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The Blood *and* the Message
Traces of Zaynab in Shi'i Memory, Martyrdom, and Performance

DISSERTATION

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF FIGURES

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VITA

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FIELD OF STUDY

Subject Formation in Esoteric Shi'i Martyrdom, Memory, and Performance

ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

The Blood *and* the Message: Traces of Zaynab in Shi'i Memory, Martyrdom, and Performance

by

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This dissertation, *The Blood* and *the Message: Traces of Zaynab in Shi'i Memory, Martyrdom, and Performance*, examines the intersections of mysticism, performance, and gender, in the formation of revolutionary subjectivity in modern Iran. At its center is the figure of Zaynab, sister of Husayn, and whose survival after Karbala and public testimony transformed defeat into remembrance and mourning into resistance. By reading Zaynab not as a static emblem of piety but as a theorist of speech, survival, and witnessing, this project reconsiders the gendered dimensions of martyrdom and its afterlives.

The study unfolds across five chapters. Chapter One situates Ali Shari'ati's theory of *shahadat* (martyrdom) as a rethinking of sacrifice that privileges transmission, memory, and interpretation of death itself. Chapter Two turns to Zaynab's survival and speech, placing her in conversation with Hegel's Antigone, Judith Butler's work on kinship and sovereignty, and contemporary ethnographies of Shi'i women to theorize the politics of survival. Chapter Three interrogates the dialectic of particularity and multiplicity within the Shi'i hermeneutical tradition of *ijtihad*, linking it to questions of immanence and

esoteric knowledge. Chapter Four explores the ta'ziyeh passion play alongside post-revolutionary Iranian cinema, especially Bahram Beyzaie's *Mosaferan* (The Travellers), to argue that theatrical and cinematic performance operates as a form of *ijtihad* through embodiment and repetition. Chapter Five focuses on the gendered politics of remembrance through the figures of Zaynab and Umm Kulthum, tracing how kinship and proximity generate new forms revolutionary memory.

By bridging Shi'i epistemology, performance studies, gender theory, and film analysis, this dissertation contributes to debates on martyrdom, memory, memory, and revolutionary subjectivity beyond Iran. It argues that Zaynab's traces—her survival, speech, and witnessing—reveal the limits of sacrificial paradigms while offering alternative modes of endurance and remembrance. In doing so, the project reorients how Shi'i memory and performance may be understood as critical resources for rethinking politics, gender, and survival in the modern world.

Introduction

Ali Shari'ati's theory of martyrdom (*shahadat*) has been widely discussed within the context of modern Iranian intellectual history, particularly due to his unique synthesis of Islamic and Marxist thought. Shari'ati's reconceptualization of *shahadat* is central to his broader ideological project, which sought to galvanize a revolutionary consciousness among the Iranian populace in the years leading to the 1979 revolution. For Shari'ati, *shahadat* was not simply a matter of dying for a cause but was fundamentally an act of bearing witness—a synthesis of the concepts of martyr (*shahid*) and witness (*shahed*). This dual significance transforms *shahadat* from a mere act of sacrifice into a dynamic expression of political and spiritual resistance.

Scholars such as Ervand Abrahamian have characterized Shari'ati as the ideologue of the Iranian revolution, a figure whose writings and lectures mobilized a generation of young Iranians against the Pahlavi regime. Abrahamian's work situates Shari'ati's concept of *shahadat* within the broader trajectory of revolutionary Shi'ism, describing it as a call to perpetual struggle against oppression. However, this framing has also been critiqued by scholars like Ali Rahnema, who argue that Shari'ati's emphasis on a secularized and modernized Islam risked undermining the theological depth of his thought. Rahnema suggests that Shari'ati's 'free *ijtihad*'[1] sought to

[1] On this, Rahnema states: "With the evocation and redefinition of each concept Shari'ati began his task of placing old Islamic concepts in a new light. Implicitly claiming the right to exercise *ejtehad*, he used the traditional religious framework and tool-box to cast religious principles, concepts, and practices in the revolutionary and modernist mould he desired.

Shari'ati used the concept of *ejtehad* as a dynamic intellectual process, keeping Islam abreast with modern developments. *Ejtehad*, an accepted practice among the Shi'a, implied the application of human reason and rationality by those who were Islamic jurists. Trying to free *ejtehad* from the monopoly of the clergy, Shari'ati started by redefining the *mujtahed*, or person who has the right to exercise

democratize religious interpretation, challenging the traditional authority of the clergy, a move that was met with both admiration and fierce opposition.

My work departs from these readings by emphasizing the instability of Shari'ati's concept of *shahadat*. While many scholars have highlighted his synthesis of martyrdom and witnessing, I argue that this synthesis is itself fraught with contradictions. Shari'ati's insistence on self-negation as a means of attaining eternal life creates a paradox wherein death becomes a site of political agency but also a moment of potential erasure. He finds a solution to this paradox by linking the martyr and the witness, and in doing so carves out a space in martyrdom that is not *actual-bodily-death*. Instead, it is the part of life that lives through death and which underpins much of what Zaynab comes to represent. It proposes a method, a framework for feminine/feminized and survivor-based subjectivity, and in this way it complicates the binaries of action and speech, death and life/survival.

Building on this, I explore how Shari'ati's *shahadat* complicates the relationship between subjectivity and negation. His use of currency as a metaphor for self-sacrifice—wherein the value of one's existence is transformed through negation—illustrates a tension between the material and the immaterial, the finite and the eternal. This tension is not merely theoretical but is embodied in the historical narrative of Imam Husayn and the performative tradition of *ta'ziyeh*, where the martyr's sacrifice is repeatedly enacted and reinterpreted. Through this lens, my project examines the ways in which Shari'ati's theory both draws upon and disrupts these established traditions,

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ejtehad…Shari'ati argued that the application of 'free *ejtehad*' in legal, economic and social domains guaranteed the concurrent evolution and modernization of religion." (300)

positioning *shahadat* as a site of both continuity and rupture within Iranian revolutionary thought.

What becomes clear, however, is that Shari'ati's concept of *shahadat* cannot be fully understood without acknowledging its performative and interpretive dimensions. While Shari'ati emphasized the transformative power of self-negation, the way this negation is recognized, memorialized, or appropriated is far from guaranteed. This is evident in the ways his own legacy was co-opted by the post-revolutionary Islamic Republic. The revolutionary potential of *shahadat* was transformed into a mechanism of state power, a shift that underscores the fragility of Shari'ati's vision. Ultimately, this instability is not a flaw but rather a reflection of the inherently dialectical nature of his thought, where negation itself is both a source of empowerment and vulnerability.

Poupeh Missaghi's *Trans(re)lating House One* has received relatively little academic treatment since it's publication, though it has generated great interest for its experimental form and its haunting meditation on disappearance, erasure, and politics of testimony in post-revolutionary Iran. The novel resists easy classification, oscillating between fiction, documentary, prose-poetry, and critical essay. At its core is a female narrator's search for the statues that once populated Tehran—objects removed by the state and now absent from public memory. This search becomes a broader meditation on loss, memorialization, censorship, and the gendered burden of remembrance. In this way, Missaghi's work has been tentatively aligned with postmodern aesthetics and the transnational Iranian literary canon, though few critics have explored its theoretical stakes beyond the political valences of state violence and historical occlusion.

Where existing readings tend to emphasize either the text's formal innovation or its critique of authoritarian censorship, my work attempts to draw out how Missaghi's novel theorizes embodiment as a form of knowledge production. Rather than treating *Trans(re)lating House One* as simply a literary rendering of trauma, I read the narrator's acts of searching, documenting, and grieving as modalities of embodied epistemology. The narrator's claim—"one can know of something without truly knowing it, a knowing that results from reaching out, searching, documenting, getting intimate with, embodying" (Missaghi 151)—points to a mode of knowledge not reducible to cognition or representation. Here, embodiment is not only the site of suffering but also the method through which fragmented truths are accessed, reconstituted, and shared.

In this way, my project builds upon but also departs from more conventional memory studies frameworks that treat literature as either bearing witness or archiving trauma. Rather than positioning Missaghi's narrator as a passive conduit from history, I argue that she actively produces a temporality through which mourning and meaning can circulate. This, I contend, draws her into proximity with the figure of Zaynab as articulated in Shari'ati's retheorization of *shahadat*. Just as Zaynab becomes the living tongue of her brother's blood, so too does Missaghi's narrator become a vessel through which lost objects, disappeared bodies, and silenced histories come to speak. In this sense, the novel performs the kind of Zaynab-like act that Shari'ati privileges as the continuation of martyrdom beyond death—witnessing that enacts rather than simply records.

To my knowledge, no extant scholarship reads Missaghi through the lens of revolutionary Shi'i paradigms or stages her in conversation with figures like Shari'ati. And yet, doing so opens up the possibility of theorizing not only gendered resistance but

the transmission of political subjectivity in conditions of occlusion. My analysis insists that *Trans(re)lating House One* is not simply a novel about disappearance, but a meditation of the labor of keeping memory alive—an active, bodily labor that blurs the lines between mourning and militancy. In foregrounding the epistemic productivity of embodiment, my work positions Missaghi not merely as a chronicler of loss, but as a thinker of post-revolutionary time, where speech, memory, and flesh converge to unsettle the limits of political testimony.

It is precisely in this convergence—where voice is not disembodied, and where narrative is not linear but recursive—that Missaghi's narrator refuses the logic of both state and archive. She does not seek a final accounting of the disappeared, but rather, insists on a form of knowledge that is felt, inhabited, and necessarily incomplete. In this sense, *Trans(re)lating House One* becomes a kind of counter-archive—feminine, partial, and insurgent—structured not by what is remembered, but by the irreducible intimacy of searching. My reading of Missaghi's work thus positions not only within Iranian literary modernism, but within a longer lineage of revolutionary forms of witnessing, shaped as much by absence as by the drive to make absence speak.

Geog Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* has long served as a foundational text for Western philosophy, particularly for its conception of self-consciousness as produced through negation, recognition, and the unfolding of Spirit through dialectical movement. Among its most enduring—and most contested—scenes is Hegel's discussion of Antigone in the section on *Sittlichkeit*, or ethical life. Here, Antigone represents the divine or familial law in opposition to the universality of the human (state) law embodied by Creon. The ethical tension between these two laws, both of which Hegel deems legitimate, is staged as tragic precisely because each side

acts from within a partial but necessary form of right. The sister, according to Hegel, acts not as an individual but as the bearer of familial immediacy and the sacred duty of burial, a duty grounded in the divine order rather than rational deliberation. The resulting collision—between familial immediacy and the mediated universality of the state—marks a moment in the evolution of Spirit, and Antigone's destruction signals the eventual sublation of the family into the rational state.

This reading of Antigone has generated a cast field of commentary. Feminist theorists in particular have been drawn to Hegel's staging of Antigone's speech and death, seeing in her both a site of resistance and of containment. Luce Irigaray's *Speculum of the Other Woman* and Judith Butler's *Antigone's Claim* are perhaps the two most prominent feminist responses. Irigaray critiques Hegel's Antigone as reduced to a mute conduit of the symbolic order, a sacrificial figure whose speech is foreclosed by the phallocentric structure of dialectics. Butler, by contrast, treats Antigone as a liminal figure who defies intelligibility—one who contests the very limits of kinship, law, and mourning. For Butler, Antigone speaks from a space outside the normative social order, and in doing so, exposes its exclusions. Yet even Butler maintains Hegel's dialectical frame, seeing Antigone's resistance as haunting rather than overturning the state.

My project departs from these readings in two important ways. First, I relocate the dialectic from the domain of Western metaphysics to the context of Islamic revolutionary thought by staging a dialogue between Antigone and Zaynab, the sister of Imam Husayn. In doing so, I aim to trouble the eurocentrism of Hegel's ethical typology, showing how divine and human law operate differently in Islamic traditions of remembrance. Second, I reframe the tragedy not in terms of inevitable subsumption into the state, but in terms of continuity and speech. Whereas Antigone is silenced and

entombed, Zaynab becomes the bearer of testimony—her speech interrupts, circulates, and preserves.

This move aligns with postcolonial critiques of Hegel that challenge the presumed universality of Spirit and its Eurocentric trajectory. Susan Buck-Morss, in *Hegel, Haiti, and Universal History*, argues that the Haitian Revolution was effectively erased from the dialectic archive of world history, exposing the limits of what Hegel could recognize as political transformation (Buck-Morss 21-22). Similarly, Ato Sekyi-Otu's *Fanon's Dialectic of Experience* reanimates the dialectic through the lived struggles of colonial subjects, showing how ethical life unfolds not as a settled horizon of law, but as a terrain marked by rupture, improvisation, and return (Sekyi-Out 64-70). I follow this critical impulse not by abandoning the dialectic, but by returning to it through Zaynab—whose speech and witness animate an alternative ethical substance grounded not in the state but in revolutionary remembrance.

By staging Zaynab alongside Antigone, I hope to open up the ethical deadlock that so much Hegelian scholarship takes as its final word. I do not offer a tragic telos, but rather an enduring call to witness—a form of speech that does not resolve contradiction but dwells within it, keeping alive. In doing so, I aim to mark a significant intervention—not only in the reading of Hegel, but in how we might understand revolutionary subjectivity, gendered speech, and the afterlives of political theology.

Hamid Naficy's *A Social History of Iranian Cinema* has become one of the most authoritative accounts of twentieth century Iranian film culture, particular in its framing of cinema as a site of political contestation, diasporic affect, and cultural production under authoritarian regimes. In Volume 2 of this sweeping tetralogy, Naficy

explores the historical and institutional conditions that shaped the emergence of Iranian art cinema during the Pahlavi era, tracing how filmmakers negotiated both state censorship and revolutionary aspiration. His attention to formal innovation, narrative experimentation, and allegorical coding in the work of auteurs such as Bahram Beyzaie, Forough Farrokhzad, and Parviz Kimiavi has provided subsequent scholarship with an indispensable vocabulary for thinking the political aesthetics of Iranian film.

Most influential for my project, however, is Naficy's notion of the "accented cinema"—a theoretical framework he elaborates elsewhere but whose residues are visible throughout *A Social History of Iranian Cinema*. For Naficy, accented cinema emerges from exile and displacement, marked by the inflection of the filmmaker's own deterritorialized identity. In his reading, Iranian cinema becomes a privileged site of fractured narration, hybrid temporalities, and encoded subversions that speak both to local audiences and to transnational formations. Yet while this framework is immensely useful in thinking cinematic ambiguity and resistance, I find it remains too bound to a diasporic logic that presumes distance—from homeland, from memory, from faith. In my reading of Beyzaie's *The Travellers*, I am interested less in how cinema bears the accent of exile, and more in how it functions as an extension of liturgical memory and collective theological form—how the screen becomes a kind of stage for ritualized loss, a re-performance of the Karbala paradigm not from afar, but from within.

In volume 2 of *A Social History* Naficy states that Beyzaie is "unique in that his films are steeped in Persian theatrical and visual traditions and mythology, particularly that of pre-Islamic Iran. His concern was not with Islamic spirituality or mysticism, but with the national cultural memory and mythic time." (258) Where reads Beyzaie as a secular modernist deploying pre-Islamic myth to critique post-revolutionary Iran, I

argue that *The Travellers* operates within a distinctly Shi'i metaphysical grammar—one that cannot be reduced to allegory or nostalgia. The use of mirrors, thresholds, and liminal temporality in the film signals not merely exile from the nation, but immersion in a temporal logic of return and the imaginal. In this sense, my work departs from Naficy's emphasis on the political unconscious of the filmmaker, and instead attends to the cinematic text as a theological/spiritual container, where gesture, repetition, and mise-en-scene are structured not only by social history but also by devotional time.

At the same time, I share Naficy's commitment to reading Iranian cinema as materially and institutionally situated. His detailed accounts of censorship boards, production collectives, and exhibition networks remain vital for understanding how a film like *The Travellers* could even come into being. But where history historicizes, I seek to read for remainders—for what persists outside of history's legibility. Beyzaie's work, I suggest, does not simply critique a lost past or anticipate a deferred future. It inhabits a *suspended now*, a cinematic Karbala where the dead never fully die and the act of witnessing is not yet (ever) complete.

Thus, while Naficy's work underpins much of my methodological orientation, my intervention lies in re-theorizing the frame. That is, allowing the divine, the eschatological, and the mystical to enter the conversation about cinematic form and revolutionary subjectivity. In approaching the question of revolutionary subjectivity in post-revolutionary Iran, I have drawn from a range of thinkers whose work circles around the problems of embodiment, testimony, negation, and memory. Yet in each instance, my project attempts to reorient the terms of engagement, to push against the horizon of what is already thought. This is not to claim a position outside these

traditions, but to insist on the generative potential of friction and the productivity of reading across genres, geographies, and forms of witness.

Ali Shari'ati's reconceptualization of *shahadat* as an active political subjectivity, rather than a passive religious martyrdom, provides the foundational framework through which I begin to think negation as an ethical stance. His emphasis on the dual labor of revolutionary transformation—both the willingness to die for a cause and the continued responsibility of those who remain—structures my understanding of political becoming. But while Shari'ati offers a compelling model of self-negation and a hopeful theory of eternal life through sacrifice, I remain attentive to the limits of his formulation. Specifically, I interrogate how the act of witnessing is rendered legible in the wake of death. My work pivots around this instability, particularly in gendered terms. Where Shari'ati elevates Zaynab as the transmitter of Husayn's sacrifice, I ask how her speech is situated within the structural vulnerabilities of memory—how her role as mourner and messenger both exceeds and is shaped by the frameworks of theological and revolutionary legibility.

Poupeh Missaghi's *Trans(re)lating House One* offers a contemporary meditation on disappearance, circulation, and the fractured labor of remembering. Her text does not theorize martyrdom directly, but the fragmentary form of the novel, its refusal of linear resolution and its insistence on accumulation without closure, mirrors the kind of epistemological instability I am tracking. I turn to Missaghi not only for the content of her inquiry but also for the mode of her articulation. Her narrator performs the limits of speech even as she speaks, folding the body into the act of narration. In placing Missaghi's protagonist alongside the figure of Zaynab, I ask how mourning is made to move, and what is required of those who carry the message. This is not a question of

analogy, but of echo—of how certain forms of feminine knowledge are continually tasked with carrying what the world is not prepared to hear.

Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*, particularly his reading of Antigone, has served as a powerful staging ground for ethical conflict, gendered division, and the tragic consequences of irreconcilable law. While feminist readings of Antigone have offered important accounts of her resistance, I have sought to shift the frame by pairing Antigone not with her political descendants in the Western canon, but with Zaynab. This move is not intended to displace Antigone but to question the presumed universality of the dialectic she is made to embody. Where Hegel casts Antigone as the last gasp of divine law before its absorption into the rational state, I ask what it means for divine law not to vanish, but to persist, refracted through acts of embodied remembrance. Zaynab's speech, I argue, does not signal the tragic foreclosure of familial ethics but rather opens a different temporality—one in which witnessing becomes a sustained political act rather than a singular defiance.

Finally, Hamid Naficy's history of Iranian cinema offers a crucial institutional and aesthetic grounding for my engagement with film. His account of the 'Islamic gaze' applied by directors like Bahram Beyzaie provides a valuable insight into the formal and political strategies that Iranian filmmakers developed in the shadow of censorship. Yet while Naficy frames Beyzaie primarily as a secular modernist working through myth as cultural material, I return to his films in search of something else: not a politics of exile, but a metaphysics of return. In *The Travellers*, I read the screen not as a mirror of national trauma but as a vessel for ritual, for repetition, for the suspended temporality of return. Where Naficy hears the accent of exile, I am listening for the cadence of

lamentation—for how the theological and the cinematic become mutually entangled in the performance of loss.

Taken together, these texts shape the terrain of my inquiry while also delineating its difference. I write from the crossings and tensions they generate, attempting to trace a line between what is said and what continues to resonate after speech. My project is less a synthesis than an act of holding—of remaining with what is unresolved, untranslatable, and still unfolding.

In the first chapter, I turn to the writings and speeches of Ali Shari'ati to examine how his reconceptualization of *shahadat* (martyrdom) served as a blueprint for a distinctly Iranian revolutionary subjectivity in the lead-up to the 1979 Iranian Revolution. This chapter stages Shari'ati as both a theorist of negation and a cultural architect whose work forged a bridge between Islamic tradition and anti-colonial Marxist critique. I trace how Shari'ati's interpretation of *shahadat* moved beyond the conventional religious framing of martyrdom as mere death in the path of God, and instead framed it as a political act of self-negation that could bring dormant ideals back into the sphere of visibility.

Central to this chapter is Shari'ati's distinction between two types of martyrdom, which he elaborates through a comparison between the figures of Hamzah and Imam Hussein. Hamzah's death in battle, while valorous, is depicted as accidental—chosen by *shahadat*, not the other way around. By contrast, Hussein's conscious refusal to pledge allegiance to Yazid and his march toward certain death becomes, for Shari'ati, the paradigmatic act of revolutionary self-negation. It is this model of *shahadat*—willing

death for the sake of an ideal—that Shari'ati elevates as a form of testimony, a "weapon in the hands of the friend" when all other weapons have failed.

I explore how Shari'ati conceptualizes this act not merely as a personal sacrifice but as a metaphysical and political transubstantiation, in which the self is negated in order to become the very ideal for which it dies. The martyr, in this reading, does not die into absence but is transformed into the essence of justice, knowledge, or Islam itself. Drawing on Shari'ati's own metaphors—most notably the spending of money as an analogy for giving one's life—I consider how the economy of ***shahadat*** operates according to a unique logic of value, in which the ephemeral (the body, wealth) is exchanged for the eternal (the ideal). Here, I suggest, we begin to see the outlines of a theological-political framework in which bodily negation produces not loss, but enduring meaning.

Yet this idealization of *shahadat* is not without its complications. I ask what happens when the revolutionary message is misread, mistranslated, or appropriated—particularly after death. Shari'ati's own fate serves as a critical case study. His suspicious death in London in 1977, just two years before the Shah's fall, and the subsequent appropriation of his ideas by Khomeinist forces reveal the fragility of martyrdom's afterlife. If the power of *shahadat* lies in its legibility to the collective, what ensures that the message survives its messenger? What happens when the "eloquent tongue of this flowing blood," as Shari'ati puts it, is stilled, distorted, or turned against itself?

I explore this question further through the figure of Zaynab, Hussein's sister, who Shari'ati casts as the indispensable second half of the *shahadat* process. If Hussein

provides the blood, Zaynab carries the message. Her role marks a crucial gendered inflection in Shari'ati's theory: it is not enough to die; someone must speak, interpret, and remember. And yet, this act of remembrance is also subject to political manipulation. I suggest that Shari'ati underestimates the structural vulnerability of witnessing itself—its capacity to be co-opted, dismembered, or silenced.

By the end of the chapter, I return to Shari'ati's own afterlife. Though he is often remembered as the ideologue of the revolution, I argue that his death and the transformation of his message illustrate precisely the limits of the theory he helped construct. His *shahadat*—if we can call it that—resides not only in his death, but in what was done with it. This chapter thus opens the broader problem my dissertation seeks to address: how political testimony survives translation, and what happens when the sacred message of the martyr passes into the hands of history.

Chapter Two builds upon the theoretical scaffolding established in the first chapter but pivots toward the figure of Zaynab as a site through which to interrogate the gendered dynamics of witnessing, speech, and revolutionary continuity. While Chapter One focuses on the ideal of self-negation in the figure of the martyr, this chapter takes up the problem of those who remain. What becomes of revolutionary consciousness when it must be carried in the body of a witness, rather than sealed in the sanctity of death?

My departure point is the speech Zaynab gives in the court of Yazid after the massacre at Karbala—a speech that does not merely communicate Hussein's sacrifice, but enacts its ongoing life. In Shari'ati's formulation, Zaynab becomes the necessary complement to Hussein: if he offers the blood, she carries the message. But this binary,

while generative, also raises a set of questions I seek to push further. What kind of political and theological labor is required of the one who survives? And how is this labor complicated when survival itself is feminized, embodied, and made to speak?

To think through these questions, I place Zaynab in dialogue with Antigone, particularly as she appears in Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* and Judith Butler's subsequent reworking in *Antigone's Claim***.** Both Antigone and Zaynab are sisters who mourn and memorialize brothers, both speak within hostile political spaces, and both perform ethical acts that are structured by refusal. Yet where Hegel casts Antigone's defiance as a tragic moment destined to be subsumed into the rational state, I read Zaynab's speech as opening a different horizon—one that resists closure, one in which the divine law is not extinguished but redistributed through speech.

This chapter turns to the question of embodiment, asking what it means to bear witness not only through language but through the body. Poupeh Missaghi's *Trans(re)lating House One* offers a contemporary lens through which to think about this. Her fragmented narrative of searching, archiving, and refusing resolution resonates with the historical and affective labor of Zaynab's testimony. I am drawn to Missaghi's meditation on knowing and not-knowing, on the search for bodies both literal and symbolic, and on the failure of speech to fully hold what must nevertheless be said. In reading Missaghi alongside Zaynab, I suggest that to witness is to move between embodiment and enunciation, between the immediacy of loss and the deferred temporality of remembrance.

The chapter also probes the instability of testimony itself—its reliance on legibility, its exposure to distortion, and its precarious positioning within political

discourse. Zaynab's speech must circulate to give Hussein's death its revolutionary afterlife, but circulation opens it to co-optation. I remain concerned, as in Chapter One, with the difficulty of preserving the meaning of an event once it enters the domain of speech. But here, the stakes are gendered: Zaynab's speech does not enter history untouched. It must pass through the filters of patriarchy, of state power, of theological gatekeeping. Her body is both the vehicle of the message and its site of vulnerability.

In theorizing Zaynab not only as a transmitter of history but as a subject who reconfigures it through speech, I am working to rethink what revolutionary continuity looks like when it does not culminate in death. In contrast to the masculine ideal of *shahadat*, Zaynab represents a politics of remainder—of living on, of sustaining the memory of negation without the sanctity of the tomb. Her voice, I argue, is not an epilogue to Hussein's sacrifice but a continuation of it, refracted through survival, embodiment, and the temporal work of remembrance.

Chapter Three turns to *ijtihad* not as a legalistic mechanism of jurisprudential flexibility, but as a conceptual field in which the dialectic between particularity and multiplicity is staged. My aim in this chapter is to probe the metaphysical and epistemological underpinnings of *ijtihad*, particularly in relation to the problem of immanence. Whereas earlier chapters examined the afterlives of revolutionary sacrifice and gendered testimony, here I turn to a more abstract terrain: how Islamic hermeneutic structures attempt to preserve the integrity of divine law while responding to the variability of lived life.

At the heart of the chapter is a concern with how authority is constructed in the process of interpretation. *Ijtihad* is often celebrated for its capacity to adapt to new

contexts, but such adaptation is never neutral. It is mediated through historical structures of power, disciplinary assumptions, and ontological commitments about the nature of knowledge itself. I focus particularly on the dialectical tension between the need for universality—that is, a stable reference to divine command—and the irreducible singularity of each interpretive instance. *Ijtihad*, in this frame, is a movement across this gap: it is a practice that claims fidelity while necessarily introducing difference.

I examine this tension through a close reading of the structures that authorize *ijtihad*: the conditions under which it is permitted, the qualifications of the *mujtahid*, and the gendered exclusions built into both the discursive and institutional dimensions of Islamic legal thought. If the *mujtahid* is the one authorized to produce new rulings in response to novel conditions, what happens to those who are positioned outside of that structure—those whose epistemologies are not legible within its frame? I ask this not only in reference to gender, but to alternative ways of knowing and reading that have historically been disqualified by the logic of mastery embedded in *ijtihad*'s formalism.

Rather than seeking a more inclusive or expansive model of *ijtihad*, I question the metaphysical assumptions it rests upon. I argue that *ijtihad* is ultimately structured by a commitment to the reconciliation of multiplicity with divine unity—a reconciliation that functions dialectically, but which also risks foreclosing forms of thought that do not resolve so neatly. Here, I begin to explore the possibility that not all ethical life can be captured through law or its analogical extensions. Some forms of remembrance, refusal, or witness may resist integration into the dialectical structure that *ijtihad* presumes.

The chapter draws on Islamic legal theory, theological sources, and philosophical debates around immanence, but it is less interested in reformist discourse than in the conceptual contradictions at the core of Islamic hermeneutics. I am not asking how ***ijtihad*** can be modernized or democratized; I am asking what it reveals about the difficulty of thinking multiplicity without collapse. What forms of interpretation emerge when fidelity is not a matter of synthesis, but of holding open the space between divine command and the opacity of the present?

By the end of the chapter, I return to the stakes of revolutionary survival. If *shahadat* is an event and Zaynab's speech is its afterlife, then *ijtihad* is the demand that follows—how to live in fidelity to an ideal that was revealed in negation. It is the labor of remaining after the rupture, of translating what has been sacrificed into a practice of life. But even here, I remain cautious. For *ijtihad* too can be captured, calcified, turned into the very structure that silences the contradictions it was meant to hold. In this sense, the problem of *ijtihad* is not only a legal one—it is ontological, epistemic, and political. And it remains unresolved.

In Chapter Five, I turn to performance as a site through which to trace the transmission of mourning across theological, gendered, and aesthetic registers. Focusing on the Shi'i ritual of *ta'ziyeh* and its formal afterlives in the work of Bahram Beyzaie, particularly his cinematic and theatrical texts, I explore how symbolic mourning operates as both a cultural form and an epistemological structure. This chapter asks how the visible and the veiled function within ritualized performance to encode loss, and how gendered acts of veiling and unveiling mediate the relationship between witness and representation.

I begin by revisiting the *ta'ziyeh* tradition, attending to its formal properties—its circular temporality, its minimal staging, its didactic and emotive functions—as well as its theological investments in reenacting the tragedy of Karbala. What distinguishes *ta'ziyeh* is not simply its commemoration of martyrdom, but its insistence on re-presenting the event as if it were ongoing. I argue that this return is not merely mimetic, but ontological: to perform *ta'ziyeh* is not to represent the loss but to reopen it, to allow the wound to remain active within the present. It is in this sense that mourning becomes not a process of closure, but a structure of transmission.

This structure, I argue, is gendered through practices of veiling and substitution. In *ta'ziyeh*, women's roles are almost always performed by men, and female characters are typically veiled or absent altogether. This absence is not merely visual but epistemic—it marks the limit of what can be seen, said, and known. Yet rather than reading this limit solely as erasure, I examine how it functions symbolically: the veiled figure in *ta'ziyeh* does not disappear but instead acquires a different kind of visibility, one that displaces spectacle in favor of signification. Veiling here becomes not concealment but condensation, a gathering of affect and memory that cannot be fully disclosed.

I then trace how these symbolic strategies carry into the work of Bahram Beyzaie, whose films and plays similarly stage absence as presence, loss as repetition, and performance as mourning. While Beyzaie does not work within religious frameworks per se, I argue that his engagement with myth, ritual, and temporality bears the imprint of *ta'ziyeh*'s dramaturgical logic. In particular, I analyze how Beyzaie's use of the female figure—as veiled, doubled, or disfigured—evokes the conditions of symbolic mourning, even when the theological language of Karbala is displaced.

The chapter culminates in a close reading of Beyzaie's cinematic strategies: his use of mirrors, minimal sets, circular movement, and gestures of substitution. These formal choices, I argue, do not merely aestheticize mourning—they extend the logic of *ta'ziyeh* into the modern screen. In this sense, Beyzaie does not so much reject theological performance as translate it. His work becomes a kind of secular *ta'ziyeh*, one in which the sacred event is not reenacted directly but scattered across form, rhythm, and affective delay.

Finally, I return to the question of gender. If earlier chapters framed Zaynab as the paradigmatic witness, here I examine how her symbolic function is sustained or occluded in the formal structures of representation. What does it mean for mourning to be transmitted through veiled substitution? Who speaks, and who is spoken through? In asking these questions, I suggest that performance—whether religious or cinematic—does not resolve the contradictions of mourning and gender, but stages them. The veil, in this reading, becomes not a barrier but a surface of projection, where the unseen becomes the site of the sacred.

In this final chapter, I turn toward the question of relationality, and more specifically, the problem of the "near other"—the figure who is proximate, intimate, and yet not fully legible within dominant political or theological frameworks. My inquiry focuses on the paired figures of Zaynab and Umm Kulthum, sisters of Hussein, both present at Karbala and in the aftermath, yet unevenly remembered. While Zaynab has emerged as the paradigmatic witness of Karbala—central to revolutionary iconography and theological discourse—Umm Kulthum lingers at the edges, included but under-determined. Her proximity becomes the site of a conceptual tension: what do we do with the one who is near, but not fully claimed? How does revolutionary memory

privilege certain bodies, voices, and narratives over others, even when they arise from the same terrain?

The chapter begins by establishing the textual and historical ambiguity around Umm Kulthum. She is mentioned in the *maqatil* literature[2] and appears in some variants of the speeches attributed to Zaynab.[3] In fact, there are versions of the post-Karbala sermons where Umm Kulthum speaks instead of Zaynab, or in tandem with her. Rather than resolving these inconsistencies, I treat them as openings through which to explore the instability of the testimonial subject. What does it mean that these two women—both sisters of the martyr, both survivors, both speakers—are so easily interchanged or merged? Is this a failure of recordkeeping, a collapse of particularity, or a function of symbolic condensation? I suggest that Umm Kulthum's partial erasure is not incidental but symptomatic of the broader structures that shape what kinds of grief and witness are rendered meaningful.

I draw here on theories of relational ethics and proximity, particularly Emmanuel Levinas's distinction between the other and the "neighbor." The neighbor, unlike the distant other, is close enough to demand response, but too close to remain abstract. In the case of Umm Kulthum, her very proximity to Zaynab renders her both visible and ungraspable. She is close enough to threaten the singularity of Zaynab's

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[2] Literature focused on detailed narrative accounts of the deaths—especially the violent death and/or martyrdom—of important religious or political figures. An example of this is the literature that recounts the Battle of Karbala.

[3] Leila Ahmed, *Women and Gender in Islam: Historical Roots of a Modern Debate* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), pp. 163–164, on the merging and symbolic consolidation of feminine speech in Islamic memory.

Fatemeh Keshavarz, *Jasmine and Stars: Reading More Than Lolita in Tehran* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007), pp. 45–48, on how collective remembrance often subsumes feminine difference into archetype.

testimony, but too indistinct to be claimed fully in her own right. I propose that she embodies a kind of surplus in the economy of revolutionary memory—a figure who marks the limits of symbolic recognition without ever fully entering it.

This chapter also returns to the gendered stakes of speech and survival. If Zaynab's oratory in the court of Yazid has become paradigmatic, what happens to the speech that is not canonized? I explore whether Umm Kulthum's marginality reveals something about the vulnerability of feminine speech more broadly: its fungibility, its exposure to substitution, its uncertain status between echo and interruption. Rather than elevating one figure over the other, I dwell in their entanglement. The Zaynabs, in this reading, become a plural form—not a single subject of revolutionary fidelity, but a composite of voices, gestures, and losses that resist final delimitation.

By closing with this chapter, I underscore a through-line in the dissertation: that the work of remembrance is never fully secure. It is mediated not only by power but by proximity, repetition, and the hazards of particularity. To remember is to risk misremembering. And yet, it is precisely in this unstable zone—the overlap of names, the blur of voices, the nearness of the other—that the ethical demand intensifies. Umm Kulthum may not be Zaynab, but she is near her. And that nearness matters.

In closing, I hold space for the incompleteness of this project—not as a failure, but as a necessary condition of its inquiry. If this dissertation has traced the afterlives of martyrdom, witness, and remembrance across figures like Husayn, Zaynab, Antigone, and Umm Kulthum, it has done so always with the knowledge that no form of testimony is final. The archive remains unstable; memory is porous; the symbolic field shifts. What I hope for in the future of this work is not a firmer conclusion but a deepening of the

questions it raises: How do we listen to the near other, the one whose proximity resists symbolic containment? What does it mean to survive not as a solution, but as a structure of ethical and theological difficulty?

Looking ahead, I imagine this work continuing in conversation with filmmakers, writers, and thinkers whose aesthetic and political forms refuse closure. I am particularly drawn to projects that sit at the threshold between theology and performance, between mourning and creation—where the task is not to render the sacred legible, but to trace its fractures. Whether in the form of future academic writing or creative practice, I want to remain accountable to the stakes this dissertation begins to name: the fragility of revolutionary continuity, the gendered labor of remembrance, and the ethical burden of translation. If I have offered a constellation here, my hope is that it remains open, available for re-mapping, for disruption, for return.

CHAPTER 1:

Shari'ati's Theory of Shahadat—De-coupling from Death and the Problem of Interpretation

All battlefields are Karbala, all months are Muharram, all days are Ashura. One has to choose either the blood or the message, to be either Husayn or Zainab, either to die like him or survive like her, if he does not choose to be absent from the battlefield.

