

HEARING THE HISTORY OF POLITICAL PROTEST

On the Threshold of the Political

The Sonic Performativity of Rooftop Chanting in Iran

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Inja kojast?

The video is black. The roar of a crowd hums in the background. Sounds I can't make out punctuate the din. A few lights trace across the screen dithered and delayed by scarce bandwidth. A groggy voice announces in Farsi the date at close range. "Tomorrow is Saturday. Tomorrow our fate will be sealed." She mutters. What I vaguely thought I could hear is verified by her witness: "Tonight you can hear the sounds of 'Allah-O-Akbar' getting louder and louder than in previous nights." And as she speaks, the din gives way to outbursts that can be distinguished layer upon layer, closer and farther away, enunciated uniquely each time: "Allah-O-Akbar," "A-lla-hu-Akbur," "All-Ahu-Akbar." . . . "Inja kojast?" / "Where is this place?" the speaker asks. "Where is the place where each night the cries for Allah get louder and louder?" Far off in the distance, a scream mutters a protracted plea that is indecipherable though I desperately want to make sense of it . . .

In the summer of 2009, I was glued to a screen at all hours of the day, intercepting, fielding, and consuming bits and bytes of information regarding Iran's disputed presidential elections. I held my breath during the earliest days while watching the pregnant pause of silent protests in anticipation of the revolution's denouement. Soon, however, silent protests would give way to the force of the Islamic

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Revolutionary Guard and descend into the firing of weaponry upon the unarmed masses, leading to large-scale injury and a significant death toll. Cell-phone videos of the peaceful protest marches in support of Mojeh Sabz (green wave) candidate Mir Hossein Mousavi were uploaded to YouTube and Twitter, followed by videos of violent clashes with Basij militiamen and police. Then a series of anonymously posted videos appeared on YouTube representing the nightly chanting of “Allah-O-Akbar” by scores of people shouting from rooftops and balconies in Tehran (subsequently followed by videos made in other Iranian cities as well).¹ By July of 2009, dozens of these pitch-black videos began to circulate widely on the Internet. By December, I had counted over eighty videos that chronicled nightly protests spanning the months June through September, followed by a few that commemorated the events alongside the Shi’a holy day of Ashura in December.

The Iranian government had barred entry to representatives of foreign media and systematically jailed Iranian journalists accused of being hostile to the regime, leaving the disputed 2009 Iranian elections and ensuing protests to be reported largely by a new breed of “citizen journalists.” Filling in the information vacuum, citizen journalists tweeted and uploaded to the Internet raw video footage of protest marches and confrontations with Basij militiamen by day and the voices of dissent performed on Iran’s many rooftops by night. Under the cloak of darkness, residents of Iran’s major cities climbed to the rooftops of their buildings to chant “Allah-O-Akbar” in numbers—a brief reprieve from the violent suppression of their street protests.² The video entitled “Inja kojast” (translated as “Where Is This Place”) received over 313,403 hits (as of this writing).³ Dubbed with English, Spanish, and Japanese subtitles, this video was sampled by a music producer (“Tehran’s Roof Tops Remix”), and it also inspired an important scene in the 2010 French film *Fleurs du Mal* (*Flowers of Evil*).⁴

In sum, this video became widely influential as an Iranian cultural text in transnational circulation. The important shifts in the politics of representation marked by Iran’s post-2009 election protests and government crackdowns, echoed in the ensuing revolutions throughout the Middle East dubbed the “Arab Spring,” reveal lines of continuity and novel improvisations upon historical, material, and sensible genealogies of protest. I focus in particular on “Inja kojast” as a paradigmatic representation of the rooftop chanting videos that began to appear online after the announcement of Mahmood Ahmadinejad’s incumbent win, an example that stages the politicization of a sonic performative. I examine how it has circulated as a representation of a suffering Iranian woman to a transnational virtual public sphere while it also recontextualizes the ethical domain of Shi’a politics through an engagement with the formal repertoire of *Ta’ziyeh* mourning rituals characteristic of what Michael Fischer has coined the “Karbala paradigm”—that ever-present trope of Imam Hossein’s martyrdom symbolically reiterated by Iranians in quotid-

ian performance.⁵ By engaging “Inja kojast” and its life in circulation, I examine the nightly chanting as sonic performatives, cries that, through the deployment and recontextualization of an Islamic Revolutionary ethos, have the capacity to enact a counter-politics.

Rallying Cry(ing)

“The cry of ‘Allah-O-Akbar’ was the defining sound of the 1978 protests against the Shah of Iran, during a revolution that toppled the Pahlavi monarchy and established the Islamic Republic of Iran,” writes Negar Mottahedeh.⁶ While outside Iran, televisual representations of the Iranian revolution were dominated by the chanting of “Marg bar Amrika” or “Death to America” by Iranians marching through the streets burning the US flag, the nation was domestically unified through the ubiquitous rallying cry “Allah-O-Akbar.” This earlier revolutionary context is represented in the video for the song entitled “Allah-O-Akbar, Khomeini Rahbar,” which urged a politically diverse citizenry to stand behind this *rahbar* or new “leader.”⁷ The chanting of “Allah-O-Akbar” was further exploited as a nationalistic call to arms during the Iran-Iraq war in the music video for the anthemic “Allahu Akbar—Iran, Iran.”⁸ As anthropologist Setrag Manoukian points out, the exiled Ayatollah Khomeini called upon his followers to invoke Allah during this earlier period against the tyranny of the Pahlavi monarchy.⁹ These videos illustrate that the chanting of “Allah-O-Akbar” has not only been employed by dissenting Iranians over the last thirty years in opposition to various national and foreign forces, it has also been hyper-mediated and circulated widely.¹⁰

The subsequent Islamic Republic of Iran, born as a result of such demonstrations, adopted a proprietary relationship to what is otherwise one of the most ubiquitous Islamic utterances, translated as “God is great.” Despite its pious provenance and deployment as the paradigmatic cry of the revolutionary uprising against the Shah, the Islamic Republic of Iran (IRI) that was inaugurated by these earlier revolutionary calls interpreted the post-2009 chanting of “Allah-O-Akbar” as blasphemous and an affront to their authority. Journalist Jalal Hosseini argues that this is due in part to the fact that opposition candidate Mir Hossein Mousavi called upon his supporters to remember the revolutionary history of this performative chant in an open letter, stating, “Let’s not abandon the green colour which is a symbol of spirituality, freedom, and religious mentality and moderateness and the Allah O Akbar slogan that tells us of our revolutionary roots.”¹¹ As the official color branding his campaign, the color green has symbolic significance predating candidate Mousavi’s appropriation of it, preceding even its designation as the signifier of the 1979 revolution. Also tied to the Karbala paradigm, the color green is understood by Iranians across class and political spectra to symbolize the righteous path of Shi’ism specifically and the Prophet Mohammad more broadly.¹² Hosseini goes on to contextualize the IRI’s contradictory stance toward this symbolism:

