the weakness, rather than the veracity of the connection, at once attesting to a realization of the African origins of the musical style while simultaneously claiming their original Persianness and development from Būshihīr antiquity. Anthropological studies bear out this contest and conflict over musical and ritualistic origins.

Contemporary sound studies inquire into how the physiological dimension of music-making, specifically drumming, embodies or activates histories of violence. For example, in his book detailing the intimacy between embodiment and musical performance, John Mowitt energetically navigates a plethora of disciplinary genres to poeticize the magnificence and violence of musical physicality and "materiality."²⁴⁴ Though Mowitt's text focuses in particular on the history of the trap set, of the relationship between black history and various forms of musical genres, Būshihīr Muharram's *sinj va damām* and *sinah-zanī* practices connect with a certain possibility of violence materialized by music, the acts of its making, and the specificity such crystallization evokes in the context of African diasporic music in a region bereft of

²⁴² Even today, when engaging strenuous agricultural labor such as wheat tilling, or in construction, workers are said to call for a "bor saz" during the final stages of building, which indicates exerting one's greatest effort. Bor saz refers to the last stage of *sine-zani* (chest pounding) in a form of the ritual known as Bor Heydari.

²⁴³ Sharīfīyān, 102.

²⁴⁴ Mowitt, John. *Percussion: Drumming, Beatin, Striking*, Duke UP, 2002.

violence's verification.²⁴⁵ Enclosing the nūhah-khūn—the primary singer—in “bur,” with achingly precise and predetermined rhythm, mourners strike their chests in unison, recreating the sound of a large, collective drum in the violence of self-striking, transmuting African gesture to Shi'a expression, while confounding the direction of that transmutation or transformation.²⁴⁶ The būq's role in sinj va damām strengthens violence's evocation; assuming its own voice, this horn demands so capacious a lung capacity that it usually takes more than one individual to play, one person not being able to perform for more than a minute at a time. In descriptions of horn performance, the physical pain of playing surfaces on the body: “The performer puts so much pressure on himself that the muscles of his neck protrude.”²⁴⁷ Like the drum, the būq ferments layers of meaning: the cavernous lung capacity it requires recalls not only the incredible might demanded by pearling labor, but the deep emotional and physical costs exacted by the occupation itself—on its practitioners and their families, who endured the peak season months in anxiety and fear of no return.²⁴⁸

In *Arb'ain*, the violent and obsessively precise rhythm of slaps consistently overwhelms content: if sinah-zani's predetermined meter and highly organized hitting belies its seeming organicity, spontaneity and primitivity, its association with sinj va damām evokes yazlah's connection to instrumentality and conforms to the water labor conjured by Taqvā'ī's out-of-place dead fish yoked with the essence of African slave songs in the Middle East.²⁴⁹ This synesthetic

²⁴⁵ More closely related, Richard Wolf's research on drumming in the North Indian Muharram rituals asks how Muharram rhythms opens windows into the diverse array of emotions experienced by participants. Richard Wolf, "Embodiment and Ambivalence: Emotion in South Asian Muharram Drumming," *Yearbook for Traditional Music*, vol. 32, 2000, pp. 81-116.

²⁴⁶ Sharīfīyān, 158.

²⁴⁷ Sharīfīyān, *Mūsīqī dar Būshīhr*, pp.34

²⁴⁸ Al-Tae, Nasser, "Enough, Enough, Oh Ocean": Music of the Pearl Divers in the Arabian Gulf." *Middle East Studies Association Bulletin*, vol. 39, no. 1, 2005, pp. 21.

²⁴⁹ Harban, Jasim. L'Fjeri , Silsilat al-fann al-sha'bi fi al-Bahrayn. al-Mu'assasah al-'Arabiyah, 1996.

absorption of the visual by the aural interrogates the salutatory image of “work” that commentators have generally assumed images and scenes like this to evoke. A major film critic and commentator on Taqvā’ī’s work writes that the ubiquitous images of sailboats and freight ships indicate the identity of the laborers in the South and the participants of Arba’īn as represented in the film’s chronicle of the ritual: “shots of farmers working in fields and fishermen going about their business... both integrates the ceremony into daily lives and demonstrates that these passionate, artistic people are the same ones who ordinarily farm and fish.”²⁵⁰ Apt, this interpretation mildly contradicts another plausible one: one that would highlight the notorious details of unfree labor for which Būshīhr served as a significant portal for centuries. The physiological harshness of drum music—which I return to below—overlaying the image of a dead fish revives this connection with or without the assurance of Taqvā’ī’s own intentions.

In scholarship on the origins of blues and jazz, the past of African slave labor irrevocably figures as a primordial recursive echo resounding through each subsequent iteration and performance.²⁵¹ Baraka’s *Blues People* remains one of the most insightful and original studies of this kind detailing the complex and rich history of black music, its transfigurations of contrapuntality, ellipsis, obliquity, antiphonality, and the contradictions of jovial black sound.

²⁵⁰ Naficy, 104

²⁵¹ The unobvious polyphony of ways of construing the nature of the proximity of blackness and death clarifies itself somewhat partially in recent debate on the meaning and value of black music and performance. This debate, one might argue, belongs to the difficulty of understanding a connection between two forms of thanatological possibility and proximity. One, a proximity based upon normative expendability (necessary and foundational or aberrant but normalized, depending upon the perspective); and second, an anthropological distillation of black diasporic culture that recognizes the significance and singularities of vestiges of African spirituality and orientations toward death in scattered, undisciplined, and geographically dispersed traces. No clear articulation between these two manners of proximity to death seems to present itself short of moralizing hierarchization of, quite often, misrecognized scholarly concerns and methodologies.

Even when apparently shorn of the shackles of this history of coerced labor, jazz music bears the inscription of work—an inscription that follows from African melodic phrases, war beats and polyrhythmic layering, to the very first slave work songs, through to contemporary hip hop and rap music.²⁵²

Though over the past few decades “new musicology”’s insistence on thematizing sociality through music obliterates the innocence with which people once referred to music’s nonreferentiality and escape from interpretation, the intransigence of this age-old perception remains a specter hovering over mainstream and commonsense understandings of (especially Western classical) music. The specter of musical autonomy fits strangely comfortably with self-proclaimed materialist analyses of commercial music that position it as a cultural industry pawn of ideology. Black studies’ sophisticated strategies for theorizing black music transcend this ossified bind of academic musicology through recourse to notions of profligacy, excess and exorbitance that denote active inhabitation of the limits of being and the moral economy of the subject, rather than docile assumption of economically predetermined motive.²⁵³ Plastic, polysemous, capaciously unstable this excess invites signification while resisting meaning’s closure—a metaphor for the dominant strategies of black music Baraka memorably outlines.²⁵⁴ This excess marks the nonreduction of slavery to labor, and the nonreduction of labor to itself, designating a realm of interiority—or more specifically, a rejection of the circumstances

²⁵² Some classic studies include Tricia Rose, *Black Noise : Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America*. Wesleyan UP, 1994. David Toop, *Rap Attack: African Jive to New York Hip Hop*, Pluto, 1984; Havelock Nelson and Michael A. Gonzales, *Bring the Noise: A Guide to Rap Music and Hip- Hop Culture* (New York: Harmony, 1991).

²⁵³ For just a few examples of this type of strategy, see Lindon Barrett, “Figuring Others of Value: Singing Voices, Signing Voices, and African American Culture” in *Blackness and Value: Seeing Double* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP), 2009; Nicole R. Fleetwood, *Troubling Vision: Performance, Visuality, and Blackness* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2011, chapters three and four especially; Ronald R. Judy, “On the Question of N**** Authenticity,” *Boundary 2* (21.3) 1994, p. 211-30.