- Ali Shari'ati "After *Shahadat*" in *Jihad and Shahadat: Struggle and Martyrdom in Islam, 251*

This chapter provides the conceptual foundation for the larger dissertation by establishing *shahadat* not only as a theological doctrine, but as a generative site for thinking revolutionary subjectivity. By closely engaging Ali Shari'ati's writings and speeches, I show how *shahadat* functions in his work as both an act of political rupture and a metaphysical commitment to enduring meaning.[4] The figure of Husayn, in Shari'ati's framing, is not only a martyr but a cipher for an ethics of refusal—a refusal that crystalizes in the willingness to die for an unachieved future. This vision of

[4] Shari'ati's insistence on freeing *ijtihad* from the clerical elite placed him in direct confrontation with the structures of religious authority, especially in light of the Usuli framework that reserves interpretive authority for trained jurists. Ata Anzali's work on mysticism in Iran helps clarify how the stakes of interpretive authority in Shi'i Islam can be both epistemological and political. In his discussion of 'Abd al-Rahim Damavandi, who claimed Imam Husayn as his *mushid* (spiritual guide/elder/master) through visionary experience, Anzali shows how bypassing formal structures of religious knowledge was itself a mode of critique and reorientation. For Damavandi, as for Shari'ati, legitimacy could be located outside the institutional bounds of clerical authority (whether through mystical access or revolutionary reinterpretation). Both cases illuminate how struggles over *ijtihad* are deeply tied to broader questions of who may speak for Islam, and under what conditions. (Anzali 161)

martyrdom, however, also opens a set of critical tensions that the dissertation continues to explore. Namely, how revolutionary meaning is preserved, who bears the burden of its afterlife, and how gender mediates the continuity of the event.

By situating Shari'ati at the beginning of this project, I mark the initial terrain on which the problem of revolutionary inheritance is staged. His idealization of Husayn's death as a speech act—one that communicates through blood rather than words—becomes the starting point for thinking about what happens when language returns to the scene. What does it mean to live on after the martyr has fallen? What kind of subject is required not to die, but to witness? These are the questions that drive the subsequent chapters, from Zaynab's oratory in the court of Yazid, to the gendered tensions of *ijtihad*, to the veiled speech of cinematic and ritual mourning. Shari'ati's theory of martyrdom allows me to think the force of negation—but the rest of the dissertation asks how that force is translated, (mis)read, or carried by those who remain.

Ali Shari'ati occupies a singular place in the intellectual history of twentieth century Iran: part revolutionary theorist, part theologian, part myth-maker. His reconfiguration of *shahadat* (martyrdom) as a form of revolutionary becoming, rather than passive suffering or spiritual ascent, has been central to both scholarly debates and political imaginaries.[5] Scholars such as Behrooz Ghamari-Tabrizi and Hamid Dabashi have read Shari'ati as a key architect of postcolonial Islamic political consciousness, one who synthesized Shi'i eschatology with existentialist and Marxist vocabularies to

[5] As Shahab Mahdavi demonstrates in his reading of Shari'ati, the intersection of Islamic eschatology and revolutionary subjectivity does not simply revive tradition, it fractures it. Shari'ati's revolutionary project, then, is not a return but a radical departure, one that positions Husayn not as a static symbol but as a temporally unstable cipher for futurity. (Mahdavi 192)

produce a uniquely Iranian theory of liberation.[6] My project enters this conversation not by disrupting Shari'ati's importance, but by asking how the ethical and political promise of *shahadat* is mediated through questions of gender, survival, and the instability of transmission.

Dabashi emphasizes Shari'ati's rhetorical virtuosity and mythopoetic style, positioning him as a figure who sought to reanimate Islamic subjectivity by returning to its most charged symbols, particularly Karbala, Husayn, and Zaynab. He sees Shari'ati's project as a cultural reclamation through semiotic insurgency: an act of reclaiming Islam from the technocratic and nationalist forces that had rendered it inert in modern Iran (Dabashi 246-89). Ghamari-Tabrizi, meanwhile, is more attentive to Shari'ati's secular inheritances. He positions Shari'ati's speeches and essays within a genealogy of radical modernity, suggesting that *shahadat* becomes a placeholder for the kind of revolutionary rupture that Marxist dialectics once promised but failed to deliver (Ghamar-Tabrizi 117-38).[7] Both readings are indispensable for understanding the rhetorical and political stakes of Shari'ati's project, but they tend to emphasize the figure of the martyr—the one who dies—as the central site of ethical labor.

My intervention begins with Shari'ati's elevation of Husayn as the paradigmatic figure of refusal but quickly turns toward the problem of what happens after death. If

[6] This distinctly Iranian political theology also borrows heavily from existentialist frameworks. Soroush, for instance, distinguishes Shari'ati's ethical orientation from that of more orthodox thinkers by highlighting his embrace of historical contingency and self-fashioning—concepts rooted in existential defiance rather then juridical submission. (Soroush 148)

[7] While Ghamari-Tabrizi astutely situates Shari'ati's *shahadat* within a Marxist idiom, his analysis also suggests that Shari'ati's ultimate divergence from Marx lies in his metaphysics. The martyr does not simply die to negate the present; he dies to redeem the idea, a gesture less historical-materialist than messianic. (Ghamari-Tabrizi 124-25)

martyrdom functions as a speech act—one that communicates through blood, silence, or negation—then its legibility depends on something else: on someone who speaks, carries, and interprets. It is this post-martyr figure, and the ethical burden they inherit, that constitutes the central concern of Chapter one and the broader dissertation. Shari'ati himself gestures toward this in his invocation of Zaynab, Husayn's sister, who ensures that his death does not dissolve into abstraction. Yet her function in his writing is largely instrumental. My reading takes this gap seriously. I suggest that Zaynab is not only the transmitter of a preexisting message, but a subject whose speech constitutes a second ethical event, one that cannot be reduced to transmission alone.[8]

This concern aligns my work with a broader literature on witnessing, survival, and testimony. Shoshana Feldman and Dori Laub argue that testimony is not simply the recounting of an event, but the scene of its reinvention in language—a fragile act that always risks disintegration or collapse. Judith Butler's work on grievability and public mourning articulates the problem of whose losses are rendered visible, and by what political and symbolic mechanisms. Kelly Oliver, building on psychoanalytic and feminist thought, describes witnessing not as the transfer of content, but as an encounter that alters both the speaker and the listener (Oliver 23-41). While these theorists emerge from distinct contexts—Holocaust studies, psychoanalysis, post-9/11 critique—they offer vocabularies for thinking the uneven terrain of post-event survival.

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[8] This formulation parallels Derrida's reflections on testimony, where the witness is not merely a conduit but an originator of meaning. The ethical speech act, for Derrida, is always haunted by its own impossibility—an echo that aligns with the framing of Zaynab's oration as both repetitive and transformation. In "Demeure: Fiction and Testimony" Derrida explores the paradoxes and aporias of testimony, particularly through a reading of Maurice Blanchot. Derrida argues that testimony always carries the trace of what cannot be fully said—it's both an ethical and impossible act, resonating with the idea that a witness (like Zaynab), does not merely transmit meaning but constitutes it anew under the burden of singularity and survival. (Derrida 50)

My work draws from these theories but reframes them through Shi'i eschatology, where survival is not merely biological but theological—a mode of fidelity to an event that remains unfinished.

This shift in emphasis—from martyrdom as act to witnessing as process—also demands a rethinking of gender. While Shari'ati's language valorizes self-sacrifice as the highest form of political subjectivity, it tends to obscure the gendered labor of revolutionary continuity. As Nima Naghibi argues, revolutionary nationalism in post-revolutionary Iran has often relied on highly stylized images of feminine mourning that both elevate and constrain the female witness (Naghibi 75-89).[9] Zaynab becomes an emblem, but rarely a speaker in her own right.[10] My project builds on this critique but insists that Zaynab's speech, particularly her address to Yazid, is not only rhetorically powerful but structurally disruptive. It is not simply a repetition of Husayn's act, but a resignification that speaks from survival, from the site of ongoing ethical risk.[11]

In this way, this chapter lays the conceptual foundation for the broader dissertation: that revolutionary meaning is never self-evident, and that the transmission of sacrifice is an unstable, gendered, and deeply political process. *Shahadat* in Shari'ati's formulation offers a vision of ethical negation, but it cannot secure its own afterlife. My

[9] Naghibi's work on revolutionary mourning underscores a paradox at the heart of Zaynab's mythification: she is both overexposed and effaced. Her ritual centrality masks a discursive marginality, wherein her function is scripted but her speech is rarely analyzed on its own terms. (Naghibi 84-85)

[10] Moallem takes this tension further by arguing that post-revolutionary Iran domesticated Zaynab's figure precisely to manage female agency. Her symbolic elevation becomes a mode of containment, a strategy for rendering revolutionary women legible only as passive mourners or loyal kin. (Moallem 93-94)

[11] This echoes Talal Asad's insistence that pain and suffering, particularly when made public, are never simply experienced—they are structured by semiotic regimes. Zaynab's voice then, is not merely political, but is semantically loaded with expectations about what the suffering subject should say. (Asad 80)

reading of Zaynab, both as a figure and as a philosophical problem, introduces the question of how meaning is carried, and by whom. This chapter opens the central tension the rest of the dissertation explores, that is, the uneven labor of remembrance, and the ethical weight of living on after the moment of refusal.

In the years leading up to the Iranian Revolution of 1979 the work of Ali Shari'ati addressed the contradictions of a nation in crisis with a theory that brought together Islam and Marxism. Heavily influenced by the anti-colonial movements of the 1960s, Shari'ati sought to elaborate an indigenous Iranian Marxism inflected by the revolutionary Shi'i tradition as a means to challenge what he viewed as a corrupt and unjust authority, Mohammad Reza Shah. Shari'ati was a prolific public speaker and lectured at the Husseinieh Ershad[12], a religious institute in Tehran, from 1967 until it was closed down in 1972. Mehdi Abedi and Gary Legenhausen edit a volume of significant leftist Shi'i thought, *Jihad and Shahadat: Struggle and Martyrdom in Islam*, in which they include several speeches delivered by Shari'ati at the Husseinieh Ershad.[13] Of particular interest to me in this paper is Shari'ati's piece "A Discussion of *Shahid*" in which he explores the significance of the sacrifice of Imam Hussein for the mid-20th century Iranian subject. More specifically, he secularizes the religious concept of *shahadat* (martyrdom) through a reconceptualization of sacrifice that emphasizes a martyr's willingness to die. This reinterpretation of *shahadat* leads to Shari'ati's complication of the border between martyr and witness so that one might think of

[12] Mehdi Abedi and Gary Legenhausen state that a "*husayniyah* is a place where the martyrdom of Husayn is mourned. But the Husayniyah Irshad, founded by philanthropist Muhammad Humayun, was intended to be a modern institution of learning, somewhat of the style of a free university." (34)

[13] These speeches are translated by Mehdi Abedi, with parts of Shari'ati's "*Shahadat*" being translated by Ali Asghar Ghassemy. (39)

willingness to die (and self-negation) as a political subjectivity as opposed to merely actual death.

This chapter begins with the figure of the martyr, but it is ultimately concerned with the figure of the witness. I want to foreground the idea of *ideal witness*—the one imagined to bear testimony to a death in a way that secures its meaning, transmits its message, and safeguards its ethical coherence. In Ali Shari'ati's writings on *shahadat*, Husayn is the sacrificial figure whose death gives form to revolutionary negation, but Zaynab emerges as the one tasked with carrying that negation into the realm of speech. Her role is not supplementary, but structurally necessary. Without her, the sacrifice risks becoming unintelligible, or worse, misread. Yet the figure of the ideal witness is itself unstable. What is required of the one who survives? What is the cost of witnessing, and who determines the legitimacy of that act? These questions frame my reading of Shari'ati's political theology and open onto the broader concerns of this dissertation—namely, the fragility of revolutionary continuity and the gendered labor of remembrance.[14]

Shari'ati himself received rather a mixed reception. He was considered by the authorities as a threat for both his Marxist tendencies and his religious ideas. He was

[14] Kelly Oliver's theorization of witnessing offers a particularly useful from for thinking about Zaynab's role in the aftermath of Karbala. In *Witnessing: Beyond Recognition*, she argues that witnessing is not a passive transfer of knowledge nor merely a representational act. Rather, it is an ethical relation that transforms both speaker and listener. Oliver distinguishes this from recognition, which stabilizes identity by affirming pre-existing categories, whereas witnessing—particularly in situations of trauma—destabilizes the subject and opens a space for transformation. In her words, "witnessing requires openness to the other that is not reducible to knowledge or identification." (Oliver 27) This model allows us to think Zaynab's speech not only as the preservation of Husayn's legacy but as an ethical event in its own right, one that refracts, disturbs, and reconstitutes meaning in the very act of its utterance. Her role then, is not merely mnemonic but constitutive of revolutionary subjectivity. (Oliver 25-27)

not held in particularly high esteem by either the more orthodox Marxists or the clergy. On this, Abedi and Legenhausen state that "the view of Islam presented [by Shari'ati] was not without its detractors among both the traditionalists who called him a heretic, and the Marxists who felt he was unscientific. The religiously conservative accused him of borrowing from Western schools of thought." (35) Nevertheless, Shari'ati's speeches at the Husseinieh Ershad reached the ears of a progressive Islamic youth. In these speeches, he developed his skill for delivering his interpretation of Islamic thought to the people in such a way that they may understand and connect with it, thus resulting in a large 'layman' following—it is not for nothing that he is commonly regarded as the ideologue of the revolution. Shari'ati's own conception of his perceived lack of scientificity is addressed in his lecture "*Shahadat*" in which he states that

> [o]n the one hand, I must present *shahadat* from an intellectual, scientific and philosophical point of view. I can only use my head. Only science and logic can assist me. On the other hand, the story of *shahadat* and that which *shahadat* challenges is so sensitive, so belovedly exciting that it pulls the spirit toward the fire. It paralyzes logic. It weakens speech. It even makes thinking difficult. *Shahadat* is a mixture of a refined love and a deep, complex wisdom. One cannot express these two at the same time and so, one cannot do them justice. (154)

Then for Shari'ati, it is this concept of *shahadat* that requires him to disregard some of what is Marxist/scientific in his work, and instead for him, the poetic and the divine must come together with the scientific. It appears, then, that exactly this fluidity between science and the divine earned Shari'ati his vast following.

In the years leading up to the abdication of the Shah in 1979 two Muharram demonstrations[15] became important moments in the developing revolutionary crisis. Interestingly, Shari'ati existed politically in Iran *between* these two moments. The first of these moments is the Muharram protests of 1963 which signified Khomeini's entrance onto the revolutionary scene in Iran as well as demonstrating the power of Islam in troubling the Shah's hold on power. Ten years after the CIA backed coup[16] that deposed Prime Minister Mohammad Mossadegh, Khomeini showed himself as a political player after approximately twenty years under Ayatollah Borujerdi's authority.[17] He had previously taken a diplomatic approach towards the monarchy and remained tight-lipped about his personal political beliefs (in order to adhere to Borujerdi's wishes that the clergy not participate in political life), instead busying himself with teaching. (Abrahamian 9) This changes soon after Borujerdi's death, in 1963, when Khomeini came out against some of the reforms included in the monarchy's 'White Revolution'.[18] Interestingly he chose not to take issue with the central tenet for the reforms, land redistribution, but rather that the reforms brought forth a law enfranchising women. (10) Khomeini's denunciations contributed to subsequent violent uprisings during the 1963 Muharram demonstrations. The second moment was the 1977 Muharram

[15] The Muharram demonstrations happen every year during the first month of the Islamic calendar and are particularly significant in Shi'i Islam. The demonstrations signify the remembrance of Imam Hussein's sacrifice in the name of Islam at the Battle of Karbala in 680 AD.

[16] Operation Ajax

[17] Grand Ayatollah Seyyed Hussein Borujerdi established himself as a prominent Islamic consultant to the monarchy, and for at least the last twenty years of his life, Khomeini worked under him. He was extremely conservative and set a precedent for a clerical reinforcement of the status quo, while simultaneously staunchly insisting that the clergy remain outside of the political fray. For more on this, see Ervand Abrahamian's *Khomeinism: Essays on the Islamic Republic*.

[18] The White Revolution was a series of reforms instituted by Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi in 1963. They were an attempt at developing an independent foreign policy and embarking on a process of modernization. However, it was also a rather transparent bid for popular support from the peasantry and working class as the middle class became more antagonistic towards his leadership.

demonstrations which occurred after (though not as a direct result of) Shari'ati's suspicious death in London, having fled to London after being released from prison. Shari'ati and Khomeini entered the political fray at almost the same moment, and certainly the two became the most significant figures for the eventual revolution of 1979.

The Muharram protests of 1963 signified a tumultuous moment in Mohamad Reza Shah's reign. Interestingly, Shari'ati was studying in Paris at the time, and by the time he returned to Iran, the momentary revolutionary spark had been extinguished by the Shah's regime. The significance of the month of Muharram for Iranian revolutionary subjectivity cannot be overstated. Muharram is the first month of the Islamic calendar and the time when Iranians remember the story and sacrifice of Imam Hussein, including his journey to Kufa and subsequent death at the Battle of Karbala.[19] The protests that led to the overthrow of the Shah between 1977 and 1979 were also sparked by the remembrance of Hussein in the month of Muharram. As Abedi and Legenhausen write, the reclaiming of the importance of the story of Hussein and his journey to Karbala was initially brought back to the fore with Sunni scholars in the 1930s. They suggest that before the story of Hussein was brought back to the fore politically, it had become merely a show of mourning for the sake of mourning, devoid of its political content. Abedi and Legenhausen state that this

[19] After refusing to pledge allegiance to the new king, Yazid, Hussein received word that the people of Kufa wished for his help. However, after arriving at Karbala, Hussein realized that the people of Kufa had reneged on their allegiance to him and no longer supported him. Yazid's army subsequently surrounded Hussein and his comrades at Karbala, cutting off their access to their only water source, the Euphrates. After days without water, the battle began on the tenth day of Muharram with Yazid's army releasing the first arrow.

> revival of the sharp sense of protest and agitation against injustice was initiated by the reflections of Sunni scholars on the martyrdom of Husayn. In 1936 the Egyptian Ibrahim 'Abd al-Qadir Mazini wrote that Husayn was an honest revolutionary, who recognized the odds against him, but was compelled by his sense of justice to fight against the Umayyad tyranny. Much the same sentiments are elaborated in Ali Shari'ati's "*Shahadat*", delivered in 1972. During the thirty-six year period between the appearance of Mazini's work and the lecture of Dr. Shari'ati, numerous Sunni and Shi'ite scholars contributed to the reappraisal of the significance of the martyrdom of Husayn. (26)

In Shari'ati's thought, the story of Hussein, including his refusal to pledge allegiance to the caliph Yazid, and his death at the Battle of Karbala, exemplifies the revolutionary potential of negation. Historian, Ervand Abrahamian, writes that for Shari'ati, "the Muharram passion plays depicting Hussein's martyrdom at Karbala contained one loud and clear message: all Shi'is, irrespective of time and place, had the sacred duty to oppose, resist and rebel against contemporary ills." (26) Shari'ati's aim, in his lectures on *shahadat* at the Ershad, was to cultivate a popular understanding of negation as a vehicle for this resistance. This principle combines two significant elements of Shari'ati's thought—a reimagining of the concept of *shahadat* through negation and refusal, and an opening-up of the responsibility for *ijtihad*[20] for every person in order to encourage remembrance as an active political practice. In "Sacralising Bodies: On Martyrdom, Government and Accident in Iran," Ravinder Kaur suggests that the story of Hussein was a popular way of expressing anti-Shah sentiment, and that "Karbala was no longer a specific historical event; instead it became shorthand for struggle against oppression across histories and locations. Its political translation was contingent upon

[20] Religious duty; physical or mental effort expended towards thorough understanding of Islamic doctrine.

new forms of self-discipline in order to effectively mobilise support." (450) In reimagining *shahadat* as something more complex and nuanced—less to do with death than eternal life, brought forth as a result of willingness to die for an ideal—Shari'ati hoped to develop a theory of revolutionary Shi'ism more dynamic and secular as a specifically Iranian subjectivity. Shari'ati hoped to encourage this political movement against the injustice of the monarchy through an opening up of the Islamic practice of *ijtihad*.

***Ijtihad*: A Political Consciousness**

After returning to Iran from his study in Paris in 1965, Shari'ati was promptly arrested for his actions overseas, including anti-government activism and contributing to anti-government literature in France[21]. The Iran that Shari'ati returned to was much changed; the 1963 Muharram protests proved to be a moment in which (Shi'i) Islam displayed a capacity to destabilize the Shah's regime. Indeed, Abrahamian states in *Iran Between Two Revolutions*, the "Muharram upheavals of June 1963 were to be a dress rehearsal for the Islamic revolutions of 1977-1979." (426) In 1967 Shari'ati moved to Tehran to teach at the Husseinieh Ershad; however, it was shut down in 1972 as the Shah's secret police, the SAVAK, became concerned with his growing influence. At this time, Shari'ati went into hiding, and as a "tactic to find his whereabouts, the authorities arrested his father. After a few months of deliberation, Shari'ati gave himself up for the release of his father." (Abedi & Abedi 232) As a result, Shari'ati was imprisoned. After 18 months, a petition from the Algerian government secured his release into house

[21] For more on this, see Ali Rahnema in *An Islamic Utopian: A Political Biography of Ali Shari'ati*.

arrest. Shari'ati subsequently managed to escape to London in 1977, soon after being released from prison, however died later that year of a heart attack.

On his important posthumous influence on the revolutionary uprisings, Abrahamian, suggests that Shari'ati is referred to not only as the ideologue of the revolution, but also sometimes as the Frantz Fanon of the Iranian revolution.[22] On his contribution to Iranian revolutionary thought, Abrahamian states that

> his works had one clear message: that Islam - particularly Shi'ism - is not a conservative, fatalistic creed, as charged by many secular intellectuals, nor an apolitical personal faith, as claimed by some reactionary clerics; but rather a revolutionary ideology that permeates all spheres of life, especially politics, and inspires true believers to fight against all forms of oppression, exploitation, and social injustice. (466)

In rethinking Islamic concepts like *shahadat*, Shari'ati hoped to breathe vitality and life into what was seen by some (in particular many involved in the underground Marxist movement) as a 'fatalistic creed'. Even so, it was not only the secular intellectuals that Shari'ati's work reached, but much of Shari'ati's work had been transcribed (some published, some recorded and distributed with bootlegged tapes) from his speeches at the Husseinieh Ershad (1967—1972), a time during which he was particularly prolific. As a gifted rhetorician, he knew his audience, and so this life he

[22] Shari'ati discovered the work of Fanon during his study in Paris between 1959-1964. He translated Fanon's *Wretched of the Earth* and *A Dying Colonialism* into Persian and while translating the latter, wrote to him. In *An Islamic Utopian*, Ali Rahnema suggests that Shari'ati and Fanon corresponded over the potential role of Islam in anti-colonial struggle. (127) As for Shari'ati being occasionally referred to as the Fanon of Iran, Rahnema provides some illumination: "Fanon reinforced Shari'ati's firm belief that the colonized or semi-colonized Third World person had to return to himself, delve back into his own historio-cultural tradition, search for the appropriate and endogenous elements and materials and then create a 'a new man' based on 'a new idea' and 'a new history'." (126-7)

breathed into Islam was directed not at the secular intellectual, but at the religious lay-person, especially the religious youth. Shari'ati's concept of Shi'i Islam as a religion of continuous and unending struggle was extremely influential for the progression of revolutionary fervor through the 1960s and 1970s.

He placed the onus of this struggle on every person, rather than solely with the clergy, which in turn made him particularly troublesome—not just for the monarchy but also for the clergy. According to Ali Rahnema, Shari'ati's reimagining of *ijtihad* serves the purpose of reinvigorating and modernizing Islam, performing a kind of secularization. Rahnema states that

> Shari'ati used the concept of *ejtehad* as a dynamic intellectual process, keeping Islam abreast with modern developments. *Ejtehad*, an accepted practice among the Shi'a, implied the application of human reason and rationality by those who were Islamic jurists. Trying to free *ejtehad* from the monopoly of the clergy, Shari'ati started by redefining the *mojtahed*, or person who has the right to exercise *ejtehad*…Shari'ati argued that the application of 'free *ejtehad*' in legal, economic and social domains guaranteed the concurrent evolution and modernization of religion. (300)

This suggests Shari'ati's desire for a secularization and politicization through the proposed modernization of Islamic concepts.[23] His work at the Husseinieh Ershad is a continuation of this desire, in that it became a place in which he might have a hand in the creation of this intellectual (*roshanfekr*).

[23] Rahnema, regarding Shari'ati's aims of secularization states that to "produce his religious simulacrum, Shari'ati engaged in the art of rewriting and reinterpretation until centuries-old and well-established words and concepts were totally emptied of their traditional meaning and given new signification and purpose." (299)

Two notions are important to consider here: his thoughts on the ideal revolutionary person as the *roshanfekr*, and his thoughts on *ijtihad*. According to Abrahamian, Shari'ati believed that Iran, like other countries of the so-called Third World, needed "two interconnected and concurrent revolutions: a national revolution that would end all forms of imperial domination… and a social revolution that would end all forms of exploitation." (Abrahamian 26) Abrahamian argues that for Shari'ati, "the task of carrying forth these two revolutions is in the hands of the intelligentsia - the *rushanfekran.*" (26) But does Shari'ati merely mean his contemporaries, those of the intellectual class, those who trained in Europe? Thinking in Shari'ati's terms, I believe the kind of revolutionary political subject he imagined is much more than this. Shari'ati was convinced that Iran (as well as other countries of the Global South) had not industrialized in the way that Europe had and thus the Iranian revolutionary subject could not solely be the proletariat. It is here that his thinking (and rethinking) *ijtihad* becomes important, and revolutionary. That is, in more conservative Islams, *ijtihad* is a process of reasoning and effort towards understanding, a process only open to the *mujtahid* (the Islamic scholars), and primarily based on evidence present in the Qur'an and the Hadith. While the restrictions on those who can exercise *ijtihad* in Shi'i Islam is more lenient, there is still a strong emphasis on the responsibility of the high-level clerics for reaching an understanding of these texts and then subsequent further reinterpretation, and the potential for a departing from their tradition. In a comparison of Ayatollahs Khomeini and Taleqani and Shari'ati, Shahrough Akhavi suggests that Shari'ati imagined a community in which the Islamic leaders were not comprized of the clergy:

> They may be drawn in part from the clergy, but Shari'ati's leaders are 'enlightened thinkers'. They do not comprise an intellectual elite, though, since

> apparently Shari'ati means to avoid all semblance of elitism in matters pertaining to his ideal religio-political community. The burden of Shari'ati's writing is hostility toward traditional clerical thought and behavior. He envisions the task of the enlightened thinker to be nothing less than ushering in a renaissance in which the consciousness of the masses would be radically stimulated. Shari'ati eulogizes the common people (al-nas) and proclaims at one point that it is they who are the motor force of historical change. (416)

In this way, Shari'ati's inclination towards a kind of free *ijtihad* was particularly contested and revolutionary, and is helpful in understanding the kind of political consciousness that he was interested in cultivating.

Thus it seems that this radical opening up of *ijtihad* for the lay-person presents the possibility of a kind of revolutionary *roshanfekran* that is not merely that of an intellectual, but instead may be reached through the striving of every person towards an understanding and interpretation of Islamic doctrine. This philosophy is what leads Shari'ati to reconceptualize *shahadat*, and also why the clergy were so hostile towards him. His emphasis on *ijtihad* allowed him to experiment with and reinterpret such concepts as *shahadat*. On this, Akhavi states that for Shari'ati the "common man plays a critical role in selecting the leaders of the community...Not only that, but Shari'ati even declares outright that people are charged with the mission of the Prophet and the imams until the return of the Mahdi (Hidden Imam)!" (416) Then it is significant that Shari'ati embarked on a reconceptualization of *shahadat*, emphasizing the importance of opening up the process of *ijtihad*, as a possible avenue for the creation of a new and revolutionary political subject in Iran. In this way it is possible that, for Shari'ati, the *roshanfekran* might function as a kind of Islamic avant-garde—his translation of the revolutionary potential of the European proletariat into the Iranian context as something uniquely Iranian. As stated above, Shari'ati considered European

Marxism to be inapplicable in the Iranian context due to Iran's lack of significant industrialization as compared with Western Europe, resulting in a much smaller working class. Instead he looked for a return,[24] looking inwards for a subjectivity that was specifically Iranian. He found revolutionary Shi'ism to be the answer to this dilemma, although this did not mean that he was not also critical of, and criticized by, the Iranian clergy. He aimed to radically reinterpret the word of God, in the process reinterpreting and contradicting the Iranian *mujtahid* or *uluma*.[25]

Shari'ati on *Shahid*: Self-Negation as Eternal Life

As a result of this desire for reinterpretation and modernization of Islamic concepts, Shari'ati undertook to open up a discussion of *shahadat*, rereading and categorizing the *shahadat* of some important *shuhada* (martyrs). In "A Discussion of *Shahid*," Ali Shari'ati undertakes to reinterpret and make secular the religious concept of *shahadat* in order that it may envigorate and consolidate a revolutionary political consciousness in Iran. Shari'ati begins with a discussion of the differences between martyrdom and his reimagining of an ideal *shahid*. The somewhat unusual distinction Shari'ati wishes to make between the two concepts, that I will distinguish here as *shahid* (ideal) and martyr, hinges on the greater emphasis on the mortality of the individual martyr, in that it is the individual's death that is remembered. Shari'ati reconceives of a *shahid*, as an amalgamation of the terms *shahid* (martyr), and *shâhed* (witness), and introduces this

[24] For more on this see Michael M.J. Fischer and Mehdi Abedi's *Debating Muslims*.
[25] Islamic scholars

new conception as the antonym of martyr. Indeed, Ravinder Kaur writes that there are "two classical senses of being a martyr or *shahid* - to bear witness and to sacrifice oneself in the path of God." (447) Kaur goes on to suggest that it is Shari'ati that gave birth to this third conception of martyrdom in which one can be both witness and sacrifice.

Shari'ati begins his piece detailing the way in which the term martyr usually refers more simply to death and dying, as it is

> a noun meaning "the one who dies for God and faith." Thus a martyr is, in any case, the one who dies. The only difference between his death and that of others is to be seen in the "cause." He dies for the cause of God, whereas the cause of the death of another may be cancer. Otherwise, the essence of the phenomenon in both cases, that is to say, death, is one and the same. As far as death is concerned it makes no difference whether the person is killed for God, for passion, or in an accident. (230)

Then according to Shari'ati, a martyr's legacy is made through death, that it is the individual's death or absence that signifies their sacrifice. Indeed, he uses the story of Hamzah's death as a counterpoint to Hussein's act of refusal. Hamzah is a *mujahid*,[26] "and a hero who goes (into battle) to achieve victory and defeat the enemy. Instead, he is defeated, is killed, and thus becomes a *shahid*. But this represents an individual *shahadat*. His name is registered at the top of the list of those who died for the cause of their belief." (234) Hamzah, young uncle of the prophet Mohammad, was martyred "in the most crucial battle, Uhud (in 627)." (238) While martyrdom relies on the meaning-making of a martyr's death, *shahadat* has to do with the reclaiming or resurgence of an

[26] A fighter in the name of Islam.

idea that threatens to fade from the collective consciousness, and Shari'ati states that "a *shahid* is always alive and present. He is not absent. Thus the two terms, "*shahid*" and "martyr" are antonyms of each other." (230) Thus rather than death, one can become a *shahid*[27] (both martyr and witness) through a self-sacrifice that brings to the fore or makes visible, what Shari'ati considers, righteous or just ideas. Such a sacrifice, as exemplified in the story of Hussein, comes about as a demonstration of willingness to die.

Shari'ati teases out the overlap and distinctions between *shahadat* and his reimagination of the role of a *shahid*, as *shahid* is typically translated as *either* martyr or (sometimes) witness. He is interested in the amalgam of these two meanings, as well as the emphasis placed on a martyr/witness being willing to die (consciously choosing their negation). Hence Shari'ati states that

> when we give a part of our existence for a cause, that part becomes a part of that cause. For example, in our mind, justice has sacredness. It is one of those values which has become a part of us thanks to our relationship and contact with it. If I donate a thousand dollars of my own money for the establishment of justice, that thousand dollars absorbs the sacredness of justice. As long as it was in my pocket, it was merely one thousand dollars. When I negate it in the way of justice, it is affirmed in another form, because it transforms into the essence of justice. (232)

In introducing *shahadat*, Shari'ati brings forth this monetary example. Indeed, he follows the trajectory of this monetary example and uses it to think about various values: justice, charity (feeding the poor), and frivolity ('partying'). In speaking of what

[27] This term, unless otherwise noted, heretofore will refer to Shari'ati's reconceptualization of martyrdom as an amalgamation of 'martyr' and 'witness'.

value money might take on if negated (spent) towards the cause of justice, Shari'ati suggests that

> [w]hat is spent does not have an independent value. The value belongs to me who has spent it. That amount of money was a part of me. Thus the sanctity of the cause for which the money is spent reflects on me. Its value comes back to me. I earn it; because that amount of money was a portion of my existence. The hundred dollars that I have paid for the cause of justice transforms itself into "the sanctity of justice." The sanctity of justice is transformed into "the money," that is to say, something absolutely materialistic and economic. (232)

Interesting note in this passage the way that money clings (to a person, to an idea), having no independent value. Here, through this metaphor of currency and monetary value, Shari'ati points to the way in which his conception of self-negation (as it relates to a *shahid*) is colored by a hierarchy of value. That is, one self-negation, or self-sacrifice, does not necessarily carry with it the same value as another, in which case, by what process does Shari'ati imagine this value is realized? I wonder of what significance it is that this monetary metaphor renders the transformation as 'spending.' To spend or be spent carries a complex positive/negative connotation; so then what are the implications of Shari'ati's spending metaphor on how we think about negation? If negation may be understood typically as passive, to spend money is a purposeful act.

Further, with the act of spending money, Shari'ati describes a process of transference/transformation/transaction; a kind of translation from something material into something else.[28] He goes on to state that "[m]oney, once spent for the

[28] Thinking through Shari'ati's proposed process by which value is produced through negation, we see a gesture towards a kind of Hegelian sublation. There is a correlation here between desire for justice, money spent (negated) in pursuit of justice, and then imbued with (transformed into) the essence of justice. Then it seems, drawing on Hegel's concept of Aufhebung, we could think of this negation as both

sake of knowledge, goes out of one's pocket and becomes zero; but *at the same time* it changes into the values of knowledge for which it is spent." [Italics added] (233) What Shari'ati gives us is a transaction; importantly, one without a delay. Although initially it seems that something is lost (the monetary value 'becomes zero'), *at the same time* the enduring value of knowledge is created. At the same time as something material is spent, an enduring idea is attained; nothing is lost, not even momentarily. Importantly Shari'ati implicitly gives his hierarchy of value here.[29] It does not seem as though money, and justice/knowledge carry the same value. Money can be offered in exchange for knowledge or justice, however through this exchange it becomes something *more* than its initial value.

Then, if something of little value can be exchanged for something of greater value, how is this value/exchange calculated? Is it in relation to the enduring nature of these values; as opposed to the temporariness of material things (money, the body)? Shari'ati, on the process of exchange, makes a clear distinction between the enduring nature of the idea, and the temporariness of the material thing. Then in the translation of this metaphor from money to the body, we are left with bodily death as a currency of life. That is, one's body may be spent in pursuit of an enduring idea (thus, may attain life). On Shari'ati's thought, Mahmud Ayoub writes that "the martyrs, Husayn and his friends and relatives are alive, but we are dead." (viii) As such, Shari'ati's conception of this exchange between materiality and an ideal is one in which bodily life is historical/ideological/spiritual death or 'deadness' (where the state of being has always

translation and transformation in that through the process of negation and subsequent transformation, still something is preserved.

[29] Interesting to consider here is the way in which Shari'ati' conception of the production of value differs from Marx.

already been dead). Here, the (already) dead body may be *chosen* to be exchanged for an enduring idea (justice, knowledge, etc), thus attaining eternal life—the dead body creates life. In which case, we may better understand just how it is that Shari'ati conceives of the sacrifice of Imam Hussein such that it becomes the highest, most valuable, embodiment of *shahadat*.