In a religious state, where religion is present in every aspect of life, Iran's protestors have managed to turn religion against their government. . . . *Allah-o Akbar* is perhaps the single most symbolic phrase in the Muslim world, yet Iran's current rulers, who themselves employed this slogan in their struggle against the Pahlavi regime in the 1979 Revolution, did not tolerate the protesters' cries of *Allah-o-Akbar* after the 2009 presidential election. *Allah-o Akbar* has essentially become a forbidden phrase.¹³

The regime took offense not only to the movement's appropriation of the color green but also to the chanting of "Allah-O-Akbar." Hosseini describes the Revolutionary Guard's reactionary and futile tactics in response to the nightly chants:

For the first time in the recorded history of the Islamic Republic, the armed forces of the Islamic regime attacked the homes of people from which cries of *Allah-o Akbar* were heard in order to prevent them from chanting this phrase. Not even the Pahlavi regime, which did not invoke faith or claim religiosity, had such violent encounters with its opponents, many of whom chanted *Allah-o Akbar* from their rooftops at night.¹⁴

The chant's extensive reach resulted from its capacity to speak to an ethical imperative at the heart of Shi'a Islam and also from its function as a provocation to the Islamic Republic. "Maryam," a participant in the chanting who lives in one of the older, more religious neighborhoods in South Tehran, is quoted by Hosseini as saying "a large section of society, which is religious and has no issue with this slogan, wished to let the leaders of this regime know that it is, after all, not above God."¹⁵ Hosseini goes on to quote numerous Tehranis of many stripes, each arguing that the chant has enabled them to register solidarity across the political and class spectrum and has the capacity to resonate even beyond the nation by appealing to other Muslims globally. They each attest to the versatility of chanting "Allah-O-Akbar," which is due to its appeal to the pious and patriotic backers of the Islamic Republic and also because of its power as a performative, political rallying cry.

As Behrooz Ghamari-Tabrizi et al. have argued, the IRI has located Islam in the public sphere.¹⁶ Minoo Moallem as well has argued that the location of Islam in the public sphere results from a complex historical emergence born in struggles over how to define a modern Iranian "civic body."¹⁷ Moallem notes the instability and constantly changing nature of this civic body, with its roots in European civilizational thinking, its deployment as a Pahlavi tool of governmentality, and its transformation into an Islamic political technology. In every instance, however, these techniques have worked to "naturalize the spheres of family and civil society and distinguish them from the sphere of politics; these concepts are essential in the construction of modern rational subjectivities and liberal citizenship."¹⁸ This struggle over Islam in the public sphere spans the entire twentieth century, marked on the

one hand by political regimes that impose the myth of democratic secularism (the Pahlavi dynasty) and, on the other hand, political regimes that center Islam, as in the postrevolutionary formation of the IRI. In every case, however, women's bodies have become theaters on which the nation's politics have been staged, whether through the forced unveilings of the Pahlavi regimes or the forced veiling imposed through Islamic nationalism.¹⁹ This is due in part to a significant public/private cultural and spatial division, constructing the public sphere into what Moallem calls the Islamic *ummat*, a "fraternal and patriarchal community."²⁰ This community requires the performance of piety and thereby positions the civic body against the "Westoxicated" history of the pre-Islamic public sphere as well as the domesticated, private sphere.²¹

The Pasdaran, or Islamic Revolutionary Guard, was instated following the overthrow of the Shah in 1979 in order to enforce the public performance of piety by all citizens and to enforce moral codes through diverse surveillance practices, including patrolling the streets in search of morality code violators.²² Their policing practices actively reiterate and perform the gendering of the public sphere as the masculine site for ethico-religious political enactment and the performance of citizenship and the private sphere as feminized domestic space and site for the reproduction of the means of the public sphere's political productions.²³ It would seem that the demarcation of the public as the site of political agency and the feminized domestic sphere as the space of social reproduction is here disrupted by the seemingly simple political act of crying out from the rooftops.

Moallem has written of the rooftop chanting that ensued after the imposition of a curfew prior to the revolution in 1978, stating that "the roof (*bam*, or *pohst-ebam*) found a new function as a liminal urban space, neither public nor private."²⁴ Balcony and rooftop chants of "Allah-O-Akbar" performatively enact political possibilities that breach gendered spatial binaries. These chants seem to function outside the framework of modern liberal citizenship, refusing the possessive-individual-as-agent-and-bearer-of-rights and, instead, enabling the performance of a collective will through what Fred Moten calls "ensemble" (more on that later). When considering as well the physics of sound, sound's capacity to move, bounce, and blend with other sounds, rooftop chanting has made for an ideal medium of dissent against the civic body of the day, whether it be the monarchy of 1978 or the IRI of 2009, with its systems of public surveillance and techniques of enforcement. But is it just a medium of dissent? Is it merely a resistance practice? Could it be instead an invocation of a different sphere of political action, one that does not privilege the individual agent? Put differently, the chanting of "Allah-O-Akbar" after the disputed 2009 elections is not only the expression of agency by beleaguered citizens, nor is it merely an opportunity for women to more safely participate in the masculine act of political protest. The chanting is a sonic performative that, by collapsing the binaries of secular/religious and public/private, disorients the geography of Islamic political action in Iran.

Inaugurated at Khomeini's provocation, the rooftop chants of "Allah-O-Akbar," which audibly, collectively, and publicly announced an Islamic *ummat* just prior to the Shah's overthrow, also functioned in the overthrow of the Pahlavi monarchy as a collective speech act, linguistically, aurally, and then materially enacting into being an *ummat* that would later be formally codified into constitutional law.²⁵ Thus, far from being mere chant, the collective performative utterance of "Allah-O-Akbar" enacted and formed the Islamic public that enabled the formal transformation from monarchy to Islamic Republic. An appeal to God (as opposed to the monarch) consecrated the public sphere through what Charles Hirschkind has coined an "ethical soundscape"; this collective sonic performance transformed Iran.²⁶ Post-2009 election chanters of "Allah-O-Akbar" further short-circuited the neat public/private distinctions imposed by the IRI by not only enacting a political command from the rooftops of their domestic spheres but also claiming a moral high ground that eclipsed the corrupt appropriations of Islam by the IRI, thus disorienting political space and claims to justice in a way that could authentically operationalize an Islamic ethical practice.