²⁵⁴ Baraka, 23-4.

resulting in the opposition of interiority and exteriority—circumscribed by the recognized if contested foundations of American blues and jazz: the work song.²⁵⁵

In musical notation, the term articulation refers to the technical treatment of a particular sound—its terseness, softness, depth, or volume, for example—as well as the overall clarity of distinction between the sounds internal to melody and harmony and constituting the textures between them. In his famous ethnomusicological treatise and memoir, John Chernoff offers up foundational hazards of theorizing with the language of specifically African music, of elevating it to the status of theoretical departure. Crucial differences create obstacles for an interpretation and appreciation of African music, in particular, the meaning of the ubiquity and primacy of melody and harmony in Western classical music, and the relative subordination or privation of these in African-derived music. African and African-derived music is concerned—at least it is almost unanimously, if very controversially believed²⁵⁶—with the complexity and interplay of rhythms that emphasize tensions, rather than simultaneity, modularity or linearity in time. This divergence in musical investments tempts the imagination of philosophers and thinkers in various directions; philosophy has long equated and valorized the sophistication of melody and harmony of classical music with occidental rationality.²⁵⁷ In the wider field of musicology, the denigration of African-derived music and its kinetic relationship to the body resounds a broader scholarly repudiation or wariness of centralizing the body in the theorization of music.

²⁵⁵ If this recognition is nearly ubiquitous, a few studies deny the retention of specifically African elements in blues. For an example of this rare position, Arthur Schlesinger Jr., *The Disuniting of America: Reflections on a Multicultural Society* (New York: Norton, 1991)

²⁵⁶ See for example, Kofi Agawu, *Representing African Music: Postcolonial Notes, Queries, Positions*, London: Routledge, 2003. Agawu takes the extreme position, writing that “African rhythm”, in short, is an invention, a construction, a fiction, a myth, ultimately a lie’ (61).

²⁵⁷ Max Weber’s *Rational and Social Foundations of Music* exemplifies this regard, but a whole host of 20th century texts accomplish similar tasks

Fusion and its Discontents

The specifically Persian views of black musical form departs from broader musicological perspectives, harking back to a tropology of pollution which Taqvā'ī's documentary seems to deconstruct. "Afro-Iranians"²⁵⁸ and the idea of Afroasianness more generally reinforces the kind of limit case African slavery poses for the familiar problem of an old anthropological approach to diasporic culture: the study of syncretism. A common Persian synonym for black (*sīyah*), the term "Zang" or "Zangi" appears superficially to indicate the East African, specifically Zanzibari, or alternatively "Habashi" (Abyssinian) origins²⁵⁹ of many black slaves who, along with gold, tortoiseshell, mangrove, ivory and teakwood were transported by ship to the Persian gulf since the earliest period of the Persian empire, supporting the economic growth of the Sasanian dynasty.²⁶⁰ The Sasanians (A.D. 224-651) take credit for integrating the first maritime trading system in the Persian Gulf,²⁶¹ and recorded evidence of slaves in the Persian Empire dates back to at least the 3rd century, during which time the Persian Gulf began to dominate the Western Indian Ocean trade.²⁶² Trudged through harsh desert climes by caravan and on foot by way of the

²⁵⁸ I qualify this term first, in recognition that it is one chosen by writers, scholars, researchers, artists, and filmmakers interested in demarcating this population as such, and second, that is borrowed from an American tradition and politics of identity hyphenation.

²⁵⁹ Likewise, this methodological obstacle runs through medieval Arab historiography. For example, Pouwells notes that Arab historians use the term "Zang" loosely and without geographical specificity (395).

²⁶⁰ Joseph E. Harris, "Africans in Asian History" in Joseph E. Harris, éd., *Global Dimensions of the African Diaspora*, Howard UP, 1993, pp. 325; Maurice Lombard, *The Golden Age of Islam*, American Elsevier, 1975, pp. 167. A.M. Watson, *Agricultural Innovation in the Early Islamic World*, Cambridge UP, 1983, 26.

²⁶¹ Redha Bhacker, "The Cultural Unity of the Gulf and the Indian Ocean: A Longue Durée Historical Perspective." *The Persian Gulf in History*, edited by Lawrence Potter. Palgrave, 2009, pp. 169.

²⁶² Ricks, Thomas. "Slaves and Slave Trading in Shi'i Iran AD 1500-1900." *Journal of Asian and African Studies*, vol. 36 no. 4, 2001, pp. 407-18. Pouwels, Randall L. "Eastern Africa and the Indian Ocean to 1800: Reviewing Relations in Historical Perspective." *The International Journal of African Historical Studies*, Vol. 35, No. 2, pp. 391. The Sasanids extended economic activities as far as Aden, which they occupied in the sixth century and dominated trade with Sri Lanka in the East (Hourani 140-1).

Western frontier, captives were boarded onto dhows tracing water routes to three major port Persian entrepôts throughout the premodern and modern histories of the Indian Ocean trade: the ancient city of Siraf in the province of Būshihri during the 9th and 10th centuries, to the island of Kish during the 12th through 14th centuries, to Hormuz in the 14th through 16th centuries,²⁶³ Būshihri again vying for domination of caravan routes to Iran's interior during the 19th and 20th centuries, especially.²⁶⁴ In addition to the fact that at least nine or ten points of departure comprised the entire known system of East African slave export to the Muslim world, the slaves sailing from the East African coast were not necessarily natives of the region.²⁶⁵ Assumptions about tracing linear movements mislead, as scholars note in the context of tracking slave origins across the transatlantic slave trade.²⁶⁶ Slavers commonly seized victims from the African mainland interior, a form of violent theft that fueled the East African slave trade to the Persian Gulf in the 18th and 19th centuries.²⁶⁷ Every single raid and kidnapping could not possibly possess a material correlate in inscription or recording. Perpetrators would not have been interested in cataloguing their crimes, and victims were immediately encouraged, by way of sorcery and other forms of psychological violence, to forget their pasts—a phenomenon Saidiya Hartman poignantly describes in *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route*.²⁶⁸

The assumption that the majority of Iranian African slave descendants are East African descended generates a perplexing loop—what I've been calling in various contexts

²⁶³ Ricks, *Sea-faring*, 357.

²⁶⁴ Willem Floor, "Bushehr: Southern Gateway to Iran." *The Persian Gulf in Modern Times: People, Ports, and History*, edited by Lawrence G. Porter, Palgrave, 2014.

²⁶⁵ Lovejoy, *Transformations in Slavery*, 25.

²⁶⁶ W. Jamieson, "Material Culture and Social Death: African-American Burial Practices" *Historical Archaeology* 29.4 (1995), 44.

²⁶⁷ Frederick Cooper, *Plantation Slavery on the East Coast of Africa*, 32.

²⁶⁸ Hartman, Saidiya V. *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007.

“recursivity.”²⁶⁹ Scholars of East African history are well familiar with the infamous Shirazi hypothesis, which fabricates Persian ancestry for Swahili residents in coastal Tanzania (Kilwa), modern day Kenya (Mombasa) and Somalia (Mogadishu). Swahili traditions collectively memorialize late first millennium contact between Persian immigrants and African indigenes as the primal scene of Swahili being. The tradition recalls the Persian Ali B. Hasan who immigrated from Shiraz because he was insulted by his brethren due to the fact that his mother was an Abyssinian slave. A version of this tradition claims Hasan outfoxed Muli or Mrimba, the African King, by using the test that was presented him (to surround Kilwa with cloth) to prohibit the King’s return access to the island.²⁷⁰

If early and mid-twentieth century historiography took for granted Swahili claims to descent by Persian nobles like Hasan—supposed founders of Swahili settlements in the premodern period, later superseded by Arab rulers—the past few decades has witnessed a revisionary perspective on the self-transparency of the Shirazi-Swahili connection. Critical of the interplay between history-telling and writing; political and ideological motivations; the social constitution, purpose, and meanings of legend; and racialized attitudes toward the African mainland, historians of East Africa have questioned the literalness of the Shirazi origins of the Swahili. Nevertheless, while citing problems such as insufficient architectural, archeological and linguistic data and scant evidence for premodern Persian settlement, historians recognize the potency that the Shirazi myth holds for the Swahili themselves—a social significance which

²⁶⁹ The assumption derives from the fact that, in the absence of detailed recorded evidence for slave trading in earlier periods, the modern period (18th-20th centuries) provides some refreshing contrast. Most significantly, Omani colonization of the East African coast generated a new kind of infrastructural organization in which the slave trade and its promotion figured substantially.

²⁷⁰ Pouwells, 404.

creates historical significance where conventional means for historiographical specificity are irrecoverable or absent.