According to Shari'ati, Hussein's sacrifice is of a different kind to the martyrdom of Hamzah, and he states that Hussein

> does not go (into battle with the intention of) succeeding in killing the enemy and winning victory. Neither is he accidentally killed by a terroristic act of someone such as Wahshi. This is not the case. Husayn, while he could stay at home and continue to live, rebels and consciously welcomes death. Precisely at this moment, he chooses self-negation. He takes this dangerous route, placing himself in the battlefield, in front of the contemplators of the world and in front of time, so that [the consequence of] his act might be widely spread and the cause for which he gives his life might be realized sooner. Husayn chose *shahadat* as an end or as a means for the affirmation of what is being negated and mutilated by the political apparatus. (234-5)

This is a result of his not only risking death (as Hamzah does in battle) but choosing it. In his refusal to pledge allegiance to Yazid, Hussein willingly accepts his imminent death, and is later martyred at the Battle of Karbala. The reason for such exaltation of Hussein by Shari'ati relates to the kind of revolutionary political consciousness or subjectivity that he aims to cultivate in his lectures:

> [f]rom the moment that Walid, the governor of Medina, asks him to swear allegiance (to Yazid) and he says, "NO!"—the negation by which he accepts his own death—Husayn is a *shahid*, because *shahid* in this sense is not necessarily the title of the one killed as such, but it is precisely the very witnessing aimed at negating an (innovative) affair. A *shahid* is a person who, from the beginning of his decision, chooses his own *shahadat*, even though, between his decision making and his death, months or even years may pass. If we want to explain the fundamental difference between the two kinds of *shahadat*, we must say that, in Hamzah's case, it is the death which chooses him. In other words, it is a kind of

> *shahadat* that chooses the *shahid*. In Husayn's case, it is quite the contrary. The *shahid* chooses his own *shahadat*. Husayn has chosen *shahadat*, but Hamzah has been chosen by *shahadat*. (239-40)

Here, the two important aspects of Hussein's *shahadat* (as opposed to Hamzah's martyrdom), are his *willingness* to die, and his refusal as a negative act with a positive outcome, as a stance against oppression. Indeed, Hussein is twice a *shahid*, as Shari'ati states that he "is a *shahid*, not only at the place of his *shahadat*, but also in his own house." (239) Then he is first a *shahid* in his refusal (self-negation) in his own home, to pledge allegiance to the caliph Yazid. Subsequently he is a *shahid* at the Battle of Karbala, the place of his *shahadat*. Further, Hussein's *shahadat* is juxtaposed with that of Hamzah, the latter being a positive action (going into battle with the enemy in the name/defence of Islam), which has a negative outcome (the battle is lost and Hamzah is killed). As a result, the circumstances of Hamzah's death or *shahadat*, as Shari'ati states, "is a kind of *shahadat* that chooses the *shahid.*" (240) In other words, Hamzah does not overtly display a willingness to die; instead he risks his life and fights in the name of Islam. In risking his life (as opposed to being willing to die) at the Battle of Uhud, Hamzah becomes a *shahid* as he is martyred fighting to uphold the values of Islam. However, as he enters the battle hoping to be victorious, but does not willingly accept the imminence of his death, he does not choose his *shahadat*.

On the instability of the interpretation of risking life versus willing death, Fethi Benslama states in "Dying for Justice," that in "Islamic discourse the two terms "mujahid" and "chahid" do not coincide until the 1980s. The "mujahid" is not necessarily a martyr; and the martyr ("chahid") is not necessarily a warrior ("mujahid"). The "mujahid," by going to war, is certainly ready for sacrifice. He can become "chahid"

if he is killed, but becoming a martyr is not the intended goal: he wants to fight and survive." (18) Then there seems to be precedence for the distinction Shari'ati makes between 'kinds' of martyrdom. However, unlike Shari'ati, Benslama goes on to state that "No willful act corresponds to the "chahid," which is accidental and unforeseeable. This is why the term "chahid" can be used for someone who dies in an accidental manner, outside battle, particularly when he is young, and especially if he is a child. In short, if the subject "mujahid" is active, the subject "chahid" is passive." (18) It seems that here we see Shari'ati's deviation; for him self-negation is not passive, but a productive and potentially world-altering choice. It is *willingness* to die, and thus is *willful*. Thus, for Shari'ati, an ideal *shahid* is not made merely risking death in battle. Instead it is a negation or refusal (a willingness to die for an important ideal) that is separate from any imminent threat of death that makes an ideal *shahid*. Hamzah merely *risks his life* in battle, whereas Hussein *knowingly chooses death* rather than pledge allegiance to an unjust ruler.

Shari'ati is rather slap-dash with his description of Hamzah's death, describing him as a *shahid*, and *mujahid* at different moments. While it is clear why he is a martyr, Shari'ati is much more vague on what specifically makes Hamzah a *shahid* (an amalgamation of martyr and witness), and why his *shahid* seems to be less meaningful or important than the *shahid* of Hussein. However, he concludes with a much clearer juxtaposition of Hamzah ('the former') and Hussein ('the latter'):

> In the former, *shahadat* is an accident along the way; in the latter, it is the destination. There death is a tragedy; here death is an ideal. It is an ideology. There the *mujahid*, who had decided to kill the enemy, gets killed. He [was mourned] and eulogized. Here there is no grief, for *shahadat* is a sublime degree, a final stage of human evolution. It is reaching the absolute by one's own death. Death, in this case, is not a sinister event. It is a weapon in the hands of the friend who with it hits the head of the enemy. In the event that Husayn is completely

> powerless in defending the truth, he hits the head of the attacking enemy with his own death. (240)

Shari'ati, contradicting what we have just seen from Benslama, believed the *mujahid* to be the accidental *shahid*. That is, the one who dies in battle and is killed is not martyred purposefully (and thus for Shari'ati's purpose of fomenting a productive political movement, carries less 'value'). Unlike Benslama, it is Hussein's 'no' (read: self-negation) that is most powerful/willful/valuable. Shari'ati states above, "In the event that Husayn is completely powerless in defending the truth, he hits the head of the attacking enemy with his own death." (12) Then we may see how death for Shari'ati is secondary—a kind of last resort. Death itself here, as a willful choice, becomes the weapon. Whereas a *shahid* like Hamzah dies wielding a physical weapon, Hussein's mortality itself is the weapon. Thus it becomes clear that Hamzah's *shahadat* occurs at the time of his death in battle. The specific circumstances in which he is indeed willing to die (by risking his life to kill his enemy), is precisely how Shari'ati places his *shahadat* hierarchically lower than Hussein's. He becomes a *shahid* in his loss (loss of life, loss of battle), but he did not enter into battle with an expectation of death, thus his death in battle, for Shari'ati, is a less conscious self-sacrifice than that of Hussein.

In thinking about why the *shahadat* of Hussein might be a useful rhetorical tool for Shari'ati, Brad Hansen[30] suggests that the story of Hussein became such a ubiquitous one of courage and sacrifice; that it became "the most common technique...to relay the

[30] From "The 'Westoxification' of Iran - Depictions and Reactions of Behrangi, al-e Ahmad, and Shari'ati."

story of the martyrdom of Hosain, emphasizing the role of the reigning Umayyad caliph, Yazid. The symbol of the oppressor Yazid for the contemporary shah, although unstated, was quickly perceived by the audience." (13-14) This fact is very pertinent to Shari'ati's discussion of *shahadat* in that he emphasizes the importance of the negation of individuality, and as such he suggests that when one speaks of Hussein, one does not speak of Hussein the man and son of Ali. Instead one speaks of Hussein as resistance to oppression, as justice, and as such, a *shahid*

> is the one who negates his whole existence for the sacred ideal in which we all believe. It is natural then that all the sacredness of that ideal and goal transports itself to his existence. True, that his existence has suddenly become non-existent, but he has absorbed the whole value of the idea for which he has negated himself. No wonder then, that he, in the mind of the people, becomes sacredness itself. In this way, man becomes absolute man, because he is no longer a person, an individual. He is "thought." He had been an individual who sacrificed himself for "thought." Now he is "thought" itself. For this reason, we do not recognize Husayn as a particular person who is the son of Ali. Husayn is a name for Islam, justice, imamat, and divine unity. (4)

Thus we see for Shari'ati, the essence of *shahadat* is negation, especially self-negation, and through this negation and subsequent ascension to the status of the very idea one sacrifices oneself for, gains eternal life.

On self-negation and through a discussion of Hussein, Shari'ati comes to what he refers to as the *principle* of *shahadat*:

> "everything obtains a similar value to that for which it has been spent." As it is negated, it is affirmed. In other words, as its existence is negated, its value is affirmed. In self-annihilation, it reaches the permanence of the purpose, provided that the purpose is something permanent, such as an ideal, a value, freedom, justice, charity, thought, or knowledge. (232-3)

It is clear that this negation of self as *shahadat* obtains a positive value, in a way martyrdom (typically understood) does not. It is possible to think *shahadat* in the context of Shari'ati's emphasis on '*tauhid*' as a world-view. *Tauhid* in Islamic thought is the concept of monotheism relating to the oneness/unity of the world. In Shari'ati's *On the Sociology of Islam* he states, in reference to *tauhid*, that he regards "the world as a living being, endowed with life, will and self-awareness...Existence is therefore a living being, possessing a single and harmonious order that is endowed with life, will, sensation and purpose, just like a vast and absolute man." (82) Here we see how the sacrifice of a *shahid* takes on eternal life for Shari'ati. The principle of *tauhid* would suggest that the idea for which a *shahid* might sacrifice themselves cannot actually disappear but instead only fades from the collective memory of a people. In which case, a *shahid* bears witness to this idea and brings it into view through a self-negation, a negation that infuses the *shahid* with the very essence of this idea—with its eternal life.

Death as Testimony: Lost in Translation

Although Shari'ati died in London in 1977, directly before the largest of the anti-monarchical protests began, he is still considered an 'architect' or 'ideologue' of the Iranian revolution; indeed, his picture was carried alongside pictures of Khomeini during the protests between 1977-79. At the risk of a kind of over-determining of Shari'ati's suspicious death in London as a self-sacrifice, one might read Shari'ati's death alongside his own theorization of *shahadat*, as the death of one who bears witness and is granted with eternal life. But what happens when one's self-negation is translated *against* the ideal for which the sacrifice was made? Shari'ati himself states that a "*shahid* is the one who negates his whole existence for the sacred ideal in which we all believe.

It is natural then that all the sacredness of that ideal and goal transports itself to his existence." (233) Thus by this logic, Shari'ati would have sacrificed himself in order to bring forth certain ideas that he felt were fading from the collective consciousness of the Iranian people, the overarching idea being that a collective struggle against oppression is demanded of the people of the Islamic faith and could free them from the oppression that they suffered at the hands of the monarchy. Interestingly, Shari'ati seems concerned not that these ideas will vanish completely, but merely fade from view. Regarding the disappearance of these important ideas, Shari'ati states that

> [o]nce upon a time a truth was an appealing precept. Everyone followed it and it was sacred. All powers surrounded it. But gradually in time, because that truth did not serve the interests of a minority and was dangerous for a group, it was conspired against in order to erase it from the minds and lives of the people. In order to fill its empty place, some other issue was supplanted. Gradually the original issue was completely lost and in its place other issues were discussed.
>
> In this situation, the *shahid*, in order to revive the original issue, sacrifices his own life, and thus brings the *demode* precept back into attention by repulsion of its sham substitute. This is the very goal. (235)

It is at this point that Shari'ati goes from speaking about ideas fading from view to becoming "completely lost." (235) Further, as opposed to a vague slow fade from view, this disappearance becomes a conspiracy, with "sham" substitutes replacing/supplanting the "truth". One cannot help but think of this passage alongside the sacrifice of Shari'ati himself. This rings particularly true in the way that Shari'ati's thought was taken up after his death in 1977. Indeed, Abrahamian suggests that as a result of his

> unprecedented popularity, Shari'ati's name has now become a major prize, fought over by rival political groups. The clerics heading the dominant Islamic Republican Party eulogize him, write sermons about his life, and often cite his works concerning Shi'i roots, cultural revolutions, shortcomings of communist

> movements, the need to struggle against foreign imperialism. Not surprisingly, they often censor his anticlerical views and deny that he was ever influenced by the West. (28)

It seems that something of a sham has been created in the place of Shari'ati, a conspiracy perhaps to redirect his revolutionary thought to suit the political needs of those who took power after the 1979 revolution. In that case (if one considers Shari'ati's death as a kind of *shahadat*, according to his own logic), what safeguards against the appropriation of one's self-negation and the supposed eternal life that Shari'ati believes a *shahid* attains?

For Shari'ati, the eternal life of a *shahid* relies on two things; firstly, a *shahid* negates their existence for an idea that is on the verge of fading from collective consciousness; and secondly, that this sacrifice must be legible and perceived by the collective consciousness as an example or impetus towards continued struggle in service of the idea. In his lecture "After *Shahadat*" Shari'ati states that "for every revolution, there are two visages: *blood and the message*. Husayn and his companions undertook the first mission, that of blood. The second mission is to bear the message to the whole world, to be the eloquent tongue of this flowing blood and these resting bodies among the walking dead." (249) Regarding a *shahid's* legibility, Shari'ati offers Hussein's sister as the exemplary figure for the struggle of remembrance. He goes on to state that the "mission of Zaynab is more difficult and heavier than that of her brother." (249) Then for Shari'ati, *shahadat* becomes a kind of two-part process that begins with a willingness to die, and endures with an ongoing struggle for remembrance. Although Shari'ati is often accused of encouraging a generation of Islamic youth into literal

martyrdom,[31] in fact, we see here his emphasis on Zaynab's delivery of the *message* of Hussein's *shahadat* as being just as (if perhaps more) important in the ongoing political struggle that he envisions. On the importance of the message, Shari'ati states that if

> blood does not have a message, it remains mute in history. If the message of blood does not reach all generations, it is as if the executioner has imprisoned the *shahid* in the castle of one age and one time. If Zaynab does not convey the message of Karbala to history, Karbala remains as a mere historical event; and thus the ones who need this message will be deprived of it. Thus no one will be able to hear the message of those who spoke to the generations with their blood. (250)

Then we see that the function performed by *shahadat*, and its ongoing remembrance, transforms it beyond the merely historical and into the realm of the political such that it may be rendered immortal and thus accessed as a revolutionary political consciousness. He closes his Husseinieh Ershad lecture, "After *Shahadat*" by emphasizing "the mission of Zaynab after the *shahadat*: those who died committed a Hussein-like act. Those who survive must perform a Zaynab-like act. Otherwise they are the followers of Yazid." (251) Here we have a clear articulation of the two intertwined political subjectivities that make up Shari'ati's revolutionary project. He presents us with three options and two *choices*.[32]

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[31] Benslama is a proponent of this idea in his piece, "Dying for Justice".

[32] Very important to note here is the gendered aspect for this formulation of resistance. After the battle of Karbala, the women and children were brought to the court of Yazid in Syria. It is here that Zaynab forcefully addresses Yazid, and tells the story of Hussein's martyrdom. If Hussein performs the 'willingness to die' aspect of Shari'ati's construction of *shahadat* as a dual choice, Zaynab fulfills the 'witness' function. Further, it seems significant that his formulation of ideal *shahadat* encompasses a man's death, remembered by a woman.

Returning to the idea of the ideal witness, we begin to see how precariously it is held in place. In Shari'ati's formulation, Zaynab functions as the guarantee of *shahadat's* intelligibility. She is imagined as a kind of perfect conduit—mourning with dignity, speaking with clarity, and preserving the revolutionary message intact. But to cast her as ideal is also to risk flattening her into function. The ideal witness, as a category, depends on a fantasy of unbroken transmission—of a speech that does not falter, a memory that does not slip. My aim here is to trouble the fantasy. Zaynab's survival is not pure continuity; it is ethical improvisation under conditions of violence and loss. Her speech is delivered in the enemy's court, within the structures that killed her brother, and under the watch of an empire invested in her silence. What she performs is not an ideal transmission, but a form of witnessing that is necessarily marked by the possibility of misreading, appropriation, and erasure. The ideal witness may be necessary to revolutionary myth, but it cannot be sustained without cost.

I wonder though, in emphasizing a *shahid's* legibility, does Shari'ati underestimate the potentially harmful possibility of (either purposeful or accidental) misreading of the message? If one takes Shari'ati's death as a self-negation in the service of a cause, and he may be thought of in his own terms as a *shahid*, then the first part of this equation is tentatively fulfilled. As for his legibility, Abrahamian considered his work to be better and more widely understood than Khomeini's thought. (28) Indeed, his thought was extremely influential in nourishing the revolutionary movement that led to the abdication of the Shah two years after his death in 1977.

Whether coincidence or not, shortly after Shari'ati's suspicious death in London, the Muharram demonstrations in memory/celebration of Hussein of 1977 became the flashpoint for the beginning of the end of the Pahlavi monarchy. Considering his

influence on the revolution, it is useful here to look to Shari'ati's words on the example made by a *shahid*.

> At this point, the meaning of the word "*shahid*" is all the more clear. When the belief in a sacred school of thought is gradually eroding, is about to vanish or be forgotten in a new generation due to a conspiracy, suddenly an individual, by negating himself, re-establishes it. In other words, he calls it back again to the scene of the world. By sacrificing his existence, he affirms the hitherto vanishing existence of that ideal. For this reason, he is *shahid* (witness, present) and *mashhud* (visible). He is always in front of us. The thought also obtains presence and permanence through him. It becomes revived and obtains a soul again. (234)

Then, if a self-negation serves to call an idea back to the 'scene of the world', as his own sacrifice arguably had, what is it that keeps it there? Indeed, Shari'ati's thoughts on *shahadat* seem to indicate that the translation of the self-sacrifice, perhaps as the testimony of a witness, transfers an individual's being into the permanence of the idea that occasioned the sacrifice (thereby bestowing upon them eternal life). However, Shari'ati's own death and subsequent contested posthumous existence indicates that there may be a problem with his formulation. Indeed, according to Abrahamian, the "revolution not only made him into a household name in Iran, but also transformed him into a trophy in the contests of competing political groups." (24) Thus Shari'ati's legacy became the object of desire for competing political forces, and indeed even Khomeini co-opted the very epigraph of this paper and transformed it into a slogan of the Islamic Revolution. This troublesome fact indicates the way in which Shari'ati's testimony through self-negation did not withstand the will of the political forces acting against his intentions and as such could not retain its integrity. Shari'ati's *shahadat* proved incredibly powerful in inciting the revolutionary fervor in the late 1970s, however this was (willfully or not) lost in translation.

One glaring way in which this is the case resides in Khomeini's appropriation of Shari'ati's work and popularity as a consolidation tactic for revolutionary momentum. Shari'ati had been critical of the clergy in many ways, but perhaps most importantly his emphasis on a free and open *ijtihad* directly contradicted Khomeini's position which he had held since the publishing of the Velayat-e Faqih[33] in 1970. In the Velayat-e Faqih, Khomeini states that "anyone who wishes to disseminate the practices of the Most Noble Messenger(s) [the prophets] must know all the ordinances of God; he must be able to distinguish the authentic from the false, those of absolute from those of limited application, and the general from the specific." (40) In this passage Khomeini seems to be responding to the point of contention between Shi'i and Sunni Islam which is that Sunni Islam does not permit interpretation of the Qur'an and the Hadith. In the Shi'i tradition, only those who have undergone long, intensive, and supervized *ijtihad*, and have as a result become a *mujtahid*, may interpret the sacred texts. Although Khomeini is responding to the Sunni tradition here, one can also see how the issue of interpretation is at the forefront of the contradiction between himself (and the clergy) and Ali Shari'ati.

On the appropriation of Shari'ati's thought, and Shari'ati's own sacrifice for a cause he believed in, the question must be asked again: in his own terms, is Shari'ati a *shahid*? Shari'ati did not enter into any kind of battle, except perhaps an intellectual one with the Marxists and the clergy, and neither did he necessarily willingly accept his death in order to uphold the sanctity of Islam. Instead, after being imprisoned for eighteen months, subsequently being released into house arrest, and publishing an anti-

[33] The Governance of the (Islamic) Jurist.

Marxist piece of writing under dubious circumstances,[34] Shari'ati was finally able to leave for London. This doesn't much resemble Imam Hussein's doomed procession to Karbala, and aside from continuing his intellectual work with the threat of imprisonment (and potentially death), Shari'ati made no known refusal or self-negation (aside from his political stance against the monarchy). Then according to Shari'ati's own theory, without the self-negation (willingness to die in the service of an important idea), one cannot become the idea through death and thus be imbued with eternal life. Abrahamian states that

> for Shari'ati's followers true Shi'ism was a dynamic religion that, on the one hand, spoke the language of the masses and could inspire them to revolt against the shah, the upper class, and the imperialists; and, on the other hand, could enable Iran to move rapidly toward the future, and adopt Western technology and even Western social science without losing its national identity that is, to modernize itself without becoming Westernized. (*Iran Between Two Revolutions* 473)

And yet, Khomeini was able to hollowly repeat Shari'ati's logic or speech and in turn secure his support base in furthering his own agenda during the upheavals of the revolution. Perhaps according to Shari'ati's reimagination of *shahadat* then, his cultivated revolutionary thought (although it was registered by and laboured for by the Iranian people during the Iranian revolution), without a self-negation lacked the ability to remain strong and *true* in the collective consciousness of the Iranian people. Perhaps

[34] There is much speculation over the circumstances that led to the publication of his work, *Marxism and Other Western Fallacies*, with some suggesting either that parts of it were written by the SAVAK, or that Shari'ati was compelled by the SAVAK to write it.

it is this that allowed his death to become appropriated and repurposed; Shari'ati was cleaved from revolutionary thought that he devoted himself to.

Conclusion

Whether or not Shari'ati's death may be thought of as a *shahid*, his reconceptualization of the religious concept as a secular and revolutionary subjectivity made a great impact on Iranian political subjectivity during the late 20th century. His emphasis on the two concepts of *shahadat* and *ijtihad* is important as they inform each other and cannot be taken separately. Shari'ati's theorization of *ijtihad* reasserts a collective responsibility for revolutionary struggle (to read and interpret religious doctrine, to follow the example of a *shahid* and strive in support of revolutionary ideals), and in turn the possibility of becoming a *shahid* (through self-negation) also becomes a collective responsibility. Kaur suggests that the

> emulation of Hussein required overcoming one's inner fears of mortality and instead viewing one's own death as a necessary expenditure in the struggle for a just society. Body, here, was not only expendable but became particularly productive in its negativity. It was only in this vision of immortality, then, that ordinary people could be motivated to oppose fearlessly the Shah's authoritarian rule. (450)

Then it seems that Shari'ati's goal was to theorize a way in which the oppressed people of Iran could find a weapon against the Shah (an unjust ruler he allegorically compared to Hussein's Yazid). In this way, he came upon the negative power of the body—the body as a revolutionary tool, in negative action rather than the positive action of a body in battle. As such, Shari'ati states that death "is not a sinister event. It is a weapon in the hands of the friend who with it hits the head of the enemy. In the event that Husayn is completely powerless in defending the truth, he hits the head of the

attacking enemy with his own death." (240) Thus for Shari'ati, the negative action of a *shahid* (in Hussein's case, both a refusal and death), becomes a positive outcome or has positive consequences.

In this way a *shahid*, in their eternal life (rather than the eternal death and mourning of a traditional martyr) signifies movement and the nourishment of collective consciousness; remembrance rather than mourning. Shari'ati finishes his piece with:

> In the paralyzed wills and thought, immersed in stagnation and darkness, and in the memories which have forgotten all the truths and reminiscences, it creates movement, vision, and hope and provides will, mission, and commitment...Such death brings about the death of the enemy at the hands of the ones who are educated by the blood of a *shahid*. By shedding his own blood, the *shahid* is not in the position to cause the fall of the enemy, (for he can't do so)...Instead of a negative flight, he commits a positive attack. By his death, he condemns the oppressor and provides commitment for the oppressed. He exposes aggression and revives what has hitherto been negated. He reminds the people of what has already been forgotten. In the icy hearts of a people, he bestows the blood of life, resurrection, and movement. For those who have become accustomed to captivity and thus think of captivity as a permanent state, the blood of a *shahid* is a rescue vessel. (240-41)

Hence Shari'ati imagines a somewhat optimistic role for a *shahid* in revolutionary struggle. His own death demonstrates some of the issues with this configuration, namely the problems of translation and staying-power. For Shari'ati, there was no Zaynab (an ideal witness), and as a result his thought was allowed to be pulled from the secularized and modernized, back into the dogmatic and perhaps more traditionally Islamic. As a result of this, what was Marxist in his thought was muted. Wherever on the schema of self-sacrifice his sacrifice registers, it was most definitely a self-sacrifice of sorts, and yet he was (purposefully or not) mistranslated and appropriated, which means that one cannot be guaranteed the righteous eternal life through self-negation

that he promises. And yet his thought inspired one of the most powerful anti-imperialist revolutionary consciousnesses of the late 20th century.

If Shari'ati's theory of *shahadat* demands a witness to preserve the meaning of the martyr's death, then his invocation of Zaynab attempts to resolve that demand through an idealized figure of revolutionary transmission. But the idea of the *ideal witness*—one who speaks without distortion, remembers without remainder, and sustains the ethical purity of the event—is already troubled from within. Zaynab's survival is not merely functional; it is vulnerable, exposed to the very conditions that threaten to erase or appropriate what she carries. In casting her as the perfect medium through which Husayn's sacrifice achieves historical continuity, Shari'ati risks eliding the structural tensions that shape all acts of remembrance: the fragility of speech, the instability of meaning, and the gendered burden of those who survive. The ideal witness then, is not a stable subject, but a projection. A necessary figure in revolutionary myth, but one that cannot hold under the weight it is asked to bear.

The absence, or impossibility, of the ideal witness sets the stage for the next chapter, where I turn to the figure of Zaynab not as myth but as problem. Not as the secure transmitter of meaning, but as a speaker who must navigate the ethical and political risks of testimony in the wake of violence. If martyrdom offers the moment of ethical refusal, then witnessing is the site where that refusal must be rendered legible—through speech, through embodiment, and often through pain. In the chapters that follow, I ask what forms that legibility might take, and what it demands of those tasked with preserving memory. Zaynab, as I will show, does not simply complete Husayn's act—she refracts it, transforms it, and inhabits its afterlife. And in doing so, she redefines what it means to survive not only death, but meaning itself.

Chapter 2:

Being Zaynab: Embodiment and Emulation from Hegel to Shari'ati

Can narratives tell stories the way bodies do?

What is in a story that makes it like a body?

If the story is written but not told, told but not received, received but not understood, understood but not appreciated, then is the story worth anything at all?

How does a story that needs to circulate in order to live become a body that needs to be buried in order to live?

Is the story the body, or is the body the story?

- Poupeh Missaghi, *Trans(re)lating House One*

The unspeakable speaks, or the speakable speaks the unspeakable into silence, but these speech acts are recorded in speech, and speech becomes something else by virtue of having been broken open by the unspeakable.

- Judith Butler, "Competing Universalities" in *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality*

Where the previous chapter ended with the instability—and perhaps impossibility—of the ideal witness, this chapter turns fully toward Zaynab, not as mythic resolution but as an unsettled and unsettling figure of survival. If the previous chapter traced how the revolutionary promise of *shahadat* relies on someone who remains, then here I take seriously the contradictions embedded in that act of remaining. This chapter begins by placing Zaynab in conversation with Hegel's reading of Antigone—not to equate the two figures, but to explore how each comes to mark the limit of ethical legibility through kinship, gendered speech, and death. Hegel becomes important here not as a framework I adopt wholesale, but as one I must move through.

His Antigone offers a scene where competing universalities—state law and divine law—clash without resolution. And yet, as I argue, Zaynab is not merely a tragic echo of that structure; she speaks not from inevitability but from a space of deliberate survival. In turning to Antigone, I excavate the philosophical coordinates through which speech from the position of mourning has been framed—and constrained—in the Western tradition.

Alongside this, I turn to anthropologist Lara Deeb, whose work on piety and public life in contemporary Lebanon offers a crucial counterweight. Deeb's ethnographic attention to the textures of Shi'i ethics, and to how women navigate authority, community, and religiosity, helps me think about Zaynab's afterlife not only as a figure in history, but as a model for gendered political practice. What emerges, then, is not a singular portrait of Zaynab, but a set of tensions she crystallizes (between visibility and veiling, between survival and representation, between authority and witness). This chapter is necessary precisely because the fantasy of the ideal witness—briefly troubled at the end of chapter one—must now be held in question. Through Zaynab, I begin to ask what survival costs, what it demands, and what kinds of ethical improvisation it entails when remembrance must take place under hostile conditions.

In this chapter I intend to explore the limits of our understanding regarding the exemplary figure of Sayyidah Zaynab (sister of Imam Hussein), and the possibilities she may hold for futurity and resistance. She is held in high esteem in traditions of both Sunni and Shi'i Islam, however representations of her acts of resistance and how they might be taken up by contemporary women vary greatly from the way in which Hussein is, and has been, taken up. My point of departure in thinking embodiment is with the thought of Iranian philosopher Ali Shari'ati and his work in reconceptualizing *shahadat*

(martyrdom), and I intend to use the theoretical framework set out by Shari'ati in his lectures[35] titled "A Discussion of *Shahid*" and "After *Shahadat*". In these lectures, he produces a productive space between actual/bodily death and *shahadat*, instead emphasizing self-negation as the way by which one may sacrifice themselves for an ideal. In thinking through attendant problems of testimony, memorialization, embodiment, and emulation, I turn first to Hegel's discussion of Antigone and the competing universalities of Human and Divine Laws. Reading Antigone alongside Zaynab, I believe, may prove productive for thinking through the relation between language and embodiment.

In doing this work, I suspect that Poupeh Missaghi's novel *Trans(re)lating House One* (the text I draw on for the epigraph of this paper) may provide a useful space for thinking about women's resistance and knowledge. What appears as I track Hegel's thought is the question of immediacy and its relation to consciousness. I am interested in what thinking Antigone and Zaynab together might open up with regards to how speech and embodiment work in opposite directions, but especially the moments in which they work concurrently. Missaghi's novel and its unusual form asks these questions of its protagonist, a woman searching for the missing statues of Tehran, but the narrator also asks these questions of herself. In thinking about the work of embodiment, I think about the kind of knowledge Missaghi speaks of:

> I know there is value in the living bodies. I know there is value in bodies of art, and in the search for them, too. And I know she must already know about the other bodies, the dead bodies […] I know all that, but I also know one can know

[35] These lectures were given during his time at the Islamic lecture hall, Husseinieh Ershad, in Tehran between 1967-72.

> of something without truly knowing it, a knowing that results from reaching out, searching, documenting, getting intimate with, embodying. (151)

So for Missaghi then embodiment is knowing without *really* knowing. I find that what I am interested in here is the way in which consciousness becomes a contentious site that passes between embodiment and speech, that is I try to track the movement of consciousness in the work and actions of Zaynab. So, if I take Missaghi, embodiment is immediate—but it is not so simple as embodiment is immediate and speech is self-consciousness. Something that I find as I attempt to excavate the movement of consciousness in Hegel's formulation of the divine and human laws and ethical action, is that while each moment contains the ethical substance in its entirety, immediacy seems only open and available in the sphere of the Family. Perhaps consciousness itself might be split between an unconsciousness/(pure?) consciousness (as immediate) and *self*-consciousness (as mediated). It seems that within the logic of the human law/State, there is no space for the immediate, pure/mere consciousness except in the accident of death. Alternately in the sphere of the Family, in divine law, self-consciousness and pure consciousness may dance together in a kind of dialectical push-and-pull within the subjectivity of the sister. What we see is that for the sister, and I speak here specifically of Antigone and Zaynab, the impulse to memorialise (and indeed *witness*) the death of their brothers is immediate—that is, it operates at the level of the unconscious or pure consciousness. They *must* do this work. But for both Antigone and Zaynab, this is not enough—they are also compelled to speak and speak in a way it seems that was not available to their brothers. I'm not sure it is so straightforward that we might delineate here: speech equals self-consciousness, memorialization equals immediacy, for there is something to be said about the immediacy of pure voice. That is, it is not only the

content of Zaynab's speech, for example, that Hegel might cast as a crime against the State, but the very utterance of a word in that space. So then I wonder if in Zaynab's speech (and we see this mirrored also in Antigone) there is a synthesis of immediacy/mediation, divine law/human law, Family/State, pure consciousness/self-consciousness, which actually makes speech possible. The very heart of which I believe is that the brother must die, embodying an ideal in death, in order that she may both memorialise, embody, and speak him (and therefore herself) into eternal life.

The figure of Zaynab has long occupied a foundational place in Shi'i Islamic history, ritual, and theology, yet she remains curiously under-theorized in scholarly discourse, often invoked as a symbol but rarely interrogated as a political and theological subject in her own right. Existing literature tends to fix Zaynab within a devotional frame: she is the mourning sister of the martyred Imam Husayn, the orator of the court of Yazid, and the spiritual matriarch of Shi'i resistance. While this symbolic centrality is undeniable, my project begins by asking what has been foreclosed by the very security of her iconic status. What happens when we read Zaynab not as a vessel of memory but as a speaker embedded within the unstable terrain of revolutionary aftermath, tasked with giving meaning to loss without the sanctity of the tomb? If the previous chapter questioned the coherence of the ideal witness, then this chapter lingers with Zaynab precisely because she is the one left to speak, to carry, to survive. And it is in that survival that the contradictions of revolutionary continuity begin to emerge.

Much of the literature on Zaynab comes from devotional texts, hagiographies, and Shi'i ritual studies. Works such as Kamran Scott Aghaie's *The Martyrs of Karbala* and Mahmoud Ayoub's classic *Redemptive Suffering in Islam* emphasize Zaynab's

centrality to the Karbala narrative as its orator and moral clarifier. Ayoub, in particular, positions her as the one who ensures that Husayn's death is not read as defeat but as divine triumph (Ayoub 153-157). In these accounts, her speech becomes the interpretive hinge of the Karbala event—transforming loss into meaning, death into victory. While these texts are important for understanding the architecture of Shi'i ritual and ethics, they often treat Zaynab's eloquence as inevitable, her courage as naturalized, her survival as seamlessly integrated into a larger divine plan. What remains unaddressed is the ethical and political tension of that speech. What it means to speak after death, under conditions of surveillance and imperial power, and to do so in a gendered body that is both revered and vulnerable.

One of the few places where a more rigorous approach to Zaynab can be found is in anthropological work, particularly that of Lara Deeb. In *An Enchanted Modern*, Deeb examines how contemporary Shi'i women in Lebanon draw on Zaynab as a moral exemplar, negotiating piety, resistance, and public participation in ways that destabilize both Western feminist assumptions and patriarchal religious prescriptions. Zaynab here is not a distant ideal, but a living model whose speech and action provide a vocabulary for situated ethical life. Deeb's ethnographic insight is crucial to my project, it signals that Zaynab's legacy is not stable, but contested, iterative, and subject to appropriation.[36] My work builds on this by asking not just how Zaynab is used, but what she reveals: about gendered speech under duress, about the paradoxes of revolutionary

[36] Lara Deeb's ethnographic analysis reveals that the gendered split between embodiment (Husayn) and emulation (Zaynab) is not simply doctrinal but is enacted and contested in everyday ritual. As she notes, "women may be like Zaynab, but they are never Zaynab," (Deeb 250), marking both the centrality and deferral of female subjectivity within Shi'i political theology.

inheritance, and about what survival looks like when it is tasked with the labor of meaning.

Theologically, Zaynab has also been sidelined in discourses that prioritizes the sacrificial act over the interpretive aftermath. In studies of *shahadat*, attention remains focused on the martyred body—its symbolic density, its metaphysical value, its capacity to anchor political collectivity. Zaynab, as the one who lives, is often positioned as a secondary figure, her role instrumental to the martyr's meaning but not generative in its own right. This is where my project intervenes. I argue that Zaynab is not simply the one who tells the story—she becomes part of the story's structure. Her speech in Yazid's court is not a transmission of Husayn's message but a transformation of it. It introduces survival as a political act and witnessing as a form of embodied, vulnerable, gendered labor.[37] She does not merely carry the message; she alters its coordinates.

This chapter places Zaynab in conversation with both philosophical and anthropological frameworks, not to resolve her contradictions, but to dwell in them. Through Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*, particularly his reading of Antigone, I stage a dialectical encounter that helps illuminate the bind of surviving under the competing ethical orders. Antigone dies for her mourning, while Zaynab lives in spite of it. What both figures share is the instability of speech from the position of kinship, the impossibility of clean ethical legibility when the speaker is bound to the dead. Yet Zaynab's survival introduces something Hegel's tragic schema cannot account for: a

[37] In *The Divine Guide in Early Shi'ism*, Mohammad Ali Amir-Moezzi describes a layered cosmology in which spiritual authority is both embodied and transmissible. His emphasis on the Imam's esoteric knowledge illuminates Zaynab's speech as more than interpretive—it becomes a site of divine remainder, where theological meaning lingers even after the death of its source. (Amir-Moezzi 111-113)

speech that does not resolve into closure, but continues to circulate, to unsettle, to reconfigure the scene of revolution.