"Ethical Soundscapes"

A little over halfway through "Inja kojast," the narrator's voice begins to quiver as she delivers a series of questions pertaining to the existential quagmire experienced by her and other Iranian youth—the majority of the nation's population. The narrator mournfully laments oppression experienced at the hands of the unjust and undemocratic forces of the IRI. Then, at about the 01:30 mark, the formal qualities of the narration in the video begin to resound like a form of Ta'ziyeh performance known as *rowzeh khani*, in which a speaker laments and mournfully recalls the suffering endured by a Shi'a holy figure and leads an audience of the pious in a mourning ritual. Ta'ziyeh is central to the quotidian performance of Shi'a martyrology and is dispersed across many Iranian cultural forms. Ta'ziyeh as dramatic form appears across many different performance genres spanning the continuum from religious to secular, though it is firmly rooted in Shi'ism. As Hamid Dabashi has characterized it, "Ta'ziyeh is more a performance of mourning—as its name clearly indicates—that has historically spread over a whole constellation of dramatic and ritual performances."²⁷ But he also cautions, "Today it is impossible to understand Ta'ziyeh outside its Islamic and Shi'ite context."²⁸ Although contemporary *rowzeh khani* is almost exclusively gendered as a male performance practice, women in some cases could act as *rowzeh khan* in a private gathering of women. In "Inja kojast," however, the narrator embodies the position of the reciter of *rowzeh khani* sermons on the semipublic site of the rooftop. Her recitation carries the meter of the *rowzeh khan*, her cries seemingly timed to enter at the same structural place as the cries of the *rowzeh khan* recalling the suffering of Imam Hossein.

Performance studies scholar Diana Taylor contrasts the "archive"—those

accumulated materials that “endure”—with the “so-called ephemeral *repertoire* of embodied practices/knowledge . . . [that] enacts embodied memory: performances, gestures, orality, movement, dance, singing—in short, all those acts usually thought of as ephemeral, nonreproducible knowledge.”²⁹ But repertoires are proprietary cultural acts entitled to certain bodies understood as rightful heirs to their enactment. Various intersections of gender, sex, race, class, or ethnicity can demarcate that entitlement. We can read through the transgression of cultural entitlement how the narrator of “Inja kojast” embodies and resignifies the masculine repertoire of rowzeh khani and through video recording creates an archive of the more wide-scale political transgressions of rooftop chants to which she is witness and that seem to confound her. Though confounded, she nevertheless reiterates the Karbala paradigm by performing as rowzeh khan, joining others versed in the repertoire in a mourning that ritually and collectively appeals to an ethical order beyond the limits of the currently possible.

Mazyar Lotfalian has identified the presence of this formal tradition of Ta'ziyeh in state-sanctioned televisual and cinematic productions depicting the Iran-Iraq war as well as in the highly celebrated film movement that emerged after this war, referred to as the “New Iranian Cinema.”³⁰ The renaissance of the Karbala paradigm for Shi'a Islam has had implications at the quotidian level as well, argues Lotfalian, reigniting widespread participation in various Ta'ziyeh rituals, including carnivalesque processions through neighborhoods during the month of Muharram as well as a reinvigorated interest in rowzeh khani.³¹ The rowzeh khani recitation in “Inja kojast” represents a chronotopic fusion of a masculine tradition of sermons depicting the persecution of holy figures with the contemporary persecution of Iranians by the IRI carrying with it the moral authority wielded by the earlier revolutionary rooftop chanters of “Allah-O-Akbar.” And just as in the conventional performance tradition of rowzeh khani, auditors somatically respond to the call of weeping by engaging in mourning and weeping themselves. There is a dialogic component to the performatives enacted in the rowzeh khani genre, which “Inja kojast” and the rooftop chants more generally reproduce. They incite a collective response that laments a specific tragedy through a dialogic performance that appeals to a higher moral authority with the power to bring to reckoning those who have perpetrated the contemporary injustices. For this reason, these acts have provoked the IRI.

Hamid Dabashi has called Shi'ism a religion of protest and the Shi'ite performance tradition known as Ta'ziyeh a “theatre of protest.”³² He describes Ta'ziyeh as “the constellation of all these variations on mourning the death of the Prophet's grandson, Seyyed al-Shuhada, Hussein ibn Ali, ‘the Prince of Martyrs’ (d. 60/680). It is in that thematic sense that Ta'ziyeh became a paramount mode of mobilization during the Islamic Revolution of 1979 and immediately following, during the war with Iraq (1980–1988).”³³ Because, according to Dabashi, Ta'ziyeh

functions as the paradigmatic Shi'ite performance tradition, its connection to protest within Shi'ism has accordingly meant that its recitation has consistently stood on the side of righteousness, endowing the pious with the capacity to speak "truth to power."³⁴ For this reason, the embodiment of this form by the narrator of "Inja kojast," and the rooftop chants more generally, was received as an affront to the regime. As speech act, it invoked the ethical imperative at the heart of the Karbala paradigm, laying bare the un-Islamic and unethical nature of the IRI's actions, particularly pertaining to the 2009 elections.³⁵ It did so in particular through a process of sonic performativity that could cut across the rigid borderlands of gendered spatial segregation and political agency imposed by the IRI. The anonymity that emboldened citizens to climb to their balconies and rooftops to collectively chant, creating a sonic force against the Shah, has been repeated with a difference by a multitude that came together for a new collective outcry.³⁶

The collective performance of "Allah-O-Akbar" can be read on the one hand as an embodied form of what Hirschkind has called a "collective political sensibility" connected to prior iterations and citing prior collective invocations of piety.³⁷ In this way, the narrator of "Inja kojast" summons the ethical listener to found a "counter-public" that can be compared to the Egyptian cassette-sermon listeners analyzed by Hirschkind. But, on the other hand, the counter-public created by collective rooftop chanting in Iran breached the rigid boundary created in the Islamic Republic between the private and public spheres and enabled a public performance that stemmed from the private sphere. The fact that these chants were performed under the cover of night aided participants in evading the technologies of surveillance used to suppress their outcries by day. Through the deployment of the speech act that sutured together a multitude in protest, we can read these incantations as constituting the formation of what Hirschkind calls an Islamic counter-public that lays claim to a different ethical order than that espoused by the IRI.³⁸ Furthermore, the anonymity provided by the combination of darkness, threshold space, and sound can be read in the way Fred Moten has written of slave narratives, as "*recits* and recitations (which is to say rationalizations or theorizations) of an improvisatory suspension of subjectivity, and of a certain desire for subjectivity, and of any prior understanding of subjectivity's differentiated ground."³⁹ Can we read these chants as "ensemble," which Moten describes as "the improvisation of and through the opposition of totality and singularity in and as a descent into the generative cut between description and prescription"?⁴⁰ What theories can enable a better understanding of this sound? Sound is not just the thing that the performers but also the stage and theoretical object that becomes materialized on the rooftop. The Allah-O-Akbar videos seem to question the very notion of the category of subject who acts as political citizen in the civic body, representing instead an anonymous ensemble of prayer. Could it be that the contemporary resurgence of these chants signals the endurance of a founding anonymity that becomes neither sovereign nor citizen? By