If the problem of origin expresses itself in speculations and pretense to true knowledge about the lineage of African descended inhabitants of the Persian Gulf, this problem of origin is not merely analogical, but directly enjoins the Shirazi Swahili mire. Sharīfīyān’s observation that Būshihri protracts against its imagined geographical boundaries echoes the blithe celebratory recitations of indigenous cosmopolitanisms that sustain certain postcolonial nostalgic tone amongst Indian Ocean World scholars. Despite the reality of fluctuating migration habits amongst port inhabitants across the Gulf regions to East Africa in times of economic as well as climactic precarity, the observation of Būshihri’s cosmopolitanism warrants serious pause. The fact that Africans were imported to the Middle East for sexual and entertainment purposes—as concubines, singers, and entertainers—compounds the necessity for a deeply critical perspective on black performance—one which can contemplate the dark conditions of possibility for the celebration of diasporic culture, specifically, musical culture, even, and particularly musical mourning culture.²⁷¹ Sharīfīyān himself remains vigilant against the confusing claims of earlier historians, whose views on indigenous ethnic “tribes,” on ethnicity and race more generally, crystallizes in the equivocal Persian term “nijād,” tentatively translatable as race but lacking the same structural history of development as a philosophical and scientific concept. In the subsection “races and kinfolk,” Sharīfīyān quotes the prominent Iranian historian Iraj Afshar’s *Negahi be Būshihri*, in which Afshar breaks down the demographic of Būshihri as follows: “in addition to Mediterranean peoples, there were Dravidians, blacks, Semitic peoples, Elamites,

²⁷¹ Lewis, Bernard. “The African Diaspora and the Civilization of Islam” Kilson, Martin L. and Robert I. Rotberg. *The African Diaspora: Interpretive Essays*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1976, 43.

Sumerians, Nordics, Arab, Lor, Behbehanis."²⁷² Footnoting the passage, Sharīfīyān expresses uncertainty about such divisions. What appears to modern readers as a curious and simultaneous *failure* of differentiation as well as an exorbitance of differentiation would perhaps not have been understood by historians of Afshar's generation. (Hasan Pirniya, another renowned Iranian historian writes of the existence of blacks in Iran prior to the migration of the Aryans.²⁷³) Exorbitance and failure of differentiation marks an indifference to the starkly distinct realities of voluntary and coerced migration. Neither historically inaccurate nor blind, the standard Iranian, and one might generalize, Middle Eastern gesture of narration, writing the history of settled African peoples primarily in terms of commerce flows and merchant migration elides the very real and, to modern day readers, theoretically serious distinction between force and assent. The paradoxical simultaneity dissolves the enormous violence that was the reality of Indian Ocean slavery. This dissolution itself produces violence, even as it also stands for the ambiguity of a historical *knowing* about African presence, origins, and being. Such ambiguity is magnified by the Shirazi Swahili legacy. If Afro-Iranians are East African descended, as scholarship speculates with the fragmented and fallible recensions it has available, and if East Africans claim Shirazi, or Persian descent, Afro-Iranians are, so to speak, redundant: Iranian-Afro-Iranians. The presence of blackness bemuses tautology; it also, and thereby, coheres notions of cultural purity. Without the fantasy cushion of a region bordering, enclosing, and sealing off the Iranian mainland there would be nothing to contrast the purity and staidness of Iranian identity supposedly left unadulterated, as its southern provinces absorb pollution and "creolize" from the outside in. The

²⁷² Sharīfīyān, 25.

²⁷³ Pirniya, 144.

witticism and impossibility that is Iranian-Afro-Iranian approximates the conceit undertaken more generally by the “creole” signifier.

Creolizing Legend

The drifting stained glass images glowing in motion prior to the start of nūhah-khūni’s preparations in Taqvā’ī’s film evoke Ashura’s arcane lineage and burial in deep history. For just as South Iranian Arba’in encrypts African ways of being for Būshihri inhabitants, all the while recursively constituting what counts as African, the entire constellation of Muharram rituals retroactively ciphers pre-Islamic mythology, pulling attention to the inaccessibility of its core truth and framing an inquiry about historical objectivity. Geometrical shapes flash neon between suspended images of a white horse, recalling Husayn’s mythic archetype, Siavash, the tragic hero of Iranian national epic.²⁷⁴ In Firdūsi’s 10th century *Shāhnāmah*, or the *Book of Kings*, the story of Siavash relates the hero’s liminal position as a wrongfully exiled Iranian prince who ultimately fails to assimilate to his diasporic refuge; to illuminate Siavash’s transcendental purity, his betrayal recurs transpatially—in his divinely native Iran, where he is ousted by his king father (Key Khosrow), and in Turan, Iran’s geographical archetype-adversary, where the leader Afrasiyab first embraces, then ultimately murders him after new lies about the tragic hero spread. Seduced by his wily step-mother Sudabeh, betrayed by his father Key Khosrow, and again betrayed by his father-in-law, Afrasiyab, like Husayn, the figure of Siavash irradiates mythological purity, but without the self-conscious dress of historical realism.

Just as Husayn is wrongly tricked by his clan members in Karbala who falsely declare its safety for his arrival, Siavash is beheaded at the hands of a false friend in Turan. Recalling the

²⁷⁴ Siavash’s name means literally “the one with a black horse.”

profound Shi'i investment in familial relation, epitomized by the dissident configuration of the imamate, Siavash's murder at the hands of the Afrasiyab's brother, creates a structural parallel between the significance of bloodline and of spatial sovereignty.²⁷⁵ As indicated by its adherence to a marginalized version of the religion, Iran's relationship to Islam bears marks of alienation and assertion of difference. Resisting, unlike most of its geographical neighbors, Arabization and assimilation to the linguistic substance of Islam, the hermeneutic and textual experience of Islam in Iran is mediated to a large degree by affective strategies such as theater, storytelling and painting, in which both the Shahnameh epic and the tragedy of Karbala are transmitted through performance and figuration.²⁷⁶

Scholars have generally stopped at the mere fact of the symbolic resonances between the pre- and post-Islamic narratives of Siavush and Husayn, drawing little further theoretical relevance from this parallelism. The translation of narratological elements from the pre-Islamic myth of Siavush into the tragedy of Karbala implies the nonoriginality, or the always already lost historical origin of Shi'ism. Indeed, the Muharram constellation of embodied ritual embeds Karbala's memory—in the the coffee-house paintings, performances, and story-telling reliving Siavash's death, a staple of Iranian popular culture prior to the post-Republic dissolution of the practice. This arrangement remarks a kind of historicity that is both processual and communal. This performative historicity is neither culturally specific nor a quaint simulation of true

²⁷⁵ Hayes, Edmund. "The Death of Kings: Group Identity and the Tragedy of Nezhād in Ferdowsi's Shahnameh." *Iranian Studies*, vol. 48, no. 3, 2015, pp. 369-393.

²⁷⁶ Mino0 Moallem, "Aestheticizing Religion: Sensorial Visuality and Coffeehouse Painting in Iran," *Sensational Religion: Sensory Cultures in Material Practice*. Yale UP, 2014.

historicity; rather it is the profound enactment and engagement of historicity as a philosophical problem.

Contrary to Iranian ethnomusicologists and historians' denigration of its blackness as a kind of dilution and adulteration, Būshihīrī Arba'in's Shi'ism elucidates, even celebrates this profoundly original nonoriginality in revision of the containment of syncretism, creolité, and fusion to that which is manifest and visible. In its disregard for the standards of mourning, its invitation of jubilation and prioritization of rhythm Būshihīrī communities exaggerate and hyperbolize Arba'in, drawing attention to, centralizing its definitively improvised character.²⁷⁷ By focalizing rhythm in this spectacularization of Arba'in, it offers up a defacement of traditional temporality that blurs distinctions between chronology, circularity, and stillness. This defacement or interrogation in turn reopens the self-evidence of historicity into the aporetic fund at its core. If the possibility of historical experience demands a form of reception irreducible to the intransigent mold of the elusive but omnitemporal present—what any commonsense understanding of temporal movement requires—then historicity itself is ultimately impossible without expressions that detoxify the self-coherence of origins.²⁷⁸

Uncontroversially, blackness poses crises for conservative perspectives on cultural geography, like Sharīfīyān's typical assumption that "the influences and changes instigated [by African slaves] not only did not result in the strengthening of the host culture, but sometimes

²⁷⁷ David Marriott's insights into the way blackness accrues to itself the insignia of unproductive labor as metonymized by certain objects of excessiveness (the decadent lifestyles represented in popular culture industries, luxury commodities, lavish jewelry, bounteous and hypersexualized womanhood) resonates with the language ethnomusicologists adopt to interpret the syncretization of Būshihīrī culture. Despite the socioeconomic destitution this peripheral population daily experiences, Bushihri music is viewed as unrestrained in its exuberant supplementation of mourning with jubilation. Without the discipline of a clear understanding of the origins of such exuberance, blackness "will open civil life to the chaos of a demotic thematization whose consumption promises only pathological enjoyment" (2).