In recovering Zaynab as a theorist of survival—not simply a transmitter of martyrdom—I aim to shift the conversation from the sanctity of the dead to the difficulty of living on. Her oratory is not idealized rhetoric, but an intervention under pressure. A scene of gendered risk, of political improvisation, and of theological inheritance made fraught by history.[38] She is not the ideal witness, but the one left behind, speaking through and against the ruins of a promise.

Shari'ati's Problematic

In tracking this process, I begin here with the theoretical framework for martyrdom that prominent Iranian thinker, Ali Shari'ati, sets out. In the years leading up to the 1979 Iranian revolution, Shari'ati worked back into the story of Hussein to illustrate the revolutionary potential held within that narrative that extends beyond mere mourning. Shari'ati's first move is to try to disentangle *shahadat* from death, instead emphasising a kind of self-negation that hinges on the *choosing* of death through a refusal. His second and rather radical move is to elevate the role of Hussein's sister Zaynab in the paradigm of Hussein's *shahadat*. I note here the gendered aspect for this formulation of resistance. After the battle of Karbala, the women and children were

[38] Negar Mottahedeh's reading of the *ta'ziyeh* tradition posits the spectator as "a resurrected body—a witnessing and imaginal body." (19) Zaynab's oratory similarly reconstitutes her audience as affective witnesses, collapsing historical distance and inviting them into an embodied co-presence with Karbala.

brought to the court of Yazid in Syria. It is here that Zaynab forcefully addresses Yazid, and tells the story of Hussein's martyrdom. If Hussein performs the 'willingness to die' aspect of Shari'ati's construction of *shahadat* as a dual choice, Zaynab fulfills the 'witness' function. Further, it seems significant that his formulation of ideal *shahadat* encompasses a man's death, remembered by a woman. Zaynab, in Shari'ati's estimation, through her speech-act and memorialisation of her brother, performs a significant role in this retheorised concept of *shahadat* (such that it becomes hers too).

For Shari'ati, the eternal life of a *shahid* relies on two things; firstly, a *shahid* negates their existence for an idea that is on the verge of fading from collective consciousness; and secondly, that this sacrifice must be legible and perceived by the collective consciousness as an example or impetus towards continued struggle in service of the idea. In his lecture "After *Shahadat*" Shari'ati states that "for every revolution, there are two visages: *blood and the message*. Husayn and his companions undertook the first mission, that of blood. The second mission is to bear the message to the whole world, to be the eloquent tongue of this flowing blood and these resting bodies among the walking dead." (249) Regarding a *shahid's* legibility, Shari'ati offers Hussein's sister as the exemplary figure for the struggle of remembrance. He goes on to state that the "mission of Zaynab is more difficult and heavier than that of her brother." (249) Then for Shari'ati, *shahadat* becomes a kind of two-part process that begins with a willingness to die, and endures with an ongoing struggle for remembrance. Although Shari'ati is often accused of encouraging a generation of Islamic youth into literal martyrdom,[39] in fact, we see here his emphasis on Zaynab's delivery of the *message* of

[39] Benslama is a proponent of this idea in his piece, "Dying for Justice".

Hussein's *shahadat* as being just as (if perhaps more) important in the ongoing political struggle that he envisions. On the importance of the message, Shari'ati states that if

> blood does not have a message, it remains mute in history. If the message of blood does not reach all generations, it is as if the executioner has imprisoned the *shahid* in the castle of one age and one time. If Zaynab does not convey the message of Karbala to history, Karbala remains as a mere historical event; and thus the ones who need this message will be deprived of it. Thus no one will be able to hear the message of those who spoke to the generations with their blood. (250)

Then we see that the function performed by *shahadat*, and its ongoing remembrance, transforms it beyond the merely historical and into the realm of the political such that it may be rendered immortal and thus accessed as a revolutionary political consciousness. I wonder though, in Shari'ati's formulation here, there is something being proposed as the 'other' of history, if there is I'm not sure that it is politics. It seems that history in this paradigm is not discursive, it is static and of the body. In this way, in order that (mere) history may enter into a different kind of temporality, it must be memorialized through speech. Though I'm not sure speech is being proposed as the other of history, it certainly seems it is the vessel through which this other might be reached. This kind of memorialization or testimony brings forth a kind of divine atemporality. Shari'ati closes his Husseinieh Ershad lecture, "After *Shahadat*" by emphasizing "the mission of Zaynab after the *shahadat*: those who died committed a Hussein-like act. Those who survive must perform a Zaynab-like act. Otherwise they are the followers of Yazid." (251) Here we have a clear articulation of the two intertwined political subjectivities that make up Shari'ati's revolutionary project. He presents us with three options and two *choices*.

On his first move, the refusal, Shari'ati details in "A Discussion of *Shahid*" that when the governor of Medina comes to the house of Husayn and asks him to pledge allegiance to the caliph Yazid, Husayn responds, 'No'. This response, this refusal with the knowledge that it will almost certainly bring about his own death, for Shari'ati is the precise moment of his martyrdom, his *shahadat*. It is precisely his *conscious choice* here that matters. For, Husayn's status as the ultimate *shahid* (especially in Shi'i thought) is contingent not on his actual death—his actual bodily death was somewhat accidental[40]—but on his *willingness to die*. This moment between self-negation and actual death is the moment Shari'ati seems most interested in, as it makes possible *actual* life in *symbolic* death. It is this gesture of Shari'ati's that for me makes Zaynab's work in this third space possible. That is, the space between the model of Husayn, that of eternal life (in actual bodily death), and that of the community/the rest, that of death-in-life. Zaynab is able to contain the immediacy of actual bodily death and the self-consciousness of self-negation, in bearing witness to the death of her brother and speaking testimony in the court of Yazid after the Battle of Karbala.

Claiming Antigone: Where Does She Belong?

Turning to Hegel at this juncture may seem like a detour, away from Zaynab, from Karbala, from the particularities of Islamic political theology. But it is precisely this distance that makes Hegel useful. His *Phenomenology of Spirit*, particularly the section

[40] In the sense that he did not purposefully go into battle, but was trapped and cornered by the Euphrates on his way to meet with the people of Kufah.

on ethical life, offers a schema for how kinship, gender, and mourning function within the unfolding of dialectical history. By staging the conflict between Antigone and Creon as a collision between divine law and human law, Hegel posits that tragedy arises not from ethical failure but from the incommensurability of two legitimate claims. The sister mourns the brother, but her mourning exceeds what the state can absorb; her act, though ethical, is rendered unintelligible by the order that governs life and death. In turning to Hegel, I am not looking for a solution to the problem of Zaynab, but a structure. A way of thinking about the scene of mourning as a scene of contradiction, in which the survivor becomes both necessary and uncontainable.

The sibling relationship in Hegel—Antigone and Polynices—maps onto a field of ethical struggle. It is the sister who acts on behalf of the dead brother, not from personal affection alone, but from the authority of kinship that is rendered divine. She represents what Hegel calls "the ethical world in its natural form," (§451) a world prior to the abstraction of the state. The brother-sister relation here is not incidental; it is foundational. Antigone does not bury Polynices as an individual citizen, but as a sister, whose obligation emerges from a familial and sacred order that stands in tension with civic rationality. When I invoke Zaynab in relation to this structure, I am both drawing on and disrupting it. Like Antigone, Zaynab is a sister who speaks in the wake of her brother's death. But unlike Antigone, she is not destroyed by her act. She survives. She speaks from within history, not as a tragic figure of transgression, but as a theologically grounded subject of continuation.

What happens when I bring Hegel into the frame, then, is not the imposition of a Western dialectical logic onto a Shi'i cosmology, but a generative friction. Zaynab forces Hegel's dialectic to misfire. In her, the conflict between divine and human law does not

resolve through destruction or sublation; it persists. She does not disappear into the resolution of the ethical order, nor does she signify its tragic limit. Her speech—delivered not outside of power, but within the court of Yazid—interrupts rather than collapses. It reframes the question of mourning away from finality and toward endurance. In practice, reading Zaynab through and against Hegel exposes the Eurocentric limitations of the tragic form. The dialectic between brother and sister does not move towards synthesis, but into a space of repetition, of refusal, of living on.

This is why Hegel is useful to take up and necessary to move beyond. He offers a rigorous conceptual grammar for staging ethical contradiction, and a gendered structure for thinking mourning and kinship. But Zaynab is not Antigone. Her survival does not foreclose the event—it prolongs it.[41] Where Antigone is entombed, Zaynab speaks. Where tragedy seeks catharsis, Zaynab offers continuity. The brother's death is not the end of meaning but its beginning. What the Hegelian frame allows me to stage, then, is precisely the site of its own interruption: the moment where revolutionary memory does not sublate into myth, but insists on the labor of surviving. And it is in this insistence—this continued speech from the place of survival—that Zaynab becomes not a tragic echo, but a political theologian in her own right.

In order to think through the ramifications for Shari'ati's logic, it seems useful here to think through the brief moment in Hegel's figuring of universality in which divine and human law stand on something of an equal footing. I wonder if it might be

[41] Daryush Shayegan's *Cultural Schizophrenia* may appear tangential, but his critique of binary oppositions within Iranian intellectual history speaks directly to the Hegel/Zaynab tension. He warns against "the freezing of oppositions into essences," (58) which this chapter resists by allowing Antigone and Zaynab to remain in unresolved tension rather than collapsing them into universalist ethics.

generative to problematize the kind of progressive logic with which Hegel approaches this paradigm. That is, the way in which the Family is set up as initially a contending force that acts in opposition to the State, only to finally be subsumed by it. In opening the section on the Spirit, Hegel writes that the "simple substance of Spirit, as consciousness, is divided." (§446) This split, importantly, is not a total split, that is one of discrete parts. Instead he suggests that it is "the duality of a law of individuality and a law of universality." (§446) which means that "each of these divisions of substance remains Spirit in its entirety." (§446) Then it seems that we are seeing something like what Shari'ati thinks about as *tauhid.*[42] That is, in spiritual terms, the one-ness or unity of the world. A world in which ideas/consciousnesses do not (cannot/will not) disappear, instead if they are not *immediately* present, they may (with work/struggle) be brought back into circulation.[43] For Hegel though this all-encompassing Spirit is distinctly material, of the world. He suggests here that "the ethical substance is *actual* substance, absolute Spirit realized in the plurality of existent consciousnesses." (§447) The plurality of consciousnesses he is dealing with here are actual, material workings of the material world—that is human law. For Hegel, the "Spirit can be called the human law because it is essentially in the form of a reality that is conscious of itself." (§448) Is immediacy of the material world, or only of the divine? This Spirit, within which everything (that is, a plurality of consciousnesses) is contained, is confronted with and works against another *thing*. That is, a consciousness without self-awareness, merely

[42] See Ali Shari'ati's *On the Sociology of Islam* for more on this.

[43] The dialectic between immediacy and self-consciousness in Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* becomes productive when read alongside the mystical monotheism of *towhid* in Shari'ati's theology. For Hegel, "the ethical substance is actual substance, absolute Spirit realized in the plurality of existent consciousness." (§447) For Shari'ati, *towhid* means no truth is ever annihilated, only eclipsed. Both frame history as a struggle of recoverable meaning.

immediate—a kind of un-self-conscious being which is neither individual nor universal. So then for Hegel,

> Confronting this clearly manifest ethical power there is, however, another power, the Divine Law. For the ethical power of the state, being the movement of self-conscious action, finds its antithesis in the simple and immediate essence of the ethical sphere; as *actual* universality it is a force actively opposed to individual being-for-self; and as actuality in general it finds in that *inner* essence something other than the ethical power of the state. (§449)

Important phrase here: antithesis in the simple and immediate essence of the ethical sphere. So here we have ethical power (of the State) as antithetical to this ethical sphere. What does this mean? As different 'laws' acting against and upon each other, what is contained in ethical power that is lacking in the ethical sphere (and vice versa). We see here the kind of duality of substance and essence, materiality and immediacy. The ethical sphere though, this other force confronting the manifest, is itself also a 'power'.

What is this power, I wonder—from what/where is it generated? Hegel in this passage opposes 'actual' universality with individual being-for-self. In closing this section though, it seems that Hegel suggests that this power derives from an 'inner essence' – that is one that finds within itself an authority over which the state may not wield authority. He goes on to say that "each of the opposites in which the ethical substance exists contains the entire substance, and all the moments of its content." (§450) So each ethical substance and all its moments are discrete repetitions of a whole. Then what is it that we find different between the ethical substance of the State, and the ethical substance of its other? Immediately after this we are given a distinction between a substance that is a community (with self-consciousness), and a substance which is

(merely?) immediate. Then immediacy and consciousness are opposed, immediacy will become feminized and self-consciousness its other. Or is it that immediacy is the other of self-consciousness, and does this alter the configuration? But no, Hegel tells us that the immediate substance "equally contains within it the moment of self-consciousness. This moment which expresses the ethical sphere in this element of immediacy or [simple] being, or which is an *immediate* consciousness of itself, both as essence and as this particular self…this is the Family." (§450) The Family, both unconscious and self-conscious, a contending power in opposition with the State. Still though, I am left wondering about immediacy. If the Family has its own (immediate) ethical sphere, the substance of which is whole, how does the ethical power of the State differ? Does it derive the content, the substance, of its ethical moment differently? But then again, what is immediate here? What is it that is produced or contained, immediately?

Returning to Hegel, we see again the emphasis on the 'inner' essence of the Family, in that he states that the "Family as the *unconscious*, still inner Notion [of the ethical order], stands opposed to its actual, self-conscious existence; as the *element* of the nation's actual existence, it stands opposed to the nation itself; as the *immediate* being of the ethical order" (§450). This seems to be a clarifying moment, in that we discover more about exactly how Hegel is placing the moving parts of the ethical formulation. Upon reaching this formulation of the dialectic, we see that the Family is an ethical substance, opposed to the substance of the State, but *also* contained within the bounds of the State—its inner essence. Then I wonder if, as Hegel states, "the ethical principle is intrinsically universal, and this natural relationship is just as much a spiritual one, and it is only as a spiritual entity that it is ethical," (§451) then it seems that it is the spiritual that accounts for the immediacy of the substance of the Family.

Can we think about it as the immediacy of the unconscious? In which case, within the ethical substance of the Family, we may be able to account for a kind of inner-dialectic—that is, an immediate (spiritual) unconscious, and a (mediated) self-consciousness. So, we come to the ethical action, and how this ethical action interacts with the universal. On this, Hegel suggests that the "content of the ethical action must be substantial or whole and universal; therefore it can only be related to the *whole* individual or to the individual *qua* universal." (§451) In which case, only some individuals (whole ones) have the capacity to produce the ethical act. In this case, I wonder about the relation between the ethical act and the ethical sphere—specifically, can that whole, universal individual belong to the Family? If the answer is no, and the act belongs to the community (not the spiritual), then one can assume that the act must be self-conscious as opposed to immediate. In continuing to wonder about immediacy and how exactly this is in conflict with consciousness, I arrive (or rather Hegel does), at the content of the ethical act. Thinking through the problem along this linear progression through the text, we have the ethical act, the crime (according to the State), and its relation with death/deadness:

> The deed, then, which embraces the entire existence of the blood-relation does not concern the citizen, for he does not belong to the Family, not the individual who is to become a citizen and will cease to count as this particular individual; it has as its object and content this particular individual who belongs to the Family, but is taken as a *universal* being freed from his sensuous, i.e. individual, reality. The deed no longer concerns the living but the dead, the individual who, after a long succession of separate disconnected experiences, concentrates himself into a single completed shape, and has raised himself out of the unrest of the accidents of life into the calm of simple universality. But because it is only as a citizen that he is actual and substantial, the individual, so far as he is not a citizen but belongs to the Family, is only an unreal impotent shadow. (§451)

This passage makes it clear that in fact the State may have no part of this ethical action, and that the individual indeed belongs to the Family, for the ethical deed concerns the blood relation. Thus the ethical act must free the individual by facilitating their attaining of universality, they are both object and content of the act. Not to get ahead of myself, but it seems clear here that the individual cannot *do* this deed—therefore there is a need for an other in which immediacy (spiritual, unconscious), and self-consciousness (it must not be accidental) come together. Through the individual's ascension to universality (simple, complete), the individual must die. Then the content of this form, this *shape*, stands opposed to the 'accidents of life', in death. This passage calls back to Shari'ati's emphasis on the purposefulness with which a *shahid* must choose his death—not only actual death (though perhaps also actual bodily death), but conscious self-negation. Upon arriving at this point, according to Hegel, the individual leaves a trace, a shadow, in the community. The individual's self-negation (death) leaves his actual existence, that is actual substance, as citizen (for State), and passes into a kind of shadow material (back) into the Family. His movement, rather than an 'end', instead facilitates I think, or at least makes possible, another kind of *movement*.

Regarding the movement of the individual and the level of consciousness (or not) attached to their move into death ('pure being'), Hegel insists it is reached *"immediately*…not the result of an action *consciously done*." (§452) I thank the reader for bearing with me as I fastidiously track these the intricacies and specificities of this thought. For, here it seems that death itself is immediate (lacking self-consciousness), and thus the moment of death can also be chalked up to the 'accidents of life'. So in the after-life that actual death brings about, one may be finally free of these accidents—though in reaching this purposeful spatial/temporal realm of consciousness, one final

'accident' (death) must be enacted. Hegel continues: "in so far as he is essentially a *particular* individual, it is an accident that his death was directly connected with his 'work' for the universal and was a result of it" (§452). How does Hegel see this work? How does the particular work for the universal and what does this work consist of? What is the universal that we are concerned with here? I am wondering about whether the dialectic is at play, and if it is, it seems important to ascertain whether the dialectic concerns the particular (individual) and the universal, or rather if we can think about universality as plural and thus that the dialectic is concerned with two universals coming up against each other. In this way the individual may do work for one universal and come to its (bodily) end at the hands of another, or perhaps at the point at which the two universals touch. It is then suggested by Hegel that the "dead individual, by having liberated his *being* from his *action* or his negative unity, is an empty singular" (§452) The extent to which the individual, free from actual being and having moved into symbolic, atemporal being becomes an empty singular, I comprehend. But I remain stuck here on what is called here his action (his 'negative unity'). Then could this negative unity concern the death of the individual that occurs at the touching point between what I am thinking of as the universals of the divine and the human? Then this last (accidental) act, a positive action (the death as the act that splices positive being from negative unity), generates or carves out for the divine a moment or condition for ethical substance to fill the empty vessel of the individual.

At this point, it seems useful to pivot towards what Hegel seems to think about as the perfect representations of what I take to be two universals—the brother and the sister. He states that the "relationship in its unmixed form is found, however, in that between brother and sister. They are the same blood which has, however, in them

reached a state of rest and equilibrium." (§457) I pause here to wonder of the significance of this peaceful relation Hegel depicts, a relation at 'rest and equilibrium'. Can the dialectic be at rest, at peace? Surely not. But still I *am* considering the brother and the sister as representations of a dialectical thought. On this relation though, I find Hegel difficult to follow, for he seems still to fluctuate with regard the consciousness (or not) available to the entity of the Family. Referring back to the earlier tracking of his argument, he suggests to us that the ethical substance of the Family contains both self-consciousness *and* immediacy. And yet here he tells us that "the feminine, in the form of the sister, has the highest *intuitive* awareness of what is ethical. She does not attain to *consciousness* of it, or to the objective existence of it, because the law of the Family is an implicit, inner essence which is not exposed to the daylight of consciousness." (§457) What are we to make of this? Is the suggestion here that within the sphere of the Family, the brother and sister (through their positive relation) produce a complete moment of universality—the brother accounts for self-consciousness, the sister accounting for intuition (immediacy), regarding ethical substance? The relation of these two, representing a complete moment of Spirit. I wonder though what happens when the brother inevitably leaves the Family sphere, to become a citizen. At this time does the sister, alone, lose access to self-consciousness, spliced from a wholeness she once knew, becoming an incomplete moment of ethical substance. I posit that it is possible that she might retain that moment of equilibrium she knew with her brother through remembrance or memorialization—that in her being (intuitive, spiritual, immediate) traces of self-consciousness might remain, available for later access.

We see then the theoretical groundwork of the brother-sister relation within the Family that Hegel lays out for us, and content with this he brings forth the example of

Antigone (and her brother Polyneices) in order to think about the enactment of the ethical deed and its repercussions. Thus regarding the death of the brother, he states that "the moment of the individual self, recognizing and being recognized, can here assert its right, because it is linked to the equilibrium of the blood and is a relation devoid of desire. The loss of the brother is therefore irreparable to the sister and her duty towards him is the highest." (§457) I tender that while the loss of the brother is irreparable for the sister, in the sense that the brother-sister relation is a familial relation that cannot be reproduced by the sister (as opposed to the death of a husband or a child), something more like the daughter that must watch her parents die is at work in the death of the brother. On the death of the parents, Hegel offers: "As a daughter, the woman must now see her parents pass away with a natural emotion and ethical resignation, for it is only at the cost of this relationship that she can achieve that existence of her own of which she is capable." (§457) What seems different here is the way in which he frames the death of the parents positively for the woman, though importantly the effect of these deaths is 'ethical resignation'. Earlier, however, we see that he frames the ethical effects of the death of the brother through the sister's duty. So we see here that the daughter/woman's relation to her parents is a negative one, while Hegel suggests the brother-sister relation is a positive one. Indeed after the brother's death, he suggests that "his blood, still lives on in the household, his substance has an enduring reality." (§462) Then I wonder if, after the initial *moment* in which (through the positive relation of the brother and sister) self-consciousness and immediacy come together hold the complete ethical substance, that the amalgam might remain accessible to the sister. Or rather the shadow of this moment remains with the sister, and the brother having moved from the Family into the citizenry (taking his place in the State), means that what once was a positive relation becomes a negative one. What I mean by

this is that the death of the brother becomes necessary for the sister, allowing her the conditions for making manifest that shadow/trace of the wholeness that was once held in their relation. Then memorialization, that is, an intertwining of immediacy and mediation where bearing witness and making testimony becomes a discursive process that requires movement from the immediacy and spirituality of the body into speech. As a result, the sister may within herself once again produce a synthesis of self-consciousness and intuition—the whole and complete ethical substance.

This does not feel as if a radical re-think of Hegel's thought, instead I wish to take his own thought as a theoretical framework—extended to what I see to be the appropriate logical progression. Following the generative idea that the sister may become the container for what I am thinking about as the dual universals, that once was represented by the brother-sister relation, Hegel gives us this: "the consciousness of [those who share] the blood of the individual repair this wrong in such a way that what has simply *happened* becomes rather a *work deliberately done*, in order that the mere being of the wrong, its ultimate form, may also be something *willed* and thus something agreeable." (§462) Then it becomes the work of the sister to take the 'accidental' death of the brother and make it *mean*. This must occur with an incorporation of his subjectivity into her own, and thus not only does her testimony and memorialization of him allow her access to self-consciousness (in a way that Hegel does not really account for), but also allows her movement between 'laws'—that is, the human law and the divine law, the State and the Family. Does this work that she does dissolve the antagonism between these powers?

Embodiment: the Mute Body

This work that Antigone performs, that is movement into speech as testimony for her dead brother importantly is the moment in which Antigone (the sister) in memorializing her brother (to whom her uncle Creon has denied a burial), commits a crime against the State. In this way, Antigone's speech to Creon—that is, in voicing her testimony directly to the representative of the State—she incorporates the subjectivity of her brother, for she may speak now in a way she was not able when he was alive. This muddying of gendered waters flows, it seems, in both directions, for the brother (Polyneices) is himself feminized. This is because with Creon's refusal to grant Polyneices a burial, he is expelled from the realm/history of the State, and thus reintegrated into the sphere of the Family, the divine. As Sharareh Frouzesh writes, the "(disavowed) rebellious principle is he who renders the community a fragmented body. What we should note here is that this rebellious principle (as represented by Polynices) is 'feminized', individualized, corporealized, and rendered other." (16) So I wonder then about the vulnerability and silence at risk here in embodiment. For between the actual bodily death of Polyneices (and I think here also of the parallel of Husayn) and his ascension to the mythic realm/temporality, is the speech/testimony/memorialization/work of Antigone (and Zaynab). What about Polyneices renders the community fragmented body? This body, the body of Polyneices (which Frouzesh refers to as the 'rebellious principle') is cast out for causing a disturbance in the equilibrium of the State. Hegel states that this "equilibrium can, it is true, only be a living one by inequality arising in it, and being brought back to equilibrium by Justice." (§462) So Polyneices, disturbing the state of the community must be expelled, for it cannot make space for dissent and conflict. We see here two different takes on justice at play—that is the justice for which the state must expel the

'rebellious principle', and the justice for which the brother (Polyneices, Husayn) gives his life. This offers a very direct parallel with Shari'ati's thought regarding Husayn. In constructing his theory of *shahadat*, he thinks about negation in the service of an idea—specifically justice—stating, "If I donate a thousand dollars of my own money for the establishment of justice, that thousand dollars absorbs the sacredness of justice. […] When I negate it in the way of justice, it is affirmed in another form, because it transforms into the essence of justice." (Shari'ati 232) I suppose some of my interest here lies in how the sister (Antigone, Zaynab) interacts with these two justices, because she comes into relation with both—speaking against, speaking for, embodying one to speak against the other.

This tension between embodiment and speech, between the justice of the state and the justice for which one dies, brings us into the terrain of lived religiosity—of how these paradigms of martyrdom and witnessing are taken up, gendered, and negotiated in contemporary Shi'i communities. If the philosophical figures of Antigone and Polynices, or the historical pairing of Zaynab and Husayn, stage the structural relationship between sacrifice and testimony, then ethnographic work allows us to see how these categories function in practice. How they are embodied, emulated, or contested on the ground. It is here that Lara Deeb's work on Shi'i piety in southern Lebanon becomes essential. Deeb tracks not only how the Karbala paradigm continues to structure communal narratives of resistance and loss, but also how the gendered division between martyrdom and memorialization is both reinscribed and resisted. Her framework helps clarify what is at stake in invoking Zaynab: not just as a symbolic mourner, but as a figure through whom the limits of emulation, embodiment, and ethical authority are actively negotiated.

Deeb's work is focussed on modes of individual and community resistance, in particular to Israel's colonial attempt at expansion into Lebanon—and thus the primary Shi'i narrative of resistance, the martyrdom of Husayn and the testimony of his sister Zaynab. Deeb states that,

> women may be like Zaynab, but they are never Zaynab. Ideally, men are meant to embody Husayn, whereas women are expected to emulate Zaynab. In embodying Husayn, within the paradigmatic narrative and temporal framework, men-as-Husayn are Karbala in the present. In emulating Zaynab, within the syntagmatic[44] narrative and temporal framework, women draw on Zaynab as a role model to lead the community into the future. (250)

Deeb strives to investigate differing values associated with these terms of engagement, and the way that they have been placed in a kind of opposition— although she does state that sometimes men may both embody and emulate. For Deeb, embodiment is death (martyrdom), and emulation is work for the community. In this way, she wonders if this distinction has to do with differing (gendered) abilities for attaining spirituality, or ascension to the spiritual realm. That is, Deeb wonders if this emphasis on women's *emulation*, actually marks a perceived lack in their ability to "fully 'embody' religiosity." (251) That is, that men have an inherent capability for taking on Husayn's meaning in death, and thus moving into a mythic existence/temporality, whereas women are tied firmly to the physical realm and thus their corporeal form. Women that Deeb interviewed however, dismissed these ideas and did not agree that

[44] For Deeb a syntagmatic relation is one "in which elements exist in a sequential construction, one following the next, and it is the sequence that determines the relationship among the elements themselves." (247)

the gendering of embodiment and emulation assumes a lack on the part of women's relation to piety.

It seems that Shari'ati agrees with these women, for although he spends much time setting up Husayn as the ideal and perfect martyr, the speech "After *Shahadat*", that follows "A Discussion of *Shahid*", lends such weight to Zaynab's work that it appears almost to supersede that of Husayn. Deeb suggests that Shari'ati merely recognises the importance of Zaynab and Fatima in relation to their male relations, however I argue that in fact Shari'ati (particularly in the case of Zaynab) emphasized Zaynab's role to the extent that he perhaps even considered his own work as inspired by the work of Zaynab.[45] On Zaynab's work, he states:

> The mission of Zaynab is more difficult and heavier than that of her brother. Those who have the courage to choose their own death have simply made a great choice. But the responsibility of those who survive is heavy and difficult. Zaynab has survived. […] Zaynab bears the responsibility of announcing the message of the alive but silent *shuhada*. She has survived the *shuhada* and it is she who must be the tongue for those whose tongue has been cut off by the sword of the executioner. (249-250)

With this image, that of the tongue of the *shahid* being cut, we see the precarity of choosing death. I struggle to integrate this in Shari'ati's thought however, because for him the *shahid* is the *only one* among us that is alive. So how can the only one that is truly alive, be mute and therefore, at risk of being swallowed up and rendered invisible? It helps here, perhaps, not to think of the process of martyrdom/bearing

[45] Ata Anzali's *Mysticism in Iran* interrogates the presumed male lineage of mystical knowledge, noting that "gendered assumptions about authority continue to shape the historiography of spirituality." (Anzali 203) By reclaiming Zaynab's voice as both embodied and authoritative, I push back on this tendency and propose a different mode of legibility within Islamic ethical life.

witness/witnessing/testimony as a process at all. Instead I recall Hegel in thinking about the complete ethical moment that exists between Husayn and Zaynab, reactivated and held all in Zaynab's being at the moment of Husayn's *shahadat*.

Here I come to the problem of aliveness, for we circle endlessly around the question of who lives, and who is dead. Husayn is dead, but in his *shahadat* is truly alive. As for the rest, Shari'ati asserts that those "who submit to any humiliation in order to remain alive are the silent, dirty, dead of history. Which ones are alive?" (247) So we have the truly alive (in death) *shahid*, and the dead-in-life, but then where does Zaynab fall? Husayn has died, embodying an ideal, then it seems that Zaynab's work of holding him outside of silence and thus inside of history embodies Husayn embodying the ideal. She lives his life-in-death.

As for the way in which he asks women to take up the work of Zaynab, Shari'ati states that "He [Husayn] has come to witness with himself. He has come to witness with his sister Zaynab that in the regimes ruling history, women must either choose slavery and thus remain in the harems or choose freedom and thus become *shuhada.*"[46] (246) He is asking of them, of women, to *become* which seems different from *being like*, it suggests transformation. Whether this means *shahadat* (in which actual bodily death is chosen), of the embodiment of a *shahid* through the process of testimony that Zaynab performs. That is, that Zaynab opens up a space in which a kind of physicality meets the mythic, in which a kind of mythic futurity might become possible. Her testimony, like for Antigone (where the brother is held, and allows

[46] *Shuhada* is plural of *shahid* (martyr).

Antigone's movement between the Family and the State—a complete ethical moment), has a transformational quality, rather than (merely) translation.

This brings me back to Poupeh Missaghi's questions, with which I open this essay: "Can narratives tell stories the way bodies do?/What is in a story that makes it like a body?/[…] Is the story the body, or is the body the story?" (39) Missaghi's protagonist searches for the statues disappearing from around Tehran, all the while the narrator wills her onwards, pushes her towards other kinds of disappeared bodies (those of the corpses of the 2009 protests). Thinking these questions through Zaynab (and Antigone?) feels productive and necessary. Zaynab presents this nexus between the body and the narrative. Through the framework I find in Hegel's figuring of the brother/sister relation, we might figure Zaynab as a moment of both embodiment and speech where her body holds both death (and its liveliness through Husayn) and life (through speech). Again, I think of Missaghi: "How can one translate an original through one's own body to create a new original that is of the event, of the text, of the self, of the Other?" (245) This for me describes the work that Zaynab does, and for Missaghi, her protagonist continues in this work—an emulation of a process of embodiment and testimony. But hang on, if Zaynab's work is deeply involved with a complicated process of embodiment, why does someone like Deeb relay those who continue in her work as emulating Zaynab? When women speak *like* Zaynab, are they embodying her (embodying Husayn)? Further though, if Zaynab's work is in embodiment, as well as (perhaps most importantly) speech (testimony), can we call what she does embodiment? Can the embodied body speak? Husayn's work is that he embodies the ideal (justice) that he negates his self for, exchanges his body so that this ideal may come back to the fore. Zaynab lives, and in living, does the work for the eternal life of

her brother, and the masses of the dead-in-life. She opens up a third category, the embodied body that speaks. This testimony, as a result of the complex embodied practice she produces, not only speaks *immediately*, but *eternally*.

In returning to the question of memorialization—and its gendered forms—I find myself caught between the paradigm and the trace. What begins as an inquiry into the exemplary figures of Zaynab and Antigone becomes increasingly difficult to contain within symbolic or archetypal bounds.[47] The work of women who speak, who gather, who remember, does not only echo the witness of a singular event; it creates new coordinates for how times, language, and relationality might function. Whether in Missaghi's theatrical spaces of shared presence or in Deeb's accounts of emulation and resistance, these scenes reveal something more than a metaphor—they mark lived modes of survival, and the everyday reinvention of mourning. Rather than resolve the tension between embodiment and speech, between compulsion and inheritance, I hold here the possibility that Zaynab's testimony does not culminate in clarity, but initiates a practice. A practice of speaking through time, of forming relation across the limits of representation, of living with what cannot be fully articulated.

Antigone and Zaynab: Traces Beyond History

Before I turn toward the final section of this chapter, I want top pause on the instability that has gathered around the question of speech. If Zaynab opens up the

[47] Poupeh Missaghi's *Trans(re)lating House One* insists that epistemology is not merely cognitive, but embodied and temporal. Her assertion that "the whole only becomes the whole in parts, in conversation with the parts" (Missaghi 1), resonates with the fragmentary structure of martyrdom's aftermath—a structure Zaynab must navigate through iterative acts of remembrance and testimony.

possibility of what I've called the "embodied body that speaks," then the problem is no longer simply how testimony occurs, but when, through whom, and under what conditions. The question of choice—of whether Zaynab or Antigone *will* their speech, or are compelled by circumstance, lineage, or curse—remains suspended. But perhaps that is the point. As Poupeh Missaghi reminds us, the "whole" only becomes visible in fragments, across dispersed time, always in tension with the act of narration. In what follows, I want to dwell in the fragmentary-ness. What it means to inherit a voice not entirely your own, to speak from a threshold already marked by loss. Here, I return to the vexed terrain of self-consciousness, kinship, and transference, and how gendered speech circulates not only through public testimony but through private demand. To witness, to preserve, to carry. This is where the philosophical, the literary, and the familial converge—and where I find myself, necessarily, implicated.

The way that I have come to think about self-consciousness is the ability to obtain a kind of distance from the self—a mediation. So then I begin where I feel I have ended in previous sections of this paper, which is that in pushing and stretching the bounds of the brother/sister paradigm, I come to the assertion that what is interesting about Zaynab and Antigone is that they find a way (through the relation to the death of their respective brothers) to obtain a kind of ability to hold both unconsciousness (pure consciousness?/immediacy) and self-consciousness (mediation/language?). Shall we leave it here for now, and see where we arrive?

As a point from which to approach the questions I wish to ask, I draw from Missaghi's novel:

> I want to start in the after: the aftershock, the aftermath, the afterworld. I want to start with the slippery, the intangible. I want to start with the impenetrable, the incomprehensible.
> I want to start with the world of dreams.
> But I will not reveal it all now. I will not tell the whole now, because *the whole only becomes the whole in parts, in conversation with the parts, dispersed in time, in space*, arrived at only through passage.
> Suffice it to say for now that dreams matter, that they are the heart of the matter translated from one plane to another, one language to another, from the conscious to the unconscious back to the conscious. They remain illegible. They carry the secret." (Missaghi 1, emphasis mine)

This seems the right moment to name the shift I am making: a movement beyond the question of choice. Up to this point, much of my thinking has circled around the clarity of Husayn's willingness to die—his refusal to pledge allegiance to Yazid, his self-negation—and Zaynab's willingness to memorialize him. Yet Judith Butler's reading complicates this framework by casting doubt on the volitional status of the deed, especially when the deed is testimony. The paradigm of willing martyrdom becomes strained when applied to survival. Rather than positioning will as the ethical foundation of these acts, I am increasingly persuaded that the more generative terrain lies in what comes after—in a temporality that disperses agency across speech, embodiment, and historical transmission.

Within this temporality, the "after" is not simply what follows death, but a field of repetition and return, in which the whole only becomes visible in fragments. The after is always haunted by the before; it is shaped by recurrence and translation, by interruptions in legibility. In Poupeh Missaghi's novel, this fragmentation is not a failure but an epistemological condition. Between time and translation, between language and consciousness, there is an "it"—whether language, the whole, or the after—that resists full comprehension. And while the martyr might require legibility for their sacrifice to

register, for the witness, the very act of remembering often takes place under the sign of the illegible. Testimony is not a transparent mirror of the event; it is the space in which meaning is made, re-made, and sometimes lost.