relocating to this interstitial space could these chants open severances in the civic body? What kind of stage is the balcony, the rooftop; better yet, *inja kojast*? Where is this place? There is a constancy and something very radical about the incantations that have been mistaken as a kind of fundamentalism, a sentimentalism, or a feminine-ism in their mediated circulation. By retaining the Islamic revolutionary ethos, the performance does not wholesale dispose of the religious connotations inherent in the utterance “Allah-O-Akbar/God is great” (although it would appear by the regime’s repressive crackdown that this would be their interpretation). I would instead argue that the practice, with its roots in the elegiac tradition of Ta’ziyeh, sutures an audience into a pious mourning ritual. While there seems to be a desire to interpret these chants as secular, by both Western commentators as well as by the Basij militia and Ahmadinejad himself, I would argue that these utterances improvise on Islam in order to perform what Moten refers to as “knowledge of freedom,” or that knowledge which prayer contains but which is not experiential knowledge. Moten asks, “Is knowledge of freedom always knowledge of the experience of freedom, even when that knowledge precedes experiences?” He continues, “What this knowledge of freedom requires is an improvisation through the sensible and the intelligible, a working through the idiomatic differences between the modes of analysis which would valorize either over the other.”⁴¹ It would seem the chanting of “Allah-O-Akbar” evinces a “knowledge of freedom” that appeals to another formation that is indeed more liberationist and ethical than that espoused by the IRI.

Semiviral Aural Reimaginary

Eliding the aforementioned historical context for the performance practice, the rooftop chanting videos have gone semiviral owing to the market value of emotional appeal in late capitalism broadly but specifically because of the war propaganda campaigns of the recent past. The emotional appeal of the oppressed “Muslim-woman” (a term coined by miriam cooke that Mino Moallem revises to describe the flattened signifier through which Muslim women are represented in the West), as many have commented, has resulted in the swaying of public opinion in support of the waging of otherwise unpopular recent wars (Iraq, Afghanistan, Libya, etc.).⁴² This suffering has necessarily been framed as one at the hands of a domineering Islamic masculinity (read terrorism) against which the West has waged a war. Thus the emotional appeal to which so many YouTube audiences have responded is a familiar one and has provoked predictable testimonial responses. The circulation of “Inja kojast” and videos like it have had disparate political and social outcomes. Rather than necessarily composed of “ethical listeners” who constitute an Islamic counter-public, YouTube audiences constitute what Zizi Papacharissi has called a “virtual public sphere,” which she notes is pulled more generally into a hegemonic center defined by global capitalism.⁴³ Thus when encountered by this virtual public sphere, there is a reductive reading of the chanting as representative of a suffering

feminized individual in need of liberation. Furthermore, when considered through a history of Hollywood film narrativization—the history that informs how Internet video is perceived in the West—“Inja kojast,” with its disembodied voice-over narration, could also be a representation that harkens the spectator back to the classical Hollywood period Kaja Silverman maps. By applying feminist film theory to film sound rather than just image, Silverman expositis how the female voice becomes contained within the diegesis while the male voice has the capacity for omnipresence outside the diegesis. She writes, “By confining the female voice to a recessed area of the diegesis, obliging it to speak a particular psychic ‘reality’ on command, and imparting to it the texture of the female body, Hollywood places woman definitively ‘on stage,’ at a dramatic remove from the cinematic apparatus.”⁴⁴ So any capacity the chanting may have to breach the gendered codes of political action becomes lost in a spectatorial tradition that relegates the female voice to the performance of injury within the confines of the diegesis. The domineering logic to the consumption of these videos is thus one that reduces the event to a case of oppressed womanhood.

This reductive hegemonic reading is seen as necessary for the production of liberal empathy by Americans for Iranians. For instance, Susan Moeller, who penned a Huffington Post piece right around the time of “Inja kojast’s” semiviral circulation, argues that this most recent phase of the chant’s signification has helped to win Americans over to the protesting Iranians’ cause. Moeller claims that “watching Americans are learning to reframe the meaning of ‘Allah O Akbar’ and re-imagine the people of Iran. The pictures from Tehran are showing that Iranians are not monolithic in their beliefs.”⁴⁵ Moeller suggests that this collective chanting has somehow cut through Islamophobic representations of a fundamentalist Iran to create an affective and empathic opening through which Americans can “re-imagine the people.” Moeller’s argument echoes the sentiment of the comments written on the YouTube page for “Inja kojast,” such as “This breaks my heart!” left by Annabanana23663 or “I have listened to this so many times already that you would think I would have moved on BUT I continue to listen and will continue to listen for there is truth in that voice of pain. And only by embracing pain can we love truth. And truth not only will set us free but without truth we cannot be free. Go you beautiful Persians. The people of the USA love you for your defiance” (by YouTube viewer HulkSmashPunyHumans). Can the overdetermined engagement with “Inja kojast” within the virtual public sphere that Moeller has outlined be resisted? What is the difference between the recorded archive of the event featuring the narrator in “Inja kojast” and the ephemerality of the pleas made by the ensemble of voices calling “Allah-O-Akbar”? Can the virtual public respond to these invocations without confusing itself for the hailed? What is the role of the virtual auditor of these calls? Does the virtual auditor, by simply hearing calls of “Allah-O-Akbar” circulated in new media forms, have the capacity to engage in the ethical listening practice they seem to be calling for?