²⁷⁸ Jacques Derrida, *Heidegger: The Question of Being and History*, pp. 142.

weakened and disintegrated it” (*Ahl-i Matam* 30). Sharifiyan’s analogy between the African musical influences effected by slave presence and the Arab invasion of Rayshahr which brought an end to Persian dynastic early modern history illustrates the extent to which, in the same breath, pride of cosmopolitanism decays into aversion, revealing the guiling displacements at constant play in the representation of Afro hyphenation. The emergence of this hyphenation in the Iranian South functions, according to ethnomusicologists, as a kind of unyielding amnesic pause; literally, African musical influence is thought to have extinguished "historical memory.”²⁷⁹

But blackness does more than precipitate crisis; it magnetizes. No wonder that the last decade alone has witnessed a spate of new scholarship on Afro-Asian diasporas in the Middle East and Southeast Asia, of which novel interest in Afro-Iranians forms just one genre.²⁸⁰ Revelations of *both* crisis and allure reestablish and nourish traditional perspectives on culture as self-contained ontogenic and historically guaranteed entities. And this is so, especially so, even when syncretic forms fail to arrest; when they mundanely index, rather than spectacularize, difference (as in the case of Caribbean cultural festivities, whose “creolité” has long gone uninterrogated as a problem for thought, and treated rather as a self-evident state of affairs available to perception.)²⁸¹ By suspending the traditional understanding of temporality through the disruption that is syncopated, suffering sound and intersubjective pounding, *sinj va damām*

²⁷⁹ *Ahl-i Matam*, 30.

²⁸⁰ The overwhelming majority of publications listed under the subject heading “Afro-Asia” still refer primarily to post-Bandung transnational politics of race, identity, activism, and foreign policy, as well as political correspondences between African-American antiracist movements and intellectuals and third world activists and their movements (such as the Dalit-Black Panthers connection.) In proportion to this genre of scholarship, the number of works published on Afro-Asian identity is still incremental.

²⁸¹ Aisha Khan, "Journey to the Center of the Earth: the Caribbean as Master Symbol," *Cultural Anthropology*, vol. 16, no. 3, 2001, pp. 271-302.

and *Arbai'n*'s preservation, distribution and affirmation of it exact a rethinking of the moment or event of historical coalescence and the concept of culture(s) that this coalescence makes possible. Taqvā'ī's artifact heightens, through its self-consciously mediated form, historicity as performance: the unyielding repetition of a memory whose referent loses itself in the flashes between what is there to be sensed.

CHAPTER FOUR:

Simulating the Archive: Incantatory Blackness in Bahrām Bayzā’ī’s *Bāshū*

Bahrām Bayzā’ī’s *Bashu, the Little Stranger*, was written and produced at the height of the Iran-Iraq war, but war is never directly thematized—one of the many reasons the Islamic Republic of Iran banned the unapologetically pacifist film from domestic distribution for three years and sabotaged its eventual release.²⁸² Instead, war is metonymized by explosive displacements, fire, smoke, and burnt flesh. The withdrawal of historic referent inflates the substitutional possibilities of catastrophe, creating a kind of anamorphic image of disaster that is present but oneiric, barely accessible to sense. Arguably, the trauma figured by the bombs exploding on the Khūzistāni border surfaces in the spectral form of the main character Bashu’s mother, whose incineration inaugurates the film; her ambiguous blackness incants an unsound condition between being and non-being, fact and imagination, past and future, the constative and uninterable, magnetizing and repelling catastrophe’s referent. The gravity with which her veiled figure moves through space hyperbolically belies the impermanence of the path she traces—a nameless, nebulous shape sweeping depths of fields, irruptive in her quiescence.

The most famous of Iranian films foregrounding phenotypically-inflected racism, Bayzā’ī’s film *Bashu* poses questions about the disfunction of historical memory lodged in a frozen anamnesis; the violent itinerary of difference reluctantly borne by corporeal vestige and disrupting the visual field. It does so through four subtly interlocking registers: first, at the representational level, through summoning tropes of Arab difference that deploy an equivocal blackness for their coherence, thus emitting a suggestion about the capaciousness of racial

²⁸² Prematurely showing it on public television the night before its anticipated first screening.

blackness as an anachronizing medium that absorbs other forms of historically registered difference; second, through an abbreviation of the African spirit healing ritual zar which exemplifies the diffuseness and precarity of the memory of African slavery's millennia long persistence in the Persian Gulf, as well as a resistance to recognition, recombination or recovery; third, through the child-figure's articulation of genealogical isolation that threads the long durée of African slavery in the Indian Ocean world through the imbrication between the modern European concept of race and its relationship to Southwest Asian understandings of the human dependent upon patrilineal kinship; and finally, through an implicit, modest and yet powerful hypothesis about the material conditions of possibility for post-industrial media like film—that is, the deeply repressed economic and social history of slavery in the Indian Ocean world. The elasticity of temporalizations that Bashu's mother plies with her undecidable image; the ephemerality of cinematographic semblances that gleam with signs from the Indian Ocean past, generate myriad underthought trajectories of modernity that culminate in the celebrated technological processes that film and media studies consistently demands and configures attention toward in the name of a fantasy of theoretical repletion.

At its most prosaic, *Bāshū* is a story about a displaced ethnically and racially ambiguous child from the south of Iran—probably Khūzistān— whose parents and sister blow up in a bombing that destroys his entire village. Bashu escapes into the back of a truck which transports him hundreds of miles up to the verdant border of the Caspian Sea, the northernmost Iranian province of Gilan. Explosions interpreted as threats literally propel him north. When the pickup driver stops for tea en route, construction detonations nearby launch Bashu from his nap in the cargo area, running through shrubs in order to escape what he perceives as the continuation of the bombings. A series of cinema vérité moves like a handheld shot chasing Bashu's bolt through

a forest, coupled with extreme long shots of an imperceptible figure fluttering across the frame demonstrate the temporal intimacy and confusion which mediates the viewer's experience of Bashu's experience of time throughout the film. Eventually Bashu runs as far as a ricefield where Na'i (played by famous theater actress Susan Taslimi) and her two young children share a meal nearby. Upon seeing him, Nā'ī expresses repulsion for Bashu's dark skin color, wondering if he has escaped from a coal mine. Gradually her instincts prompt her to take Bashu in, against the objections of extended family and Gilaki town dwellers, all of whom find Bashu's phenotypical difference a subject of derision and comedy. The village shopkeeper slips Nā'ī an extra bar of soap; a group of young boys encircle, bully, and parody Bashu at every sighting.

Most commentators who dwell on the theme of racism in the film interpret Bashu's character as ethnically, or at least culturally, Arab, and this interpretation—though burdened by the undecidable profile of the schism between ethnicity and culture, appears buttressed both by Bashu's rare speech in the film and his real-life person Adnan Afravian, who was not a professional actor and whom Bayzā'ī chose specifically because of his skin color, which he thought exemplified the coastal Iranian profile. But Arabness is never directly referenced, other than the very few instances when Bashu speaks Arabic, and because he appears to identify as Iranian, rather than Arab, the question of his difference seems to be truly a metaphorical one, a placeholder.

At the time of *Bahu's* production, Persian denigration of Arabness is both topical and convenient. It is a longstanding current in Iranian social history, from the neo-Zoroastrian renaissance led by Persians self-exiled in India in the 16th century all the way through to the more familiar 19th and 20th century nationalist discourses shaping a narrative of Arab invasion and debasement of Persian civilization, extirpation of Arabic vocabulary in Persian poetics and

everyday discourse, and revival and popularization of ancient, and thus presumably truly authentic Iranian history and essence.