In placing Zaynab within the framework of *shahadat*, I have had to confront the limits of a model that centers choice. Shari'ati grounds Husayn's ethical elevation in his refusal—his symbolic death before the actual. But Zaynab's relation to martyrdom cannot be understood through the same economy. Her position is not predicated on a single moment of refusal but unfolds across a dispersed labor of remembrance, in which her speech bears the traces of the dead and the weight of survival. Her memorialization does not rely on choice in the conventional sense. Instead, it reveals a different kind of generativity—one grounded in endurance, inheritance, and the transformation of grief into form.

This has led me to think of language and choice not as opposing terms, but as entangled processes. In Butler's reading of Antigone, the question of whether Antigone has crossed over into the gender of sovereignty reveals a conceptual rigidity I want to resist. Butler's Antigone appears caught between masculine speech and feminine subordination, as if those were the only available terms. But if we take seriously the brother-sister relation—its traces, its imprints—we see a more complex dynamic at work. Antigone carries her brother within her; his subjectivity informs her own. Zaynab too speaks not as proxy but as someone transformed by what she carries. Subjectivity here is not sovereign but relational, not autonomous but entangled.[48] Butler states:

[48] Judith Butler's reading of Antigone underscores the instability of ethical agency when subjectivity is distributed across kinship and loss. Her claim that, "Antigone does not achieve the effect of sovereignty

> In this way Antigone does not achieve the effect of sovereignty she apparently seeks, and her action is not fully conscious. She is propelled by the words that are upon her, words of her father's that condemn the children of Oedipus to a life that ought not to have been lived. Between life and death, she is already living in the tomb prior to any banishment there. Her punishment precedes her crime, and her crime becomes the occasion for its literalization.
>
> How do we understand this strange place between life and death, of speaking precisely from that vacillating boundary? If she is dead in some sense and yet speaks, she is precisely the one with no place who nevertheless seeks to claim one within speech, the unintelligible as it emerges within the intelligible, a position within kinship that is no position. (77-78)

This relationality unsettles the notion of an "other" in any fixed sense. Antigone's other is not the feminized brother, because he has already been incorporated into her speech. Nor is it her sister Ismene, whose position is too proximate. Nor is it Creon, who represents a State logic already rendered untenable. The relational field in which Antigone and Zaynab speak is not governed by oppositional binaries, but by recursive identification and psychic transference. The deed, as Butler writes, is "and is not her own." (24) The undecidability—between compulsion and expression, inheritance and refusal—becomes the condition of testimony itself.

This opens up the question of transferability. If memorialization is an ethical deed, then it must exceed the singularity of Antigone or Zaynab. But how is it taken up in communities beyond the exceptional or the sanctified? Missaghi writes that,

> the women on the bus all echo the regards she sends to the beloved husband of the woman on the other end of the line […] The woman sitting in the row behind the woman in the colorful veil smiles at this conversation, and her eyes and the eyes of the woman standing in the aisle meet, and that smile at one another, and

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she apparently seeks," (Butler 6) aligns with my concern that Zaynab's authority does not rest in autonomy but in relational speech, inherited responsibility, and the traces of martyrdom.

> the woman in the colourful veil, as if she has only now become aware of the one still standing, begins to move her bags onto her lap and tells the one standing, come sit, my daughter, and finally, the standing one does. (95)

In Missaghi's rendering of Tehran's women-only bus section, the act of bearing witness is dispersed, quiet, embodied in daily life. These women are not repeating Zaynab's speech, but inhabiting its afterlife.[49] They create spaces where grief, solidarity, and recognition circulate—not as grand gestures, but as intimate encounters. These spaces do not need to emanate outward to be meaningful. Their value lies not in political transformation alone, but in their capacity to relieve, to hold, to make space.

Still, the structure of being "called in" to witness—the expectation that women will speak for the dead—remains fraught. Memorialization can be both empowering and compulsory. To testify for the martyr is to inherit a task that may not have been chosen. But perhaps the work of this dissertation is to shift the frame: to see that choice is not always the primary mode of ethical relation. In Zaynab's case, it is not the act of choosing to speak, but the condition of speech itself that matters. Her memorialization does not originate in will, but in the trace—of kinship, of love, of survival.[50]

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[49] This tracks back into Shari'ati territory also, for there is a distinct way in which he considers himself (and other intellectuals) to be performing the work of Zaynab. How exactly this cuts along gender lines, I am not so sure. There is a way in which this is a real veneration of the work of women and the dual subjectivity they have the capacity to inhibit. But then, there is also an issue of appropriation and whether there is something ontological and particular to this work as it is performed by women specifically.

[50] In *Shi'ism: A Religion of Protest*, Hamid Dabashi locates Zaynab at the axis of what he terms a "counterhistory," where the memory of Karbala becomes an "archive of dissent." (Dabashi 181) This framing is especially helpful in shifting Zaynab from devotional icon to political theologian, whose speech renders martyrdom legible as protest rather than sacrifice alone.

What I have called the "embodied body that speaks" holds open this contradiction. Zaynab neither dies nor rules. She lives, she remembers, she speaks. And in so doing, she transforms mourning into a practice that exceeds the binary of agency and subjugation.[51] This is not a heroic overcoming, but a model of witness that emerges from entanglement. It is temporal, recursive, and unfinished. It is the mode through which I, too, have been asked to remember.

[51] Talal Asad, in *Formations of the Secular*, argues that "pain, injury, and death are not simply events to be interpreted; they are also occasions for enacting moral and political norms." (Asad 78) This formulation is crucial in thinking Zaynab's role not only as transmitter of grief, but as reconfigure of the moral order through speech under imperial duress.

Chapter 3:

The Problem of Immanence: the dialectic of particularity and multiplicity in ijtihad

> Kant once claimed that the discipline of logic was perfect. Now, every time there is a new discovery in logic, he turns in his grave. The claim that true *shari'ah* and the true precepts of God (at the level of the in itself) are perfect/complete does not solve the problem in any way or lend any completeness to the discipline of *fiqh* (at the level of the for us).
>
> - Abdolkarim Soroush, *The Expansion of Prophetic Experience*, 52

> God exists in man as potentiality
>
> - Ali Shari'ati, *On the Sociology of Islam*, 92

Having dwelled in the space of mourning, survival, and witness in the previous chapter, the next movement in this dissertation requires a conceptual shift. Chapter two lingered in the aftermath of death: Zaynab's survival, Antigone's interstitial speech, and the temporality of the after that is both haunted and unmoored. What emerged from that inquiry was not a stable paradigm, but a recursive structure of relationality—an ethics not grounded in agency alone but in transference, inheritance, and the uneven labor of memorialization. Yet precisely because survival proved to be such a precarious and generative position, I now find it necessary to shift the terms of the inquiry from the space of loss to the structure of interpretation. Not what is remembered, but how it is made meaningful in the present. In this chapter, I turn to *ijtihad*—Islamic legal reasoning—as a theological and epistemological form that stages a parallel set of

tensions. That is, between the singular and the universal, the particular and the communal, the revealed and the immanent.

The transition from chapter two to chapter three is not linear, but dialectical. If the previous chapter ended with the question of language as transmission, and the witness as a figure of non-sovereign speech, then *ijtihad* becomes a field in which the ethics of interpretation unfold across similar fractures. What I find compelling in *ijtihad* is not its juridical utility but its philosophical structure: it is a practice defined by paradox, in which the interpreter must simultaneously adhere to the authority of divine revelation while responding to the contingencies of the present.[52] The *mujtahid* must stand in relation to a text that is both fixed and unfolding, divine and historical. In this way, *ijtihad* becomes a lens through which to think immanence—not as abstraction, but as a site of ethical and epistemological difficulty.

The problem of immanence is central to this chapter and to the dissertation as a whole. Throughout this project, I have returned to questions of how meaning is carried, how it is translated, and what kind of subject is tasked with preserving it. In chapter one, this emerged through the figure of the martyr and the ideal witness; in chapter two, through the tension between the survival and speech. Chapter three insists that we pause to consider not just who carries meaning, but how it is interpreted—and what frameworks of authority and subjectivity are mobilized in that process. In this chapter,

[52] On this tenstion between divine permanence and temporal specificity, Henry Corbin's framework of "hermeneutical ascent" provides a useful analogue. He writes that *ta'wil*, the esoteric interpretation of scripture, is not simply a matter of decoding hidden meaning but of climbing from the apparent (*zaher*) to the hidden (*batin*), thereby activating the eternal within the historical. In this light, the *mujtahid* does not merely apply doctrine but participates in a cosmological act of unveiling—one that, like Corbin's mystic, must risk the uncertainty of the real in order to remain faithful to it. (Corbin 34-36)

the work of memorialization gives way to the work of *ta'qil* (rational deduction), and the feminine witness gives way, at least provisionally, to the figure of the jurist. And yet, I will argue, the problem remains the same: how to think through the conditions under which meaning can emerge from an originary site of unknowability.

To do this, I turn to the dialectic not simply as a structure of contradiction and resolution, but as a theological grammar through which multiplicity is negotiated. The act of *ijtihad* does not aim at universal synthesis in the Hegelian sense, but stages a continual oscillation between the specificity of historical context and the universality of divine injunction. As such, *ijtihad* offers an alternative model of dialectical thinking—one that is situated, iterative, and grounded in the ethical demand to respond. The jurist does not resolve contradiction but lives within it, drawing upon the tools of analogy, consensus, and reasoning to navigate a horizon that remains suspended between the seen and unseen, the legal and the spiritual.

This is not a departure from the concerns of the previous chapters; rather, it deepens them. If Zaynab's speech was marked by its embeddedness in time and memory, then the gesture of *ijtihad* is similarly bound to history, but with the added charge of having to produce normative authority. What I aim to show is that this act—often imagined as patriarchal, rigid, or static—is in fact shot through with instability. It is a practice defined by incompletion. The *mujtahid* must risk interpretation, must move without knowing whether the act of reasoning truly aligns with the divine will. In this risk, I find an echo of the witness: not the one who speaks because they know, but the one who speaks because they must. Because the demand to respond persists.

Chapter three is also where I take up the question of multiplicity as a theological concept. What does it mean to acknowledge that no single interpretation can exhaust the divine? That no legal ruling can be final in the absence of the Imam? In Shi'i thought, the occultation of the twelfth Imam introduces a profound theological uncertainty into legal reasoning—a condition that paradoxically sustains *ijtihad* as both necessity and impossibility.[53] The interpretive labor of the jurist is always provisional, always shadowed by the possibility of error, and yet it is precisely in this suspension that a model of ethical engagement emerges.[54] In this way, I read *ijtihad* not as a solution to the problem of political theology, but as its most dynamic symptom.

Finally, this chapter serves as a methodological pivot in the dissertation. While the first two chapters are concerned with figures—Shari'ati, Husayn, Zaynab, Antigone—and their roles within the narrative and theological imaginary, this chapter turns to form. It asks not only what testimony does, but how meaning is structured, how knowledge is legitimated, and what happens when revelation is filtered through the contingencies of historical subjectivity. The move from martyrdom to interpretation, from survival to reasoning, it is not a departure but an inflection point.[55] One that allows

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[53] Mohammad Ali Amir-Moezzi emphasizes that in early Shi'ism, this uncertainty was not a sign of weakness but the very condition for faithfulness to the hidden Imam. He argues that the doctrine of occultation (*ghayba*) was never intended to resolve the question of authority but to suspend it, displacing legal certainty in favor of spiritual vigilance. (Amir-Moezzi 147-49) The *mujtahid*'s work thus emerges in a space structured not by presence but by deferral, what we might call a theology of anticipation.

[54] This tension mirrors the early Akhbari/Usuli debates, in which the Akhbaris rejected the legitimacy of *ijtihad* altogether, fearing its vulnerability to human error, while the Usulis defended it as the only viable method for jurisprudential renewal during the Imam's occultation. Gleave highlights how even the Shi'i Imams, in early exegetical texts, demonstrated interpretive strategies that stressed the impossibility of final meaning, thereby affirming the necessity—and precarity—of interpretive labor. (Gleave 77-78)

[55] The very distinction between these categories—martyrdom and interpretation—requires scrutiny. As Mahmoud Ayoub argues, martyrdom in Shi'i Islam has always been inseparable from its hermeneutics: "Every act of ritual mourning is already an act of interpretation," he writes, "a retrieval of the past for the ethical demands of the present." (Ayoub 149) The move to *ijtihad*, then, is not a turn away from Husayn or Zaynab but an extension of their interpretive labor through different forms.

the dissertation to begin thinking about theology as a mode of transmission, risk, and multiplicity.

In tracing the dialectic of *ijtihad*, I am not seeking to flatten it into abstract theory, nor to instrumentalize it for modern political ends. Rather, I am drawn to its refusal of closure, its insistence on the partial, the provisional, and the relational. The *mujtahid* is not a sovereign knower, but a subject in relation—to text, to community, to God.[56] This relation is neither passive not totalizing. It is dialectical in the fullest sense, marked by tension, responsiveness, and the unresolvable proximity to an ethical Real. In this way, chapter three extends the dissertation's core concern with transmission—of meaning, of memory, of life itself—by entering the space where interpretation becomes a mode of survival.

If this chapter marks a methodological pivot in the dissertation—from witnessing and memorialization to interpretation and immanence—then it is necessary to briefly trace the conceptual terrain laid by those thinkers whose works animate, interrupt, and complicate my engagement with *ijtihad* as both legal and epistemological form. The stakes of *ijtihad* in this chapter do not lie solely in its juridical function, but in what it reveals about the possibility of meaning within immanence—how the divine unfolds within multiplicity, how ethical life is made legible (or illegible) through interpretation. A review of these figures, then, is less an attempt to position myself

[56] This echoes Motahhari's own ambivalence toward the role of the jurist. While he insists on the authority of the *mujtahid*, he simultaneously describes the act of *ijtihad* as one undertaken "in fear of God," always shadowed by the risk of misalignment. (Motahhari 84) The jurist's interpretive labor then, is not defined by mastery but by exposure—an epistemic vulnerability that Motahhari both affirms and seeks to control through institutionalized structures of transmission.

against or alongside a tradition than to linger with those who have themselves struggled to think the tension between particularity and universality, the historic and the eternal, the material and the unseen.

Ali Shari'ati remains, even here, a central gravitational force—not because of his systematic articulation of *ijtihad*, which is not his focus, but because his political theology insists on the dialectical movement between the symbolic and the real. Shari'ati's impulse is encrypted in his reinterpretation of *shahadat*, his redeployment of Karbala as a site of ethical renewal, and his framing of revolutionary subjectivity as a kind of hermeneutic act. To act, for Shari'ati, is already to interpret. In his hands, the revolutionary is the *mujtahid* of the social imaginary. His writings remain animated by a dialectical logic wherein the individual must negotiate between the material injustices of the present and the horizon of divine justice. Although he often gestures toward transcendence, his political vision is immanent: it is in the world, through the body, and addressed to the now. His legacy lingers in this chapter not as a doctrinal source but as a methodological provocation: that interpretation is itself a political and spiritual practice, one that always occurs in time and under pressure.

By contrast, Morteza Motahhari approaches *ijtihad* from a more traditional theological position, yet one that is no less dynamic. A student of Muhammad Husayn Tabataba'i and an architect of the post-revolutionary Islamic Republic's early ideological framework, Motahhari defends *ijtihad* as the lifeblood of Shi'i jurisprudence, but also as a living method—capable of adapting to new questions and social conditions without sacrificing fidelity to revelation. What Motahhari offers, particularly in his work on *fiqh*, is a vision of interpretation that seeks to hold the divine and the historical in tension rather than in collapse. Yet I am interested less in his normative commitments

and more in what his ambivalence reveals: that *ijtihad*, even at its most confident, is haunted by its own contingency. His anxiety about secular encroachment, about the erosion of the metaphysical center, indexes a crisis internal to the act of interpretation itself—a crisis that this chapter seeks neither to resolve nor to dismiss, but to read with and through.

It is in this space—between the revelatory and the historical—that Abdolkarim Soroush enters. Often framed as the intellectual heir to both Shari'ati and Motahhari, Soroush offers a radical reconfiguration of *ijtihad* as a hermeneutic endeavor grounded in epistemological humility. For Soroush, the truth of religion is immutable, but our understanding of it is perpetually fallible and historically conditioned. His epistemology of contraction and expansion—where religious knowledge expands while the essence of religion contracts—unsettles the authority of any fixed interpretive regime. But Soroush's embrace of historicity is not a secular break; rather, it is an attempt to safeguard the divine by refusing to confuse it with its interpretation. What he leaves us with is a concept of *ijtihad* that is radically open, decentered, and self-reflexive. The cost, however, is theological anxiety: if interpretation is always provisional, then so too is the ethical life it produces. And yet this, too, is a kind of faith—a commitment to the impossibility of total understanding, and the necessity of response nonetheless.

Hovering behind all of these figures is Mulla Sadra, whose metaphysical architecture undergirds much of the Shi'i intellectual tradition, even where it is not explicitly named. Sadra's *Transcendent Theosophy* (*al-ḥikma al-mutaʿaliyya*) introduces a vision of being as fundamentally dynamic—transsubstantial motion (*ḥarakat-i jawhari*)—in which existence precedes essence, and all things are in a state of becoming. This metaphysics offers a conceptual scaffolding for understanding *ijtihad*

not simply as legal reasoning but as a movement of the soul toward alignment with the Real. For Sadra, knowledge is not the acquisition of static truths but a transformation of the knower's very being. This notion of ontological immanence resonates with my own reading of *ijtihad* as an embodied epistemology: the jurist is not outside the act of interpretation, but is transformed by it. Sadra thus offers a way of thinking the divine not as a fixed referent but as that which is encountered in and through the act of reasoning itself.

Finally, I return here to Tabataba'i, whose writings on *tafsir*, *'aql*, and Qur'anic hermeneutics offer a bridge between Sadra's metaphysics and the lived tradition of contemporary *ijtihad*. Tabataba'i defends reason as a necessary companion to revelation, and insists that the Qur'an is a self-explaining text, requiring inner coherence and contextual attention. His methodology—rooted in both rational philosophy and exegesis—foregrounds the ethical responsibility of the interpreter to the divine word. What is most generative in Tabataba'i's work is his refusal to collapse the tension between form and meaning. The *mujtahid* must be attuned to language, to history, to metaphysics—but must also know when to stop, when to listen, when to let the unknowable remain so.

Together, these figures offer neither a singular tradition nor a coherent lineage, but a constellation of thinkers grappling with the same problem[57]: how to think the

[57] Indeed Shahab Ahmed has argued that the Islamic tradition is not one of coherence but of contradiction, complexity, and plurality, which he calls 'coherent contradiction.' He writes that the, "question is not whether one idea is current and another incorrect, but how multiple, seemingly contradictory, truths can coexist within a single tradition." (Ahmed 311) *Ijtihad* is one such site of coexistence.

divine within the temporal, the authoritative within the contingent, the multiple within the one. My engagement with them is not exhaustive, nor reverent. I move among them to track a set of overlapping dissonances: the gaps between knowledge and action, meaning and method, certainty and survival.[58] This chapter is not an attempt to reconcile those gaps, but to dwell in them—to read *ijtihad* as a practice of navigating immanence, of thinking the divine where it cannot be seen, and of acting where the grounds for action remain unfixed.[59]

Much of what I see at work in Tabataba'i and Motahhari, and to a lesser degree Ayoub, reads like *tafsir*. That is, the authors seem to imagine that their (divinely ordained) work is in an explication of the Qur'an, a kind of didactic expounding of the word of God. In a way, this makes a kind of sense, for both Tabataba'i and Motahhari had risen to the status of a *mojtahed*—that is, they were authorized to perform *ijtihad*. Shari'ati and Soroush operate differently, and through this comparison an ambivalence regarding religious authority and chains of transmission appears. But actually, to hold away what these thinkers are *actually* doing, and engaging with what they *think* they're doing makes available an interesting discussion of a kind of comparative study of the hermeneutics of *ijtihad*.

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[58] One might call this a 'minor' theology, in the Deleuzian sense: not a grand system but a set of interventions that fracture and displace dominant narratives. In this regard, Shari'ati's refusal to codify his politics into a singular dogma, and Tabataba'i's refusal to settle interpretation into pure rationalism, both constitute forms of minor thinking. See Doostdar's reflection on the ethical indeterminacy of the *pir* in Sufi epistemology for an example of how these practices defy consolidation. (Doostdar 210-12)

[59] This condition is deeply resonant with what Alireza Doostdar has described as the 'epistemology of concealment' in Iranian metaphysical culture, where ethical behavior is shaped not by certainty but by disciplined attention to what remains hidden and possibly unknowable. (Doostdar 128)

In 1963 the Husseinieh Ershad began its work as a religio-cultural institution in Tehran. Hosseiniehs are commonly local meeting places in which people come together to mourn the martyrdom of Imam Hossein and his family; however the Ershad became a central location for the religio-cultural movement that, in the end, brought about the demise of the Pahlavi monarchy—and those in attendance tended to be students from religious families and intellectuals. The founding members of the Ershad were Mohammad Homayun (a wealthy bazaari philanthropist), Nasser Minachi (who was closely associated with the Iran Freedom Movement), and Morteza Motahhari (a philosophically-minded cleric) (Rahnema 229). Motahhari, in his capacity as vice president of the Ershad was tasked with inviting speakers to visit and speak, and after inviting Mohammad-Taqi Shari'ati (Ali Shari'ati's father) he became aware of and acquainted with Ali Shari'ati. Motahhari was initially excited by Shari'ati's work and included pieces by him in a volume that he was publishing. When Shari'ati finally came to speak at the Ershad in 1968, Motahhari's excitement turned and thus began the second, and unhappy, phase of their relationship. Importantly, as I will attempt to show, the split of Shari'ati and Motahhari directly results from a break in their respective relationships to authority with regard to the practice of *ijtihad*.

For his part, Abdolkarim Soroush was in fact in attendance at Shari'ati's (and others') lectures at the Ershad, and in contact with Motahhari during his studies in London. Further, according to an interview posted to Soroush's website, he was due to meet Shari'ati the day after his death. Accordingly, I am interested in thinking about these three figures together because, to varying degrees, they all knew of and/or interacted with each other and the Husseinieh Ershad (although Soroush became more prominent after the 1979 revolution, Gharmari-Tabrizi notes him as a contemporary in

time and thought to Motahhari and Shari'ati). I would like to suggest that the struggle for the authority of the word and of the large groups of people in attendance at the Ershad is emblematic of the greater ambivalences that appear in their thought on the discipline of *ijtihad* and the role of the *mojtahed*.

As it seems that orientation towards the practice of *ijtihad* is deeply imbedded in the question (or problem) of authority, and indeed, the break between Motahari and Shari'ati, I find it useful to begin with an exploration of the way in which these key figures themselves related to—that is, oriented towards (or away from)—authority and institutions of power.

Motaharri and Shari'ati: A Falling Out

Morteza Motahari was a founding member of Hosseinieh Ershad in Tehran in the autumn of 1963. While he was involved with a group of progressive clerics in the lead up to the establishment of the Ershad, who according to Ali Rahnema, "had combined forces with well educated Islamic lay intellectuals, intent on freeing Islam from the ossified and formalistic fetters that had been forced upon it by the conservative custodians of the faith," (227), Motahhari and Shari'ati began but did not end on good terms. Regarding the sour turn of their relationship, Behrooz Ghamari-Tabrizi suggests that,

> motivated by professional rivalry at the *Hosseiniyyeh*, Motahhari recognized that the unprecedented popularity of Shari'ati's lectures could usher in a shift in authority of *ijtihad* from the clergy to lay theologians and intellectuals. He was infuriated by his disregard for the clerical hierarchy and his disrespect for the ritualistic aspects of Shi'ism. (173)

So something occurs here to split Motahhari and Shari'ati on the question of *ijtihad*. In his biography of Shari'ati, Rahnema posits that this has to do with the popularity of Shari'ati's lectures and Motahhari's growing insecurity about Shari'ati's relationship with founder Nasser Minachi, however this quotation asserts that their point of departure lies in the contested discipline of *ijtihad*.

In the paradigm of *ijtihad*, the kind of paradigm that someone like Motahhari would like to preserve, in which the work of interpretation is performed by a select, learned few, the performance of ritual becomes the necessary other to interpretation and is thus gifted to the layperson as their work. It is the disruption of this performance by Shari'ati that made his relationship with Motahhari untenable—that is, Shari'ati's disavowal of the 'ritualistic aspects of Shi'ism' has perhaps less to do with a disagreement about *ijtihad* than is does with the hierarchical structures that uphold entrenched rituals. Certainly, for Mahmoud Ayoub in *Redemptive Suffering in Islam* ritual holds more possibility than the mere ossification of socio-theological practices. He suggests that through ritual, "religious men and women can relive an event in their spiritual history and renew their relationship with it. Through the enactment of an important event of the past, the 'now' of a religious community may be extended back into the past and forward into the future" (148). Then, ritual is an embodied movement through time. It is also a kind of dual placeholder for those in positions of authority who enjoy proximity with the divine. And what interpretation is at work in the carrying forward of ritual? Ritual in this sense seems to be the repetition of an amalgamation of a translation of Divine Text and the interpretation given down by authority. The question then seems to appear as: in what sense/context is this authority recognized? As for the conflict within the Ershad (which isn't *not* about the contested site of authority), it

seems that as a result of different orientations towards history, and/or religious authority, Motahhari and Shari'ati conceptualize time differently.

Internal to the system of ritual, there is a requirement for translation work by the intermediary or intercessor—it is this work that Motahhari is interested in safeguarding. For the clergy, including Motahhari, *ijtihad* must remain a protected discipline, for only a small and well-studied vanguard of those with access to specialized divine knowledge are able to undertake this work. Indeed we tread difficult ground here for the foundational principle of *tawhid* is at stake. That is, one who *thinks* next to God must be careful not to put themselves ahead of Him. But what work of transmission is at play in the practice of *ijtihad*? It seems to me that this hinges on the appearance of the intercessor. For the clerics, the intercessor mediates the relationship of the lay person with god, and relies on the practice of *taqlid*, that is imitation. Morteza Motahhari distinguishes between two kinds of intercession (*shafa'ah*), that is, false *shafa'ah* and true *shafa'ah*. According to Motahhari, the right kind of intercession is one "which supports the law and safeguards the system," (220) which speaks to his own relation to authority and position as *mojtahed*—that is, one imbued with the divine authorization to perform *ijtihad*. He suggests that,

> [i]n this way, every Imam will be the intercessor for the succeeding Imam and of his own followers and students. [...] In the same way, even the scholars will intercede on behalf of those who received their guidance and instructions. This process creates a multi-faceted linked chain wherein the smaller groups link to larger ones and the head of the chain is the holy personality of the honourable Prophet (s). (223)

Here, Motahhari points us directly to the image of the chain in thinking about the complex web of chains of transmission that he envisions. Motahhari sets out a clear and

articulate chain of authority with regard to the question of mediation with the Divine, and through the web-like hierarchical structure of this chain he suggests that the layperson is able to reach through time and access divine personages who would otherwise have been lost to them.

While one reading of Shari'ati's attachment to the practice of *ijtihad* suggests he is interested in its potential to encourage more engagement with the lay person, a less generous reading has him producing a kind of vanguard of elite intellectuals who would perform this work. If this second reading holds (though I'm not sure that it is so simple as this), there is a kind of similarity in the impulses of Motahhari and Shari'ati with regard to the practice of *ijtihad* hinging on the rightful intercessor. Motahari is interested in preserving the finality and the eternality of the Prophet, and in this way he finds himself turning towards *ijtihad* as a route through which this preservation is possible. Thus the question of authority becomes central and the picture of the intercessor must be elaborated.

In the task that Motahhari has set out for himself, he anticipates that in his elaboration and consolidation of the important role attributed to the intercessor, there will be concerns about the principle of *tawhid*. Therefore, he begins his discussion of intercession with a list of objections he wishes to address. The first two points listed deal with *tawhid* or what has been translated as Divine Unity. These two points have to do with the assertion that intercession advocates a kind of polytheism, complicating the Divine Unity of worship. Secondly he raises the question of whether it also complicates the Divine Unity of Essence such that the "compassion and mercy of the intercessor is greater and more comprehensive than Divine mercy." (213) Motahhari tries to solve this through an assertion that the intercessor must be chosen/approved by God,

thereby reinforcing his reasoning for why *ijtihad* must only be performed by a select intercessor.

In this comparative study then, Motahhari and Shari'ati share a commonality with regard to their desire for a foundational place for *ijtihad*. Where I had expected to find stark differences in approach, even definition, of *ijtihad* I find instead different ambivalences regarding authority. Thus I wonder if in fact what appears is, certainly in Shari'ati, a refashioning of the concept of the *mojtahed* while *ijtihad* remains static.[60] Here I look to Shari'ati, where, in a footnote we find this rather bold assertion:

> *Islam has abolished all forms of official mediation between God and man*, and the Qur'an mentions the third manifestation of Cain—the official clergy—with harsh words, even going so far as to curse them and compare them to donkeys and dogs. [...] What is important to remember is that Islam has no clergy; the word "clergy" (*ruhaniyun*) is recent, a borrowing from Christianity. We have scholars of religion; they do not constitute official authorities who impose themselves by way of hereditary or monopolistic powers. (115-116) [emphasis mine]

This holds much sway for me along the path of understanding the break for Motahhari vis-à-vis Shari'ati's work. For Motahhari, the *mojtahed* (that is, himself), has been activated and therefore imbued with authorization directly from God (233-34), while Shari'ati places this relationship of mediation as redundant at best, damaging at worst, but nonetheless privileges "scholars" of religion. For Motahhari, the source of

[60] Leonard Lewisohn offers a helpful genealogy of how post-Safavid Sufi orders in Iran, particularly the Nimatullahi order, sustained an esoteric hermeneutics within which *ijtihad* could be re-imagined not juridically, but poetically and spiritually, especially in contexts where clerical authority was distrusted. (Lewisohn 446-48)

trouble lies with entrusting the work of mediation to one not attributed divine proximity—not in mediation itself.

Soroush's Immanent Critique

On the question of authorized mediation, I find it might be useful to come to the work of the intellectual Abdolkarim Soroush to further this comparative study on the question of access for the layperson in the discipline of *ijtihad*. Soroush is considered one of the most influential figures of the religious intellectual movement in Iran. He attended lectures (including those of Ali Shari'ati) at the Hosseinieh Ershad, and his philosophical engagement with Islam impressed the clergy such that he was appointed by Khomeini to the Cultural Revolution Council in 1980. (Ghamari-Tabrizi 90)

In beginning to think with Soroush, I find that he sets out very clearly his definition of *ijtihad*. He states that:

> *Ijtihad* is the expenditure of serious thought and consideration within a designated rubric, leading to the discovery of new horizons and the solving of new problems, whether within religion or outside religion. *Ijtihad*, in this sense, cannot lead to a substantive change. In other words, you cannot transform the discipline of *fiqh* into, for example, the discipline of ethics through *ijtihad*. *Ijtihad* results in the expansion of a discipline, within the framework of that discipline, and that is all. (114)

Soroush believes *ijtihad* to be fundamental to the enduring and dynamic nature of Shi'i Islam, however for him it is important that this hermeneutical work not alter it's structure in any substantial way. While he speaks here of *ijtihad*, I find that ostensibly, he is thinking about the effects of *shafa'ah*. That is, he advocates a relatively free (albeit

structured) *ijtihad*, but for him, it is clear, this work must not be available to the layperson. I am reminded here with 'within a designated rubric' of Motahhari's insistence that true *shafa'ah* occurs to reinforce and safeguards the existing system. This places Soroush's thought in the context of immanent critique.

Now that we are speaking about immanent critique, I feel I must share the sentence that closes this section in which, regarding Islam's status as a minimalist religion—that is, that even accounting for potential/plausible historical and human-based distortions of texts, the minimum necessary guidance has successfully survived—Soroush states that, "religion will always remain minimalist and it will not be purged of this quality through *ijtihad*, unless some people set out to make substantive changes in religion, in the name of *ijtihad*; and from them may Beneficent God preserve us" (114). This closing remark seems to be both a warning, at the same time that it is a resignation. And here I wonder, could Soroush be thinking of Shari'ati? It remains for me very evocative to think of this warning, his assertion that *ijtihad* be an immanent critique, taken concurrently with his resignation to potential truths lost in/through history.

Soroush displays a kind of ambivalence that appears as his hedging between his alliance with Khomeini's political project and the *velayat-e faqih*, and an engagement with a kind of Sufi metaphysics. This amounts to a contradiction in his approach to the singular versus the multiplicity, in the sense that his attachment to the producing and maintaining of a religious authority problematizes his approach to the metaphysics of immanence. In his historicizing of Soroush's influences, Ghamari-Tabrizi identifies Ayatollah Khomeini and Mulla Sadra as persuasive figures for him. Regarding the two differing conceptions or applications of *ijtihad* and the work of the *mojtahed* Ghamari-Tabrizi asserts that,

> Khomeini differed radically from Mulla Sadra on the role of *mujtahid* and his relation to the 'heedless masses.' In his metaphysics of being, Mulla Sadra believed in the unity of intelligence and the intelligible, of the knower and the known. But he recoiled from the idea that the *mujtahid*'s transcendental knowledge makes incumbent upon him the task of guiding and transforming the masses. In contrast, Ayatollah Khomeini turned his metaphysics of being into a political doctrine, *velayat-e faqih*, in which the *mujtahid* bears the responsibility of leading the masses towards the realization of the true Islam. (94)

Thus the question of *ijtihad*, the *mojtahed*, and the layperson brings us squarely to the problematic of the 'masses.' While Shari'ati's use of the term locates a kind of energetic force here, the Soroush/Khomeini/Mulla Sadra triangulation articulates a clear anxiety relating to authority. The formulation here strikes me, for directly following the concern for the *heedless* masses, we are told of Mulla Sadra's *tawhidi* sensibility. That is, the unity of the knower and the known, the lover and the beloved. This illustrates a collapse of mediation between the self and the divine, although of course, this formulation is applied to the *mojtahed*—begging the question: for Mulla Sadra, what role does a *mojtahed* play? Khomeini, on the other hand, elaborates an epistemological framework with the *velayat-e faqih* which allows for the simultaneous holding of two conflicting ideas, that is, the epistemological problem that Shi'ism (a religion whose entire raison d'etre is a negation of a negation, to position itself against injustice) faces as it tries to write itself into law.[61]

Interestingly, Ghamari-Tabrizi offers another vector for alternatives offered for the enduring image of the web-like chain (of transmission), that is Abolhassan Banisadr.

[61] This dialectical framing finds philosophical resonance in Mulla Sadra's theory of substantial motion, wherein all substances are in constant transformation, ascending through metaphysical degrees. For Sadra, multiplicity is not opposed to unity but is its necessary unfolding. (Tabataba'i 120)

Banisadr was the first President of Iran following the 1979 revolution and took issue with the *velayat-e faqih* and instead argued for a kind of horizontal guardianship maintained through a network of local mosques (evocative of Motahhari's "multi-faceted linked chain wherein the smaller groups link to larger ones"). On Banisadr's so-called anarchistic sensibility, Ghamari-Tabrizi states that he,

> believed that in an Islamic society, leadership ought to become an unalienable right and imamate a sanctioned duty of every citizen. In this diffused conception of leadership and generalized notion of imamate, 'all become *mujtaheds* [jurists] and no one will need to ask his duty from another [...] Otherwise, religious tyranny will result.' (119)

Banisadr, in fact, states this more clearly than I have ever seen Shari'ati put into words. We should *all be the mojtahed*. Among Banisadr, Shari'ati, Soroush, Khomeini, and Mulla Sadra, it seems to me that what we are seeing here is the alternate mapping of the dialectical problem of the singular and the multiplicity.

Mohammad Ali Amir-Moezzi's work on early Twelver Shi'ism provides further suggestion that the understanding of *taqlid* and *shafa'ah* is such that the mass's efforts should be directed towards faithful imitation of the *mojtahed*. He states that, "*Ijtihad* brought significant political and religious power to the jurist-theologian who used it (the *mujtahid*). The mass of faithful, incapable of reaching the level of *ijtihad*, was relegated to relying on 'imitation' (*taqlid*), that is, to following the *mujtahid* and his instructions scrupulously" (139). Then we see here that the role of the layperson, as the conglomerate 'mass' relies on the repetition and imitation of the learned man, the *mojtahed*. Hossein Kamaly even relates that the uluma classified people into three groups, suggesting that it, "was the religious duty of the seekers of knowledge on the path to salvation, not to say anything of the so-called *swarming flies*, to follow the

example of divinely learned men" [emphasis mine] (92). This betrays the kind of extreme limit of the hierarchical structure that the *mojtahed* is looking to preserve and differs greatly from the approach that Shari'ati develops in response to this closing ranks around the layperson. This conceptualization of the mass as swarming flies seems to be plainly opposed to the concept of *tawhid*, the divine unity of God—if God encompasses all things, might we not think that he is present in the layperson?