Not only were YouTube users impacted by “Inja kojast,” but the video’s representation of Iran’s rooftop chants inspired the narrative arc of French filmmaker David Dusa’s *Fleurs du Mal* (*Flowers of Evil*, 2010), a film that explores the precarity and instability of Iran after the 2009 elections. Through a chanting scene in which the two main characters, Gecko (Rachid Youcef) and Anahita (Alice Belaïdi), vociferously call out “Allah-O-Akbar” on the edge of a rooftop in the avowedly anti-Islamic nation of France, they thumb their noses at both nation-states at once while also sealing their romantic bond. Perhaps in an ironic play on Khomeini’s mid-twentieth-century exile in the same city, the beautiful, educated, and upwardly mobile Anahita is incubated in Paris for a time while the political instability following the 2009 elections settles down. Completely obsessed with the post-election struggles that she and her friends were actively engaging in on the streets of Tehran, she daily follows every new tweet and YouTube video. Biding her time in Paris, she convinces Gecko, the bellhop at her swanky hotel, to give her a tour of the city, and the two soon become lovers.⁴⁶

Fleurs du Mal weaves narrative scenes with YouTube footage of Iranian post-election street protests and, in one scene, an image of Neda Agha Soltan’s assassination. Viewed over 1,300,000 times (as of this writing), there has been a wide-scale promotion through documentary films, video diaries, songs, and various other imagery of what has been called Neda’s martyrdom for Iran’s “green revolution.” Despite the high number of casualties among Iranians of different classes, ethnicities, and ages, a feminized suffering at the hands of an Islamic fundamentalist Iranian masculinity has become a privileged symbol. But this has enabled an affective attachment to be made, which has, quoting Moeller yet again, enabled Americans to “re-imagine the people of Iran.” But this time, somewhat counter to Moeller’s claim, it is not only “pictures” that are functioning to transform perceptions of Iranians; sound operates as a critical conduit to an interiority characterized by pain and suffering that has particular appeal. I argue that the suffering sounds of “Inja kojast” resonate within what I have elsewhere termed an “aural imaginary” through which Americans are invited to “re-imagine the people of Iran.”⁴⁷ Through the suffering sounds of an anonymous feminine-sounding voice, which reflects upon and poetically translates the suffering sounds of a nation’s nightly chanting of “Allah-O-Akbar,” a direct link has been made to *the feminized victim of Islam*. There is a reductive conflation of the image with the sound in both the liberal humanitarian discourse and the critical discourse around these performances. Despite the predominance of black, saturated darkness in the videos, there is a projection onto the archived footage that screens the narrative most familiar to transnational audiences.⁴⁸ The old Orientalist desire for pulling back the veil, a peek into the burqa, a wind-blown hijab—that feminized opening to reimagine and know the radical other that is Iran has become attached to a new perceptual modality: aurality.

I have elsewhere written about the limitations of the Iranian woman’s mem-

oir genre and of the invocation to “speak” structured into this genre.⁴⁹ Despite the marketing of the genre as a platform for truthful testimony by Iranian women, many of whom have been persecuted and imprisoned by the IRI for political reasons, what inevitably emerges is the narrative of injury and victimization at the hands of a fundamentalist Muslim masculinity and the Islamic Republic of Iran. This genre has unwittingly been structured into a narrative of suffering that deploys tropes of injury, oppression, and rightlessness with respect to Iranian women and inevitably produces the site of refuge and the language through which these women speak, that is, Western modernity, as the ultimate agent in the narrative. What we, similarly, find in the distribution of the videos is a liberally motivated, semiviral, aural reimaginary that nevertheless writes the Iranian woman as yet again suffering at the hands of an overbearing Islamic masculinity. But how can we perceive these cries differently than called for by Moeller and engage this counter-modernity of aural protest? There is a theater of protest opened up in these performances that is invisible, illegible, and inaudible to those who experience them as simply semiviral videos that disappear just as quickly as they appear. As I argue in the next section, when situated within a history of Iranian performative protest, “Inja kojast” and the chanting it narrates has the potential to open up alternative spaces for political enactment representing how radical political desire survives history and all its brutal variations.

On the Threshold of the Political

“It’s one of the simplest and most effective ways to call people together. . . . They can take our texting, they can take our Internet, they can take our cell phones but we show them that with the sound of ‘Allah-O-Akbar’ we can come together. . . . People are calling God with all their heart. Perhaps this sound will shake the Kingdom of God.”⁵⁰ So narrates oldouz84 on the final of her four-part series of pitch-black “Allah-O-Akbar” chanting videos entitled “Allaho Akbar Arshe Elahi Ra Be Larze Dar Khahad Avard 26 Khordad” (“Allah-O-Akbar Will Shake the Kingdom of God.”)⁵¹ Her voice is by now marked by the weight of the losses collectively endured over the previous days of protest, including and exceeding the ones that she names. The potential she narrates as being contained in the act of the collective plea “Allah-O-Akbar,” I argue, is a potential that historically emerges as a chance claim upon the spaces remaindered from the liberal relegation of politics to the public sphere and cultural/social (re)production to the private sphere. Chanting transforms these boundary spaces into stages of ethical protest. Under the cloak of darkness, people exited their densely packed high-rise units in order to join what Moten names a “chorus of ensemble.”⁵² By occupying such threshold spaces, chanters enabled a critical revision of not only the liberal construction of public politics but also the atomization of subjectivity that liberal political philosophy imposes.

In his discussion of “Inja kojast” and the rooftop chants taking place during the disputed Iranian elections of 2009, anthropologist Setrag Manoukian also

seeks a reading that does not reduce these events to marches for individual rights. He develops the notion of the “crowd” (by building upon Paola Virno’s idea of the “multitude”) to describe a “mobile, heterogeneous milieu of potentiality” dispersed across economic, religious, and political spectra.⁵³ However, in an effort to theorize how the multiplicity of voices that constitute the crowds chanting “Allah-O-Akbar” become a subject agitating the state and against which the state must mobilize, he conflates the space of the street with the space of the rooftop and the balcony. Manoukian, and other scholars who have commented on the 2009 uprisings, have neglected to consider the uniqueness of the balcony and rooftop—as compared to the street—and the gendered nature of this oversight has born reflection here. While there is a history of crowds in Iran that Manoukian nicely maps, conflating the rooftop chanting of “Allah-O-Akbar” with this history continues the foreclosure of a form of dissent particular to modern Iranian history that is gendered in ways divergent from the politically legible masculinity of street protest. By limiting his reading of crowds to the liberal political formation of a public sphere and its multitude structurally distinguished from a private sphere (which he does not name but which is always implied), Manoukian overlooks the shifting context for the enactment of the political.