Bashu's unnamed Southern origins accommodates his ambiguous, unplaceable Arabness, and because one of the longstanding Persian tropes of Arab difference is in fact a fantasy of blood impurity that derives from the nomadism of origins, his particular *kind* of Iranianness does not contradict his Arabness. Coastal peoples have long been designated as belonging to a "primitive universe" by Iranian and Arab historians alike,²⁸³ a disprized but indispensable zone undergirded by an imaginary of dilution. This denigration of the coastal or creole is shared amongst Gulf Bedouin cultures as well; anti-Arabness encounters anti-Persianness in a seemingly infinite temporal circulation of localized animus that the invisible backdrop of the Iran-Iraq war, one of the "most impenetrable inter-state conflicts since WWII,"²⁸⁴ assimilates into the deepest strata of the film's representation.²⁸⁵

Why is it corporeal difference, a blood impurity that surfaces physiologically, and specifically, through the skin that most satisfies the empirical desire to produce the experience of difference "immediately," that is through sight?²⁸⁶ The choice to represent Bashu's difference as one bound up in skin tone—despite the lack of even anecdotal claims that Arabs are darker than Iranians—elicits a question about why the history of race, though never exclusively bound to phenotype, and in fact, always imagined in excess of the corporeal, finds its privileged metonym

²⁸³ Nelida Fuccaro, "Rethinking the History of Port Cities in the Gulf." *The Persian Gulf in Modern Times: People, Ports, and History*. Edited by Lawrence G. Potter, Palgrave, 2014, pp. 24.

²⁸⁴ Shahram Chubin and Charles Tripp. *Iran and Iraq at War*. I.B. Tauris, 1998, pp. 1.

²⁸⁵ Miriam Cooke. *Tribal Modern: Branding New Nations in the Arab Gulf*. U of California P, 2014, pp.30.

²⁸⁶ For Michael Chaouli this is why race theory is an aesthetic operation: "a science that attempts to fathom depths from surfaces" (29). Chaouli, "Lacoon and the Hottentots." *The German Invention of Race*. Edited by Sara Eigen and Mark Larrimore, SUNY, 2006.

in blackness. In Bayzā'ī's film this blackness is more swarthy than jet, generating ambiguity and problems for recognition, yet it is one that stereotypically absorbs filth and foreignness, even when filth is transvaluated, an alluvial human essence stranded between the terrestrial and the metaphysical, between dirt and dirtiness. Toward the end of the film, recapitulating the film's ultimate generalizing gesture, Nai'i pronounces that Bashu "like all children, is a child of sun and the dirt." Yet the "dirty" color of Bashu's skin imbues this final universalizing gesture with ambivalent meanings. When Nai'i's relatives come to visit her, no one resists remarking upon Bashu's "charcoal" color. They gather on a carpet passing around tiny glasses of tea, reprimanding Nai'i for her reckless decision to host the foreigner, while various members molest Bashu. An aunt gropes Bashu's head in search of lice; an uncle demands dental inspection. Bashu's body gradually discomposes itself: his slouching back buckles, his visibly perspiring skin dampens his ragged yellow tee shirt collar. A small girl he had earlier glimpsed from the window with curiosity crawls toward him on the carpet and swabs his face with her finger, which she examines, disappointed. Bashu lowers his head in shame.

This bodily discomposure culminates in convulsive fits after Nai'i angrily pushes the relatives out. Bashu moans, shivers and shakes on the ground, the color drained from his lips, sweat soaking his clothes as Nai'i panics, unable to interpret his illness; she sprints through the village in search of the local doctor, who soberly informs her his medicine does not cure blacks. Later in the film, Nai'i herself gets a fever after a sleepless night searching for runaway Bashu in a downpour. Bashu interprets her illness as zar affliction, possession by spirit winds, which Bayzā'ī indexes with minute fleeting details. Outside, straddling a large inverted pot, and invoking the significance of drumming in zar, Bashu pounds out a rhythm, wails and sways to it. Pasty-faced, Nai'i's body awakens from the verge of death, twitches and jerks on her mat as she

is jolted to her knees. Performing the signature signs of spirit possession, her shoulder blades roll, her chest jilts, her torso bounces while closed eyelids and a dropping jaw betray a state beneath or beyond conscious. She throws a white sheet over her jerking body as camera cuts back and forth between Bashu's drumming intensify the acceleration of the rhythm and her pantomimes. A pan moving away from Bashu's concentrated grieving face through the blonde rice fields gather the aleatory dimension of this healing ritual, which culminate in Nai'i's full recovery. Through a kind of hyperbolic parallelism typical for Bayzā'i the filmmaker, Bashu's interpretation of Nai'i's delirium adjusts the viewer's understanding of his own sickness earlier

It is not a contradiction that Bashu's blackness is unidentifiable in the film. How could it be? Neither Persian nor Arab, the idiosyncratic name Bashu has no meaning, does not belong to an identifiable culture. "Say something so I can know what language you have. You're black, you're dumb, you have no name. Every human being has a name," Nai'i prods a curled-up Bashu with her stick in their initial encounter. If a gendered distinction between violence and non-violence, agricultural and domestic slavery, has long trivialized Indian Ocean world slavery as a subject of theoretical meditation Bashu's name dissolves that distinction with its senselessness.²⁸⁷ Hortense Spillers writes of the being "*nowhere* at all,"²⁸⁸ the loss of an attachment to one's name that characterized movement through the Middle Passage. Across the passage from the African mainland to the eastern coast, the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden, literal castration, the fate of male slaves destined for royal servitude, paralleled the more commonplace

²⁸⁷ As Richard Eaton writes in his introduction to *Slavery and South Asian History*, "in South Asia as elsewhere, naming or renaming individuals was one means by which masters asserted their control over the identity of their slaves: "Whereas high-status women in the Chola court or in Muslim societies bore names identifying them with their fathers or husbands, female slaves were named simply 'daughters of god,' indicating their kinless status" (xxx).

²⁸⁸ Spillers, Hortense J. *Black, White, and in Color : Essays on American Literature and Culture*. U of Chicago P, 2003, pp. 215.

castration of the name across genders. This kind of castration was compensated for with belittling reminders. Slaves were often renamed with floral and ornamental associations: Chaman Gol (“Lawn Flower”), Taza Gol (“New Flower”), Almas (“Diamond”), “Mubarak”.²⁸⁹ Like Bashu’s name, the zar he performs to heal Nai’i literalizes by a kind of cosmogenic analogy this dispossession of self specific to slavery, and which the narrative of the film reflects in the dispossession of childhood.

Commentators interpret the prominence of the child-figure in post-revolutionary Iranian cinema variously, at times as a depiction of trauma-induced passivity (in the way that Gilles Deleuze famously characterizes the postwar rupture in the history of cinema as an atrophy of capacity and disintegration of faith in the human subject’s agential drive to passive witnessing). Alternatively, film scholars like Vicky Lebeau understand the child-figure as a proxy for the “mental machinery” that is the film-spectator relation; the child is the ideal spectator, detailing the dispossession of self in the moment of captivation in narration, or absorption in the repetition of the other. Certainly the character Bashu might be seen as a kind of Deleuzian allegory for post-revolutionary shock as it worked itself out during the Iran-Iraq war period, or retrospectively as a transition to political skepticism or impotence manifested in the slow paced art cinema of someone like Kiarostami, who worked on the film with Bayzā’ī and whose own child-centered “earthquake trilogy” was released during the same quarter decade. I would suggest instead that Bashu the child figures neither the representation of a national structure of feeling nor the fantasy of a witnessing prior to the stain of sexualized adulthood, but the absolute

²⁸⁹ Mirzai, 101. Toledano, 67.

absence or impossibility of childhood, a kind of racialized genealogical isolation that gestures back toward the history of African slavery in the Persian Gulf.

The pallor of diegetic allusions to this history cause one to seriously doubt, if not entirely overlook, their referential earnestness. The viewer first glimpses Bashu dramatically peering between two tall strands of an abyss of sugar cane in his southern village. Khūzistān was the most important sugar-producing site in the third century during the Sasanian period, where African slaves manned the cane fields, elongating the connection between slavery and sugar into an undateable chasm that echoes through this scene in the ambiguity of stalk identification.²⁹⁰ Like the unread footnote, this detail in the history of sugar cultivation enjoins the entire history of slavery in the Mediterranean and South Asia to Atlantic slavery, as it underwrites the economic processes of modernity that scholars like C.L.R. James, Eric Williams, W.E.B. Dubois understood as directly powered by chattel slavery in the Caribbean basin. Though, and because, there seems really no conclusion to be drawn from this fact, it is often forgotten that it was through contact with the Islamic world, especially during the Crusades, that Europeans acquired the expertise to transform sugar cultivation into one of the most lucrative and exploitative projects the world had ever known.