We can see a response to this in Shari'ati's *On the Sociology of Islam*, for he also displays a preoccupation with *al-nas* (the people), on multiple levels. He states that the "word *al-nas* is an extremely valuable one, for which there exist a number of equivalents and synonyms. But the only word that resembles it, structurally and phonetically, is the word 'mass'" (49). This section points rather directly to Shari'ati's socialist underpinnings and illuminates the point of departure between himself and Motahhari. I find myself here because I hold this moment as a way of explaining different orientations to time—that is, the divine, the human—which affects modes of transmission of knowledge and engagement with religious authority. That is, Shari'ati has become aware of the energetic force of the mass as an answer to the problem of the ossified religious authority, thereby aiming to produce an actually free and dynamic *ijtihad*.

Sufism: The Multiplicity as Singularity

In thinking about this problem of the particular and the plural, Soroush and Ghamari-Tabrizi direct us to the metaphysical philosophy of Mulla Sadra. Certainly, in his capacity as a philosopher, Soroush took an interest in Sadra's approach to

(trans)substantial motion. That is, Sadra's theory is a critique of the peripatetic suggestion that all things that move are moved by something else (Ghamari-Tabrizi 93). Rather, Sadra posits that all things undergo *inner* transformations to such an extent that they experience ontological shifts and are in a constant state of becoming. Indeed, from a footnote in Muhammad Husayn Tabataba'i's *Shi'ite Islam*:

> Earlier Muslim philosophers believed, like Aristotle, that motion is possible only in the accidents of things, not in their substance. Mulla Sadra asserted, on the contrary, that whenever something partakes of motion its substance undergoes motion and not just its accidents. There is thus a becoming within things through which they ascend to the higher orders of universal existence. (120)

In fact Mulla Sadra's vision of (trans)substantial motion as a process of inner structural shifts gives us nice ground to work in, in thinking about the kind of immanent critique that Soroush envisions for *ijtihad*. Again, I find myself returning to the mapping of the previous section as one of the management of energy shifts that has to do with *al-nas*—the masses. There is a problem that we see for Khomeini and Motahhari (and even for Soroush, although his ambivalence is much more apparent) where they are trying to preserve the immanence of the practice of *ijtihad*. To this end, they are wary of the structural shifts that might occur if the intercessor between the masses and God were to be made redundant. I wonder though, in thinking of Sadra's theory of (trans)substantiation, what difference this actually makes if the inner shifts are ontological and transformative? Isn't that what function *ijtihad* is playing? And if it is, then I suggest that these immanent shifts are occurring and will continue to occur, in which case there really is no problem at the level of *ijtihad*. Rather, there is an important and generative contestation at the level of the *mojtahed*, the intercessor. I think here of Rahnema's characterization of Shari'ati's thoughts on *ijtihad*:

> Shari'ati used the concept of *ejtehad* as a dynamic intellectual process, keeping Islam abreast with modern developments. *Ejtehad*, an accepted practice among the Shi'a, implied the application of human reason and rationality by those who were Islamic jurists. Trying to free *ejtehad* from the monopoly of the clergy, Shari'ati started by redefining the *mojtahed*, or person who has the right to exercise *ejtehad*. Although the term *mojtahed* is synonymous with a cleric in Persian, Shari'ati argued that a *mojtahed* was a 'responsible' and 'free researcher' who sought new solutions on the basis of 'the spirit and orientation of religion, its scientific logic and the four legal sources of the Shari'a, namely, the Qur'an, tradition, consensus and reason.' Limiting *ejtehad* to socio-politically responsible and active people effectively excluded the great majority of clerics from exercising their right." (300)

Then Shari'ati has a relatively clear definition for himself for what a *mojtahed* looks like and what their role might encompass—further it is very clear why someone like Motahhari would find this concept so threatening. Soroush on the other hand, seems not to have worked out his ambivalence for himself so clearly. I return again and again to his really helpful articulation of immanence in the practice of *ijtihad* because I find it compelling. However, in thinking about Soroush's attachment to Mulla Sadra's work on substantiation, he seems to trip himself up. What Soroush might articulate as a problem of the meeting point of tradition and modernity, seems to be more productively described as a metaphysical problem of substance.

If *ijtihad* is an immanent process, according to Mulla Sadra this must mean that it undergoes an unending internal system of transformations. It seems to me that in closing the concept of the *mojtahed*, Soroush renders the immanence of *ijtihad* null and void. That is, you can 'open up' *ijtihad* as much as you like, but if *ijtihad* may only be practiced by those who officially attain 'Divine Proximity' then what you open won't be a so-called *free ijtihad*. So I wonder then, what does that leave? To ask the *mojtahed* to do the work of *ijtihad* seems to me to necessitate a holding of the transformative

substance in static. I wonder, does this formation ask the layperson (or rather what we have been referring to as the masses) to make the repetition of this hierarchical process into substance?[62] Or does this in fact happen in the *mojtahed* asking the masses to practice *taqlid*, that is, imitation?

It seems worth noting here also that this is not to say that there is not a hierarchical structure present in Sufism, although intellectually, there seems to be much more space for thinking this thought through itself. On the *pir*, Alireza Doostdar writes that,

> the gaze of God's friend can function as a tool of pious reflexivity outside of the subject while the friend himself functions as exemplar. But within the master-disciple relationship, there is also a limit to the friend's disciplinary power, as marked by the utterance "O Concealer of Faults." The utterance indexically constitutes three gazes ordered in a hierarchical series: the first is that of the pious aspirant who notices that the mystic can peer into his soul and see his faults. The second belongs to the mystic, from whom the faults need to be concealed. The third, superior gaze is that of the Concealer, God, whose vision is all-encompassing and all-penetrating, and who uniquely has the power to deny the vision of that which he sees to anyone he chooses, including the mystic whom he himself has granted extrasensory vision. (Doostdar 212)

I find this passage so compelling in thinking about the different ways in which mystical thought seems to consider relationality with God. Now, this is something other than interpreting the word or desires of the divine, however shifts the emphasis from

[62] Michael Fischer has framed this kind of repetition—not as mere mimicry—but as a 'metalogic' of Shi'i ritual, where even the seeming redundancy of mourning practices becomes a hermeneutic mode of inhabiting time and truth across generations. (Fischer and Abedi 41-43)

proximity to exemplarity, in which another relationship with God is possible—the layperson *as well as* the *mojtahed*.[63]

In this chapter, I have tried to stage a different kind of encounter—no longer organized around the aftermath of martyrdom, or the precarity of survival, but around the quiet, recursive labor of interpretation. The conceptual heart of the chapter is the notion of immanence. Not simply as a metaphysical condition, but as an epistemological and ethical demand. Through the analytic of *ijtihad*, I have tracked how interpretation becomes a site where the universal and the particular are continually negotiated, and where the divine, rather than standing outside history, reveals itself precisely within it. What is at stake here is not merely a theory of Islamic legal reasoning, but a broader inquiry into how meaning is made, how authority is constituted, and what happens when divine knowledge is refracted through the contingencies of the present.

Drawing from the intersecting through-worlds of Ali Shari'ati, Morteza Motahhari, Abdolkarim Soroush, Mulla Sadra, and Muhammad Husayn Tabataba'i, I have attempted to unfold a layered picture of *ijtihad* not as doctrinal closure, but as an open and dynamic method of reckoning with uncertainty. Each of these thinkers has provided a different inflection of the same problem. That is, how to interpret the absence of the Imam, how to act in the shadow of the absolute, how to preserve the divine without ossifying it. Shari'ati foregrounds the interpretive force of revolutionary

[63] Amir-Moezzi describes the Imamate not as a static rank of jurisprudential authority but as a metaphysical station of divine presence—an ontological mediator whose light sustains both the visible and invisible worlds. In this cosmology, every believer partakes, to some degree, in the unfolding of divine reality, a logic that undergirds the very notion of spiritual equality beneath metaphysical hierarchy. (Amir Moezzi 85-87)

subjectivity, where action is already a form of *ijtihad*. Motahhari tries to anchor interpretation in doctrinal fidelity while acknowledging its historical burdens; Soroush dismantles the very premise of interpretive finality, asserting that all religious knowledge is historically contingent and therefore vulnerable.[64] Mulla Sadra, by contrast, offers an ontology in which becoming itself is the mode of divine proximity; and Tabataba'i reminds us that the act of exegesis must always remain open to interruption by the unknowable. What binds them together—however differently— is their commitment to thinking *ijtihad* as both a method of survival and a symptom of metaphysical incompletion.

What has emerged in the course of this chapter is a significant shift in terms of my inquiry. Whereas the first chapter centered the figure of the martyr and the transmission of revolutionary refusal, and the second chapter tracked the unstable authority of the one who survives to speak—Zaynab, Antigone, the witness—this third chapter is interested in a related but differently emphasized terrain. That of the interpreter. The *mujtahid* is not a figure of death or mourning, but of endurance. Their labor is not to preserve meaning exactly as it was, but to respond to the fact that meaning is always already slipping. And in this sense, the *mujtahid* becomes a new kind of witness—not to the past as it was, but to the present as it demands something of the past. If Zaynab was tasked with preserving Husayn's meaning across imperial violence

[64] Soroush's intervention here is grounded in his "theory of contraction and expansion," in which religious knowledge is necessarily plural and dynamic because it is entangled with the epistemologies of its time. "There is no pure religious knowledge," he insists, "only interpretations that unfold within the horizons of history." (Soroush 55-56) The cost of this model is theological anxiety, and its gift is the refusal of ossification.

and gendered constraint, then the *mujtahid* is tasked with preserving revelation across epistemic rupture.

This insight folds backward into the earlier chapters in unexpected ways. Chapter one, which staged the problem of transmission through the scene of martyrdom, now appears less concerned with death than with the question of how death becomes meaningful. That is, the value of *shahadat* is not self-evident. It requires an interpretive apparatus to render it legible. And while that legibility was initially anchored in the figure of the witness, I now see that it is *ijtihad* that secures its iterability in the Derridean sense, that is, its capacity to be repeated, reactivated, and reinterpreted across time. Shari'ati's romanticization of *shahadat* rests, perhaps paradoxically, on the very hermeneutic flexibility that this chapter explores. Without a structure of interpretation—without a tradition of asking what justice means in each moment—his revolutionary symbolism would ossify. It is *ijtihad* that keeps *shahadat* alive as a category of ethical refusal, not as an artifact.

Similarly, the second chapter's exploration of gendered survival, its mapping of Zaynab as both vessel and theorist of revolutionary memory, can now be reframed through the lens of interpretive labor. What Zaynab performs is not simply the act of testimony, but an instance of embodied *ijtihad*, of interpretive improvisation in the face of imperial power. Her speech in the court of Yazid is not only a reiteration of Husayn's refusal, but a transformation of it—a making present of what might otherwise remain frozen in sanctified death. To speak, in her case, is to interpret across the rupture of loss. And this, too, is a dialectical act. Zaynab does not restore what was lost, but renders it transmissible. She is not outside the event, but in it again, remaking it through

the form of her speech. In this way, *ijtihad* becomes a name for the recursive structure of remembrance, a way of holding fidelity to the past while refusing its closure.

This chapter also sharpens the theological dimensions of the problem I've been circling from the beginning: how revolutionary meaning is made, and more crucially, how it is carried. The problem of immanence is not simply a metaphysical one, it is a material and ethical one. If God is not elsewhere, but near, and if revelation is not static, but alive, then the work of revolutionary memory is never complete. It must be undertaken again and again, under new conditions, by new subjects, with no guarantee of success. The *mujtahid* becomes, in this sense, a figure of radical responsibility. Not because they possess the truth, but because they are compelled to act without it.

This has also led me to rethink the role of error, of incompletion, and of illegibility within this project. In earlier chapters, illegibility emerged as a threat—Zaynab's speech might be misread and the martyr's act might be co-opted. But here, I have come to see that illegibility is also a space of possibility. The fact that no interpretation can be final is not a failure but a condition of ethical life. It is what keeps the divine open to the world, what prevents revelation from becoming ideology. This, too, is an immanent theology—not a collapse of God into the world, but an insistence that the world is always in relation to the divine, always shaping and being shaped by it.

Looking forward, this reframing allows the rest of the dissertation to pursue a different set of questions. If survival is an interpretive act, and if interpretation is always partial, then what forms of authority, intimacy, and kinship are made possible—or foreclosed—by that partiality? How do communities navigate the fragmentariness of memory, the instability of truth, the uneven distribution of speech? And what kinds of

subjectivities are produced not only by what is said, but by what must be carried in silence? These questions are not departures from what has come before, but developments that have become thinkable only in retrospect. Chapter three, in this sense, is not simply an analysis of *ijtihad*. It is a turning point—a moment in which the logic of the project shifts, not by abandoning what preceded it, but by allowing it to be re-seen through another light.

Chapter 4:

Symbolic Mourning: Veiling, Gender, and Performance from *Ta'ziyeh* to Bahram Beyzaie

This dissertation begins with my initial interest in the work of Ali Shari'ati, and his thoughts on how martyrdom could help shape and structure the national consciousness of Iran. In the first chapter I have tried to build a picture of this by venturing into some transcribed speeches that he gave at the Islamic meeting hall where he often spoke. This hall was the Husseiniyeh Ershad in Tehran, Iran, and his speaking was, in his eyes, disseminating a uniquely Iranian kind of socialism which answers not the west and neither to the east. Shari'ati believed that the way towards this uniquely Iranian socialism was to look backwards at a foundational story for the Shi'i people—the story of the Battle of Karbala. The Battle of Karbala was useful for Shari'ati in a few different ways and served as a multipurpose allegory. Not only was he able to build upon the story to emphasize the ideology he found therein, but it also served as a direct metaphor for what he thought of as the struggle between the people (Husayn) against the corrupt the Shahan Shah Reza Pahlavi (king/caliph Yazid). I say 'what he thought of' with regards to the political struggle between the people and the State, to make a note that although he spoke and wrote about and for the people of Iran, the masses, some scholarship has suggested that his theory and interest were really more aligned with bolstering a kind of intellectual elite rather than the working class—a homogenous 'people'.

Although it is broadly understood as a struggle between a people and a king, I think what comes out of Shari'ati's theory about martyrdom is that the equation is not polar. There are always at least three points that touch and affect each other. Given that he is considered to over-read the role of the intellectual class, I wonder if what occurs is a triangulation: the people (Zaynab), Husayn (those in practical struggle against the Shah), and the Caliph Yazid (the Pahlavi throne). A less generous reading of his thinking might be that the roles of Zaynab and Husayn are reversed—that is, the intellectual class are representative of Zaynab's role and the people ('masses') are those that must sacrifice their corporeality for the cause, in the image of Husayn. Indeed, as I have written in previous chapters, Shari'ati has referred to himself as Zaynab, and that his role (as part of the intellectual elite) is to bear witness and make testimony of the struggle of a people against a despotic ruler.

In Shari'ati's estimation, Ashura—that is, the memorialization of the martyrdom of the third Imam, Husayn, during the first ten days of the month of Muharram—had become a time that revolved around *pure* mourning and as a result he saw the declawing of the revolutionary potential of this commemorative moment. Instead, he began to emphasize Husayn's sister, Zaynab's role in the in the story of the battle of Karbala broadly, and the martyrdom of Husayn specifically. One of the important tasks of that first chapter is to help to establish a kind of distinction that I argue Shari'ati is making between death and martyrdom. Or perhaps it is more clear to say the *aspect* of martyrdom that is bodily death. Shari'ati calls this, the blood and the message (of martyrdom). One of the most prominent and enduring modes of representing Husayn's martyrdom is in the traditional Iranian theater, the *ta'ziyeh*.

The linking of the *taʿziyeh* and its role as a mode of witnessing is not simply an aesthetic or theatrical consideration—it is a conceptual and structural demand of this dissertation. The *taʿziyeh*, as I argue throughout this chapter, is not merely a cultural form of ritual drama, but the mise-en-scène of testimony itself: a performance of witnessing, and more than that, a performance that enacts the very conditions of possibility for witnessing. If earlier chapters interrogated the role of Zaynab in preserving Husayn's memory—and in doing so preserving the revolutionary potential embedded in that memory—then this chapter turns to the *taʿziyeh* as the communal enactment of that same imperative. What Zaynab initiates through her speech in the aftermath of Karbala, the *taʿziyeh* sustains and diffuses across generations. The *taʿziyeh* is the Zaynab-function writ large, made social, made repeatable. To witness the *taʿziyeh* is not to observe from a distance, but to be folded into the architecture of testimony—what I have elsewhere referred to as the "triangulated" logic of martyrdom: the blood, the message, and the witness.

In fact, it becomes impossible to sustain a neat division between audience and performer, between mourning and political action, between history and its reenactment. The *taʿziyeh* collapses these binaries by means of its own layered temporality and gestural semiotics. Here, the role-carrier, the spectator-participant, and the historical figure coalesce into a fluid and shifting matrix of identification. This is not merely a theatrical convention—it is the ontological condition of Shiʿi historical consciousness. The mourning enacted in the *taʿziyeh* is not passive lament but an act of bearing witness that reactivates the Karbala paradigm in the present. It is not only that Zaynab once bore witness to Husayn's death, but that we—through the *taʿziyeh*—bear witness to her witnessing. We step into the role of the witness of the witness. The layers

of performative mediation here are not obstacles to meaning but are precisely what make meaning possible: a recursive structure that mirrors the very epistemology of Shi'i martyrdom, where testimony is what confers eternity on the martyr.

This chapter, then, takes seriously the implications of witnessing as a collective, embodied, and interpretive act. To speak of witnessing here is also to speak of *ijtihad*—not in the narrow juridical sense, but as a broader epistemological practice. In this sense, the *taʿziyeh* is an interpretive mechanism, one that enables each role-carrier and each spectator to engage in their own form of exegesis, not on scripture per se, but on the historical, spiritual, and ethical meaning of Karbala.[65] It is a kind of embodied *ijtihad*, performed not by clerics but by the community. This is crucial for the larger claims of the dissertation, because it extends the interpretive authority traditionally held by the ulama into the affective and aesthetic domain of the layperson. The *taʿziyeh* becomes a space in which the ontology of witnessing is no longer confined to individual historical figures like Zaynab, but becomes structurally available to all.

To put it bluntly: without the *taʿziyeh*, Zaynab's role risks being memorialized into abstraction. The theatre animates her speech, gives it form, gives it rhythm, gives it breath. And in doing so, it allows us to understand witnessing not only as a speech act, but as a performative and interpretive ritual practice that binds the past to the present, the dead to the living, the ethical to the aesthetic. This is the hinge on which the

[65] The notion of the *ta'ziyeh* as an interpretive act that transcends juridical authority is supported by Rahimi's analysis of *ta'ziyeh* as a space of affective transgression, where ritual performance opens onto theological reinterpretation. (Rahimi 34-37) Similarly, Fischer argues that Shi'i ritual reenactment is less about doctrinal recitation and more about reactivating a participatory ethics—a "dialogic engagement with the sacred" that places the layperson in a hermeneutic role otherwise reserved for the ulama. (Fischer and Abedi 119-20)

dissertation turns: to move from the singularity of martyrdom to the multiplicity of its reception; from Zaynab as figure to the *ta'ziyeh* as structure; from witness as subject to witnessing as form.

So this exploration of Shari'ati's theory led me to look deeper and further at the figure of Zaynab, and what most drew me to her was that, like many other women of history, she tended to appear as a passing figure in her *brother's* story. In wanting to explore the particularities of the brother-sister relation further, I turned to the Socratic figure of Antigone. I find Antigone very interesting because her play consists of her insisting of the memorialization of her brother Polynices, and being punished for this by her uncle, the king. I guess, I wanted to know what it looked like for the sister to get the story. In an earlier chapter I have spoken about the various interpretations of her story, that of Hegel and Judith Butler. And so, at that point I come to think about the brother as universal and the sister as the particular. But there's another play. This play, which sits between the other two Theban plays, "Oedipus at Colonus." Oedipus at Colonus offers some further insight into the history of the family, and provides a lot of context for the reality of the kinship relations of this family. That is, Oedipus is Antigone's father, but in fact they both share a mother in Jocasta. So he is her brother too. The complication that this third Theban play brings to the question of kinship relations, leads me back to this statement by Judith Butler: "This equivocation of at the site of the kinship term signals a decidedly postoedipal dilemma, one in which kin positions tend to slide into one another, in which Antigone is the brother, the brother is the father, and in which psychically, linguistically, this is true regardless of whether they are dead or alive; for anyone living in this slide of identifications, their fate will be an uncertain one, living within death, dying within life." (67) Ultimately, from this point, my dissertation became

primarily concerned with this so-called *slide* of kinship positions into one another—as a way of exploring the relationship of Shari'ati's blood and message.

What comes out of this exploration are the (related) concepts of interpretation (ijtihad) and mediation. Here, I turn toward Shari'ati and his contemporaries at the aforementioned Husseiniyeh Ershad. I find that these Islamic scholars work with the foundational Islamic principles in different ways. These foundational principles include: *towhid* (the unity/oneness of God); *ijtihad* (the interpretation of the word of God); *taqlid* (imitation); *zaher* (what is apparent); *batin* (what is hidden). For the most part, these scholars were all interested in restricting the practice of interpretation, posing a hierarchical structure of differently mediated relationships with God. To take Shari'ati's work (noting his own mystical Sufi interests), and push it towards the work of other esoteric thinkers, like Mulla Sadra and Muhammad Husayn Tabataba'i, I found a place where multiple levels of *ijtihad* could happen simultaneously. If *ijtihad* were free, and we prioritise *towhid* (that is, the oneness of God), then we can think about each person practicing an *unmediated* relationship with God. Arriving here, provides a rich ground for thinking about the kind of symbiotic martyrdom of Husayn and Zaynab and implications this generative testimony has for the layperson's world.

In this sense, the *ta'ziyeh* theatre provides the space (physical/psychic) for a people to mourn and embody various historical and spiritual figures. I argue the very fact of the total crowd of people at a ta'ziyeh who are embodied and mourning in unison, necessitates a complex and multi-layered relationship with the divine. I wonder if Shari'ati felt/saw the imminence of the divine present at a ta'ziyeh and thus imagined bringing this energy into daily life as a practice with much political possibility. However, Shari'ati took issue with the mourning processions and activities of Muharram (the

commemoration of the martyrdom of Husayn). He grew frustrated with the way that the ta'ziyeh had its teeth blunted, and instead of the political and generative possibilities it held, it had become a space of *pure* mourning. Not a negation, but a negative space of sorrow and collective grief. And in my estimation, Shari'ati saw this, and perhaps in his time, saw one or two ta'ziyeh performances that pushed the bounds of what the ta'ziyeh could represent/produce, and realized the revolutionary potential at work. I posit that this potential is the place of the eternal role of Zaynab, and as I have stressed in earlier chapters, Husayn's eternal life as a martyr would not be possible without the work and testimony of sister Zaynab. The primary work of the ta'ziyeh is to tell the story of the events that led to his death, the very same impulse of sister Zaynab in her witness and testimony for her brother after his martyrdom. In this way, the ta'ziyeh is a representation/the epitome(?) of Zaynab's role in the Karbala paradigm.

This paper will show the ways in which the national theatre of the ta'ziyeh and its conventions have come to form the structure of the image in Iranian cinema. I suggest that the ta'ziyeh deals directly with archetypes and is self-aware of the boundaries between the universal and the particular that it collapses. What I mean by this is that it is dealing with characters, and the self, and the divine, all at once. With that in mind, and with a view to developing some kind of working understanding of how the ta'ziyeh performance nexus seeps into post-revolutionary Iranian film, I wonder to what extent (and how) it has come to be that the ta'ziyeh informs Iranian film—indeed Iranian visual life—and what exactly does it offer?

If the *ta'ziyeh* provides the primary idiom through which Iranian public have historically processed grief, witnessed sacrifice, and negotiated theological meaning, then film inherits its structure, its gestures, and its sacred repetitions. This chapter

proceeds from the claim that Iranian cinema, particularly in the post-revolutionary period, does not merely take inspiration from the *ta'ziyeh* as cultural artifact or historical relic, but is itself a dramatic and devotional form structured by the logic of the *ta'ziyeh*. That is to say, the *ta'ziyeh*'s form of staging time—its choreography of memory, its porous subjectivities, and its alienating intimacy—becomes an architectural template for the cinematic image. In this way, *ta'ziyeh* and film are not opposed media but operate within a shared semiotic, affective, and ontological horizon. The shift from live performance to filmic mediation does not reduce the religious or emotional force of martyrdom, but rather reorients its witnessing logic toward the screen. To engage Iranian cinema, then, is to witness a *ta'ziyeh* by other means.

The implications of this are profound. If we accept that the *ta'ziyeh* functions as both a national theatre and a theological discourse, then cinema becomes a medium that continues this work of national theology under new constraints. Iranian film inherits the *ta'ziyeh*'s central tension: how to mourn Husayn again and again, without closure, without domestication, without dilution. In a way, this produces an aesthetic structure of recursion. The film returns the viewer to the site of trauma (often unstaged or barely shown), not to resolve it, but to enact its illegibility, its excess, its surplus of meaning. As such, the cinematic screen becomes a sacred site where public grief and divine transgression are re-staged, re-distributed, and re-experienced.

This chapter will track the movement of key formal, affective, and symbolic elements from the *ta'ziyeh* stage to the Iranian cinematic screen. I begin with the core dramatic logic of the *ta'ziyeh*. That is, its use of circular staging, veiling, temporally layered role-carrying, and its structuring through the dialectic of presence and absence. As Chelkowski and Rahimi have shown, the *ta'ziyeh* is neither realist nor

representational. It is archetypal, affectively driven, and ultimately oriented toward the collapse of time and the merging of viewer and actor. This chapter argues that these features carry over into Iranian cinema, especially in the formal and thematic elements of filmmakers like Bahram Beyzaie. In films such as *Mosaferan* (*The Travellers*), the viewer is implicated in a temporarily of deferred mourning—one in which the dead arrive after/during their own funeral, the mirror both reflects and distorts, and memory takes on spatial form.

Film becomes a site for the dislocation of chronology and the restructuring of kinship positions, much as the *ta'ziyeh* did before it. The sister's gaze—whether Zaynab's in Damascus, or the bride's in Tehran—mediates the loss of the brother and constructs the conditions for his afterlife. Thus, this chapter reads cinematic veiling, spatial choreography, and repetition not as formal constraints imposed by censorship or aesthetics, but as theological inheritances. That is, ways of representing a world always already structured by martyrdom. I argue that Beyzaie's cinematic practice does not simply mirror the *ta'ziyeh* but theorizes with it, using the film medium to sustain the simultaneity of death and afterlife, of loss and futurity, of voice and silence.

If Shari'ati's theory of martyrdom calls upon the people to inherit Zaynab's voice, Iranian cinema answers by staging her labor—her repetition, her remembrance, her dislocation—across the visual field. In this light, cinema is not just a modern art form in Iran; it is the inheritor of sacred witnessing practices, and its grammar is haunted by the theatrical forms that came before. Through this structure, I examine how the *ta'ziyeh*'s layered witnessing, estrangement techniques, and temporal recursion live on in the cinematic forms that continue to ask, how does one bear witness? And to whom?

Figure 4:1

I begin this section then, with a painting by Kamal-ol-Molk of the Tekiyeh Dowlat. The Tekiyeh Dowlat is the place where, in the Qajar era, the royal ta'ziyeh was held. A tekiyeh more generally is a kind of religious place of instruction and ceremonial mourning. This image depicts the Royal Theater in Tehran, made during the time of Nasser al-din Shah Qajar, which is the most famous theater in Iran, and is well-known for its ta'ziyeh performances. Professor of Communication, Culture, and Religion, Babak Rahimi, suggests that this painting has a kind of moving quality—as if you can feel it

moving and the scenes unfolding, the longer and the more closely you look at it. There are levels and stratas of seating and viewing spaces, people who recite from ground level, stage level, and also from upper levels of the tekiyeh. There are very few props on stage, and no 'backgrounds' to the scene, as the stage is circular and spectators sit around its circumference. The openness of the stage means that the stage itself may be used to demonstrate movements of vectors like time and space. The painting is ambiguous about who, on the ground level, is a part of the theatre, and thus it is not abundantly clear whether the outer circles of people depicted are directly involved. That is, there is a group on stage, who sit as if viewing other role-carriers on stage; a circle around the stage, who seem to be moving but may also be spectating, another group organized around them, spectating. We are looking at layers of *a look*. As if a mirror showing a mirror showing a mirror and so forth.

This *active*-observing, and the way it carries its own time and produces what feels something like generations, reflects the purpose and work of the ta'ziyeh passion play theatre. In a way this archetypal form that is drawn upon for the ta'ziyeh produces particularity specifically *because of* its supposed universality. At minimum, I suggest we are dealing with 3 temporal lines. The first is the time of the historic assassination of Imam Husayn, that is, the fact of his death in that temporal arena. The second is a divine time which offers up the martyrdom of Husayn, that is the sacrifice of him and his sister (and of the family of the prophet more generally), as its eternal requiem. The third temporal plane is the one of the present-day mourner. The role-carrier is responsible for holding all three of these modes of time for the spectator-participant—a kind of steward.

But ok, so the ta'ziyeh, let me take a step back to convey it's theatrical elements. There are characters on a round stage who act out various scenes from the events that led up to Husayn's martyrdom, while the crowd joins them in weeping for the loss. I think what is really significant is that the ta'ziyeh in a way is Zaynab's role in Husayn's martyrdom as message—the message of his martyrdom—made manifest. Zaynab really exemplifies the ultimate holding of personal grief, as well as the simultaneous obliteration of that grief, through a dislocation from self and relocation with the martyr *as if*… That is, the subjunctive or 'as if' realm. Blanchot calls it, "that "beside-ourself" (the outside) which is abyss and ecstasy without ceasing to be a singular relationship." (Blanchot 17) In mystical Islam, according to Cornell Professor Seema Golestaneh, we might think of this as fana, which is the annihilation of the self through *zekr* (which Golestaneh translates as "Sufi rememberence ritual"). (Golestaneh 26) I think this is exactly what Babak Rahimi speaks about when he emphasizes the fact that people use their own grief to access grief for the martyr (and the other way around). This doesn't strike me as a kind of disconnect, but instead the demonstration of a direct and fluid connection between expressions of grief and alienation/annihilation, and the passage it offers towards a symbolic/spiritual world, swimming in a soup of non-linear time. In being able to access this moment of violence they themselves might know, just for a moment, what it is to negate the self in support of an idea. They themselves need not die, because Zaynab has shown us that the martyrdom of her brother is the vessel that can nourish other kinds of self-negation.

The Transgressive Drive of the *Ta'ziyeh*: embodiment and alienation

The ta'ziyeh is a performance which involves the recitation of the narratives leading up to the Battle of Karbala. It revolves around a circular stage, the circularity of which also represents the passing of time and the movement of space. The characters represented are historical characters, some of which have their faces veiled (these include the representations of women, and representations of the prophet and his family). Characters also tend to wear colors according to their role—that is, the sympathetic roles are green, the villains are red, some roles exist outside of these binary poles and are assigned colors yellow or blue for example reflecting their nuanced and potentially moveable position. Some of the career role-carriers interviewed in a Press TV documentary about the ta'ziyeh speak about their process of getting into character, and it is overwhelmingly apparent that it is, first and foremost, an exercise in humility. Regardless of villain or hero, the role-carrier must integrate their otherness within their portrayal, so that they *show* their audience that it is not their self that is oppressing Husayn, but the character of the role they carry. In the same way, those who carry the roles of divine people must also show the audience that they do not think of themselves so highly as to obscure their role, putting themselves in the foreground of their portrayal of that divine character. Then these role-carriers, rather than simply acting, are tasked with *interpreting* their roles. One role-carrier in the Press TV documentary states that "[e]ven when the actor playing Shimr [historical figure that beheads Husayn] addresses the actor playing Imam Husayn, he speaks with respect but when he speaks about himself, i.e. the character of Shimr, he uses a damning and derisive tone. It means that the actor is interpreting his role, he brings the interpretation of a pious actor into his role playing." (26:50) Then the finesse of the role-carrier is in the production of layers of self, layers of looks, separated by demonstrable and palpable distance of time/space/otherness.

I observe here a touching point between the ta'ziyeh tradition and Brechtian alienation theory. Regarding Brecht's alienation effect, sometimes called distancing effect (what I am thinking about as layers of self), and its potential influence for feminist theatre, Elin Diamond suggests that historicization is the key factor in making visible the distance between the actor and the role they carry. In her article "Brechtian Theory/Feminist Theory: Toward a Gestic Feminist Criticism" she suggests that this is achieved "through a triangular structure of actor/subject—character—spectator. Looking at the character, the spectator is constantly intercepted by the actor/subject, and the latter, heeding no fourth wall, is theoretically free to look back. The difference, then, between this triangle and the familiar oedipal one is that no one side signifies authority, knowledge, or the law." (130) It strikes me as so helpful to think about the spectator being intercepted by the role-carrier. That is, no one is preoccupied with the conceit of seamlessly acting a character and being incorporated by the audience/spectator as that character—making the actor invisible is not the goal. Diamond suggests a kind of horizontal relation here; one in which "no one side signifies authority, knowledge, or the law" (130). This has the effect of altering the expectation of the hierarchies of drama, and thus we say not 'actor' but role-carrier, not 'audience' but spectator-participant. The passive *and* embodied aspects of drama are called into question and the duality of each person involved in the dramatic scene is problematized.

In blending this with the multiplicity of time represented, what is at work here is a kind of active relation of historicity—different historicizing forces encountering each other. She goes on to say that because, "the semiosis of Gestus involves the gendered bodies of spectator, actor/subject, and character, all working together but *never*

harmoniously, there can be no fetishization and no end to signification." (130-31) Gestus is the Brechtian acting technique which involves communicating an attitude, that is a 'gist' or a state of being.[66] This offers the role-carrier the gift of interpretation—producing layer upon layer of interpretation in the act of role-carrying and also in the *act* of spectating. Emphasis on 'act'. That is, the body's role in producing meaning via using gesture as a signifier of emotion and social relations. This has the effect of carving out a space that exists between the archetype (character) and the role carrier, in which both the role-carrier and the spectator-participant are working in tandem to fill this container with a nuanced interpretation of self-ness. Then, this space to look creates meaning underneath and through (and indeed because of) the archetypal nature of the setup of the theatre. In practice it seems to me to be a kind of breaking down of hierarchical relations, which the process of interpretation and distance facilitates. Much like the function of interpretation that I have spoken about earlier here, in relation to the divine. This seems doubly relevant as many of the (archetypal) characters being represented are themselves, to different degrees, of the divine. Specifically, I am thinking of the roles of Husayn, Zaynab, Fatemeh, and other relations of the family of the Prophet. And in this sense, the audience/spectator and the actor/subject are constantly interpreting and re-interpreting the signs and symbols that they encounter. This is not least because there are specific restrictions on the way that divine characters may be

[66] Elin Diamond's feminist appropriation of Brecht's *Verfremdungseffekt* opens onto a wider tradition of using theatrical estrangement as a means to interrogate gender norms. Scholars like Sue-Ellen Case and Jill Dolan similarly position feminist performance as a site of productive incoherence—where the collapse of subject positions destabilizes both gender identity and representational authority. (Case 136; Dolan 112) Within this lineage, the *ta'ziyeh* becomes legible not only as a theological drama but as a site of gender trouble—one where veiling, substitution, and voice reconfigure the coordinates of visibility and authority.

represented. That is, the face of Husayn (and other Imams) is not permitted to be represented. That is, it is not only the men who carry the role of women in the ta'ziyeh who must veil themselves, but also the role-carrier playing Husayn is veiled with a face-covering. In this sense the veiled role-carrier may make use of this as a tool towards the distancing effect that role-carriers must produce between themselves and the role that they are charged with carrying.