What spatial and hence gender possibilities are opened up on balconies and rooftops in Iran that are otherwise foreclosed on the supposedly public street or Internet? While most commentators have primarily focused on the novelty of citizen journalism emergent during the contestations over Ahmadinejad’s announced second term and the rise of new media forms in the dissemination of reportage on protests, what can be made of the decidedly low-tech practice of rooftop chanting and the particularities of a completely black video that features an off-camera female-sounding rowzeh khan and innumerable voices chanting in the distance? Iran’s rooftops are the threshold between the public and private, the feminized domestic sphere and the masculine public sphere. Rooftops functioned as convenient extensions for protest long after the curfews imposed during the 1978 demonstrations against the Shah.⁵⁴ Furthermore, balconies and rooftops are ideally perched broadcast points for the amplification of dissent. Resonating against hard surfaces in the built environment, this dissent contributes to the acoustics of the city, which echoes a spatial resonance with which Iranians are familiar, including that of *hayats* (courtyards common to living quarters), *hammams* (public baths), *maydans* (densely populated urban squares often named after revolutionary gatherings), and, among the Shi’a, the mosque. Pious or not, all are attuned to the “ethical soundscape” of *adhan/azan* (calls to prayer) broadcast from loudspeakers five times a day, the sonic hailings of Islam to the sounds of piety, which echo across the cityscape, bouncing off high-rise buildings and sidewalks. Thus the strategy of collective chanting emerges from an acoustic consciousness always already anticipating the call to ethical action. Balconies and rooftops are semiprivate, semipublic but also nonprivate, nonpublic

spaces in a country that rigidly polices the boundary between the private and the public. These liminal breaches of the public/private division are disruptive to state policing and surveillance and thus open up a space of potential that the traditional site of protest—the street—forecloses. Rooftops and balconies function therefore as semiautonomous zones where practices deemed illegal by the surveillance state are hidden in plain sight. This makes them sites that are not overdetermined in their agential capacity or in their gendering. When considering the rigid history of racialization and gendering of public space and the policing of agency within the public sphere, we must reimagine rooftops and balconies as revisions upon political space.

Knowledge of *Freedom*

“This essay is for the telling of a free story. . . . This telling must also be situated on the frontier at which ‘Man’ is improvised.”

—Fred Moten, “Knowledge of Freedom”

What if we consider the balconies and rooftops on which Iranians chanted “Allah-O-Akbar” in the way that Moten has reflected on Ralph Ellison’s claim to the fate of becoming one and yet many, what Moten extrapolates more broadly as the black radical tradition?⁵⁵ I quote at length from Moten, who writes,

A threshold at which it is necessary, yet seems unfathomable, to imagine a phenomenology of totality and singularity that would reveal some opening of the possibility of political agency, of another mode of organization unopposed to freedom. That phenomenology would have to provide a sense—neither sensible nor intelligible (more than sensible, more than intelligible)—of a whole not bound by the interminable oscillation of systemic relation and nonrelation. Such a phenomenology would move beyond the endless and always asymmetrical tension between individual and society, or self and other; finally, it would move beyond any ontological formulation of, and in, difference that displaces the whole and leaves us at the site of a discursive contest of infinite curvature where our reality never escapes the forces power exerts over responsibility and in/determination exerts over improvisation.⁵⁶

The uncanny parallelism between Moten’s metaphor—threshold—as a boundary space at which point various binary oppositions through which power functions (totality/singularity, individual/society, self/other) can be breached and the balconies and rooftops on which Iranians chanted “Allah-O-Akbar” enables me to theorize a deconstructed, performative freedom. Moten names a formation called “freedom”—as it has emerged in the black radical tradition—that is not the same conceptualization of “freedom” that emerges from the enlightenment tradition, since blackness is that ontology against which the Enlightenment tradition of “freedom” was constructed and which produced instead blackness as “unfreedom.” Moten identifies

a form—improvisation—that has the ethical aim of freedom but is not bound to a humanist teleo-logic. Building upon Jacques Derrida, he proposes a conceptualization of freedom that is born from an improvisation upon the Enlightenment in the formation of a “new Enlightenment.”⁵⁷ This is a direct rebuttal to those who claim that “nothing good—experientially, culturally, aesthetically—can come from horror.”⁵⁸ Building upon Moten, then, I propose that we read the lamentations exhibited in “Inja kojast” as a continuation of the rowzeh khani performance form but with a marked difference. The liminality of threshold space, combined with the ambiguity of the Internet audience, makes possible conditions for a plea rooted in a classical formal tradition but routed through different spatial, somatic, and technological means. As Lila Abu-Lughod has suggested, this formal continuity is important in deciphering the workings of power. The “shift in perspective” Abu-Lughod advocates for requires “asking not about the status of resistance itself but about what the forms of resistance indicate about the forms of power that they are up against.”⁵⁹ Thus it is through the performance of the discursive tradition of rowzeh khani on the threshold space of the balcony/rooftop that a freedom—both endemic to Shi’ism and resuscitated by an ensemble of voices chanting “Allah-O-Akbar”—gets improvised upon. This is a freedom that itself improvises upon the liberal notion of “freedom” imposed through secularism and deliberately banned in the formation of the IRI. It improvises upon space and the seemingly overdetermined location for the political in public. It improvises upon “Man” (as Moten describes in the epigraph that begins this section) in all its connotations: racially unmarked, patriarchal, universal, rights bearing, and individualized subject. Saba Mahmood suggests that we “attend carefully to the specific logic of the discourse of piety: a logic that inheres not in the intentionality of the actors, but in the relationships that are articulated between words, concepts, and practices that constitute a particular discursive tradition.”⁶⁰ This discursive tradition, relocated to the threshold space of the balcony and uttered by a female-sounding voice, falls within the genealogy of Ta’ziyeh but with a critically important difference. Through improvisation upon a sonic performative, the hegemony of the ethical and political orders is disrupted.

Mahmood urges that we pay attention to how “different modalities of moral-ethical action contribute to the construction of particular kinds of subjects, subjects whose political anatomy cannot be grasped without applying critical scrutiny to the precise form their embodied actions take.”⁶¹ This is particularly important when thinking beyond the religious/secular binary, in a historical context in which this very binary has been the pivot on which state formation has turned. Mahmood’s insistence is important to bear in mind when considering claims made by “Inja kojast’s” narrator in yet another video, entitled “In Rozharo Faramosh Nakonim!—31 Khor-dad 1388” (“Let Us Not Forget These Times”).⁶² Here, the narrator addresses the religious proclivities of the anonymous chanters. She describes them as consisting of Muslims and non-Muslims, atheists, Jews, Zoroastrians, those living and those dead.

These various chanters call out “Allah-O-Akbar,” not just to represent themselves as Muslim but to call upon one another in an ethical appeal and a mode of address, which show the one and the many to be a polytheistic as well as haunted ensemble. In response to the anonymous voice that asked “Inja kojast/Where is this place,” I would respond, it is a rooftop, a balcony, a proscenium of political activity in which a plea can be made to a higher ethical order than that represented by not only the IRI but contemporary liberal politics in general. In particular, it is a space in which the sonic performative “Allah-O-Akbar” opens up the possibility for a different order, a different politics, and a different knowledge of *freedom*.