In the scene where Nai'i expels her guests for their cruelty to Bashu, Nai sarcastically consents to one relative's casual offers to put Bashu "to work". "Please take him," she begs, yanking Bashu's hand. A medium close-up of Bashu, breathless, cuts to a seemingly irrelevant image of a child-like figure in a black veil. Her back moves farther and farther from the viewer

²⁹⁰ Barbara L. Solow. "Capitalism and Slavery in the Exceedingly Long Run." *The Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, Vol. 17, No. 4, 1987, pp. 712. William D. Phillips, Jr. *Slavery from Roman Times to the Early Transatlantic Trade*. Manchester UP, 1985, pp. 68. Maurice Lombard. *The Golden Age of Islam*. Markus Wiener, 2004, pp. 167.

in an empty expansive desert populated with scattered footprints. A cut back to a perplexed Bashu shifting his drifting off-screen gaze from one direction to another signals a boundless dissociation. Nai'i's joking gesture to force Bashu on her sister-in-law reproduces the gratuitous sundering of familial bond, rends his psyche. The image of a child wandering through a desert (a convenient metaphor for absolute isolation, but also of origin), relives a trodden primal scene, the trail of swollen feet, desolation, death from the African interior to the Eastern coast. The Arabic word 'abd (for slave) comes from "treading on the ground to trace a clear, smooth path."²⁹¹ A slave bound to his master for more than three generations was named, *al-turtub*, dust.



Figure 9. Still of Bashu's sister from Bahram Bayzāi's *Bashu, the Little Stranger* (1986)

²⁹¹ Mohammad Ennaji, *Slavery, the State and Islam*. Translated by Teresa Lavender Fagan. Cambridge UP, 2013, pp.48.

Kinship is a powerful heuristic for analyzing and taxonomizing patterns of enslavement. Prohibition on and violability of kinship bonds defines one of the clearest barbarities of Atlantic world slavery, exemplified in the vacuity of the parental relation. In contrast, the paucity of sources on especially pre-modern family structure in Islamic worlds²⁹² leads to a situation in which the position of slaves in relation to the Muslim family and polity is often sentimentalized. Where the question is thought about at all, assumptions about post-manumission assimilation assume too much, without addressing the scene of originary violence. Instead, like the loss of language in the zar ritual that it summarily dramatizes, *Bashu* consistently deflects attention from the question of “treatment” back to a scene of original disruption. In doing so, *Bashu* calls to mind that the ephemerality of the Indian Ocean archive itself conveys the theft of identificatory modality—the continuous discontinuity of being one’s self, a self with the possibility of a present, however ontologically questionable.

²⁹² Cristina de La Puente, "Free Fathers, Slave Mothers and Their Children: A Contribution to the Study of Family Structures in Al-Andalus." *Imago Temporis*, vol. 7, 2013, pp. 31..



Figure 10. Frontal shot of Bashu's mother

Because Bashu's family, and especially his mother, remains with him throughout the film in a way that exceeds spectrality, the death of Bashu's family might thus be read as metaphorical—a simulation of genealogical isolation rather than, or in, addition to literal orphanhood. This isolation is reaffirmed over and over again through his blackness, and the social world that hyperbolically ostracizes him for it. The power of the bond between Bashu and his mother erupts in the enjambment of temporalities, unsealing, deflating, re-aerating this hyperbole, but these reorganizations of the real are consistent only in their evanescence and resistance to being remarked or perceived, qualities film exaggerates by virtue of its already artificially manipulated renderings of time and space.

Consumed by fire during the first scene of the film, Bashu's mother reappears before his eyes in sporadic sequences throughout the subsequent plot, achieving brief scissions between Bashu and the viewer on the one hand, and the film universe as a whole on the other through a

free indirect cinematic discourse. In the clip I showed at the beginning of this talk, the camera technique illustrates this scission twice. [slide] First as Na'i quarrels with birds, Bashu's mother surfaces on the right hand side of the screen; as she walks behind Nai'i to the other side of the shot, the camera abandons Nai'i's actions to follow the veiled figure off screen. The immediate cut to Bashu running forward toward us signals that it is *his* apparition we witness. Second, the dramatic medium shot of Bashu's mother facing the camera head on cuts away to Nai'i making bread; the camera again pans away with Bashu's mother as she walks past the hearth into the woods. Her veiled black figure ushers the focus on narrative action off screen, absorbing Bashu's attention which shifts from surprise into panic, and at other times into bursts of hysteria.

Almost all commentators on Beyzai note his well-known grounding in traditional Persian Ta'ziyeh theater, arguing for its ubiquitous expression in his films. Like Asiatic theater more generally—which Bayzā'ī has researched and written about extensively— the Taziye tradition inverts the Aristotelian hierarchy of time and space: plot does not power action or performance but is rather an excuse or pretext for the performance itself.²⁹³ An expert dramaturge who has written over one hundred plays and screenplays, Bayzā'ī did not require recourse to special effects to represent the distinction between reality and hallucination; classic camera techniques clarify this division for the viewer. Significantly, it is her static, at times gestural poise and gait that seem to suspend Bashu's mother in the realm of the otherworldly. [slide] Her body is both iconic and theatrical. Samuel Weber reflects on the contemporary perseverance, even proliferation of traditional theater practices in the overwhelming wake of new media's virtualizing powers and effects. Calling on Walter Benjamin's meditations on epic theater, Weber arrives at a crucial distinction between theater and theatricality. He extracts the defining

²⁹³ Samuel Weber, *Theatricality as Medium*, Fordham UP, 2004.

quality of the latter as the significance of interruption; theatricality “brings the plot in its sequence to a standstill and thereby forces the listener to take a position” (qtd. in Weber 114).

Bashu’s mother interrupts action. Yet whatever demand her interruption might impose on the viewer dissolves in the brevity of her appearance, and in her inability to assume the imperative. It might be more accurate to say that she confronts the viewer with a cognitive chiasmus that the viewer cannot bind. More than the character Bashu himself, Bashu’s mother is a mystery and risk to perception which is heightened, even exemplified by the combination of her Arab and South Iranian fusion of hijab; her long black jilabiye indexes Arabness—perhaps Iraqi origin—while her *burighih*, the black mask she wears over her face is specific to the Southern provinces of Iran (by legend, a tradition begun by women attempting to hide their beauty from slave masters). Like Bashu, she is dark skinned, particularly in contrast with pale, blue-eyed Taslimi, with whom she is systematically juxtaposed. Yet, save her temple, eyes and jaw, her face consistently withdraws itself from this perception. Various generations of critique of black iconicity remark the affective force of the visual inscription of blackness, its power of erasure and hyperbole, as well the way in which singularizing the black image reinscribes the act of racialization as marked through sight and sense. The undecidability introduced by hijab—an equivocal African origin both fused with and veiled by uncertain Arab and Persian markers inflates the stakes of the critique of racialized perception. Theories of spectatorship, especially those that can account for processes of racialization, thus possess compelling pedagogical resources; the enclosed surrender to audiovisual narrative in effect demonstrates the untenability of a thought of perception that is merely or solely possessive; the cinematic as act rather than artifact exemplifies historical process by decoupling it from the human fantasy of exteriorized

chronological time, showing how historical process, however fragmented and incoherent, coalesces through a secretion of perception of affect.²⁹⁴

Beyzai's refusal to directly represent or name the historical event to which the initial bombs in the film have been assumed to refer inflates the meaning of the catastrophe. Explosions accrue representational depth. The death of Bashu's family might thus be read as metaphorical—a simulation of genealogical isolation rather than literal orphanhood. This isolation is reaffirmed over and over again through his blackness, and the social world that hyperbolically ostracizes him for it. The power of the bond between Bashu and his mother erupts in the enjambment of temporalities, unsealing, deflating, re-aerating this hyperbole. Orphaning places the problem of kinship at the center of the film. It is a theme that Bayzā'ī pursues in his following feature film, *Shayad Vaghti Digar (Maybe Some Other Time)*, made almost simultaneously with *Bashu*, and released in 1987. About a mentally tormented middle-class woman, played again by Susan Taslimi (who also plays two other female roles in the same film), *Maybe Some Other Time* chronicles a marriage unraveling through suspicions of infidelity, exacerbated by Kian—the female protagonist's gradual and inscrutable psychic decomposition. Kian learns, at the film's climax, upon meeting her estranged twin sister Vida through a series of sinuous plot actions, that she was abandoned by her impoverished single mother as a baby. Kian relives the traumatic spectacle of this abandonment in one of the film's final and most animated of scenes. Not only does the actress Susan Taslimi play her own mother; the scene is shot from the fictive perspective of the infant Kian as her mother fantasizes it; the viewer, placed in this infantile