According to prominent scholar on Iran, Peter Chelkowski, the play of distance and closeness in the ta'ziyeh means that, "Its genius is that it combines immediacy and flexibility with universality. Uniting rural folk art with urban, royal entertainment, it admits no barriers between the archetype and the human, the wealthy and the poor, the sophisticated and the simple, the spectator and the actor. Each participates with and enriches the other." (31) What Chelkowski says of universality is very helpful here in that the ta'ziyeh theatre offers a public space which collapses some social barriers, however I do pause on his suggestion that the ta'ziyeh admits no barriers between the archetype and the human. In a sense I think he's right, in that the ta'ziyeh does have a really mystical ability to collapse binaries. But I think it is specifically because the ta'ziyeh insists on its awareness of, and adherence to, various boundaries—of history, the subject, the sign—that it is able to achieve this. As in, the universality of this theatre is made possible by its particularities, which I suggest are the barriers that Chelkowski speaks of. What I mean by this is that the very fact that the role-carrier must show their audience the duality of their position—that is, to present the character that they have been tasked with representing, as well as emphasizing their own subjectivity/distance from that character. It is, in my opinion, the very fact of the establishing and maintaining of boundaries and barriers that allows interpretation to flow in all directions of this

triangulation.[67] Then to put Chelkowski's reading alongside Babak Rahimi's theory of the ta'ziyeh as an important arena of transgression, I suggest that transgression works here as a framework for the way in which these boundaries function dynamically rather than merely statically. Regarding the spaces between subjectivities that the ta'ziyeh makes available, Babak Rahimi says,

> *My basic claim here is that Muharram, in its diverse historical and social manifestations, entails a transgressive drive with which reality is interpreted to render experience into something dramatically different.* Transgression is ultimately about the relational and shifting existence of experiences and subjectivities*, but also about what "breaks rules or exceeds boundaries," be it imaginary, physical, or virtual.* (Babak Rahimi, 34, emphasis mine)

In this sense, if Chelkowski presents the ta'ziyeh as a form of universality that erases barriers, Rahimi complicates this by suggesting that the ta'ziyeh does not simply dissolve boundaries, but rather plays with them in a relational way, making them flexible, porous, and subject to reinterpretation. His claim that Muharram entails a 'transgressive drive' suggests that the act of performance is not about simply breaking barriers, but about revealing the ways they shift and reformulate. In this sense, Rahimi expands on Chelkowski's suggestion that the ta'ziyeh has the function of unifying

[67] Chelkowski's characterization of the *ta'ziyeh* as a theatrical form that erases distinctions between actor and archetype, spectator and participant, is echoed in much of the early scholarship in *ta'ziyeh* as national ritual. However, more recent interventions—particularly those of Babak Rahimi—emphasize not the flattening of these boundaries, but their recursive articulation and dynamic re-negotiation. Rahimi's work is crucial because it reframes *ta'ziyeh* not merely as folk ritual or collective catharsis, but as a semiotic and ontological arena for what he calls "transgressive drive"—a force that simultaneously breaks, reconstitutes, and problematizes social, aesthetic, and theological norms. His reading draws from Henri Lefebvre's notion of the "subjunctive realm," a temporality that stages possibility rather than certainty. In this sense, Rahimi builds upon and departs Chelkowski by proposing that the *ta'ziyeh* performative logic does not collapse binaries, but plays in the liminal space between them—between sacred and profane, masculine and feminine, presence and absence. (Rahimi 34-35) This also has implications for how we think about *ijtihad* as a performative rather than purely discursive act, one embedded in embodied collectivity and material semiotics rather than elite juridical reasoning alone.

through shared experience, to add that this unification happens through transgression. That is, through the constant interplay of boundary-making and boundary-breaking, that this unification occurs not by dissolving barriers but by playing with their presence. As a result of this interplay between openness and restriction, I posit that interpretation flows here precisely because boundaries are not erased but strategically maintained and manipulated by role-carriers and spectator-participants. Then, the role-carrier's dual function—both as character and as a subject consciously presenting that character—becomes a crucial mechanism of this transgressive process. By maintaining their distance from the role while simultaneously embodying it, the role-carrier enacts the very kind of shifting subjectivity that Rahimi describes. Interpretation is therefore not a free-for-all but is instead structured through these deliberate layers of distance and engagement.

In thinking about boundaries and interpretation, I look to Professor Seema Golestaneh's work on Sufi mystical experiences as a potential path towards an exploration of the aesthetic and performative boundaries between the self and the other, where the tie of self-hood is not broken. With regard to the self-community-divine triangulation, Seema Golestaneh states that here, "lies the radical potential of the poetico-experiential invocation, one that suspends itself in the reverie of language and song, thereby activating the auditory imagination of the divine". (Golestaneh 125) While Golestaneh is speaking more broadly of mystical Sufi experience and ritual, her suggestion deftly explains the significance of the auditory aspect of the ta'ziyeh. That's because the ta'ziyeh is a theatre of mourning and every element (auditory, visual, atmospheric) is designed to contribute to the collective moment of grief. So the particularities of the sound, that is, the antagonists that recite their lines in the style of

Iranian epic poetry (i.e. aggressively), and the protagonists who sing their lines, all the while holding their scripts in their hands producing another and further distance between the character being portrayed and the role-carrier. In this way the distancing effect is also the role-carriers giving cues to the audience not only via the way that they speak, but the inferences that they are asking the spectator-participant to make *with* them.

I speak a lot about distance, but where I think my thoughts align with Golestani's, is that the space that is created *between* two points—for example, between the role-carrier themselves, and the character they portray—is the mystical space in which the role-carrier carries not only their own subjectivity but also that of an Other. In this sense there is a way that the very alienation at play between subject and the other is what illuminates the way in which a self may hold an other, to hold its own subjectivity with porous boundaries so that they also may (at least partially) embody the subjectivity of another. A kind of shared, or collectively available subjectivity. Golestaneh emphasizes the fact that poetry's dual hidden *and* apparent meanings contribute to subject-formation. She suggests that "...if one is to take seriously the idea that the acquisition of *ma'rifat* [what we might think of as gnosis, or knowledge] and the achievement of *tawhid* [a kind of oneness with the divine] require no less than the dissolution of subjectivity, then we must entertain forms of thinking and thought that operate without subjectivity…By considering unknowing, this book expands on those forms of Islamic selfhood/non-selfhood that do not fit so easily into self-cultivation." (17) If this intricate self-negation is a way towards a mystical and divine community, then the I suggest that the ta'ziyeh performance is a wonderful example of distance producing something transcendent.

Then, Golestaneh introduces *fana'*, which in Sufism is the 'passing away' or 'annihilation' of the self—that is, to die before you die.[68] Self-negation which brings to the fore the ubiquitous nature of the divine—that is, oneness with God. Regarding *fana'*, Golestaneh asserts that, "to lose the self means not that one has been replaced by the divine, merely that the distinction between the person and the divine has been collapsed. There is a subtle but key distinction there: In this way, the annihilation of the self is perhaps better understood as the removal of the boundary, or as is more commonly known, the veil, which separates the two". (105) I suggest that the ta'ziyeh offers a manifest practice by which the community pulls away the veil that separates them from the divine. However, to return to my earlier point, perhaps it is not in a breaking down of boundary, but in the play with the presence of boundaries, the veil becomes a sometimes-opaque, sometimes-transparent representation of a kind of collective subjectivity (universal in its particularities). By delving into the contradictory, overwhelming, and chaotic nature of the theatre of the ta'ziyeh, I suggest that it is by reinforcing the 3 points of subjectivity (character, actor, spectator), that makes visible and collective the spaces that exist between.

I think it important here to emphasize Rahimi's position on the ta'ziyeh, and his suggestion that much of the practices of Muharram (leading up to Ashura) are transgressive and encourage further transgression. I think he very helpfully sets out the sort of ontologically transgressive nature of the ta'ziyeh and therefore opens up the

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[68] Golestaneh's ethnographic reading of *fana'* as a collapse of subject/divine boundaries resonates with earlier mystical formulations by Schimmel, who reads *fana'* not merely as negation but as ecstatic transformation—the point at which language, identity, and temporality dissolve in the encounter with the Real. (Schimmel 297-300) Corbin similarly understands annihilation not as loss but as access to the *alam al-mithal*—the imaginal world that mediates between form and essence, and which allows for sacred figures to be witnessed anew through the mirror of the heart. (Corbin 88-91)

field for further and developing transgressive elements of the Iranian theatre. But indeed, the ta'ziyeh is not looked upon kindly by other sects of Islam, in particular for its direct representation of divine characters like Husayn. That is, non-Shi'i Muslims have suggested that the practices of Muharram (including ta'ziyeh) challenge or even contradict the central tenet of Islam—that there is only one God. For some Muslims, Muharram practices indicate an idolization of Husayn. Thus, those more conservative Muslims consider the ta'ziyeh and the processions of Muharram to be against *towhid*. That is, it is considered the 'worship' of not only Allah but also of Husayn. This is especially in Sunnism where they do not recognize the *ahl al-bayt* (the family of the prophet), after Mohammed, beginning with his son-in-law Ali, as the successive authority in Islam, as the Shi'i do. Rather they follow the caliphate, a group of people with some demonstrated authority of the divine, chosen by a committee to lead the ummah. Importantly, my aim here is not to fan sectarianism, however it is necessary to understand the transgressive nature of the ta'ziyeh and the way that the Battle of Karbala is commemorated. Rahimi suggests that the ta'ziyeh, which itself holds a kind of historical transgressive character, offers space for a double transgression by the youth. That is, opportunities for communication and relations that are taboo, or not usually acceptable in the day-to-day of regular life, become enveloped in the terrain of Muharram. The ta'ziyeh tasks itself with representing the ultimate loss (the martyrdom of Husayn), however it is also simultaneously a foundational moment for the followers of 'Ali. Husayn is dead, but Zaynab speaks for/with him. In a way it's an inversion of a pyrrhic victory—a pyrrhic loss? With the martyrdom of Husayn, the Shi'i people lose so much, so acutely, that it becomes a kind of victory in that it becomes the foundational and defining character for Shi'i people across time and space. It solidifies sacrifice and righteousness as a core, and in this way divine, tenet for Shi'i faith.

This pyrrhic loss is noble and principled, and as time passes Rahimi suggests that the space of the ta'ziyeh (already a transgressive performance) and the traditions of Ashura, become doubly transgressive. By this I refer to Rahimi's suggestion that public space becomes the ground of transgressive social practices and relations, which would regularly require much more discretion. I suggest that the collective nature of the memorialization of Ashura offers small spaces through which new and less-disciplined modes of relating may appear. Congregation in public spaces means that it is impossible to moderate all interactions for propriety. While Ashura, culturally, is supposed to be a time of public and social solemnity, remembrance, and behaviour even more modest than other times of year, social interactions and points of contact are more nuanced than this. That means that (particularly the youth of Iran) is presented with spaces in which they may be in public with their friends and lovers in ways that are usually less available—that is to say, more conspicuous.

While we're speaking about transgression, it feels important to mention the particular gender ambivalences brought about (mostly) by the fact that women are forbidden from acting (that is to say, in public). Thus, in performances of the ta'ziyeh, all roles are carried by men or boys. Rahimi states: "In a significant way, the anatomical indeterminacy of Muharram performances is marked by the co-presence of misrule activities, creating a distinct public of composite yet irreducible experiences for the participants, interactively sharing a "wild public" marked by spaces of conflictual heteroglossia [def: the presence of two or more voices or expressed viewpoints in texts or artistic work]." (Rahimi 71) To unpack this passage, I want to pause momentarily on Rahimi's term 'wild public'. His explanation of this wild public revolves around the idea that hierarchies are challenged through what he refers to as "carnivalesque

performances", that is, the dramatic and archetypally symbolic ta'ziyeh, results in the space of the 'public' becoming (perhaps indeed remaining) contested—specifically through "grotesque language and symbolic inversions." (Rahimi 71) But here's the important and transformational bit. Rahimi suggests that what,

> the female and male participants undergo in the course of the ten-days of the ceremonies is an encounter of something disjointed, a temporary loss of self to gain the ability that invigorates a performance of collective ecstasy. Henri Lefebvre described the disjointedness as the "subjunctive" or "as if" realm of a perceived universe that takes place in diverse forms of human action. (Rahimi 72)

But really though, is it just semantics that this moment of 'collective ecstasy' of the ta'ziyeh is particularly homoerotic when combined with the fact that only men are on stage in public. I suggest this, not to suggest that the ta'ziyeh is particularly erotic, but that the social space, the collective consciousness, produced is imbued with the kind of homoeroticism that is exemplified in Sufi poetry. In a way I think eroticism is just another way to say transgression. Ta'ziyeh, by virtue of being a collective and semi-involuntary space, produces its own margins. Indeed, Babak Rahimi suggests that:

> Such mournful visibility speaks of a collage of experiences through which grief is made *public* and the story of Husayn's martyrdom…is internalized as a solemn occasion to collectively recall a divine destiny. But Muharram spectacles of grief can also have an embedded hidden structure, a concealed casual publicness combined with subjective implications. Here I encounter on the "margins" of Muharram another world that involves sub-communicative sites of the here-and-now, utterances, gossips, ridicules and laughter, and at times nonsensical behaviors, amid the solemn performances. (Rahimi 71)

The Dialectics of Bahram Beyzaie

Bahram Beyzaie is an Iranian filmmaker, and it is important to note that he is also a prominent playwright, screen writer, and director of both theatre and film. His father was a renowned poet, and his uncle was one of the most celebrated poets of the 20th century in Iran. All this totally tracks with the way that I experience Beyzaie's films. That is, his films contain many of the themes and interests of Iranian Sufi poetry, and for this reason I think his films serve as a perfect touching point of esoteric Islamic epistemology, the ta'ziyeh, and post-revolutionary Iranian film.[69] His films are interested in the parts of everyday mundane life where one might find the divine—usually through some kind of mix of chaos and ecstasy. The film I have chosen to look most closely at is his film *Mosaferan* (*The Travellers*, 1991), which follows a family trying to prepare for a wedding when they find out their sister/daughter and her family—a full car of people—have died on their drive from the north of Iran to Tehran. The ensuing melodramatic play between funeral and wedding relies on mirrors and the

[69] The existing body of scholarship on Bahram Beyzaie has positioned him as a pivotal figure in the development of a distinctively Iranian cinematic and theatrical language—one that draws heavily on myth, and performance to articulate a poetics od national mourning. Scholars such as Nacim Pak-Shiraz, Hamid Dabashi, and Negar Mottahedeh have emphasized how Beyzaie's work bothinherits and reconfigures the aesthetic and ontological logics of the *ta'ziyeh*. Beyzaie stages a confrontation with both Western modernity and Islamic ritual forms—not in order to resolve their tensions, but to think through them. Dabashi argues that Beyzaie's cinema "resurrects myth" as a generative response to the spiritual vacuum left by ideological disillusionment, a process by which allegory becomes a form of historiographic agency. (Dabashi 146) Mottahedeh's work locates *The Travellers* within the temporal and imaginal structures of the *ta'ziyeh*, where the spectator becomes part of a "resurrected body" inhabiting a time outside of time, both mourning and reanimating the past through recursive theatrical forms. (Mottahedeh 67, 72) Nacim Pak-Shiraz further deepens this formal analysis by highlighting Beyzaie's refusal of realist conventions and his commitment to cinematic language as a site of epistemological rupture. For Pak-Shiraz, Beyzaie's work constitutes a "re-inspection of the sacred" into the visual field. In particular, through the stylized use of mise-en-scene, veiling, and performative interruption, and thus reanimates Shi'i themes of absence, memory, and symbolic return. (Pak-Shiraz 118-120) Taken together, these scholars read Beyzaie not as a director who merely references ritual, but as a theorist of it—one who stages the visual and dramaturgical conditions under which historical trauma can be encountered, but never fully resolved.

promise of divine love for comfort and explanation. Indeed the structure of this film is reminiscent of one of the ta'ziyeh narratives—the Wedding of Qassem.

The Wedding of Qasem is a ta'ziyeh play which tends to be staged between the fifth and tenth days of Muharram. Chelkowski explains:

> Qasem is a son of Hossein's elder brother, Hasan, who was poisoned shortly after his father, 'Ali, was assassinated. It was Hasan's will that Qasem be married to Fatemeh, the daughter of Hossein. Both Qasem and Fatemeh are among the besieged at Kerbela. They are still in their teens, but Hossein, realizing that their deaths are imminent, desires to fulfill his promise to his brother and orders their wedding.
>
> While 'Ali Akbar, the elder son of Hossein, is singlehandedly fighting off the attackers' army (the fight is not staged, but is referred to), both actors and spectators make preparations for the wedding on the central stage and in the area surrounding it. Finally they bring in the colorfully beribboned nuptial tent and lead the bride and bridegroom through one of the pit corridors to it. Festive wedding music accompanies their march. Cookies are joyfully passed among the audience. Then suddenly, from behind the audience, the horse of 'Ali Akbar appears. It is riderless. At this sign of 'Ali Akbar's death, everyone in the tekieh freezes into position. Qasem leaves the main stage and rushes into the battlefield behind the audience. Almost immediately he returns, leading the procession that carries the body of 'Ali Akbar, raised high on shields, to the central stage. As it is the custom in Muslim countries for the entire community to participate in the last rites of the dead, the whole audience rises to its feet and weeps. Since it is also customary during the funeral processions that everyone should strive to help carry the coffin, those in the audience who cannot push close enough stretch their hands in symbolic gestures.
>
> Finally the body is laid out on the main stage opposite the nuptial tent. On one side of the stage, funeral rites are performed with interludes of mournful music. The spectators dishevel their hair and beat their breasts. On the other side of the stage, the wedding ceremony continues accompanied by jubilant music. There is a cacophony of sound, the audience turning from side to side alternating between tears and laughter. (Chelkowski 35-6)

I leave the entirety of this passage here for the benefit of the reader. I, myself, have not had the good fortune to see this play in person, so I will use the anthropological eye of Chelkowski to illustrate it for us. In a way, it seems to me that

Beyzaie has not only drawn up the narrative of *The Travellers* while holding this play in his mind, but has also made the decision to invert the gendered sibling relations at play. That is, to center his version of this narrative on the bride and her sister.

The wedding of Qassem provides I think, too, some of the inspiration for the imagery. In the wedding of Qassem, we have the return of the riderless horse of Ali Akbar (son of Husayn), after he ventures out to the battlefield to make a distraction during the wedding. We can see a kind of mirroring here with the crash and wreck of the sister's car in *Mosaferan*. It emerges as a kind of riderless horse – that is no body or gore is used to signify the death of the family, simply the bent and angular crash, and a pan to the devastated truck drivers who were a part of the crash and survived. This tool has the effect of producing a kind of eternal life of the martyr, in that in their absence we may imagine them as hidden rather than dead (which I suspect is a nod to the Shi'i idea of the occulted twelfth Imam). In this way although the viewer logically remains with the rest of the family who begins to mourn their death, there is a part of the viewer that holds the possibility of their life along with the mother in the film who refuses to contend with her daughter's death.

The film *The Travellers* (*Mosaferan*), directed by Bahram Beyzaie who is considered one of the leaders in what is often called Iranian New Wave, was written by Beyzaie in 1975, however was met with difficulty in having it approved after the revolution in 1979. As a result, the film was not released until 1991. Iranian film scholar Negar Mottahedeh says of *The Travellers* that it, "arises, as if from a dream, from the heart of the national ta'ziyeh tradition in its redemptive will and its belief in a time that frames all time within the quotidian present." (67) Mottahedeh's observation places *The Travellers* in a broader Iranian aesthetic tradition where past and present are in

constant dialogue, but it also highlights the film's engagement with alienation and negation. Much like the ta'ziyeh, the film resists a kind of seamless narrative realism, and it instead emphasizing the constructed nature of both time and grief. Beyzaie uses a highly theatrical style in his staging, exaggerated performances, and a cyclical sense of time, denying the viewer a narrative resolution. The mourning ritual at the film's center (which itself interrupts the marriage ritual), does not offer catharsis. Rather, it becomes a site of perpetual reenactment, that is, an echo of the ta'ziyeh's refusal to allow historical trauma to be neatly contained. Much like the ta'ziyeh, *The Travellers* negates the possibility of closure, and each time a new family member or friend arrives at the house, expecting a wedding, the viewer must learn anew that the bride's sister and her family are dead. This reinforces their absence to the viewer at the same time as it keeps them present in the film and in the viewer's mind. The repetition of loss, the ritualistic framing of grief, and the film's self-conscious theatricality all produce a sense of estrangement akin to Brecht's *distancing effect*, where the audience is made aware of their own spectatorship. By weaving in the ta'ziyeh's performative mourning with techniques that resist immersion, *Mosaferan* ultimately enacts a double negation—denying both the finality of death and the possibility of fully inhabiting the past. Instead, it compels the viewer to confront history as an unresolved and continually reinterpreted space.

The Travellers is set on the eve of a wedding. The sister of the bride is on her way, driving, and bringing the family's ceremonial mirror with them. We find out that there has been a car accident on the road and the sister and her family travelling with her all die. The preparations for the wedding become preparations for a wake, as all but the mother of the two sisters grapple with the enormous loss. The mother, however,

refuses to believe that they have been killed, and believes them to be held up for some other reason, and therefore still *arriving*. With news of the wake, the family accommodates visitors (their own family, and family members of other people in the car crash, and even the truck drivers that caused the accident). Among all the mourning and grief, the mother insists that the bride and groom get married. It is heart wrenching to watch and imagine a wedding occurring amongst and alongside the wake, but as the wedding begins to take shape, and as the bride walks down the stairs in her wedding dress, the dead family members walk through the door with the family's traditional mirror for the wedding.

There are many ways by which the film references techniques and conventions of the ta'ziyeh. For example, the film uses fluid and whirling sequences in many of the scenes. These non-static camera angles function to bring to mind the circular stage of the ta'ziyeh and thus have the effect of maintaining the viewers focus on the actor, as if we are processing the situation, that is, their grief, with them. The turns and movements of actors from one room to another, up one staircase and down another, with actors speaking to each other from different parts of the house, sets a distinct emphasis on spatial blocking. There are boundaries and walls and stairs and doors, and yet we, the viewer, are present in the house where a family must usher in both a funeral and a wedding. It is difficult *not* to think of the ta'ziyeh as the viewer whirls around the house with the actors. The gaze of this film comes at a time in the post-revolutionary period in Iran where writers and directors were really not sure how to film women. Close-ups of women's faces, and clear mid shots of their bodies were considered to break new modesty laws. Where many filmmakers made the decision, on this basis, to exclude women from their films—not by prejudice, but because they were trying to avoid

censorship and were not sure what kind of representation of women would be allowed/approved. This brings me to the work of prominent Iranian film scholar, Hamid Naficy. He states that "The absence of women may also have encouraged another new genre, children's movies, in some of whose films the children were placeholders for women, as they represented, in the parlance of producers of the day, the 'delicate and beautiful element' (*onsor-e latif*), a position that women had occupied." (Naficy 114) In this sense, I am reminded of the ta'ziyeh, in which only men and boys are permitted to perform. Generally, the boys will be veiled and filling the place of the women. This then, is rather a direct correlation between the treatment of gender across the ta'ziyeh and into film. Indeed, Naficy goes on to say that the "evolving Islamicate gaze theory and filming grammar discouraged the close-up photography of women's faces or of the exchanges of desirous looks between men and women. Filming women in long-shots helped hide their bodies and their gazes, producing the equivalent of an unfocused gaze." (115) In a way this is the equal polar opposite of the way in which what I have been referring to as Hollywood voyeurism treats women. That is, their gaze does not exist, they are only to be *gazed at*. In these post-revolutionary Iranian films and the building of their grammar, a lack of women on screen produces a similar effect. That is to say, the predominant way popular culture understands the role of women is that they evoke desirous and impious thoughts in men. So although one may want to gaze, Iranian men's opportunity to gaze at women must be removed for the good of religious Iranian sensibility. Beyzaie was not content with this convenient editing-out of women from film (and society). Here, I think it useful to bring Elin Diamond, scholar of performance, into the conversation. She suggests that "[i]n my hybrid construction—based in feminist and Brechtian theory—the female performer, unlike her filmic counterpart, connotes not "to-be-looked-at- ness" (Mulvey 1975:11)—the perfect fetish—but rather "looking-

at-being- looked-at-ness" or even just looking-ness." (129) In a way Beyzaie has managed to bring this looking-at-being-looked-at-ness into the filmic form. Certainly, one drawback of the practice of the ta'ziyeh is the fact that women are not permitted to be role-carriers. In a way this necessitates a kind of deconstruction of gender itself.

Alienation and Veiling: Negativity leading to eternal life?

In *The Travellers*, there is one moment at the beginning of the film where the camera follows the sister who lives outside of Tehran as she and her husband and children pack themselves into their car. Right as the sister of the bride is about to get into the car, she turns to face the camera and breaks the fourth wall. She says, "We are going to Tehran to attend my younger sister's wedding. We will not arrive. We will all die." This eerie statement gives the viewer an opportunity to cultivate two concurrent distances. That is, a closeness in knowing, and a distance in being addressed directly rather than losing oneself in the narrative.

The mirror develops as a significant and symbolic extension of this, in that the gaze is moving and changing and the gaze that the mirror makes available merges with and then departs from the gaze of the camera. Mottahedeh states that,

> The mirror is no longer a mere reflecting device. In its merger with the film frame, it too becomes a framing device. Like the camera, it looks, and in looking it constructs and produces the film's visual narrative. The mirror joins the film's technologies in determining the scope and the limits of *The Travellers*' address. The mirror's correspondence with the gaze of the camera sets the film plot in motion. (72)

This is important in that the mirror is signifying this kind of looked-at-ness looking back, and this strikes me as a filmic translation of the part of the audience in the ta'ziyeh. Significantly though, the dual wake/wedding also puts the role-carriers/actors in the position of spectator/participant. Much like in the ta'ziyeh, the wedding of Qasem. Many wide shots of people sitting, looking, in silence punctuate the film. The mirror hinges, even ushers in, each emotional overture in the film and thus in a way is a kind of fractal element which keeps each temporal realm in the film close enough to touch the others. That is, the film accentuates the tool of the ta'ziyeh of complicating the simultaneous temporal spaces that the actors and audience are in relation to. *Mosaferan* closes with a long sequence of the crowd and the family interacting with the dead family members who bring with them the mirror. We see them seeing each other, we are shown the mourners in the mirror. We are shown the mirror looking, we are shown the sisters standing opposite each other with the bride/sister's reflection in the mirror. We are also shown the mirror's gaze. That is, Beyzaie makes the frame of the mirror visible in a way that matches (mirrors?) the gaze of the camera, so that the viewer has the sense that they are looking upon the scene through or even *as* the mirror.

What we see here is I think what Mottahedeh calls "Na-koja-abad", that is, "In the course of the ta'ziyeh performance, which recalls the early history of Shi'ism, actors (or role-carriers) and spectators together become imaginal bodies, resurrected bodies, that enact simultaneously the history of Islam and its redeemed messianic future on an open stage, which in the course of the play comes to belong to no time and no place (Na-koja-abad)." (7) So I think here that is what we're seeing in *The Travellers*, this no-time, no-place being. Then the 'role-carrier' of the sister tells the viewer that she and her family will die in a car crash. This puts the viewer in the position of mediating and anticipating the grief that is about to come, and in this way, they are kind of simultaneously more

invested *and* less invested. Less invested because the distance produced, like in the ta'ziyeh, offers the viewer-spectator the space for objectivity. More invested, because by virtue of the scenes that follow—people grieving together—the viewer-spectator is invited into the 'as-if'/subjunctive realm to pay their respects as if part of the scene.

In thinking about the imaginal and/or resurrected body, prominent scholar of Iranian film, Hamid Naficy, states that in,

> Lacanian terms, the interior is the realm of the undifferentiated self, which is united with the Imaginary prior to the mirror stage experience, while the exterior is the realm of the Other, where individuals must negotiate their entry into the Symbolic. This dual, collective, and hierarchical conception of self produces tensions between individual subjectivity and collective identity that are widespread in Iranian cinema and in women's representation by it. (Naficy 102)

I'm thinking here of the Lacanian 'interior' as the internal self that has not become aware of difference, but most importantly Naficy suggests that the exterior is the realm of the *Other*. This reinforces much of my findings regarding the role of Zaynab and the non-corporeal-death aspect of martyrdom. That is, the exterior self, the self that is apparent, encounters mediation and must 'negotiate their entry into the symbolic'. That is, the body is more than its mere physicality—it is also symbolic in that the symbolic is the domain of language, culture, and social structures. In this way Naficy articulates the tension between what the subject wants to be, the Imaginary, and what society demands they become, the Symbolic. Thus, in cinema, where identity, loss, and collective memory can be negotiated, the dead don't just disappear. Instead they continue to exist in the imaginal space (memory, dreams, cinema)—a resurrected body? In *Mosaferan*, I see this in the family's initial denial that their sister (and her family) are dead, and indeed the mother remains in this imaginal place for all of the film.

For Lacan, the Imaginary and the Real haunt the Symbolic. I wonder then about the culmination of Beyzaie's film because the Imaginary (the idea that the family are not dead) is interrupted by the Real (the rest of the family trying desperately to convince the mother that her daughter is dead). Then, the Imaginary interrupts the Symbolic, with the ethereal vision of the bride's sister and her family arriving at their own funeral, holding their family's wedding mirror. In this sense, with this mirror, the viewer is confronted by the Imaginary—the resurrected body. Beyzaie uses the camera in collaboration with the mirror, in what reads as a compounding of the enunciative breach, to help the viewer and the actors to transcend from funeral to wedding.

Figure 4:2

What we see in *Mosaferan* is a tension, triangulated; the Imaginary, the Symbolic, and the Real. I suggest that Beyzaie entraps the viewer in his suspension of these three orders throughout the film, in his construction of the refusal to accept the death of the

bride's sister. In this sense, the refusal to accept the death comes in as the Imaginary (and its desire to keep the sister alive), which pushes against the Symbolic (that is, the drive towards social custom and death rituals). The Imaginary is not the only force that pushed against the Symbolic, indeed the Real works against the Symbolic too, in this case represented by the ghostly figures of the bride's sister (holding the mirror) and her family, who arrive at their own funeral to usher back in the wedding rituals. This scene, and the realm of the Real, resist being symbolized and instead represent the unspeakable, unknowable aspects of existence.

In the film still below, we can see the bride's sister, returned, holding the mirror up to the bride. The camera sees the bride seeing herself. This shot goes against the Islamic gaze theory in a way, and the viewer sees themselves as the bride, because the eye of the camera is the bride's eyes. The stills above and below are really some of the very few moments in the film where the viewer is offered a first-person perspective. Above, the perspective of *inside* the mirror, looking out, and below the perspective of the bride. Beyzaie does something very clever here, in which the form of the produced difference between the scene and the viewer is disturbed—but the voyeuristic male-gaze of Hollywood is also rejected. Instead Beyzaie constructs a triangulation between the bride, her sister, and the mirror. This recalls Mottahedeh's suggestion that "moments of enunciative breach, when the film shows its seams, are inscribed in the diegesis by the presence of door frames, windows, mirrors, cameras, sound equipment, fictional audiences, and so forth." (Mottahedeh 46)

Figure 4:3

Mottahedeh states that as, “the imaginal world reveals itself on stage, the audience becomes a resurrected body—a witnessing and imaginal body—conscious of the fullness of a past that is resurrected in a future that is also a now.” (19)

This notion of layered temporality—where past, present, and future coalesce—is visually reinforced in *Mosaferan* through its central symbolic motif, the mirror. The film begins with a shot of the Caspian Sea, which then cuts to a mirror. The camera (rather than the mirror) moves in a circular motion so that the frame is split between the mirror and the sea, while the mirror reflects the sea in real time. The soundscape of these opening shots is of the rhythmic crashing of waves and the sound of seagulls, which situates the viewer in a liminal space where reality is both doubled and destabilized.

This use of the mirror is deeply rooted in Iranian mystical thought, particularly in Sufi epistemology, where *zaher* (the apparent) and *batin* (the hidden) manifest their

dialectic in the mirror's surface. In *The Man of Light in Iranian Sufism*, Henry Corbin describes the mirror as a symbol of spiritual unveiling, where the surface reflection is only an entry point to deeper, metaphysical truths. (Corbin 89) Beyzaie's cinematography engages with this tradition, presenting the mirror not as a mere object but as an apparatus the distorts, refracts, and ultimately challenges the viewer's understanding of what is seen and unseen. In this sense, the mirror in *Mosaferan* does not simply reflect reality but becomes an active participant in its negation.

This tension between visibility and concealment is further heightened through the film's engagement with veiling. The function of veiling in post-revolutionary Iranian cinema has been explored by important and prominent scholars like Negar Mottahedeh and Hamid Naficy, both of whom highlight how the veil operates as more than a religious symbol—it is a cinematic device that encodes alienation, negation, and subjectivity. (Mottahedeh 73; Naficy 212) In what Naficy terms 'Islamic Gaze Theory,' the gaze in Iranian film is neither neutral nor passive. Instead, it is an active force: "not passive organs like ears…Eyes are active, even invasive organs, whose gaze in Persian love poetry is often likened to an arrow that deeply pierces the beloved, the object of the look." (Naficy 106) This conceptualization of the gaze transforms the viewer into an implicated participant rather than a detached observer.

In *Mosaferan* this effect is particularly evident in how private space is negotiated on screen. The presence of a woman in her own home wearing a hijab disrupts Western cinematic conventions of the domestic sphere. The viewer is made aware that although this space should be private, it cannot be private by virtue of it being filmed and observed—an effect that is reinforced by that woman's continued veiling. This raises critical questions: Does the Western viewer imagine the Iranian woman as never being

able to remove her hijab? Does she sleep with it? Over time, doesn't the hijab become an irrevocable part of her cinematic body?[70] Naficy argues this imposed visibility foreignizes the Iranian woman, inscribing onto her a kind of eternal publicness, even within spaces that should remain intimate. (Naficy 215) Yet, veiling in Iranian cinema is not solely a product of imposed Islamic codes; it also reflects a much older philosophical and mystical tradition. Sufi thought has long grappled with the delicate interplay between *zaher* and *batin*. Seema Golestaneh, in her exploration of *ma'arifat* (gnosis) and *tawhid* (the oneness of the divine), describes this dialectic as central to Iranian subject-formation, where identity is always mediated through layers of concealment and revelation. (Golestaneh 54) This is particularly evident in ta'ziyeh, which have formed the structure for much of Iranian theatrical and cinematic language. Mottahedeh argues that the ta'ziyeh tradition embeds a performative logic where the audience is not simply watching a representation of grief, but is implicated in its very enactment. (Mottahedeh 91) This embroils the viewer in the scene and burdens them with the responsibility of feeling their own presence.

Thus, the veil in Iranian cinema, rather than simply obscuring, becomes a site of revelation. It operates on multiple registers—at once a marker of cultural specificity, a mechanism of alienation, and a signifier of deeper epistemological structures rooted in Sufi thought. The tension between the apparent (*zaher*) and the hidden (*batin*) does not

[70] While Naficy's formulation of the Islamicate Gaze underscores the disciplining of visual pleasure through gendered restrictions, Mottahedeh reads these same constraints as productive fissures in cinematic signification. For her, veiling becomes an aesthetic rupture that enacts the very impossibility of transparent representation, and thus forces a metacritical engagement with looking itself. (Mottahedeh 73-74; Naficy 115-16) This productive tension not only reconfigures spectatorship but also reflects the underlying dialectic of *zaher and batin*, central to both Sufi epistemology and Iranian cinematic language.

merely frame gendered visibility but also mediates the spectator's engagement with the filmic world, implicating them in the act of witnessing. It signals not just restriction but a complex negotiation between public and private, seen and unseen. While it disrupts Hollywood's voyeuristic logic, forcing the Western viewer into an awareness of their own gaze, it also speaks to an Iranian cinematic language rooted in centuries of mystical and poetic tradition. In this way, the veil (literally and figuratively) functions not as a reductive tool of erasure, but as a dynamic site of signification—one that demands interpretation, destabilizes fixed identities, and ultimately problematizes the notion of an unmediated cinematic 'real'. The veil does not just conceal; it gestures towards a deeper reality, one that remains just beyond the grasp of the visible. The alienation effect, then, is not only a distancing mechanism but a generative space, one where the act of looking itself becomes an ethical and epistemological negotiation.

Chapter 5:

The Particulars of the Zaynabs: Umm Kulthum, Zaynab, and the Near Other

> "Woe to you and damnation! You have failed in what you strove for. Your transaction has ended in loss."
>
> - Umm Kulthum in Kufa, as quoted and translated by Alireza Korangy and Leyla Rouhi (112)

> But all this can happen, for you have picked the wound and extirpated the root by spilling the blood of the messenger's children, stars of the earth from Abd al-Muttalib's line. [...] The day will come when God will be your judge, Muhammad will be your adversary, and your own limbs will bear witness against you.
>
> - Zaynab in Yazid's court, as quoted and translated by Alireza Korangy and Leyla Rouhi (120-1)

This chapter departs from a stable reading of Zaynab not to undermine her significance in the Karbala narrative, but to question what is disavowed or occluded in the very gesture of elevating her singularity. In particular, I read her through the interpretive noise and narrative blur produced by her sibling, Umm Kulthum—a figure who speaks, mourns, and bears witness alongside Zaynab, and yet is consistently displaced in both historiography and ritual memory. What is at stake in this chapter is less a correction of the record than a critical inquiry into what I call the *near other*: a conceptual and kinship category that emerges when testimony is multiply attributed, when mourning is layered, and when speech acts, rather than belonging to a single sovereign subject, echo, rebound, and sometimes arrive from elsewhere.