Notes

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1. They have been archived on the following website: Chas Danner, MightierThan.com, www.mightierthan.com/2009/07/rooftop/ (accessed July 2, 2014).
2. Militiamen took to canvassing door-to-door warning residents against such rooftop calls and, in some cases, raided homes to ensure that residents were not on rooftops or balconies.
3. The original video was posted to YouTube by oldouz84 and had received 136, 248 views as of writing. Ouldouz84, “Inja kojast,” YouTube, www.youtube.com/watch?v=2oM6lgPO6Yo&list=PLQwQL-vuib8qV3EnDdGC6IxMAOSTi4E5p&index=35 (accessed March 3, 2014). A second version reposted and translated with English subtitles by MightierThan had received 176, 134 views as of this writing. See MightierThan, “Poem for the Rooftops of Iran: ‘Where Is This Place,’” recorded June 19, 2009, YouTube, www.youtube.com/watch?v=pKUZuv6_bus&list=PLQwQL-vuib8qV3EnDdGC6IxMAOSTi4E5p&index=18&feature=plpp_video (accessed July 2, 2014).
4. The Spanish and Japanese subtitled versions received an additional 1,321 views together as of March 31, 2014. For the Spanish version, see MightierThan, “Poema para las azoteas de Irán—19 de junio de 2009,” YouTube, www.youtube.com/watch?v=oOGLxd378Is&feature=watch_response (accessed July 2, 2014). For the Japanese version, see LunaticEclipseIran, YouTube, www.youtube.com/watch?v=o4BCSdPYioo&feature=watch_response (accessed July 2, 2014). For the hip-hop remix, see: TakhtehJamshid, YouTube, www.youtube.com/watch?v=JE39WJU8JYE&list=PLQwQL-vuib8qV3EnDdGC6IxMAOSTi4E5p&index=14 (accessed July 2, 2014).
5. Michael Fischer coined the term *Karbala paradigm* to describe the founding legend of Shi’ism in the story of Hussein that he explains “is the most emotionally intense and concentrated, and is the reference point for almost all popular preaching . . . the emotionally potent theme of corrupt and oppressive tyranny repeatedly overcoming (in this world) the steadfast dedication to pure truth; hence its ever-present, latent, political potential to frame

- or clothe contemporary discontents.” See Michael Fischer, *Iran: From Religious Dispute to Revolution* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1980), 13.
6. Negar Mottahedeh, “Allah-O-Akbar,” *ArteEast Quarterly*, www.arteeast.org/2012/10/30/allah-o-akbar/ (accessed July 2, 2014).
 7. Ahmad G., “Allaho Akbar Khomeini Rahbar Enghelabi Revolutionary song,” YouTube, www.youtube.com/watch?v=inTaGxdTdCo&list=PLQwQL-vuib8qV3EnDdGC6IxMAOSTi4E5p&index=8&feature=plpp_video (accessed July 2, 2014).
 8. AlHidayahHannover, “Allahu Akbar—Iran, Iran,” www.youtube.com/watch?v=YuEmikp5QQk&list=PLQwQL-vuib8qV3EnDdGC6IxMAOSTi4E5p&index=10&feature=plpp_video (accessed July 2, 2014).
 9. Setrag Manoukian, “‘Where Is This Place?’: Crowds, Audio-Vision, and Poetry in Post-Election Iran,” *Public Culture* 2, no. 22 (2010): 241.
 10. On the importance of the Internet in this circulation and hyper-mediation, see Babak Rahimi, “Affinities of Dissent: Cyberspace, Performative Networks, and the Iranian Green Movement,” *CyberOrient: Online Journal of the Virtual Middle East* 5, no. 2 (2011), www.cyberorient.net/article.do?articleId=7357.
 11. Mir-Hossein Mousavi, “Mousavi’s Letter to Iranians,” *Al Jazeera*, www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2009/06/2009614142547175118.html (accessed July 2, 2014).
 12. Abbas Varij Kazemi, “Appropriating the Past: The Green Movement in Iran,” *Global Dialogue: Newsletter for the International Sociological Association*, isa-global-dialogue.net/appropriating-the-past-the-green-movement-in-iran-2/ (accessed April 26, 2014).
 13. Jallal Hosseini, “The Alla-O Akbar That Targeted the Heart of the Dictator,” Gozaar, June 17, 2010, www.gozaar.org/english/articles-en/The-Allah-o-Akbar-that-targeted-the-heart-of-the-dictator.html.
 14. Ibid.
 15. Ibid.
 16. Behrooz Ghamari-Tabrizi, Mansour Bonakdarian, Nasrin Rahimieh, Ahmad Sadri, and Ervand Abrahamian, “Editor’s Introduction,” *Radical History Review*, no. 105 (Fall 2009): 3.
 17. Minoo Moallem, *Between Warrior Brother and Veiled Sister: Islamic Fundamentalism and the Politics of Patriarchy in Iran* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 62.
 18. Ibid., 61.
 19. Ibid., 69.
 20. Ibid., 28.
 21. I am not arguing that this binarization of space and politics is unique to postrevolutionary Iran. Nor is this to suggest that behaviors and practices are not actively policed by the IRI in the private sphere. The diffuse nature and biopoliticization of power and its effects in Iran, while key questions animating the issues taken up here, are topics beyond the focus of this current essay.
 22. Many *Mojeh Sabz* activists accused the Basij arm of the Islamic Revolutionary guard of violent crackdowns, which resulted in the deaths of numerous protesters. See “Arrests at New Iranian Protests,” *BBC News*, July 21, 2009, news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/8161824.stm.
 23. I am deliberately referring to the gendering of these public and domestic spheres, as opposed to their sex segregation, so as to point to the gender performativity required in the embodiment of these spaces. Of course, women do lay claim to political space within the Iranian public sphere; however, doing so necessitates the performance of a masculine mode of citizenship and a claim to political rights as gendered masculine. Women have

actively participated in public political protest at least since the Constitutional Revolution of 1953 (if not prior); as this has been widely documented, it is not up for debate here. What I am instead considering here is how women as political subjects in modern Iranian history have necessarily looked a lot like men as political subjects, since political subjecthood—as articulated through liberal political philosophy—depends on the public sphere of politics-as-masculine. Thus, women in the streets, while not synonymous with men in the street, does nothing to destabilize the historical formation of the public sphere as the site of masculine political subjecthood.