²⁹⁴ For example, Francisco J. Varela, "The Specious Present: A Neurophenomenology of Time Consciousness." *Naturalizing Phenomenology: Issues in Contemporary Phenomenology and Cognitive Science*. Edited by Jean Petitot, Francisco J. Varela, Bernard Pachoud, and Jean-Michel Roy, Stanford UP, 1999.

position, stares at a medium close-up of flailing Taslimi the mother, who clings to the back of a carriage that she incorrectly believes carries away her baby. The scene lives in two temporalities and tones: on the cobbled streets of a decades-old sepia tinted Tehran and .in the modern living room of Vida's artistic and exaggeratedly bright high-rise apartment.

Incidentally, abandoned carriages play a symbolic role in Bayzā'ī's oeuvre. In a short he made early in his career, *Safar*, two orphaned boys search amongst urban debris for their parents. [expand relation.] Kian is restored to peace after this impossible reminiscence about her own abandonment. Hints earlier in the film suggest a connection between Kian's mother and Iranian history. Kian first discovers a painting of her in a dusty antique gallery which houses eclectic items from Iran's past. Kian's climactic reenactment of the moment of her severed bond to a meta-national history figured as maternal but encapsulating all the masculine emblems of temporal motion, significance and grandeur, invigorates Kian. In the final scene of the film she breathes in a bouquet of flowers gifted by her husband and smiles outside on the doorsteps to Vida's apartment, walking out into the night with her psyche repaired and restored.

In contrast, the severed bonds of kinship remain frayed at the ends by the conclusion of *Bashu, the Little Stranger*, which ends on a freeze frame. Having returned from his search for employment with a lost arm, Nai's husband quarrels with his wife over the permanent guest, wondering how they can afford to feed another child as when they can barely feed themselves. Bashu breaks in on this quarrel, which quickly dissipates as Nai'i's husband hides his reservations, embracing Bashu's sympathetic hug at the sight of the missing limb. The fate of the family resolves itself in Bashu's unacknowledged acquiescence to work. Nai'i scrunches her nose at the familiar and threatening whiff of a wild boar, and barks. Nai'i, her husband, and Bashu run into the rice fields yelling with sticks, chasing off the feral threats.

Bayzā'ī's allusion to the spirit healing ritual zar bears a potency belied by the casual brevity and simplification of the sequence. It is important that one would miss it altogether without some prior knowledge of zar's distinctive elements—the belief in geographically distinct and individuated winds that penetrate the body's interior, requisite cathartic drumming, the striking bodily convulsions that indicate the wind's awakening in the host body, the presence of a white sheet concealing the wind-ridden's shape, the obvious association with Bashu's southwestern roots.

Scholarship on zar spirals anxiously around the desire for origins, sketching recursive lines through deep etymology that wind through links between Abyssinia to Persia but with insecurity about the direction of that connection and the coordinates of its offshoot trajectories. For example, the Iranian writer Taghi Modarassi put forth a wild thesis in the 1950s based upon a spurious etymological claim. Like “moan,” in Persian “zar” is onomatopoeic expression for suffering. Thus, the association itself was not strange, but the tortuous route Modarassi took to get there approximates similar theories, such as Leo Frobenius's one from the 18th century. Modarassi conceived of “zar” as the Persian name attributed to a ritual introduced to Iran by African sailors in the 16th century. The theory alludes to the 16th century Portuguese invasion of the island of Hormuz during Portugal's initial attempts to gain hegemony over the lucrative Indian Ocean sea trade routes. Modarassi hypothesized that members of this African crew would've been left behind after the Portuguese viceroy was driven out of Hormuz. Their descendants would have passed on the memory of zar. In a similarly peculiar fashion, Frobenius

attributed to a myth of early Persian influence in East Africa the origins of both the zar rituals he witnessed in Omduman and bori in Hausaland to Persian origin.

Other equally compelling etymological hypotheses complicate any confidence. Scholars of zar like Janice Boddy, following early 20th century accounts claim an Arabic origin; a kind of contraction of *zahar* (he visited) that may have seeped into Amharic, and then re-loaned into Arabic;²⁹⁵ in the late 1980s Richard Natvig revived an even older etymology identifying zar as a Kushitic loan word into Amharic meaning sky god. Noting the fact that possession cults can absorb the violent impacts of social change through spiritualizing them, Natvig linked the origin of zar in the Amharic resettlement of the Abyssinian plateau, which forced the Kushitic-speaking Oromo who had invaded the region earlier in the 16th century into an unwelcome and rapid Amharicization.²⁹⁶ Even in this version of the story, zar originates in dissemination, and specifically as a dissemination responding to historical trauma.

Despite the problems inability to possess its origins poses for making broad theoretical judgements, most historians of the phenomena agree that the diffusion of zar throughout the Middle East and North Africa connects to the millenia long trade in African slaves.²⁹⁷ (Although, outside the bounds of anthropology and history, the phenomenon is rarely imagined as an artifact of slavery; Iranian psychiatry, for example, attempts to categorize zar possession as a kind of culturally-bound dissociative state characterized by episodes of apathy and

²⁹⁵ Snouck Hurgronje, *Mekka in the Latter Part of the Nineteenth Century* (1931), pp.100

²⁹⁶ Natvig, 686.

²⁹⁷ Although the dating of this diffusion is unreliable, based as it is predominantly upon European accounts from the 19th century. Richard Natvig, "Oromos, Slaves, and the Zar Spirits: A Contribution to the History of the Zar Cult." *The International Journal of African Historical Studies*, Vol. 20, No. 4, 1987, pp. 669..

mania.²⁹⁸) I argue that the facticity of zar's etymology and aetiology is much less interesting than the way the impossibility of that facticity reflects film's embodiment of the ritual structure of zar—an embodiment that can also be described as disembodiment— *and the impossibility of full facticity in the Indian Ocean archive* . For zar is premised on a loss of univocity. In the ritual, this loss reverberates through the viewer's relation and experience of someone else's dissolution in a lost catastrophe whose racial referent, while inscribed on the body, nevertheless frustrates the faculties of decryption. This is the paradigmatic condition of blackness in the wake of slavery in Iran.

Convulsion, recurrent paroxysms and forms of corporeal agitation were for one of the most important theorists of antiblackness and of colonial revolution, hieroglyphics for the analysis of oppression. In "Concerning Violence," Frantz Fanon goes so far as to remark the indispensability of possession and dance to any study of the colonial world.²⁹⁹ In the passage in question Fanon thinks specifically of zar: "the emotional sensitivity of the native is kept on the surface of his skin like an open sore which flinches from the caustic agent; and the psyche shrinks back, obliterates itself and finds outlet in muscular demonstrations which have caused certain very wise men to say that the native is a hysterical type" (56). What is dissipated in

²⁹⁸ Mianji, Fahimeh and Yousef Semnani, "Zār Spirit Possession in Iran and African Countries: Group Distress, Culture-Bound Syndrome or Cultural Concept of Distress?" *Iran J Psychiatry*, vol. 10, no. 4, 2015, pp. 225-232.

²⁹⁹ Fanon's analysis of zar and possession rituals is part of a larger analytic framework of psychosomatic pathology ascribed to the colonial condition. Fred Moten takes up Fanon's ambivalent reading of the psychosomatic—its oscillation between the poles of pathology and revolution—in "The Case of Blackness," though I think he exaggerates the extent to which Fanon was unaware of his own complex inhabitation of this polarity: "the self-consciousness of the colonized is figured as a kind of wound at the same time that it is also aligned with wounding, with armed struggle that is somehow predicated on that which it makes possible—namely, the explosion of so-called truths planted or woven into the consciousness of the conscious-minded ones. They are the ones who are given the task of repairing (the truth) of man; they are the ones who would heal by way of explosion, excision, or exorcism. This moment of self-conscious self description is sewn into Fanon's text like a depth charge" (210).