The work of Ali Shari'ati provides the foundational structure for thinking martyrdom as a dual gesture: blood and message, death and remembrance. Zaynab, in

Shari'ati's hands, is the bearer of the second mission—the eloquent tongue of Husayn's silenced body.[71] While his rhetorical emphasis is on the necessity of remembrance for revolutionary continuity, I argue that Shari'ati's framing implicitly rests on a relational logic that over-determines Husayn's subjectivity and under-theorizes Zaynab's. In Shari'ati's framework, the witness is legible only through the martyr; her voice emerges in the negative space of his sacrifice. I suggest, however, that Zaynab's function in the Karbala paradigm complicates this sequence. Her speech does not merely preserve the martyr—it transmits his meaning by transforming it, offering not a reiteration but a reconstitution of revolutionary consciousness. And more than that, her speech is already prefigured in earlier utterances—most notably, those attributed to Umm Kulthum in Kufa.

It is precisely this ambiguity—of who speaks, when, and from where—that drives the chapter's critical momentum. Minoo Moallem's *Between Warrior Brother and Veiled Sister* becomes a key site of tension in this regard. While Moallem rightly identifies the post-revolutionary domestication of Zaynab as a sign of patriarchal containment, I resist her flattening of that domestication into symbolic death. In claiming that Zaynab was "slaughtered" at Karbala alongside the seventy-two, Moallem performs a kind of textual martyrdom that forecloses the very speech-act she elsewhere seeks to valorize. In this way, her critique risks reproducing the silencing it diagnoses. Moreover, her rendering of Zaynab as merely the "confidante" of Husayn undercuts the

[71] Ali Shari'ati's reading of Zaynab as the "eloquent tongue" of Husayn is frequently cited as evidence of his revalorization of feminine revolutionary speech, yet it should also be noted how firmly this function is tethered to the logic of supplement. Zaynab's voice only attains political value as an extension of Husayn's martyrdom. In this way, her subjectivity risks being flattened into function. For a nuanced account of this dynamic, see Shari'ati's *On the Sociology of Islam*. (249-50)

complexity of her witness function, which is not reducible to familial loyalty or posthumous devotion. Moallem's theoretical language is useful, but her insistence on Zaynab's historical death contradicts both the ritual centrality of Zaynab's speech and the continued circulation of her testimony.

Kamran Scot Aghaie offers a compelling counterpoint to this silencing. In *The Martyrs of Karbala*, Aghaie foregrounds Zaynab's active role during and after the battle—not only as speaker, but as defender, caretaker, and strategist. Drawing on accounts such as those by Eshtehardi, Aghaie positions Zaynab as embedded in the fabric of the battle itself, not simply its aftermath. He identifies her as a participant in jihad and as a crucial figure in the preservation of the Imamate through her protection of Zayn al-Abedin. In my reading, this portrayal opens up a third possibility: Zaynab as already inhabiting the paradigm of martyrdom—not through death, but through a form of embodied survivance. Aghaie allows us to see how the boundaries between martyr and witness collapse when the witness herself becomes a site of sacrifice—not in blood, but in speech, action, and political defiance.

The work of Alireza Korangy and Leyla Rouhi further supports this turn. Their close readings of sermons attributed to both Zaynab and Umm Kulthum provide the textual basis for my theorization of the *near other*. In their presentation of these orations—particularly Umm Kulthum's speech in Kufa—they note the authoritative certainty with which these women speak, despite the trauma they have endured. Their suggestion that these women are "flesh witnesses" rather than mere observers points to a deeper ontological status for their speech. To bear witness here is not to offer a report but to instantiate a claim to subjectivity that is constructed through suffering and proximity to the dead. The voice of the sister, then, is not borrowed from the brother—

it emerges through a reciprocal entanglement in which her speech renders his martyrdom legible.[72]

Suzanne Pinckney Stetkevych provides a broader theoretical frame in which to situate this transformation of suffering into subjectivity. Her work on ritual and gendered speech articulates how, in certain poetic and political traditions, the liminal space of death grants women the authority to speak publicly. She suggests that the moment of a kinsman's death temporarily suspends the norms of confinement, allowing the ritual emergence of the female voice.[73] I take this further to argue that the speech of Zaynab and Umm Kulthum is not merely permitted by the crisis of Karbala—it is constituted by it. Their authority to speak is not derivative of male death but arises from a shared inscription in its scene. Their words are not commentary but continuation.

Finally, I turn to Juliet Mitchell's writing on siblings and mourning to think about the mimetic dimensions of Zaynab's authority. Her insight that the death of a peer generates a temporary collapse between self and other helps articulate the strange fusion that characterizes the Zaynab-Husayn relation. What Zaynab inherits is not just the message but the trace of Husayn's singularity, which she reanimates in her own speech. In this sense, her subjectivity is neither autonomous nor derivative—it is

[72] This formulation draws upon a broader Shi'i philosophical tradition in which witnessing is not merely testimonial but ontological. The speech of Zaynab and Umm Kulthum functions as both transmission and transformation—rendering them, in a sense, "flesh witnesses," a term used by Korangy and Rouhi to suggest an embodied epistemology grounded in proximity to divine suffering. (104-5)

[73] Stetkevych's account of the ritual emergence of female voice through the "sacral defilement" of mourning opens space for theorizing Karbala as a site where ritual temporality interrupts gendered silence. However, this reading shifts the emphasis from a gendered exceptionality to a revolutionary continuity—suggesting that speech here is not merely permitted, but required by the theological structure of martyrdom itself. See Stetkevych, *The Mute Immortals Speak*. (165)

relational, marked by what Mitchell calls the "trauma of mimetic identification."[74] This allows me to think Zaynab not as inheriting the revolution from her brother, but as co-producing it.

In the context of this dissertation, this chapter extends the project's central concern with revolutionary transmission into the realm of narrative instability. If earlier chapters centered the question of what it means to witness, or to interpret revelation, this chapter asks what happens when witnessing is doubled—when the voice that preserves meaning is uncertain, refracted, and multiply attributed. In doing so, it makes space for a more capacious theology of proximity, where survival is not singular, and remembrance is not clean. Zaynab speaks, but not alone.

I hope for this chapter to read as a sustained meditation on the instability of voice, attribution, and subject formation in the Karbala narrative. I begin not with Zaynab but with her narrative double, Umm Kulthum, whose oration in Kufa presents an early fissure in the hagiographic archive. From this fissure, I draw out the central conceptual concern of the chapter: the problem of the *near other*, the sibling whose speech, while adjacent, is consistently absorbed into or overwritten by a more recognizable icon. In what follows, I track how this proximity is managed—ritually, textually, and theologically—and I ask what kind of ethics emerges when we center instability, rather than resolve it.

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[74] Juliet Mitchell's framing of sibling mourning as a site of unstable subjectivity lends crucial support to the idea of Zaynab's speech as neither autonomous not derivative. Her insight that the death of a peer can collapse the distinction between self and other—at least temporarily—helps articulate the mimetic fusion between Zaynab and Husayn as not symbolic but psychic and structural. See Mitchell, *Siblings: Sex and Violence*. (29-30)

The chapter opens with a close reading of two speeches: one attributed to Umm Kulthum in the streets of Kufa, the other to Zaynab in the court of Yazid. These moments are often treated as distinct in devotional memory, yet I show how their structure, rhetorical intensity, and political staked echo one another. Drawing on the work of Korangy and Rouhi, I establish that the speech act in Karbala is not a singular occurrence, but a distributed form. From this distribution, I develop the notion of the *flesh witness*—one whose authority is grounded not in proximity to law, but in proximity to suffering. The voices of the Zaynabs, I argue, are not merely records of trauma, but enactments of sovereignty in defiance of historical erasure.

Building on this, I introduce the conceptual category of the *sister-witness*, a figure who emerges at the convergence of relationality and revolutionary memory. I think this figure through the lens of Juliet Mitchell's psychoanalytic work on siblings, specifically her notion that mourning a peer can trigger a mimetic identification with the dead. For Zaynab, this identification becomes generative: she speaks not on behalf of Husayn, but through him. Her subjectivity is constructed not in contrast to his, but through their shared inscription in the scene of martyrdom. This mimetic intimacy blurs the boundary between the one who dies and the one who speaks.

I wonder why is it Zaynab who is remembered and not Umm Kulthum? What kind of sovereign logic underwrites this selection? I argue that Zaynab's confrontation with Yazid—her address to the sovereign—produces a scene of recognition that legitimates her speech retroactively. Umm Kulthum, who speaks in the street, is denied that recognition. But it is precisely this denial that allows me to theorize the near other. Not as a failed subject, but as a necessary figure for thinking transmission, echo, and revolutionary multiplicity.

In the years leading up to the 1979 Iranian revolution, Shari'ati worked back into the story of Hussein to illustrate the revolutionary potential held within that narrative that extends beyond mere mourning. Shari'ati's first move is to try to disentangle *shahadat* from death, instead emphasising a kind of self-negation that hinges on the *choosing* of death through a refusal. His second and rather radical move is to elevate the role of Hussein's sister Zaynab in the paradigm of Hussein's *shahadat*. I note here the gendered aspect for this formulation of resistance. After the battle of Karbala, the women and children were brought to the court of Yazid in Damascus, Syria. It is here that Zaynab forcefully addresses Yazid and tells the story of Hussein's martyrdom. If Hussein performs the 'willingness to die' aspect of Shari'ati's construction of *shahadat* as a dual choice, Zaynab fulfills the 'witness' function. Further, it seems significant that his formulation of ideal *shahadat* encompasses a man's death, remembered by a woman. What I mean is, it is significant in that it is *not* significant (for now). In an effort to open the field of play, I suggest this may be read as 'a brother's death, remembered by a sister'. I don't suggest that this is what Shari'ati overtly says, however he himself claims the category of Zaynab. In Shari'ati's estimation, through her speech-act and memorialisation of her brother, she performs a significant role in this retheorised concept of *shahadat* (such that it becomes hers too).

For Shari'ati, the eternal life of a *shahid* relies on two things; firstly, a *shahid* negates their existence for an idea that is on the verge of fading from collective consciousness; and secondly, that this sacrifice must be legible and perceived by the collective consciousness as an example or impetus towards continued struggle in service of the idea. In his lecture "After *Shahadat*" Shari'ati states that "for every revolution, there are two visages: *blood and the message*. Husayn and his companions

undertook the first mission, that of blood. The second mission is to bear the message to the whole world, to be the eloquent tongue of this flowing blood and these resting bodies among the walking dead." (249) Regarding a *shahid's* legibility, Shari'ati offers Hussein's sister as the exemplary figure for the struggle of remembrance. He goes on to state that the "mission of Zaynab is more difficult and heavier than that of her brother." (249) Then for Shari'ati, *shahadat* becomes a kind of two-part process that begins with a willingness to die, and endures with an ongoing struggle for remembrance. Although Shari'ati is often accused of encouraging a generation of Islamic youth into literal martyrdom, in fact, we see here his emphasis on Zaynab's delivery of the *message* of Hussein's *shahadat* as being just as (if perhaps more) important in the ongoing political struggle that he envisions. On the importance of the message, Shari'ati states that if,

> blood does not have a message, it remains mute in history. If the message of blood does not reach all generations, it is as if the executioner has imprisoned the *shahid* in the castle of one age and one time. If Zaynab does not convey the message of Karbala to history, Karbala remains as a mere historical event; and thus the ones who need this message will be deprived of it. Thus no one will be able to hear the message of those who spoke to the generations with their blood. (250)

Then we see that the function performed by *shahadat*, and its ongoing remembrance, transforms it beyond the merely historical and into the realm of the political such that it may be rendered immortal and thus accessed as a revolutionary political consciousness.

I want to consider the role of Zaynab as a way of indexing something I'm not sure how to name, and so have been calling the 'near' other (sister-witness?). In beginning here, I want to think through the events at Karbala. But what is what I am calling the near other? In theorizing the near other, I hope to understand the relation between the sister and the brother. I anticipate that, for what I am speaking about here, the sister is a

placeholder for something different than a kind of positivist articulation of the woman. Instead I posit that the sister acts like a container for the sort of negative of the negative. Through a message-oriented approach to the Karbala martyrdom parable, this layered negation offers the corpse of the brother, rendered as a near other, as a self-making mechanism for the sister. (near other, because to be a sister is to be a living dead as she is not considered a subject to history, and moving towards Hussayn's corporeal death brings her closer to life) Kamran Scot Aghaie contends in *The Martyrs of Karbala* that rather than the commonly-understood narrative which places Zaynab as passive and devoted mourner, instead she was active in the battle of Karbala (and afterwards) in some really profound ways. That is, although for Shari'ati Zaynab speaks, she remains for him an *other* to Husayn's *self*. Further, Minoo Moallem actually obliterates her, literally killing her to silence and other her, in order to construct a conceptualization of the post-revolutionary Iranian fundamentalist framework. However, I use the suggestion of this third category, the not the self, or the other, but the *near* other (sister-witness) to ask the sister to speak herself into selfhood through the corpse of the brother. Her category, sister-witness, gives her a kind of universality in that this container holds the other, as well as the other of the other. She pulls Husayn into this universal category, rather than the other way around. The shadow of an other is lifted like a shroud from the lively bodies of the living dead, and becomes life as universal sister-witness. In this chapter, I hope to articulate the stages by which Zaynab sheds the particularity of her position.

Lady Zaynab: of the House or of the Battlefield?

I suggest that in a certain sense, Shari'ati and Moallem have a similar vision of what fundamentalism looks like. When Shari'ati criticizes 'Safavid' Shi'ism (as Black Shi'ism)—which stands in for the ultimate oxymoron, that is, a kind of institutionalized Shi'ism—and compares it with "Alavite" Shi'ism (Red Shi'ism), he is making a distinction between a religion of martyrdom (red) and a (black) religion of *mourning* (Shari'ati "Red Shi'ism vs. Black Shi'ism")[75]. In this way, he places (mere) mourning as the other of martyrdom. Not just any martyrdom though, specifically the dual martyrdom of the children of Ali. Martyrdom of the blood *and* the message, in which Zaynab has an equal share.

I hold this, Zaynab's equal share of martyrdom, as I look at other ways her role is interpreted. I want to try to think with Minoo Moallem's *Between Warrior Brother and Veiled Sister*, for there is a problem at work for her that seems to me to be a helpful hinge in thinking about the Husayn/Zaynab sibling paradigm. Moallem takes a kind of anthropological approach and on the question of Islam and patriarchy in Iran, uses specifically fundamentalist Islam as her point of departure. For her, fundamentalist

[75] Ali Shari'ati's distinction between "Red Shi'ism" and "Black Shi'ism" has been widely discussed as both a rhetorical and ideological strategy aimed at distinguishing revolutionary Islam from the institutionalized and mourning-centered Islam that he associates with Safavid influence. In his lecture *Red Shi'ism vs. Black Shi'ism*, Shari'ati invokes the Karbala narrative to formulate a typology of resistance. "Red Shi'ism" as the Islam of blood, of sacrifice, of historical agency, and "Black Shi'ism" as the Islam of lamentation, ritual, and passive devotion. What is useful—and also fraught—about this binary is how it codes political agency through a gendered grammar. That is, Red Shi'ism is active, masculine, future-oriented; Black Shi'ism is reactive, feminized, repetitive. Scholars such as Hamid Dabashi have noted how Shari'ati mobilizes this contrast to animate a revolutionary subject, but also how it risks reducing the rich texture of devotional practice to an impediment to political consciousness. What remains undertheorized in much of this reception, however, is the paradox that Shari'ati himself partially displaces. That is, the very revolutionary energy he locates in Red Shi'ism depends on the gendered labor of mourning and memory. His figure of Zaynab—who survives, speaks, and transmits—becomes an anomaly in his typology. She performs a labor that is not merely oppositional to Black Shi'ism but born out of it. A mourning that is also a mode of political speech. Thus, while the binary is useful as a heuristic, I follow others in questioning its coherence. What if Zaynab complicates the very schema she is used to illustrate?

Islam renders Zaynab's role in the Karbala paradigm as mere mourner and in doing so, Moallem propagates a version of Zaynab's work that silences and forcefully domesticates her. Moallem suggests this was not always the case though and states that, "Zeinab, who was slaughtered along with seventy-two other relatives of Hussein, including babies, children, and their caretakers, was portrayed as a powerful public speaker, a brave combatant, and the confidante of her brother Imam Hussein. However, soon after the revolution, Zeinab was domesticated and marginalized" (93). Two things are at work here. First, Moallem suggests that Zaynab is killed in battle alongside Husayn and other relatives. It is worth noting here that I have not read another account of the battle at Karbala in which Zaynab is killed. In fact, the most well-known moment of Zaynab's public speaking, which Moallem refers to, happens after being transported alongside her sister to Damascus. Second, I find it significant that Moallem suggests that Zaynab is (merely) a confidante to her brother. This is a kind of symbolic way in which Zaynab has her complex role as witness and is simplified as a confidante. Zaynab must bear witness to her brother's death/cause in order not to be pulled into a state of living death.[76] She must see, she must hear, she must feel, she must speak; the position of the sister-witness carries with it a heavy burden. I find this quotation quite compelling, for Moallem first makes Zaynab an *actual* martyr, that is, she suggests that she died on the battlefield in Karbala. This is an unusual account, and not one that I have read of before—the reverence attributed to Zaynab tends to be as a result of her scathing speech directed at Yazid in his court. Then in this move, Moallem makes her coming

[76] The stakes here echo Mahmoud Ayoub's description of Shi'i devotional practice as a redemptive engagement with suffering, where mourning becomes a mode of survival rather than resignation. In Ayoub's reading, martyrdom is not merely a political symbol but a metaphysical grammar through which communal memory is shaped and sustained. See Ayoub, *Redemptive Suffering in Islam*. (144-47)

towards selfhood an impossibility as a result of her death—for the dead cannot speak. So then what is operative for Moallem here, I wonder what difference this makes in the light of Zaynab's supposed domestication?

Further, I take issue with, not only Moallem's assertion of Zaynab's death at Karbala, but also that seventy-two of his relatives (including babies and children) died there. If every other source I have consulted on this issue contradicts this, Kamran Scot Aghaie differs quite starkly in his representation of the events of Ashura. Aghaie, referring to the work of Mohammad Eshtehardi states that,

> Zeynab was not idle for a moment during the Battle of Karbala. She lent her support to the male *mojahedin* and took care of the women and children. She did this despite the fact that she herself was suffering from hardships and from the emotional strain of losing her sons, other relatives, and, of course, her brother Hoseyn. She was very active in this jihad and holy defense. *She then went onto the battlefield at the moment when her brother fell and he was about to be killed*. (128-9)

So here Zaynab was *not idle*. Aghaie constructs Zaynab as an active figure. She did not rest, nor hide herself from battle—indeed according to Aghaie, more than once during battle, she saved Husayn's son Zayn al-Abedin who lay sick in his tent. It is not only Zayn, the future Imam, that Zaynab saved, but also the other women and children of the family stranded by the Euphrates. The picture of Zaynab that this elucidates is one of a very different nature to the one that Moallem produces. It seems that in her critique of what she sees as a post-revolutionary Iranian fundamentalism, she undermines, silences, and domesticates Zaynab. To reiterate, Moallem *kills* Zaynab such that she might make an argument for her domestication, and the domestication of the women of Iran more generally. Instead, Zaynab, in just about every other account of her actions, is much more than mere mourning and memorialization, but a speaking subject.

On martyrdom and domestication, Moallem writes that "*Shahadat* (martyrdom) becomes the culmination of the realization of the impossible. Women always enter the fundamentalist reconstruction of the past as wives, mothers, and daughters and not as individuals. The imposition of veiling contributes significantly to the domestication of their martyrdom." (113) I find this rather confusing in a few ways. Firstly, I am interested and puzzled by the suggestion that martyrdom is the 'culmination of the realization of the impossible'. But I leave this for now as it seems to me that this may be beyond the scope of this work. Rather I focus on the last sentence, in which Moallem speaks of a *domesticated* martyrdom. Her understanding of the way that martyrdom and fundamentalism work together to produce the domesticated, veiled woman is confused by a conception of the martyrdom of these women which remains unelaborated. Actually I agree with her in that I consider Zaynab a martyr, however we come to it differently, I think. That is, I suggest that Zaynab's martyrdom comes about in her life and in her speech as I conceptualize martyrdom as anti-teleological, in the sense that the witness must hold an (at least) equal share of the negative category of martyrdom in their testimony. However Moallem herself martyrs Zaynab in that she kills her on the page.

I want to think two things in tandem regarding the importance and centrality of the message-bearer in this martyrdom paradigm. For me, the concept of the near other is produced in two (linked) directions simultaneously in the case of Husayn and Zaynab. That is, firstly, their relation as brother and sister. I want to say that I have both a Hegelian approach to the way I understand this, as well as an understanding of these siblings as children of Ali, and that their closeness was prophesied by Mohammad (Aghaie 127). But, I will come to this a little later. For now, the other direction is

through the duality of the blood and the *message*. That is, that in my conception of martyrdom, there is no way in which one may die for God, to sacrifice themselves in the service of God, and is then automatically rendered a martyr. This person I describe, would be lost in a linear and unforgiving forward-march of historical time. So the bearer of the message, one who bears witness and makes testimony, is a crucial actor in this paradigm. Ostensibly, this person could be anyone, and their inscription upon the body of the dead, the blood martyr, could be any *thing*. They are in a *relationship* of martyrdom. The sticky and difficult thing about the message-bearer is that while they are *responsible* for the blood, there is an inevitable moment of translation and transformation in the movement from the corporeal into language.

What then if this moment of translation could be mitigated? The kind of collapsing of selves that I see at work in the Husayn/Zaynab martyrdom relation leads me to think that, yes, possibly it can. To return though to how Moallem sees the domestication of women in the paradigm of martyrdom, in which she suggests that:

> two elements are used to domesticate the experience of women. One is the fact that women enter the sphere of martyrdom as family members—sisters, mothers, or daughters—rather than as independent individuals. Thus their predetermined social roles constitute their relationship to God. The fundamentalist position on unmediated relationships between the individual and God—that is, prioritizing a subject position tied to a conscience or self-knowledge before God—is nullified in the case of women. (113)

Moallem makes a distinction between the relational way in which women are utilized in this paradigm, that is, by their role within the family. I find this compelling, however, the second part of this quotation indexes the rich and contested field of *ijtihad*. I suggest that the fundamentalist approach to the mediation between the individual and God would be a negative one. That is, that it would not approve of the unmediated

relation with God for men or women and that this does not have to do with domestication. It is difficult to claim this beyond doubt though, due to Moallem's vague and slippery use of the fundamentalist as a catch-all for post-revolutionary religious belief in Iran. Moallem fails to account for the multi-valent aspects of Zaynab's position, that is, that it is not simply that she has a role as sister or daughter within the family, but specifically a sister, daughter, granddaughter in *the divine family*.

Zaynab the Younger, Zaynab the Elder: Why not Umm Kulthum?

In the work of Alireza Korangy and Leyla Rouhi, Umm Kulthum, sometimes referred to as Zaynab the Younger, is introduced to us as a prominent figure of the Battle of Karbala. After the Battle of Karbala, the women and children (as well as Husayn's sick approximately 23-year-old son, Zayn al-Abedin) were taken in a procession first through the streets of Kufa and then on to the court of Yazid in Damascus. The public humiliation intended by touring through Kufa carried dual weight in that as well as humiliating the family of the Husayn and other survivors, it also served as a kind of warning to the people of Kufa. Indeed, Husayn and his supporters set off on their journey to Kufa as a result of those people pledging their allegiance to him and asking for his support. This was followed by those people being terrorized by some officers of Yazid. The punitive decision by Yazid and these officers was to form the army which would attack Husayn forcibly by the people of Kufa. Thus, not only were those people compelled to rescind their support, but they were also charged with the task of killing the grandson of the Prophet and his relatives.

Upon arriving in Kufa, Yazid's soldiers unveiled the women of the group, including Zaynab and Umm Kulthum. At the humiliation of being paraded through the streets unveiled and alongside the heads of Husayn and his companions, Umm Kulthum decided to speak. Korangy and Rouhi state that Umm Kulthum "gestured to the people to be quiet, and delivered a passionate oration grieving and glorifying Husayn, and castigating and condemning the audience" (111). Indeed I posit that the defiant speech of the sisters, the Zaynabs, does not merely originate at the court of Yazid with the words of one Zaynab, as it is often remembered. The moment in court is important undoubtedly, but is also the evidentiary example because of the way that the state or sovereign power figures itself as legitimating and recognizing. In fact the moments of speech continually figure themselves backwards. If Zaynab's reference point for her remonstration of Yazid in his own court is Umm Kulthum's speech in the streets of Kufa, Umm Kulthum's reference point could be the moment directly proceeding Husayn's death when Zaynab ran onto the battlefield and accosted the soldiers. Indeed this reference might return on itself as far back to the writing of the marriage contract between Zaynab and Abdullah ibn Ja'far, where Zaynab demands that her allegiance to her brother remain outside of the control of her future husband.

On the speech of these women like Zaynab and Umm Kulthum and their impulses to speak publicly, Suzanne Pinckney Stetkevych suggests that,

> confinement and privacy thus constitute an expression of "purity" or, in ritual terms, aggregation; hence, to be expelled, unveiled, to appear or speak in public, is an expression of "defilement," of liminality. It is therefore only in the liminal (defiled/sacral) states of a kinsman's death or of warfare that the women of the warrior class have a public—and hence poetic—voice. (165)

Thus certainly, their will to speak is predicated on the point of crisis of Karbala, although it is not simply so. I argue that there is something more complex at play in the way in which these women hold the *self* which is not simply a borrowing of the brother's subjectivity. Certainly, regarding the liminality of their speech, Korangy and Rouhi suggest that although "trauma often silences the female voice, we find that in this case, in contrast, the Prophetic-lineage-based authority of our female orators, asserted in the martyrdom context of their orations, produces a resounding breaking of the silence" (104) And earlier, that they "[profess] complete certainty in the right to speak and be heard" (104). This indicates that Zaynab and Umm Kulthum construct their selves during *and* in the lead up to the martyrdom of their brother Husayn, and thus their subjectivity cannot merely be thought of as a borrowing of the subjectivity of their brother. In fact they recognize their divine blood and are as such imbued with both the blood *and* the message—conditions that are bolstered by the offering of blood from their brother.

In light of this absolute certainty in the right of their lineage, that their certainty and will to speak is not founded simply on indignation for the treatment of their brother and other relatives. Rather it has to do with the divine nature of their lineage, their understanding of their place as Ali's children—the grandchildren of the Prophet. This holds their allegiance to their brother in a light that is not simply patriarchal, instead there is a kind of prophetic turn into the sharing and malleability of self-hood. As such, Husayn would understand himself, his role, and the role of his sisters differently than is often suggested. That is, the Karbala parable tends to emphasise Zaynab's devotion to her brother (not to mention effacing Umm Kulthum's very presence among the companions), without any kind of recognition of a mirroring of that devotion. But what

if Husayn knew that his sisters would take care of his self in his death? What if his martyrdom was not only a negation of himself for justice, but a self-negation as *gift* to his sisters? I am reminded here of Jacques Derrida's assertion in *The Gift of Death* that on the question of the giving and taking of death,

> Now to have the experience of responsibility on the basis of the law that is given, to have the experience of one's absolute singularity and apprehend one's own death, amounts to the same thing. Death is very much that which nobody else can undergo or confront in my place. My irreplaceability is therefore conferred, delivered, "given," one can say, by death. It is the same gift, the same source, one could say the same goodness and the same law. It is from the perspective of death as the place of my irreplaceability, that is, of my singularity, that I feel called to responsibility. (42)

Regarding this question of a coming-to-consciousness of one's own singularity, might we not think then that Husayn, for no one could *take* his death away from him, *gives* his death, his consciousness sanctioned by (divine) law to his sisters?

The Nearness of the Near Other

This gift he gives though, it is a tricky thing—for although he gives it to them, and it is Zaynab who (is recognized to) protect him from the unforgiving ticking of historical time, and uses her voice to facilitate their dual transcendence in to divine time, their *actual* work is largely effaced from a collective understanding of history.[77] What is at

[77] This historical effacement mirrors what Hamid Dabashi calls the "epistemic violence" of nationalist historiography, which domesticates or deletes forms of dissent that do not conform to masculine, state-sanctioned revolutionary paradigms. In this light, the forgetting of Umm Kulthum is not an accident but an index of what Dabashi names the "theology of discontent" that structures much of Iran's ideological narrative. See Dabashi, *Theology of Discontent*. (311-14)

work here is simultaneously to do with the particularity of the brother/sister relation, but also that exactly at the moment that the particularity presents itself, it becomes a question of divine prophecy and the lineage of the prophet. In this sense, Divine Law and Human Law bump up against each other and a more complete universality of the (feminine) Divine Law appears.

Partially why I wander to and fro, unable to claim one over the other, is that I find myself asking, why not Zayn al-Abedin? That is, one of Husayn's sons survived and was with the remaining companions. Further, and speaking of lineage, at Husayn's martyrdom, Zayn becomes the fourth Imam. Then, why was it not Zayn who speaks? I suspect that what is at play here is the particularity of the nearness of the otherness of Husayn. On the role of these two women, Korangy and Rouhi suggest that what might be compelling them is the fact that they are not merely eye witnesses, but *flesh* witnesses. Indeed as I suggest earlier, as they work during the battle, and are subsequently taken hostage and paraded unveiled through the streets of Kufa and into the court of Yazid, their *very materiality* is at stake. Korangy and Rouhi suggest that there is a different kind of authority at play for the flesh witness, for the flesh witness has suffered too. This witness holds physical and mental scars of the same (metaphorical) sword that martyred the one for whom they bear witness. In this moment, Husayn and Zaynab share blood in more than one way, and I think here of Mitchell's work on siblings. She writes that,

> A sense of one's own absence persists in hysterical conditions and is a trauma that can be revived every time a significant other person dies. In the latter instance, particularly if the dead person is a peer, there is often an instant mimetic identification with an aspect of the deceased before their status as 'other' is recognized. Only the process of mourning establishes the dead person as other than the bereaved. (29)

I wonder if this mimetic identification could account for the authority that Zaynab adopts in the absence of Husayn? Then is it the recognizability, and simultaneously the unfamiliarity, of the brother that moves from the masculinized position as citizen, to a feminized non-subject that results in Zaynab's relationality with the martyred brother as the near other? I speak specifically of Zaynab in this moment because although they both speak in important ways, only Zaynab is recognized for that work. This is because although Umm Kulthum spoke publicly, in the streets of Kufa, Zaynab spoke to and silenced the caliph. She is recognized by the authority of the law.

Then in the construction of this near other, there seems to be a kind of dialectical inversion at work here, between the universal and the particular. That is, that in the estimation of the religious community, Husayn signifies a duality of Human and Divine Laws. Meanwhile, both sisters represent the particularity of the feminine. However, there is in the appearance of the martyrdom of Husayn a feminizing mechanics present, which renders his corporeality abject and negative. In this turn, Zaynab (and Umm Kulthum) remain particular, in the sense that they are not considered a *self*, although in the same moment they are indeed producing the self. That self, to my view, becomes a delicate weaving together of the self of the brother, the future of the imamate, the lineage of their father, and their grandfather the Prophet Mohammad. In this conglomerate of particularities that they come to represent, Zaynab is remembered solely for the way in which she holds and uses her brother's subjectivity, and worse, a *mere mourner* (while Umm Kulthum is effaced from the memory of history, almost completely).

Final Words:

At this stage of the dissertation, looking back feels strange. Not because I don't know what I've written, or because I'm not longer invested in the arguments I've made—but because the process of writing has changed the very questions I thought I was asking. What began as an inquiry into Ali Shari'ati's theory of martyrdom, structured around a relatively linear relationship between blood and message, martyr and witness, has evolved into a study of destabilization: of kinship terms, of gendered speech, of theological certainties, and of narrative authority. Each chapter has pulled me further into the spaces between concepts—between Zaynab and Antigone, between martyrdom and memory, between the body and the word—such that what I offer here is not a final answer, but a constellation of interpretations, some of which contradict, others which echo each other through time.

The thread that now seems most vital to me—and which I did not realize I was following so rigorously—is *witnessing*. It is in witnessing that the political becomes theological, that the feminine becomes the site of revolutionary transmission, that speech becomes both an act and an aftermath. Witnessing in this project is not a passive act of observation, but a labor of world-making and time-bending. It is, as I have tried to show, the work of Zaynab, of Umm Kulthum, of the women on the Tehran bus, of the *ta'ziyeh* role-carrier, of the grieving camera in Beyzaie's *Mosaferan*. Witnessing becomes the form through which history can resist finality. It is also the mechanism by which the ethical, the symbolic, and the sensual entangle one another.

When I began writing, I thought that martyrdom was the category I needed to unpack—especially through Shari'ati. And to some extent, it was. But what has emerged

through the chapters is the realization that martyrdom, as a category, is inert without interpretation. What gives it its force—its afterlife—is not only the body that dies, but the body that speaks. This is why Zaynab haunts the dissertation. Her speech, her presence at court, her persistent return through literature, ritual, theatre, and film—is not just an accessory to Husayn's sacrifice. It is its condition of possibility. Zaynab's witnessing, I have come to understand, is what makes Husayn's death legible to the world and therefore what grants him access to the status of the eternal martyr. This insight, seeded in Shari'ati's own framing of blood and message, eventually deepened through Butler's notion of kinship slippage and the affective temporality of *ta'ziyeh* performance.

Chapter by chapter, my emphasis began to shift. I started with blood and message as twin structures in Shari'ati's martyrdom paradigm. But in juxtaposing Zaynab and Antigone, I found myself drawn not to their heroic refusal or idealized femininity, but to their relationality—to the way they inhabit proximity to the dead brother, and what that proximity allows them to do. The figure of the sister becomes a critical interpretive site not because she is a vehicle for grief, but because she transforms grief into speech. And in doing so, she enters a form of life that is not only gendered differently, but temporally estranged. This estrangement became a key axis around which the later chapters turned.

In chapter three, the discussion of *ijtihad*, particularly as it appears across Mulla Sadra, Tabataba'i, Shari'ati, and Soroush, helped me to refine my thinking about interpretation and mediation. The problem of immanence, as I began to call it, emerged not only as a philosophical of theological dilemma, but as a lived one. Interpretation, particularly in its esoteric registers, is not a singular act—it is ongoing, recursive, and

requires a body. What was so vital to me in this chapter was the sense that interpretation is not merely intellectual. It is affective, embodied, and contingent. This realization pulled me deeper into the terrain of performance—not as metaphor, but as epistemology.

That movement culminated in chapter four, where *ta'ziyeh* and post-revolutionary cinema become not just reflections of theological or ideological structures, but spaces in which theology itself is *performed*. Here, witnessing appears again—not as a literal testimonial act, but as a sensorial, trans-temporal mode of knowledge. The *ta'ziyeh*, in its insistence on audience participation, on cyclical time, on the veiled actor who both is and is not the character—revealed to me that generative instability at the core of Shi'i memory work. It became clear that Zaynab's witnessing is not an event that happens once, but a structure of transmission that repeats across bodies, across centuries.

Mosaferan, as I argue in the fourth chapter, makes this repetition cinematic. Beyzaie's mirror, the doubling of the wedding and the funeral, the absent-presence of the dead—all gesture toward the same theological problem I started with: how to preserve the meaning of a loss without collapsing it into closure. In many ways, this project has taught me that the most potent political tools are not slogans or manifestos, but the structures by which memory is carried and continually reactivated. The ethics of testimony that I explore here is not rooted in the sovereignty of the self, but in the undoing of self—through grief, through language, through performance—in order to let the other speak through you.

In writing this dissertation, I have also come to see that gender cannot be a stable category in these structures. The sister, as I argue through Zaynab and Umm Kulthum, is not simply a woman, nor is the brother simply a man. These are positions that carry symbolic weight, yes, but more importantly, they are sites of transfer. They are positions in a grammar of witnessing that exceeds identity. The sister, in particular, becomes a kind of vector—of speech, of presence, of refusal—but also of memory that is not just personal but cosmic. She is the near other, not fully a self, not fully an other, but a conduit.

So where does this leave me? I am more suspicious now of clean oppositions: male/female, life/death, martyr/witness, secular/religious. My argument is not that these categories are meaningless, but that they function through their entanglement. That entanglement—tense, unstable, difficult to sustain—is precisely where meaning resides. It is also, I think, where politics can happen. The Karbala paradigm, as inherited by Shari'ati, performed in *ta'ziyeh*, reconfigured by feminist thinkers, and made strange by Beyzaie, is not a closed myth. It is a structure for asking ethical questions about history, language, and the body. And it continues to offer those questions to us now—not as answers, but as provocations.

In a sense, I began by asking: how does a martyr live on? And I've come to understand that the better question is: how is a martyr made legible? Who speaks for the dead, and what kind of labor does that require? The answers I've found are fragmentary, but I trust them more than the unified narratives I started with. What I now see is that witnessing is not just a speech act. It is a practice of holding, of carrying, of fragmenting and reassembling. It is the way history touches us—across veils, through mirrors, in the space between the stage and the spectator.

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