24. Moallem, *Between Warrior Brother*, 85.
25. “Speech act theory,” originally developed by structural linguist J. L. Austin, describes the process by which a linguistic utterance performs change in the world. Put plainly, Austin maps processes where “in saying these words we are doing something,” and from this he coins the term *performative utterance*. Austin’s most famous example is the case of the utterance “I do” when uttered in the course of a wedding ceremony, which, within the ceremonial context, transforms the speaker from single to married. See J. L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1962), 12–13.
26. Charles Hirschkind, *The Ethical Soundscape: Cassette Sermons and Islamic Counterpublics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), 6.
27. Hamid Dabashi, “Ta’ziyeh as Theatre of Protest,” *Theater and Drama Review* 49, no. 4 (2005): 92.
28. *Ibid.*, 93. While generally understood as Islamic in its semantic makeup, many have argued for a more expansive understanding of the performance form, especially with regard to its political potential. See the special issue of *TDR* on Ta’ziyeh in *Theater and Drama Review* 41, no. 4 (2005): 91–99.
29. Diana Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 19–20.
30. Mazyar Lotfalian, “Islamic Revolution and the Circulation of Visual Culture,” *Radical History Review*, no. 105 (2009): 165.
31. *Ibid.*, 166.
32. *Ta’ziyeh* is an umbrella term used to describe a performance tradition of mourning rituals that includes site-specific performance practices such as the predominately male self-flagellation rituals *sineh zani* (collective and rhythmic chest beating and prayer utterance), *qameh zani* (blood letting of the scalp with sword), *zanjir zani* (rhythmic beating on back with chains), and public recitation rituals such as *rowzeh khani* (melodic recitations describing the suffering of various Islamic figures, including imams and the prophet’s daughter Fatemeh), *dasteh khani* (the collective chanting of suffering by mobile bands of pilgrims), *shabih-khani* (a less formal solo recitation), and *pardeh-dari* (descriptive telling employing a painted mural or banner). See Dabashi, “Ta’ziyeh,” 91–99.
33. *Ibid.*, 92.
34. *Ibid.*, 91.
35. Fischer, *Iran*, 26.
36. Despite the diversity of motivations that inspired the chanting, numerous groups have attempted to instrumentalize the practice under the organizing logic that they are a part of a campaign meant to warn the nation’s leaders against the imposition of gag orders or actual detainment of opposition candidates. See “Green Movement’s Warning to the Regime about Safety of Opposition Leaders,” *Green Voice of Freedom*, September 20, 2010, en.irangreenvoice.com/article/2010/sep/20/2330 (site discontinued).
37. Charles Hirschkind, *Ethical Soundscape*, 30–31.

38. Ibid., 106.
39. Moten discusses the example of Uncle Toliver, the slave who prayed aloud for a Yankee victory and paid with his life after refusing to pray for a Confederate one. Moten's focus on prayer and professing as a formal dimension of sound reveals how the sonic lends itself to the passional affective register enacted through a corporeality that visuality does not as readily allow. See Fred Moten, "Knowledge of Freedom," *CR: The New Centennial Review* 4, no. 2 (2004): 276.
40. A concept he develops across numerous texts, Moten's "ensemble" is at once a riffing on the musical notion of a heterogeneous unity in sonic performance while it is also developed as a Derridean notion that deconstructs or improvises upon the self/other dyad into a form of consciousness that opens in on that formation. See Fred Moten, "Knowledge of Freedom," 280.
41. Ibid., 303.
42. Minoo Moallem, "Muslim Women and the Politics of Representation," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 24, no. 1 (2008): 106.
43. Zizi Papacharissi, "The Virtual Sphere: The Internet as a Public Sphere," *New Media and Society* 4, no. 1 (2002): 9–27.
44. Kaja Silverman, *Acoustic Mirror: The Female Voice in Psychoanalysis and Cinema* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988), 63.
45. Susan Moeller, "Media Literacy 101: 'Allah O Akbar' Has Become a Cry for Freedom," *Huffington Post*, www.huffingtonpost.com/susan-moeller/media-literacy-101Z-irans_b_217780.html (accessed July 2, 2014).
46. Despite the somber context of the film's main narrative preoccupations with Iran's botched 2009 elections, this plot point, I argue, enables the cathexis of an Orientalist drive that is shared by Western audiences: a drive to consummate the desire for the feminized Muslim woman seen to have suffered under the despotic rule of Muslim masculinity. This same desire gets sublimated in the consumption of a feminized Muslim suffering, leading to a reductive popular reading of "Inja kojast" that eclipses the ambivalence of and disparate intentions behind the chanting it documents. In particular, it is through the cries of the narrator's female-sounding voice that "watching Americans are learning to . . . reimagine the people of Iran" as finally available to and eligible for their empathy, attention, and yearning. The visual consumption of the archived event further forecloses the complex ambivalence of the ensemble's performativity.
47. Roshanak Kheshti, "Touching Listening: The Aural Imaginary in World Music Culture Industry," *American Quarterly* 63, no. 3 (2011): 711–31.
48. There are certainly diverse and divergent readings of these texts. However, I would argue that there is a logic through which the video is made intelligible to YouTube audiences, one informed by Western humanism, which can only interpret the narrator's individualized suffering as heard against a chorus of suffering individuals.
49. Roshanak Kheshti, "Can the Memoirist Speak? Representing Iranian Women, Gender, and Sexuality in Recent Popular and Scholarly Publications," *Feminist Studies*, 38 (2012): 50–72.
50. Oldouz84, "Allaho Akbar Arshe Elahi Ra Be Larze Dar Khahad Avard 26 Khordad" ("Allah-O-Akbar Will Shake the Kingdom of God,") YouTube, www.youtube.com/watch?v=ztE-zoo0Xd4&list=PLQwQL-vuib8qV3EnDdGC6IxMAOSTi4E5p&index=36 (accessed March 31, 2014).
51. Ibid.
52. Moten, "Knowledge of Freedom," 241.
53. Manoukian, "Where Is This Place?," 245.

54. Ibid., 241.
55. Moten discusses a passage from Ralph Ellison's epilogue to *Invisible Man*, which reads, "Our fate is to become one and yet many—This is not prophecy but description"; *ibid.*, 279. While it may initially seem like a stretch to stitch into an analysis on Iranian political desire a theory developed around the black radical tradition, I want to argue for some parallels. Recalling, for example, how Frantz Fanon's *Wretched of the Earth* fomented postcolonial liberation struggles and—most famously in the Iranian context informed the work of Ali Shariati—I look to Moten as a scholar whose work on the medium of sound and, in this case, the plea and the prayer, helps to shift our understanding of what counts as the political and as protest.
56. Ibid., 280.
57. Ibid., 275.
58. Ibid.
59. Lila Abu-Lughod, "The Romance of Resistance: Tracing Transformations of Power through Bedouin Women Authors," *American Ethnologist* 17, no. 1 (1990): 47.
60. Saba Mahmood, *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005), 16–17.
61. Ibid., 24.
62. See oldouz84, "In Rozharo Faramosh Nakonim!—31 Khordad 1388" ("Let Us Not Forget These Times,") YouTube, www.youtube.com/watch?v=xcJEoxo24OM&index=33&list=PLQwQL-vuib8qV3EnDdGC6IxMAOSTi4E5p (accessed March 31, 2014).