Fanon's compelling insight is an abstruse and yet profound distinction between the native and the slave; the way in which zar's trajectory traces routes that depend upon the slave's involuntary movement through time and space that approximates stillness rather than motion.

Film theory describes the medium's suspension in between two and three dimensionality, eliciting a perception that occurs simultaneously through surface and depth—the surface of celluloid, screen or interface, and the depth of psychological repletion, projection, desire, fantasy, intentionality, deep neuronal networking, even spirituality, depending on one's orientation.³⁰⁰ The zar fever sequence filmed through Bashu and then through Nai'i suggests that spirit possession is not merely a ritual response to conditions of personal suffering attached to purely possessable experience. It is rather a kind of pneumatic drift whose untrackable trajectory both flattens and dilates time. It also suggests that the occult psychic needs to which slavery was an even more mysterious response remain lodged in a lost topography that surfaces in febrile fantasy and diminutions of self. We may think about this through the interaction of at least two forms. Zar's pulsatile element strengthens this undoing of temporal dimension; film's temporality suspends the spectator in a world she is complicit in producing but will never possess, mythologizing this lost past that presses down on the present and seeps through the edges of perception, stopping short of penetration.

It is a kind of dispossession that tempts abstraction toward meditations on the ontology of the subject. Ethnographic accounts of zar in Iran begin with an invitation to speak. the mama or baba zars, or Persian leaders of and adepts, demand the wind identify itself by speaking through the mouth of its chosen host. Commonly, the individual afflicted will begin confusing languages,

³⁰⁰ Aumont, *Aesthetics of Film*, 10.

speaking in an admixture of languages he or she has no proficiency in: usually, Swahili, Arabic, Hindi, Urdu, Persian, or radically shifting tonality.³⁰¹ The zar sequence in *Bashu* is too brief to belabor details. It is, like most mainstream representations of the ritual, a sententious abstraction that does not even dissimulate an ethnographic moment. [trans.] Instead the plot displaces linguistic confusion into an edifying and moralizing tale about Iranian polylingualism.

Analyses of *Bashu* rightly focalize the thematic significance of Persian as a universalizing medium in the film, either connecting it ideologically to the nationalizing project or in connection to female abjection.³⁰² The film's dialogue is spoken primarily in Gilaki, a Northern dialect unfamiliar to most Iranian viewers. Bayzā'ī's risky decision not to include Persian subtitles in the domestic distribution of the film channeled the affective estrangement alienating *Bashu* as an Arabic speaker. A pivotal scene coalesces the heavyhanded symbolism of Persian, and while Persian certainly does presents itself as a medium of national reconciliation in the film, its historical role in the global history of race remains overshadowed by this emphasis. Like Sanskrit, at moments even rivaling it,³⁰³ Persian constituted one of the major sources of linguistic paleontology that inaugurates both the modern human sciences and the biological taxonomy of human bodies through the trope of kinship.³⁰⁴ If the historical constitution of the relationship between language and body has never been transparent, scholars of race agree at the very least on the significance of language in the debates over the theoretical relationship between

³⁰¹ Observations of zar in Ethiopia as well as the Middle East feature this element of "speaking in tongues" (Natvig, 679).

³⁰² For example, Rahimieh, "Marking Gender and Difference."

³⁰³ For example, in his 1792 speech "The Origin and Families of Nations," William Jones pronounced Iran the cradle of human civilization, identifying the only remaining human family in the wake of the great biblical flood to reside in the northern parts of Iran.

³⁰⁴ Engelstein, Stefani. *Sibling Action: The Genealogical Structure of Modernity*. Columbia UP, 2017.

language and human variety, heritability, and taxonomy.³⁰⁵ Almost every choice in the film *Bashu* asks the viewer to conceptualize the Persian language, and Iranianness itself, as proxies for an originary, primordial whiteness. Kinship mediated by racial precedes kinship mediated by the nation in a sense that is not merely chronological. From its geographical propulsion north toward the Caucasus, where the history of whiteness makes its home in the fantasy of the Caucasian body³⁰⁶ to the stark juxtaposition between North and South, Indo-European and Semite, adult and child, Bashu and Nai'i in their admittedly strange pairing recapitulate myriad, if obscure and buried allusions to the history of race.

Nai'i is an illiterate peasant; after revealing his secret of Persian literacy Bashu comes forth to replace the doctor as Nai'i's scribe, acting as prosthetic intermediary in the sexual act that epistolarity between Nai'i and her distant husband replaces in a cinema dictated by censorship of even prosaic acts of heterosexual romance.³⁰⁷ But Bashu rarely speaks. In her final letter to her husband who has left the village in search of employment, Nai'i dictates, "and little by little, out of every six words he [Bashu] says, I understand three." The translation "understand" used by the English subtitled version of the film does not capture the more idiomatic nuances of "Man ra halim mishad," which translated more literally would mean, "gives me sense."

"There is only one language," Derrida famously writes in *Monolingualism of the Other*, a philosophical experiment immersed in his colonial experience growing up in Algeria. By which Derrida meant both that, on a mundane level, one tends primarily to speak in one language,

³⁰⁵ Peter Fenves, "What 'Progresses' Has Race-Theory Made Since the Times of Leibniz and Wolff?" *The German Invention of Race*. Edited by Sara Eigen and Mark Larrimore, SUNY, 2006.

³⁰⁶ Nell Irvin Painter, *The History of White People*. Norton, pp. 59-71.

³⁰⁷ Negar Mottahedeh. *Displaced Allegories: Postrevolutionary Iranian Cinema*. Duke UP, 2008, pp. 20.

despite any proliferation of proficiency in multiple languages; and more abstractly, that the numerality of languages is called into question by the necessary relation languages have with one another, whether that relation is conceived in terms of kinship or translation. While the “speaking in impossible tongues,” that is a consistent feature of observations about zar possession evokes this ontological univocity that may very well be the status of language in general it also becries a kind of cosmological damage to the self that may or may not be rooted in phenomenologically individuated experience. This pullulation of speech is also radical interruption. Derrida wished, without dissolving the enormous violence, “however cruel,” of historical instances of colonial linguistic expropriation to extract a universalized structure of assault proper to the human relation to language: “inside languages there is a terror, soft, discreet, or glaring” (23).³⁰⁸ Yet, whatever one thinks about the ambiguous ethical dimensions of theory’s universalization of structures of historically and geopolitically specific instances of violence, whatever one judges about the efficacy of the preservation of distinction that Derrida hoped to maintain in the wake of abstraction, his indisputable observation nevertheless walks away with itself, strangely failing to grapple with the psychic needs the seductive forces of fantasy fulfil—or, the *right* to the fantasy of owning one’s language, of belonging to a language. Zar impalpably specifies a historical prohibition on this propriety, while the filmic display of plurivocity, like Derrida’s ontological univocity, appears to mark it as transcendental. The politicization of ipseity that Derrida figures through a denaturalization of possessive speech is only meaningful on the basis of a possibility for and an access to possession.

In this paper I have suggested that the experience of film reproduces a torn or degraded accessibility made palpable through the fragment, the impersonal detail that the media archive of

³⁰⁸ A structure repeated in his meditations on responsibility in *The Gift of Death*.

Indian Ocean world slavery diffuses in a trail of withdrawn intentions. Opaque deposits, doubtful intuitions, impossible conclusions that gravitate toward oblivion while also haunting any kind of qualitative rupture periodization schemes impress. In *Bashu*, an absorbent yet unidentifiable blackness, genealogical isolation, and pale allusions to wind spirits and the economic history that renders their presence intelligible articulate the lost dimensions occupied by this history's dissipated pastness, whose objectivity defies the more lucid registers of perception. These traces are scattered partial coordinates; photographic objects whose minutiae dissolve in transitory state. They condense a kind of durative vertigo reflecting the sheer impossibility of synthesizing the effects of time on the scale of millenia. Yet the resilience of blackness disrupts the fragment's passage to oblivion, demanding that its difference be thought, rather than abandoned. For the fragment possesses a kind of dream-force whose instability is also its power of divination, a transcendence or defiance of dimension also capable of throttling sense.

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